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### ► To cite this version:

Claire Petitmengin, Martijn van Beek, Michel Bitbol, Jean-Michel Nissou, Andreas Roepstorff. What is it like to meditate? Methods and issues of a micro-phenomenological description of meditative experience. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2017, 24 (5-6), pp.170 - 198. hal-01653495

**HAL Id: hal-01653495**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01653495>**

Submitted on 1 Dec 2017

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## What is it like to meditate?

### Methods and issues of a microphenomenological description of meditative experience<sup>1</sup>

Claire Petitmengin, Martijn van Beek, Michel Bitbol, Jean-Michel Nissou, Andreas Roepstorff

#### Abstract

In our society where interest in Buddhist meditation is expanding enormously, numerous scientific studies are now conducted on the neurophysiological *effects* of meditation practice and on the neural *correlates* of meditative states. However, very few studies have been conducted on the *experience* associated with contemplative practice: what it is like to meditate – from instant to instant, at different stages of the practice – remains almost invisible in contemporary contemplative science. New concrete "micro-phenomenological" interview methods have recently been designed to help us become aware of our lived experience and describe it with rigor and precision. The present article presents the results of a pilot project aiming at applying these methods to the description of meditative experience.

The first part of the article describes these methods and the adjustments made to them in order to investigate meditative experience. The second part provides micro-phenomenological descriptions of two processes of which meditation practice enables the practitioner to become aware: a) the twofold process of loss of contact with the current situation and generation of virtual ones in "mind-wandering" episodes, and the process of regaining and maintaining contact with the present situation induced by meditation practice; b) the premises of the emergence of a thought. The third part of the article highlights the interest of such descriptions for meditation practitioners and meditation teachers, defines the status of these results and outlines the research directions they open.

#### Introduction

In our society where interest in Buddhist meditation is expanding enormously, notably in the secularized form of "mindfulness" methods, numerous scientific studies are now conducted on the neurophysiological *effects* of meditation practice (e.g. Lazar *et al.*, 2006; Farb *et al.*, 2007; Slagter *et al.*, 2007; Grossman *et al.*, 2007; Grant *et al.*, 2010; Holzel *et al.*, 2011; Desbordes *et al.*, 2012; Jensen *et al.*, 2012; Allen *et al.*, 2012) and on the neural *correlates* of meditative states (e.g. Brefczynski-Lewis *et al.* 2007; Brewer *et al.*, 2011; Lutz *et al.*, 2008; Lutz *et al.*, 2013; van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2012; Mrazek *et al.*, 2013; Reiner *et al.*, 2013; Zanesco *et al.*, 2013), and provide important results. For example, it has been shown that the practice of meditation might reduce stress and depressive relapse rate (Teasdale *et al.*, 2000; Segal *et al.*, 2002). However, very few studies have been conducted on the lived *experience* associated with contemplative practice: what it is like to meditate – from instant to instant, at different stages of a practice – remains almost invisible in contemporary contemplative science (e.g. Khalsa *et al.*, 2008; Fox *et al.*, 2012; Ataria, 2014, 2015). At most, some coarse characterizations of classes of meditative experiences are given an ancillary status in neurophenomenological studies of meditation (Lutz *et al.*, 2012). Even the recent innovative study which proposes a matrix of phenomenological categories as a heuristic tool to generate hypotheses about the neural mechanisms of meditation practices (Lutz *et al.*, 2015), derives these categories from the analysis of texts (such as meditation manuals), not from a phenomenological description of these practices.

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<sup>1</sup> This "Phenopilot" project, as it is called, was supported by a grant from the Mind and Life Institute.

This vacuum may be explained by the naive or currently widespread assumption that since meditative experience - as any experience - is produced by brain activity, the knowledge of its neural correlates is enough to understand what is at stake in meditation, and to explain its effects. It can also be due to the mistrust against introspection in Western science which, ever since Auguste Comte claimed that it is impossible to walk in the street while watching oneself from the balcony, has been built on its exclusion. Moreover, in contemplative traditions, it is not common and usually discouraged to talk about one's experience, except with one's teacher. For example, a participant who had been practicing in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism for 45 years, told us after the second interview: "This is very unusual for me. I never had the opportunity to share my experiences so accurately with anyone, even with my teachers, even with my wife."

