The Phenomenology of Insentience: Buddhist Meditation and Sensual Experience

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Some years back I published a series of articles in which I argued that scholars of religion were misguided in thinking that the proper objects of their study are the experiences that take place in the minds of religious adherents. The argument is not simply that we have no access to such experiences, although this is patently true. (We study plenty of things that are available to us only indirectly, through inference and induction.) The issue is more that the underlying philosophical presuppositions—the opposition between inner subjective experience and the outer physical world—is problematic on its face and incompatible with the philosophical outlooks of many of the traditions we study. Moreover, the emphasis on experience often turns out to be in the service of a larger ideological agenda. The position renders subjective experience an ostensible and determinate object whose salient or intrinsic characteristic its precisely its non-objective character. And this gives rise to mischief. (One example of this mischief is the perennialist claim that two very different descriptive accounts actually reference one and the same subjective event.)

The phenomenology of religion was always a bit of a slight of hand; indeed, the claim by scholars of religion to be doing some sort phenomenology is dubious at best. When *philosophers* talk about phenomenology, whether they claim allegiance to Husserl or Heidegger or Sartre, they mean that their starting point is what is given to us in the immediacy of experience—philosophical phenomenology assumes a first-person point of view. The methodological impulse is skepticism; it is a return to what is directly available or observable in an attempt to discern the constitutive structures of consciousness while doing...
an end-run around seemingly intractable metaphysical quandaries. The époché, in the Husserlian sense, refers to the strategic bracketing of questions pertaining to the ontological status of objects that appear to consciousness. Phenomenology borrowed Cartesian modes of introspection and skepticism, but jettisoned some of the metaphysical baggage—the dualistic substance ontology. Phenomenology positioned itself as an alternative to naturalistic philosophies that take as a given the external world, as well as to idealist philosophies that deny it.

Yet when scholars of religion take up the term “phenomenology,” they use it to refer to the experiences and life-worlds of others, and the époché or bracketing now means refraining from judgement on someone else’s metaphysical assumptions or truth claims. In short, they are working at cross purposes with the Husserlian project, as they elide the irreducible gap between third-person and first-person accounts. Whereas philosophical phenomenology presumes an anthropological unity of human life-worlds, phenomenology of religion tends to be interested in alterity.

I do not want to rehearse my critique of the rhetoric of experience or the phenomenology of religions here. But I did approach this workshop as an opportunity to pursue a nagging question: how are we to handle religious traditions whose project is avowedly phenomenological, i.e., traditions that not only speak in the first person (as many do), but who seem to be actively engaged in a kind of phenomenological introspection. Shouldn’t their accounts and analyses be treated seriously, just as we treat seriously the analyses of Hegel, or Husserl, or Heidegger. Of course, this doesn’t mean taking their statements at face value. But we cannot simply reject out of hand their claim to be doing something akin to phenomenological description in an anthropological mode.

I have in mind the modern Theravāda vipassanā movement, particularly the so called “Burmese method” that spread to Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India, and has now spread around the world. In the past I discounted this tradition first because their reading of canonical materials seemed suspiciously modern and idiosyncratic, and second because deep controversies that run within this tradition belie their claim to any sort of phenomenological
rigor. Be that as it may, there is little doubt that they sincerely think they are doing something akin to what we might call an introspective analyses of consciousness.

The methodological focus of this tradition is sati—bringing to mind or mindfulness—nowadays understood as bare attention to what is immediate present in consciousness. This notion of bare awareness—attending to the present—has arguably become the foundation of Buddhist modernism, a global movement that sees meditation and living in the present as the essential teaching of Buddhism. This understanding has crossed sectarian and cultural boundaries; it plays a central role in the self-presentations of the Theravāda, Chan and Zen, and virtually all Tibetan traditions that are promulgated in the West, and is touted by media stars such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nat Hanh. (It is even being picked up by the Buddhist Churches of America, who, as Shin Pure Land Buddhists, are supposed to reject anything that smacks of meditative practice.)

I thought a second look at this tradition would be appropriate for this conference, as their meditation techniques are specifically designed to draw one’s attention to the vivid immediacy of sensual experience.

