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Happiness and the Psychology of Enlightenment

An Investigation into Methods and Results

Edited by Patrick Jones

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Meet the editor

Dr. Patrick Jones is a public speaker and an occasional university lecturer. He was an honorary research associate at Murdoch University in Australia and has written a curriculum for Western Sydney University on mindfulness-based entrepreneurship. He has presented at state, national, and international conferences in psychology and health for twenty years. He has been a director for eastern ashrams and western monasteries. With degrees in psychology and theology, Dr. Jones publishes in the areas of mindfulness, quality of life, and well-being. Through his clinical work and research, he developed a quality-of-life psychometric instrument (CLINQOL) and a Mindfulness-based Quality of Life and Well-Being Program, which has been published as a 30-day self-help book, *Clear Mind Open Heart*.

Contents

Preface

Happiness, now commonly also referred to as well-being, is usually derived from how we think and feel about our life conditions. When they go down, we usually feel distressed and problem-solve ways to bring them back up to baseline so we can feel good again. Enlightenment is an alternative experience of well-being which is not sourced from this process but is a natural resting state that produces happiness or well-being spontaneously. Here, we do not need our life conditions to be a certain way to feel good, which, of course, is a psychologically robust way to live.

Such an approach is traditionally found within religion and spirituality, however, it is dressed in different clothes depending on the discipline. As a non-religious or secular approach to happiness has increasingly been embraced in the mainstream, it is necessary to examine these different approaches and translate them back into usable methods and results.

In this volume, authors from around the world and from different disciplines present their approach to enlightenment. Whilst diverse, they seem to arrive, as expected, at a place that is common to all. In brief, each chapter addresses the following: Chapter 1, *Introductory Chapter: The Paradigm Shift from Event-Based Well-Being to Nondual Well-Being*, introduces the difference between conventional well-being and enlightenment, the relevance of the different pathways to achieve it, and its application to modern society.

In Chapter 2, *Psychological Stages of Enlightenment*, following a summary of the methods and results found across major religious and secular approaches, a framework of the path to enlightenment, made up of five major stages and their markers is proposed.

Chapter 3, *Enlightenment and the Psychology of Self-Transcendence: Pathways to Fundamental Well-Being and Prosocial Behavior*, explores the notion of enlightenment and critically evaluates practices that facilitate these states. It examines empirical studies implementing nondual practices and assesses their role in well-being.

In Chapter 4, *The Realisation of Emptiness in Zen Satori: A Narrative Review*, enlightenment states, or satori, are explored within the Buddhist Zen tradition, including the boundaries between self and nonself, the bliss of "attaining" or reaching supreme states of oneness, union or a dissolution of a concrete identity or sense of "self."

In Chapter 5, *Enlightened Joy and Love, Selflessness and Beyond,* the concept of enlightenment as a stable and enduring plateau state is explored with a study of 32 exemplars from various traditions. The researcher identifies key characteristics of this state, including a sustained sense of well-being and connectedness that transcends the fluctuating emotions of ordinary consciousness.

The research in Chapter 6, *Perspective Chapter: Contemplation – A Symbiotic Approach to Esthetic Presence*, explores the connection between contemplation and self-realization through an interdisciplinary lens that includes philosophy, psychology, and spirituality. Tracing its origins from classical Greek philosophy to ancient Eastern approaches to modern thought, it investigates how contemplative practices such as engaging with beauty in art or nature can lead to self-awareness.

Chapter 7, *Perspective Chapter: Literary Reading as a Pathway to Enlightenment and Eudaimonic Flourishing*, presents a Christian view of enlightenment and includes the notion that embracing suffering is an essential purifying component of the path to such flourishing. Proposing a Christian form of enlightenment to include heightened awareness of God's presence, apprehension of God as Beloved, and a renunciation of self-orientation, it examines the poetry of Fr George Herbert and Saint John of the Cross and how literary reading can be a pathway towards enlightenment and eudaimonic flourishing.

In Chapter 8, *Forgiveness: Practicing Inner Peace*, the psychological study of forgiveness and its role in mental health and well-being is explored, along with a review of psychological theory and models of clinical intervention. The researcher examines how the compassion of forgiveness can support an individual's quest for inner peace when suffering from unjust emotional injury.

Chapter 9, *Yoga and Religion in the Quest for Happiness and Enlightenment*, draws from The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and their eightfold path or method and investigates the role of yoga within religious contexts as a path to enlightenment and well-being. Synthesizing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings of the spiritual and psychological benefits of yoga, it discusses the evolution of yoga practices and their contemporary implications.

Chapter 10, *The Neuroscience of Psychological Well-Being and Flourishing*, completes the volume and highlights current literature on how neuroscience informs the conditions necessary for psychological well-being and flourishing. Three conditions, mindfulness, compassion, and creativity, are identified as foundational components for enlightenment, and the chapter explores the neuro-underpinnings of these three conditions and their role in cultivating optimal human flourishing.

The ten chapters take us on a journey across a wide range of disciplines, exploring the heightened states of inner well-being. While there are clear methods and practices that trigger such experiences, there are also indicators that they are still obtainable by the everyday person. Additionally, with a clear commonality across diverse traditions, it lends evidence that these are universal qualities of a human being and, as such, should be a developmental expectation as one matures in the lifespan.

Aristotle [1] asserted that all things have a function, and their meaning is found in the full expression of that function. There is evidence that happiness is natural to the entire functioning of a human being, an inbuilt inner phenomenon, not contingent upon conditions. As such, any current methodology or easy-to-integrate new mainstream methodologies that provide guidance on the process to achieve this are highly useful and relevant. Furthermore, given the increased global focus on mental health and well-being, it is only appropriate that such findings play a visible role in the dialogue.

The academic editor sincerely thanks all authors for the quality of the chapters and their generous openness to the peer review process. Each chapter was accepted because of its unique contribution to a broad offering on the topic of happiness and the psychology of enlightenment. I hope the readers of this book benefit from the range of approaches to such an important topic as human happiness, and others, in turn, benefit from their wisdom.

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Reference

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Chapter 1

Introductory Chapter: The Paradigm Shift from Event-Based Well-Being to Nondual Well-Being

Patrick Jones

1. Introduction

The exploration and experience of well-being is most commonly confined to what research has found makes the difference: conducive life conditions, along with positive thoughts and feelings about those conditions. If either the conditions or thinking changes, so does the report of well-being [1]. We could call this model event-based well-being, as it is dependent upon the quality of life circumstances (gross phenomena) and the mental state about them (subtle phenomena).

However, we can also approach well-being in a very different way. In this alternative model, well-being is seen to be derived from a different set of causes—an experience independent of life conditions. We could call this nondual well-being, as it does not rely upon a subject evaluating an object. But it is rare and unusual, both in the research and in the common experience of the everyday person.

Typically, this type of well-being has been within the disciplines of religion, spirituality and even philosophy. Up to now however there has been little investigation of this phenomenon in a field that one would expect might navigate the topic of happiness—psychology. However, with the advent of mindfulness into the mainstream, this is all changing. It is being recognised that human beings have the potential to access states of well-being that are both sourced differently and are far superior to the normal and expected levels derived from one's life conditions and mental style.

2. Nondual well-being

There appear to be many paths or methods that may lead to these experiences. In this volume, we explore both what the experience might look like and how it is approached from different disciplines or traditions. Often seen as a type of nondual or unitary state, its primary quality is the absence of a tangible sense of an independent self, with individuals reporting no definitive separation between themselves (subject) and other things (object). This state goes by many names including absorption, self-transcendent experience, union with God, satori, awakening or enlightenment [2].

Whilst often varying in presentation, these approaches seem to arrive at a place that is common to all, primarily because it is non conceptual. Of relevance is that a

common factor of these absolute state is that it has very positive qualities on a relative level, ones that express themselves in an affective and cognitive way through positive thoughts and feelings. And yet at the absolute level, it is independent of those constructs. As a result it has been found to be extraordinarily robust and can withstand the most impactful physical, psychological events, and come out untouched or able to allow the impacts without engagement.

3. The modern application of ancient wisdom

What we are exploring in this inquiry is the next stage or extension of our mental health and well-being constructs. Whilst the inner well-being model has been mapped out and described for thousands of years across many traditions, we are now beginning to see evidence that these experiences are being achieved through secular or mainstream methodologies rather than only the traditional religious or spiritual disciplines.

In recent times these experiences have benefited from a surge of scientific interest, with the growth of mindfulness issuing in a golden age of practice and scientific investigation. And now with the addition of the field of neuroscience, an extra level of exploration into how these states appear in the brain is possible.

In this volume, we look at the different approaches to such nondual well-being from both a scientific point of view, and from the plethora of different approaches that trigger them. This includes classical Western approaches to contemplation and aesthetics, ancient Eastern Buddhist notions of satori, modern predictors of self-transcendent experiences, current assessments of exemplars and their characteristics, Christian notions of mysticism, Hindu yoga practices and the role in the experience of enlightenment, the neuroscientific correlates of flourishing, and the psychological stages in the journey to enlightenment. We explore the evidence of these states, traits and experiences, the concepts that might underpin them, and the associated affect, cognition and behaviour that come with them or is enhanced by them.

4. Relevance

In view of the world's renewed interest in mental health and well-being, and the accumulating evidence that with variations of mindfulness training, these heightened states of inner well-being are obtainable by the everyday person, it is crucial that such findings play a visible role in the conversation. Currently it is still absent from many critical discussions for which it is highly relevant. For example, economic strategy that is designed to protect, maintain and enhance civil quality of life [3], continues to display ignorance of the evidence-based methodologies that deliver these superior states of well-being.

Whilst first world governments and relevant departments like education, health or social services, are ideally positioned to create forums and budgets to explore the material and immaterial benefit of such well-being, instead it is emerging Bhutan, with its Gross National Happiness (GNH) [4], that is leading the world in placing happiness as foundational for progress and policy.

Similarly clinical approaches like cognitive-behavioural therapy still primarily treat major disorders such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), by modifying thoughts, feelings, behaviours or events, in order to secure

patient recalibration back to previous well-being baselines [5]. Although essential for crisis management and important mental health and well-being targets, this approach to cultivating happiness is still confined within traditional cognitive-affective constructs. However it appears, in view of this new research, backed by millennia of traditional investigation on the causes and conditions of happiness, that an experience of a more robust "trait" versus "state" well-being, is achievable independent of the modification of typical treatment variables.

Whilst mindfulness is now coming into its own in the field of psychology, there must still be caution that it is not simply inserted to support the existent paradigm that modifying the cognitive-affective-behavioural process is the only way to enhance well-being. While beneficial to conventional or event-based well-being (our mental state about the quality of our life circumstances), this approach still pivots on the premise that modifying the cognitive process is the principal variable to enhance well-being. What is offered instead and remains the foundational premise of the traditions from which mindfulness springs, is that the fundamental source of well-being, is ultimately non-cognitive, non-affective and non-behavioural - happy for no reason.

As Fr Richard Rohr [6] highlights, for most of us, our own deepest identity is still well hidden from us, and religion's primary job is to bring this foundational truth to consciousness. As identity is also now the domain of psychology, it is critical researchers and practitioners develop the tools to uncover the same source of well-being and disseminate this data back into public policy, clinical interventions and decision-making forums relevant to the happiness of society.

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Chapter 2

Psychological Stages of Enlightenment

Patrick Jones

Abstract

The journey to actualise our full potential is a complex one but there is research to suggest it is marked with signs along the way. Following an investigation of the literature, a theoretical framework made up of five major stages and their markers is proposed. It is suggested that in Stage 1, the conventional sense of self, well-being pivots on the experiences of pleasure and pain. In Stage 2 (Mindfulness) a new level of nonjudgmental objectivity develops where thoughts can be seen as passing mental events. With practice, Stage 3 awakening events may occur, leading to an interruption of the sense of a continuous self. Over time, these intermittent states may stabilise, leaving a default of the ongoing awakened state of Stage 4, an altruistic, peaceful resting state with no discernible sense of self, and increased functionality. Finally, after a seemingly infinite amount of practice, the rare uninterrupted blissful state of perfected enlightenment, along with unlimited capacities, occurs (Stage 5). With the increase now in evidence-based mindfulness research, we are able to evaluate the psychology of enlightenment and its associated stages. If we can translate methods and outcomes into psychological language and find common ground with western concepts of happiness and human potential, we may find antidotes to our mental health inquiry, that can raise the bar from coping to contentment.

Keywords: mindfulness, enlightenment, self-actualisation, awakening, self-realisation, union with God, nondual, nondual well-being, inner well-being, spiritual awakening, Buddhist psychology, bodhisattva

1. Introduction

In the conventional model of well-being, we find that affect and satisfaction with one's life conditions necessarily fluctuate based on changing mental and physical phenomena [1]. Biologically and psychologically driven by minimising pain and maximising pleasure, well-being varies because individuals achieve desired goals, rest momentarily, and then seek to close more perceived aspiration-achievement gaps [2] in an ongoing loop of goal achievement derived from changing life conditions.

In his critique of such well-being constructs, Vitterso [3] contends that such approaches rely too heavily on extrinsic satisfaction (having or not having) and these types of goal achievement models miss inner dimensions like self-actualisation or meaning. Vittersø and Søholt [4] argue for alternative models such as eudaimonic or psychological well-being which focus more on being than having. They argue that

relying on intrinsic factors delivers true well-being and that people will in fact actively suppress their hedonic tendencies to get it.

Whilst prioritising being, over having or doing, is not typical of the subjective well-being, quality of life, or life satisfaction constructs, it is crucial to happiness models that include constructs such as self-actualisation [5], spiritual awakening [6], enlightenment [7], self-realisation [8] or union with God [9]. Here the conventional sense of self, that seeks to "have" by maximising pleasure, and "not have" by minimising pain, is viewed as the problem and the cause of fluctuations in well-being. It is argued that only by deconstructing the sense of a separate, abiding self can stable well-being be achieved, one that does not fluctuate in response to life conditions [10].

Such unchanging "nondual" well-being, within these paradigms, is seen to be the most psychologically healthy approach for a human being. One who has developed both resilience in response to fluctuating life conditions and a robust well-being that can be happy for no reason. In Buddhist psychology, the nondual or enlightened state, is seen as both the endpoint of training and the fulfilment of human potential [1].

Though not typically seen as part of the developmental stages, there is some literature in the field of mindfulness, that sees that these advanced states of well-being are the extension that is missing [11]. Such experiences are seen as higher levels of human development [12, 13] or the completion of the developmental domains. In support of this we are beginning to see increasing evidence of the significant differences between beginners and long term meditators in a range of indicators, including the transition from effort-based to effortless concentration when the sense of a self that is controlling the meditation dissolves [14].

The standout characteristic however is not just differences in levels of concentration but the report of nondual awareness states [15], self-transcendent events [16], or anomalous experiences [17]. It is these experiences involving a dissolution of the sense of an abiding and separate self or "anatta" [18], that lead to an expanded and unitary state of consciousness [19], and a perception of oneness or connectedness to people and surroundings.

Sogyal Rinpoche from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition describes the unfolding of this new sense of self: "Then there is the very nature of mind, its innermost essence, which is absolutely and always untouched by change. At present it is hidden within our own mind, enveloped, and obscured by the mental scurry of our thoughts and emotions. Just as clouds can be shifted by a strong gust of wind to reveal the shining sun and wide-open sky, so, under certain special circumstances, some inspiration may uncover for us glimpses of this nature of mind" [20].

He continues: "Mystics, poets and psychologists throughout history have described it with different names, but what they are all fundamentally experiencing is the same essential nature we find in the depth of our being". That is while groups in psychology, art, and religion have tried to describe this sense of self, if it is the nature of a human being, it can never be copyrighted by one school of thought or tradition. And now this type of experience and the approaches to achieve it are being increasingly researched in the fields of psychology and neuroscience [21, 22]. Methods to build attention are being explored for their impact upon well-being, along with the so called "deconstructive" methods [23], that aim to dissolve the sense of self and its separateness from things and others.

The psychological process to achieve this outcome has been well described in Joseph Campbell's hero's journey. In his comprehensive treatise, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" he describes how people undergo the process of moral, mental, emotional and spiritual transformation: "The individual, through prolonged

psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment" [24].

In early psychological investigations Maslow [25] saw these experiences as the final stage in his hierarchy of needs model, with them delivering a sense of ego-transcendence, becoming in touch with ultimate reality, and a transcendence of all dichotomies. In recent years, self-report instruments have been developed to obtain data on such peak experiences. Early efforts included the Washington University Sentence Completion Test, [26] Cook-Greuter's revised version [27], and Hood's Mysticism Scale [28], followed later by the Brief Index of Self-Actualization [29].

Such nondual experiences seem to be fleetingly accessible to diverse developmental levels rather than only at the "higher" levels [30, 31]. For example, Martin's research "Ego Development Stage Does Not Predict Persistent Non-Symbolic Experience" found a broad variation in psychological maturity [32, 33]. That is, if an individual is capable of nondual or ego-less states, their unprocessed psychological material (developmental delay or arrest), triggered by life events, can interrupt their nondual experience. Hence whilst the highest nondual states appear to occur with people at different levels of maturity, completion of the steps in each developmental line still seems relevant, to both maintain these experiences and fill in gaps in psychological health.

There is also clinical evidence, that such nondual experiences can occur for people with unstable psychological foundations. For example, individuals who practise meditation methods and have not developed a cohesive sense of self (Borderline Personality Disorder), may be more disposed to experiencing states that deconstruct that sense of self [34, 35]. However these experiences can also act as a catalyst for people to implement methods to complete the developmental gaps that keep them from returning to those heightened states.

A key distinction here is whether an individual is having a bona fide spiritual experience or is experiencing some level of psychosis [36]. In clinical presentations it may be necessary to make a differential diagnosis, as whilst both may initially present as experiencing similar phenomena, the associated experience that comes with them is very different [37]. Provision is now made in the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) under the category "Religious or spiritual problem" for crises associated with possible changes in consciousness [38].

Whilst both presentations could involve a form of euphoria and a dissociation from their conventional sense of self, a psychosis is typically characterised by accompanying paranoid or grandiose delusions, thought disorder or hallucinations [39]. Other differentiating indicators of psychosis could include heightened negative affect, a disconnect from reality, disruptions in normal speech or thought processing, including cognitive slippage [40].

By contrast, a spiritual experience, whilst it may also incite an elevation of positive affect, it tends to include feelings of unity (derived from a dissolution of the sense of self), a sense of calm, clarity, transcendence, heightened present moment awareness and sense of purpose [41]. However what makes diagnosis more complex is that characteristics like sleep disturbance, fluctuating affect, impulsive behaviours, seemingly poor judgement, or impaired social functioning, whilst often predictable indicators of mental disturbance, may also occur in someone who has experienced a profound spiritual experience and is struggling to integrate this with their previous functioning baselines [42].

This is well described by Meher Baba in his work with the more advanced versions of this state: "But the case of masts (God-intoxicated) is altogether different in origin, as well as in potentiality. There is no doubt that masts often exhibit an incapacity to deal with the ordinary situations of life; and they are, in this respect, comparable to those who are deranged in mind. But the departure of masts from normal behaviour and responses is not due to lack of sufficient mental development, nor is it due to any chaotic forces of disruption; it is due to a suspension of interest in the ordinary pursuits of life, and to an absorption in the spiritual realities encountered on the path towards Truth-realization" [43].

As spiritual or awakening experiences can trigger a dramatic shift in consciousness, for many it can dismantle default mental styles, such as the tendency to habitually suppress or avoid unpleasant emotions, which in turn can issue in a disruption to the previous status quo. Whilst for most, these events are short-lived and can be somewhat integrated or understood, for those who engage in regular self-opening practices, these events can become habitual and will need more attention and guidance [44].

In view of these possible outcomes it could be seen as reasonable to have some concern about meditation-like practices and their possible contraindications and potential for harm (meditation-related adverse effects or MRAEs). However it is important to dispel the notion that all such reactions are necessarily adverse events, as in some cases they are transient expected outcomes from egoic deconstruction processes, or simply increased awareness of one's current situation [34]. Best practice in value-based healthcare [45] would be to screen such complex presentations before intervention, so as to responsibly differentiate mental health indicators from spiritual health indicators. If bona fide, this rare experience then has the opportunity to not be shut down with medication or invalidation but be nurtured towards spiritual emergence rather than mistreated and either dwindle or become a spiritual emergency [46, 47].

Traumatic events that lead people to dissociate, chemical alteration through drugs and psychedelics [48] or exposure to single pointed concentration activities like some sporting events or fishing that led to flow or in the zone experiences [49], can also trigger these states. These random states, whilst they may result in "beyond the self" experiences, are not stable foundations from which to build the experience in a predictable or ongoing way. They are, however, doorways inviting individuals to then apply robust methodology to build the experience of a "self-lessness".

To progress to the deeper levels of proficiency in the necessary tools is essential. With practice individuals should be able to maintain attention longer in the present moment, be better able to neutrally watch and allow thoughts and emotions that arise, respond freshly to new challenging events or treat apparent enemies with equanimity and kindness [50]. Progressing to a level of mastery that can issue in the nondual states typically takes a solid command of these fundamentals, which is why major religions focus on building the introductory skills, often in tandem with ethics training.

In the religious traditions methods to progress safely and predictably to these states have been developed and refined over thousands of years [51]. Their methods aim to transition the practitioner's experience from a temporary state to an ongoing trait, whilst avoiding developmental gaps that cause personal and interpersonal difficulties if stages are missed. Their preparatory or foundational practices are typically comprehensive and lengthy before the initiate can begin the hazardous work on the deconstruction of the sense of self [52]. In some traditions, to progress to this

advanced end of the teaching curriculum, a student might have to ask the teacher three times for teachings before they were accepted. Or they might have to wait doing menial work for weeks, months or years before the teacher felt they were ready. Having the right motivation, foundation and psychological maturity to even begin the work was paramount, as they would need it to face the dragons from within or without.

There appear however many psychological advantages to being able to access these nondual states, especially when challenging circumstances present. Once stabilised, someone with this level of mastery can act more skilfully in their life areas, whilst maintaining inner calm. However the path and process from novice to master, like all hero's journeys, is scattered with insights and mistakes.

2. Theoretical context

Each spiritual or religious tradition has proposed their own model to explain the progression of maturation on the path to spiritual actualisation. To supply some context to the theoretical framework of the proposed five stages of psychological enlightenment in this chapter, it would be of use to cover some variations offered in various traditions. For example in Hinduism, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras [53] offer a comprehensive set of techniques and instructions culminating in Samadhi, or absorption in the Absolute [54]. His "Eight Limbs of Yoga" include the yamas (non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity, non-greed), and niyamas (cleanliness/purity, contentment, discipline/austerities, self-study, contemplation), and become indicators or traits of adepts [55]. The remaining limbs, asana (yoga postures), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) if practised lead to samadhi (absorption). This in itself has several levels of refinement [56]:

Level 1, Savikalpa Samadhi (4 stages), has progressive levels of concentration and absorption in meditation, moving to bliss and then stillness, latent tendencies remain undissolved. In Level 2, Nirvikalpa Samadhi, psychological imprints have been dissolved and only consciousness remains. It is experienced by withdrawing into meditation and one returns to function in the world with supernormal capacities. Level 3, Dharmamegha Samadhi or complete liberation occurs while still in a physical body. Here the yogi has cleared all residual karmas, and it is characterised by a desireless concentration, the realisation of the self, and limitless knowledge and insight [57, 58].

In Buddhism we have in the earliest Theravada tradition, the presentation of the four noble truths: (1) life is "dukkha" or incapable of satisfying us; (2) the origin of this suffering or "samudaya" is craving and attachment to transient objects; (3) the cessation or "nirodha" of suffering is the releasing of these attachments; (4) and the way "marga" to achieve this is through the eightfold path [59]. This eightfold path, which can serve as both method and indicator of the level of maturity of a practitioner included [60]: right view; right intention; right speech; right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; and right concentration. An ordinary person, who has not understood or practised, is known in Sanskrit as a "pṛthagjana" (without jnana or knowledge), and is considered to be trapped in the endless cycle of samsara or the pursuit of external pleasure and avoidance of pain. If the path is practised this can lead into the four progressive stages of awakening: Stream-enterer (some understanding), Once-returner (reduced desires and ill-will), Non-returner (has overcome sensuality, partially awakened) and the Arahant (fully awakened) [61, 62].

In the later Satipatthana Sutta (The Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness), four levels of practices and attainments are laid out as fundamental to progress [63]. These include: (1) The Contemplation of the Body (Mindfulness of Breathing, The Postures of the Body, Mindfulness with Clear Comprehension, The Reflection on the Repulsiveness of the Body, The Reflection on the Material Elements, and The Nine Cemetery Contemplations; (2) The Contemplation of Feeling (contemplation of pleasant and unpleasant feelings/tones; (3) The Contemplation of Consciousness (contemplation on the impermanence, origination and dissolution of all factors found in consciousness; (4) The Contemplation of Mental Objects [The Five Hindrances (sense-desire, anger, sloth and torpor, agitation and remorse, and doubt), [The Five Aggregates of Clinging (the impermanence of material form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness), The Six Internal and External Sense Bases, The Seven Factors of Enlightenment (the presence of mindfulness, the investigation of mental objects, energy, joy, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity), and an understanding of the previously mentioned Four Noble Truths [59].

In the even later Mahayana Buddhist tradition the Tibetans lay out six "paramitas" or means that a practitioner cultivates on the path to enlightenment [64]. These include generosity (dana), ethical conduct (sila), patience (ksanti), diligence (virya), meditation (dhyana), and wisdom (prajna). Using these practices as a gradual process of effort and refinement, a progressive formula of five paths leading to enlightenment is taught: (a) the path of accumulation—possessing a strong desire to overcome suffering (self and others) and a renunciation of worldly life; (b) the path of preparation—practising meditation, and having a conceptual knowledge of emptiness; (c) the path of seeing—the practice of meditation on the nature of reality, and the realisation of emptiness; (d) the path of meditation—purification and the accumulation of wisdom; (e) the path of no more learning—complete purification [65].

Within these five paths, categorised in seven groupings, there are thirty-seven factors of enlightenment that are practised at specific stages of the first four of the five paths [66]. Once mastered these collection of practices and mental states including such things as ethical conduct, concentration, and equanimity, are then seen as qualities that demonstrate the presence of enlightenment. Following this there are ten stages of development known as "bhumis", or grounds that describe the progression of a practitioner on the path to enlightenment and represent different levels of spiritual development [67]. Whilst described quite differently in multiple sutras [68, 69], in brief these are:

(1) Joyous: first direct perception of emptiness, entry into the third of the five paths, phenomena viewed as empty so loses all attachment, works at the perfecting generosity; (2) stainless: perfect ethics and the overcoming of tendencies for negative actions; (3) light-Maker: radiant, cultivates the perfection of patience and equanimity; (4) radiant: perfection of effort and elimination of afflictions, progressively deeper absorption in meditation, increasingly skilful in wisdom and teaching; (5) difficult to overcome: perfects arduous practices, now difficult to conquer, strong powers of meditation; (6) manifest: experiences phenomena as empty and can abide in undisturbed contemplation of emptiness; (7) gone afar: can be in meditative absorption for long periods of time, know the thoughts of others and can adapt teachings accordingly; (8) unshakeable has overcome all afflictions, completely absorbed in dharma, the bodhisattva has attained nirvana; (9) good wisdom: faultless, mastery of all aspects of dharma—concepts, meaning, grammar, and teaching, magical power to change form if needed to best serve; (10) cloud of dharma: overcome all traces of

affliction, transcend the ordinary laws of time and space, limitless powers like a cloud spontaneously spreads teaching in all directions [70, 71].

In Zen, another later branch of Buddhism, the 10 phases of Zen Ox Herding [72, 73] clearly outline pivotal turning points on the journey: (1) seeking the Ox—searching for fulfilment and happiness in worldly pursuits; (2) finding the tracks—insight that all forms come and go, leaving fleeting satisfaction; (3) first glimpse of the Ox—first spiritual experience or satori; (4) catching the Ox—building a spiritual method and lifestyle; (5) taming the Ox—becoming aware of a "watcher" independent of thoughts, perceptions and emotions; (6) riding the Ox home—now mindful and not ruled by the mind; (7) Ox forgotten, Self Alone—nondual awareness with intermittent returning to identification with the mind, the practitioner exerts no effort, and spontaneously practices without with goal or purpose; (8) both Ox and self-forgotten—duality of practice and practitioner dissolve into oneness; (9) return to the source—the adept completes the process from mountain, to no mountains, to mountain again, everything is the same but without attachment; (10) entering the World—leaving the isolation of the mountain to return to mundane life, spontaneously providing help to those in need—"Barefoot and bare-chested, I mingle with the world; Though covered with dirt, I beam with joy." (p. 2) [74–76].

In Judaism, included in its three core practices of "torah" (study), acts of "hesed" (kindness/love) and "tzedek" (righteousness/justice), is "avodah" (prayer) [77]. Amongst other methods, three stages of self-seclusion meditation "hisbodedus" [78, 79] are recommended including withdrawal from physical stimuli, applying concentrated attention and directing awareness to the Divine, and dissolving into the Creator in a state of oneness "echad" [80]. Historically a Baal Shem (later replaced by the Hasidic tzadik leader) was a Jewish practitioner of Practical Kabbala who was seen to be able to heal, perform miracles and exorcisms, and protect people from disasters. Such individuals were seen to have dutifully performed the two categories of "mitzvoth" (person to person duties and person to God duties) or the "peeling" of the shell towards the five levels of consciousness or communion with God [81, 82].

These levels are: (1) Nefesh—awareness of the body, physical world and surrender of one's will to God and the fulfilment of the commandments); (2) Ruach—love and motivation to serve God, the "the toil of the heart"; (3) Neshama—loving God with all one's soul, "the rapture of the heart", receiving of Divine insight); (4) Chaya—the end of self-seeking, dissolving of the ego, knowledge of absolute truth, the life that Adam had in the Garden); (5) Yechida—"echad" or the state of oneness, one sees the light of the Infinite in everything, all is one with no divisions, one with all-encompassing reality [83].

There is much written over the centuries within the Christian mystical tradition, however like many methods, the focus is less on a detailed delineation of each of the steps on the ladder, and more on the devotional path of faith laid out in the scriptures, rituals and the dogmas. One approach however is a division of the spiritual life into three stages: Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive [84]. Outlined by Garrigou-Lagrange [85] in his "The Three Ages of the Interior Life", he drew from the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas and St John of the Cross [86]. These stages (Nathe [87] adds a "pre-way" stage for those who aren't on the journey) can include:

[Pre-Way—frequent engagement in minor sins, little resistance to major wrongdoing, optional or sporadic prayer and rituals] (1) Purgative Way: (a) Underdeveloped—infrequent engagement in minor sins, weak resistance to major wrongdoing, intermittent prayer and regular rituals; (b) developing—occasional minor sins, strong resistance to major wrongdoing, regular prayer and rituals;

developed—vigilant resistance to minor sins, rare major wrongdoing, some justification of imperfections, very regular prayer and rituals; (2) illuminative way: (a) Underdeveloped—accidental minor sins, no major wrongdoing, imperfections are regretted and renounced, regular prayer and rituals; (b) developing—imperfections guarded against, thirst for self-renunciation and divine love, frequent graces infused prayer and rituals; (3) unitive way: (a) developing—imperfections are impulses only, contemplation infused with supernatural graces and occasional extraordinary phenomena, non-resistant surrender to purification, disinterest in the self; (b) developed—imperfections are rare and not easily apparent; frequent experience of divine union in prayer [88].

Within Islam, Sufism is a more esoteric path [89] that outlines a variety of spiritual practices and stages of spiritual awakening. It is usually divided into a progression from observing religious laws "Sharia", to self-purification and practising the spiritual path "Tariqa", leading to direct realisations of the divine or the experience of mystical truth "Haqiqa", culminating in complete union with the divine "Marifa" [90]. The twelfth century poem, the Conference of the Birds, by Farid Ud-Din Attar [91] famously outlined these stages in terms of valleys, though typically they are referred to as evolving stages of the self or ego "nafs", and are usually ranked from the lowest to highest self [92]:

(1) Egoic Self—characterised by desires like lust, anger or greed, it chases its cravings and material possessions; (2) Reflective Self—the development of self-awareness, one's negative traits and actions are seen inviting repentance; (3) Inspired Self—inspired by a spiritual calling, it seeks to do good, please God and serve others, abandons worldly knowledge as useless in the path; (4) Peaceful Self or Detachment—has a level of self-control, more detached from material desires, building trust in God; (5) Pleased Self or Unity—finds inner peace, satisfaction, and surrenders to the divine will, the realisation that all is connected and God is beyond all forms; (6) Surrendering Self—deep contentment surrenders to the divine, free from self-centred desires with an unbroken sense of union with the Divine, awed by the absolute and what lies beyond the relative; (7) Pure Self or Annihilation—complete purification, the ego is free from attachments, the self disappears into God consciousness. Some writings distinguish in this last stage the ecstatic experience of God intoxication followed by the option of a "second sobriety", which includes the transformed mystic returning to the world as a living witness [93–95].

The above examples, in coming from a broad range of religious traditions, typically bring with them the cultural characteristics or beliefs of those frameworks. A more psycho-spiritual model, proposed by James Fowler, identifies six stages of how people progress from a simple to more complex belief systems [96, 97]. The "Stages of Faith" according to Fowler are:

(1) Intuitive-Projective Faith: in early childhood, faith arises from experiences and relationships with caregivers; (2) Mythic-Literal Faith: during middle childhood, faith builds through stories and symbols or religious texts; (3) Synthetic-Conventional Faith: by adolescence, faith is shaped by the social norms and the community; (4) Individuative-Reflective Faith: in young adulthood, an individual critically examines and take responsibility for beliefs; (5) Conjunctive Faith: by mid-adulthood, a more complex and integrative understanding or experience of faith occurs; (6) Universalizing Faith: in this final rare stage, individuals may develop a profound sense of oneness and dedicate themselves to causes and universal values greater than themselves.

It is of note that this last stage is the foundational point for some of the models given previously. This level is also similar to Kohlberg's post-conventional fifth and sixth stages where someone may disobey rules that are not consistent with their beliefs in human rights or justice [98]. In Stage six (universal ethical principles driven), abstract moral reasoning is derived from perceived universal ethical principles, rather than rules per se. Kohlberg thought there may be even a seventh stage of Transcendental Morality, or Morality of Cosmic Orientation, which linked spiritual experience of religion with moral reasoning, however, he struggled to obtain empirical evidence for this [99].

Along with the growth of humanistic psychology [25, 100, 101], transpersonal psychology [102] developed to address the self-transcendent experiences (STEs), often triggered by extreme conditions, psychedelics and meditation practices [103]. It's focus was on both practices that contributed to the expansion of self, and the impact of these experiences upon mental and physical health. Since this field spread into the so-named popular psychology arena in recent years [104], there have been many secular or mainstream attempts to delineate the process, and the investigation has burgeoned [105, 106].

Some of the features of such awakenings identified in secular or non-religious frameworks include decreased interest in material possessions or financial wealth; decreased sense of separateness from others; decreased mental noise or emotional reactivity; increased sense of union or interconnectedness; increased compassion and altruism; increased calm, gratitude and well-being, and ultimately a sense of oneness or no sense of self [41, 107, 108]. Scales have also been developed to capture some of these characteristics including: The Enlightenment Scale [109], Hawkins' Consciousness Scale [110], Daily Spiritual Experience Scale [111], Spiritual Enlightenment Experience Scale [112], A Scale to Measure Nonattachment [113], and The Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment (NADA) [114].

2.1 Proposed model

In view of the diversity and cultural specificity of some of the above models, we would do well to have our own more mainstream, psychologically informed categories with similar state or stage identifiers. To this end, given the relative paucity of investigation within the field of psychology, a theoretical framework of five primary stages of psychological enlightenment and how the stages are derived was proposed. It is argued that if these stages are fundamental to the actualisation of human potential [5], there should be easily identifiable markers that might be expected along the way.

In the following sections, we will explore what can occur in each stage, and the implications for the practitioner. Starting with "Stage 1: Pre-state—Conventional sense of self", we look at the normal or conventional way of relating to oneself and events. In "Stage 2: Mindfulness" we explore what might be expected when an individual starts to step back and objectively observe mental processes. In "Stage 3: Awakenings (State)" we examine the stage where intermittent gaps in the normal sense of self or awakenings to the nondual experience start to occur. In "Stage 4: Awakened (Trait)" the transition of the nondual experiences of "no self" from temporary states to a persisting trait, is outlined. Finally in "Stage 5: Enlightenment", the rarest of states, we investigate what it might be like when an individual experiences an unchanging nondual state where all psychological fluctuations cease, and the practitioner is seen to be perfected with control over phenomena.

3. Stage 1: Pre-state—Conventional sense of self

3.1 Literature

Early psychological research into happiness focused primarily on quality of life areas like relationships, work, money, health, and leisure. These elements were initially seen to play a significant role [115–117]. However, over time, it became evident that these life circumstances had a surprisingly small impact (8–15%) due to the influence of cognitive processes [118, 119].

The research emphasis shifted to the subjective factors of cognition and affect [120–122] leading to the development of constructs like subjective well-being [116], life satisfaction [123], and psychological well-being [124]. These constructs have become widely used in research, policy, and practice, despite their varying or overlapping components [125].

As the research into happiness progressed, the consensus was that it was comprised of objective conditions and subjective processes. The latter included affect [126], and cognitive processes that assessed the level of satisfaction with one's life [127–129]. Within this model, positive and negative events were seen to temporarily affect well-being, but according to constructs like the Dynamic Equilibrium Model [130], most people can adapt back to pre-existing well-being levels [131]. Well-being is believed to be under homeostatic control (Homeostatically Protected Mood) within a set-point that enables people to return to a similar level of life satisfaction [132, 133]. This almost autonomous self-regulating system comprises of buffers like optimism, reframing, problem solving or seeking social support to get back on track [134].

When asked, "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?" populations reported themselves to be only three-quarters (75%) satisfied with their lives [135]. From an evolutionary psychology framework [136], up to now such partial satisfaction has been argued to serve some function such as being a protective neurophysiological state [137], with increased positive affect being linked to increased risk-taking [138]. That is, it is acknowledged that it is beneficial to be happy, but not excessively so, lest we get too reckless.

3.2 Indicators

This pre-state stage reflects the normal or conventional way of relating to oneself and events. Here people experience pleasure if things go well, pain if things go badly. It is not absent of goodness or insights but typically an individual is unable to experience a state of well-being that feels good no matter what is going on (happy for no reason). Here well-being comes from the quality of one's thoughts, life events, and interpersonal connections.

This approach is based on the premise that there are basic human needs, and if people fulfil their needs, they are more likely to be happy. The focus is on achieving satisfaction across critical life areas like relationships, work or money. The perception of quality of life is determined by the width of the gap between expectations and outcomes [139], with each individual setting these markers differently.

Expectations can be based upon judgements of previous performance, future predictions, ideals, or others' performance. The bigger the gap, the lower the reported quality of life. With this approach a major predictor of self-esteem is social comparison [140]. If there is a significant gap between how one views one's performance

versus others, in domains important to that individual, then self-esteem will consequently be low (or high).

Driven by the survival drive and its dual forces of minimising pain and maximising of pleasure, individuals who experience such a gap or a negative event, will seek strategies to reduce the gap [141, 142]. They may target the event to better match expectations (problem-solving) or alter expectations (reframing). They might choose to fight to change the event, flee from it, or freeze and ignore it.

If the problem solving response is successful and the negative event is resolved, they recalibrate back to their premorbid well-being baseline [143]. However, if the event cannot be changed, they can still alter their expectations, by reframing it and changing their response to it, allowing individuals to adapt to unchanging outcomes. In this approach, the well-being set point is relatively stable, unless disrupted by events. When problems arise that affect this, the adaptation response is triggered, recalibrating it back to baseline or previous well-being levels [144].

This self-regulating process, similar to maintaining body temperature, blood glucose, or water levels, is maintained through a complex blend of positive, neutral, and negative beliefs that have evolved to ensure psychological survival. Although events may temporarily affect mood or affective state, they usually do not change deeply entrenched belief systems, resulting in a typical return to baseline once emotions subside [145].

With this model however, people remain vulnerable to events that exceed their mental resources or adaptation abilities. If a traumatic event occurs, an individual may not be able to recalibrate easily back to baseline. If an acute crisis becomes chronic, their mental state may remain compromised, establishing a new baseline. This is typically when individuals seek counselling or additional resources. If successful and they upgrade their skillset, they may return to or surpass their previous well-being point, however to protect well-being, they must be adept at negotiating life events that challenge its stability. And if they cannot, even if temporarily, then well-being will suffer [146].

4. Stage 2: Mindfulness

4.1 Literature

The arrival of modern mindfulness and its diverse group of techniques [147] has sparked extensive research into the advantages of building self-awareness. Its methods have been found to diminish personal biases related to self-processing and support the maintenance of subjective well-being [148]. Practitioners aim to cultivate meta-awareness (self-awareness), the ability to modulate their behaviour (self-regulation), and build qualities such as interpersonal skills, and empathic accuracy [149].