Our study emerged from the hypothesis that the lack of knowledge about meditative experience hampers the understanding of both the effects of practice and its correlates: its effects, because only a fine-grained description of the experience of the subject would enable us to understand the processes mobilized during meditation, that may help to explain such effects (Philippot & Segal, 2009); its correlates, because the more the neuroimaging techniques are refined, the finer the level of granularity of description of the corresponding experience needs to be, to enable the cognitive neuroscientist to make sense of the brain activity he measures (Lachaux, 2011). Such a description is now made possible by the recent development of new concrete "micro-phenomenological" methods enabling us to become aware of our lived experience and describe it with rigor and precision.

This article outlines the results of a pilot project aimed at applying these methods to the description of meditative experience. The first part of the article describes the methods and the adjustments made to them in order to investigate meditative experience, as well as the specific objectives of the study. The second part provides micro-phenomenological descriptions of two processes of which meditation practice enables a practitioner to become aware: a) the twofold process of loss of contact with the current situation and generation of virtual ones in "mind-wandering" episodes, and the process of regaining and maintaining contact with the present situation induced by meditation practice; b) the premises of the emergence of a thought. The third part of the article highlights the interest of such descriptions for meditation practitioners and meditation teachers, defines the status of these results and outlines the research directions they open.

## **Part 1. Methodology and objectives**

### **Microphenomenology**

Microphenomenology is a method of descriptive phenomenology inspired by the "Explicitation interview" initially developed by Pierre Vermersch to help persons engaged in professional practices to become aware of the implicit part of their mental or physical actions (Vermersch, 1994/2014, 2009, 2012). This interview method was then adapted to the domain of cognitive science research for describing experiences associated with any kind of cognitive process, including manifestly embodied processes such as perception or emotion (Petitmengin 2006), and complemented by a method for analyzing verbal reports and detecting regularities in the form of generic structures (Petitmengin, 1999; Petitmengin *et al.*, submitted), and methods of validation of these results (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009; Petitmengin *et al.*, 2013; Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013, 2016). The specificity of this method is to enable the researcher to collect

descriptions of a *high level of reliability* and a *fine degree of granularity* of the *microdynamics* of *singular* experiences, in its *pre-reflective* dimension.

The method starts from the acknowledgment that a large part of our experience is unrecognized, remains unnoticed, or "pre-reflective" in the phenomenological language. The main reason for this lack of awareness is that our attention is almost completely absorbed in the content, the "what" of our activity, to the detriment of this activity itself, the "how". We are like blind persons exploring objects with the tip of their stick, whose attention is entirely directed toward the object, and who ignore the contact and variations of pressure of the stick in the palm of their hands. Like blind persons, we use this information in action, but usually it remains largely unnoticed. The purpose of a micro-phenomenological interview is to help subjects redirect their attention from the content of the experience towards the mode and dynamics of appearance of this content, and to describe it precisely. This redirection is very similar to the gesture of phenomenological reduction as described by Edmund Husserl: withdrawing from our exclusive focusing on objects, and broadening our attentional gaze (Bitbol, 2014) so as to reveal and describe the underlying "intentional life" of consciousness (Husserl, 2002), and, even deeper, the pre-intentional layer of the "self-affection of life" (Henry, 2000).

The very condition of this reorientation of attention is to lead the interviewed person to describe a singular experience. If you ask her: "What is your experience when you meditate?", it is almost certain that you will obtain a rather general description, corresponding to the meditation instructions she has received, or to the representation she has of her experience. The only chance you have to obtain a better description of what she actually lives is to 1) lead her to describe a particular phase of experience, which is precisely situated in time and space; 2) bring her back to the singular, concrete experience she is describing, each time she moves away from it towards the expression of comments, justifications, explanations and beliefs corresponding not to what she is experiencing but to what she thinks or imagines or believes about her lived experience. One of the devices of the interviewer is, every time the subject uses an abstract term, to restate it in the interrogative form by inviting him to describe the concrete action that underlies this term. For example if the interviewed subject says: "I adopted an open mode of attention", the interviewer replies: "Take your time to go back to the moment you adopted an open mode of attention... At that moment, how do you open your attention?". The slowing down of the verbal flow, the presence of hesitations and silences, co-verbal gestures, the use of "I" and action verbs in the present tense are then clues that the subject is not reciting ready made knowledge but is *discovering* pre-reflective processes.