I confess that my decision to return to the vipassanā movement was also motivated by the 2004 film, “I Heart Huckabees,” an “existential comedy” written and directed by David Russell, and inspired in part by Russell’s Buddhist practice. At one point in the film the lead character, Jason, ends up studying with a Frenchwoman, a nihilist with a rift on emptiness, who teaches that suffering is inevitable, that there is no avoiding human drama, that life is essentially meaningless and absurd. For temporary relief from the anomie of human existence, she has her students whack each other on the head with a large rubber ball so as to stun their inner dialogue into silence. This results in a state of “pure being” which frees them, at least temporarily, from their daily troubles and concerns. In the movie this becomes known as the “ball thing.” Russell is playing with Buddhist meditation, with the notion of pure presence, and with the rhetoric of emptiness. And yet in its comic simplicity, it seemed to raise essential questions about the modernist Buddhist penchant for “being here now.”
The global mindfulness movement utilizes the venerable Buddhist rhetoric of *vipassanā* and *samatha*—insight and concentration. For those in the room who are not specialists in Buddhism, allow me to give a quick overview of how these terms are understood. *Vipassanā* or insight, according to its modern proponents, is garnered through focused attention to what immediately appears to consciousness, with the aim of becoming fully and lucidly present in the moment to moment flow of perceptions, thoughts, feelings. In the Mahasi Sayadaw method, which is the most influential form of this practice, you first focus awareness on your breathing, watching the belly rise and fall with each breath. Whenever your attention wanders, as it invariably does, you bring it back to the rise and fall of the belly.

After gaining some facility in this, you are told that, should your attention wander to bodily sensations, stay with the sensations as long as you can remain “mindful” of them—by which they mean remaining fully aware of the sensations without either resisting or taking pleasure in them. Should your attention wander elsewhere, bring it back to the breath. As you become more adept you are told that should your attention wander to a sound, then attend to it as pure acoustical sensation; i.e., without conceptualizing it as a “passing car,” “bird,” “cough,” or what have you. Eventually the technique is extended to the remaining sense fields: smells, tastes, sights, and even thoughts. As thoughts come and go in the mind, one attends not to the content of the thought, but only to the immediate awareness of “thinking.” Eventually, the mind is allowed to move where it will; any sensation, thought, or emotion can be the focus of one’s immediate and lucid awareness.

This sustained attention to whatever arises in the perceptual field is intended to elicit a profound understanding of the Buddhist teachings of suffering, impermanence, non-self, codependent origination, and so on. Specifically, as one gains insight into the interdependence of the mind and its objects, and the transitory and afflicted nature of conscious experience, craving to worldly things and the sense of being or having a discrete ego fall away. *Vipassanā*, say its modern exponents, is the very heart of the Buddhist path.

*Vipassanā* exists in some tension with *samatha* or concentration. Concentration is
understood as calm, focused, and unvarying attention to a single object that eventually gives rise to *jhāna* or absorption into the object. Most contemporary Theravāda masters use the breath as an initial meditation object; students focus either on the rise and fall of the belly, or the sensation of the breath passing in and out at the tip of the nose. The goal is not to grasp at the physical sensation of breathing, so much as to let go of any other object that arises in the perceptual field. Focussed concentration is acquired, in other words, not by seizing at a mental object, but rather through returning to the object as soon as one becomes aware that attention has wandered. In the end, the goal is for the mind to become absorbed wholly into the object such that both self and other fall away. This technique is supposed to lead to increasingly rarefied states of trance, with names like the “realm of absolute nothingness,” and the “realm of neither cognition nor non-cognition,” and eventually culminates in a state called *nīrodha-samāpatti* in which all sentient experience and cognition has ceased.

In sum, whereas *vipassanā* practices are intended to heighten and expand sensual awareness so as to expose the very processes of cognition and world construction, *samatha* is aimed at narrowing the focus, at developing calm, and at eventually halting the process of cognition altogether.

There is a vast literature, and not a few scholarly controversies, pertaining to the relationship between insight and concentration. It is well known that the two categories map onto two standard canonical models of the Buddha’s enlightenment. In what is believed to be the earlier account, the pivotal moment is the result of a series of four *jhānas*—absorptions or trances—at the end of which the Buddha realizes the four noble truths and is liberated from rebirth. In this account, with its focus on yogic trance, there is continuity with earlier pre-Buddhist ascetic practices.