Typically, someone who has entered stage two aims to use methods like mindfulness to both develop non-judgmental attention to the present moment [150] and better regulate their behaviour in a more prosocial way. Practices such as focused attention, open monitoring, and loving-kindness are employed with the aim to build awareness, concentration, and compassion [151]. Such techniques assist in maintaining well-being levels or restoring mood homeostasis [145].

One drawback however of trying various practices outside of a cohesive model or process [152] is that progression to higher well-being levels may be hindered, as steps built into these models may be missed. In the more recent applications of mindfulness

techniques there are a range of methods that whilst effective in themselves [153, 154], are designed to produce very different effects [155]. For example some interventions to improve well-being or reduce anxiety, have been isolated from a larger set of practices originally designed to deconstruct subject-object duality [1].

Despite this, what is still possible with any of the techniques, is the beginning of a type of mental objectivity and greater control over the mind. Old beliefs and feelings that normally dictated the sense of self and actions, have the chance to be observed more neutrally, reducing their power. As a practitioner develops the ability to step back and observe their mind, they start to be able to switch from "I believe that…" to "I am having the thought that…" [156].

With input from neuroscience, we have now found that developing such objectivity and present moment awareness, decreases unnecessary rumination, increases activation of "task-positive" brain regions related to life skills such as conflict monitoring and cognitive control [157, 158], and enhances well-being [159, 160]. By being able to neutrally observe their mental processes, individuals gain greater choice in whether to engage with or disengage from their thoughts and emotions in order to protect, maintain, or optimise well-being [22, 161, 162].

Such freed-up attentional resources [163] lead practitioners to exhibit reduced activity in the default mode network associated with rumination [164], increased activity in brain regions linked to cognitive control [165], and a richer cognitive, sensory, and perceptual response to stimuli. Regarding relationships to others, such training increases altruistic behaviours [166] and fires up increased activity in parts of the brain, like the insular cortex, that are associated with empathy [167].

4.2 Indicators

This capacity to neutrally watch mental phenomena as passing mental events, also includes a reduced resistance to emotional or physical movements, and an increase in a stance of openness. In this stage people can begin to be less reactive to passing pains or pleasures, whilst still learning to balance quality of life and live their life as functionally as possible. There are a range of attributes or qualities that can be developed [168]. Under a grouping of what could be called Clear Mind some of these could include:

(1) Present moment awareness: a present time, moment by moment awareness of thoughts, feelings and sensations; (2) neutrality: the ability to neutrally observe thoughts, feelings and sensations as passing events; (3) clarity: the ability to clearly identify one's beliefs and emotions; (4) regulation of attention: the capacity to disengage from thought and direct attention as required; (5) thought suspension: the ability to suspend engagement in thought and just be. Attributes focusing more on affect and an open approach to people and life events could be characterised under Open Heart, and could include: (1) openness: openness to life events (people, opinions, and experiences); (2) acceptance: the ability to accept and allow rather than avoid either good or bad feelings; (3) response freshness: to respond uniquely or freshly to each new event; (4) relaxation: a natural relaxation response to life events; (5) interpersonal equanimity: the capacity to treat others non-judgmentally or compassionately [169, 170].

When individuals become more skilful at stepping back and observing their mental process, they also tend to deal with current problems more effectively as there is less mental static or interference [171]. This increasing objectivity and freedom to choose what thoughts to listen to, make it easier to identify maladaptive schemas and

behavioural repertoires, thus reducing the psychological load they accumulate over their life.

With sufficient practice or opportunity, past residual trauma can also be processed, or as Freud argued, the latent becomes manifest [172]. Life events that trigger unprocessed psychological material provide opportunities to deconstruct past cognitive distortions that need review. As practitioners develop the ability to watch thoughts pass, and experience feelings as transient, mental movements can begin to lose their agency. This can lead to the experience of relating to thoughts as just thoughts, rather than thoughts as "me". At this point the "watcher" or witnessing self that can objectively watch thoughts may also come under question—what is watching the thoughts?

5. Stage 3: Awakenings (State)

5.1 Literature

The self as described in Stages 1 and 2, is a stable, independent, and cohesive entity that that works to be robust in the face of psychological challenges [173]. In Stage 3, for the first time, the sense of "me" begins to present as less tangible, rather than as a familiar solid defined point or location. The transition from the conventional sense of self, that generates its well-being from an ability to manage its environment, involves a fundamental shift—the replacement of the dualistic subject-object perception of me and the world, to no apparent sense of a "me".

Jung [174] referred to the first two stages as individuation, the process of integrating the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche, and saw that to become one's true integrated self, was the primary goal of human development. He also then argued that this process was in preparation for the next step: "The first half of life is devoted to forming a healthy ego, the second half is going inward and letting go of it." (p. 399). Interestingly, Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, was influenced by Jung and asserted that the "recovery" or purification stage got people started, however it was having a "vital spiritual experience" that was the foundational healing of addiction [175].

When an individual begins to experience such a discontinuance or interruption of a continuous sense of a self [176], it is a departure from the default and can manifest in many ways. For example, in advanced mindfulness practices, it can spontaneously occur when practitioners master the ability to observe the mind's fluctuating nature without judgement [177–179].

In Wilber's [180] integral theory and subsequent four-quadrant grid, he delineated ten principal stages in the spectrum of consciousness. These cross referenced cognitive, moral, and object relations lines of development against stages of consciousness identified in the contemplative traditions. Wilber identified that individuals who had such nondual or non-symbolic experience spanned a range of developmental levels [50]. However, to achieve consistently higher levels and transform these experiences from temporary states to permanent traits, repetition and practice were still required.

This aligns with the structured approach of the religious traditions, which prepare their students through sequenced practices. Whether it is seen as a dissolution of the self, absorption, surrender to the divine, awakening to the nondual nature, or enlightenment [1, 181, 182], a systematic method is always presented as fundamental to sustaining these outcomes.

In recent years, neuroscience researchers have been looking into how the brain's neural networks help create and sustain the sense of self. Andrews-Hannah and colleagues [183] found eleven brain centres that play a role in different types of "selfing." For instance, the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex is linked to "self-and-other," the medial temporal lobe handles the "self-in-time," and the insula deals with emotional states that shape our self-perception. Brewer, Garrison, and Whitfield-Gabrieli [184] also found that if the prefrontal cortex subsystem is turned off, we lose our sense of time and feel timeless. If the temporal lobe is turned off, we may feel a sense of unity or no separation.

Moments of ecstasy, deep meditation, or even epileptic seizures can interrupt or make this "selfing" disappear. For meditation practitioners, who are adept, as the Dalai Lama noted, in experiencing "the mind observing itself" [185], a reduced identification with this mind-body signal can allow them to respond to events in literally a "self-less" way. To support these experiences occurring, just as in Stage Two, advanced concentration methods can be used to both improve attentional regulation skills and reduce discursive thinking.

Once these skillsets develop, the tendency to relate to all thoughts (including the "I" thought) as objective realities (cognitive reification), can be addressed through deconstructive practices that dismantle the "self-schema" or self-beliefs [21, 22]. By examining the thinking, feeling, and perceiving processes that create the sense of self or "minimal phenomenal self" [186], these methods aim to uncover what it might be like to experience the "self" as "substance-less".

This approach moves beyond the introductory levels of mindfulness, and argues that the notion of a self is an unnecessary construct that is mistakenly perceived as an independently existing, stable agent (subject) separate from thought (object) [187]. In the contemplative traditions, such constructs are seen as false and limiting, obstructing the otherwise naturally arising state of enlightenment or self-less perception [19, 188]. This new construct is in stark contrast with the conventional notions of the self as found in Stages 1 and 2, where the experience of a sense of self is founded on a sense of place, purpose and boundary.

5.2 Indicators

After typically a substantial amount of practice, intermittent gaps in the normal sense of identity, or awakenings, can start to happen. Words may be experienced as empty thought forms, and an expanded sense of space or absence of an obvious sense of self can occur [189]. Practitioners move from initially being able to watch thoughts neutrally, to experiencing the emptiness of the words that make up these thoughts. Similarly when the facility of allowing emotions builds, it leads to an increasing emotional openness. These changes are the beginnings of a movement towards Maslow's self-actualisation [5].

If they have progressed to sustaining a silent mind, there might also be a sense of a "me" that can watch silently the gap between thoughts (the silent witness). When a practitioner sustains this mindful watching, they perceive the sense of "me" more lightly, and like the words, it can begin to feel optional. There is still the experience of thinking, feeling, sensing, and acting, but it feels lighter. When they progress from neutrally watching their thoughts to watching the sense of self, it begins to appear less solid.

Over time the perceived transparency or emptiness of the thoughts can move to the "I thought" or the "me" [190]. At this point of progress a practitioner is able to

objectively investigate the point from where the "I" is looking. Here the experience of being not just the nonjudgmental watcher, but more a type of neutral awareness that is doing the watching, can emerge. A type of intangible self that is not merely a composite of thoughts, feelings, and sensations. In these moments, the practitioner can experience themselves beyond the limitations of what their thoughts say they are, as articulated by Wittgenstein "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." [191].

Such experiences can also randomly occur in events like intense suffering, psychedelics, lovemaking, or an ecstatic sunset [192]. Typically, they close quickly as they are unfamiliar, and the person is not able to hold this state (state not trait). The first experience of this type of consciousness is usually unexpected, as it occurs as a break from the normal flow or "sense of a self" existence. These glimpses however typically occur in response to consistent mindfulness-like methods that involve stepping back and watching the mind stream of thoughts and feelings.

If there is regular practice, there can be an increase in the frequency, duration and intensity [193] of the experiences of the "no-self". With such practice intermittent openings or awakenings can consolidate and move towards becoming the default experience of operating in the world. However, often there is much psychological clearing (tapas) to be done before the state of stabilisation occurs. The appearance of latent tendencies, old ways of being, or attachments continue to occur and need to be met with non-judgmental awareness, that can watch rather than react to the passing mental events.

Life areas like work, money, and relationships [168] are quite common places that need to be renegotiated. Practitioners may have an occasional experiences of themselves beyond their fluctuating thoughts, feelings, and sensations, however, for this to stabilise, there is much to purify. If however there is an growing shift from an external to an internal source of well-being [194, 195], individuals can feel less dependent on life events needing to go to plan to maintain well-being.

Opening experiences can trigger an internal reshuffle, as the individual is now different in some way and the rest of their moveable parts, psychologically speaking, need to readjust [196]. When regular openings, satoris or awakenings are combined with practices of seeing through default identifications with long-held beliefs, old mental styles can fall away or not be believed so rigorously. Worries may still remain and get activated or triggered, but there may not be enough charge to maintain the full reaction repertoires.

The changes in this clearing out stage can be challenging to face and include a lot of energy movement, as past trauma and unintegrated psychological material can surface for years. It is seen that such fears are essentially empty, a mental projection or illusion, and that what is happening mentally about an event is the cause of distress rather than a past event that no longer is occurring. In watching and allowing the thoughts, feelings, and sensations until they pass, proof of change is signified by either no reaction, or a relaxed accepting of any residual mental movement.

As practitioners progress in this stage, there can also be a drawing to inner stillness, to conducive peaceful life conditions and a growing disinterest in needing events to fuel well-being. This integration stage invites jobs, relationships and other responsibilities to be re-negotiated, as any previous arrangements set up for security or happiness become less required. One of the consequences of these changes can be an increased interest in the well-being of others [155, 197], though this might be preceded by an initial inward focus.

Experience and interest progressively shifts from event-based well-being to inner well-being. This stabilisation stage is typically long, and most advanced practitioners

who progress this far, end up staying here for the duration. Whilst they might be able to intermittently access this free, no-self place, most are not able to stay there or access it on demand. However with consistent good method, this may progress and issue in the next stage of a more predictable experience [13, 198].

6. Stage 4: Awakened (Trait)

6.1 Literature

The inquiry into nondual experiences usually, but not always, distinguishes between temporary and persisting states [199, 200]. Terms such as 'awakenings', "satoris" or mystical experiences refer to brief or singular events where the sense of self dissolves, resulting in an experience of oneness with everything.

By contrast the terms "awake" or "awakened" (distinct from "woke"), generally describe long-term or enduring nondual states [201]. This is when the experience has settled, and it is the default state, although unprocessed elements of the psyche may still arise and require clearing. Maslow [5] approached this distinction in his concept of self-actualisation, by using "peak experience" for temporary states and "plateau experience" for sustained ones.

Nondual or awakening experiences, in some literature, are regarded as the culmination or apex of psychological development [12, 29] and are seen to typically only happen after dedicated practice. While this sequence is generally the case, there is substantial evidence that they are also accessible along the way rather than only at the later stages [30, 31].

These experiences engender feelings of ego-transcendence, a sense of connection with an ultimate reality, and a transcending of dichotomies. Nondual experiences often begin as temporary insights or experiences [32], with advanced practitioners aiming to develop the capability to transform these temporary states into a continuous experience [202].

In Tibetan Buddhist psychology (which varies across the four Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug schools of thought), three training outcomes can be outlined as markers of this progression: "Mindfulness", "Calm abiding", and "Insight" [1]. These are: (1) Mindfulness—when practitioners attain an awareness of consciousness, or meta-awareness, that allows them to observe mental phenomena without clinging or aversion, yet they still perceive from a subject-object duality; (2) Calm Abiding—the mind is now able to remain in a state of one-pointed concentration for a prolonged period of time, and they can perceive phenomena in an interconnected way as occurring spontaneously; (3) Insight—involves directly experiencing nondual awareness, with the capacity to engage each moment with sustained non-referential awareness (no sense of self) [6, 198, 203].

In this last stage, such an accomplished practitioner is seen as walking the path of a "bodhisattva" (*byang chub sems dpa*), or "hero of the enlightened mind" [204]. With the aspiration to go beyond the conventional goals of well-being, they have trained the mind to attain a nondual cognitive state "for the benefit of all sentient beings" (ultimate bodihicitta) [205]. Here the practitioner recognises, whilst continuing to serve others, that there are no independent entities such as "I" (subject), "mind," or "things" (object). Instead, mental (subjective) and physical (objective) phenomena are viewed as interdependent and empty of inherent existence.

Recent research data on these stages of progression suggest that advanced meditators that transition from focused attention (FA) to open monitoring (OM) and achieve these effortless "no thought" states, exhibit a decrease in overall brain activity, indicating cessation of intentional control [206]. This forms an inverted U-shaped curve [207], with beginner meditators showing more activation in attentional areas than untrained controls, but advanced meditators showing less activation, indicating they needed to make no effort to remain undistracted [208].

Other research on the nondual experience finds it is correlated with decreased activity in areas responsible for body sense (medial parietal areas). For example, adepts who report a sense of expanded space, no sense of self, and timelessness showed reduced neurological activity in perceptual processing areas [209]. Such physiological correlates of consciousness [210] support traditional mindfulness theory that the sense of self is not a physical or locatable entity, and any perceived sense of self can be interrupted or potentially deconstructed voluntarily [211] and remain dismantled.

These experiences are outlined in the Buddhist typology of concentration states (jhana). For example the fourth Jhana state (infinity of space), is described as the experience of formless absorption. Here the self is not limited to its normal sense of spatio-temporal continuity but rather is perceived as connected to the expanse of empty space [7].

One characteristic of this experience is the report of so called "uncaused happiness" or bliss, states not associated with external stimuli. Vaitl et al. [212] found that when such meditators reported blissful states, they were associated with greatly elevated positive affect and increased theta synchronisation [213]. Hagerty et al.'s [208] research also supports this by mapping the brain wave patterns of an adept meditator who could generate on demand progressively more blissful states for sustained periods.

6.2 Indicators

At this point of Stage 4, remaining layers that may have held together a conventional sense of self have worn away "the apple falls from the tree", and the default is a "no-self" state [33]. Meditation transitions to being able to turn awareness onto itself and absorb into the experience of oneness or union, rather than being directed towards a chosen meditation object. It is characterised by a restful sense of space, varying levels of peace or bliss, and the comprehension that nothing outside of itself can add to the experience.

Also described as the natural resting state [214], there is decreasing mental movement, and attachments (too much desire/too much aversion) that have not been integrated can be triggered or spontaneously arise. However the relationship to them is very different as, if seen, they are able to be experienced as non-substantial mental movements, rather than solid entities with an inherently meaningful existence or validity.

However, as these can still influence thoughts and behaviours, previous practices are still required. With sustained awareness, the beliefs, emotions and behaviours connected to them can gradually disappear. Interestingly the Buddhist notion of attachment (too much desire or too much aversion) is reflected in the previously referenced DSM-5, under the diagnostic categories of Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder (anxious and clinging) and Reactive Attachment Disorder (mistrustful and avoidant). Whilst criteria must be met to achieve diagnosis, it highlights the bidirectional tendencies that all individuals must integrate to achieve balance.

With time and practice individuals experience an increased mental clarity with their energy often being described as lighter or stronger [215]. There is mostly a

growing inclination towards some form of altruism [205, 216], as the default of self-preoccupation has dissolved. Some of the risks, however, include a mistaken but unseen identification with some senses of a superior "self" due to an increasingly untouchable mental state, a habit of leadership without supervision, and a lack of acknowledgement when residual attachments intermittently arise.

After what is usually a rigorous self-watching stage, there is often a returning of attention back to the world to contribute, whilst operating from a more expanded or self-less experience. One of the many challenges can be to functionally integrate back into normal society and relate to others still operating within a conventional event-based well-being model of optimising their life conditions [19]. As time passes the integration becomes easier or more mature.

As explained in Zen: "First mountain, then no mountain, then mountain again" [217]. During this stage, which typically lasts until death, some choose to live a more silent anonymous mystical life of ongoing purification,, as articulated by Wittgenstein "Of what one cannot speak about, one must be silent" [191], while others choose to teach and translate their experience within a tradition or from their own formulations. Others may remain living their lives as before, however all versions are transformed, lit up by an invisible inner well-being.

During this penultimate stage there is also a perceptible increase in functioning [15]. Whilst varied it can include both increased mental and physical reaction times, increases in intuition, insight, and a general elevation in skills across a range of areas. Whilst the full scope of these enhanced capabilities will be covered in Stage Five, the gradual development of special abilities, is seen as the natural unfolding of human potential [218].

7. Stage 5: Enlightenment

7.1 Literature

In some literature and schools of thought, the terms "awakening" and "enlightenment" are used interchangeably for the stabilised nondual experience [219]. However, like the terms "quality of life" and "subjective well-being", they are actually different constructs [220]. The term awakening refers to the nondual experience where there is either a transient or permanent dissolution of a tangible sense of self, leaving in its place a relaxed or peaceful emptiness or no sense of self. However in this stage, unprocessed psychological phenomena can still move, seen and unseen in the psyche, leading to errors in judgement and variations in the depth of the experience.

Enlightenment, on the other hand, traditionally refers to the stage beyond this. In this extremely rare stage, what remains is an unchanging state where all psychological purification has now ceased, and there is no mistaken view or unseen self-referential biases [221, 222]. The individual is seen to be perfected and has complete control over all phenomena. This rarest of states is when there is nothing left to purify as all self-serving tendencies have naturally dissolved or been seen through. The essential nature is expressed without any hindrance and is associated with full control over whatever is in in attention. In many traditions this is typically associated with what is seen as miraculous, or beyond our understanding of known laws. This is the final or perfected example of human potential.

An early example of this is Siddhartha Gautama or the Buddha [223], who is seen to have achieved the state of perfect enlightenment as an outcome of long term

ascetical practices and meditation. He is described as also having access to supernormal abilities, which in the sutras he is reported as discouraging students to display or seek for their own sake [224]. To assist others achieve his experience themselves, he taught the previously outlined Four Noble Truths and Eight-fold path (including mindfulness), leading ultimately to the deconstruction of the false sense of a solid self [225].

In line with the range of theoretical frameworks presented in the Introduction, the three main branches of Buddhism (Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana), all assert the possibility of perfection for a practitioner, known respectively as arahant, bodhisattva and mahasiddha [226]. In these advanced or final stages of practice practitioners are seen to develop special abilities in comparison to normal functioning [227]. These aptitudes are seen as a natural outcome of seeing through the illusion that the subjective self and objective phenomena are separate and inherently existent entities.

7.2 Indicators

In the Tibetan Buddhist school of Dzogchen [228], which includes a "pointing-out instruction" ("ngo sprod"), or direct introduction to the nature of mind, the first step of training ("Treckcho") targets stabilising such non-dual awareness or awakening. If this is achieved only then can it be followed by the advanced practices of "Togal" or training in special abilities in service of others [20]. This order is set to prevent a practitioner from developing special abilities derived from concentration that are not pure, ego-less and in service of humanity—aka the antihero [13, 229].

In early Theravadin texts, six abilities known as the "abhinnas" (siddhis) or higher knowledge, are reported to spontaneously unfold for practitioners who have attained progressive levels of concentration or "jhana" states. In most accounts, the practitioner must have progressed past the first four "material" jhanas before supernormal mental abilities start to manifest [230], however there is some divergence as to when they are seen to manifest. The levels of jhana illustrate a step-by-step progression in mental control, and in various sutras, the Buddha encourages disciples to develop the jhana states, which are integral to the practice of right concentration in the eightfold path [231]. As the average mindfulness practitioner rarely achieves the first level depicted by these states [232], empirical studies seldom evaluate practitioners who have progressed through the jhana states, however they are foundational for the development of the full range of human capabilities in Buddhist theory [233]. In summary they are:

(1) First jhana (joy)—uninterrupted concentration with pleasant sensation or background bliss; (2) Second jhana (contentment)—the dissolution of bliss and progression to motionless, quiet contentment; (3) Third jhana (utter peacefulness)—equanimity without positive or negative feelings, continuous one-pointedness; (4) Fourth jhana (infinity of space)—absorption without forms, attention moves beyond the body with the self being experienced as expansive empty space [145]; (5) Fifth jhana (infinity of consciousness)—awareness perceives a sense of infinite space (oneness with all existence) that includes one's own consciousness; (6) Sixth jhana (no-thingness)—infinite consciousness itself is seen as empty of abiding existence, but in a constant state of change (increasing, maintaining or decreasing); (7) Seventh jhana (neither perception nor non-perception)—going beyond the duality of perception and yet awareness remains; (8) Eighth jhana (cessation)—the cessation of overt consciousness, leaving a perception of oneness with everything (can appear unconscious) [7, 230].

In Hinduism the list of these abilities can number as many as twenty-four [234]. Some of the extraordinary faculties outlined in this tradition include: (1) Performing Miracles (psychokinesis)—attaining extraordinary physical powers such as disappearing, walking on water, passing through solid objects, or flying; (2) Celestial Hearing (clairaudience)—being able to hear sounds from far away or other realms; (3) Knowledge of Thoughts (telepathy)—communicating without words and understanding unspoken languages, including those of animals; (4) Knowledge of the Past and Future (knowledge beyond time)—knowing past and future events of both themselves and others, including other life cycles; (5) Celestial Vision (clairvoyance)—having vision that is free and unobstructed, with the ability to see things in minuscule detail, from far away, through solid objects, in the dark, or understanding the nature of someone's mind; (6) Eradication of All Defilements (end of suffering)—realisation of enlightenment or nirvana (seen as the attainment of greatest value), where the practitioner transcends the cycle of birth and death [218, 222, 235].

As mentioned earlier, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras outline a graded progression of gross to subtle practices through the eight limbs of yoga, leading the aspirant to union or absorption (samadhi) [58, 236, 237]. From this state, abilities beyond normal functioning (siddhis) are believed to develop [224, 238, 239]. If a practitioner perfects these practices, eight abilities (siddhis) are thought to develop, including the capacity to: (1) decrease the body to any size; (2) expand one's body indefinitely; (3) become as heavy as needed; (4) become weightless; (5) be anywhere at will; (6) manifest immediately whatever is thought; (7) exert control over nature and natural forces, and (8) experience undiluted happiness.

In another Hindu text, the Bhagavata Purana, Krishna lists 10 signs that indicate a person has achieved perfect mastery [240], including the capacity to: (1) be unaffected by hunger, thirst, and physical desires; (2) have the ability to hear distant sounds; (3) see things far away; (4) move one's body in line with one's thoughts (teleportation or astral projection); (5) assume any form at will; (6) entering form (alive or inert); (7) choose the moment of death; (8) interact with beings in different realms; (9) perfectly manifest intentions; and (10) execute commands or instructions unhindered.

Although these abilities may seem remarkable or desirable, they are always seen as secondary to achieving self-realisation or perfection (kaivalya) [58]. In all traditions, it is believed that the complete set of abilities cannot be fully realised until the practitioner has reached a state of perfection. Only when they are unwavering, pure, and untouchable can their full human potential be unlocked without limitations, however both such a state and its effects are understood to progressively unfold. There is some evidence that some of the lesser faculties can occasionally occur naturally in some individuals with little to moderate training (the scope of western parapsychological research) [241]. However, the full set of attributes is seen to be reached only after the highest states of concentration are under the complete control of the practitioner [10].

Given the magnitude of the proposed states and abilities found in the final stage of enlightenment, it is reasonable to seek verification of the literature that proposes they are simply the full spectrum of human potential. In response to this there is now a growing body of literature documenting empirical findings about advanced meditators [208, 242, 243]. However, as mentioned earlier, a demographic constraint indicated in some research, is that the attainment of such levels is both taboo to self-reveal (considered an obstruction on the path to enlightenment) and exceedingly rare, with traditions citing that only one in a thousand of a thousand of a thousand practitioners could reach such levels of attainment [235].

8. Conclusion

The journey of progression on the path to actualising our potential is a complex one, but it seems both possible and able to be marked with signs along the way [178]. For example, in the beginning, as a result of an insight, event, or meditative practice, an individual can begin to question the path of the conventional sense of self (Stage 1), where well-being pivots on being elevated if one experiences pleasure if things go well, or decreases if one experiences pain or some form of distress if things go badly.

They may then start the journey of Stage 2 (Mindfulness) where they learn to observe thoughts and feelings. With this new level of nonjudgmental objectivity, they may develop a silent witnessing mind that can see thoughts as passing mental events rather than objective realities. With sustained practice, Stage 3 awakening events may occur, where a gap in the normal stream of thoughts occurs, leading to an interruption to the normal sense of a continuous self.

These nondual events may increase in frequency, duration and intensity, and lead to a more ongoing sense of interior space, and a deeper perception of the emptiness of subtle (mental) and gross (objects) phenomena. Over time with the right practices, these intermittent states may stabilise, and the process come to an end, leaving a default of the ongoingly awakened state of Stage 4, an altruistic, peaceful resting state with no discernible sense of self and increased functionality [244]. Finally after seemingly an infinite amount of practice, Stage 5 of enlightenment is seen as possible. Seen as an extraordinary uninterrupted blissful state of happiness, along with its set of unlimited capacities, it has been persistently argued in all religious traditions, that such attainments are achievable [221, 227].

With the burgeoning increase now in evidence-based mindfulness research (including neuroscience), we are at a juncture unlike any time in history, to evaluate the psychology of enlightenment and its associated stages. We have an opportunity to plumb the findings of millennia old traditions and put them to the test. However we need to continue to both translate methods and outcomes into comprehensible psychological language and find common ground with our western concepts of happiness and human potential [236]. The contemplative traditions of both East and West, appear to contain comprehensive systems and antidotes to our mental health inquiry, and as such provide an opportunity for us to explore if we can raise the bar from coping to contentment.

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Chapter 3

Enlightenment and the Psychology of Self-Transcendence: Pathways to Fundamental Well-Being and Prosocial Behavior

Matthew Furnell and William Van Gordon

Abstract

The concept of enlightenment has long intrigued scholars and contemplation practitioners alike, often associated with profound insights into the nature of self and reality. This chapter explores the notion of enlightenment through the lens of non-dualism, emphasizing the dissolution of the independent, single, permanent self and the emergence of self-transcendent experiences. Such experiences are characterized by a sense of universal oneness, benevolence, compassion, and an overarching feeling of happiness and love. We critically evaluate various practices that have been proposed to facilitate these states, including near-death experiences, insight meditation, and the use of psychedelic substances. By examining empirical studies that have implemented these practices, we critically assess their role in promoting well-being and positive effects on individuals' psychological states and behavior. Through a comprehensive analysis, this chapter aims to illuminate key pathways to enlightenment and their potential to foster a more compassionate and harmonious human existence.

Keywords: emptiness, nonduality, self-transcendence, meditation, near-death experience, psychedelics, psilocybin, Buddhism, well-being, prosocial behavior, enlightenment, nonself

1. Introduction

> *"Enlightenment is the moment the wave realizes that it is water."*
>
> – Nhat Hanh [1], p. 138

Enlightenment, as understood across various spiritual traditions, represents a profound transformation in consciousness and perception of reality. In Buddhism, enlightenment (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*) is understood as an awakening to the true nature of reality, leading to the dissolution of attachment to an independent, permanent self and liberation from suffering [2]. In Hinduism, enlightenment (Sanskrit: *mokṣa*)

also involves the cessation of suffering, but emphasizes the realization of the self's unity with the divine ultimate [3]. The Greek mystic schools, such as the Eleusinian Mysteries, viewed enlightenment as a profound transformation of the ignorant soul, achieved through the pursuit of wisdom, inner purification, and contemplation [4]. Neoplatonism, influenced by Plato's teachings, emphasized the soul's return to the One, the ultimate source of all existence, through intellectual and spiritual practices [5]. Similarly, in Christian mysticism, enlightenment is seen as the union with God, attained through contemplative prayer and the experience of divine presence [6]. Furthermore Sufis, the mystics of Islam, believe that recovering an awareness with one's full identity is the most urgent task to be undertaken within this lifetime [7].

Across these diverse traditions, enlightenment is consistently seen not only as the ultimate aim of spiritual practice but also as a journey involving the transcendence and dissolution of the ego (Latin for "I") and the recognition of non-duality: insight into a reality that is interconnected and interdependent. These self-transcendent experiences (STEs), where one's subjective sense as an isolated identity fades away, and the boundary between one's sense of self and others dissolves into to an experience of unity with other people or one's surroundings [8], have become the subject of empirical research in social and clinical psychology, cognitive sciences, and neuroscience.

Throughout such research, various types of STEs have been identified such as near-death experiences [9], unitary experiences [10], transpersonal experiences [11], mystical experiences [12], non-dual awareness [13], meditation-induced near-death experiences [14], emptiness experiences [15], sacred moments [16], awe-inspiring experiences [17], quantum change experiences [18], persistent non-symbolic experiences [19], and psychedelic unselfing [20]. Despite the different terminologies used, there appear to be some notable areas of convergence in the experiences being described.

For example, consider the following accounts of STEs:

> *I felt myself one with the grass, the trees, birds, insects, everything in nature. I knew so well the satisfaction of losing self in a perception of supreme power and love.*
>
> ~ (as quoted in James [21], p. 299)

> *You melt into your surroundings. There's no separation. When I breathe in, the universe breathes in with me, and when I exhale the universe exhales with me.*
>
> ~ (as quoted in Van Gordon et al. [15], p. 269)

> *I felt an empathy with everyone and everything and was aware of the interconnectedness and oneness of all.*
>
> ~ (as quoted in Ring and Valarino [22], p. 172)

> *The feeling of no boundaries – where I didn't know where I ended and my surroundings began. Somehow I was able to comprehend what oneness is.*
>
> ~ (as quoted in Griffiths et al. [23], p. 19)

Across these accounts, a common theme emerges: decreased self-salience (ego-disillusionment) and a heightened sense of connection with others and one's surroundings [24]. Whether it involves a Christian experiencing the presence of God, a Buddhist experiencing emptiness (Sanskrit: *Śūnyatā*) through meditation, an individual with terminal leukemia recounting a near-death experience, or a first-time

psilocybin user reflecting on their experience, each narrative appears to point toward the dissolution of self-boundaries and a profound unity with people and objects around them. It has been asserted that these experiences, historically reported by prophets, visionaries, and mystics, and more recently by participants in psychedelic research, are virtually identical [25].

As reported, experiences of emptiness, near-death experiences, and psychedelic-induced experiences have the potential to evoke states of self-transcendence [15, 22, 23]. Additionally, these experiences often share common features such as a loss of time and space, visions of light, communication with otherworldly beings, and intense emotional responses, ranging from overwhelming peace to, in some cases, fear [14, 26, 27]. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be on the simultaneous transcendence of one's understanding of the world and the confines of one's ego [28].

Recent studies exploring the potential effects of STEs have suggested compelling connections between such experiences and enhanced critical and creative thinking faculties, improved well-being, and an increase in prosocial behaviors such as kindness, self-sacrifice, co-operation and resource sharing [29, 30]. However, the diversity in terminology describing each experience has somewhat hindered comprehensive cross-study comparisons. The labels used often reflect specific religious or secular perspectives, are linked to the inducing triggers of such experiences, or are associated with the duration or intensity of such experiences. Although these types of experiences are often reported in spiritual and religious individuals, atheists and agnostics have also reported them [31]. Therefore, "self-transcendent experience" appears to be the most appropriate term to refer to such experiences as it remains neutral regarding secular or spiritual connotations in addition to capturing a spectrum of intensities [8].

Indeed, STEs can be induced to different extents, for different durations, through a variety of different practices [32]. Several measures have been developed to assess the intensity of such experiences including the Spiritual Transcendence Scale (Spirit-TS) [33], Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ) [34], States of Consciousness Questionnaire (SOCQ) [35], the Non-dual Awareness Dimensional Assessment (NADA) [36], and the Ontological Addiction Scale (OAS) [37].

Although these measures may be useful to assess differing states of consciousness, it has been cautioned that even a successful occasioning of an STE must be evaluated with respect to a larger context: the goal is not the experience in and of itself, but rather to integrate the insight that arises during such experiences into one's life [38]. Therefore, it is important to investigate if these insights have an enduring impact on an individual's well-being and behavior. It is also crucial to determine whether the effects of STEs vary depending on the practices used to induce them, despite any similarities in the experiences themselves. What follows is an exploration and critical evaluation of three potential triggers of STEs including near-death experiences, insight meditation practices, and psilocybin use, and their long-term effects on well-being and behavior.

2. Self-transcendent near-death experiences

Near-death experiences usually occur in life threatening situations when an individual is approaching or has temporarily begun the process of dying [39]. These situations can include cardiac arrest, clinical death, severe blood loss during or after surgical operations, septic or anaphylactic shock, electrocution, comas from

traumatic brain injuries, intracerebral hemorrhage or stroke, suicide attempts, and experiences of near drowning or suffocation [40]. Near-death experiences have also been reported as occurring in non-life-threatening situations such as during grief and anxiety, epilepsy, syncope and Cotard's syndrome [41].

A recent comprehensive systematic analysis of case reports, case series, and qualitative studies on near-death experiences from 1980 to 2022 [40] identified 'near-death experience' as a broad term encompassing four main categories: emotional, cognitive, supernatural, and spiritual or religious experiences. The latter, emphasizing a sense of oneness with the universe, is particularly relevant to the study of STEs. Individuals reporting spiritual or religious near-death experiences often describe feeling a profound unity with the universe or nature, experiencing no separation between themselves and their surroundings [41–43]. However, for some individuals the experience of self-transcendent near-death experiences can be distressing and characterized by a profound sense voidness, isolation or nothingness [44].

The primary focus of this exploration is the long-term effects of positive self-transcendent near-death experiences. Ring and Valarino [22] suggest that despite the diverse personalities and cultural backgrounds of individuals who have had near-death experiences, they often undergo similar transformations, resulting in a common psychological profile among NDErs (those who have had a near-death experience). By synthesizing various studies on the aftereffects of near-death experiences [45–49], Ring and Valarino [22] identified twelve psychological and behavioral changes frequently observed in NDErs: (1) a greater appreciation for life; (2) increased self-acceptance; (3) heightened concern for others; (4) a deep reverence for life; (5) anti-materialistic values; (6) reduced competitiveness; (7) enhanced spirituality; (8) a quest for knowledge; (9) a stronger sense of purpose; (10) a lack of fear of death; (11) belief in life after death; and (12) belief in a higher power.

Recent empirical studies have reinforced the idea that near-death experiences, even those lasting only a few minutes, can lead to lasting changes in self-identity, cognition, emotions, life orientation, and compassion [50–53]. Greyson's [39] two-decade study of 63 NDErs and Long and Woollacott's [52] analysis of 834 NDErs both identified enduring transformative effects. Supporting Ring and Valarino's [22] proposed psychological and behavioral profile of NDErs, these studies reported statistically significant long-term impacts on life appreciation, reduced fear of death, spirituality, altruism, compassion, life meaningfulness, self-acceptance, and decreased materialism [39, 52].

To illustrate how the typical aftereffects of a near-death experience can transform an individual's life, a case study example of an NDEr can be examined. Robert, once a corporate lawyer in Los Angeles, experienced a profound shift in his life goals following his near-death experience:

> *I felt no interest in competing and felt myself opening to the problems of others—that was sort of hard to understand. I heard about transcendental meditation and became a meditator. I made new friends and left the business community and lawyers .... I felt prestige and status needs dropping away and liked the simple life in a farm house on the Snake River in Idaho.*
>
> ~ (as quoted in Ring and Valarino [22], p. 299)

This example highlights several aspects of a typical NDEr's psychological profile. Notably, there is a reduction in competitiveness and an increased concern for others, along with greater self-acceptance and anti-materialistic values. Robert's decision to

take up meditation after his near-death experience reflects his intensified pursuit of knowledge. Many NDErs develop a strong desire for learning, often channeling it into their spiritual journey [48]. Living in alignment with the insights gained during their experience, and striving to recapture the knowledge they feel was imparted to them, becomes a central focus for many NDErs [22].

Maintaining a spiritual practice, such as meditation, may be essential for sustaining the long-term transformative effects of near-death experiences by enabling individuals to reconnect with their self-transcendent aspects and integrate them into their daily lives. This perspective could explain the unexpected findings of Rousseau et al. [54] and earlier studies by Olson and Dulaney [55] and Greyson [56], which indicated no significant association between near-death experiences and quality of life changes a year later. If this is the case, it raises the question of whether the occurrence of a near-death experience alone, without meditation, can provide the same beneficial effects. Additionally, it prompts inquiry into the specific qualities of meditation that enable individuals to reconnect with and integrate such transformative experiences.

3. Meditation-induced self-transcendent experiences

Self-transcendent experiences obtained through meditation practice are typically associated with insight meditation (the process of meditatively analyzing the true nature of experience), which can lead to the realization of non-self and emptiness [57]. This form of meditation, sometimes considered a form of 'non-dual meditation,' has a long history and is found in various religious and spiritual traditions, ranging from the esoteric teachings of ancient Egypt and Platonic thought purification, to the Jewish Kabbalah, Christian contemplative meditation, and Buddhist vipassana meditation [58].

Within the Buddhist tradition, the insight of non-self (Sanskrit: *anātman*) involves recognizing that no permanent, singular, or independent self exists, nor anything belonging to it, within the five aggregates: form (the body), feeling (pleasure, displeasure, indifference), perception (the mental process of identifying features), mental constructions (all mental activities and emotions), and consciousness (awareness) [59, 60]. From this Buddhist perspective, what is typically perceived as a permanent, singular, and independent self is actually an illusion, as the 'self' defined by these aggregates is constantly changing (impermanent), exists only in relation to its parts (not singular), and arises from causes and conditions (interdependent) [61, 62]. Building on this, the realization of emptiness (Sanskrit: *Śūnyatā*) involves understanding that not only the self but all phenomena lack inherent, independent existence [60].

Therefore, within meditation, a self-transcendent experience can be characterized by experiences in which the self and all phenomena are merged into a unified whole (non-dual awareness) or the boundaries of the self-dissolve into emptiness [60]. Several empirical studies have tried to assess the effects of meditation-induced insight into emptiness [15] or meditation-induced experiences of non-dual awareness [63, 64]. However, these studies typically have a small sample size due to difficulties in recruiting expert meditation practitioners who are able to induce such meditative states.

Despite these limitations, models have been proposed to illustrate how process, content, cognitive, and meta-cognitive processes interact in cultivating

self-transcendent experiences during meditation [65]. One such model [15] suggests that meditation begins with calming and stabilizing the mind, which facilitates an investigation of non-self and leads to the perception of emptiness. Experiencing emptiness results in an altered perception of time and space, along with compassionate farsightedness—a universal outlook infused with compassionate intention [15].

Importantly, within the Buddhist framework, achieving the mental stability necessary for insight into emptiness (i.e., to have a self-transcendent experience) requires not only concentration training but also the cultivation of ethical conduct [66]. Ethical conduct emphasizes the intentional regulation of speech and actions to mitigate afflictive emotions such as anger, attachment, greed, jealousy, and ignorance, which are seen as distortions that perpetuate suffering [67]. By cultivating mindfulness and self-awareness, ethical training enables practitioners to identify and address these harmful mental states, fostering emotional balance, compassion, and mental clarity [67]. Furthermore, adherence to principles like right speech, right action, and right livelihood not only supports the development of these qualities but also helps practitioners avoid extremes such as moral relativism, potentially allowing self-transcendent experiences to contribute positively to well-being and prosocial behavior [67].