In most cases, as it is difficult to describe an experience while it is unfolding, there is a temporal gap between the initial experience and its description. The second key to the micro-phenomenological interview is thus to help the subject to retrieve or "evoke" the experience, whether it is in the past or only just over, by retrieving precisely the spatio-temporal context, and then the visual, auditory, tactile and kinaesthetic, and possibly olfactory sensations associated with the very start of experience to be described. The subject "evokes" this moment when he recalls it to the point that the past situation becomes more present for him than the present situation is. The evoked experience may be "invoked" if it occurred in the past independently from the interview, or "provoked" for the purposes of the interview, usually just before the interview. In this study, we sometimes led participants to describe significant meditative experiences of the past. But given the subtlety of meditative experience, and the difficulty to evoke a past meditative experience in its most minute details, we usually concentrated our investigation on provoked experiences, while introducing two new variants:

- Interview interrupted by meditation: in the course of the interview, the practitioner is encouraged to meditate in order to search for the answer to a given question.
  - Can you try to describe more precisely what you do with your attention at that moment where you shift?  
[Break during which Helen practices]
  - I will try to explain it. Now when I sit and sense into it, I feel the activity is over here.
- Meditation interrupted by the interview: the interview starts after the meditation has been interrupted at a random point, by the sound of a gong for example.

The third key to the interview consists in helping the subject to loosen the focus of attention on the content, the "what" of the evoked experience, in order to let the "how" appear. For example the interviewer reorients the attention of the subject from the content of an inner image which is emerging to consciousness, to the dynamics of appearance, the genesis of this content: the rapid phases which precede its stabilization, and at each phase, the subtle inner micro-gestures that are performed to elicit, recognize, evaluate, enrich, maintain or rule out this image, as well as the bodily sensations and feelings that accompany this process. To collect this diachronic description, the art of the interview consists in asking questions which guide the interviewee's attention towards the various moments of the process, which flag them without suggesting any content, such as "how did you start?", "what happened then?", "when you did this, what did you do?", "when you felt this, what did you feel?". This type of "content-empty" questioning enables the researcher to obtain a precise description without infiltrating his own presuppositions and creating "false memories". Here is a small excerpt of an interview using this type of questioning:

- When I realized that I was gone, the thought vanished.
- How did it vanish? Was it instantaneous or gradual?
- It was very quick, but it nevertheless took a moment.
- And what happened during this moment?
- I loosened, I loosened my tension on that thought.
- And when you loosened your tension on that thought, what did you loosen?
- In fact I loosened a light tension in my head.
- Where exactly was this light tension in your head?
- It was at the top to the right and at the front of the head.
- And when you loosened it, how did you go about it, what did you do?
- And so on.

Elicitation interviews have an iterative structure which consists in helping the subject to evoke the experience to be described repeatedly, while guiding her attention towards a diachronic mesh which is finer each time, until the desired level of detail is reached. The average length of an interview is one hour for describing what may be just a few seconds of experience. The subject's ability to provide a fine-grained description, thanks to the interviewer's questions, is an additional clue that the description does not come from an implicit theory, because no theory describes internal processes at such level of detail.

### **Objectives and organization of the study**

The micro-phenomenological method enabled us to collect very detailed descriptions of experiences supposed to be inaccessible to consciousness and hardly describable, such as the

micro-genesis of an "intuition" (Petitmengin, 1999, 2007; Remillieux, 2014), the emergence of an epileptic seizure (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2006; Petitmengin, 2010), the microgenesis of a choice (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2013), or the emergence of the famous "rubber hand illusion" (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2013), to give a few examples. These results gave us the idea to propose to the Mind & Life Institute a pilot study of micro-phenomenological description of meditative experiences in the context of practices in the Buddhist tradition.