In the later account, the Buddha’s enlightenment is the result of something more akin to introspective analysis, as it focuses on the discernment of the links of the chain of codependent origination. Schmithausen argues that this textual tradition is later subsumed or superseded by one that emphasizes the emptiness of the self as the constitutive event of
the Buddha’s nirvāṇa. In both cases, the impetus for enlightenment seems to be a kind of analytical insight.

Why should we have two differing canonical accounts of this key moment in the Buddha’s biography? Most scholars agree that the discord reflects, albeit obliquely, the historical context and development of early Buddhism. Scholars note that techniques of focused awareness leading to trance were part of the śramanīc religious background; the Buddha himself is said to have mastered such techniques from his teachers, Āḷāra Kālāma (Sk. Ārāḍa Kālāma) who specialized the state of “absolute nothingness,” and Uddaka Rāmaputta (Sk. Udraka Rāmaputra) from whom the Buddha learned the state of “neither cognition nor non-cognition.” Thus the jbānic enlightenment narrative and the associated presence of yogic trance practices in the later tradition is believed to reflect the enduring legacy of pre-Buddhist śramanīc techniques. The later enlightenment narrative, that highlights introspective analysis of dependent origination or non-self, foregrounds the uniquely Buddhist analytic understanding of the self.

While there is a general consensus on the above, there is disagreement about the historical details. Some scholars hold that the path of concentration leading to trance was part and parcel of early Buddhism, but was subordinated to insight, while others, notably Johannes Bronkhorst, suspect that samatha techniques were originally rejected by the Buddha but crept back in later on. Be that as it may, it is clear that later tradition always reserved a place for concentration exercises alongside insight. This balancing act was not always easy, however, as is evident in the exegetical gymnastics around the state of nirodha and its relationship to nirvāṇa. You will recall that nirodha or extinction refers to a state in which consciousness has ceased altogether; it is the culmination of the path of trance. Experientially, nirodha should be identical to nirvāṇa, yet the tradition goes to considerable lengths to differentiate the two; only nirvāṇa brings an end to rebirth. What is curious is that, given the philosophical stance of the tradition—i.e., the central doctrine of the co-arising of mind and object—it is not clear how two states that are phenomenologically identical can have two distinct soteriological outcomes.
The tension between concentration and insight—between *samatha* and *vipassanā*—is structurally related to a central Buddhist conundrum, namely, whether the root of karma and *samsāra* is craving or ignorance. Exegetes map concentration and insight onto craving and ignorance respectively; concentration is touted as the antidote for craving, and insight the antidote for ignorance. I would note that, in a related vein, Buddhaghosa sees *samatha* as the antidote for extreme self-mortification, while insight is the antidote for hedonism.

There is a vast secondary literature on the doctrinal, historical, ethical significance of the concentration-insight distinction; Johannes Bronkhorst, Lance Cousins, Paul Griffiths, Lambert Schmithausen, and Tilmann Vetter, to mention only a few, have all weighted in on the issue. [To summarize a considerable body of literature, Buddhist exegetes have taken three approaches to the issue.

The first approach is to see insight and concentration as complementary: both are necessary but neither is sufficient. Trance unaccompanied by insight is without soteriological value, while insight cannot be fully developed without some command of concentration.

The second approach is to insist that insight is superior in every respect to concentration. Concentration may be helpful, depending on the practitioner, but not necessary.

The third approach views both concentration and insight as legitimate but distinct paths; both, done properly, lead to liberation.

The modern *vipassanā* tradition vigorously rejects position 3, and there is a sometimes virulent debate among those who hold to 1 and 2. Specifically, there is argument over the minimum level of concentration required (most agree that it is *upacāra samādhi* or access concentration, there is confusion over the interpretation of this stage), and whether concentration can be developed in tandem with insight.)

To my mind, the problem with much of the secondary work in the area, whether based on textual sources or field work, is that scholars end up reaffirming the traditional view that concentration and insight form a coherent and complementary pairing; they
accept the claim that the categories emerged from, and point toward, a kind of phenomenological description. But I am not so sure.

So let’s return to the modern Theravāda vipassanā tradition, whose claim to be engaged in a phenomenology of inner states is, perhaps, most compelling. As we have seen, their goal is a lucid, detached, and protracted awareness of the flow of sensations, thoughts, feelings as they arise in the perceptual field.