In addition to the spiritually meaningful insights attained both within and post-meditation, an increase in compassion is also often reported both during and following STEs. For example, in a study of meditation-induced STEs among 25 advanced Buddhist meditators, all but one participant reported that feelings of universal oneness were accompanied by profound compassion and a desire to care for all beings [15]. For instance, one participant described their experience as follows:

> *A sense of responsibility and love springs up. It requires no effort. Its love for all things. Its compassion for all things ... Its unconditional because it's infused with wisdom, with not being attached to self.*
>
> ~ (as quoted in Van Gordon et al. [15], p. 269)

This profound intention to benefit others beyond the self, that arises due to experiences of self-transcendence, has been reported as a key mechanism through which meditation promotes positive social outcomes [29]. Meditation-induced STEs can turn a rigid, defensive self-centred mindset into a more open and receptive one, increasing positive other-focus by integrating reward and social signals in the brain [29]. A recent systematic review supports this idea, showing that wisdom-based Buddhist meditation practices which emphasize contemplation on interdependence and non-self, encourage prosocial behavior by cultivating a sense of interconnectedness and common humanity, altruism, and feelings of oneness [68].

In addition to the influence on prosocial tendencies, meditation-induced STEs have also been shown to have a positive impact on well-being. For instance, a study involving 294 meditation practitioners found a significant relationship between meditation-induced STEs and psychological well-being, as measured by meta-awareness, (dis)identification with internal experiences, and (non)reactivity to thought content [69]. Furthermore, a study investigating 379 meditation practitioners' experience of self-transcendence found that all participants demonstrated significant improvements in measures of well-being, meaning, and lifestyle factors, as well as significant reductions in negative emotions and symptoms associated with depression [70]. Overall, the largest improvement reported by practitioners was the increased percentage of time they experienced happiness in their daily lives [70].

Although such cognitive psychology studies provide strong evidence linking meditation-induced STEs to positive outcomes for well-being and prosocial attitudes, a limitation remains that only a relatively small number of individuals can induce such experiences through meditation alone [15]. In an attempt to address this limitation, a randomized controlled trial involving 45 novice meditators assessed the effects of mindfulness meditation on perceived body boundaries and increased allocentric frames of reference (two phenomenological features of self-transcendence) [71]. While results suggested that mindfulness training alters novice practitioners' experience of self, relaxing the boundaries of the self and extending the spatial frame of reference further beyond the physical body, no data was collected on the behavioral or well-being consequences of these experiences [71].

4. Self-transcendent psychedelic experiences

Psilocybin, the psychoactive compound found in a family of mushrooms commonly known as 'magic mushrooms' [26], was first isolated from the *Psilocybe mexicana* mushroom by Albert Hofmann in the late 1950s [72]. In the 1960s, preliminary research began exploring psilocybin's therapeutic applications and effects [73, 74]. However, in 1971, due to the United Nations classifying psilocybin as an addictive substance without medicinal value [75] and U.S. president Nixon's 'War on Drugs' [76], research into its therapeutic applications was halted. Yet, as evidence of the therapeutic potential associated with psilocybin has emerged, many countries have begun to reassess their policies restricting research into the naturally occurring psychedelic substance [77].

Over the past 15 years, growing research has indicated that controlled psilocybin use can lead to significant and lasting reductions in depression and anxiety among cancer patients [78, 79], alleviate symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder [80], and help mitigate substance addiction [81, 82]. Furthermore, in healthy individuals, psilocybin is associated with enduring positive psychological effects and self-reported improvements in mood, behavior, and the personality trait of openness [83–85].

It is important to note that psilocybin use is not merely a modern trend; although scientific study began in the 1960s and re-emerged in the 2010s, its traditional use dates back much further [75]. For example, McKenna [86] contends that around 150,000 years ago early human ancestors used psychedelic mushrooms to improve creativity and cognitive functioning. Evidence of relatively more recent use includes prehistoric rock art estimated to be 6000 to 8000 years old, which was found in Spain and the Saharan mountains, indicating ancient knowledge of mushrooms' psychoactive effects [87]. Additionally, psychoactive mushrooms were integral to spiritual rituals in ancient civilizations as early as 1500 BCE [75]. For instance, Indigenous Mesoamerican cultures valued them for both medicinal and sacred purposes in religious ceremonies and daily life [88]; traditional Chinese Daoist texts describe them as crucial for achieving immortality [89]; and it is proposed that ancient Greek mystery schools incorporated them into religious rituals [90] to "elevate man above the human sphere into the divine" (Nilsson [91], p. 44).

At maximum intensity, psychedelic experiences are asserted to resemble self-transcendent experiences and can lead to psychological transformation [35, 92], although it should be noted that very few studies have sought to directly compare purported transcendent states arising from psychedelic use with more recognized forms of STEs. Nevertheless, in a 14-month follow-up to a double-blind study on the psychological

effects of psilocybin in 36 first-time users, 58% of participants ranked the experience among the top five most meaningful of their lives, and 64% reported increased well-being and life satisfaction [23]. Similarly, a double-blind study with 52 participants examined psilocybin's impact on personality traits [85]. The results showed that the psychedelic experience enhanced participants' esthetic appreciation, imagination, creativity, and openness to others and new ideas. For those who experienced something akin to a psychedelically-induced STEs, this openness remained significantly elevated more than a year after the psilocybin session [85].

However, several previous studies on the long-term effects of psilocybin have shown limited evidence of lasting positive changes on trait measures of disposition [23, 93, 94]. Furthermore, a number of recent studies have reported significant negative effects associated with psychedelic use, including triggering anxiety and other psychiatric diagnoses [95], destabilization and difficult self-experiences [96], and heightened risk of adverse effects for those with preexisting psychiatric conditions such as personality disorder [97].

To further explore the potential long-term effects of psilocybin-induced STEs on prosocial attitudes and psychological functioning, a double-blind, three-arm randomized trial was conducted with 75 healthy individuals, six months after their initial psilocybin dose [98]. Participants were divided into three groups: a low-dose psilocybin group with standard support, a high-dose psilocybin group with standard support, and a high-dose psilocybin group with 'spiritual practice support,' which included an additional 30 minutes of daily sitting meditation and other practices focused on integrating spiritual values into daily life.

The results highlighted two key findings. Firstly, participants who received higher doses of psilocybin reported not only more intense 'psilocybin-occasioned mystical experiences' (i.e., STEs) but also more lasting improvements in prosocial behaviors and psychological functioning [98]. This suggests that the enduring benefits of psilocybin use may not stem from the substance itself but rather from the self-transcendent experiences it induces. Such findings align with previous research highlighting the critical role of psilocybin-occasioned STEs in promoting lasting positive changes in psychological well-being, prosocial disposition, and spiritual worldview [79, 99]. For example, a study comparing individuals who experienced psilocybin-occasioned STEs with those who took psilocybin without having an STE found significant differences in lasting positive effects, such as a sense of connection with the universe and increased compassion and love for others [26].

Secondly, while the psilocybin-occasioned STE was the primary driver of positive changes, incorporating meditation and other spiritual practices after the psilocybin dose significantly enhanced long-term prosocial behaviors and psychological functioning [98]. This finding aligns with the previous observation that individuals who had self-transcendent near-death experiences but did not engage in subsequent spiritual practices showed no significant improvements in quality of life one year later [54]. In contrast, those who practiced meditation after their STE reported lasting improvements in well-being, life satisfaction and prosocial attitudes [22].

This implies that for a STE to have a lasting and prolonged effect, it must be fully experienced and integrated into one's life. This integration can be achieved through ongoing spiritual practices, such as meditation, which help to reinforce and sustain the insights and transformations gained during the STE. By regularly engaging in these practices, individuals can deepen their understanding and connection to the experience, allowing its positive effects to permeate their daily lives and contribute to long-term psychological and behavioral benefits.

5. Progressive stages of self-transcendence

While cognitive psychology studies have suggested promising links between near-death experience-, meditation-, and psilocybin-induced STEs with positive outcomes for well-being and prosocial behavior, previous research indicates that the intensity of self-transcendence can vary, influencing its impact [19]. For example, Martin [19] conducted semi-structured interviews lasting 6 to 12 hours with 319 participants who reported having STEs. This research led to the development of the 'Four Location Continuum Model,' which categorizes and differentiates the varying degrees, and progressive stages, of experiencing self-transcendence [19].

At Location 1, individuals are on the earliest portion of the STE continuum and although there is a reduction in the narrative self, the singular and illusory "I", it is still present. This location is categorized by the experience of not being limited by the boundaries of the physical body, and an accompanied new found sense of fundamental well-being [70].

At Location 2, individuals' pervasive sense of everything being fundamentally fine deepens and there are fewer and less powerful conditioned psychological responses. A key feature here is the boundaries between what feels like the self and what feels like outside of the self increasingly soften, or disappear entirely, leading to non-dual awareness not yet present in Location 1. Interestingly, at this 'location', conditioning around needing the approval of others begins to dissolve, which may result in less social, and less socially desirable, behavior [19].

At Location 3, individuals have shed much of their previous psychological conditioning and negative emotions, experiencing a heightened sense of present moment awareness, inner peace, and well-being compared to Locations 1 and 2 [70]. They predominantly feel a blend of highly positive emotions, such as compassion, joy, and love, often accompanied by a strong sense of divinity. Although the need for approval has diminished even more than at Location 2, these individuals often value helping others and strive to maintain social harmony [19].

Finally, at Location 4, individuals typically report the disappearance of any remaining narrative self-related thoughts and emotions [70]. This stage is characterized by a more profound sense of non-duality where individuals often describe having no sense of personal agency or decision-making ability, experiencing life as if it unfolds naturally while they observe the process. The term 'freedom' is frequently used to describe their dominant ongoing experience, and while all locations offer a sense of expanded freedom, the level experienced at Location 4 appears to be far more significant [19].

There is an interesting distinction made between Location 2 and 3 regarding the influence of STEs on prosocial behavior. This distinction echoes the statement by clinical psychologist and former Trappist monk James Finley: "You can be an enlightened asshole" [100]. At the second 'stage' of self-transcendence, there is profound insight into non-duality, which may be seen as a form of enlightenment or awakening, as discussed in traditional religious texts [101] however, this does not necessarily lead to positive prosocial behavior. In fact, the opposite can sometimes occur due to the reduced need for approval from others and a potential rise in moral relativism.

This distinction in self-transcendence stages and their impact on prosocial attitudes is also evident in Buddhist philosophy. For example, the four stages of awakening (*Srotāpanna*, *Sakṛdāgāmin*, *Anāgāmin*, and *Arhat*) roughly correspond to the 'Four Location Continuum Model.' At the second stage, *Sakṛdāgāmin*, the attachment to others' approval begins to dissolve, which may lead to a decreased concern

for conforming to social norms [102]. Furthermore, a distinction is made between Hinayana Buddhism, which some would argue focuses more on individual enlightenment, and Mahayana Buddhism, which some assert emphasizes the collective enlightenment of all beings and seeks enlightenment for the benefit of others [60].

This comparison highlights the complexity of self-transcendence and its varied effects on behavior. Although some individuals may naturally extend their spiritual growth to benefit others, others may achieve an increase in personal enlightenment without necessarily enhancing their prosocial behavior. This underscores the importance of integrating spiritual insights gained through STEs with and ethical framework such as compassionate intention, ensuring that personal transformation aligns with a broader commitment to the well-being of all.

6. Conclusion

There are many pathways to self-transcendence. Attachment to the idea of a single correct method should be avoided; however, any chosen approach should be imbued with wisdom and compassion [57]. The present chapter has explored the potential long-term effects of STEs induced by near-death experiences, meditation practices, and the use of psychedelics. Although descriptions of self-transcendence in each case often share common themes, such as the dissolution of self-boundaries and a profound sense of unity with others and surroundings, the effects on well-being and behavior can vary depending on the method used to induce them.

Near-death STEs can significantly influence an individual's psychological and behavioral profile, but these changes are not always long-lasting [54]. This may be because such experiences often occur unexpectedly to a diverse range of individuals, some of whom may not engage in spiritual practices. Without ongoing spiritual practices such as meditation, particularly those rooted in Buddhism that emphasize the integration of insight with compassion, the initial benefits of a self-transcendent near-death experience may diminish. Spiritual practices such as meditation help individuals reconnect with the insights gained during Near-death STEs and integrate them into daily life, thus leading to a positive influence on behavior.

Furthermore, the sudden and potentially dangerous nature of near-death experiences can leave individuals unprepared and without the necessary framework to fully understand or benefit from the experience, which may lead to confusion, fear, or distress [44]. In Buddhism, developing a conceptual and intellectual understanding of concepts, such as non-self, is often likened to having a road map that enables practitioners to more accurately interpret and make sense of the experiences they have during deep meditation [59]. These conceptual frameworks guide the practitioner through the complexities of the experience, and without it, understanding experiences such as self-transcendence may be difficult to comprehend or benefit from.

Of the three mechanisms of self-transcendence discussed in this chapter, meditation-induced STEs are unique as they do not always require an external trigger to occur. In some ways this characteristic can be seen as a purer form of self-transcendence as it comes from within. Those able to induce STEs through meditation are usually engaged within a wider spiritual practice, which in the case of Buddhism promotes the combination of insight and wisdom gained through such experiences with compassion and love for all beings [103]. Due to this, those able to attain self-transcendence through meditation usually benefit from prolonged positive effects on well-being and prosocial attitudes [15]. However, achieving self-transcendence

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through meditation alone presents its own challenges, as it typically requires expert meditators with years of practice to reach such states through advanced meditation techniques [104].

Psychedelically-induced STEs appear to offer a means of inducing an STE that involves much less effort than meditative practice as well as less risk of harm than STEs that occur as part of an NDE during life threatening situations. However, although these experiences have been shown to enhance psychological functioning and be meaningful for users [85], due to a lack of comparative research it remains unclear to what extent they resemble more recognized forms of STE such as those induced by meditation. There is also the issue of negative effects although these appear to be reduced when psychedelics are used in a controlled way under medical supervision. Similarly, the positive effects of psychedelics are significantly more enduring when combined with spiritual practices such as meditation [98].

The integration of spiritual practices, particularly meditation, with STEs has been a consistent theme throughout the analysis of the three methods for inducing STEs discussed in this chapter. Such practices have been shown to enhance and prolong the positive effects of STEs on well-being and behavior. Therefore, it is advisable that any path chosen to achieve self-transcendence should be grounded in a spiritual framework. In this context, a spiritual framework is understood as "spiritual but not religious", emphasizing ethical conduct grounded in compassion, empathy, and openness to others as core values [105]. Entering into an STE with a compassionate mindset and subsequently engaging in practices that help one understand and integrate the insights gained into daily life, is the essence of enlightenment. It is not merely the experience of self-transcendence that matters, but how it shapes and nurtures one's outlook and behavior [38].

To build upon Nhat Hanh's [1] poetic description of enlightenment provided at the start of this chapter:

> *Enlightenment is not only when a wave realizes that it is the water,*
>
> *but also, when the water nourishes all life with its boundless embrace.*

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Chapter 4

The Realisation of Emptiness in Zen Satori: A Narrative Review

David G. Starlyte

Abstract

This narrative review scrutinises the Zen-Buddhist concept of satori (enlightenment), critiquing its theoretical foundations in the literature, as well as comparing it to other Buddhist-frameworks, particularly Tibetan Dzogchen. Via a framework seeking conceptual coherence, interpretations of satori are explicated to place satori contextually in both the literature, historical milieu and Buddhist-philosophical tenet. In the Chan Buddhist tradition, śūnyatā (emptiness or voidness) is a crucial pretext for the satori transcendence experience sown in transcending all dualities. This is echoed in the Zen pursuit of complete nothingness of both being and non-being. Once purified of delusion, satori is to awaken to the origin of liberation, karma and dharma – no longer bound by the predicaments of worldly dualism or limitations imposed by vocabulary and language. In the same way tranquillity of the mind is experienced as bliss in kenshõ, satori, Dzogchen or rigpa — states of oneness are described as eudemonic (inducing happiness). When unconstrained by its inexplicability, satori emerges as a bridge of expansion from the self (stifled by ignorance and delusion) towards reformulation of self-concept (nonself) into blissful transcendence.

Keywords: satori, kensho, dzogchen, rigpa, sunyata, enlightenment, buddha-nature, bliss, happiness, Zen, emptiness, transcendence, dharma, chan, mu, koan, nonduality, awakening, oneness

1. Introduction

This narrative review critically appraises the Zen-Buddhist, non-conceptual idea of satori *(*悟り*)* (translated as "enlightenment"), as a transcendent state and its theoretical foundations in the literature including connection to Tibetan Dzogchen. By way of introduction, we first explore how the literature interprets satori – is it a route, experience or a destination? This is followed by an investigation of whether it may be instructive to compare satori with other parallel Buddhist traditions for an experiential understanding of boundless transpersonal encounters and emptiness, and how different authors have explicated satori. It will predominantly focus on satori-rich narratives, especially those with a strong conceptual scope from authoritative sources.

We will then dissect consequential anatomy examining how other Buddhist traditions (particularly Tibetan Dzogchen) consider the stages of awakening and frame fundamental nondivisible essence and eternal states of union. Regarding the boundaries between self and nonself, we will investigate how the conundrum of

nondualistic boundlessness is solved within the duality of language. Is the bliss of "attaining" non-attainment, reaching supreme states of oneness or union via dissolution of a concrete identity of sense of "self," all the way to enlightenment, explicable?

By way of comparison and contextual discussion of the enlightenment concept, we will endeavour to provide some substance to the unknowable ethereal realm. For example, an explanation of enlightenment may be constrained first by the non-existence of language able to describe it, and second, by only being comprehensible by enlightened beings. That is any metaphysical conjecture regarding an invisible world can be seen as a type of delusional reasoning, one that attracts strong refutation in Zen. Thus, the inquiry will not attempt to explain the inexpressible, but only point to parameters of understanding.

2. "Defining" the ineffable

Can one objectively define enlightenment or other metaphysical understandings of transcendent states or are they unknowable? Etymologically, satori (悟り is a noun derived from the root verb, satoru (さとる, サトル), meaning "to know," whereas satoruka is a transitional process towards awakening ("ka" denotes active change) [1, 2]. Satori refers to "enlightenment," whereas "satoruka" depicts a process or transition towards enlightenment [1].

Watts posits a generalised view of satori as "the sudden and intuitive way of seeing into any-thing, whether it be remembering a forgotten name or seeing into the deepest principle of Buddhism [3]." This definition interprets satori as a momentary insight, demarcating a sudden glimpse of insight or awareness – comparable to "epiphany' in English – rather than a prolonged or perpetual state of being enlightened [3]. Other scholars pursue a more enduring state, the result of practice, versus an intermittent state that may occur unpredictably [4].

For example, Encyclopædia Britannica's definition explicates several themes that will be explored later, including features of revelation, intuition, and inexplicability: "Satori, in Zen Buddhism of Japan, the inner, intuitive experience of Enlightenment; Satori is said to be unexplainable, indescribable, and unintelligible by reason and logic. It is comparable to the experience undergone by Gautama Buddha when he sat under the Bodhi tree and, as such, is the central Zen goal. Satori is analogous to the conversion experience or spiritual rebirth of other religious traditions in that it constitutes a complete reordering of the individual in relation to the universe [5]."

Japanese scholar D.T. Suzuki, a significant figure in the rise of interest in Zen philosophy in the West [4, 6] provides a framework for comprehending satori by advocating for a releasing of analysis or logic, and instead opening to the intuitive, direct, and experiential [7]. This places satori within the realm of imagination, art or music, in terms of it being an emanation, a transcendental experience. In Suzuki's description, reaching satori grows from inside like a seed, nurtured through practice and supportive conditions like sunshine, shade, water, and fertile soil.

Suzuki frames satori experientially as returning "home," arguing: "Satori is not a thing one can possess like a possession, a computer, a house, or a car. Nor is it a content of thought one reflects on. Nor is satori something one can create. Rather, satori is best conceived as the condition of the mind, free of words, concepts, and reason. Words, concepts, and reason cannot cause satori, nor can they fully clarify the experience of satori" [7].

Moore depicts satori as "the realisation of emptiness" [3]. Other scholars like Harwood position satori as a stepping-stone towards the most elevated of spiritual attainments, nirvana and the ending of all suffering [8]. Pelowski et al. [3] describe satori as the "paragon of Buddhist enlightenment," whilst phenomenologically establishing its universal essence and inherent characteristics, unconstrained by borders, discipline, or culture/ethnicity. More recent scholarship has questioned the interpretation of satori as enlightenment [9].

3. Towards enlightenment

Is satori a direct insight into nonself, or along a continuum towards its ultimate expression? In order to dissect the contextual layering of satori, it is necessary to add a comparative dimension to this analysis. For example, other Buddhist traditions offer insights, differing in frameworks and terminologies which may offer insights into the nature of satori.

By way of comparison, Ying cites Shenhui's nondual comparison of prajna (insight of the true nature of phenomena) and samādhi (state of meditative absorption) as being inseparable from each other, analagous to lamp and light – where there is prajna, there is samādhi and when there is samādhi, there is prajna [10]. Ying propose a nondualistic epistemological and ontological connection between prajna and samādhi, yoking them together as "samādhi-being" and "prajna-knowing [10]." Both nondual states of awareness arise from an awakened mind as both substance and manifestation.

It is reasonable to ask if satori is unique to Japanese Zen, or are there other metaphysical or spiritual paths to enlightenment within other Buddhist traditions? In the Pali Visuddhiñana-katha, the Theravāda, vipassana-ñanas ("insight-knowledges") are variable stages towards understanding reality's fundamental nondivisible essence and leading towards enlightenment (four-stages) [11]. The jhānas (received in samādhi-meditative-absorption) are considered compatible and intertwined as insight comes with shamatha (tranquillity of mind) [11–13]

In Tibetan Buddhism, jñāna (gnosis), is a term for pure-awareness or consciousness devoid of conceptual constraints, with ten stages leading ultimately to full nirvana (enlightenment) [14, 15]. This is differentiated from vijñana (divided understanding or knowing). The Buddha, as the omniscient Tathāgata, knows the immeasurable and sees the inscrutable reality "as-it-is" [16–18]. Yathā-bhūta, is a Mahāyāna-sanskrit term denoting insight of how things are in actuality, synonymously used with śūnyatā (emptiness), dharmatā (dharma-nature), tathatā (suchness) and tattva (actuality) [19]. When used contextually as yathabhūta-daršana or yathābhūta-jnānadaršan, it indicates an epistemological insight into what is real, direct, experiential insight – transcendent of ātman (a permanent self-identity) [20].

Dzogchen (The Great Perfection) introduces the crystal-clear awakening consciousness of rigpa beyond causes or conditions as both arising from self and self-illuminating [21]. This involves primarily a contemplative practice of non-dual awareness. Arising from the idea of "self" or conditioned personality into *trekchod* (transcendence or liberation from self) [21]. Thusly, the spiritual can be integrated in both personal and interpersonal expressions as expressions for ultimate revelation.

The Dzogchen tradition is made up of the timbre of a living essence transmitted via a Master, first spread to the west from Tibet via Chögyal Namkhai Norbu [22].

Baker argues that whilst Dzogchen may be achieved without rituals or practices, it is generally attached to the practice of qigong and yoga, as well as its inherent illuminating nondualistic philosophical worldview [23]. Furthermore, rigpa (pristine awareness) is a tenet of Dzogchen, as rigpa denotes knowledge or unitary consciousness, which is applied to both wakeful and semi-conscious states, sleeping or dreaming. The frequency of satori parallels Tibetan rigpa in the unconditioned, luminous awareness of awakening, transcendent of all conditions [21].

Baker describes Dzogchen as the ultimate state of purity of consciousness separated from the Vajrayāna tantric practices from which it arose [23]. Transcendence of conditioned states of human consciousness reveals the 'Buddha Nature' (tathāgatagarbha) of the mind, an essential state impossible to quantify or put into words. Sanderson argues that Dzogchen is a practice expressing "a hierarchy of revelation" through states of purifying consciousness (from the obtainable towards increasingly rarefied states) culminating in the ascent to sudden enlightenment [24]. Similarly, satori involves practices of higher or elevated consciousness to attain a liberated state [2, 5]

4. An investigation of satori literature

In this next section we will address a range of questions that commonly arise in the investigation of satori.

4.1 Is there utility in intellectually defining an ineffable state of beingness?

Crowe unpacks the conceptual challenge of describing satori as a personal transcendent experience, arguing for "irrationality." He ultimately maintains satori's indistinguishability from other mystical views [25]. Whilst Crowe builds on the transcendental knowledge necessary for salvation, he omits Heineng's example of spiritual practice based on intrinsically "pure mind-self" nature [26].

Heine, a respected scholar of the life and teachings of Dōgen, a prominent figure in Zen-Buddhist theory and history emphasises the utter futility of any ideas or discourses regarding this state [27, 28]. Rather, the absolute nothingness (absence of illusions) is a gateway towards satori. Nakamura notes that satori is an intuitive awareness, requiring liberation from any attachment to letters of a sūtra, yet stops short of critiquing conjecture [29].

Nishimura maintains that in the Zen-tradition itself, it is believed that all speculation is "delusory thinking" [30]. Boaz depicts satori as a pathway of eclipsing form, all of its attachments, and even emptiness [31, 32]. Meanwhile, Chandra positions satori as "truth" [33]. This 'truth' surpasses all constructions of the mind to a state of spiritual illumination – to know things "as they are" [34].

4.2 Is satori a radical re-organisation of life?

Thompson argues enlightenment and awakening are metaphorical constructs [35]. Chandra emphasises the origin of satori involves the obliteration of all ignorance and delusion [33]. Whilst Welwood frames satori as a new way of being and seeing from a transformed perspective [36]. This echoes Davis' exploration of the liminal state of transcending egoic "self" and entering muga (non-self) (**Figure 1**) [37, 38].

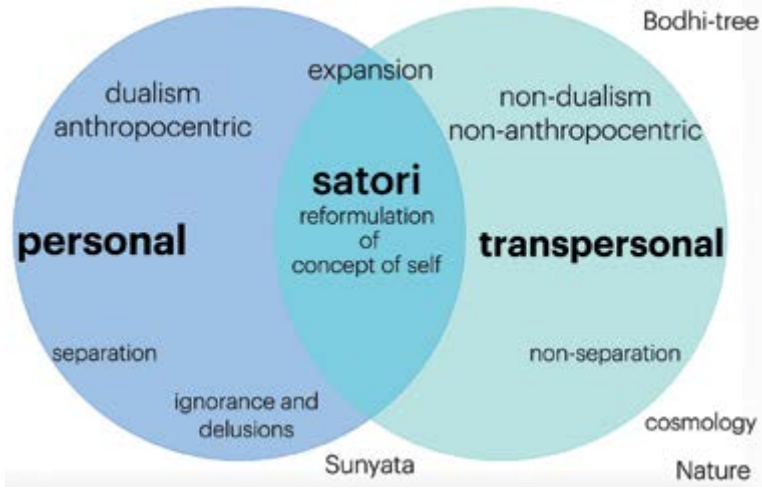

Figure 1.
Satori as a coalescence between personal and transpersonal domains.

4.3 Is one required to undergo a loss or removal of oneself into the totality of the universal 'cosmic consciousness?'

The limited (and limiting) self is defined by Bridges as the fictionalised entity that tries to control what it perceives as "self" [39]. Jesuit priest, Johnston takes a different approach to the satori narrative, by accounting phenomenologically for satori as an inner journey of first ego-death, and then via intensive Zazen-meditation-focus as the portal to personality transcendence into satori "oneness" or "union" [40].

The prolonged discipline of Zazen practice is designed to liberate the illusory ego-self from the hold of self-centredness, so the essential self becomes naked, revealing Buddha-nature (the illumined nature of uncontaminated mind allowing all the possibility of becoming Buddha) [41]. Nelson describes satori as a permanent, transformed connection to ordinary life via the integration of awakening in daily life and practice [42]. Fouts cites Suzuki's insight of "experience experiencing itself" [43]. If satori is a manifestation of non-self, how is this revealed? Ultimately, if satori is the journey from self to non-self [44], then it could be argued that it is more a pathway than a destination (**Figure 2**).

4.4 Is satori a manifestation of the Buddha-nature, and inseparable from its source?

Curtin cites Dōgen's reinterpretation of the Nirvana-sūtra's, from "all beings 'have' Buddha-nature" to "all sentient beings 'are' Buddha-nature" [45]. Dōgen Zenji captures universal existence in its entirety as Buddha-nature [46]. This follows the view of The Platform-sūtra that self-nature is indistinguishable from Buddha-nature (**Figure 3**) [47].

Dōgen's view of awakening is that at the same time it exists, it also does not, since the essence of Buddhism is that which cannot be attained or grasped [48]. Curtin argues that according to Dōgen, since impermanence is also the Buddha-nature, dharma (the nature of reality) can be observable in conventional reality [45].

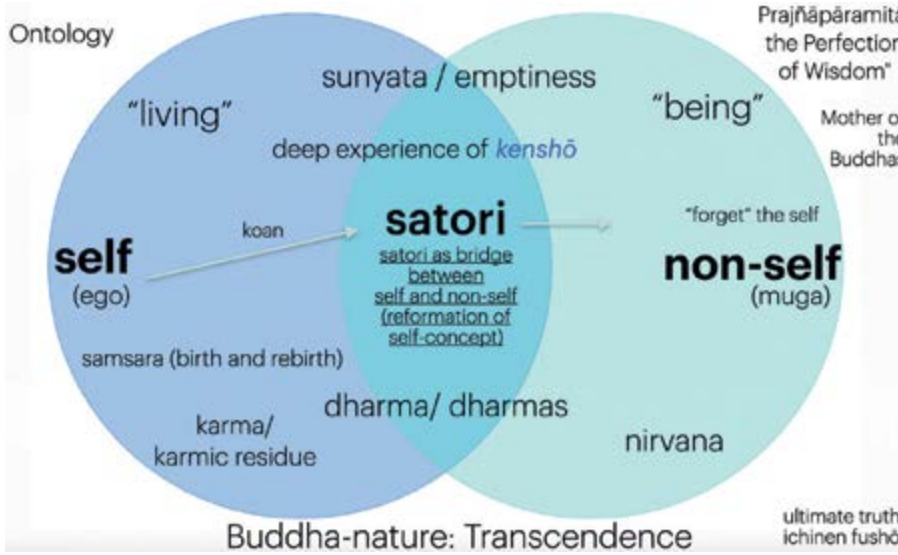

Figure 2.
Satori as bridge between "Self" and "Non-Self."

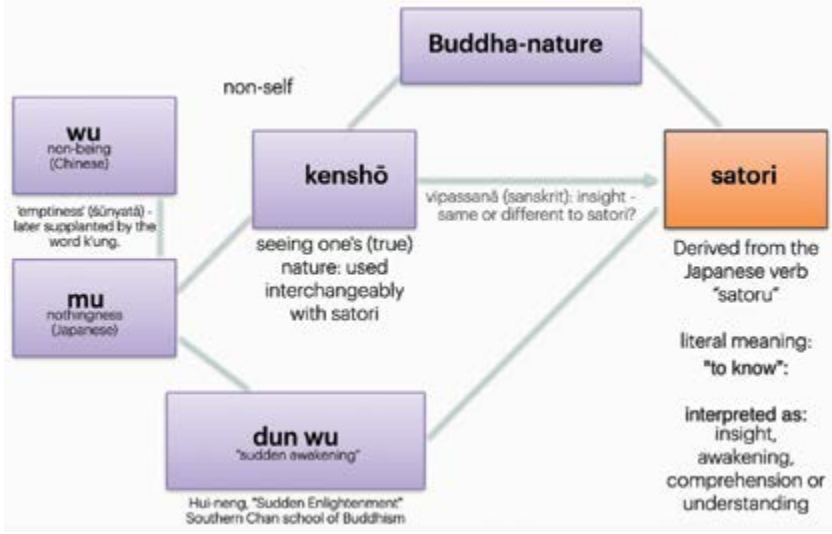

Figure 3.
A pictorial analysis of "Satori."

4.5 How does one reach satori?

Nomura places satori within the context of a holistic path of wisdom, "Monshishū-shō (study, reflection, Zazen seated meditation, practice and awakening)," quoting Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō emphasising Zazen-practice as the pathway to awakening [48]. Heine mentions Zenki (undivided activity), which is paraphrased by Nakamura as indivisible presence – the awareness of impermanence [27, 49]. In contrast Curtin maintains that Zen, as the "path of no path" nullifies the idea of a structure to satori, as well as removing conventional "subject and object" principles [45, 50].

Article	Satori: etymology	Kensho	Practices/ processes/how to get there (e.g. Koan)	Context history, connection to Ch'an school/Huineng's "sudden enlightenment"
Crowe 1965, 'On the 'Irrationality' of Zen'	absent	absent	absent	absent
Johnston 1967 'The Zen Enlightenment'	absent	absent	absent	absent
Nomura 2022, 'Zen Philosophy of Mindfulness: Nen <?> according to Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō'	absent	absent	present	present
Nakamura 1995, 'Zen Practice and Self-Control'	absent	absent	absent	present
Heine 1990, 'Does the Koan Have Buddha-Nature?	absent	present	present	present
Nelson 2004, 'Opening a Mountain: Koans of the Zen masters/ The Koan: texts and contexts in Zen Buddhism'	absent	present	present	present
Fouts 2004, 'Satori: Towards a Conceptual Analysis'	absent	absent	present	present

Table 1.
Comparative analysis of Satori in the literature [25, 27, 29, 40, 42, 43, 48].

Kyoto and Harvard University Research Fellow, Nomura extracts the essence of mindfulness from Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō' philosophy, developing a contextual understanding for the transformation of Chinese Chan to Japanese Zen [48]. Approaching satori from an angle of total presence or total absence, Nomura argues for Zazen as 'mindlessness' rather than 'mindfulness' [48]. Since mindfulness is wisdom, and wisdom is mindfulness – practice and awakening are inseparable. Even though explicating the practice of Zazen, with satori as a personality change to "see reality as it is," Nakamura, the Yamaguchi University scholar makes no mention of either kenshõ (seeing one's true nature), nor the connection to Chan, nor Heineng's "Sudden Enlightenment" (**Table 1**) [49].

4.6 How does the kōan (paradoxical riddle) deconstruct rationality?

Comparative Philosopher, Nelson, highlights kōan as a religious symbol, acknowledging paradox, yoking satori to kenshõ towards ultimate enlightenment [50]. Bridges positions kōan as a soteriological device to demolish linguistic boundaries or confines – a process of "unlearning" towards transcendence [39]. Heine unwraps the complexities of the Zen-kōan – enigmatic, textured and non-conclusive – reflective of Zen [27]. The kōan dismantles conceptual thinking, breaking up position and hierarchy through paradox – even to the point of positioning Zen as non-Buddhist [51]. Crowe cites Suzuki's focus is on the "irrationality of Zen" in soteriological terms to break down the personality structure of self [25]. The kōan represents this idea metaphorically. There is a need for kōan explication, as well as contextually sitting

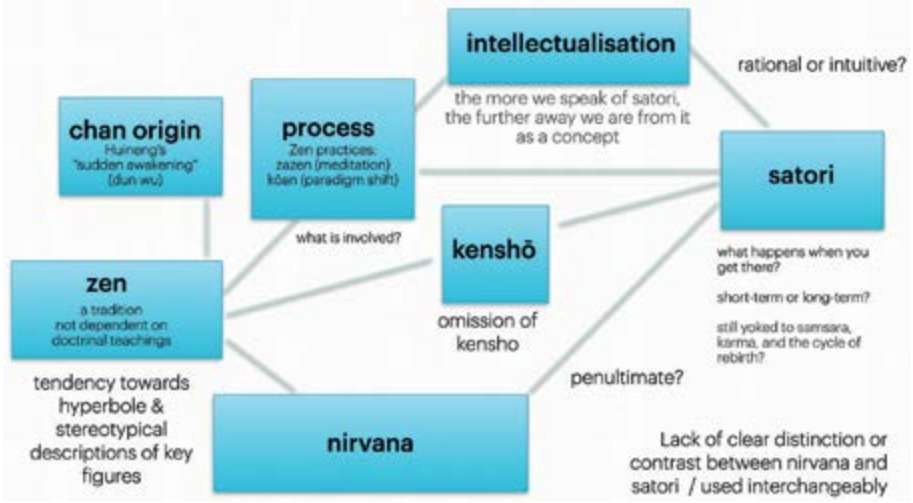

Figure 4.
Framework for conceptualising the ineffable Satori.

satori within Zazen meditation practice as core and central to satori. Crowe's reductionist perspective lays the groundwork for future exploration [25].

4.7 Is satori both a transcendent state and pathway to attainment of enlightenment?

Johnston positions satori as the culmination of the Zen journey, a "process of unification in which the whole personality is harmonised in a oneness which reaches its climax in enlightenment" [40]. Despite Johnston's assertions, the literature generally fails to differentiate whether satori is on a continuum towards enlightenment or the final destination (**Figure 4**). Whilst the degree of pluralism may influence whether interpreters of satori define it is an apogee of non-anthropocentricism, there remains a bias of being human. Notwithstanding the uniqueness of Zen, influenced by both Japanese isolation and imperialism [52], and well-expressed in the "sudden awakening" notion of satori – it is virtually always referenced as a stand-alone theme, without being linked to its Chan-derivation [53].

Satori-literature removes nirvāna and parinirvāna from its lexicon, entrenching the narrative that Zen-Buddhism is separate from its roots. Multiple terms have been used for the enlightened beings of satori, including kami, immortals, patriarchs, saints, Buddhas, and holy people [53]. The repositioning of Shinto kami (gods), the formless spirits animating life, as buddhas and Bodhisattva avatars is entirely ignored as a philosophical influence [54–56]. Berkhin and Hartelius argue that attempts to translate Buddhist concepts into terminology from other traditions are misguided and lead to outcomes that are no longer accurate reflections of Buddhism [57].

4.8 How does Zen Buddhist secularisation, modernisation and increasing embeddedness in Japanese policy and government patronage contribute to the "separateness" of satori?

The catastrophe of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the scale of which is unimaginable, casts a shadow on the exegesis of Zen Buddhism [58, 59]. Seven Japanese

invasions of China, a territory that dwarfs Japan by some twenty-five times, implies a deep motivation for colonising its mother-culture [60]. No doubt Buddhism was mobilised for political expediency within Japan, evolving imperialism, and nationalising Zen for the purposes of nation-building [58, 61].

The lack of attention to the influence of Chan Buddhism's Sixth Patriarch Huineng's Sudden School is at least to some extent, a distortion or misrepresentation of ideas [62, 63]. Whilst mentioned by Nomura, Nakamura and Heine, Crowe and Johnston make no mention of "sudden enlightenment" and Chan-origins (**Table 1**) [25, 27, 40, 48, 49]. Nishimura underscores the ceaseless aspects of realisation – The Southern School of "Sudden Awakening" gained traction in its orientation towards the process of "realising" as an experience that is personal in nature, versus The Northern School's destination-based "realisation" pinnacle [30].

As well as pointing to the propagation of Chan-practice through farming, Green illustrates the proposition of continuity after satori, citing the Zen-parable, "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water" [53]. The omission of the farming-genesis implies the possibility of a cognitive dissonance and structural elitism – that which Putman refers to as the separation of virtue from skills, elevating the "architect" structurally above the "bricklayer" [53, 64]. This is evidenced in the tendency to romanticise Zen in the writings of Suzuki [65].

4.9 Is there an inherent intellectual superiority expressed in the literature vis-à-vis satori?

Sosteric's research into transcendent or mystical encounters notes the subjectivity that colours these experiences, and the interpretation thereof [66]. Varying terminologies express the phenomenology of satori and other mystical phenomena or "connection experiences." Outcomes are coloured by ethnic persuasion, epistemological, and ontological backgrounds [66]. One cannot point to the intentions of the entrenched narratives of satori without reference to its context.

For example, Heine's text, rich in historical background, critiques other writings as being one-sided, yet brings forth a partisan dimension [27]. Iida expands upon the spread of elitism within Japanese discourse, explaining homogenising tendencies [67]. In making satori inaccessible to the lay-person, Borup argues Zen is an elitist construct [68]. Sharf argues for Japanese "exceptionalism" [69].

Equality and egalitarian ideals are only recently being expressed in education, and in Japan, the issues of power, power differentials, the management of power, imperialism, nationalism and institutionalised racism are constraints influencing the expression of satori [70–72]. This also genders satori as primarily the domain of men, in the midst of an oppressive pedagogy [49, 73]. Joskovich points out that multiple scholars (like Suzuki) have formulated Zen as a mental science by extracting it from its cultural milieu and removing it from its original institutional context [74].