The Sanskrit word *bhāvanā* which is translated by "meditation", literally means "cultivation". To meditate is more specifically to train oneself "to see things as they are"<sup>2</sup>. Buddhist meditation techniques can be broadly divided into two groups: *shamatha* and *vipashyanā*, to use the Sanskrit terms. *Shamatha*, the practice of "calm abiding", usually aims at slowing down the flow of thoughts by focusing the mind on an inner or external object. *Vipashyanā* or "clear seeing" consists in applying the attention which has been stabilized by *shamatha* to the whole experience: bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc<sup>3</sup>

We interviewed 12 practitioners with 5 to 45 years of experience of *shamatha-vipashyanā* practice, or of practices inspired by it such as the Dzogchen practice of Tibetan Buddhism. The project aim was not to compare the practices of different meditators (which would have been a much ambitious project), but:

1. to assess whether the micro-phenomenological techniques could actually enable us to collect accurate and reliable descriptions of contemplative experiences, and if necessary to adapt these techniques to this specific domain of inquiry, in order to create a research methodology that could be used for possible future projects;
2. to begin to evaluate the usefulness of descriptions of meditative experience for the meditation practitioner and the meditation instructor;
3. to identify lines of research on meditative experience, which could be investigated by future projects;

In brief, the project aimed at answering the two following questions: is it *possible* to consider meditative experience as an object of research, without reducing it to its neuro-physiological correlates? If yes, why is it *interesting* to do so?

Each practitioner participated in two or three interviews. The "experiential protocol" of the first interview was the following:

1. Pre-interview: the participant is explained the context and objectives of the research project, and then asked to provide details about his/her practice: tradition, usual practice, number of years or cumulated hours of practice, rhythm of practice (daily or weekly). If the participant is not familiar with the interview method (which was the case for most of them), he is proposed to experience a small micro-phenomenological interview.
2. Meditation session (20 minutes): the participant is asked to practice *shamatha*: focus her attention on her breathing, and when she realizes that her attention has left the breathing, to come back to her breathing.
3. Elicitation interview (60 to 90 minutes): after a general description of the unfolding of the session, the interview focuses on one or two specific moments.

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<sup>2</sup> See eg. Tulku Uryen Rinpoche, *As It Is*, vol. 1 & 2..

<sup>3</sup> For typologies of Buddhist contemplative practices, see, e.g., Germano and Hillis 2005; Lutz *et al.* 2007; Lutz *et al.* 2015.

4. Post-interview: the participant is asked questions on her experience of the interview itself, such as: "Did the interview help you become aware of anything, did you learn anything during the interview?"

The "experiential protocol" of the second (and possible third) interview was the following:

1. Pre-interview: after a brief reminder of the research, the participant is asked for the possible effects of the first interview on her practice between the two interviews.
2. Meditation session (20-30 minutes): the participant is asked to practice his/her own usual practice
3. Elicitation interview as in session 1.
4. Post-interview as in session 1.

## **Part 2. Examples of lines of investigation in meditative experience**

This second part provides micro-phenomenological descriptions of two processes that meditation practice enables the practitioner to become aware of: a) the twofold process of loss of contact with the current situation and generation of virtual ones in "mind-wandering" episodes, and the process of regaining and maintaining contact with the present situation made possible by meditation practice; b) the premises of the emergence of a thought.

### **2.1 Mind wandering**

The purpose of the concentrative practice of calm abiding is not to become aware of the unfolding of episodes of drift, but only to stabilize the attention by regularly bringing it back to the concentration support. But as micro-phenomenological interviews make it possible to explore everything that happens during a meditation session, they allowed us to explore not only the inner act of coming back to the breath and the effect of this coming back, but also what happens when attention has left the support, in other words the very ordinary but phenomenologically almost entirely unknown process which is called "mind wandering".

### **Scientific context**

Although mind wandering had previously escaped mainstream research, the number of publications related to this phenomenon has increased considerably since a large scale study published in *Science* (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010) suggested that we spend more than half of our time wandering off into the past or into the future, without being aware of having thereby lost contact with the present reality. This is so even when we are engaged in highly demanding or risky tasks such as driving (Galera et al, 2012; Yanko & Spalek, 2013).