Now, people can and do argue over the soteriological, ethical, and practical value of such a practice. And yet many of us, I would venture to say, even those of us with no experience in Buddhist meditation, have a sense of what they are talking about. Indeed, this is what so many find compelling about “new age Buddhism,” and what renders it an apparent repudiation of my critique of the rhetoric of experience. We have all had moments of mental repose where the sensual world around us seems more alive—colors, feelings, sounds more vivid—where there is a sense of at-oneness with the world, and where the subject seems to coalesce into the object. This is the subject of aesthetic writings and literary works as well; think of T. S. Eliot’s “still point in the turning world” (although without the Vedantist ontology). Vipassanā—understood as the cultivation of “bare attention”—would appear to nurture and exploit this not entirely unfamiliar or even exceptional state, using it as the foundation of a phenomenological introspection of mind-body processes in the interest of cultivating detachment, selflessness, and so on.

But not so fast.

In the scholarly debates over the nature of mystical and religious experience, the “constructivists” seem to have carried the day. Constructivists are those who insist that the experiences of religious practitioners and mystics are induced, shaped, and interpreted through their cultural expectations. Do we want to say that “bare attention” is constructed? Certainly, it can be induced by a set of exercises, and its significance and cognitive ramifications are shaped by tradition and expectation. Yet what makes “bare awareness” compelling as the subject of phenomenological inquiry is precisely the sense that it is not culturally constructed.
It is a “universal”? Well, as soon as we try to gain some descriptive or analytic purchase on the nature of this state, we run into trouble. We have seen that, even in early canonical accounts, there is a problem parsing *vipassanā* and *samatha*—two states that *should* each have distinct phenomenal attributes. This venerable quandary still plagues the contemporary Buddhist tradition; according to modern exponents, both *vipassanā* and *samatha* cultivate attention on a single object in order to bring the mind to rest in the moment. The difference is that with *samatha* the object remains the same from moment to moment, while in *vipassanā* the object is whatever happens to appear within one’s perceptual field. (In Theravāda Abhidhamma, *sati* is always necessarily accompanied by *samatha.*) And yet prolonged *samatha* is described as resulting in trance, absorption, and ultimately in the cessation of consciousness, whereas *vipassanā* is said to bring about an acute (and sometimes excruciating) awareness of the moment to moment flow of phenomena. The conceit is that we can distinguish, on empirical grounds, blank mind, the absence of cognition, from full mindfulness, in which awareness—the ego—is absorbed in the moment-to-moment flow of percepts. In truth, even the leading meditation masters in Southeast Asia today can’t seem to do this in a consistent or convincing manner. They all accuse their rivals of mistaking *jhānic* trances, which have little soteriological value, for stages on the path to liberation.

Again, this is not a new issue in Buddhism. I mentioned the attention devoted to parsing *nirodha* and nirvāṇa, a conceptual problem that arose, I argue, from the inability to distinguish the phenomenological features that distinguish these two states. And last year at Yale I spoke about a medieval East Asian Buddhist debate that extended over centuries over the whether sentient objects can attain enlightenment, a debate that stems again from the problem in distinguishing liberation—the extinction of nirvāṇa—from simple sentience. Some eminent prelates embraced the buddhahood of the sentient as a kind of theopanism that renders the entire universe the body of the *dbarmakāya* Buddha. This position is akin to, and was perhaps inspired by, Tantric theologies that foreground sensory experience in their ritual regimes. Others found the buddha-nature of the sentient position utterly untenable, as it rendered moral responsibility a fiction and undermined the need for
religious discipline and meditative practice. In other words, they rejected the notion that becoming a non-self can be equated with insentience. That the debate was so animated and prolonged suggests the depth of the problem.

So I end where I began, convinced that the problem is with the underlying epistemology associated with the rhetoric of experience, with what Richard Rorty has called this the “mirror of nature” and “glassy essence” picture of mind, and Daniel Dennett has called the “Cartesian theater.” That we can’t, at the end of the day, distinguish being senseless from being here now, suggests that “being whacked” (an image that delightfully encompasses both), should not be construed as a determinative and ostensible something in the world.