According to Thomas Cleary, kenshō ("seeing one's true nature") is the insight-stage that leads to satori – full kenshō is satori [75, 76]. Sharf's explication of kenshō, for instance, within the Sanbōkyōdan tradition, position it as an intimate understanding of the fundamental nonduality innate to phenomenological existences [77]. The statement, there is "no Zen without kenshō" critiques an array of satori-literature omissions of kenshō (**Figure 4**; **Table 1**).

No doubt, there are differences in opinion regarding where kenshō fits in, with some authors using kenshō interchangeably with satori. Dōgen emphasises that if

you accentuate kenshō as a direct realisation, it only becomes another obstacle to the attainment of enlightenment [78]. This perspective adds to the inscrutability of dissecting satori. Collectively, the literature fails to acknowledge the association between the Chinese Mahāyāna Bodhichitta ("awakened mind") and kenshō [79, 80]. The Chan heritage of mu (nothingness) as the metaphorical birthplace of the awakening mind or Bodhicitta is connected to the "absolute emptiness" of śūnyatā [81, 82].

4.10 To what extent is satori a universal experience or has it been diluted?

Nugent proposes that St. John of the Cross experienced satori [83]. Whilst a dialogue regarding the particularistic and ethnocentric Zen-paradigm [84] is outside of the scope of this review, perhaps some of the words frequently used to describe the satori experience like "oneness" appropriate satori as all-encompassing Zen universalism? For example, Thick Thien-An describes the unity of the pervading interconnectivity: "When we experience that we and everything in the universe are not different that we are a part of everything and everything is within us…if we realise the oneness of everything, that is satori" [33]. If it is only realising 'oneness,' then a homogenised satori is available for all.

Furthermore, an example of misappropriating satori from its intended context, is the removal of disciplined practice and cultivation of virtue within the broader context of Zen. Fouts "conceptual-nonconceptual" analysis embraces Suzuki's philosophy, encapsulating contradictions, yet pursues a reductionist approach in pinpointing satori outside of its environmental context, as well as the crux of Zen-lifestyle, self-cultivation and practice [43]. The etymological meaning and derivation of satori from satoru is disregarded.

What happens after satori: do the mythopoeic elements of satori imply a connection with the mythopoeic conception of incarnation – or even Shambhala (spiritual kingdom)? A gap in the literature is the lack of reference to the trajectory and phases of satori, and what occurs afterwards – is there a similar land for Zen-Buddhist enlightened beings, like Shambhala, the Tibetan-Buddhist celestial realm, energised by symbolism? [85, 86].

5. Overarching nonsubstantialist notion of emptiness

Does the merger of duality-nonduality (or being-nonbeing) foment a symbolic duality as Priest proposes [87] – or as Abe [88] posits – is nonbeing dependent on the being it negates?

The negation of wu (nothingness) expressed in Huineng's "No-mind," mirrors śūnyatā, as Chan Buddhism dismantled codification and literary principles, instead endorsing non-being (**Figure 5**) [51]. In the Chan Buddhist tradition, śūnyatā (translated into the Chinese-term "kong"), a crucial element of Mahāyāna teachings, is repurposed as a meditative-strategy for mental purification [89]. Śūnyatā is a crucial pretext for the satori transcendence experience sown in "transcendence of all dualities" [87, 90].

Instead of the Western pursuit of "being," the Zen pursuit of "absolute nothingness" is beyond "relative" emptiness, and it presides over the pervasive emptiness of both being and non-being [91]. The Zen-kōan, as an instrument for breaking up of position and hierarchy through paradox even to the point of positioning Zen as

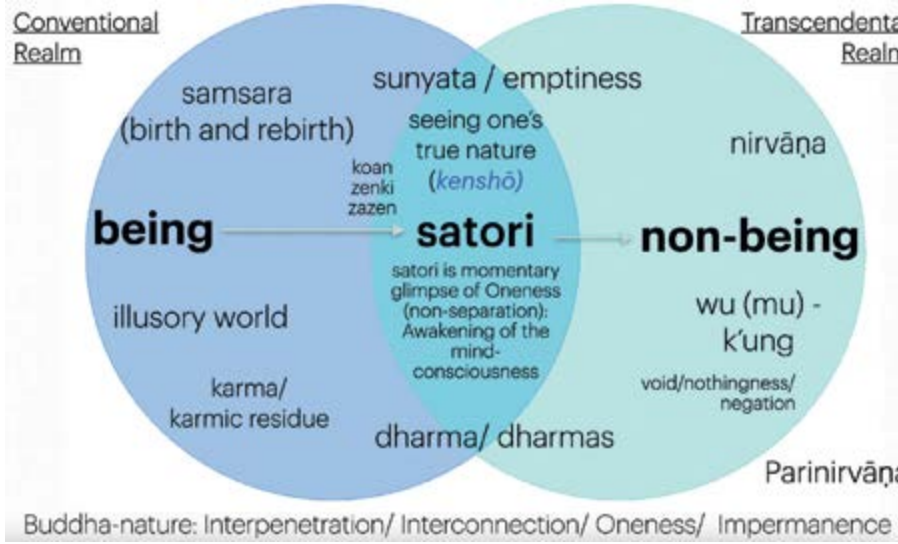

Figure 5.
Satori as merger between conventional and transcendental realms.

non-Buddhist, is part of the context of dismantling conceptual thinking and disintegration of subject and object dualism [42, 51].

In The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng elucidates the ultimate lacuna; "There is no Bodhi-tree. Nor stand of mirror bridge. Since all is void, Where can any dust alight? [51]" Huineng's Platform Sūtra points to ultimate 'nullification,' conceding that even the dharma is void [51]. Dōgen qualifies void by dissolving it into "the realm of the real Dharma" [92].

5.1 Is there reciprocal relationship between being and nonbeing, and the process of unbecoming?

Chan destratification is expressed in emptiness. But had to face its own reification as an obstacle towards Buddhist aims of compassion, mindfulness and enlightenment [42]. Wu as the ultimate void of ontological vacuity abrogates incorporation, whilst diffusing epistemological categorisation [93, 94]. Whilst unimaginable from a phenomenological view, wu evokes ontic womb, both indivisible and interconnected. Huineng's "no-mind" doctrine is represented symbolically by the feminine lacuna, abyss, death, breast (nourishment, entanglement, suffocation, safety) and the unknown [88].

Zen Buddhism humanises this void by scrutinising the mind – establishing the dualities of purification along a spectrum between "purified" and "defiled" – thus discerning states of absorption within which to frame enlightenment [95]. Emergent truth transcends samsāra and Dōgen's "ichinen fushō" (short non-arising eternity of insight) describing an eternal moment of everything unborn — essentially, the ultimate Buddha-nature that is not born and will not die [48]. This echoes Dzogchen's unconditioned illuminated consciousness depicting the possibilities (via exertion) to attain liberation – the experience of innate 'Buddha Nature' [23].

Klong chen pa (1308–1364) illustrates this in The Precious Treasure of the Basic Space of Phenomena [10]*:*

"In brief, within the ultimate womb of basic space, spacious and spontaneously present, whatever arises as the dynamic energy of its display —as samsara or nirvana— in the very moment of simply arising has never known existence as samsara or nirvana. Whatever arises in a dream due to the dynamic energy of sleep does not actually exist. There is only self-knowing awareness, the blissful place of rest, extending infinitely as the supremely spacious state of spontaneous equalness."

5.2 Is satori primarily a nondual experience dissolving and deconstructing the sense of ego-boundary and expanding relationships to "other" in terms of interconnection and oneness?

Western philosophy's "Unus Mundus" (One World) concept points to both a singularity of source and primordial derivation [96]. Carl Jung calls this "synchronicity," denoting both universality and perfect order, yet also revealing an "underlying unity." According to Jung, "collective unconscious" is a shared realm of the psyche made up of primordial archetypes, themes, and part of a shared superstructure or ideation matrix [97, 98]. Jung depicts satori as numinous, in which the bounded subject-object proportions are dissolved into "unio mystica" (mystical union) with ultimate reality (via "extreme subjectivity") [97].

This "ultimate reality" is referred to in the Sanskrit term, Dharmadhātu, the purified eternal state of enlightenment, union, oneness, emptiness and essence of buddhahood – the "all-pervading non-conceptual space ...that contextualises both the intrinsic and the extrinsic aspects (of) experience into one unified whole" [99]. Lamotte characterises this as "absolute" [100]. This epitome of space and spaciousness is open with possibilities such that within the vast emptiness that which is nonexistent may arise, or that which needs space for expression, may manifest into phenomena [101]. Boaz calls this eternal, ultimate realm the "perfect sphere of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection," "...a luminous emptiness" that informs our "intrinsic actual nature" [31].

5.3 Is the concept of "at-one-ment" in satori connected to the perception of happiness?

Bucca depicts satori as the "Zen experience of illumination," placing satori in the context of Bion's "O" symbol [102]. The "O" weaves together a tapestry of overlapping abstractions including infinite, ultimate reality, divinity, absolute truth, "a thing-in-itself," but also used within a therapeutic context of being "at-one" or "at-one-ment" [102]. Psychoanalyst, Paul Cooper's experiential framing of the search for "unitive experience" is depicted in his chapter title, "The Gap Between: Being, Knowing, and the Liminal in Between," exploring themes of abyss, fracture and precipice to explain the sometimes-narrow separation between states of separation and states of elevation [91]. Bion's framing of "ultimate truth" transcends "conventional knowledge" rather inhabiting the unknown realm of faith or what he calls "primacy of experience" [102].

Kazuaki Tanahashi's translation of śūnyatā in The Heart Sutra as "boundlessness" places śūnyatā outside of the notion of nothingness or the oft-translated "emptiness," inviting an interpretation of openness, possibility and spaciousness [103–105]. This spaciousness is perhaps what satori is directed towards, echoing Buddhist interdependence or Thich Nhat Hanh's interpretation of the five skandhas as unified states of "interbeing" [106]. Furthermore, this boundlessness, expressed in the Dzogchen tradition as "great bliss" (bde ba chen po), is the primary vessel of Dzogchen upon

full realisation of the "awakened mind" in all things" [10]. That which is aware of all phenomena as derived from unified consciousness, elevates self-awareness into the terrain of the "great bliss." Ying describes such transcendence as a "path-less yet blissful journey within oneself" [10]. Various scholars and mystics have described the intuitive state of dissolution of "self" as blissful [107]. Nonattachment to any notion of separated self-identity is linked to happiness in Buddhist philosophy – indeed the dissolution of self leads to what Korean Zen Buddhist Pojo Chinul's describes as "awakening to the True Mind that pervades the universe" [108].

Longchenpa (also known as Klong chen pa or Longchen Rabjam), a Tibetan lama and Dzogchen master, initiates The Precious Treasure of the Basic Space of Phenomena by describing an uncreated source encoding that allows for a context of continuous spaciousness, even within the created:

"Within the expanse of spontaneous presence is the ground for all that arises.

Empty in essence, continuous by nature, it has never existed as anything whatsoever, yet arises as anything at all. Within the expanse of the three kayas, although samsara and nirvana arise naturally, they do not stray from basic space—such is the blissful realm that is the true nature of phenomena" [10].

Longchenpa's description of primordial and continual emptiness arises infinitely as supreme bliss [10]. In an ultimate sense, emptiness and bliss are both unified and inseparable [109]. The blissful realm that Longchenpa depicts as an ethereal presence pervading all creation, before creation, and encompassing all uncreated, is expansively boundless and hence impossible to describe. This evokes Wittgenstein's "das Mystische," the inability to express ineffable feelings ("Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent") [110].

6. Buddha-nature and bliss

6.1 Where does happiness sit within the parameters (or non-parameters) of elevated states of consciousness, and the "realisation of emptiness?"

In the same way tranquillity of the mind is experienced as bliss in kenshõ or satori in what Kwee et al. calls "flowering silence", so-called "peak experiences" or mystical state of oneness are described as eudemonic — giving birth to "intense happiness" [111, 112]. Lonchenpa explains, "The supremely blissful state of natural rest is sublime meditative stability, spontaneously present without having to be cultivated. Always present, like the course of a great river, it is self-evident" [113].

Through a Buddhist lens, purification of the mind is seen as the pathway and portal towards transcendence of the body, which is the "highest happiness" — the limitless bliss of eternal enlightenment or liberation from this world [114, 115]. The Dzogchen conviction of enlightened or awakened mind, pivotal in "sudden awakening" from a state of tranquillity (empty-mind), shares a common source with Zen-Buddhism of the Prajñāpāranitā Sutras and Lankāvatāra Sutras — delineating and deconstructing the mind's essential nature conjoined to the emptiness concept [116]. Dzogchen provides a discerning viewpoint unifying awareness with emptiness, hereby highlighting inseparability of terminologies, yet also their primordial origins [21]. A similar understanding is implied within the satori tradition as a unitive phenomenon [91].

The Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of universal purity in tathāgatagarbha — an immutable womb of all creation and Buddhahood, both absolute and eternal — is

associated with eternal bliss [117]. As a soteriological principle, such a proposition orients a practitioner towards acts of virtue and purification. The trinity of worlds, Dharmakaya, Samboghakaya (The Buddha's limitless, celestial body), and Nirmanakaya (The Buddha's physical manifestation) is said to uphold the principle of union [118].

Within the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition (according to Indrabhūti), "Supreme bliss is not impermanent because Supreme bliss is ever-lasting" [109]. From an ultimate perspective, Longchenpa writes in The Way of Abiding, "nondual supreme bliss abides within our own natural state" [119]. Longchenpa emphasises enlightenment as experiencing one's true nature – according to Dzogchen everything is already here, present, abiding: "There is only self-knowing awareness, the blissful place of rest, extending infinitely as the supremely spacious state of spontaneous equalness" [119].

Sixteen century Tibetan lama and eighth "Karmapa," Mikyö Dorje, poetically frames Buddhism as a blissful path reaching towards the pinnacle of purity of consciousness, pristine beyond measure and beyond anthropomorphising:

"Awareness, the accomplishment of the illustrious Ādibuddha, Places the melting drop of great sublime emptiness.

On the flame tip of the great bliss path..." [109].

Samantabhadra (or Dharmakāya Buddha), the ceremonial Primordial or First Buddha in Tibetan Buddhist tradition, represents the original, pure state, which is seen to have always been and always will be enlightened, uncontaminated, celestial, indestructible like a diamond, and never subject to duality [120]. The Prayer of Samantabhadra reveals "the ground of all is uncompounded, a self-arisen, infinite, and inconceivable expanse, having neither the name samsara nor nirvana. If it is known, Buddhahood is attained. If it is not known, beings wander in samsara" [121].

Encountering suffering is the antithesis of Buddha-nature, as Buddha-nature "is deemed to be unconditioned, beyond suffering, and thus equated with imperishable bliss" [109]. Shakya notes that since nirvana is depicted as a complete dissolution of all suffering and abrogation of all pain, some regard it as a "a state of pure bliss" [122]. Thipsungnoen et al. describe this level of happiness as "transcendental happiness" [123].

Mikyö Dorje, reveals that the purity of Buddha-nature dissolves the conceptual framework of selfhood – this is a state of bliss liberated from the body-mind's ignorant tendencies [109]. Consequently, the lasting transcendent bliss of Buddha-nature liberates any attachment to either body or mind. Selflessness from the conceptual structure of self is a pathway towards this state of Buddha-bliss. The essential quality of Buddha-nature is emphasised as the link between purification and bliss: Johnston notes: "Purity, selfhood, bliss and permanence—[these] transcendent qualities are the result [of purification]" [109].

6.2 Is there evidence or corroboration of enlightened or higher states of consciousness being linked to happiness?

Pelowski, Akiba and Palacios's research, "Satori, koan and aesthetic experience," found a correlation between satori and happiness in art-appreciation [3]. Whilst not conclusive, the yoking of happiness and enlightened states (satori) is not a new concept, rather it is embedded within the Dzogchen tradition. As Ying points out, the perspective of the "great bliss" as the underlying crux of Dzogchen emphasises that "having realised the nature of one's awakened mind as the basis of everything, one experiences all things in the one taste of great bliss that is inexpressible but nominally given the designation of great bliss" [10]. Ying describes this Dzogchen path of "great

bliss" as "the spontaneous presence of the fruition itself" [10]. This immutable "great bliss" involves non-action, spontaneity, effortlessly flowing, never grasping, nor clasping, nor trying, negating all control or controlling.

The Tibetan master, Nubchen Sangye Yeshe notes:

"it is "that" which experiences] gives rise to everything. In this regard, "it is the awakened mind that has no inherent entity from the beginning, and it is the pure space of great bliss. [Therein,] while pain is not abandoned, great bliss self-arises. This "great bliss" is imperishable and inexpressible. Even the ordinary mind is primordially unable to perceive this great bliss. In this way, it [i.e., the great bliss] manifests itself. It cannot be found in others [but only within oneself]"" [10, 104, 124].

7. Conclusion

There are myriad streams and approaches in the way satori has been interpreted, as well as differing representations of awakened people post-satori. The realisation of emptiness is experienced in multifarious Buddhist traditions, from Dzogchen to Zen. Each transcendent path offers the redemption of internal Buddha-nature as a portal to ultimate bliss.

The link with Dzogchen is particularly illuminating and pivotal towards expanding understanding of the meaning and context of satori. The consensus amongst authors is that satori as self-realisation is significant, requiring undergoing a personal epiphany and interior transformation. Once purified of delusion, satori is to awaken to the origin of liberation, karma and dharma – no longer bound by the predicaments of worldly dualism and limitations imposed by vocabulary and language.

Meditating on the void of both non-being and empty-mind, positions satori as a primordial experience – revealing a momentary glimpse of 'oneness,' nondualism, and nonseparation – connected to the psychospiritual analysis of "'ego-death," wherein boundaries of consciousness have been transmuted. This denotes the awakening of the mind-consciousness from the ontology of being into non-being. An altered state of profound consciousness unmediated by ātman sense of self or personal identity, satori is encapsulated more by an intuitive understanding than a direct experience of nonduality.

However, salient gaps were uncovered with the apparent disconnect between satori, kenshō and Huineng's "Sudden Enlightenment" School. Further research into the universal aspects of satori is called for, as well as comparative analysis with other Buddhist-traditions, particularly samādhi, Mahāyāna Bodhicitta, Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen and Theravāda jhānas.

In the final analysis, metaphysical conjecture regarding an invisible world is seen as a type of flawed reasoning, one that invites strong refutation in the Zen-tradition. To that end, satori sets up a contra-distinction to analysis or logic in the same way that all separation, opposition and contradiction is harmonised into a point of wholeness that is seen as indistinguishable from Buddha-nature. This seeming paradox seems to only get resolved in the 'oneness' of being, in which the boundless-self and boundlessness of ego-boundary is experienced via an inner metamorphosis and dissolution of opposites. In our conventional state of awareness, suffering is all-pervasive, however Buddha-nature, as an unconditioned phenomenon, is seen to surpass all suffering in its absorption into the sublime. As such the conceptualisations of both bliss and emptiness are understood to both conjoin and dissolve when an individual reaches this state.

Ultimately, satori emerges as a bridge of expansion from the self (stifled by ignorance and delusion) towards reformulation of self-concept (nonself). Any attempts at capturing satori must be rejected because it appears that mundane reason, constrained by the confines of logic, is incapable of reaching an ecstatic state on its own. Rather it is apparent that only through practice, may one begin to have direct experience of the unknowable states of absorption. That is, to understand the essence of satori, hermeneutics can only point to ultimate illumination, but not express its underlying essence. Hence, it appears that only through acknowledging the experiential nature of satori, can one begin to unwrap it, as it may only be truly knowable by those who have reached the pinnacle it points to.

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Conflict of interest

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Chapter 5

Enlightened Joy and Love, Selflessness and Beyond

Amir Freimann and Aviva Berkovich-Ohana

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of *enlightened joy and love* as an aspect of a stable and enduring spiritual "high plateau" state, referred to here as "Living Transcendence," which contrasts with transient mystical or spiritual "peak" experiences. Drawing from a phenomenological study of 32 "spiritual exemplars" from various traditions, the research identifies key characteristics of this state. *Enlightened joy and love* are described as stable, constant, and intrinsic to daily life, manifesting as a subtle, integrated presence rather than an intense emotional peak. These qualities are intertwined with other aspects of spiritual experience, such as noetic awareness, embodied presence, and relational interbeing. The paper also examines two Buddhism-inspired models of selflessness—the Self-Based Psychological Functioning model and the Pattern Theory of Selflessness—which suggest that spiritual development and selflessness are related to *enlightened joy and love*. The findings suggest that *enlightened joy and love* are integral to the lived experience of the spiritual "high plateau," offering a sustained sense of well-being and connectedness that transcends the fluctuating emotions of ordinary consciousness. This paper contributes to the understanding of spiritual development by highlighting the role of selflessness in achieving a stable and enduring joyful and loving state of being.

Keywords: *enlightened joy and love*, living transcendence, spiritual high plateau, nondual awareness, self-pattern, selflessness, PTSL, pattern theory of selflessness, self-transcendence, experience of being

1. Introduction

> *[R]easonable satisfaction is a purely spiritual process in which the highest summit of the soul remains unmoved by ecstasy, is not drowned in delight, but rather towers majestically above them. Man only finds himself in a state of spiritual satisfaction when these emotional storms of our physical nature can no longer shake the summit of the soul. (Meister Eckhart, [1])*

There are many definitions and little consensus on any definition of spirituality [2–4]. According to de Brito Sena et al.'s [5] recent review, the most cited references to definitions of spirituality in scientific journals are Hill and Pargament's [6] definition

of spirituality as "a search for the sacred" and Koenig et al.'s [7] definition of spirituality as "the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions." Schnieders [8] defines spirituality as "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives" and Barber [9, 10] as a journey in search of truth. A common denominator of many of these definitions, however, is their reference to a directional movement – a search, a quest, a journey – toward a *telos*, a desideratum, a holy grail, an ultimate value.

Related to the understanding of spirituality as a directional movement is the concept of spiritual development. Spiritual development has been defined as "the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred" [11]. Another definition of spiritual development is "a process of increased depth of awareness, connection to the transcendent, and search for ultimate meaning as well as engagement in spiritual practices" [12].

There are differences between traditions with regard to the nature of spiritual development, which "can be seen primarily as intrapersonal (as changes residing within the individual) or interpersonal (residing among individuals in relationship to community)" [13]. Furthermore, "In some models, spiritual development may be seen as unexpectedly sudden... In other systems, change is seen as gradual" [13]. Nevertheless, whether intrapersonal or interpersonal, sudden or gradual, intentional and effortful or spontaneous and effortless, included in the concept of spiritual development is a "vertex of maturity" [14] toward which it leads.

This "vertex of maturity" is considered by many religious traditions to be a constant, stabilized spiritual "state of being" [15, 16]. It is regarded by them the pinnacle, desideratum and holy grail of the "search for the sacred." This state is central and important for religious and spiritual practitioners and seekers, and much has been written about it in traditional scriptures and popular spiritual literature [17–19].

It is called *baqā* in Sufism [20], *samādhi* or *moksha* in Hinduism [18, 21, 22], *devekut* in Judaism [23], *nirvāṇa* or *bodhi* in Buddhism [24], *daigo* or *satori* in Zen [25–27], *theosis* or "union with God" in Christianity [28, 29], enlightenment, awakening or self-realization in the modern East-meets-West spirituality [30, 31]. In Hinduism, for example, submergence in oneness (*samādhi*) is the goal toward which "a graded progression from gross to subtle practices lead[s]" [32]. In Christianity, it is described as a state in which "the transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness" [19].

James [33] characterized individuals in such a state of being, which he called "the ripe fruits of religion in a character," as follows:

> *1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction... of the existence of an Ideal Power... 2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control. 3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down. 4. A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections...*

Many of these traditions also make a distinction between transient states, referred to as spiritual [19], religious [33], mystical [34, 35], peak [9, 10] or self-transcendent [36, 37] experiences, and the ideal stabilized and lasting spiritual state of being. In Hinduism, for example, whilst there is an acknowledgment of a progression along the spiritual path, "The supreme experience is held... to be

neither spasmodic nor ecstatic but natural and continuous and should therefore not be characterized as a 'peak' but as a lofty plateau" [18].

Zen patriarch Dogen explained that "traditionally, *daigo* is final, absolute enlightenment, contrasted to experiences of glimpsing enlightenment, *shōgo*" or *kenshō* [25]. In Sufism, the terms *fanā* (extinction or annihilation in God, referring to an ecstatic state in which personal selfhood is consumed by an awareness of the totality of reality or God) and *baqā* (subsistence or permanence in God, referring to a grounded, ongoing experience of living in the world "while being fully aware of divine presence at the same time" [20]) represent "progressive stages of the spiritual journey... with the latter constituting a more advanced stage" [38]. And in Christianity, a person who has *mystical experiences* is, according to Underhill [19], "no mystic," because "a true mystic is the person... in whom the transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness."

According to Ferrer [17], "as it has often been stressed in the religious literature, the goal of the spiritual quest is not to have spiritual experiences, but to stabilize spiritual consciousness, live a spiritual life, and transform the world accordingly." Maslow also distinguished between fleeting and intense "peak experiences" and the stabilized "high plateau," which he described as living "at a constantly high level in the sense of illumination or awakening." Speaking about his own "high plateau" experience at the end of his life, he said that "This type of consciousness has certain elements in common with peak experiences... These elements are present, but are constant rather than climactic" (cited in [39]).

2. Buddhism-inspired phenomenological models for selflessness

2.1 Self-based psychological functioning

The theory of Self-Based Psychological Functioning [40] proposes that the attainment of happiness is linked to the structure of the self. On one end of the continuum, one perceives the self as a structured, permanent, independent and solid entity, which leads to self-centered psychological functioning, complete with suffering and fluctuating and hedonic happiness (due to primarily seeking pleasant feelings and avoiding unpleasant ones).

On the other end of the continuum, Self-Less Psychological Functioning emerges when perception of the self is flexible and dynamic, and this is related to authentic-durable happiness. This is conceptualized in terms of optimal functioning, or "as the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one's true potential" [41].

2.2 Pattern theory of selflessness

The pattern theory of selflessness (PTSL) [42] builds upon the pattern theory of self [43], suggesting that what we call the self is a complex pattern of dynamically related essential processes, including embodied, affective, cognitive, reflective, and social elements. PTSL proposes that Buddhist and secular meditation reorganize this self-pattern, enabling both temporary and lasting experiences of "selflessness."

The heuristic model outlines six transformations that reorganize the self-pattern in a nonlinear, iterative way. The first three bring lasting changes: the first focuses on integrating and consolidating the self-pattern, fostering a positive self-concept and higher self-esteem. This, in turn, helps process painful aspects of the self and cultivates compassion for oneself and others.

The second transformation involves cultivating concentration and present-moment awareness, deepening embodied experience and shifting from conceptual to tacit and bodily knowledge. The third focuses on mindful awareness, enhancing decentering and ongoing reflexive (habitual and immediate) witnessing. The fourth transformation, self-deconstruction (non-self), arises from the second and third, where awareness becomes non-conceptual, nondual, and empty of content, with experiences ranging from bliss to agony.

The first four transformations set the stage for the fifth, known as self-pattern flexibility. Unlike the earlier transformations, this one impacts the overall system dynamics, enhancing the self-pattern's flexibility. It allows for rapid shifts between different, even conflicting, experiences (segregation) and the simultaneous experience of multiple aspects (integration). This flexibility fosters existential resilience, supporting the search for meaning and purpose in life [44].

Finally, one reaches self-liberation, or selflessness, as a trait (long-term experience), primarily marked by seeing beyond the identity-view and the illusory nature of the self. This aligns with the first level of enlightenment according to Buddhism, named "stream entry" [45], considered to be a very realizable goal, even for non-monastic lay-persons [46]. This transition is phenomenologically characterized by spiritual resilience, when the person resorts to spiritual perspective to answer life's big questions [47]. This, in turn, involves facing death anxiety, as well as a qualitative experience of profound ease, of deep psychological well-being that is independent of circumstances [46].

In the following section we investigate findings from a recent paper [48] of the key role joy and love play in the stabilized and lasting spiritual state of being. We then discuss its bridge to selflessness, in light of the two above Buddhist-inspired phenomenological models.

3. Phenomenology of *Living Transcendence*

A phenomenological study, conducted by the first author [48], aimed at shedding light on the experience of the relatively stabilized and ongoing spiritual state of being described above, referred to here as of *Living Transcendence*. In the study, that experience was explored via in-depth phenomenological interviews with 32 "spiritual exemplars" of different traditions and spiritual paths. "Spiritual exemplars" were individuals, nominated by experts in the religious and spiritual field from around the world as "enlightened/self-transcendent/Self-realized/God-realized/spirit-medium/awakened/surrendered/fully integrated or otherwise an inspiring exemplar of their religious/spiritual path" [48].

The interviewees included exemplars of Abrahamic traditions, Eastern traditions, tradition-less, New Age or Pagan spirituality and Indigenous traditions. To maintain the interviewees' anonymity, they will be referred to here by pseudonyms, followed by a few of the interviewee's characteristics: Religious affiliation/Male or Female/Age group/Geographical location (for example, "Salome (Hindu/F/70's/N. America)").

Transcripts of the interviews were coded by the first author and 14 analysis collaborators, and the codes were then used to create descriptive categories of the interviewees' experience. Five experiential qualities and an associated volitional aspect of *Living Transcendence* were defined in the analysis. The experiential qualities were: (a) *Noetic* (preconceptual, nondiscursive, and nonsymbolic knowing, awareness or consciousness of ultimate reality or truth); (b) *Affective* (supremely positive affective qualities of joy, happiness or bliss, and love); (c) *Embodied* (somatic and/or energetic

presence or sense of a spiritual essence); (d) *Relational* (a sense of connectivity or "inter-being" with everything, God or the whole), and (e) *Constancy* over time (being ongoing, lasting, ever-present) of the above four qualities.

The associated volitional aspect was that of will or intention to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling" or a higher power, intelligence or Self. The authors concluded that the experience of *Living Transcendence* appeared to be "constantly and consistently unitive, connective, and supremely positive, and to inextricably permeate all other experiences and contextualize them" [48]. For space considerations, here we focus on the Affective dimension of joy, happiness or bliss, and love, referred to from this point on as "*enlightened joy and love*."

In our investigation we identified a number of characteristics of the *enlightened joy and love*, described by some of the interviewees. In the following excerpt from an interview with Susan (Unaffiliated/F/60's/Australia), when asked about her day-to-day experience, she said:

> *What I find in myself is that my inner state is absolutely uniform...Every day is just whatever every day is, nothing special, but there's always this uprising of joy or excitement, the excitement of being... But it's not like the excitement of your horse winning the race, which is very thin and there's always a payback. If you're excited in your emotions, you can be sure you're going to be depressed some time later. But this excitement doesn't have an opposite. None of the things that I talked about – peace, love, joy – has an opposite. They just are there in their stability and constancy... And everything is always new. Because I'm not carrying around all my past experience with me and I'm not busy projecting forward. So life is exciting in the dullest way, from the dullest resources... It's a delight out of nothing. And it's always fresh.*
>
> *But at the same time, of course, life is very challenging. My health is not great. I have challenges with my relationships and with money. I'm impacted whenever there's a challenge. But the impact is not the only thing going on... it does not take up the whole space. The whole space is already full of being, so the impact is cushioned in something greater.*

Characteristic 1 – Stability and constancy.

This excerpt reveals several characteristics of the *enlightened joy and love* associated with *Living Transcendence*. The first is their stability and constancy. Constancy of the *enlightened joy and love* was also described, for example, by Damon (New Age/M/70's/N. America), who shared that "My initial experience, when was seven, put me deeply in touch with a sense of a universal lovingness. And the sense of unconditional inclusive lovingness has not changed in my seventy-some years."

Ness (Buddhist/M/70's/Europe) said: "I have thoughts and feelings, and in that I'm no different from an ordinary person. But there's also stability on a deep existential level." Several interviewees indicated that they continued to experience *enlightened joy and love* through the fluctuations of life and even in the midst of emotional turmoil and physical or relational crises. For example, Rene (Unaffiliated/M/70's/N. America) said: "A loving bliss or a blissful love, that's the sort of constant background feeling that I have. If I feel depressed or if I get anxiety, it's depression or anxiety that's occurring on top of this extraordinary background bliss."

Characteristic 2 – Integrated into or intrinsic to the experience of being and functioning in the world.

The second characteristic of *enlightened joy and love*, closely related to the first one, is that they are integrated into or intrinsic to the experience of being and functioning

in the world. For example, Goren (Hindu/M/50's/Asia) said that "With full awareness of what this represents, I'm telling you that the one thing I know is that I'm truly happy." Later in the interview he added: "At a surface level of life I'm fully engaged. If I'm angry or upset about something, I'm fully engaged in that emotion... And yet with that full engagement, that inner core is not at all effected... and knows itself not being effected. Ever." And Amanda (Unaffiliated/F/50's/N. America) said that her "realization of boundless love... has become integrated to the point where it's just there no matter what else is happening."

Characteristic 3 – Subtlety.

The third characteristic of *enlightened joy and love* is that they are subtle. The subtlety of the *enlightened joy and love* was referred to by Rica (Hindu/F/60's/N. America), who described the affective quality of her ongoing experience as follows: "It's not a 'happy moment' when everything's going well... Externally people would say it's joy or bliss, but the quality I'm experiencing is settledness, calm, an alignment, a coming together of something. It's happening on a more cellular level."

When Annis (Sufi/F/70's/Europe) was asked about the differences between her past peak experiences and her current state of *Living Transcendence*, she said:

> *It's finer. And there is silent joy in it now, that was not so tangible then. Then it was more like an eruption, and now it is settled, it is part of life. It is also dynamic, but very subtle dynamic. It's the same all the time and it's always new in each moment. It has a very subtle feeling quality to it, a being quality, that is just pouring out love that is not personal. It's nothing, but nothing in love and joy and freedom.*

Characteristic 4 – Inseparably intertwined with the noetic, embodied and relational qualities of *Living Transcendence*.

The fourth characteristic of *enlightened joy and love* is that they are inseparably intertwined with the noetic, embodied and relational qualities of *Living Transcendence*. This characteristic is evident in the following two excerpts, the first from an interview with Barry (Hindu/M/70's/N. America), who referred to his state as "self awareness," and the second from an interview with Salome (Hindu/F/70's/N. America), who referred to her ongoing experience of "divine love."

> *The experience of self-awareness could just as well be called love-awareness, because that's what you feel. Because the main quality of self-awareness is a sense of unification. What does it unify? Everything... The whole world. I used to love my family only and it was actually a shock to me to start loving other people, and then the whole world. That's what self-awareness does for you. (Barry)*

> *That's very much my experience, that God is joy, that God is love. And to experience love in that radical form, in that unconditional form, it's a feeling state... It's physical. It's a kind of whole-body ecstasy. It's, of course, totally inclusive – there's nothing in your frame of experience that's left out. And by feeling I don't mean emotion, although there certainly is emotion in it. By feeling I mean a whole-body knowing, a non-rational mode of perception. It's a knowing that's in your body, that's not mediated by the mind or the intellect. (Salome)*

In summary, e*nlightened joy and love* appear to be characterized by being: (1) stable and constant; (2) integrated into or intrinsic to the experience of being and

functioning in the world; (3) subtle; and (4) inseparably intertwined with the other qualities of *Living Transcendence*.

4. Conclusions

The experience of *enlightened joy and love* has some resemblance to the rapturous, ecstatic joy, happiness, delight and bliss of transient "peak" spiritual or mystical experiences. It differs from them, however, in important ways.

Transient experiences of transcendence have been commonly described as including an intense affective component. For example, in Bucke's [49] description of his brief experience of "cosmic consciousness" he writes that "…there came upon me a sense of exaltation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination impossible to describe." "Peak" experiences were defined by Maslow as "An ordinarily brief and transient moment[s] of bliss, rapture, ecstasy, great happiness, or joy [in which] we usually feel such emotions as awe, reverence and wonder" [50] and by Bassei et al. as "multifaceted transcendental and ecstatic states of extreme happiness, fulfillment, and loss of self in a mystical and transpersonal dimension" [51].

Similarly, the characteristics of transient "mystical states of mind" were described by Stace [35] as including a "feeling of blessedness, joy, happiness, satisfaction, etc." and a "feeling that what is apprehended is holy, or sacred, or divine." Recently, Metzinger [52, 53] found in his research of meditators' experiences of "pure awareness" that it "can trigger a whole spectrum of mostly positive affective states like joy, existential relief, gratitude, impersonal love, awe, and wonder, ranging in intensity from the very delicate and natural to the dramatic and overwhelming" [54].

The experience of *enlightened joy and love* differs from these experiences not only in duration. It is not akin to a prolonged ecstatic joy of a "peak" experience in the same way that Generalized Anxiety Disorder is not akin to a prolonged bout of fear or that a lasting love relationship is not akin to prolonged romantic infatuation. The dramatic, intense or "climatic" (in Maslow's words [39]) nature of "peak" experiences is contrasted by the subtlety and "background"-like constancy of *enlightened joy and love*.

Furthermore, the affective qualities of "peak" experiences are associated with a sense of being flung out of the known world of time, space, self and others, choices and actions, while *enlightened joy and love* are aspects of the experience of being *in* that world. These differences have some significant consequences. For example, "[o]ne of the most common aftereffects of awakening experiences [is] to create a desire to 'return' to this dimension of meaning and harmony" [28], while in individuals whose state of being is that of *Living Transcendence* there is no such desire because it is their ongoing state of being.

Living Transcendence has a subjective, phenomenal character, which includes the affective qualities of *enlightened joy and love*. It is also a way of being and functioning in the world. It can be thought of, therefore, as an instance of Ratcliffe's [55] "existential feelings." Ratcliffe described the concept of "existential feeling" as a "background orientation through which experience as a whole is structured… the backdrop against which [objects of experience or thought] are intelligible" [55]. The "existential feeling" was also described as "the overall *quality of being*, sometimes written as *Being* (termed the 'ontological') that pervades or serves as a background or world horizon for a given lived world" [56].

Often the term "existential feelings" has been used in reference to psychopathologies [57, 58] such as schizophrenia [59], depersonalization [60], depression [61] and neurocognitive disorders such as dementia [62]. *Living Transcendence* may be regarded as being on the opposite side of the spectrum from such disorders. Its characteristics seem to be related to some of the features of the ideal state in many of the religious traditions. From the perspectives of these traditions and of the interviewees in the above-mentioned research, the experience of *Living Transcendence*, including its affective qualities of *enlightened joy and love*, appears to be subtly positive, consistent and stable.

In light of the two Buddhism-inspired phenomenal models of selflessness, the phenomenology described in the proposed multifaceted construct of *Living Transcendence* aligns well with both Selfless Psychological Functioning (as opposed to the previously outlined Self-Based Psychological Functioning) [40], as well as the transition to self-liberation described in the pattern theory of selflessness [42]. The relationship between selflessness and *enlightened joy and love* can be described in several ways:

Selflessness as a prerequisite for enlightened joy and love: *Enlightened joy and love* can be seen as spontaneously arising when self-centeredness dissolves or is transcended. Selflessness, in this context, means letting go of the attachment to the self, which is frequently associated with suffering, anxiety, and desires. When the self-centered perspective dissolves or is transcended, it creates space for a deeper, more universal sense of joy and love, that is not dependent on external circumstances. This perspective aligns well with the pattern theory of selflessness.

Enlightened joy and love *as an expression of selflessness: Enlightened joy and love* can be viewed as a natural outcome or expression of selflessness. When a person operates from a state of selflessness, their joy and love transition from being about personal gain to a broader, more inclusive sense of well-being that encompasses others. This type of joy and love is more stable, constant, and unaffected by the usual ups and downs of life. This perspective aligns well with the theory of Self-Based Psychological Functioning.

Mutual reinforcement: The experience of *enlightened joy and love* can further reinforce selflessness. As individuals experience the profound joy and love that are associated with a selfless state, they may be more inclined to cultivate and maintain that state, leading to a virtuous cycle where selflessness and *enlightened joy and love* continually enhance each other until a stable state of being is reached.

While the above are possible descriptions of the relationship between selflessness and *enlightened joy and love*, they leave open the question about the source of *enlightened joy and love.* The term "selflessness" (similarly to "self-transcendence") suggests removal or transcendence of the obscuring, distorting or veiling effect of self-centeredness. The existent scientific literature contains little reference, however, to the nature of what is revealed when the veil is removed, and its relationship with *enlightened joy and love*.

The anecdotal evidence from the study referred to here suggests that the spiritual exemplars interviewed experienced something of an entirely positive nature, beyond the obscuring effects of self-centeredness. They referred to it as "full of being," "universal lovingness," "loving bliss or a blissful love," "boundless love," "a being quality, that is just pouring out love that is not personal," "self awareness," "divine love" and "whole-body knowing." Based on this self-report, the authors propose that selflessness is the *enabler* or "veil-remover" of *enlightened joy and love* or "Authentic-Durable Happiness" [63], rather than being its cause, as suggested by Pellerin, Dambrun and Raufaste [64].

One possible source of *enlightened joy and love* has been named "nondual awareness" (NDA) or "consciousness-as-such" [65], described as "the pure element of awareness… [which] shines by its own light; it is self-luminous" [66] and defined as "non-conceptual, non-propositional awareness, without subject-object dualistic structure" [65].