The most common method for investigating mind wandering is "experience sampling", which consists in providing the participant with an electronic device which emits a beep at random intervals (Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006). When the beep occurs, the participant is asked whether her mind was wandering just before the occurrence of the beep, and to answer a questionnaire. These studies have examined the *content* of mind wandering (temporal focus, emotional valence) and its *outcomes*, searching for a possible relationship between them (Smallwood & Andrews-Hanna, 2013; Andrews-Hanna et al 2013; Ruby et al. 2013a): for example they consistently noticed a correlation between mind wandering and negative mood (Smallwood et al., 2007; Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010). However they did not provide access to the *process* of mind-wandering, to the *unfolding* of mind wandering episodes, which would enable us to

better understand these effects, which still –remain virtually unexplored (Mooneyham and Schooler, 2013; Schooler et al., 2014).

### **Examples of descriptions and analyses**

Micro-phenomenological interviews with meditation practitioners enabled us to gather some descriptions of this unfolding, which takes the form of:

- a twofold process of loss of contact with the current situation and generation of a virtual one, followed by
- the reverse twofold process of vanishing of the virtual situation and regaining contact with the current one.

We tried to go further into the description of these two twofold processes. Here is an example of a description which though trivial is not devoid of interest.

#### **Excerpt 1: Process of generation of a virtual scene**

"A thought occurs, which involves several characters. It's like a kind of space that opens, the term "bubble" fits well. A bubble which starts from my head, at the front, top and left. The volume of this bubble is sustained by my inner speech, just as light is sustained by the engine of a dynamo and varies with changes in the engine speed. I see the characters as through my eyes, but I do not take my body in the story. That is to say that I am only eyes, my body is not in the scene. At the same time, this scene elicits many bodily sensations in me, for example in the chest, but (at that moment) I am not aware of them, I have lost contact with them. It is as if my head was cut off from my body."  
(Lise)

The interest of this description is twofold: 1) it shows that it is possible to remember an episode of mind wandering, which has been lived without awareness of being lived, in a pre-reflected or unrecognized way; 2) it enables us to begin to identify the parameters of the process of construction of a virtual scene:

- The *place of emergence of the virtual scene* in the "lived space" of the subject:  
"It's like a kind of space that opens, the term "bubble" is well adapted. A bubble which starts from my head, at the front, top and left."
- The *sensorial modalities implied in the virtual scene*, which are here the auditory: "inner speech", the visual: "I see the characters", and the interoceptive: "many bodily sensations in me".
- The *degree and mode of awareness of the sensations elicited by the virtual scene*. At the time of the episode, the subject seems to be aware of her visual sensations: "I see the characters", while being in a way unaware of them because at that time she is absorbed in the virtual scene and unaware that her mind is wandering (if she had realized this she would have brought back her attention to her breathing). We decided to call this particular mode of unawareness "MW unawareness". At the same time, the subject is unaware of her bodily sensations: "I am not aware of (my bodily sensations), I have lost contact with them. It is as if my head was cut off from my body." She is thus in a way doubly unaware of her bodily sensations: unaware of them because she is unaware that her mind is wandering, but also unaware of having any bodily sensations at all.<sup>4</sup>
- The *perceptual positions of the subject in the virtual scene*, which are the first-person (or egocentric) perceptual position in the visual modality: "I see the characters as through my

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<sup>4</sup> See Petitmengin 2006, p. 234



eyes", and a "no-body" perceptual position in the interoceptive modality: "I am only eyes, my body is not in the scene."

- The "*mode of sustainment of the virtual scene*": "The volume of this bubble is sustained by my inner speech, just as light is sustained by the engine of a dynamo and varies with changes in the engine speed."

The following excerpt highlights another mode of sustainment, and enables us to refine our inventory of the parameters of the process.

### **Excerpt 2: Process of generation of a virtual scene and loss of contact with the actual situation**

"I get lost in a thought consisting in imagining that I am cutting into pieces and then mashing the pumpkin that is being baked, now while I am meditating. This is a thought without inner discourse, consisting in doing internally the gestures of crushing the mash with a fork. I can feel very well (now) the gestures, the effort in my arms. Meanwhile, I lose awareness of my body here and now: its position, the contact of my legs with the ground, of my hands on my knees, my internal sensations. I am not either really aware of the sensations aroused by the imaginary scene (the sensation of effort in my arms). I become aware of them retrospectively, when I am back, while I still keep a trace of this moment." (Lise)

- *Mode of sustainment of the scene*: in this experience the virtual scene is generated and sustained through gestures which are anticipated internally: "I am cutting into pieces and then mashing the pumpkin", "doing internally the gestures of crushing the mash with a fork."

It is interesting to note that in both excerpts, the virtual scene is sustained through subtle inner micro-gestures – in the first case through the laryngeal and oral gestures of inner speech, in the second case through micro-gestures consisting in "mimicking" inwardly a movement mobilizing the upper body.

In the last excerpt, the subject differentiates two types of bodily sensations during the mind wandering episode: the sensations associated with the actual situation, and the sensations which are elicited by the virtual scene.

- *Degree and mode of awareness of the actual bodily sensations*. "I lose awareness of my body here and now: its position, the contact of my legs with the ground, of my hands on my knees, my internal sensations."

- *Degree of awareness of the sensations elicited by the virtual scene*: "I am not ... really aware of the sensations aroused by the imaginary scene (the sensation of effort in my arms)."

- A new descriptive category emerges, that we call the *persistence of the virtual scene*: "while I still keep a trace of this moment." This "trace" or persistence allows the subject to evoke and describe the virtual scene after she has realized that her mind had been wandering. The disappearance of the "MW unawareness" during the evocation enables her to report the sensations she had at the time of the episode, and to become reflectively aware of the sensations she was "doubly unaware" of at that time: "I become aware of them retrospectively, when I am back, while I still keep a trace of this moment."

### **Excerpts 3 and 4: Process of regaining contact with the current situation**

"When I come back to the nostrils, something relaxes throughout my head. Before there was a little tension, a light one, at the level of the skull, inside, that I was not aware of. And when I come back, at the first breathing in, it aerates itself. It relieves itself. This tension, which is not really a tension, which is very light, with a weight if you want, with a density and a weight, it releases itself, it dissolves." (Paul)

"When I come in contact with the physical sensations aroused by this (virtual) scene, it creates a special feeling of release, of finding myself again, which is accompanied by a deep sigh." (Lise)

Excerpts 3 and 4 highlight some parameters of the reverse micro-process of regaining contact with the current situation:

- the **effect of regaining contact with the current bodily sensations**. The reorientation of attention towards the sensation of breathing: "When I come back to the nostrils", "at the first breathing in", elicits a feeling of relief and release: "something relaxes throughout my head" "it aerates itself", "it relieves itself", "it releases itself, it dissolves."

- a subtle **bodily sensation which was present at the time of (and perhaps elicited by) the mind wandering episode**: "Before there was a little tension, a light one, at the level of the skull, inside."

- the **absence of awareness of this sensation at the time of the episode**: "Before there was a little tension, (...) that I was not aware of."

- the **trigger of a reflective awareness of the sensation**: the excerpt suggests that it is the very movement of releasing the tension (itself elicited by the reorientation of attention towards the nostrils), which makes the subject aware a) of the tension which is being released, and b) of the fact that this tension was already there while attention had left the nostrils.

- the **effect of regaining contact with the bodily sensations elicited by the virtual scene**, which is also a feeling of release: "a special feeling of release, of finding myself again, which is accompanied by a deep sigh."

## 2.2 The early phases of the emergence of a thought

Several *vipashyanā* practitioners described the early phases of a thought, before any virtual scene has emerged. Their accounts agree on the following micro-dynamic process.

### 1) A tiny impulsion

#### - **Sensorial form of the emerging thought**

"The thought emerges as a tiny tension (French '*crispation*')." (Lise)

"A tiny 'impulse' (French '*élan*') there (indicates the centre of the chest). It is associated with breathing, breathing in." (Paul)

"Not so much an image, but a felt sense that something arises. Like a little movement... a perturbation. It's not a thought yet. It's just a kind of a stirring (French '*animation*'). Something is about to happen." (Anna)

#### - **Place of emergence**

"there (shows the middle of the chest). " (Paul)

### 2) A tension towards that first movement

"There is this kind of movement towards that movement, if that makes sense." (Anna)