Another possible source has been described as "conceptually unstructured and unfiltered awareness of the true nature of reality," which has been said to be associated with *sukha*, the Buddhist term for genuine and enduring happiness [67]. As such, the authors propose that *enlightened joy and love* are affective qualities of nondual awareness or of awareness of "the true nature of reality" – that which is directly known and experienced when the obscuring and distorting effect of self-centeredness dissolves or is transcended.

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Chapter 6

Perspective Chapter: Contemplation – A Symbiotic Approach to Esthetic Presence

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Abstract

This research explores the connection between contemplation and self-realization, through an interdisciplinary lens that includes philosophy, psychology, and spirituality. It emphasizes the ontological and etymological foundations of contemplation, tracing its origins from ancient Greek philosophy to modern thought, even oriental approaches, and contrasts it with contemporary society's focus on technical efficiency and production. The chapter investigates how contemplative practices can lead to personal growth and self-awareness, illustrating this with historical and philosophical references, including the works of Plato and Aristotle, among others. It also delves into various practices that foster a contemplative state, highlighting their potential to transform everyday experiences and facilitate a deeper connection with one's inner self. Additionally, it discusses the esthetic dimension of contemplation, examining how engaging with beauty in art, nature, and other forms can lead to moments of self-discovery and enhance personal growth. Through a dialectical exploration of these themes, the chapter argues that contemplation remains a vital and enriching practice, offering an alternative perspective that transcends the prevalent focus on utility and production in contemporary society. A contemplative life implies an esthetic life, one that transcends everyday vicissitudes and embraces present magnificence as a value per se.

Keywords: experience, contemplative life, self-realization, slowness, ontology, beauty

1. Introduction

> *What lies behind us and ahead of us, are tiny matters to what lies within us.*
>
> *R. W. Emerson, 1840*

Cells multiply by dividing. This paradoxical phenomenon is not only worthy of *contemplation* but is also beautiful. It reveals a certain dimension of thought, such as logic, and a certain dimension of the external world. Contemplation can serve as a possible bridge between these two dimensions. This paradox, as formulated by Mark (6: 41–46), has already been addressed in practical contexts; Jesus of Nazareth performed the multiplication of loaves and fishes—by dividing them,

that is, by distributing them. Something can be divided infinitely, at least at the mathematical level. But analysis, as we will see, is far from contemplation. Although this reveals the coexistence of two seeming opposites—the constructions of division expressed in language and the evidence of multiplication expressed in quantifiable phenomena—contemplation is precisely a change of perspective on the same phenomenon, in this case mathematical or physical.

Discussing contemplation in the contemporary world might seem anachronistic. The modern world appears to have settled into a one-way track dominated by technical efficiency, methodology, and speed, as Marcuse already analyzed in "One-Dimensional Man" (1964) [1]. All these elements are valued because they lead to a greater value: production. However, this production is not understood in the Aristotelian sense of *poeisis* (poetry, as in artistic creation-production), but in the more modern economic sense, from Ricardo and Adam Smith [2].

One can distinguish productive work—which results in commodities—from unproductive work, such as intellectual labor. Moreover, Marx's contribution that production already implies consumption allows us to describe how, in contemporary society, producing is consuming.

Anthropologically and ecologically, humans seem to need to produce their means of subsistence, unlike other animals, which adapt to their environment. However, this human condition, the necessity to produce the material environment, has extended in modern society to all human dimensions, including the intellectual, spiritual, and esthetic. In this context, contemplation can be seen as an anachronism, an *atopos* that makes no sense, or whose only possible acceptance is if it is re-signified as producing something, like relaxation, well-being, or rest—to return to production.

Talking about contemplation requires acknowledging a certain intellectual-mental capacity. How did this mental capacity, seemingly unique among living beings, arise? Briefly, the known universe was created 13.5 billion years ago (BYA). The Solar System and the Earth formed 4.5 BYA. The first living being appeared 3.8 BYA. The first eukaryotic cell—with a differentiated nucleus—appeared 1.8 BYA. The first animals emerged 600 million years ago (MYA), and the first mammals 180 MYA. Primates appeared 65 MYA, apes 40 MYA, and the first hominids—like *A ustralopithecus*, who were already bipedal—7 MYA. Finally, 200,000 years ago, the first *Homo sapiens*—named by the naturalist Linnaeus—emerged in Africa.

Thirty thousand years ago, besides the extinction of another human species, the Neanderthals, cave paintings were already created, sculptures were carved, and metals were forged. Seventeen thousand years ago, the Lascaux Cave in France was already the Sistine Chapel of the Stone Age. All this suggests that the mind already meant a cerebral process. Five thousand years ago, with the emergence of writing, or with Homer's poems 3000 years ago, self-awareness was already functioning [3].

In this paper, it is argued that the mind is not seen as a thing; it is not something positive and should not be confused with the brain, which can indeed be conceived positively. The mind is a function. The mind *is* not, but rather it *is being*; it must be referred to in the gerund, because as a function, it is an action, a dynamic, a movement. Yet, contemplation requires this "to be" (infinitive), and not just *being* (gerund).

As a way to introduce this chapter, several questions are provided, in order for the reader to get familiar with the topic, and to get in touch with her/himself.

- What is contemplation from an ontological and etymological point of view?
- What relationship can be established between contemplation and self-realization?

- What are the practices that can favor contemplation as a state and as a process?
- Can contemplation transform our understanding of daily experiences and interactions?
- What is the meaning of the experience, and what do the contemplative experience of esthetics have in common?
- Can appreciation of esthetics lead to moments of self-discovery?

2. The ontology of contemplation

Contemplation originally refers to vision, the act of seeing. When this act of seeing, of observing, is especially mental, then the ancient Greeks understood it as θεωρία, that is, *theōría* or theory. Theory was equivalent to the verb *to contemplate*, consider, or speculate, which was θεωρέω. This consideration, or gaze, had to be attentive, that is, with a certain intention in the gaze, not a mere sensible reception through the eyes; hence it had to be a *mental* act of seeing [2].

It is common to use the argument of utility to give them a sense or value. In this case, we face the problem of addressing the issue from a very specific perspective: that of technical and useful production. However, theory is associated with the opposite: with festivity. Theory, in its most material aspect, is what observers engaged in during festivals and public games. The theorist was someone who did not intervene in what was observed; they were merely an observer. This role was also assigned to the ambassador of a city-state—such as Athens, Thebes, or Corinth—when visiting the festivals of other city-states [4]. Taken to the mental-intellectual level, the notion of the theorist was used to describe a person who engages in the act of contemplating or considering, as mentioned.

An original conception of contemplation was already developed by Plato in several of his dialogs, conceiving it as the knowledge of celestial beings or Nature in general, a pursuit already undertaken by Ionian physicists like Anaxagoras. Indeed, theory consists of knowing Nature, as it is unrelated to the *practical*. Thus, for Plato, and also Aristotle, theory is associated with the knowledge of Nature, understood as a subject that transcends the problems of the city. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato describes a certain stereotype of the contemplator in the figure of Thales of Miletus, one of the seven sages of classical antiquity:

> *"When he was studying the stars, he fell into a well while looking up, and it is said that a clever and witty Thracian maidservant mocked him, saying that he wanted to know the things of the heavens but forgot what was right in front of him and at his feet. The same mockery could be made of all who devote their lives to philosophy. Indeed, such a person is oblivious to their neighbors and those close to them, not only unaware of what they are doing but even of the fact that they are humans or any other creature. However, when it comes to knowing what a human truly is and what is appropriate for such a nature to do or endure, different from other beings, they put all their efforts into investigating and examining it carefully" [5]*

Plato's disciple, Aristotle, follows this line of thought by endowing the contemplative attitude with the highest sense of meaning, considering it the most exalted

human activity, which even facilitates complete happiness. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he describes this contemplative life as the most virtuous, as it is dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and truth:

> *"If happiness is an activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable [that it is an activity] in accordance with the highest virtue, and this will be an activity of the best part of man. Whether it be the intellect or something else which, by nature, seems to command and direct and possess knowledge of noble and divine objects, being either itself divine or the most divine part within us, its activity in accordance with its own virtue will be perfect happiness. And this activity is contemplative, as we have said. [...] It is also the most continuous, for we are more capable of continuous contemplation than of any other activity" [6]*

On the other hand, Aristotle sought to challenge the stereotype of the philosopher as a contemplative figure completely absorbed in his own thoughts and isolated in his ivory tower. In his *Politics*, he presents a different view of Thales of Miletus, depicting him as someone who, due to his theoretical knowledge, was able to enhance his life by applying that knowledge to practical matters:

> *"It was reproached to him that his love for wisdom was useless because of his poverty. It is said that, having anticipated, through his knowledge of astronomy, that there would be a good olive harvest while it was still winter, he put up bonds with the little money he had to lease all the olive presses in Miletus and Chios, renting them out for very little because he had no competitors. When the right time came, many sought them urgently, and he sublet them on the terms he wished" [7]*

Therefore, in antiquity, Aristotle presented multiple connotations of wisdom. Purely theoretical wisdom—*sophia*—and practical-prudent wisdom—*phronesis*—the latter being conceived as the capacity to make morally correct decisions for everyday life. Thus, a contemplative person need not to be entirely alienated from reality, isolated, or indifferent to the world or their own well-being, but rather someone who exercises prudence. This notion, both rational and ethical, would be more fully developed by the Stoics of the third century BCE and beyond.

Similarly, Plato already possessed the idea that contemplation is not merely knowledge of the Forms but also an activity connected with human life and society. In one of his most famous dialogs, *The Republic*, Plato outlines the ideal education for a good ruler and does not exclude the contemplative, or theoretical, capacity:

> *"—And how much time do you allocate for this?*
> *—Fifteen years. And once they reach the age of fifty, those who have excelled in the tests and demonstrated excellence in every respect, both in actions and scientific disciplines, should be led to the end. They must be compelled to raise the eye of the soul to behold what provides light to all things; and after perceiving the Good itself, using it as a paradigm, they should organize the state, individuals, and themselves for the rest of their lives, spending the majority of their time with philosophy..." [8]*

Contemplation, as a theoretical activity, is not merely an action or state that a human being can undertake; according to the Stagirite, it is the most natural and noble. Individuals dedicated to pure knowledge are contemplatives. In contrast to contemporary society, contemplation seems to be more natural and compatible with

human life, as it can be maintained for a longer period; interestingly, it appears that the challenge is precisely acquiring the contemplative perspective.

When science emerged as a discipline of knowledge that replaced philosophy, particularly from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it became closely associated with mathematics and technology. This theoretical activity ceased to be contemplative. Science began to be seen as technical and useful, a concept often referred to in research as "transfer." Nowadays, if what you are investigating does not have direct and immediate applicability to the world, it is considered not useful. And indeed, it may not be. However, utility and meaning are not equivalent. Contemplation, understood as theory, has meaning, and according to Plato and Aristotle, it even holds the highest significance in human activity.

But two and three centuries earlier, the Ionian physicists—such as Democritus, Leucippus, and Anaximander—who began transitioning from mythical explanations of the world to rational ones, worked particularly on understanding the world through a contemplative activity, without a direct intention to intervene in, produce, or control it. These intentions have been significantly amplified in modern and contemporary technoscience. Values such as truth, virtue, or meaning are less prevalent in contemporary technoscience. Utility, validity, replicability, and transfer are now the predominant values.

According to the Greek worldview, the former values are superior as they stand on their own. Therefore, contemplation is about observing, mentally attending to, and theorizing. Theorizing is considered the most human activity, according to Aristotle: "This activity [theorizing] is the only one that seems to be loved for its own sake, since nothing is gained from it except contemplation, whereas from practical activities, we obtain, more or less, other things in addition to the action itself" [9]. It appears, then, that the contemplative gaze is not pure passivity or inactivity but rather a different relationship with the world. It transcends everydayness and reaches the essence of things, to their knowledge.

Currently, the term "practical" is often used when "technical" would be more accurate. In philosophy, "practical" generally refers to ethics—the art of living well—politics—the affairs of the polis or city—and daily life. On the other hand, "technical" pertains to the application of specialized knowledge and skills for the creation, manipulation, or improvement of objects and processes. This term is primarily associated with technology, or more broadly with art and craftsmanship, as was the case with the Greek concept of *techné*.

That contemplation is considered a particular or even the highest and most natural perspective in human beings does not imply that human life should consist solely of contemplation, as interpreted by some factions' interpretations of Zen Buddhism, for example. The contemplative life—*βίος θεωρητικός* in Aristotle [10]—implies a dual wisdom: on one hand, purely theoretical thought—thinking for the sake of thinking—and on the other, prudence in living.

In another passage, Plato refers to contemplation as a vital attitude, a specific gaze, a way of life: the contemplative life. What one must contemplate is beauty, although it is not directly accessed through the eyes; rather, it requires a certain intellectual ascent to achieve that state of contemplating beauty. Plato illustrates this through the character of the priestess Diotima of Mantinea, offering a praise of love:

> *"When someone ascends from the things of this world through the right love of young people and begins to perceive that beauty, it can be said that he is nearing the end. For this is precisely the proper way to approach the things of love [...]. At that stage of life*

> *[...] it is worth living: when one contemplates the beauty itself. [...] Do you think," she said, "that the life of a man who looks in that direction, who contemplates that beauty, is vain...?" [11]*

Although science was indeed a cultural product that emerged at a specific time and place, such as sixth-century BCE Ionia, contemplation is less contextual and possesses a certain universal nature. Thus, it is not only Plato and Aristotle who reflected on contemplation. For instance, action is not limited to production. In Chinese wisdom traditions, knowledge is associated with action, but not understood as production.

Chinese thought does not consist of disciplines such as logic or epistemology, which are based on the assumption that reality can or should be the object of theoretical description. In other words, theory is not external to the world but is fully immersed in reality. This means that the classic problem of epistemology in the West—how a subject knows an object—has not been present. Human beings are already part of reality, connected to it, and can thus access it directly, whether through intuition or other means. Theory and practice cannot be dichotomized, as they are never thought of as separate.

In Chinese thought, knowledge typically includes a form of knowing-how. Confucius, in fact, was the first to express the fear of having his theoretical discourse separated from his actions. It is not that action should be based on discourse but rather that it is essentially its measure [12]. Contemplation, in this sense, is a direct means of understanding and accessing reality, not so much a knowing-for-its-own-sake as in Aristotle, but rather an integration of knowing, doing, and being. In any case, it is important to highlight the difficulty of interpreting traditional Chinese philosophy from a European perspective, given that there are studies that delve into the richness of traditional Chinese epistemology [13].

Other philosophical traditions, such as Taoism, have developed contemplation more profoundly. In Taoist wisdom, the Dao (or Tao) is the fundamental principle underlying all of reality. It is the source of all existence and the path that all things follow. A defining characteristic of the Dao is its dynamic nature; the Dao is not a thing. Hence, it cannot be contemplated as one would observe an object. The Dao can be translated as path, way, route, method, or manner of proceeding. This structure enables all human experience, without which the truth of any statement's content could not be evaluated.

In this sense, the Dao cannot be "summarized" or "captured" by human language; it is more experiential and fluid, while language fixes reality and renders it static. As Zhuangzi, a philosopher from the fourth century BCE, said, the Dao is that by which we walk. Again, a dynamic or vitalist approach, similar to the one used earlier to understand the human mind, is necessary. The Dao is not a static, predefined structure of reality but is continuously emerging and only exists in its process of emergence. Thus, the Dao cannot be contemplated in a traditional sense; rather, one can be in the process of contemplation [12]. In Taoism, contemplation is not merely a mental practice but a way of attuning oneself to the Dao. It is a means to directly experience the nature of the Dao, which is indefinable and ineffable. By contemplating, the practitioner merges with the Dao, transcending individual identity and experiencing the unity of all existence.

Contemplation leads to an appreciation of simplicity and naturalness. Ontologically, this means recognizing and living in accordance with the simple and pure essence of existence, free from artificial complications. In Taoism, as well as in Buddhism, the notion of emptiness—*wu*—is central. Contemplation helps to empty

(or slow down) the mind of thoughts and concerns, creating a space where the Dao can manifest. It allows for the creation of a flow, a bridge. Associated with the concept of emptiness is the ontological and ethical principle of *wu wei*. Translated as non-action or effortless action, *wu wei* refers to the need to act without force or effort. The assumption in Taoism is that Nature is already harmonious, and thus human will should not impose anything. Plants, for instance, grow through *wu wei*.

Zhuangzi, in one of his many parables, illustrates *wu wei* in everyday life. The cook Ding is a master in the art of butchering, highly trained in non-action. He describes how, initially, he used all his skill to dismember an ox, but over time, his technique became so subtle that it required minimal effort. Ding dismembers oxen by guiding the knife along the existing spaces in the body; a clumsy cook would use force, frequently having to change knives. A skilled contemplative cook uses the latent possibilities already present in things, rather than forcing or intervening directly. Zhuangzi describes this work as a form of moving meditation, where actions flow spontaneously and effortlessly, following the natural lines of the ox's body:

> *"Now, I work with my spirit*
> *and not with my eyes.*
> *Where knowledge*
> *and the senses cease,*
> *it is the spirit that acts.*
> *I follow the body's structure of the ox,*
> *penetrate into the joints,*
> *and do not touch an artery or tendon*
> *much less the large bones" [14]*

If an external observer were to look on from the outside, they might not be able to distinguish the attitudinal and spiritual shift that has occurred in the cook Ding, but it has indeed had practical consequences, as evidenced. Similarly, there has been a transformation, not just psychological but ontological, affecting the very nature of the individual. This will enable self-development, as will be argued subsequently.

The concept of inactivity as *wu wei* allows us to perceive contemplation not so much as a subject connected to an object, but rather as a relation in itself. It demands an ontological shift, not a positivist one, similar to what occurred in Husserl's phenomenology. One who is inactive does not assert themselves but rather detaches from their ego and becomes 'nobody'; they merge into a different ontological form, into a relationship. It is through production and activities that the subject-individual is constituted, to the extent that "the human being suffocates in their own doing" [15]. However, contemplation allows for the dissolution of this subject.

To the notion of contemplation as theory in ancient Greek thought, a religious connotation was later added. The historian Plutarch of Boeotia, among others, associated *θεωρία* (theoria) with *θεός* (theos)—god. This led the Latins to translate *θεωρία* as *contemplatio*, where *con-templor* carried a religious sense, being linked to *templum*. Contemplation now involved being in communion with the temple, sharing a gaze toward something sacred with the sacred itself [16].

Just as in Plato's philosophy contemplation was associated with access to and understanding of the truly real—namely, the Forms, the Ideas, and especially the Idea of the Good—the subsequent Neoplatonism, as well as the new Christian philosophy, would develop this contemplation of God as almost the only possible contemplation, since it encompasses the idea of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. The ancient

contemplative life, associated with a Greek philosopher or a Buddhist in the East, was in medieval Europe associated with the life of a religious person. This individual was not dedicated to commerce, politics, or warfare, but to a theoretical-divine contemplation.

3. Contemplation as path to self-realization

Self-realization is a multifaceted concept that might be explored through diverse angles and disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, sociology, spirituality, among others.

From a humanistic standpoint, self-realization has been referred to as a lifelong process of progressively becoming what one idiosyncratically is, as a human self-discovery adventure to be everything one is capable of becoming [17]. Such a process implies a continuous self-actualization attitude, where the person strives to achieve their fullest potential and to express their unique capabilities [18], experimenting states of flow where one becomes fully immersed and engaged in activities that bring them deep meaning and joy [19].

From a philosophical stance, self-realization can be understood as the pure knowledge of one's true self [20] in unity with all of creation [21], which might actually imply the dissolution of the ego [22]. Thus, it involves a deep inquiry into the nature of the self as well as transcending personal boundaries. Nevertheless, here emerges a concept that is worth exploring, as it is transcendence. For Plato, contemplation leads to a kind of intellectual transcendence, enabling the soul to ascend beyond the ephemeral realm of sensory perception and attain insight into eternal truths. As seen above, it is the notion of contemplation as theory.

In the Platonic case, and in much of the philosophical tradition, the theory is transcendental in that it requires accessing and interacting with the world of Ideas, which *transcends* the empirical or "vulgar" world. This transcendental contemplation not only elevates consciousness but also nurtures a profound connection with universal principles that govern essence, thereby enriching the quest for self-realization with enduring philosophical depth and spiritual resonance.

Both disciplines, psychological and philosophical have come to the same type of 'state' from a quite different inner processing, yet there are intriguing commonalities on it. From the psychological view, self-realization seems to be a kind of byproduct of a continuous sort of striving process, while from a philosophical stance, seems to be the comprehension of the process itself.

The question to raise here might be whether the practice of contemplation may be understood as a process itself of pure awareness—further discussed in the next section—, that lead to particular daily experiences of transcendence and overall, to self-realization, and which role might play esthetic there.

Indeed, the connection between contemplation and self-realization is a complex subject somehow deeply explored by ancient philosophers, whose meditations have one-way or another revealed a profound interrelation between these two dimensions of being. Yet, emerges here a question with regard to the process itself. Can we refer to contemplation and self-realization as states of being, or, how could they be more accurately understood?

It is a fact that in the timeless pursuit of wisdom, the nature of contemplation and self-realization has long been a subject of profound inquiry. To consider whether contemplation is a state, we must first delve into the essence of what constitutes a

state. A state, in its philosophical sense, is a condition of being, characterized by a certain stability and persistence over time. Contemplation, as conceived by the great thinkers of antiquity and modernity alike, is both a process and an experience, an interaction object-subject and an intersection in between both. It might be described as the active engagement of the mind in a dynamic interaction with the deepest aspects of reality.

Contemplation, can be regarded also as a state inasmuch as it denotes a sustained orientation of the individual toward the sublime. It is not merely a fleeting moment of insight but a continuous disposition toward reflective thought and inner stillness. During the contemplative act, there is no "analysis" (separation, making things discrete) at the epistemological level. But indeed, at the pragmatic-vital level, contemplation is a practice that has a beginning and an end. This state of contemplation is marked by a profound quietness, a serene focus that transcends the turmoil of everyday life. This supposes the enlightenment of the individual regarding reality. A reality transcendent to everyday fluctuations and the agitation of the urgent-necessary.

Turning to self-realization, we encounter a concept that is deeply intertwined with the notion of being and becoming. Self-realization, as articulated by sages and philosophers across cultures, is the process of actualizing one's true potential and understanding one's essential nature. It might be seen as the culmination of an inward journey, where the individual transcends the ego and its myriad illusions to discover the authentic self. This journey toward self-realization is often described as a state, yet it is not a static condition but necessarily a dynamic and evolving route.

Self-realization can be likened to the unfolding of a flower, where each petal represents a layer of understanding and insight. It is a state of perpetual growth and expansion, where the individual continually moves toward greater alignment with their true essence. In the teachings of Gandhi, self-realization involves the dissolution of the egoic self, leading to a profound sense of unity with all of creation. This state of being transcends the personal and enters the realm of the universal, where the boundaries between self and other dissolve, and therefore they come together.

Thus, both contemplation and self-realization can be understood as states, but they are states characterized by their fluidity and dynamism. Although contemplation can be understood as a state and self-realization as a goal or path oriented, they are not fixed points but rather ongoing processes of engagement and transformation. Contemplation is the state of the mind in active pursuit of wholeness, which entails presence, neutrality, accuracy, a sustained engagement with the higher realms of thought and existence. Self-realization, on the other hand, is the state of the soul in its journey toward wholeness, an ever-deepening awareness of one's true nature and place within the cosmos.

Contemplation, in its purest essence, might be referred to a state of deep and sustained reflection; a process of looking beyond—or more here—of observing without prejudice or judgment what transpires within the soul and mind. For Plato, contemplation is the path to truth, as through dialectic and anamnesis, the soul recollects the eternal Ideas, the pure forms that constitute ultimate reality.

Aristotle, on the other hand, elevates contemplation to the highest and most divine activity a human can undertake, with eudaimonia, or flourishing, being achieved through the contemplative life, where the mind dedicates itself to pure and disinterested knowledge. Likewise, for Aristotle, the good is that to which all things tend. Good could be understood as self-realization. Later Spinoza will return to this teleological vision, defining the conatus of each being as that which allows each individual to realize their potential.

The philosopher of Stagira says in his Nicomachean Ethics:

> *"Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" [23]*

Socrates reflects on the motto, from the Delphic tradition, "know thyself":

> *"For if you know yourself, you will know how to take care of yourself; but without this knowledge, you will not. So, the inscription 'Know thyself' means that the soul should get to know itself" [22]*

Self-realization implies that Socratic self-knowledge. It concerns the actualization of one's true potential and the alignment of one's life with the deepest understanding of oneself. Aristotle begins his ethics by saying: "good is that to which all things tend" [10]. It is an inner journey toward becoming fully aware of one's own nature, capacities, and purpose. Aristotelian ethics was teleological and based on the search for and acquisition of virtue. Virtue is the good and excellence-perfection of a thing. Therefore, his ethics referred to the search for excellence, to perform one's function well, one's own end, one's telos. In the case of a human being, it is to increase understanding and wisdom. This tendency toward good (self-realization) indicated by Aristotle involves self-knowledge too.

The connection between these two constructs lies in their mutual necessity for each other. Inner and outer contemplation act as the crucible within which self-realization is forged. Through the deliberate and sustained act of contemplation, one peels away the layers of illusion, distraction, and superficiality that obscure the true self and its reality around. This process requires a disciplined and honest inquiry into one's thoughts, motivations, and desires, akin to the Socratic method of relentless questioning and examination.

This method of Socrates, also called maieutic, was precisely inspired by the act of giving birth, given that his mother was an obstetrician. Just as women helped other women give birth to people, Socrates thought that with his method he could "give birth" to ideas from within people, universal definitions that were already there. The verb *give birth* in Spanish is commonly said as "dar a luz" (the literal translation would be to *give a light*).

In fact, as one engages in contemplation, the mind begins to discern the fundamental truths about existence and the self. This introspective clarity paves the way for self-realization, as one starts to align their actions, choices, and life path with the insights gained from contemplative practice.

Furthermore, self-realization enhances the practice of contemplation. As one becomes more attuned to the inner silence, the act of contemplation deepens, becoming more focused and profound. The insights gleaned from self-realization provide fertile ground for further contemplative inquiry, creating a virtuous cycle of growth and understanding.

Contemplation and self-realization are intimately connected in a symbiotic relationship (or sequential way – the completion of contemplation is self-realization). Contemplation is a state-approach that facilitates self-realization, while self-realization marks the orientation and tendency of the individual. Together, they form a pathway toward a life of wisdom, authenticity, and fulfillment, echoing the timeless insights of the ancient philosophers. Thus, both notions require a dynamic ontology

of becoming, as indicated in the previous section. They might represent the highest aspirations of the human being, the ceaseless quest for truth, good, beauty, and unity. Through contemplation, we engage with the sacred and transcendental, which is the eternity of change; through self-realization, we become one with it. This interplay between contemplation and self-realization defines the path to wisdom, a path that is as ancient as it is ever new.

4. Practice toward contemplation

From the symbiotic interconnection previously discussed, it is inferred not only a possibility but a close connection among contemplation—as an experience of direct access to the apprehension of aesthetics in the present moment—and its potential to stimulate a person's self-realization, instant by instant. We now ask what practical experiences might help us engage in the subtle yet profound exercise of contemplation (genuinely trained by the ancients) in capturing the intrinsic beauty of the present moment, as a unique—yet simultaneously kind of cyclical—opportunity to access such a space of intersection, that symbiosis between self and the world, the subject-object, 'me' and the universe.

We aim, therefore, to propose possible pathways for exploring this type of interaction within such inner-outer dimensionality, that intra and interpersonal space that can be both apprehended or directly dismissed, depending on the lens—awareness-of—and presence through which we witness that particular moment, the moment of now. Thus, drawing from philosophical insights, personal experience, and scientific research, we will explore various pathways that might help an individual on walking this direction:

4.1 Daily cultivation of solitude and silence

Following the approach of Kagge [23], the need to cultivate silence, is enriching in itself. The Desert Fathers, early Christian hermits, practiced solitude and silence as means to attain spiritual clarity and divine contemplation.

Similarly, Thoreau's reflections at *Walden Pond* [24] highlight the value of solitude for self-discovery, and in this same work he describes his experience of living alone for two years in a cabin near Lake Walden in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau was nourished by the Stoic ideas of living in harmony with nature. But he added to the Stoics the drift of contemporary society, which has caused us to lose the connection with nature, so it can no longer inspire us. This philosopher opted for a simple, self-sufficient and austere life, overcoming social conventions. Although it is true that this austere, isolated and silent way of life is not the only one possible, it can be said that it facilitates a contemplative state in the human being, with respect to the current accelerationist and productivist way of life.

Psychological research in this direction supports the benefits of solitude and silence in fostering creativity, reducing stress, and promoting deep critical self-reflection [24]. Given its essential significance to lead to contemplation, we dive a bit deeper on this pathway.

As Fosse beautifully once articulated [25, 26], perhaps it is because silence entails the act of marveling, but it also inherently possesses a certain power, much like the wide sea or a vast dark sky. Those who do not marvel at this power often fear it. This fear is why many people avoid silence, leading to background music everywhere, drowning out other noises [23].

Yet, how to practice it, how to venture myself into inner silence without fear, even when I am not used to that?

> *In silence, regeneration.*
> *In stillness, creativity.*
> *In contemplation, inspiration.*
> *In apparent emptiness, fullness.*
> *In nothing, everything.*
> *(L.P.M)*

One option is to start by making sure to allocate daily quiet time each particular day for silent reflection, at the beginning and the end of the day, for instance. Make sure to disconnect yourself from any gadgets, and to reconnect to your inner self, just free from distractions and only devoted to self-examination. It is not easy, it is not comfortable, yet you can take so much from that.

Other ways to practice it are kind of formal silent retreats, spending extended periods in silence and solitude to facilitate deep contemplation. However, one must be cautious when coming back to the 'normal' life, in order to create an inner space, a routine on practicing such an inward contemplation. At some point you will start listening to your inner patterns, your inner recurrent thoughts, your inner constant cognitive-emotional flow. This is the very first step to self-knowledge, an uncomfortable, arduous journey that nobody can do for you, except yourself.

4.2 Connecting to the capacity to marvel

We were born to wonder, but as we grow, we gradually lose this innate ability. Awe, or the capacity to marvel, is one of the most beautiful forms of fulfillment, and it is even a possible hypothesis for the birth of philosophy itself. But this capacity cannot emerge without a prior humble act of contemplation, a heartbeat of freshness, openness, mental neutrality—a kind of beginner's mind state. We are referring here to marveling for the sake of marveling, without any other objective per se.

For instance, *Ubi Amor, Ibi Oculus*, this antique Latin sentence, suggests that love—understood as the guiding force that leads on toward knowledge of the true essence of things—enriches our perception, allowing us to perceive reality with greater clarity and depth. It implies that where there is love, there is a profound ability to perceive and understand the world in a further meaningful way, transcending mere appearances and tapping into the essence of existence itself. Thus, when it is the heart that observes life, perceiving it with a soul-stirring openness, the capacity to wonder is present in everyday life. Great news or astonishments are not necessary; the mere act of noticing how the heart beats or the sun appears over on the horizon, is already a reason for wonder.

And here we connect with silence again. Silence speaks compellingly and connects us dramatically to the capacity for contemplation and wonder, allowing us to feel that spark of eternity in the face of existing reality, as we succumb to it and symbiotically merge with it. Feeling that we are nothing, yet everything. As Marcus Aurelius expressed in *Meditations* [27]:

> *Always think of the universe as one living organism, with a single substance and a single soul; and observe how all things are referred to the one perception of this being; and how all things act with one movement; and how all things are the cooperative*

> *causes of all things that come to pass; observe too the continuous spinning of the thread and the contexture of the web. These thoughts will help you cleanse yourself of the dust of earthly life (IV, 40). Observe the stars in their courses and imagine yourself running with them (VII, 47).*

4.3 Cultivating the ability to pause

The next step is how to cultivate the possibility to apprehend the beauty already present in this particular instant. What matters in this process, is to remember what truly important here is. In other words, and as Morin stated, by sacrificing the essential for the urgent, we will end up forgetting the urgency of the essential.

We often live the present as an extension of the past or an anticipation of the future, and in doing so, it can slip through our fingers. We lose the chance to savor it. Yet, a moment of pause, of conscious breathing, for instance—two or three soft, slow, mindful breaths, provides an opportunity to reconnect with who we are, even if only momentarily, beyond our diverse social roles. We can become identified with these roles, and we forget who we really are or, in other words, what our innermost essence aspires to show us.

If you are not in the habit of taking conscious pauses, we suggest you introduce them throughout the day. In the ontology of contemplation, as discussed above (Section 2), the ability to pause constitutes an essential exercise in perception, where intuition and reason may blend together.

Juan Ramón Jiménez, a Spanish poet, gorgeously captured the ability to stop and go slowly, to cultivate the appreciation of the beauty of the moment through presence, and he put it so in words:

> *Don't run.*
> *Go slowly,*
> *for where you need to go is to yourself only!*
> *Go slowly,*
> *don't run,*
> *for the child within you,*
> *eternally newborn,*
> *cannot follow you!*
> *If you go fast,*
> *time will fly ahead of you,*
> *like an elusive butterfly.*
> *If you go slowly,*
> *time will walk behind you,*
> *like a gentle ox.*
> *Eternities, 1918 Poem (XXXVI)*

4.4 Cultivating meditation, familiarization with inner patterns, and love

Practicing the ability to get familiar within, or what we know now as meditation, whose etymology traces back to Latin roots meaning deep contemplation and reflection, has been a cornerstone of contemplative practices in many philosophical traditions. In Buddhism, for instance, meditation (*dhyana*) is essential for attaining sort of inner enlightenment. The Stoics, such as Marcus Aurelius, used meditation as a tool for self-examination and cultivating virtue—that is, living in harmony with nature.

In its essence, it is a profound journey inward—a sacred exploration of the landscapes of our minds, hearts, and souls. By sitting there in silent, cultivating uncomfortably patience and resistance to escape, it is a practice that invites us to become intimate with the intricate tapestry of our inner world, where our patterns of thought, emotions, and beliefs reside like hidden treasures awaiting discovery.

Through meditation, we embark on a path of self-discovery where we encounter the raw essence of our being. In the quietude of our practice, we learn to observe without judgment, to witness our thoughts through a healthy distance as they arise and dissolve like waves in the vast ocean of consciousness. This process unveils the habitual patterns that shape our perceptions and actions, help us illuminating the intricate interplay between our minds and our lived experiences.

As we delve deeper into its practice, we cultivate a heightened awareness of our cognitive-emotional inner river—the gentle ebbs and flows of joy, sorrow, fear, and love. Thus, we patiently learn to sit with discomfort and embrace vulnerability, fostering a profound sense of acceptance and compassion toward ourselves and others.

Likewise, by cultivating such a space to get more familiar with ourselves, we also create a gateway to understanding the interconnectedness of all things. In stillness, we recognize that our inner landscape mirrors the outer world, and vice versa. We perceive the rhythms that bind us to the rest of nature, to each other, and to the cosmos itself. This awareness fosters a sense of unity and belonging, transcending the boundaries of individuality to embrace the vastness of nature. In other words, we transcend ourselves and grasp the unity, comprehending its vastness. That overwhelming moment in which self-realization manifests through pure contemplation.

Advances in neuroimaging techniques have allowed scientists to gain a deeper understanding of how meditation affects brain function and structure. In fact, regular meditation practice increases gray matter density in brain areas associated with learning, memory, emotional regulation and decision-making processes [25], leading to increased cortical thickness in the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with executive function, attention, and self-regulation [28].

Some examples of practices in this direction might be *mindfulness meditation*, which focuses on being fully present in the moment, observing thoughts and feelings without judgment, letting them come and go as they were clouds moving through the sky. Another instance might be *loving-kindness meditation*, which involves cultivating compassion and love for oneself and others. This kind of practice might be helpful on apprehending a sense of no separation. Rumi works are an example of this:

> *Leave what is not, but seems to be.*
> *Seek what is, but is not evident.*

Central to Rumi's teachings is the concept of love—both human and divine. Love, in Rumi's view, is a transformative force that can lead to profound self-realization and enlightenment. Practicing love and compassion involves breaking down the barriers within oneself, embracing vulnerability, and fostering deep, genuine connections with others. This path encourages self-reflection and the nurturing of an open heart, leading to a fuller, more authentic life:

> *Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.*

This journey requires introspection, honesty, and the willingness to face one's inner assumed 'truths' and barriers. Through consistent practice, meditation might become a transformative journey of self-knowledge and personal growth. It empowers us to cultivate inner resilience, clarity of mind, and emotional equilibrium amidst the turbulence of life's challenges. It opens doors to creativity, intuition, and inspired action, guiding us toward fulfilling our highest potential and contributing meaningfully to the collective tapestry of humanity.

4.5 Implementing self-inquiry and dialectic

Socrates and Plato employed dialectics as a way of thinking and investigating philosophically. Socrates practiced present dialog, and Plato captured the dialogs in written form. Dialectics have a more dynamic, changing, fluid nature, as is generally thought. The subsequent philosophy, in monolog or personal essay format, is monolithic, static and fixed. However, self-knowledge and self-examination requires to be a continuous process, a lifelong expedition.

Cognitive psychology supports the efficacy of Socratic questioning in promoting deeper understanding and cognitive restructuring, since this method helps individuals challenge their assumptions and develop more refined thinking patterns [29].

Though it might seem counterintuitive (since it is based on self-talk), some examples of practices in this direction are continuous self-questioning, thus, regularly questioning one's motivations, beliefs, and actions to foster self-awareness, critical thinking, and meta-emotional processes. As well as engaging in philosophical dialog, participating—through a self-aware stance—in discussions that challenge one's beliefs, cognitive boundaries and encourage deeper inquiry.

Engaging in a kind of contemplative self-talk or dialog might be a profound and vital activity to practice the *detached observer*, the capacity to separate myself from my own thoughts and ideas. Hence, in such a self-inquiry, if we remain attentive and reconnect with the presence of the moment, we may understand that there is a universe that extends outward and another that extends inward, although in fact everything is part of the same continuum.

4.6 Introducing contemplative body movements

Returning to the philosophy of the process explained in the first section, it is necessary to build a philosophy of the body. If nature is changing, dynamic, and fluid, the human being should also be processual. It is the somatic character of the human that allows us to see the bridges between the human being and the rest of nature.

Eastern philosophies incorporate contemplative movement practices as ways to cultivate contemplation, clarity, and inner balance. These practices emphasize the unity of mind and body in the pursuit of contemplation and self-awareness. Such mindful movement practices can improve mental health by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression while enhancing cognitive function and emotional regulation [30].

Although concrete examples of this kind of practice could be given, almost any particular movement might be done in a contemplative manner, transforming what could be a pure automatism into a conscious piece of embodied transition.

The Italian philosopher Agamben and the South Korean philosopher Han also refer to this attitudinal change today. When we walk devoid of a "for-something," we turn walking into a dance. In this sense, Nietzsche said in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "And let us consider lost the day when we have not danced at least once" [31]. Likewise, hands

freed from direct utility do not grab but rather play; that is, they do not point in the direction of anything beyond the act itself [32].

5. Rethinking contemplation from esthetics

5.1 The experiential nature of contemplation

To the ancient notion of contemplation as theory described at the beginning of the chapter, a religious perspective was added. Religion, etymologically, refers to *re-ligare*, meaning to relate, to unite-with, or to bind—rather than a set of dogmas. There was a significant shift in Western philosophy with the re-evaluation of experience in both knowledge and life. Notably, the fourteenth-century scholar Meister Eckhart reconciled the previously known rationalist path with the mystical path. Building upon the path of illumination through reason and intellect, as pioneered by Augustine of Hippo, Eckhart developed the mystical path, which opens up to the hidden, the mysterious, and is religious in the *re-ligious*/relational sense:

> *"The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me. My eye and the eye of God are one eye, one vision, one knowledge, one love" [33]*

Eckhart conceived mystical experience as a direct and intimate union with God. For him, this union was not merely a distant goal but a present and accessible reality. However, this accessibility requires detachment or renunciation—abandoning one's desires, material attachments, and ego. These are all seen as distractions of the soul that prevent one from opening up to the hidden. This state of detachment can be associated with the concept of emptiness in Buddhism.

Eckhart's mysticism provided a path to access God that did not rely on extensive theological studies—especially in the thirteenth century when there was widespread illiteracy—but rather on opening oneself to a type of experience accessible to any human being.

This openness represents an attitudinal shift, a change in perspective, meaning it is not necessary to retreat to a peculiar contemplative life. Instead, contemplation can occur in daily activities and human relationships. Nonetheless, understanding mystical experience is challenging because it is purely experiential, difficult to theorize and directly inexpressible. But what is experience?