#### - **Location of the tension**: the eyes and the head

"The eyes become fixated, and there is almost like a tension in the eyes. Although I'm not looking at anything visually, but the visual sense gets engaged as if looking." (Anna)

"A tension corresponding to the intention to do something, comparable to the feeling of scrutinizing something visually, of making an effort to see better something far away, which gives a sensation of tension inside the skull." (Anna)

- ***Origin of the tension:*** holding the breath, tightening the throat

"It's kind of more... holding the breath, tightening the throat... Yeah, that sense of curiosity and pausing and going after something... a holding of the breath as well. It happens at the throat. That looking... that second movement... the tightening from here, rather than from the head." (Anna)

- ***Effect of the tension***

"Then the tightening in the head happens, and it feels like the head is cut off from the body, at the throat. The flow of the energy between the body and the head gets very disconnected and gets built up in the throat. It's uncomfortable, so it kind of brings attention to itself." (Anna)

"Well, we're not speaking about anything major, it's really minor. A kind of, a subtle numbness, yes. It is as if life is not flowing completely freely in the body. Because attention is, it is like it is numbed down, a feeling, a kind of discomfort. Not like feeling nauseous or anything like that, but just like, a sense of that. There is less contact. Less permeation by life." (Helen)

The two excerpts above highlight:

***A lack of circulation of the flow of energy in the body:*** "The flow of the energy between the body and the head gets very disconnected"; "It is as if life is not flowing completely freely in the body"; "Less permeation of/by life".

***A feeling of disconnection of the head and the body:*** "it feels like the head is cut off from the body".

***The point of disconnection:*** "at the throat"; "The flow of the energy between the body and the head gets built up in the throat."

***A subtle feeling of discomfort elicited by this disconnection:*** "It's uncomfortable"; "A kind of, a subtle numbness"; "a feeling, a kind of discomfort"; "Not like feeling nauseous or anything like that, but just like, a sense of that".

### 3) Releasing the tension

- The ***trigger of the releasing*** is for Anna the awareness of the feeling of disconnection, itself elicited by the sensation of discomfort provoked by this disconnection:

"It's uncomfortable, so it kind of brings attention to itself. That's how I know the disconnection happened." (Anna)

- The releasing of the tension may have a ***spontaneous, involuntary character:***

"It's kind of releasing by itself... with the awareness that there is tightening. It's just... becoming aware of it is enough for it to relax." (Anna)

- But it is also described as fostered by ***voluntary inner micro-gestures:***

***Release the breath, the tightening in the head or the throat***

"I release the breath; release the tightening if it's in the head or the throat. Release any freezing... just kind of letting things to become unstuck again. And allow them to move in and out freely."

(Anna)

***Use of peripheral vision***

"There is almost like a tension in the eyes as well... as if visually fixating at something. So, then, just by releasing into more panoramic visual field." (Anna)

"Normally, just becoming aware that there is a fixation of tension is enough. But, if I need to use more tools, then I would usually use the visual awareness, just allowing my peripheral vision to go to more than 180°. And that releases the fixation in the eyes and the tension in the head."(Anna)

***Awareness, densification of the back and bottom of the body***

"Being more aware of the back of my body, rather than just what's at the front." (Anna)

"I go down, I drag something down in the body. It becomes denser in the lower body." (Lise)

In the following excerpt, the interviewer helps Lise to describe how she manages "going down into her body".