The term "experience" has been used in various senses. For instance, it can refer to the sensory apprehension of external reality; thus, experience and *empiria* (ἐμπειρία) are associated, meaning that empirical knowledge is accessed through experience. Another possible conception is the knowledge acquired through practice—experience in a trade or in life. Similarly, it can be used as a means of verifying a theoretical judgment—"let's test it through experience."

However, the concept intended here is gnoseological, or that experience is the apprehension a subject has of an object immediately preceding any rational judgment about what is apprehended. It refers to a mode of knowing or connecting in an intuitive or immediate manner. In this sense, experience would precede contemplation understood as theory. Yet, it is possible to have an experience during contemplation if we embrace other notions of contemplation, such as the active-interactive one. This means not merely thinking for the sake of thinking, but rather prudence in living, which involves a specific contemplative approach to the subject-world relationship.

5.2 The esthetic experience

Pythagoras asserted that life is akin to an athletic competition; some are fighters, others are street vendors, but the best are spectators. In his view, the best attitude toward life is contemplation. However, by spectators, he referred to those, and only those, who have embraced esthetic experience [34]. The term "esthetic" comes from the Greek *aesthesis* (sensation, perceptual experience), though it also has various connotations, such as the perception of only the beautiful.

Esthetic experience is relevant in this context because it necessitates contemplation as a prerequisite. Following Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* [35, 36], esthetic experience is the emotional state resulting from the disinterested contemplation of certain sensory objects. It can be divided into the following parts.

1. Conscious cognitive attention: There must be psychological attention from the individual toward the object; thus, much of the information we constantly receive from our environment is not considered esthetic experience because we are not fully attentive to it.

2. Sensory objects: The experience must involve particular entities—rather than universal ones—that are concrete and sensory. The individual perceives these either through sensory means or imagines them with some sensory trait. For example, from a symphony, we perceive the sound; from a painting, the colors; from a poem, we imagine certain situations evoked by the spoken words. This characteristic, that esthetic experience pertains to the sensory and particular, differentiates it from scientific knowledge, which refers to universal laws or purely intellectual concepts.

Generally, throughout Western philosophy, experience is associated with the knowledge of the singular, the concrete, in contrast to intellect, which enables knowledge of the universal or general. In this sense, it is relevant to note that it does not matter if the experience pertains to something internal or intimate of the subject (such as an emotional state) or external (such as the degree of light in a room), as long as it refers to something singular.

3. Disinterested Contemplation: This means contemplating an object without regard to its utility value (not considering it as "a tool for"), our ethical commitment to it, or its existence in the world. It is the attitude of a spectator of a play, where one develops a disinterested contemplation of the events on stage, or when we watch a scene in a movie with a special effect but do not pay technical attention to it.

As Rousseau said:

> *"The heart of man is always righteous in everything that does not concern him personally. In the conflicts of which we are mere spectators, we immediately side with justice... But when our own interests are involved... it is then that we prefer the evil that benefits us to the good that makes us love nature" [37, 38]*

4. Subjective Affective-Emotional Experience [39]: Esthetic experience is always the experience lived by an individual; thus, different individuals can have different esthetic experiences in response to the same object. This characteristic is

associated with feelings (which depend on one's personal history, past experiences, customs, etc.), producing a certain degree of (in)satisfaction—pleasure or displeasure.

5. Claim to Objectivity: When making any esthetic judgment—such as "The fountain is beautiful"—we consider that the esthetic value we assign (beautiful, ugly, sublime, etc.) actually belongs to the object itself, rather than being merely a way we perceive it. That is, we aim to describe it objectively through esthetic judgments [40].

This allows for recognizing the esthetic quality of a work of art with some independence from individual feelings; for example, "Game of Thrones is a well-produced series, although I do not like it," or "The Elephant Man is a very ugly film, but I love it." Florentine Renaissance thinkers of the fifteenth century proposed that for an esthetic experience, it was not sufficient for an object to possess certain beauty per se; it also required a special mental faculty of the individual—namely, a certain attitude or perspective. Therefore, both a certain activity of the individual and a certain passivity or openness are necessary for the experience to truly occur.

This fifth characteristic is still debated, on one hand, experience has a personal-subjective nature, but on the other hand, it is universal in the sense that every human has access to this contemplative-esthetic pathway. One can argue for seeing human universality and its condition through all its philosophical and cultural manifestations. It is always possible to emphasize comparing and finding equivalences between Epicurus and Chuang-Tse (and the concept of ataraxia), Horace and Yang-Chu, Zeno and Hu-Che, Seneca and Wang-Chung, or Diogenes of Sinope and Zhuangzi.

This universalist intention can be found in Hinduism, which has a unifying goal despite consisting of a wide and diverse range of cultural and religious manifestations within and beyond India. It would be necessary to embrace the concept of perennial philosophy. The humanist and Catholic Agostino Steuco aimed to use it to indicate how Catholicism had a universal character—hence its etymology: *kata* (over), *holos* (whole), *ism* (doctrine)—, and thus other religions are merely partial or earlier manifestations. In this case, it is a partial universalism.

However, later Leibniz and more recently Aldous Huxley [41] have revisited it. Embracing and compiling all religious, cultural, and philosophical contributions would provide an approach to the truth of human nature and reality—and exceeds the scope of this work—. Perhaps it is not so much about compiling, but about seeing the common points, similar to when one operates by finding the greatest common divisor between two or more numbers. The common ground is the relationship or openness toward the sacred, and that beauty is sacred.

Esthetics has been one of the last branches to emerge within philosophy and remains a relatively undervalued and underdeveloped field. One reason for this is that it is associated with the sensitive and empirical-corporeal aspects of experience. Since this implies a certain chaos and lack of understanding—the inability to reduce the entire somatic-experiential richness to logic—esthetics is considered relative and less foundational.

However, precisely because the esthetic experience is *universalizable*, as it maintains connections with the universally corporeal nature of human beings, the contemplative-esthetic relationships that can occur between subject and object transcend cultures and eras. Although some of these relationships are certainly influenced by the interpretable aspect of esthetic experience—which pertains to the domain of

taste. Immersing oneself in the beauty around and within us, whether through art, nature, or simple acts of kindness, one can attain a deeper sense of connection and purpose. The practice of pausing, actively seeking and creating beauty becomes a form of contemplation.

5.3 Esthetic contemplative practices

5.3.1 The world as art

To explore further the list of contemplative practices outlined in Section 4, we will look at how to incorporate esthetic contemplation into daily routines. For example, the artist can be seen to not only create art and express themselves through it but also sees art where others do not. The esthetic experience can be found in everyday life, following the Kantian notion, by achieving an emotional state from the disinterested perception of certain sensible objects. One can begin to see the world, especially each of its parts and movements, as works of art. The moment we see it for something, the esthetic experience vanishes. The moment descriptive judgment appears; the esthetic experience can disappear. Experiencing the world esthetically, apprehending it, implies seeing it as *natura naturata*, as if it were a created work in itself, perhaps the most beautiful of all.

Analyzing classical Greece, in his *The birth of tragedy* Nietzsche advocated for a life that is not only Apollonian but also Dionysian. Nietzsche uses the Olympian gods Apollo and Dionysus to understand tragic Greek thought, that is, polar thought, where cold-heat, above-below, feminine-masculine, totality-partiality, unity-plurality, etc. occur. Apollo is associated with order, reason, logic, and clarity. On the other hand, Dionysus represents chaos, emotion, disorder, ecstasy, frenzy, and irrationality. It seems that the Western drift in its way of life has been mainly Apollonian, always leaving the Dionysian aside. However, the most emotional-irrational-esthetic must be present to understand life experientially.

Art can be conceived from both perspectives. That is, we can analyze an artistic work, but this will not constitute an esthetic experience per se, since it will be based on reason, order, and the application of criteria. On the other hand, we can contemplate an artistic work, abstaining from any judgment; this can foster an experience that in itself may be chaotic, changing, dynamic, or irrational. Below, we will also discuss two specific cases of esthetic experience: reading and writing, as they are widely practiced.

5.3.2 Nature immersion

The connection between nature and contemplation is deeply rooted in philosophical traditions [42]. Not only Thoreau highlighted the role of nature in fostering deep reflection and self-discovery, believing that solitude in nature allowed for a more profound connection with oneself and the universe. Scottish naturalist Muir believed that immersing oneself in nature was a way to rejuvenate the spirit and connect with the sublime. Here an example of his inspiring writings:

> *"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings.*
> *Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.*
> *The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves"*

Emerson also saw nature as a source of inspiration and a means to achieve a deeper grasp of oneself and the world around [43]. In his essay *"Nature" (1836)*, he delicately expressed:

> *"In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, — he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me" [43]*

The last example of this naturalism through contemplation as a way to self-realization, comes from Rachel Carson, a marine biologist and conservationist who highlights the contemplative aspects of nature that foster a sense of wonder and resilience. In *"The Sense of Wonder" (1965)*, Carson wrote:

> *"Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter" [44]*

Another practice is *forest bathing -Shinrin-Yoku*, a revered Japanese tradition where individuals immerse themselves in the forest's embrace to be fully nourished. This ancient practice boosts a deep communion with nature, fostering mental clarity and physical rejuvenation through the serene ambiance of wooded landscapes. As expressed by Muir:

> *"The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness"*

Similarly, *mindful walking* offers a contemplative approach to traversing natural surroundings, emphasizing sensory engagement and present-moment awareness. By attuning oneself to the sights, sounds, and textures of the environment, practitioners cultivate a profound connection with the rhythms of the earth, facilitating introspection and a tranquil harmony with the natural world, a pure pathway to contemplation and self-realization.

5.3.3 Contemplative Reading

Also known as slow reading or deep reading, contemplative reading involves engaging with texts in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. For instance, *Lectio Divina*, a traditional Benedictine practice, involves slow, reflective reading of sacred texts to deepen one's spiritual understanding. It comprises four steps: reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*).

The practice of reflective reading consists of choosing texts that provoke deep thought and reflection, such as philosophical works, poetry, or literature. This practice aligns with the previously explored Platonic ideal of seeking truth through contemplation [4]. Reflective reading can be seen in the light of the esthetic act. It implies going beyond functional reading, to basic instrumental literacy.

5.3.4 Journaling

Ancient philosophers used journaling as a tool for profound self-examination and reflection. Writing helps clarify thoughts and emotions, leading to greater

self-understanding, since it requires a deliberate and reflective approach that encourages deep thinking and self-exploration. It also helps to capture the inherent beauty of the present moment, even in the face of difficulty. Expressive writing [45] has been shown to improve mental health by helping individuals process traumatic events, reduce stress, and enhance emotional well-being by fostering greater self-awareness.

A variety of prompts that encourage introspection can be used on this process. Examples include:

What am I grateful for today?
What challenges did I face, and how did I handle them?
What did I learn about myself today?
What moments of beauty did I notice?

6. Conclusions

Contemplation is a historically and culturally known phenomenon. In this research, contemplation as a state and process has been analyzed ontologically and etymologically. Initially understood as an active and attentive gaze, it later began to assume a sacred and religious charge, although maintaining its vision as a theory. Many philosophical frameworks and religions include contemplation as a necessary phenomenon to acquire a certain transcendence or look beyond the everyday.

Contemplation is a natural state that can be an analgesic to the modern world, with its emphasis on instrumentalism, accelerationism. The contemplative life requires embracing the notion of in-activity, which is not pure passivity but rather reinterpreting current activity. Contemplative life allows us to develop ethical prudence and learn the art of good living. In short, contemplation allows self-realization.

To conceive and practice contemplation, it has become necessary to understand the experience. The ancient theoretical-intellective experience has been analyzed first, then the mystical experience, and subsequently the esthetic experience. All of them imply returning to a dynamic and naturalistic vision of reality, and the purely corporeal essence of the human being.

In the pursuit of self-realization, we have uncovered a profound interplay between introspection and beauty, its inner and outer apprehension through contemplation. This philosophical and psychological exploration delves into the core of human existence, asserting that the path to self-actualization and specifically, self-realization, transcends mere existential fulfillment; it entails a harmonious alignment with the intrinsic beauty of the universe itself.

Through contemplative practices that elevate perception beyond the mundane, we cultivate heightened awareness of our place within the grand tapestry of existence. These introspective pursuits enrich understanding of personal authenticity and illuminate the transformative power of esthetic experiences in shaping a meaningful life journey.

We contend that to contemplate is to disengage from the ephemeral distractions of the world, to retreat into the inner temple of the mind, where the soul, in its purest form, can commune with universal principles. Yet, it is also to be open to the magnificence of the moment, where the intersection between what I am, perceive, feel, and do dramatically dissolves, and separation does not exist, for I am now part of a greater essence, of the same cosmic instant. Hence, it is in contemplation that we transcend the transient and grasp the immutable, the eternal forms that underpin our reality, both internal and external. And there is a mysterious sense of beauty in it.

The social and cultural advent of the West is clearly contingent. It is necessary to educate in a contemplative life that seeks to live together and enjoy beauty. This requires changing our living and our thinking, where the value of utility is complemented by that of beauty, goodness or truth. The esthetic approach facilitates self-realization and the realization of the we as a whole.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Chapter 7

Perspective Chapter: Literary Reading as a Pathway to Enlightenment and Eudaimonic Flourishing

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Abstract

Enlightenment is a common human aspiration that takes its form according to the philosophical or religious tradition that predicates it. Modern philosophical enlightenment, Buddhist, and Hindu notions of enlightenment, although the most common expressions of enlightenment in contemporary culture, are not the only definitions of enlightenment. Here a Christian view of enlightenment is presented and defended. Christian enlightenment includes the paradoxical notion that embracing suffering is an essential component of the path to flourishing, a theme explored here through the poetry of George Herbert and Saint John of the Cross and which parallels conceptual challenges in eudaimonia research. Literary reading, due to its non-directive imaginative exploration of negative emotion, is described as a pathway toward this enlightenment and toward eudaimonic flourishing.

Keywords: enlightenment, heroics, wellbeing, eudaimonia, bibliotherapy

1. Introduction

It is never obvious what one means by enlightenment when the term is employed. A discourse regarding enlightenment should, therefore, begin by defining the term from the outset. Moreover, each philosophical orientation puts forward an ideal or exemplar for human functioning. As such, it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to discuss the ideal of human enlightenment without reference to a philosophical orientation. One's conception of enlightenment, then, is shaped by the philosophical presuppositions one brings to the inquiry. Psychological science, in turn, must be aware of the philosophical tenets it assumes in its scientific investigation of the enlightenment construct. All data are interpreted in the context of a philosophical orientation.

This chapter's thesis is that reading literature can be a pathway toward a particular kind of enlightenment. The first step of the argument is to explore alternative conceptualizations of enlightenment; this chapter will propose a definition of enlightenment that takes its presuppositions from a Christian perspective. The proposed construct of

enlightenment will then be explored in light of the notion of heroics and eudaimonia research before turning to bibliotherapy research. It will be crucial to show that the experience of reading literature accomplishes the aims of the proposed enlightenment construct while also reconciling certain tensions that exist within explorations of eudaimonia [1].

2. Conceptions of enlightenment

The modern philosophical story envisioned enlightenment as the unmitigated ability to think for oneself, to throw off intellectual dependence, to transcend one's "self-incurred immaturity" [2]. Such a reliance on unmitigated reason was not without its critics, even among those who preceded the modern philosophical quest [3, 4]. Indeed, debates about the proper limits to reason and human cognition in the western intellectual tradition have a rich history, with the scholastic movement of the late middle ages being one of its peaks. As theologians found themselves forced to deal with newly discovered and translated texts of Aristotle in the west, some clarified the nature of knowledge and knowing, of faith, and of the divine.

St. Bonaventure, for example, though allowing for Aristotle's observation that knowledge must begin with sense experience, maintained that the light of Christ was necessary in both the human mind and in the created order in order for the material world to be properly intelligible [4]. Psychological science is, in fact, well positioned to elaborate on such ideas, in that it clarifies, for example, important ideas in Kant himself—i.e. the existence of *a priori* knowledge [5] as dependent on the structure of mind is analogous to William James's assertion that all human psychological experience must, in the final analysis, bear a relationship with biological processes, that "the dependence of mental states upon bodily conditions must be thorough-going and complete" [6].

This modern philosophical understanding of enlightenment—i.e. that of the individual free to think for him or herself—however, is not consistent with primarily religious conceptions—and the thesis put forward in this chapter regarding literary reading and psychological healing and wellbeing relies primarily on an alternative conception of enlightenment. Specifically, to say that literary reading may serve human functioning in a salutary manner is to say that there is a kind of supra-individual dependence that confers benefit on the individual. Such a claim suffers within the framework of enlightenment construed as unmitigated intellectual liberty [7]. What other conceptions of enlightenment exist?

Recent psychological exploration of the enlightenment construct has centered around a Buddhist conception of enlightenment [7], which involves the central presuppositions that (1) "all phenomena are devoid or 'empty' of inherent existence"; that (2) to posit the existence of being *per se* is to create a "subject-object dualism" that is (3) conceived of "as false and limiting" [8]. To accept these presuppositions and to follow their attendant conclusions and practices—that is, to achieve "this selfless way of experiencing and relating to the world"—is enlightenment [8].

This view of enlightenment shares with the Kantian articulation of enlightenment a radical interiorization—thinking for oneself in the philosophical tradition; rejection of subject-object dualism in eastern tradition [9]. Because of the influence of Buddhism on contemporary psychologists, "mindfulness" has had a major influence on clinical psychology and on cognitive behavioral models of psychotherapy [7, 10–12]. It must be noted, however, that the clinical form of mindfulness that

has developed throughout the past couple of decades has been somewhat separated from its Buddhist foundations, even if there has been some attempt to recover these foundations in recent work [7, 8].

The problem, of course, is that not all philosophical orientations, wisdom traditions, or theological structures construe enlightenment in this way. As such, if psychology is to employ the language of enlightenment—which is sometimes collapsed into related but differential constructs such as "non-discursive contemplation," [13] "nonreferential awareness… mystical experiences, peak experiences, union with God, or simply realizing the nature of mind" [8]—then it must recognize the presuppositional privilege it grants a particular religious or philosophical tradition. In fact, the term enlightenment is not one typically employed within Christian theology, though there are other terms used in the Christian tradition, as we'll see below, that overlap with the notions of enlightenment here explored.

In the contemporary case of enlightenment research, psychological science must recognize (1) its reliance on Buddhist presuppositions and (2) the fact that not all religious or spiritual conceptualizations of enlightenment converge on these Buddhist tenets. The subsequent exploration of enlightenment will privilege the Christian tradition's presuppositions, especially as articulated by two Christian thinkers and poets—the Spanish Discalced Carmelite Saint John of the Cross and the English poet-priest George Herbert. In exploring their thinking, certain overlaps with Buddhist notions, as well as crucial departures, will emerge.

For instance, although the practice of transcending the body's sensual appetites is similar in both traditions (overlap), the Christian conception highlights the inherent existence and goodness of being and the body (departure), prescribing the mortification of sensual appetite not as an affirmation of the non-existence of the body or its appetites but as a means of bringing them into proper alignment with God's will [14]—a notion Saint Augustine referred to as *ordo amoris,* "the order of love" [15].

This central Christian tenet of *ordo amoris* results in constant tension between practices of detachment and affirmation of the existence and goodness of being. It will be useful to bear in mind from the outset that "it is not that the body's inclinations and natural appetites are inherently evil. Rather, it is the proclivity to respond to those appetites *in the will* [sic] by pursuing selfish desires that leads to the development of the vice of attachment" [13].

Recently, writing from a more psychological perspective, psychologists McLaughlin and McMinn emphasized a similar idea, writing that the point of detachment is to "unmask our illusory selves and increase mental freedom by expanding the psychological qualities of metacognition and mentalization" [16]. Crucially, the illusory self that is referenced here is not the illusory self of Buddhist conception; it is, rather, the "inflated sense of subjective self-importance" [16] that distorts our vision of our human corporal reality. In the language of *ordo amoris*, it is a disordered love of self. The Christian tradition has long affirmed that "only this self-denial renders man free to carry out the will of God and to share in the freedom of the Holy Spirit… [and that] the emptiness which God requires is that of the renunciation of personal selfishness, not necessarily that of the renunciation of those created things which he has given us and among which he has placed us" [17].

Saint John of the Cross referred to this fundamental problem as "the sickness of love" [18]. By sickness of love, John of the Cross meant that the hierarchy of our desires had become malformed and that this malformation was keeping us from being united to God; the goal, then, was to re-order our desires, to establish health within the structure of our loves, so that the individual might be prepared for God's presence.

From a neurobiological perspective, at least partly, "Disordered appetites [loves] can be identified… as the effects of implicit memories and interruptive fight-or-flight reactivity originating in the amygdala"; and re-forming, or re-ordering our loves, can involve a "present-centered awareness that… short-circuits the reactive cycle of disruptive implicit memories and/or appetites" [13]. From a behavioral perspective, disordered loves involve thoughts, feelings, and actions that are jointly influenced by these biological processes and the psychosocial processes of learning and behavioral control developed in the context of our interactions with the natural and human world [19].

We might, then, define a Christian vision of enlightenment as a heightened awareness and love of God's presence, especially as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. This is analogous to McGinn's definition of Christian mysticism [20]. This definition builds on pre-Christian notions of theophany and textuality; the early Christians saw their tradition as emphasizing that the highest revelation of God was in Jesus of Nazareth and that the ultimate contemplation of God was to take place in the context of Christ's body on earth, namely, the church, its sacred texts, and through its sacraments, especially baptism and the eucharist [20]. This definition also keeps the notion of *ordo amoris* at the center. It is not just awareness of God that matters; it is also the human capacity for love toward God that matters. More specifically, as we will see below, it is the awareness of and growing love for Christ's heroic trajectory that tethers this Christian notion of enlightenment to something more psychologically accessible.

As will become evident as our argument proceeds, this definition of enlightenment contains various related constitutive elements, which can be understood as dimensions of the proposed enlightenment: (1) heightened awareness of God's presence; (2) apprehension of God as Beloved; and (3) and a renunciation of self-oriented flourishing. A person who grows in these three primary dimensions of our proposed definition of enlightenment, we intend to show, will experience more eudaimonic flourishing, greater capacity for social action and generosity, and greater mental and attentional freedom.

Although we are calling this heightened awareness of, and growing affection for, God's presence enlightenment, we do well to remember that this has not been the term employed by Christians to describe this set of ideas. The terms used vary among the various Christian sub-traditions, and include terms like "sanctification," "holiness," "spiritual marriage," "Christlikeness," "theosis," "apatheia," "union with God," among others. The path to enlightenment in the traditions that employ the term—Tibetan Buddhism, for instance—describe the process meticulously [21], and it may seem inappropriate to employ the term here in association with a tradition that does not have as elaborated a process. Part of the reason for this difference has to do with the Christian tradition's emphasis on God's action rather than on human action; although various strains of the Christian tradition have developed practices that contribute toward spiritual development, the absence of a specifically delineated formula reveals not a lack of vision but rather an emphasis on God's work in the process of the perfection of humankind and of the Christian scripture's emphasis on God's action in human history [22]. The Christian conception of enlightenment, then, highlights a general orientation toward God and the world rather than a specific progression of steps for attaining enlightenment.

Defining enlightenment in this way allows for two key distinctions. First, it allows us to distinguish between (1) a chronic state of awareness of and emotional attunement to God's presence and (2) a more sudden experience of presence, sometimes referred to as union with God and, in the parlance of John of the Cross, as spiritual marriage.

This distinction is also analogous to a distinction made elsewhere between state versus trait heroic profiles [8]. The goal for Jones was to explore whether mindfulness practices might create heroic (or virtuous) behavioral patterns more consistently (trait) rather than sporadically (state). From John of the Cross's Christian perspective, God is understood as being a participatory agent in the relationship with humans; as such, experiences of his presence cannot be "controlled" in quite the same way.

The distinction between a state of awareness and a more sudden experience of presence allows us to acknowledge that, though sudden experiences of presence are not ultimately under human control, the state of awareness or receptivity that creates the possibility for such encounters is [20]. The central question for the purpose of this chapter then becomes, how might literary reading contribute to this heightened state of awareness of God's presence? Or how might it contribute to the "cessation of disruptive implicit memory" and allow for "deeper transformation and healing of implicit memory?" [13, 22].

In Christian terms, this might be referred to as becoming "transformed by the renewal of (our) minds" (Rom 12:2) [23]. We must first, however, further specify the shape of this proposed enlightenment by exploring (1) several fundamental Christian tenets associated with it, and related, and (2) why it is that the Christian tradition emphasized this apprehension of—and affection for—God's presence as the proper human aspiration. In other words, in order for enlightenment as the heightened awareness of and desire for God—especially as apprehended in the person of Jesus Christ—to be understood properly, one must show how the Christian tradition has understood how to experience this heightened awareness and desire. And when an argument is being made for the role of literature on the path toward this enlightenment, then it is especially appropriate to explore the thoughts of Christians who expressed their ideas in literary form.

3. Christian enlightenment as the proper human aspiration

What is the relationship between this proposed definition of enlightenment—a heightened awareness of the presence of God—and human wellbeing or flourishing? The philosopher Charles Taylor has pointed out that, at least in the case of Christianity, detachment and renunciation cannot simply be incorporated into a vision of earthly flourishing. He articulates the problem well:

> *In the Christian case, the very point of renunciation requires that the ordinary flourishing forgone be confirmed as valid. Unless living the full span were a good, Christ's giving of himself to death couldn't have the meaning it does.... Here we see the unbridgeable gulf between Christianity and Greek philosophy. God wills ordinary human flourishing, and a great part of what is reported in the Gospels consists in Christ making this possible for the people whose affliction he heals. The call to renounce doesn't negate the value of flourishing; it is rather a call to centre everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this forgoing is that it become on one level the source of flourishing to others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God.... There remains a fundamental tension in Christianity. Flourishing is good, nevertheless seeking it is not our ultimate goal. But even where we renounce it, we re-affirm it, because we follow God's will in being a channel for it to others, and ultimately to all [24].*

On the one hand, the proper human aspiration in the Christian view is the renunciation of individual flourishing—"to centre everything on God"—for the purpose of being the cause of individual flourishing in others. We are immediately thrust into an existential paradox, which centers on the affirmation of the goodness of creation and simultaneously of the affirmation of its renunciation.

Yet Taylor's hint about a "fuller flourishing by God" suggests that even if the renunciation must be felt as real—a real sense of the loss of something good—the individual who experiences this renunciation may also experience a kind of satisfaction in the knowledge that this renunciation is producing current flourishing for another person or future flourishing for all, including for the renouncing individual [25]. It seems one type of flourishing is sacrificed for another type of flourishing.

We find an analogous dynamic both in eudaimonia research and in the neurobiology of positive affect. Steger, for example, makes the case that meaning in life, typically associated with eudaimonia, contains elements of hedonia, in that people who experience a sense of meaning in life feel better than those who do not, the emphasis here being in the positive emotions felt, and that positive feelings are associated with a greater sense of meaningfulness; in other words, having a sense of meaning is pleasurable, not merely strenuous and characterized by striving [26].

Burgdorf and Panksepp [27] made the case that the mammalian brain contained two distinct (and overlapping) positive affect structures. Appetitive positive affect is related to anticipatory, reward-seeking (goal-seeking) behavior, whereas consummatory positive affect is related to the processing of current sensory pleasure. Reward-seeking behavior, or exploratory behavior, may involve a level of risk or of temporary renunciation of consummatory positive affect. Although this research does not suggest that one form of positive affect is better than another, it is significant to note that cocaine and amphetamines—which on the surface appear as though they would affect the consummatory positive affect circuit—seem instead to affect the appetitive circuitry.

In fact, Panksepp has identified subcortical brain circuitry—which he has called SEEKING circuitry—that corresponds with a basic affective state, and "rather than being a 'pleasure or reinforcement system,' SEEKING coaxes animals to acquire resources needed for survival… promotes a sense of engaged purpose in both humans and animals" [28]. The human being, then, seems wired to experience progress toward a desired end as pleasurable, even if that progress involves challenges that produce displeasure. Ultimately, it seems that, despite Taylor's warning that there may be philosophical objections to uniting renunciation and flourishing into a single vision of flourishing, there are good psychological reasons for positing that the renunciation of one kind of flourishing is involved in another kind of flourishing.

Specifically, although Taylor identifies the philosophical and theological importance of not collapsing renunciation and flourishing into each other, we must nevertheless conclude that the psychological experience of proceeding toward apprehension of God's presence, even should the effort involve painful renunciation, is a distinct, perhaps unique, form of wellbeing or flourishing. There is even an echo of this in the Gospels when Christ, refusing to eat after not having eaten in some time, tells his disciples, "I have food to eat that you do not know about," explaining later that "my food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (John 4:32,34) [23].

Certain aspects of the proposed Christian enlightenment come to bear on this observation. The first thing to notice is that this Christian conception of enlightenment is teleological, that is, it specifies a proper aim and function for human life.

For John of the Cross, the end goal was spiritual marriage [18], the union of Lover (the human being) and Beloved (God); similarly, for Herbert, the proper aim was to be in the place of "true joy" with "Jesus my Master," [29, 30] and one can make a compelling argument that Herbert's entire poetic project was a literary means of creating a space where he and God could be together. The proper human functions involved for these two poets were those that led to the attainment of this end.

Several implications follow from the observation that this enlightenment is teleological. First, enlightenment is relational; it involves the human person's relationship with God, and the heightened awareness involved is more like the awareness of a person with a will than of a non-volitional object. Second, enlightenment is moral; the aimed-for end—awareness and love of and God—involves a sense of obligation to proceed toward it and to avoid departures from it. Third, enlightenment is objective; insofar as God is conceived of as a real entity, the awareness and love being pursued and the functions employed are not merely subjective realities or experiences, though they do involve subjective experience.

This latter point especially, in ways that parallel conceptual challenges in eudaimonia research, leads to the idea that—though constructs such as happiness, joy, positive emotion, peace, and so forth, may be related to this enlightenment—these and enlightenment are not necessarily the same thing. It is also important to question whether wellbeing—as understood through these positive emotion constructs—and enlightenment are the same thing or point to the same reality.

There is a problem of definition here. If wellbeing (eudaimonia) is defined as the life of virtue—i.e. "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete" [31]—and if God is defined as the highest good—which has been the tendency throughout Christian history and theology—then the case can be made that eudaimonia and the proposed enlightenment are the same, insofar as virtue is living in accordance with—or in awareness and love of—the highest good.

This definitional challenge is, in fact, what has given rise to the distinction between eudaimonic wellbeing and hedonic wellbeing in eudaimonia research. This distinction underscores the idea that wellbeing is a challenging construct to measure and that in human experience, enlightenment and some forms of felt wellbeing need not converge.

Consider the example of Cardinal Ratzinger's Letter to the Bishops concerning forms of prayer, in which he warns of the dangers of considering "feeling[s] of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth" as a sign of "spiritual wellbeing" or of "the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit"; his concern is that "when the moral condition of the person concerned does not correspond to such an experience, [it] would represent a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations" [17]. The distinction between hedonic wellbeing and eudaimonic wellbeing follows similar logic: if the virtues of eudaimonic wellbeing and functioning are to be held in higher regard, then positive emotions themselves and life satisfaction itself cannot be sufficient indicators of the presence of eudaimonic wellbeing [1, 32].

With regard to eudaimonia, one advantageous feature of the proposed Christian enlightenment is its association with the idea of the moral law of nature [14], which helps explain why one form of flourishing would be preferable. As mentioned above, the claim of this enlightenment is a moral one. Both God's identification with love and the human characteristic of desire for the divine carry with them a moral injunction. In other words, God's status as the Beloved and the human individual's status

as the Lover (using John of the Cross's language) are ontological. Hence the primary Christian injunction to love God with all of one's being.

From the Christian perspective, this moral injunction is moral precisely because it's ontological, that is, it is consistent with the sort of creature that humankind is and with the kind of being God is. The significance of this observation for our present purpose is that enlightenment is a worthwhile pursuit precisely because it is construed as the highest human achievement on existential grounds; and insofar as what is appropriate to human being is good for human beings, then the Christian enlightenment trajectory can be said to be serving real human good, even if the good being served is not totally consistent with certain human experience typically understood as good. Before we consider the relationship between this enlightenment and certain constructs of positive emotion, we will turn our attention to further evidence for the value of this self-denying posture, namely, the language of heroics.

4. The language of heroics

Broadly speaking, heroics refers to the human orientation in relation to ultimate meaning and suffering. William James explored heroism in Ref. to sainthood, and the significance of his exploration was to view spiritual virtues in light of what he called "practical common sense and the empirical method" [6]. He held religious virtues—focusing specifically on devoutness, purity, charity, and asceticism—accountable to worldly fruit, that is, their real value for earthly human life.

With Catholic saints in view, James writes that "the Catholicism of the sixteenth century paid little heed to social righteousness; and to leave the world to the devil whilst saving one's own soul was then accounted no discreditable scheme. Today… helpfulness in general human affairs is… deemed an essential element of worth of character" [6]. This is James's conclusion especially with regard to what he considers saintly excesses, but with regard to saintly virtues *per se* and to those who embodied them well, James concluded that "the saintly group of qualities is indispensable to the world's welfare," in part because "he is adapted to the highest society conceivable" [6]. Heroics, then, involves both an internal orientation and an external, social orientation, and James's contribution was to assess saintliness, or heroism, with both of these dimensions in view.

Referring to the topic of heroics in a slightly different sense, Ernest Becker employed the term *causa-sui* to describe (1) one's personal vision of reality and (2) one's death-denying, self-aggrandizing behaviors in the face of ultimate vulnerability and mortality [33]. To understand what Becker meant by *causa-sui*, it is necessary to understand the shape of the hero's journey. The trope of the hero's journey is ancient and is characterized by a voluntary confrontation with chaos, symbolically represented throughout history as the primordial waters surrounding the earth, the ancient serpent lord, the abyss, darkness, hell, and fire [23, 34–36].

It is through the confrontation with chaos that redemption becomes possible, that new life may emerge. This was, despite its essential limitation, the principal discovery of psychoanalysis. All of a person's mental trouble is the result of not facing the darkness of the unconscious and the terror of one's nature. The ego needs to turn from the small heroic system of the superego to face the terror of the id, the terror of their deeper nature, which lay hidden from them, repressed. Yet this repression, as Becker showed so brilliantly, went beyond Freud's limited view [33, 37, 38].

Freud believed such repression was the result of an over-tyrannical superego, a moral code designed to impose order and obedience. For Becker, however, repression

was necessary because reality was too terrifying to face completely; its full revelation would paralyze its beholder. Repression does not exist because it is imposed by culture; rather, culture exists because repression makes it necessary. The issue for Becker was not whether one should get past one's repressions—one's *causa-sui*—but rather which narrative of repression was the most ideal. For Becker, this was the heroic project, and though he sustains (perhaps unfortunately) throughout his argument that these heroics are illusory, Becker would have us embrace the best illusion we can manage.

For Becker, psychology demonstrates the need for humans to turn toward heroics—which is essentially religious thinking (i.e. how to hierarchize the value of one's action in the world)—if they are to be properly oriented in the world. In Becker's terms, one must live in such a way that they face the terror of existence—their own ultimate vulnerability and mortality, their own smallness in the face if vast space, their puny significance in the face of infinite possibility—in short, death; but they must do so with recourse to a narrative that confers ultimate meaning in such an experience. What is needed, then, is the highest heroics, the ultimate *causa-sui* project, "to broaden one's heroics from their crippling narrowness" [33].

For the traditional Christian, according to Becker, it was precisely this turning to face the terror of existence, the reality of one's ultimate dependence and guilt, that resulted in the highest heroics and in one's salvation: "Traditional religion turned the consciousness of sin into a condition for salvation" [33]. This observation, along with that of James's exploration of saintliness, allows for two crucial corollaries, especially relevant for our project: (1) it places these psychological considerations in the religious domain and (2) it places the experience of negative emotion—circumstances of suffering and of renunciation—at the center of the enlightenment trajectory and notions of wellbeing. Jones [8] has explored the emerging field of heroism, and Franco and Zimbardo's dimensions of heroism—(1) pursuit of an ideal; (2) anticipated sacrifice; (3) passive and active forms; and (4) one-time act or continuous behavior overlap significantly with, and corroborate, the theological and existential notions of heroics here explored [39].

5. Correlates of wellbeing

We are now well set up to understand why a simple calculation of the level of certain emotions is insufficient to understanding wellbeing, flourishing, or enlightenment (i.e. greater positive emotion and less negative emotion being the ideal in such a construal). Despite the fact that hedonia seems to make up a part of wellbeing and even enlightenment, the nature of hedonia's involvement requires specification, and it cannot be maintained that the quest for enlightenment or flourishing is one for unmitigated positive emotion.

Scales of wellbeing like Ryff's Scales of Well-Being and Paloutzian's and Ellison's Spiritual Well-being Scale [40–42] demonstrate quite clearly that explorations of wellbeing involve constructs other than positive emotion; yet the concern from a psychological perspective remains the validation of a construct like wellbeing. Psychological science in this regard has an ineluctable relationship with philosophy and, for our argument, with theology.

How does one defend from a psychological perspective, for instance, that a greater sense of purpose in life is better than a lack of purpose without appealing to increased happiness, joy, quality of life, or life satisfaction—on the one hand—and, on the other hand, decreased anxiety and depression? Recall Cardinal Ratzinger's warning above,

wherein not even "feeling[s] of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth" [17] were sufficient validators of spiritual wellbeing. And if these constructs cannot be consistently relied on to validate the value of a construct like purpose in life, then to what do we make an appeal for its validity? [43].

Jones, providing a summary of the Quality of Life (QoL) research literature, points to the "general consensus… that QoL is made up of objective conditions and subjective processes… [including] the role of affect and a broad range of cognitive processes to evaluate external conditions and to deliver satisfaction with one's life" [44]; As Ward and King [1] point out, however, eudaimonia research still seems to encounter the challenge of identifying criteria that can validate QoL without emphasizing the role of affect. In their words, "the emphasis on eudaimonia as an aspect of individual wellbeing, rather than as virtues or qualities that are useful to hone for their own sake, has obfuscated the broader importance of these motivations and behaviors" [1].

But to discuss "virtues or qualities that are useful… for their own sake" requires psychology to engage with something other than itself. The value of a psychological discourse that engages with philosophy and theology is that it can use the tenets of the philosophical or theological orientation in question to validate its constructs. This was also one of Becker's key insights [33]. There is, nonetheless, one framework of hedonia/eudaimonia that both establishes the priority of a kind of self-sacrifice and that seeks to escape the conceptual and definitional trap of specific emotions being regarded as part of one or the other. It is a framework that accommodates the experience of all emotions and that involves both the pursuit of virtue and of pleasure in the pursuit of wellbeing and flourishing.

The framework comes from Steger, and he describes a "dual process model of happiness": "the true trap of hedonia is created by two qualities: the excessive priority given to one's self-centered interests and experiences and the excessive priority given to immediate experience in the limited present tense. Thus, my understanding of hedonia is that it is marked by excessive self-centered priorities and short-term gratifications" [26]. Although we would substitute the word wellbeing or flourishing for happiness, we think this model has merit vis-à-vis the heroics trajectory we have described. One form of flourishing (the self-centered and immediate) undergoes a habit of denial in the pursuit of another (the other-centered and long-term). From the Christian theological perspective, the other involves fellow human beings as well as the ultimate other, God; and the long-term view extends toward eternity. In this framework, all emotional experiences have their place, and enlightenment with regard to emotions is characterized by emotional experiences serving the other-centered, long-term framework.

So far, then, we have arrived at a convergence between the theological and psychological domains. Our definition of enlightenment—a heightened awareness and love of God's presence, especially the heroic trajectory of Christ's life—and our definition of wellbeing—the denial of immediate self-centeredness in favor of long-term other-centeredness—converge in a manner that implicates both cognitive awareness of these dynamics [13, 17, 19, 22] and the emotional attendants of such a theological and psychological orientation [1, 13, 27, 28].

6. The role of literature

With all of the above as prolegomena to the central inquiry, let us now consider literary reading's impact both on enlightenment and wellbeing. How does literary

reading become an element in the path of attaining a heightened awareness of, and growing emotional attunement to, God?

Since the point of convergence between the theological and psychological domains so far explored has been the heroic trajectory, a useful starting point will be to show how literary reading contributes toward the heroic trajectory. To demonstrate this, we will begin by exploring in greater detail first George Herbert's poetics and then John of the Cross's. Their writing highlights elements of engagement with literary language that, for them, was central to the pursuit of God. We will then conclude by exploring experimental research in bibliotherapy about the role of literature as it relates to wellbeing and, as specifically relates to our purpose, to the heroic trajectory.

6.1 George Herbert's poetics of participatory heroics

In his short poem entitled, "On Mr. G. Herbert's booke intituled the Temple of Sacred Poems, sent to a Gentlewoman," [45] the poet Richard Crashaw, twenty years old when Herbert died in 1633 and when *The Temple* (Herbert's posthumously published collection of poetry) was published, tells the "gentlewoman" to whom the gift is directed that, "Divinest love lies in this book: /Expecting fire from your eyes, / To kindle this his sacrifice. /When your hand untie these strings, /Think yo'have an angel by th' wings."

Crashaw envisions each plume of this angel's wings as one of Herbert's poems and says, "These white plumes of his he'll lend you, /Which every day to heaven will send you: To take acquaintance of the sphere, /And all the smooth faced kindred there" [45]. Crashaw saw as central themes in Herbert the presence of divine love, the enflamed human soul as it comes into contact with this love, the downward movement of the heavenly (an angel has descended), and the upward movement of the human soul (the poems will send one heavenward).

We see here (1) the historical use of Herbert's poems for personal benefit and (2) the themes in Herbert's poetry that are seen as beneficial. As regards the latter, notice both the subjects involved in the poem ("divinest love" and the "gentlewoman") and the language of ascent and descent Crashaw invokes. Crashaw imagines the ontology our proposed construct of enlightenment establishes, namely, one of God as love and human beings as those who must be united to that love. He also sees the movement of descent and ascent as a necessary component of that unity. Herbert's poetry is rife with this imagery.

In the case of Crashaw's poem, it is the divine movement downward and the human movement upward; but in Herbert's poems, it is also human movement downward insofar as humans participate in the divine movement downward. For Herbert, this participation was ultimately envisioned in the human participation in Christ's heroic trajectory, from the descent into earthly suffering as the means to ascend to unity with God. The challenge for Herbert as he learns how to engage in this participation becomes a literary one, and a brief overview of several of his poems—"The Reprisall," "The Quidditie," "Jordan" (I), and "Jordan" (II)—can illuminate what Herbert believed he was doing in his poetic labors—and what we do when we engage with poetry like Herbert's and, possibly, with other literature also.

In *The Temple* [46], "The Reprisall" follows "The Thanksgiving," in which the poet expresses a sense of dismay regarding how best to live in the shadow of Christ's sacrifice, Christ's heroics. The poet is anxious to play his part but also not to undermine the finality and supremacy of Christ's action. Herbert is elsewhere attuned to anxieties regarding how best to spend his energies (see, for instance, "Employment

(I)," "Employment (II)," "Constancie," "The Bunch of Grapes") [46], but he also maintains a high view of original sin and of the reformed doctrine of the total efficacy of Christ's substitutionary atonement.

The poet of "The Thanksgiving," then, finds himself in somewhat of a paradox, a problem that finds its center in Christ's passion, and so the poem ends with the poet's inability to articulate the proper response to it. He must respond, he longs to respond heroically, and his response matters. How it is that it matters he cannot fully account for, but "The Thanksgiving" represents an overestimation of the poet's heroics; in the end, he is silenced by the recognition that he must fail if he is to compete with Christ: "Then for thy passion—I will do for that—/Alas, my God, I know not what" [47].

In Becker's terms, Herbert is caught in a narrow heroics in trying to compete with Christ; he requires a higher heroics, and he is at pains to articulate what that might entail. It is in the following poem, "The Reprisall," that we get the poet's answer, and it is a masterful summation of the poet's problem and of what literature was for Herbert. First, he states his dilemma:

> *I have consider'd it, and finde*
> *There is no dealing with thy mighty passion:*
> *For though I die for thee, I am behinde;*
> *My sinnes deserve the condemnation [48].*

The poet's acknowledgment that he is "behinde" has two possible meanings. It can mean, on the one hand, that his good efforts simply cannot outdo the work of Christ. This meaning is clear from the poet's attempts in "The Thanksgiving." But there is another meaning here. "I am behinde" can also mean that his efforts are marked with sin; they are not wholly good, which is why the poet can follow the line with, "My sinnes deserve the condemnation," which otherwise would seem out of place.

The following stanza captures the essence of the poet's confusion:

> *O make me innocent, that I*
> *May give a disentangled state and free:*
> *And yet thy wounds still my attempts defie,*
> *For by thy death I die for thee [48].*

So, whereas the poet begins to entertain some hope in the first two lines (lines 5–6), line 7 reintroduces doubt: no matter how morally pure he can become by his own will as a result of having been made innocent, the very act of being made innocent threatens to undermine anything he might achieve. The innocence that is granted to the poet, which thereby grants the poet the strength (the "attempts") to act innocently, always subsumes that strength.

How can one be personally heroic when Christ's heroism stands for all? That is the problem, and Herbert seems quite direct and almost aggressive about it in this poem. Arnold Stein saw this and suggested in *George Herbert's Lyrics*, as Wilcox also notes, that it was precisely this heightened directness that led the poet to "the difficult right answer" [49] in the final stanza:

> *Yet by confession will I come*
> *Into the conquest. Though I can do nought*
> *Against thee, in thee I will overcome*
> *The man, who once against thee fought [48].*

For Herbert, there is a heroism that seeks to subvert Christ's, but there is also another heroism that joins Christ's, which is captured by the concept of confession. What the poet felt as an embattled state becomes his mode of redemptive heroism. One of the best ways to read the poems in "The Church"—the central section in *The Temple*—is as confessions, that is, as the open and honest articulations of a soul that longs to be in the presence of God. It is as a poet of confession that Herbert has achieved a personal heroism that is content to participate in Christ's heroism, for confession is a mode of transformation.

The sort of transformation the poet undergoes is now viewed not relative to Christ but relative to former versions of himself: "I will overcome/The man, who once against thee fought" [48]. Instead of seeking to "revenge" himself on Christ's love, the poet will now revenge himself on his old self; he does this, in part, through the poetic craft; Herbert is conscious of his participation in a poetic labor that is at once in competition with himself and poetic tradition, as we see in his two "Jordan" poems, which we turn to now to see how Herbert implemented this confessional mode toward personal transformation.

Criticism on "Jordan" (I) has tended to reveal that the poem is deceivingly complex [46, 50]; specifically, it's difficult to arrive at the precise object of Herbert's attack. What's unclear is whether the tradition(s) he has in view is allegorical, pastoral, court poetry, or profane poetry in general; but what seems beyond dispute is that Herbert sees himself in a dialectical battle with a particular poetic tradition, or traditions, and that his personal heroism is to be accomplished on this front. The desire to write "plainly" is a clear goal, which is further illuminated if we keep in view Herbert's confessional mode. The New Testament injunction to keep prayers plain (e.g. Matthew 6:7) [23] and the implicit assumption that to confess is to be open and honest both inform Herbert's struggle in this poem. At stake are the abilities to comprehend truth and also to write the best lines. Although there is a certain kind of humility in Herbert in his aspiration toward plainness, there is also the belief that the same plainness can produce the best poetry. Line 7, for example ("And sudden arbors shadow coarse-spun lines"), shows Herbert's contempt for a poetic style that uses complicated imagery to hide poetic baseness. In short, Herbert's pursuit of a discourse that will lead him to God and that will also achieve for him poetic mastery become one.

"Jordan" (II) [51] argues similarly, but the competition is not with an external poetic tradition but with himself. He has, to a sufficient degree, internalized the poetic tradition he laments and now finds himself embattled against his own poetic impulses: He has become what he criticized in "Jordan" (I). With "Jordan" (II) we run into a problem that was implicit throughout "Jordan" (I), namely, that once God is made the aim of poetic expression, what sort of language is fit to honor him? The plainness advocated for in "Jordan" (I) was an argument against poetry that seemed too impressed with what was not God; but once we have turned our poetic attention toward God, what language is fit? As the poet expresses in "Jordan" (II), "Nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sunne."

The solution in "Jordan" (II) comes from the voice of one of Herbert's many references to Christ:

> *But while I bustled, I might heare a friend*
> *Whisper, How wide is all this long pretence!*
> *There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:*
> *Copie out onely that, and save expense [51].*

Critics have differed regarding whether this ending constitutes a solution at all. Barbara Leah Harman suggests that the poem "offers no demonstration of what it would mean to copy out a 'sweetnesse ready penn'd,'" [46] and she is correct if what we are looking for is a set of instructions on how to write such "sweetnesse." If, however, the poem is about Herbert's experience of writing poetry, then it is the transformation itself that constitutes the "sweetnesse ready penn'd."

In other words, the poem is not the solution; the poet is. This is not to denigrate the poem; Harman's criticism suggests that the poem's aim all along was to offer such a demonstration, whereas it seems that Herbert is describing an internal transformation, and to corroborate this point let us to turn briefly to another one of Herbert's poems about the craft of poetry, "The Quidditie":

My God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:
It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in France or Spain;
Nor can it entertain the day
With my great stable or demain:
It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the Exchange, or busy Hall;
But it is that which while I use
I am with thee, and most take all [52].

The poem begins by reflecting on what a poem—"a verse"—is; but, as Wilcox points out, the phrase "that which while I use" suggests that what is in view "is not the finished 'verse' itself which brings the speaker closer to God, but the act of 'using' poetry—a process which presumably includes writing, revising, and reading" [46]. The essential message of this poem is that poetry has the potential to confer on its user (writer or reader) union with God. To use the language of our proposed construct of enlightenment, poetry as Herbert understands it has the capacity to facilitate a heightened awareness and love of God, specifically through his confessional mode.

In a sense, our argument depends on the following observation: "The Quidditie" represents the totality of the poetic and religious enterprise for Herbert, insofar as the essence of poetry for Herbert is its function as the meeting place between his soul and God. According to this view, we can read the "sweetnesse ready penn'd" less as actual words to be transcribed by the poet and more as an experience of transformation to be entered into. The central point of "Jordan" (II), then, becomes the poet's internal transition from activity to stillness, from restlessness to rest, from the pursuit of divine love to the experience of it.

We can sum up the central idea we have been proposing in the following manner: the confessional mode of poetic expression Herbert employs functions as his personal heroism precisely because it is the place where he becomes united to Christ's heroism (that is, to Love himself) and is transformed; such expression reveals his conviction that he is in need of transformation. In the same manner that approaching love requires his poetry to undergo a purging transformation, so too must the poet undergo a continual death. It is his movement from a narrow heroics to a wider, higher one. And, as Becker's formulation aptly reminds us, "the God-ideology... would make sense out of his unworthiness and would translate it into heroism" [33].

In other words, it is precisely Herbert's confessional poetic, his poetic self-negation, that serves as the precondition for his salvation.

Farrington and Davis, moreover, have observed that poetry has long been appreciated for its ability to provide emotional and existential structure amid the backdrop of human suffering [53]. In their view, the poet's attempt at creating poetic structure achieved a similar structuring in the mind of those who engaged with the poetry. For Herbert, the ultimate reality for which to provide structure was the heroics of Christ and how the individual must relate to it. To participate in such a literary structuring was Herbert's manner of participating in Christ's heroics, and though his poetic labor does not guarantee God's presence, it is his manner of preparing himself for it, whensoever it should come.

6.2 The role of metaphor in John of the Cross's heroic trajectory

We've already mentioned John of the Cross's heroic trajectory, insofar as the mystical theology he explored is analogous to the heroic journey. His conceptualization of God as Beloved and the human individual as Lover also informed our definition of enlightenment: The Lover's apprehension of the Beloved is one of the dimensions of our proposed construct of enlightenment, insofar as this is John of the Cross's formulation for the ordering of human loves toward God.

The question before us now regards John of the Cross's dependence on poetry. Where John of the Cross writes in prose, it is to comment on his poetry; as such, something about literary language was central to John of the Cross's theology and instruction. Ultimately, it is what John of the Cross believed metaphor could do to nurture the relationship between God and the individual that constitutes his reliance on metaphor.

Specifically, John of the Cross relied heavily on nature metaphors to describe the essence of God, of the individual human, and of their relationship. Part of the reason for this is that, a trope among Christian mystics, the incomprehensibility of God cannot be described plainly, and so the mystic must rely on symbols to describe what they have experienced in God; but also it is the case that the symbols themselves illuminate crucial aspects of the relationship between God and the individual. A brief look at one such symbol—his use of the stag—will have to suffice.

The *Spiritual Canticle* (SC), sometimes referred to as the "Song between the Soul and the Bridegroom," refers to the series of love lyrics John of the Cross began writing during his time in prison. Despite being written during the darkest months of John of the Cross's life, and despite containing painful lines that describe his separation from, and search for, his "Beloved," these lyrics are primarily an epithalamium in the style of the *Song of Songs*. It is love, then, that frames his experience of suffering and not the other way around. The first two stanzas of SC begin as follows:

> *Where can your hiding be,*
> *Beloved, that you left me thus to moan*
> *While like the stag you flee*
> *Leaving the wound with me?*
> *I followed calling loud, but you had flown.*
> *O shepherds, you that, yonder,*
> *Go through the sheepfolds of the slope on high,*
> *If you, as there you wander,*
> *Should chance my love to spy,*
> *Then tell him that I suffer, grieve, and die [18, 54].*

The thematic device John of the Cross uses to combine the notions of suffering and love is the notion of absence. The Soul (or Lover) begins with a lament over the Bridegroom's (or Beloved's) absence. Elizabeth Howe has pointed out the difference between John of the Cross's identification of the stag with the Bridegroom and the same identification in the *Song of Songs*, which is a major resource for John of the Cross's poem [55].

In the *Song of Songs*, the Bridegroom's identification with the stag represents the Bridegroom's presence, whereas in SC it represents his absence. The stag (*cervus*) has a rich symbolic history. Isidore of Seville described some of its important characteristics: the enemies of snakes, discoverers of dittany, lovers of the whistling of reeds. Young stags (*hinnulus*, a derivative of the verb to nod), according to Isidore, are so named because they conceal themselves if they see their mother nod. Young does (*dammula*) are so named because they flee from one's hand (*de manu*) [56]. In Isidore, then, we already see the tendency of deer to hide themselves.

The *Aberdeen Bestiary* (probably twelfth century) goes further than Isidore in providing descriptions of deer that reference their tendency to retreat or hide: "Deer have this characteristic also, that they change their feeding-ground for love of another country, and in doing so, they support each other" [57]. We read further on the moral drawn from such a description:

> *The members of the holy Church seem to have a mentality corresponding to that of deer, because while they change their homeland, that is, the world, for love of the heavenly homeland, they carry each other, that is, the more perfect bring on and sustain the less perfect by their example and their good works [57].*

What we now see is that the stag has a sense for a higher country ("the heavenly homeland"), and its hiddenness is associated with its preference for this land. Along with this addition (and some others), the *Aberdeen Bestiary* also highlights what Isidore included regarding the offspring's habit of hiding when their mother nods. The stag, then, is associated with secretiveness.

The *Aberdeen Bestiary* spiritualizes this secretiveness by associating it with more than simply fear of men; this secretiveness becomes a virtuous longing for a higher realm. We also have John of the Cross's own words regarding his use of stag as a representation of the Bridegroom, and these approximate the meaning of the stag as it was articulated in this bestiary tradition [58]. The Bridegroom is like the stag not only because the stag is estranged, solitary, and flees from others, but also:

> *because of his swiftness to hide and reveal himself; his visitations to devoted souls grants them delight and encouragement, and after these visitations he causes them to feel his departures and absences, to test, humble, and teach them. In this way, he makes them feel with great sorrow his absence [18].*

The creation of longing in the human soul is the justification for the Bridegroom's habit of hiding and revealing himself. For John of the Cross, this is not merely a doctrinal claim; it is a phenomenological one. The human experience of longing is fundamental to him, and one way to approach the SC is as his attempt to describe the dynamics of the experience of longing [59]. This is, in fact, how John of the Cross prefaces his commentary of the poem. Before commenting on the first stanza, he provides this preface:

> *To remedy so much wrong and damage, feeling greatly God's anger and hiddenness because of her [the Bride's] desire to forget him [God] among created things, touched in her inner heart by fear and grief because of such lostness and danger, renouncing all things, putting her hands to work, without delaying one more day or hour, with longing and groaning from the heart in pain from the love of God, she begins to invoke her Love, telling him: [stanza 1 of SC] [18].*

Suffering and divine love are here intertwined, but we can isolate divine love as the cause of both the Bride's pain and her motivation for pursuit. The Bridegroom's absence can only cause such an experience if he is indeed "Aquel que yo más quiero," and it is here that Campbell's English translation ("Should chance my love to spy") fails John of the Cross's meaning. John of the Cross means to describe the Bridegroom as the greatest object of the Bride's love, above all other things. John of the Cross tells us as much, referring to line 4 of the second stanza ("Aquel que yo más quiero"): "that is, more than all other things. This is true when nothing is placed before the soul that causes it to fear doing and suffering all manner of service for him [God]"; and when God is the object of this highest love, his absence causes the bride to say with truth, "I suffer, grieve, and die" [18].

The Bride's sorrow and longing is predicated on the Bridegroom's identity as the rightful object of the soul's highest love; that is, when the Bridegroom is not in the place of highest love, the Bride experiences only fear, sorrow, longing, and painful sighs. This is analogous to St. Augustine's *ordo amoris,* and this dynamic parallels the dimension of our definition of enlightenment that involves attending to our emotional attunement toward God.

Whereas John of the Cross's prose thoroughly Christianizes this experience (that is, it provides a Christian understanding of such an experience), his poem speaks to us on merely human terms, phenomenological terms, which is why Juan Martín Velasco, defending John of the Cross's relevance for contemporary secular society, has said:

> *It is beyond doubt that Saint John of the Cross... is relevant in the sense that he can be proposed as a model, and can be heard as a teacher, regarding that essential aspect of the human condition, namely, the experience of God. To a generation like ours, culturally secularized yet eager for the sacred, with thirst for religious experience, with the need to recover what is essential, Saint John of the Cross can be an indispensable witness of the profundity of man, of the value of the religious, its human, aesthetic, and cultural fecundity. A witness, in short, of the perennial quality of God [60].*

It is in this sense that we can call John of the Cross more than a Christian poet; he is, in fact, a universal poet insofar as he describes universal human experiences. And it may be that the fundamental experience of human longing is stirred and directed by literature more profoundly than by other means. And if our notion of enlightenment involves at its center the heightened awareness and love of a God for whom we long, then metaphor as John of the Cross understands it—as a means for illuminating the nature of God and our relation to God—is an indispensable means for attaining this awareness.

6.3 Experiments in literary reading

Herbert outlines a vision of poetry that places it at the center of his religious practice, at the center of his heroics; John of the Cross elaborates an ontology and

a phenomenology that relies on literary metaphor. These theoretical expressions of literature's value are significant in themselves, but let us now turn to more experimental claims regarding literature and wellbeing to see if Herbert's and John of the Cross's more theoretical notions receive scientific support.

A growing body of research has demonstrated the psychotherapeutic value of reading literature, especially in the context of mental health problems, incarceration, and chronic pain [61]. Much of this research has been qualitative, typically centering around in-depth interviews. Methodologies used in qualitative studies include, among others, ethnographic studies [62]; the creation of master themes and sub-themes using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) [63]; close linguistic, literary, and social examination of audio and video recordings of shared readings groups [64]; the micro-phenomenological interview, which involves causing an interviewee to relive the experience of engagement with a literary text [65]; and so-called intimate reading, which involves the narrativizing of a participant's transformative encounter with a literary text [66]. Qualitative studies are useful when studying the effects of reading because they make "it possible to work productively within constraints where a more systematic experimental approach (using a control group, for example, engaged in a comparison activity) might have been unworkable in practice, however desirable in theory" [67].

At the same time, more quantitative methods, relying on the use of control groups and psychological questionnaires, have begun to shed further light on the relationship between literary reading and mental health. In one study [68] targeting "those at risk of mental health issues and social isolation," researchers divided participants into two groups in a cross-over design. While one group participated in a shared reading session (SR), the other group participated in "another cultural activity," in this case, the developmental exploration of the surrounding parkland (Built Environment Design Workshops (BE)); the groups then switched activities. In short, this study aimed to identify the merits of shared literary reading relative to a shared non-literary activity.

Both SR and BE were associated with reports of greater positive emotion and less negative emotion. Curiously, however, SR was associated with lower levels (that is, lower lows) of negative emotion than was BE. The researchers suggest that this finding is consistent with qualitative research, which suggests that "the intrinsic value of the Shared Reading of literature lies in its capacity to open individuals up to a broader range of emotional states, via vicarious response to characters in the text or the text's bringing to mind analogous personal situations or past events" [68]. This "broader range of emotional states" involves the experience of more intense negative emotion and positive emotion. It may be the case, as this study later suggests, that confronting these intense negative emotions directly via literary texts may be correlated to resolution of the cause of the negative emotions in the long term.

Consider this finding in relation to the renunciative dimension of our proposed construct of enlightenment: a self-denial, a renunciation of a certain kind of flourishing is essential for a fuller flourishing. This is not to equate the spiritual and psychological domains, but the convergence is striking, and the possibility that each domain has implications for the other is a central hypothesis of this exploration.

Herbert's participatory heroics involved a confessional mode, which required an honest "negative" appraisal of himself in order to experience God's presence with him; and John of the Cross's experience of longing began with a serious consideration of God's absence as a requisite to an apprehension of God's presence. In other words, this encounter with literature calls for allowing for this sort of "negative" experience to advance our Christian enlightenment, and this is precisely the dynamic the SR/BE

study seemed to highlight. Similarly, this intense emotional experience is suggested in the ACT therapy approach and is supported by findings that flexibly engaging intense negative emotions is associated with psychological well-being [10, 69–71].

In a second study [68] by these same researchers, a session of SR was compared with a session of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for participants suffering from chronic pain. In this study, the relative merits of SR were clearer:

> *Statistical analysis showed the pain rating after the session to be lower than the mean and lower than at two days before and two days after SR. The pain rating two days after was also lower than two days before SR, suggesting the possibility of some prolonged effect, beyond the duration of the group itself. Following CBT, the pain rating was above the mean. There was considerably less evidence here that CBT affected pain and emotion beyond the duration of the group [68].*

Again, the researchers pointed to parallels with qualitative research, which has shown that literary reading exposes participants to the full range of human emotion, by which they are affirmed as persons, whereas CBT reduces them to people with pain. The researchers also suggest that whereas CBT seeks only to subtract something from participants' lives (pain), SR seeks to add human fullness to participants' lives via the range of human experience found in literature.

The value of these studies, and what makes them quantitative studies, is the inclusion of an assessment battery designed to measure psychological wellbeing associated with literary reading relative to other non-literary activities. The assessments used in the aforementioned studies included the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), the Ryff Scales of Psychological Wellbeing, and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). The Ryff scales allowed for the observation that a short amount of time involved in SR increased participants' sense of purpose in life. Interestingly, the same participants who scored higher in the purpose in life subscale in SR scored higher in the personal growth subscale after BE, suggesting that the effects of shared literary reading crossed over to other activities.

The PANAS was used to measure participants' affective states immediately after each activity. The PANAS consists of twenty emotion words (10 positive, 10 negative) that must be scored 1–5 by the participant. The important finding with this subscale in the SR/BE experiment was that SR produced stronger negative affect than did BE, "*without this impacting on overall improvement in psychological well-being* (as captured by the Ryff scales)" [68]. The PANAS was subsequently used in the SR/CBT experiment with similar findings: SR was associated with more intense negative and positive emotionality and a greater range of feeling in the two-word selection. The best summary of what's happening here is the following:

> *[W]here CBT encouraged a top-down strategy of mind over matter, SR tended to bring into conscious awareness and verbal explicitness hitherto inarticulate and implicit pain. CBT, that is to say, sought to manage emotions by means of systematic techniques, where SR helped to 'find' (often hidden or buried) pain at its personal-emotional source—as an involuntary rather than intended outcome—and thence to turn passive experience of suffering emotion into articulate contemplation of painful concerns [68].*

Recall Bushlack's comment that "Disordered appetites [loves] can be identified… as the effects of implicit memories and interruptive fight-or-flight reactivity originating in the amygdala"; it may be that literary reading allows for a "present-centered

awareness that… short-circuits the reactive cycle of disruptive implicit memories and/or appetites," [13] or at the least, allows for the exploration of these implicit memories and their associated affects and experiences in a more accessible (and "considerably cheaper" [72]) way than other more explicit methods. This targeting of implicit memories has to do with literature's non-directiveness [61]: it is not aiming to cure depression or calm anxiety; it addresses the whole person and, as such, can draw out elements that have not been consciously explored. Literature's concentration of life's circumstances, moreover, allows for the imaginative exploration of more material than could ever be possible in actual life [73, 74].

Experiments involving brain scans corroborate these findings, related specifically to literature's—especially poetry's—capacity to defy expectations and arouse a greater awareness of new, deeper meaning. This "short-circuiting" of non-literary explanatory language allows for a "revitalising effect upon mental life," measured through EEG; these researchers conclude that "Literary reading… involves the immersion of attention in a dense medium that holds back the mind from superficial, over-speedy decisions or habitual biases" [75]. These brain studies reach a conclusion similar to Bushlack's [13]: it is the "reactive cycle" of implicit thought processes and desires that literary language can "short-circuit." This process is analogous to the spiritual renunciative work that characterizes our Christian enlightenment construct.

How do these findings interact with heroics? Specifically, how do these effects lead to more virtuous living, to social concern and action, if at all? Recall James's criteria for saintliness [6]: individual wellbeing in the spiritual sense should lead to an increased capacity to act in the social world. This idea is at the heart of the Christian imagination, since Christ's heroics seem to involve the quintessential renunciative trajectory. Recall also Steger's hedonia/eudaimonia framework [26]: immediate self-orientation versus long-term others-orientation; this dynamic, we have argued, seems to be at the center what it means to pursue a heightened awareness and love of God. We are right, then, to ask whether literary reading's impact on enlightenment produces this social dimension.

One line of research involves the Reading Mind in the Eyes test [76], in which it was found that fiction readers, contrasted with nonfiction readers, scored higher on empathy/social acumen measures, especially when related to the capacity to become absorbed by the story [77]. Djikic et al. [78] have also observed that those who score above average on a measure of avoidant attachment experience greater emotional change during fiction reading than in a nonfiction control condition, suggesting fiction's capacity to circumvent long-standing psychological defenses. These same researchers found that the same experimental conditions had an effect on personality, and these effects were mediated by emotional change [79].

7. Conclusion

A Christian view of enlightenment—defined as a heightened awareness and love of God, especially in the heroic trajectory of Christ—embraces the notion that facing physical, emotional, and relational pain and suffering is central to the path of the religious/spiritual transformation that renews our minds, alters the ordering of our loves, and sets us on the path toward apprehending the presence of God in Christ, which is the Christian vision of the heroic trajectory.

Taylor [24] placed the renunciation of earthly flourishing at the center of the Christian philosophy, and Becker identified the importance of this phenomenon

from a psychological and social perspective, associating it with heroics [33]. James emphasized the social utility of such a posture in the world [6], and several eudaimonia researchers have identified this renunciative posture as central to eudaimonic flourishing [1, 26, 32, 40].

Reading literature can facilitate participation in this heroic trajectory, as exemplified in the poetic writing of George Herbert—in whom we see literature as primarily confessional—and Saint John of the Cross—in whom we see literature as primarily illuminative metaphor.

Bibliotherapy research has demonstrated a variety of ways that engagement with literature facilitates this heroic trajectory. Literature can expose us in a non-directive way to difficult emotions we may not have thought worthy of exploring [61, 68]; it can create the conditions for more explicit forms of thought and desire rather than implicit thoughts and desires that inhibit "greater awareness of new, deeper meaning" [75]; it can nurture higher levels of empathy [76, 77]; it can circumvent psychological defenses that may be immune to other forms of intervention, producing emotional change [78]; and that this emotional change can result in longer-term personality change [79].

Engaging with literary reading holds promise that decentering the focus from our stories to those of others may enable us to better engage our most painful experiences and deepest longings in a manner that can nurture healing and foster the psychological flexibility to face into bearing our crosses. This process may be its own kind of flourishing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Chapter 8

Forgiveness: Practicing Inner Peace

John A. Moran

Abstract

Since ancient times forgiveness has been a mainstay practice for restoring inner peace and relationship harmony. Interpersonal transgressions can result in long-lasting unforgiveness - anger, negative rumination, avoidance and acting-out behaviors destructive to the self and others. The psychological study of forgiveness has surged recently resulting in a rich body of knowledge about types of forgiveness, the relationship of forgiveness to global mental health and well-being, and what behavioral practices promote the healing powers of forgiveness. This chapter reviews psychological theory and concepts related to forgiveness, models of clinical intervention for increasing forgiveness, and how the new psychology of forgiveness overlaps with the Buddhist notion of enlightenment.

Keywords: forgiveness, transgressions, anger, emotional injury, compassion

1. Introduction

> *"As I walked out the door towards the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I did not leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I would still be in prison."*
>
> *Nelson Mandela [1].*

Forgiveness carries profound historical significance as a cultural practice for repairing strained and fractured relationships, restoring group membership and cultural harmony, and enabling individuals to recover from emotional injuries ranging from minor slights (a forgotten anniversary) to major relationship violations (an undisclosed debt) and even "unforgiveable" behaviors. Parents of murdered children and victims of political violence have described how forgiveness freed them from entrapment in resentment and bitterness [2].

Since ancient times, forgiveness has been intertwined with religious traditions, communal justice, moral virtue, and personal enlightenment. Since the 1990's the psychological study of forgiveness has grown exponentially. For instance, a PsycINFO search of peer-reviewed articles with "forgiv*" to include "forgiv-ing" as a keyword returned 143 entries between 1985 and 2000 and 2172 entries between 2000 and 2021. A substantial body of clinical research has examined the relationship between forgiveness, unforgiveness and individual health and well-being, and the efficacy of interventions to promote forgiveness.

This chapter examines how the psychology of forgiveness can support an individual's quest for personal peace in a world where suffering from unjust emotional injury is inevitable. The chapter examines: (1) Definitions of forgiveness, psychological theory and concepts; (2) Evidence-based practices for increasing forgiveness, and (3) Forgiveness and Buddhist enlightenment practices.

2. What is forgiveness?

As a popular term forgiveness has accumulated meanings which can confuse a psychological understanding of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not [3]:

- Acquiescing—allowing harmful actions to continue.
- Condoning—not recognizing any harm or unfairness.
- Forgetting—people rarely forget; forgiveness results in different emotions associated with hurtful memories.
- Denying, or excusing, what happened.
- Overlooking the consequences or giving up on justice.
- Granting amnesty or pardon.
- Resigning oneself to what cannot be changed.

Further, mistaken ideas can cloud psychological practice of forgiveness, for example:

- Forgiveness is a religious rather than psychological phenomena.
- Forgiveness further burdens victims rather than making them stronger.
- Forgiveness is simply saying "I'm sorry" followed by "You're forgiven".
- Forgiveness is all or none, it cannot be partial.
- Forgiveness is limiting assertiveness or giving up control.
- Forgiveness is reconciling with someone who shows no motivation to change hurtful behavior.
- Forgiveness is a lame concept suggesting that people get away with things.
- Forgiveness can be forced or rushed.
- Forgiveness is easy, not an often slow process that takes practice.

Definitions of forgiveness vary among theorists, cultures, and contexts [4, 5]. Forgiveness can be defined as a dispositional trait [6, 7], a process [8, 9], and an end state (being forgiven). There is general agreement that forgiveness is a prosocial i*ntrapsychic* response to an interpersonal transgression [10, 11]. Forgiveness involves cognitive, affective, behavioral, motivational, and interpersonal components [11–13]. The American Psychological Association's Dictionary of Psychology [14] describes forgiveness as "Willfully putting aside feelings of resentment toward someone who has committed a wrong, been unfair or hurtful [...]; a voluntary transformation of your feelings, attitudes, and behavior so that you [...] can express compassion, generosity [...] toward the person who wronged you."

Forgiveness is a coping strategy to relieve the negative impacts of transgressions [15]. Forgiveness has been associated with less activation in the cardiovascular system, sympathetically mediated skin conductance, and facial muscle EMG. Forgiveness has also been negatively correlated with brain activation associated with decreased self-regulatory neural networks, anxiety, and depression [16].

Among clinicians a key distinction is drawn between decisional and emotional forgiveness: *Decisional forgiveness* is renouncing hostility against the offender, not seeking revenge or punishment, not ruminating about the injustice of the offense(s), not placing blame; and, giving up entitlement to hold resentment. *Emotional forgiveness* is replacing unforgiving emotions (chronic anger, hostility, resentment, bitterness, fear, and sadness) with positive ones such as empathy, sympathy, compassion and love [11]. Usually decisional forgiveness precedes emotional forgiveness.

Sometimes forgiveness is experienced as a sudden restoration of inner peace. More often, forgiveness is a process which unfolds gradually. There is confusion as one sorts through what happened. This can be followed by a cascade of cognitions, emotions, and behavioral reactions [17] which can lead to long-lasting and sometimes intractable unforgiveness - enduring angry rumination, resentment, bitterness, relationship avoidance, and anxiety over being hurt or offended again [18–20]. Emotional injuries can also be followed, either immediately or eventually, by the decision to forgive, and moving into the struggle to move from unforgiveness to understanding, empathy and compassion for the wrongdoer [9]. The process of forgiveness cannot be rushed and the pace of the process is different for each client. There is consensus among forgiveness theorist and practitioners that forgiveness must freely emerge within the individual, that forgiveness must be a gift which is freely given; attempts to impose a forgiving attitude or solicit forgiveness should be rejected uniformly.

Forgiveness is not an "all-or-nothing" phenomenon, or something that forgiveness provides enduring liberation from the negative residuals of being transgressed. Rather, forgiveness can be partial. The memory of the event is retained, the urge towards vengeance may be gone but one might still feel sadness, disappointment, distrust, and some bitterness when the memory is re-vivified. And degrees of forgiveness can wax-and-wane. Even after a forgiver concludes they have forgiven a transgression, they may experience surges of unforgiveness which require a forgiveness "touch-up".

3. Evidence-based forgiveness practices

Four meta-analytic studies [21–24] (N = 112 studies) have examined the efficacy of forgiveness interventions.

Two intervention models for promoting forgiveness that make up most of the studies, are The Enright process model [25] and Worthington's REACH model [15]. Overall findings indicate that forgiveness treatments produce greater forgiveness than alternative treatments and wait-list control groups. A second and consistent finding among the studies is participants reporting gains in positive affect and reduction of anxiety and depression.

Enright's Process Model Therapy has four phases [9]: (1) uncovering negative feelings and thoughts about the offense; (2) deciding to pursue forgiveness for a specific incident; (3) working towards a new understanding the offending person; (4) developing empathy for the offending person/s and discovering of unanticipated positive outcomes of forgiveness. Enright's Process Model was originally developed as a 20-session intervention, but the model and its format has been adapted for a variety of clinical and psychoeducational populations [26].

Worthington [27] developed the REACH Model for Emotional Forgiveness: Recall (R) the hurt experienced and emotions associated with it; Empathize (E) with their offender, take the other's perspective, and consider factors that may have contributed to their offender's action; explore the idea that forgiveness can be seen as an Altruistic (A) gift to the offender; make a Commitment (C) to forgive, and Hold (H) onto or maintain their forgiveness through times of uncertainty or a return of anger and bitterness. The Reach Model has been adapted into a variety of formats including do-it-yourself workbooks available for download [28].

The function of forgiveness is to achieve or restore inner peace following the hurt of unjust relationship transgressions. Transgressions are violations of relationship boundaries which can leave one feeling violated, betrayed, powerless, abandoned, insulted, disrespected, shamed, embarrassed, and morally outraged.

Being offended and offending are inherent to relationships. Relationship transgression range from minor to major. Minor transgressions might include being late; not responding to messages; teasing or joking insensitively; leaving messes; taking over a conversation; oversharing with friends; or, being distracted when full attention is expected. Moderate transgression might include frequently criticizing; overstepping boundaries like reading messages; minimizing or downplaying feelings; breaking promises; flirting; lying about one's whereabouts, or unfavorably comparing a partner to others. Major transgressions might include infidelity; emotional, sexual, or physical abuse; major financial betrayal; public embarrassment; coercive control.

Betrayal of a cherished aspect of a relationship can result in an emotional injury - hurt and anger resulting from violation of trust. "The signature marker of an unresolved emotional injury is the current and recurrent experience of the distressing pain, anger, sadness, and vulnerability that clients feel every time they are reminded of what happened or think about the person who hurt them [3]."

Emotional injuries can result in damages to the self [17] including:

Negative thinking—rumination, blaming, vengefulness, stereotyping, harsh opinions.

Negative emotions—anger, resentment, bitterness, hostility, vengeance, and hatred.

Negative behavior—revenge seeking, holding a grudge, avoiding the offender, and demands for atonement or retribution.

There is a consensus among researchers [24] that two general components of forgiveness repair emotional injuries: (a) the reduction of vengeful and angry thoughts, feelings, and motives (*decisional forgiveness*); and, (b) an increase in some form of positive thoughts, feelings, and motives towards the offending person (*emotional forgiveness*).

Before a forgiveness intervention is begun, participants usually are introduced to the psychology of forgiveness including what the intervention hopes to achieve and what participants will be asked to do. How the psychological approach to forgiveness differs from mistaken popular ideas (see above) about forgiveness is discussed. Participants are asked to inventory the range and severity of the impact of the transgression/s they want to address, and to examine if the defenses they have been using are sufficient or if they want to try forgiveness. Participants are explicitly asked if they want to engage in the forgiveness intervention.

Someone who has been the victim of an unjust transgression may not be ripe for forgiveness because the hurt is too fresh; they may want to apply the balm of the passage of time. Clearly the passage of time is related to forgiveness. Over time the sting of the injury may reduce, or subsequent events may show the offender in a new light [29]. It may be pointed out that when one chooses forgiveness, they are saying "yes" to an effort to let go of anger, bitterness, and resentment though they may not have forgivingness feelings, and that the passage of time is not an effective way of healing from a transgression compared to a structured forgiveness intervention.

Deciding to renounce hostile thoughts and actions and seeking to feel positively towards a wrongdoer are practices which overlap with Buddhist enlightenment, a state marked by absence of desire or suffering [30]. "Forgiveness requires both letting go and pulling toward. A forgiver must release the resentment, hatred and bitterness of unforgiveness. A forgiver must release the desire to avoid or to seek revenge against the perpetrator. But the act of forgiving – of reaching out towards the perpetrator – is sharper. It pricks the heart" [31].

Decisional forgiveness would be relevant to Buddhist enlightenment as it involves reducing rumination about what happened, blame-placing, stereotyping, or labelling, refraining from saying critical things about the offender to others; and refraining from subtle revenge, e.g. a sneer, ignoring, or other acts of disrespect. Decisional forgiveness includes reducing hostile thoughts such as: "I don't want to give up the right to see them suffer"; "I don't want to give up my right to punish them"; "I am morally superior"; "I'm afraid that I won't be holding them accountable." Renouncing hostility means releasing the offender from the responsibility for "fixing" the effects of the injury or making reparations.

The process of forgiving is more in the emotional domain than one's evaluation of the truth, value, or moral nature of the wrong [3]. Forgiveness involves acknowledging the wrongdoing and its impact – without minimizing, but also recognizing and responding to the humanity of the person responsible for the hurt; seeing the injustice as evidence that the wrongdoer needs change; and, genuinely desiring the good of the person responsible for the wrongdoing – even when the relationship cannot be restored [30]. Resolving anger and moving towards empathy and compassion for the offender is the hard work of forgiveness and congruent with Buddhist enlightenment practices such as *Metta* or loving-kindness meditation.

Resolving anger, empathic understanding of the wrongdoer, and compassion for the wrongdoer are emotional forgiveness work strategies shared among forgiveness interventions. Anger is a primary consequence of emotional injury. Anger can be used constructively, to empower, to assert boundaries and moral standards; or anger can become self-righteous and unforgiving, resulting in long-lasting grudges and acted-out hostile impulses [30, 31].

Emotional forgiveness encourages the diversion of anger from negative themes towards understanding and compassion. A skillful and timely apology can result in reducing anger and viewing the offender more favorably if the apology successfully

conveys compassion and empathy for the pain caused by hurtful actions, and especially if the apology conveys that the offender's action has caused them to suffer damage to their own self-worth such that they are clear about their need to engage in a self-repair process [3]. When emotionally hurtful experiences are resolved, the anger associated with the hurt no longer gives rise to blame narratives, but rather is accompanied by self-validation of the pain endured and clarity that the anger associated with the pain has resulted in personal growth and strength.

Emotional injury can lead one to view a wrongdoer simply and solely as their bad act(s), a disturbed person only capable of wrongdoing. Interventions help the hurt person think through the complexities and nuances existing within and in the context of the wrongdoing which invariably accompany substantive emotional injuries.

Thinking about forgiveness heroes can promote compassion. For example, discussing what Martin Luther King, Jr., meant when he said "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies" [32].

Enright [26] asks the hurt person to consider a series of questions: "First question: what was life like for the person who hurt you at the time of the actual injustice? Second question: What was life like for this person when he/she was growing-up? Third question: Can you see this person as part of the global human community? Does he deserve air to breathe, land to stand on, have the right to be treated as a person? Must you earn respect or is it something you naturally deserve because you are a person? Fourth question: the cosmic perspective. Can you see this person as special, unique, and irreplaceable, a person who shared with you the need to give and receive love?"

Other approaches for developing a more well-rounded view of the offender, include asking the hurt to identify times earlier in their lives that someone significantly betrayed, hurt, or disappointed them, and how they went from holding a grudge to feelings less hostile towards the offender. Or, to recall a time when they hurt someone. What did it feel like to be in trouble, to lose face, to lose respect and self-respect, and to need forgiveness? Were intentions misperceived by the hurt person?

An empty-chair dialog can help develop perspective on the actions of the offender. That is, put an empty chair across from you and imagine that you are talking to the person who did you wrong. Then change places and give voice to what they may want to say to you about their actions. Exchange chairs for several interactions.

If empathy is dropping one's guard and beginning to consider what might have been going on inside the offender and in the context of the offending behavior, compassion goes beyond understanding to include willingness to do something that would benefit the wrongdoer. In its simplest form, compassion is wishing for the well-being of the offender, perhaps that they will encounter experiences enabling them to grow beyond the faults that underpinned their wrongdoing.

Forgiveness is often referred to as a gift, giving goodness to the wrongdoer they do not deserve. A gift might be returning a phone call, acknowledging a person's presence in public, agreeing to meet and talk, accepting an apology and saying, "I forgive you", or saying an apology is not needed and moving forward in one's relationship with the offender.

Forgiveness may usually occur within the context of interpersonal interaction but forgiveness is primarily an *intrapsychic* phenomenon.

4. Forgiveness and enlightenment

The Taoist sage Chuang Tzu said, "When you open your heart, you get life's ten thousand sorrows and ten thousand joys". Maintaining peace and equanimity amidst life's welter, alarms, and excursions is difficult.

Buddhist psychology broadly defines the challenges to inner peace and equanimity as arising from desires (grasping) and aversions (avoiding). Forgiveness is a practice for restoring inner peace following the anger, vengeance, resentment, and avoidance which can follow from trivial transgressions (being cut off in traffic) to the profound (the death of a child caused by a drunk driver). Forgiveness is fundamental to the functioning of human societies. "The whole area of forgiveness is like a huge spectrum…at one end you have a fracas in the playground, and at the other end you've got mass slaughter and yet you've got this one word that is supposed to fit everything" [33].

One first encounters forgiveness a child when an adult says, "Tell Gavin you are sorry for pushing him down." Garden-variety transactional forgiveness is used for minor transgressions. Forgiveness applied to major transgressions can be sublime. "Nevertheless, in situations of gross and enduring conflict between groups, the emergence of charismatic figures who bear in their own bodies the suffering of their people yet are able to transcend the pain and lead them beyond it into the peace of forgiveness, is one of the most extraordinary spectacles that history affords. Such people become representative or archetypal figures who outgrow their own humanity and become universal figures" [34].

Forgiveness exemplars encourage forgiveness as a daily practice. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude" [35]. Mother Teresa said, "People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Forgive them anyway" [36]. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Forgiveness is choosing to love. It is the first skill of self-giving love" [37]. Within psychology Enright [38] uses the simile that forgiveness is like a muscle that must be exercised; Worthington [15] describes forgiveness as a medicine that must be taken in repeated doses.

Enlightenment includes a profound sense of inner peace, detachment from ego and material concerns, and compassion for all living things. With inner peace as a primary motivator of forgiveness, and compassion as one of its primary methods, forgiveness is clearly relevant to enlightenment. Self-forgiveness may be the form of forgiveness most relevant to enlightenment due to the turmoil which originates within the mind itself.

Often the first learning about meditation is how difficult it is to keep the mind focused on the breath. The focus of meditation is disrupted by thoughts about the past, the future, problems to be solved, and critical judgments; watching the mind's automatic functions is like a television which spontaneously changes channels. The compassion of self-forgiveness can ease self-criticism accompanying the difficult content produced by the mind and one's limited ability to control it.

5. Conclusion

Forgiveness is a practice for responding to a form of suffering – unjust transgressions causing emotional injury and damage to the self. The function of forgiveness is restoring inner peace following the mental defilements of unjust transgressions. Forgiveness does not obliterate the memory of injustices suffered, rather it holds those memories with different emotions and understandings.

Forgiveness reduces angry, bitter, blaming, and vengeful thoughts towards the perpetrator through acceptance of their humanity with its vast capacity for anger, vengeance, violence, confusion, and strongly held but mistakes ideas. The forgiven is viewed as worthy of compassion and the opportunity for redemption. As Oscar Wilde said [39], "Every saint has a past every sinner has a future."

The psychology of forgiveness provides concepts, theory, and practices for promoting forgiveness developed through the interplay of professional discourse and empirical research. The surge of popular interest in mindfulness appears to be attracting more interest in forgiveness and compassion. Mindfulness and Buddhism teachers such as Jack Kornfield, Ph.D. [40], Pema Chodron [41], Ticht Nacht Han [42], and many others examine forgiveness as skillful response for the inevitable sufferings that life entails. With overlapping interests in forgiveness from traditional religions, psychology, mindfulness, and now mindfulness, forgiveness is emerging as an important positive psychology practice associated with enlightenment.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Chapter 9

Yoga and Religion in the Quest for Happiness and Enlightenment

Linda Jane Douglas

Abstract

This chapter explores the role of yoga within religious contexts as a path to enlightenment and well-being, examining what is often perceived as 'authentic' practice. By analysing traditional practices, the chapter investigates how these practices may contribute to individual and collective happiness. The study synthesises theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the spiritual and psychological benefits of yoga. Additionally, it discusses the evolution of yoga practices and their contemporary implications, highlighting the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in the quest for enlightenment.

Keywords: yoga, spirituality, enlightenment, mental well-being, traditional practices

1. Introduction

Yoga is widely recognised as a spiritual practice with roots in ancient Indian traditions, often associated with paths to enlightenment and mental well-being. However, defining yoga in a universally accepted manner proves complex due to its diverse interpretations and practices that have evolved over millennia. The term 'yoga' encompasses a wide range of philosophical, spiritual, and physical practices, making it challenging to encapsulate within a singular definition. This chapter aims to provide an understanding of the impacts of Brahminical yoga practices on happiness and enlightenment, integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. Furthermore, the intricate nature of Sanskrit lexicons introduces an additional challenge in the accurate translation and comprehension of essential concepts, often leading to divergent interpretations of yoga practices. The complexity is further compounded by numerous reinterpretations of foundational texts within contemporary landscapes, where Brahminical traditions are reimagined and adapted to align with modern spiritual and philosophical contexts. Given the absence of a universally accepted definition of yoga, this chapter seeks to discern its perceived spiritual benefits from a traditional standpoint while acknowledging these contemporary reinterpretations [1].

2. Traditional Brahminical practices of yoga

2.1 Introduction

Yoga, an ancient discipline deeply embedded in Indian spirituality, has undergone significant evolution over millennia, transforming into a multifaceted phenomenon with profound spiritual significance and complex socio-political dimensions. Traditionally, yoga is conceived as a rigorous practice aimed at achieving mokṣa (liberation) and profound mental well-being through the integration of mind, body, and spirit. This classical perspective is elaborately documented in foundational texts such as the Upaniṣads (Esoteric Teachings), Bhagavad Gītā (Song of the Lord), and the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali (Aphorisms of Yoga). These texts, however, have been subject to various interpretations over time, contributing to a rich tapestry of "Yoga philosophy," if such a term is academically recognised [2, 3].

2.2 Historical context and philosophical foundations

The academic discourse on yoga offers a nuanced understanding of the distinction between broader Indian philosophy and specific "Yoga philosophy," a term that is contested, as it encompasses a diverse range of interpretations and practices that have evolved over time. In contrast, King [3] refers to the term 'Indian philosophy' which encompasses a high standard of logic, epistemology, metaphysics, and linguistics, grounding various philosophical systems.

The examination of schools such as Mīmāṃsā (Inquiry), Sāṃkhya (Enumeration), Nyāya (Logic), and Vaiśeṣika (Particularity), and their defences against Buddhism, Jainism, and Advaita Vedānta, demonstrates the rigorous conceptual analysis and argumentative strategies employed by these schools [4]. Indian philosophy traditionally includes a vast array of thought systems derived from the Vedic texts, which form the foundation of Hindu philosophical traditions.

The four main Vedas—Ṛgveda (The Knowledge of Verses), Sāmaveda (The Knowledge of Melodies), Yajurveda (The Knowledge of Sacrificial Formulas), and Atharvaveda (The Knowledge of the Atharvans)—contain hymns, rituals, and spiritual teachings that have significantly influenced Indian philosophical thought [5]. Brahminism, possibly an early form of Hinduism, emphasises rituals and social duties, forming a significant part of the Vedic tradition. According to historical records, Brahminism focused on the proper performance of sacrifices and rituals, which were believed to maintain cosmic order and societal stability [6–9]. While the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali is not traditionally central to Brahminical practices, it has gained prominence in contemporary society, particularly through influential yoga teachers including Śrī K. Pattabhi Jois, a Brahmin and the founder of Aṣṭāṅga Vinyāsa Yoga. Jois's teachings have highlighted the *Yoga Sūtras* as a significant guide in modern yoga practice, despite its specialised rather than universal application within Brahminism. This broader accessibility and the extensive commentary on the text make it an essential reference in discussions of Yoga philosophy today.

2.3 Key texts in yoga philosophy

The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali is a foundational text in Yoga philosophy. It systematises yoga into a coherent philosophical framework and outlines the aṣṭāṅga yoga, or the eightfold path, which includes:

1. Yamas (ethical restraints): Principles such as non-violence (ahiṃsā) and truthfulness (satya) [2].

2. Niyamas (ethical observances): Practices like cleanliness (śauca) and contentment (santoṣa) [1].

3. Āsanas (physical postures): Designed to prepare the body for meditation [10].

4. Prāṇāyāma (breath control): Techniques to regulate the life force (prāṇa) [2].

5. Pratyāhāra (sensory withdrawal): Withdrawing the senses from external objects [1].

6. Dhāraṇā (concentration): Focused attention on a single point [2].

7. Dhyāna (meditation): Sustained concentration and mindfulness [10].

8. Samādhi (self-realisation or enlightenment): The ultimate goal of yoga, achieving spiritual liberation [2].

2.4 Contemporary commentaries

The *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali have been the subject of extensive scholarly and practical commentaries, reflecting a wide spectrum of interpretations. Prominent figures such as Iyengar and Feuerstein have contributed significantly to the discourse, offering perspectives that bridge both traditional and modern applications of yogic principles [2, 11]. The diversity in these interpretations underscores the dynamic and evolving character of "yoga philosophy," and suggests its adaptability to various cultural and temporal contexts. Additionally, this necessitates a critical examination of the contemporary manifestations of yoga [2]. It is crucial to recognise that while the *Yoga Sūtras* and the eightfold path (*aṣṭāṅga yoga*) form the cornerstone of classical yoga philosophy, they are not traditionally central to all Brahminical practices. Rather, these concepts have been selectively integrated into modern interpretations of yoga, which may align with or diverge from traditional Brahminical frameworks, illustrating the contextual nature of spiritual practices within the broader Hindu tradition [12].

2.5 Key practices and psychological benefits

2.5.1 Key practices in Brahminical yoga: the eight limbs (Aṣṭāṅga yoga)

Although not universally integral to Brahminical practices, the eight limbs (*aṣṭāṅga yoga*) as articulated in the *Yoga Sūtras* have been widely embraced and adapted across various modern yogic traditions. These limbs, encompassing practices such as *yama* (ethical restraints), *niyama* (observances), and *āsana* (postures), among others, provide a holistic framework that has been interpreted and applied within both traditional and contemporary contexts. As Basu [12] observes, the inherent flexibility of the *aṣṭāṅga yoga* system facilitates its incorporation into a diverse array of spiritual practices, thereby extending its relevance beyond its original philosophical boundaries. The subsequent sections will explore these practices and

their psychological benefits, situating them within the broader continuum of both Brahminical and non-Brahminical yoga traditions.

- Yama (Ethical Restraints): The *yamas* are ethical guidelines that include *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacarya* (continence), and *aparigraha* (non-greed). These principles form the moral foundation for the practice of yoga [2].

- Niyama (Personal Observances): The *niyamas* include *śauca* (cleanliness), *santoṣa* (contentment), *tapas* (austerity), *svādhyāya* (self-study), and *īśvarapraṇidhāna* (devotion to a higher power). These observances guide the yogi's internal discipline and spiritual practice [2].

- Āsanas (Physical Postures): *Āsanas* are the physical postures in yoga that help develop strength, flexibility, and balance. These postures are designed to align the body and mind, preparing the practitioner for meditation. The practice of *āsanas* has been shown to reduce stress, improve physical health, and enhance mental clarity [11]. Empirical studies support these benefits, demonstrating that regular practice of *āsanas* can lead to improved physical and psychological outcomes [13, 14]. This empirical evidence underscores the importance of *āsanas* in the holistic approach of yoga.

- Prāṇāyāma (Breath Control): *Prāṇāyāma* involves the regulation of breath through specific techniques and exercises. It is believed to control the life force (*prāṇa*) within the body, promoting physical and mental health. Studies have shown that *prāṇāyāma* can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve cardiovascular health, and enhance cognitive function [15]. Research by Brown and Gerbarg [13] found that *prāṇāyāma* practices can modulate the autonomic nervous system, enhancing stress resilience and emotional regulation. These findings highlight the profound impact of breath control on mental health.

- Pratyāhāra (Sensory Withdrawal): *Pratyāhāra* involves withdrawing the senses from external objects, turning the awareness inward. This practice helps prepare the mind for deeper stages of concentration and meditation by reducing distractions [2].

- Dhāraṇā (Concentration): *Dhāraṇā* is the practice of concentration, where the mind is focused on a single point or object. This concentration helps develop mental clarity and stability, essential for effective meditation [2].

- Dhyāna (Meditation): *Dhyāna*, or meditation, is the practice of focused concentration and mindfulness. It is considered the most advanced stage of yoga, leading to profound inner peace and self-awareness. Meditation has been extensively studied for its psychological benefits, including stress reduction, improved emotional regulation, and increased overall well-being [2]. Empirical studies have demonstrated that regular meditation practice can lead to structural changes in the brain, enhancing cognitive and emotional functioning [16]. These findings highlight the transformative potential of meditation in achieving psychological and spiritual well-being.

- Samādhi (Enlightenment): *Samādhi* is the ultimate goal of the eightfold path, where the practitioner achieves a state of self-realisation and unity with the divine. This state of enlightenment is characterised by profound peace, spiritual insight, and liberation from the cycle of rebirth [2].

2.6 Psychological benefits of Brahminical yoga

The psychological benefits of traditional Brahminical yoga practices are well-documented. These practices, deeply rooted in Brahminical traditions, have been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression while promoting emotional regulation and mental clarity. The holistic approach of Brahminical yoga, which integrates physical, mental, and spiritual elements, fosters a profound sense of inner peace and well-being [1, 13].

2.6.1 Empirical evidence

Empirical studies substantiate the psychological benefits of yoga, demonstrating significant improvements in mental health among practitioners. A study by Iyengar [10] found that the practice of yoga reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression in participants. Similarly, Saraswatī [14] reported that prāṇāyāma and meditation practices led to notable reductions in stress levels and improvements in overall psychological well-being. Additional research by Brown and Gerbarg [13] underscores the efficacy of yoga, particularly in enhancing emotional regulation and stress resilience. These studies collectively provide substantial evidence of the psychological benefits inherent in both traditional Brahminical yoga practices and their contemporary adaptations.

2.7 Conceptual framework and methodology

2.7.1 Conceptual framework

This chapter employs a qualitative systematic literature review to synthesise findings from diverse sources, offering a comprehensive understanding of yoga's psychological benefits. The conceptual framework integrates traditional and contemporary dimensions of yoga, examining its impact on mental health and spiritual well-being. Through this lens, the chapter explores how traditional practices of yoga have been validated by modern empirical studies [17].

2.7.2 Systematic literature review

According to Creswell [17], a systematic literature review involves a structured approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesising existing research to provide a detailed overview of a specific topic. This methodology is particularly effective for examining complex phenomena like yoga practices. The review process includes the following steps:

- Identification of Relevant Literature: Conducting a comprehensive search of academic databases, including PubMed, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, to identify peer-reviewed articles, books, and other scholarly sources.

- Screening and Selection: Screening titles and abstracts for relevance and selecting studies that meet predefined inclusion criteria.

- Data Extraction: Extracting key information and themes from the selected studies, focusing on the psychological benefits of yoga practices.

- Synthesis and Analysis: Synthesising the extracted data to identify common themes, patterns, and gaps in the literature, providing a nuanced analysis of the findings.

By systematically reviewing and synthesising existing empirical and theoretical literature, this chapter aims to offer insights into how traditional yoga practices impact mental well-being and enlightenment.

2.8 Data analysis, findings, and discussion

2.8.1 Analysis

This chapter employs a qualitative systematic literature review methodology to explore the psychological and socio-political dimensions of yoga practices. The review process included the following steps:

- Identification of Relevant Literature: A comprehensive search of academic databases including PubMed, JSTOR, and Google Scholar was conducted to identify peer-reviewed articles, books, and other scholarly sources focusing on the psychological benefits and socio-political impacts of yoga.

- Screening and Selection: Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance. Studies that specifically addressed the psychological benefits of yoga and its socio-political dimensions were selected based on predefined inclusion criteria, such as relevance to the topic, peer-reviewed status, and publication date within the last 20 years. Studies not meeting these criteria were excluded.

- Data Extraction: Key information and themes were extracted from the selected studies. This included data on the psychological benefits of yoga, such as stress reduction, emotional regulation, and overall well-being, as well as socio-political implications like the use of yoga in political rhetoric and cultural diplomacy.

- Synthesis and Analysis: The extracted data were synthesised to identify common themes and patterns. General observations from the literature indicate that traditional Brahminical yoga practices significantly enhance mental health and well-being. Additionally, the politicisation of yoga presents complex socio-political implications that warrant further exploration.

A total of 60 texts were reviewed, with 29 meeting the inclusion criteria. The findings highlight the substantial psychological benefits of traditional Brahminical yoga practices, including stress reduction, improved emotional regulation, and enhanced overall well-being. Although this chapter focuses primarily on these psychological benefits, it is important to note that the socio-political use of yoga, particularly its promotion as a cultural and political tool, has also been identified as an area of significant interest. This aspect, while not fully explored in the current discussion, merits additional analysis in future editions.

This qualitative exploration provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted roles of yoga in contemporary society. Future research could further quantify these findings to establish a more robust evidence base for the psychological impacts of yoga, while also addressing its socio-political dimensions.

2.8.2 Findings

Key findings from the literature review include:

- Potential Impact on Mental Health: Several studies suggest that yoga practices, particularly āsanas (postures), prāṇāyāma (breath control), and dhyāna (meditation), may significantly alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression [11, 15].

- Cognitive Function Enhancement: Regular engagement in yoga has been associated with improvements in cognitive functions and emotional regulation [14, 16].

- Promotion of Holistic Well-Being: Yoga appears to encourage a holistic approach to well-being by integrating physical, mental, and spiritual elements, potentially fostering a profound sense of inner peace and overall health [1, 2].

2.8.3 Discussion

The findings highlight the potential significance of traditional Brahminical yoga practices in fostering mental health and overall well-being. Rooted in ancient Vedic texts and millennia-old Brahminical traditions, these practices have arguably influenced the spiritual and philosophical landscape of Hinduism. While the empirical evidence suggests the efficacy of these practices, it is important to acknowledge that many of the studies reviewed have taken the stance of interpreting their findings in the context of Brahminical yoga traditions. However, it should be noted that these interpretations are not always directly correlated with the original Vedic practices but are rather inferred or adapted to align with contemporary understandings. This perspective underscores the continued relevance of Brahminical traditions in modern society. The systematic literature review offers a nuanced understanding of the psychological benefits of yoga, reinforcing its value as a holistic approach to both mental and spiritual health.

2.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, traditional Brahminical practices of yoga may offer profound psychological and spiritual benefits. Rooted in ancient philosophical texts, these practices emphasise the holistic integration of mind, body, and spirit. The historical and philosophical foundations of yoga highlight its importance in promoting mental well-being and spiritual growth. As empirical studies continue to validate the psychological benefits of these traditional practices, their relevance and significance in contemporary society are increasingly supported by scholarly evidence.

However, the extent to which these benefits are universally applicable remains open to further exploration, particularly in light of diverse interpretations and evolving contemporary applications of yoga practices. Furthermore, the socio-political dimensions of yoga's global expansion warrant careful consideration, as they add complexity to its role in modern society. This nuanced understanding, derived from

a contextualisation of scholarly perspectives, reinforces the ongoing need for critical examination and empirical validation of yoga's multifaceted roles and impacts in modern times.

In the pursuit of happiness and enlightenment—concepts that are inherently complex and multifaceted—traditional Brahminical practices continue to highlight the relevance of compassion, humility, and the profound insights embedded in ancient wisdom. While these practices offer significant value, it is important to acknowledge, as with all religious traditions, that they can also be subject to misuse or misinterpretation. As society continues to undergo rapid transformation, the contribution of these time-honoured traditions in informing contemporary practices and shaping future spiritual interpretations and paradigms remains invaluable.

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Chapter 10

The Neuroscience of Psychological Well-Being and Flourishing

Paul Mohapel

Abstract

This chapter highlights some of the current literature around how neuroscience informs the conditions necessary for psychological well-being and flourishing. Three conditions associated with flourishing are explored in context within the brain: (1) mindfulness, (2) compassion, and (3) creativity. Mindfulness is an essential component in establishing states of flourishing by modulating specific structural and functional networks of the brain that are associated with modulating our awareness to our thoughts, emotions, and mind wandering. Compassion is an extension of mindfulness, whereby brain regions involved in the reward network generate positive emotions and feelings of social connection that compel us to act on the behalf of others. For creativity, the neural evidence suggests that a balance of specific neural circuits allows us to toggle between focused concentration and mind-wandering states, which manifest qualities of openness, curiosity, and flexibility. Identifying these neural substrates helps elucidate the states of human well-being and offers strategies to facilitate flourishing.

Keywords: positive neuroscience, mindfulness, default-mode-network, compassion, creativity

1. Introduction

The burgeoning field of neuroscience, over the course of its nearly 50-year existence, has primarily focused on studying disease and dysfunctional states of the brain. However, a sub-field is emerging that is shedding light on the complex biological underpinnings of positive human states. Some have referred to this new research field as *positive neuroscience* [1], whereby the neural mechanisms supporting flourishing, psychological well-being, resilience, social relationships, peak performance and promotion of health are studied in the brain [2]. While research that could fit within the scope of positive neuroscience has been ongoing for decades, this line of research advanced considerably with the advent of non-invasive neuroimaging technologies, such as positron emission tomography (PET) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). This chapter will overview our current understanding of how the brain underlies conditions of well-being and flourishing. By understanding how the brain contributes to positive human states, it can not only bring validity to segment of science that has traditionally been viewed as "subjective", and thus not worthy

of study, but it can also provide direction and insights into how we might cultivate greater well-being.

2. Psychological well-being & flourishing defined

Psychological well-being has been historically been studied as two components: *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* states. Hedonia refers to experiencing immediate pleasure, enjoyment, comfort, and the absence of distress; while, eudaimonia points to the intentional pursuit of activities that bring meaning, growth, authenticity, excellence and purpose [3]. While both hedonic and eudaimonic states contribute to well-being, the general consensus in the literature is that hedonic states are predominantly associated with flourishing [2]. *Flourishing* moves beyond the confines of simple happiness or feeling good; it encompasses a wide range of positive psychological constructs including: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments [4]. Kenett and Chatterjee [5] suggest that studying both short-term hedonic experiences and long-term eudaimonic fulfillments are necessary to fully understand the neural states underlying flourishing.

Recently, a framework has been proposed to guide our understanding of the brain's role in psychological well-being and human flourishing. Richard Davidson and his group's framework comprises four dimensions to guide our exploration of flourishing in the brain: *awareness*, *connection*, *insight*, and *purpose* [6]. *Awareness* is defined as intentional concentration toward our internal and external environments, such as bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions. *Connection* refers to a subjective sense of shared humanity and kinship toward other people that promotes nurturing relationships and empathetic interactions. *Insight* reflects understanding on how one's emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and experiences are shaping one's subjective experience and one's sense of self. *Purpose* refers to clarity around what is personally meaningful and important in one's life, which ensures one aligns their actions with their personal values, intentions and meaningful goals [6]. These dimensions can help guide our actions to purse activities that result in increased well-being and flourishing.

Even though this volume is exploring the psychology of both happiness and enlightenment, this chapter will focus just on the happiness neuroscience literature since very little information currently exists on the brain's role in enlightenment. However, from Buddhist psychology, the constructs of *mindfulness*, *compassion* and *creativity* are identified as foundational components for enlightenment, and as such this chapter will explore the neuro-underpinnings of these three conditions.

3. Neuroanatomy of flourishing

Some of the earliest studies that first attempted to study the brain in regard to positive states, demonstrated differential activity across the *pre-frontal cortex* (PFC), which comprises the anterior most regions of the frontal lobes. The pre-frontal lobes are relatively recently evolved structures (in ancestors of *Homo sapiens*) and have long been known to be important in foresight, planning, and self-control. The PFC is also crucially implicated in emotion, mood, and temperament—suggesting a central role in modulating cognition with emotion [7].

Typically, we see that left brain hemisphere activity of the PFC is correlated with positive emotions; while right hemisphere activity of the PFC with negative emotions [8].

It is well established that the PFC is the most important area when it comes to executing action toward a achieving a goal (i.e., pleasant experiences), and withdrawing from an aversive situation that is undesirable (i.e., unpleasant experiences). The left PFC is more active when we are going after what we want, while activity in the right PFC increases when we want to avoid what is undesirable.

The PFC is further sub-divided by medial and lateral locations; whereby the *medial PFC* (mPFC) plays important roles in processing information about the self and others, emotion regulation, and emotional decision making; and the *lateral PFC* (lPFC) is extensively involved in memory, including working memory processes that support retention of information across short delays, and episodic long-term memory encoding and retrieval processes [9].

Other brain structures also contribute to our emotional experiences in flourishing. The *orbitofrontal cortex* (OFC), the most ventral part of the PFC, is involved in the experience of pleasure, happiness, and well-being. Located just above the orbits, this region receives input from the external senses (vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste), as well as input related to the internal states of the body. By comparing the properties of an external stimulus with the body's current internal state, the OFC computes the current emotional value of a stimulus at a particular moment, and tracks changes in the subjective pleasure or reward.

Another frontal lobe structure, the *anterior cingulate cortex* (ACC) is connected to many brain areas, including the PFC, which allows it to have an important integrative role in emotion, self-monitoring, and reward anticipation. The ACC is involved in assessing the value of responses to determine whether a stimulus is currently rewarding or punishing. The insula, another critical brain region, is an area of cortex tucked between the frontal and temporal lobes. It has a broader role in emotional processing, being primarily involved in monitoring the internal states of a body. Finally, two key sub-cortical structures also play a significant role in emotions: the *amygdala* is related to emotional generation and processing; and the *hippocampus* is related to memory for facts and personal events [10, 11].

Rather than viewing the brain as discreet anatomical structures, it is more useful to understand brain function as a product of complex circuits and systems – or *networks*. A network is composed both of specific brain regions and their functional connectivity across different brain regions. Three large-scale brain networks appear to be relevant to well-being: the *executive control network* (ECN), the *default mode network* (DMN), and the *salience network* (SN).

The ECN is a set of brain regions that activate during cognitive tasks that require consciously directed attention, working memory, relational integration, response inhibition, and task-switching [12]. The DMN is another set of brain regions that activate in the absence of most external tasks and is associated with mind-wandering and spontaneous thought [13]. The SN is a third set of brain regions involved in detecting, integrating, and altering relevant interoceptive, autonomic, and emotional information [14].

It appears that these networks cannot operate simultaneously in the same moment in time, such that in order for one of them to become active the others must be inactive. Therefore, we toggle in and out of these three various networks at any given moment, and the network that is active at any given moment reflects our current state of consciousness that we are experiencing. In most situations we are in the DMN, and switching out of this requires either conscious intentional effort (i.e., the ECN) or attention drawn to sensory and/or external cues (i.e., the SN) [15]. It will later be described how our well-being can be tied to which network states are activated.

4. Mindfulness in the brain: Cultivating awareness

The greatest wealth of knowledge in regard to ways to enhance well-being have come from the meditation and mindfulness research over the past two decades [16]. Mindfulness can be defined as a form of meta-awareness where one trains themselves to consciously pay attention to their current experience, such as the recognition that one is experiencing an emotion, a thought, or a sensory perception as it occurs in the present moment without judgment [17]. The general benefits of mindfulness training include reduced emotional reactiveness, sustained focus, and greater happiness and well-being [16]. Conversely, it is well established that the opposite state of being mindful, i.e., being distracted, is associated with many negative psychological outcomes, such as impaired cognitive abilities, increased stress and anxiety, elevated depression, and exacerbated attention deficit symptoms [18].

At a neural level, mindfulness interventions have been shown to induce changes in both the structure and function of the brain. Structural studies have linked mindfulness training with increased cortical thickness and density in the ACC and the insula, consistent with the idea that mindfulness engages brain regions that are key for body awareness, memory, and emotion [15, 19]. Interestingly, one study found that eudaimonic states correlate to greater gray matter volume of the right insula, a key component of the SN in orienting attention to the external world [20]. As a caution, it should be noted that the number of studies investigating these structurally alterations with meditation are few, and the direct significance to one's well-being of these alterations remains uncertain.

Mindfulness has also been associated with changes to the network connectivity between brain regions. For example, meditation practice has been linked to enhanced connectivity within and between hemispheres of the brain, which is consistent with the idea that mindfulness can improve the underlying neural connections that support attentional self-regulation processes [15]. Specifically, meditation is associated with changes in the connectivity between the DMN and SN [21] and between the ECN and SN [22], suggesting that interactions between these brain networks support the ability to attend to current experience without judgment or reactivity. Moreover, mindfulness scores have been shown to be correlated with coupling of the SN and DMN, which is mediated by the ECN [23]. Moreover, meditators have increased connectivity within DMN structures (e.g. dorsal mPFC). These findings suggest that meditation training leads to enhanced functional connectivity between the DMN regions and other networks, which underlies present-moment awareness.

Mindfulness training appears to also influence brain responses when engaged in tasks requiring the regulating and responding to emotional stimuli. Shi et al. [24] found that the strength of the functional connectivity between SN and DMN (i.e., when one is mindful and in the moment) is correlated with positive emotional states; whereas, when the ECN, DMN, and SN were decoupled (i.e., during distraction or mind-wandering) is associated with more negative emotional states. It appears that when one becomes aware of one's current emotional state the ECN becomes activated, which includes the lPFC dampening the generation of negative emotions in the amygdala [25]. This evidence seems consistent with the idea that mindfulness training modulates the neural mechanisms involved in emotional processing by dampening negative emotions. In support, attentional meditation studies have been shown to improve outcomes related to emotion regulation; including: lower levels of stress, decreased reactivity to pain, improvements in symptoms related to anxiety, depression, and increased positive emotions and overall psychological well-being [16].

In summary, the current evidence on mindfulness training and the brain suggests that mindfulness interventions can enhance well-being by modulating the structural and functional networks of the brain. These structures and networks appear to be modulating our attention as well as our emotional regulation, suggesting that in order to cultivate flourishing we need to develop our skills in sustaining concentration and managing strong emotions.

5. Compassion in the brain: Cultivating connection

The capacity for empathy and compassion underlies caring relationships and positive social interactions, essential elements in scientific conceptions of well-being and healthy brain functioning [26]. Compassion represents the concern for others' welfare, and often contains the element of the willingness to bear witness to the suffering of others [27]. Kanov et al. [28] assert that compassion consists of three elements: *noticing*, *feeling*, and *responding.*

'Noticing' involves being consciously aware of a person's suffering by cognitively recognizing this suffering. 'Feeling' is responding emotionally to that suffering by experiencing 'empathic concern' through adopting the person's perspective and feeling along with them. Finally, 'responding' involves having a desire to act to alleviate the person's suffering. This definition aligns with Buddhist conceptualizations, where compassion requires cognitive, affective and behavioral facets [27]. Studies show that people with higher levels of empathic concern also experience higher levels of well-being [29]. Similarly, high levels of compassionate are associated with increased self-esteem, more constructive approaches to interpersonal problems, and more positive social emotions and happiness [30]; and conversely with reduced anxiety, depression, distress, and negative emotions [31].

Although there is no single compassion or empathy center in the brain, in order to understand how compassion functions we first need to understand how the brain establishes *theory of mind,* i.e., how the mind attempts to understands the beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions, and thoughts of other individuals. Theory of mind primarily is driven by the mPFC, along with other temporal lobe structures that process socio-emotional information [32]. When we make inferences about other people, the degree of activation of the mPFC reflects the degree of social closeness and connection we feel to that person.

When we experience empathy and compassion, the mPFC interacts with particular brain structures, including the anterior portions for the insula and ACC, which are implicated in processing experiences of pain, fear, happiness, and disgust [33]. It's been suggested that together these structures represent a type of empathy 'resonance circuit' that underlies the conditions for compassion [34]. For example, it has found that insula, ACC, and mPFC are activated during feelings of compassion toward victims judged to be innocent, rather than responsible for their own fate. However, when victims are perceived responsible for their own misfortune, these same brain regions were deactivated [35].

A distinction has been shown in the brain between experiences of empathy versus compassion. Empathy can lead to feelings of distress with corresponding activity in regions of the brain's pain network, whereas compassion does not activate this network. Rather than activate regions of distress, compassion uniquely demonstrates activity in regions of the reward network, such as the medial OFC and ventral striatum, which generate positive emotions and feelings of social connection [36].

These differences in the neural correlates between empathy and compassion may help explain why excessive empathy can lead to 'empathy burnout'; however, the opposite is observed with compassion training whereby workplace burnout is alleviated [37].

It appears that compassion can be trained, and with practice various neural structures and networks are enhanced. Most compassion practices involve mindfulness-based techniques, such 'loving-kindness' meditation. Loving-kindness meditation involves repeating 'generous' phrases of care toward oneself and others, and this practice has been shown to activate the anterior insula and dorsal ACC [38]. Meditators have also shown significantly greater gray matter volume in the right angular and posterior parahippocampal gyri, which is argued to have a specific role in theory of mind and affective regulation associated with empathic response, anxiety and mood [39]. This kind of compassion training results in decreased depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, as well as increased positive emotions toward one-self and others [40].

Importantly, compassion training has been shown to enhance positive emotions in response to suffering in others, which corresponded with increased activity in reward circuits in the ventral striatum and medial OFC, as well as the ECN structures of the ventral mPFC, ventral ACC, and insula [41]. This suggests that bringing mindful attention (though ECN activation) to one's or other's suffering is a critical component to compassion that differentiates it from just having an empathetic response. This awareness to suffering seems to paradoxically increases one's positive state of mind. This is further supported by the observation that, compared with cognitive reappraisal strategies, compassion practice increases positive emotions in response to others' distress [41].

Moreover, the experience of greater positive emotions in compassion trainees tends to predict the likelihood of them taking altruistic actions toward those that are suffering. For example, people trained in compassion techniques show greater altruistic giving than those trained in cognitive reappraisal techniques, which is reflected by differential activation of the dorsal lPFC and the nucleus accumbens. Furthermore, the strength of connectivity between these brain structures predicts the magnitude of altruistic behavior in compassion trainees [42]. This helps to explain why compassion training may be preventive for burnout, as discussed above.

In summary, neural evidence suggests that training in practices like compassion meditation enhance our ability to connect with others emotionally, which increases altruistic behavior. The degree of this altruistic behavior is related to degree of connectivity between the PFC, a core driver of the ECN, and ventral striatum, which is involved in regulating positive affect. It suggests that the transition from empathy to compassion depends on one's ability to be attend to suffering and then to act on those feelings to alleviate the suffering, which thereby enhances our own well-being.

6. Creativity in the brain: Cultivating curiosity

Compared with the research reported with mindfulness and compassion, our neuroscientic understanding of how the human brain underlies creativity is only beginning to be realized. A unanimous definition of creativity remains elusive; however, most agree that creativity involves generating something that is original, novel and useful [43]. Most research attempts to understand the overarching cognitive processes of creative thought. The most widely recognized view on creative thought sees it as a process of *divergent thinking* following by *convergent thinking*. Divergent thinking

refers to the ability to generate many unique responses to an open-ended prompt (i.e. 'brain storming'), while convergent thinking is the ability to determine the single "correct" answer to a problem (i.e., decision-making) [43]. We know that experiencing a state of creativity plays an important role in flourishing and in our positive engagement with the world [44].

Neuroscience studies of creativity have examined the link between cognitive processes, such as executive functions (working memory, fluid intelligence, task switching), attention, inhibition, as well as mindsets such as curiosity and an openness to new experiences [45, 46]. Recently, the construct of curiosity has been situated as an important component of creativity, particularly with divergent thinking. Curiosity can be defined as a recognition of a gap in knowledge and the intrinsic desire to close that gap through exploration and information seeking [47]. Brain activity studies of curiosity demonstrate that structures involved in the anticipation of rewards are activated, including the OFC. The OFC appears to determine the merits of the situation so it can guide choice through what is deemed rewarding [46], suggesting that being curious and creative can make us feel good.

Initial brain studies report functional brain connectivity patterns that predict differences in people's creative ability, such as changes in white matter connectivity patterns that are often associated with greater brain plasticity for processing information [48]. With respect to brain network activation, it has been shown that the ECN, DMN, and SN couple together at different stages of the creative process. Early stages are characterized by tighter coupling between the DMN and SN, while later stages by tighter coupling between the ECN and DMN [45]. The initial coupling of the DMN and SN correlates with divergent thinking, while the ECN and DMN correlates with convergent thinking [43]. It is known that the tighter coupling between the ECN and DMN correlates with better performance in creativity tasks [45].

In support of this, a recent study demonstrated how *unintentional* mind wandering in the DMN requires involvement of PFC of the ECN [49]. These brain studies indicate how creativity may require a heightened ability to shift back and forth between spontaneous and free, with evaluative and controlled, thoughts in order to surface ideas that are novel and that also make sense. In other words, creativity is not simply the process of thinking directly about the issue at hand but also the ability to 'let go of thinking', when appropriate, in order to generate solutions.

As it has been outlined above, creativity and curiosity include *openness to experience* and *cognitive flexibility*, both associated with well-being and thriving and flourishing [6]. A such, these constructs align seamlessly with the foundational tenets of mindfulness, where people are open to novelty with a curious and flexible attitude both toward their internal and external experiences. If we look at the opposite, i.e., mindlessness, this state is characterized as living by conditioned patterns with no space for curiosity and discomfort with unpredictability, which results in inflexible thinking [50]. Not surprisingly, mindfulness training has been shown to increase creativity by reducing cognitive biases and decrease reliance on inappropriate heuristics [51], enhance concentration, and stimulate curiosity [16].

Correspondingly, meditation leads to enduring changes in creative processing of the brain. For example, expert meditators are more able to readily detach from internal or external stimuli as measured by reduced activity in the DMN [52], which allows them to ruminate less and toggle more seamless between divergent and convergent thinking states. Moreover, the inability to reduce DMN activity has been associated with increases in stress and psychopathology [53], again reinforcing the notion that creativity bolsters well-being.

In summary, the neural evidence suggests that creativity in the brain requires optimal cognitive and affective balance; whereby, it is the ability to experience without imposing our own ideas and assumptions (i.e., without distortions) and to be free from overwhelming emotional states. This balance rests on our ability to toggle between focused concentration and mind-wandering, which depends on qualities of openness, curiosity, and flexibility—the exact attributes that are enhanced with mindfulness-based training.

7. Conclusions

Our understanding on how the brain supports positive human states is still in its infancy. However, we have already gained some valuable insights around some of the principal brain regions and networks that seem critical to our ability to flourish. The science, thus far, has generated encouraging results that is helpful in validating what we have observed in the positive psychological literature, as well as pointing the way to better understanding of the conditions required for further cultivation of human flourishing. Future research needs to focus on understanding how we might use the brain to better quantitatively measure well-being and discover better interventions to support human development and more advanced states like enlightenment. With the various psychological disciplines working together, including positive neuroscience, we are on the cusp of capturing and harnessing the extraordinary potential of human strengths, virtues and living a great life. Moreover, perhaps positive neuroscience can help extend the conversation to the more untouchable nondual experiences of well-being.

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Whilst happiness usually comes from how we think and feel about our life (event-based well-being), enlightenment is an internal experience not sourced from this process (inner well-being). In this volume, we look from a scientific point of view at the different approaches to enlightenment and the practices that trigger it. This includes classical Western approaches to contemplation and aesthetics, Eastern Buddhist notions of satori, modern predictors of self-transcendent experiences, assessments of current practitioners and their characteristics, Christian notions of mysticism, Hindu yoga practices, the neuroscientific correlates of flourishing, and the psychological stages in the journey to enlightenment. We explore the evidence of these states, traits and experiences, the concepts underpinning them, and the affect, cognition and behaviour they transform.

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