- At that point I go down in my body.
- How do you manage to go down in your body?
- I go towards the back of my head, that is to say, I move my center of gravity from the front of my head towards the back of my head.
- Which center of gravity are you talking of?
- My attention
- The center of gravity of your attention?
- Yes, which is rather, as often, at the level of the head, of the center of my head, just behind the eyes. I move it towards the back of the skull.
- When you move it back, what do you do?
- I press a little bit on the eyes with my lids. And by doing that it's as if I were deactivating the eyes, the gaze, I demobilize this area. I feel more the back of my skull, which becomes denser. And at the same time, quickly, this density moves down the whole back of the body, along the spine.
- When this density moves down the spine, what is moving down?
- I truly feel a small current that runs down the spine, it's like a little tingling, it feels nice, this area around the spine that is mobilized, and becomes denser. And soon, I heave a great sigh ... it relieves. It's as if my shoulders, my spine, my back, became alive again, were able to feel again. And when the sigh comes, the well-being extends to the chest, which aerates, which opens. Breathing also reanimates the front of the body.
- [...] When I open my eyes again, I no longer look with my eyes, I look from the back of my head.
- What consequence does that have for your gaze, for your field of vision?
- It is a different way of looking, of perceiving, than visual. It is no longer just visual, it is something vaster than the merely visual. It is as if I was looking with the back of my body. [...]
- How do you to look with the back of your body?
- This is not the same look at all. This look is a kind of feeling, of feeling space. I'm not focused on an object with the front of the head and eyes, it's the back of my head that looks, thus it's much vaster. The field is open to the maximum. There is less depth of field in fact. Let's say that there are no objects that stand out, this is flatter, in a sense, at least at this moment. At this point this is more in two dimensions than in three dimensions.

***- Effects of releasing the tension***

***Disappearance of the emerging thought***

"When I loosen the tension, the thought vanishes." (Lise)

### ***Reconnection of the head and the body***

"There is a sense of awareness opening up again. And, the flow between the head and the body being... there is more sense of appointment, more kind of connection, between the head and the body." (Anna)

### ***Feeling of flow and warmth, awareness of the bodily sensation, connection between me and the world***

"It is warmth. As if the blood is flowing freely, warmth, centeredness, physical sensations of the body. Can register the inhalation, the exhalation, at the level of cells. Can feel how the back and the chest move, can feel the knees, feet and legs. So there is a presence in the body and, well, the surroundings, there is no... I am sitting on [knocks on the floor] equally with the bird that is walking there outside. There is such an equality in that. And life [knocks on the floor]. That I am a part of a connectedness. There is such a feeling of belonging, just because, because [laughs], just because this is here, yes. And when attention moves out into the thoughts, it is as if... there is this feeling of separation, like that [gesture]. I think it is like this membrane [gesture] - like I said before, it is closed and here are you and there is the world, yes. And it is simply enormously liberating that I could return to the breath and the body. And to feel that that feels more true." (Helen)

In other words, when Helen gets lost in thoughts, it is as if a membrane closes and creates a separation between her and the world, her body and the environment, whereas when she is maintaining her open awareness, there is the sense of a continuity between inside and outside, and an equality between her and living beings outside. They are all part of one continuous, shared "lived space".

## **Part 3. Discussion**

This study enabled us to collect fine-grained descriptions of the dynamics of the mind wandering process and of the emergence of a thought, and to identify in both experiences a set of descriptive categories which are independent from the content of the experiences, in other words, a sketch of the dynamic structure of these experiences. We will now address the status of these findings, the research directions they open, and finally the interest of these descriptions for the meditation practitioner and the meditation instructor.

### **3.1 Status of these results**

The analyses we presented in the previous section are a long way from exhausting the content of the interviews we conducted, which themselves are far from exhausting the experiences of mind wandering and emergence of a thought. We consider them as indicating lines of investigation for future research. Any researcher trained in micro-phenomenology could consider the experiential categories we have identified:

- as hypotheses that she can confirm and clarify or invalidate by conducting and analyzing other interviews in the context of similar new experiential protocols or by creating new protocols.

- as guides for future interviews. For each descriptive category we have identified, the researcher can ask: "Which experiential protocol, which questions can I use to collect the corresponding information?". For example, which questions may bring a practitioner to describe her "perceptual position in the virtual scene?" How to get a more accurate description of the inner gestures consisting in "coming back to the nostrils", "releasing the breath" or "dragging something down in the body"?

- as heuristics to discover new dimensions to explore. The very gaps of our analyses suggest further investigations to fill them. It would thus be possible to describe more precisely the process of emergence of a virtual scene, for example the order of apparition of the sensorial modalities, their respective degrees of awareness, the micro-gestures that sustain the scene, the transitions from one scene to another, but also the transition between the emergence of a thought as a tiny tension and the absorption of attention into an elaborate virtual scene. It would also be possible to do a fine-grained exploration of the reverse process of disappearance of the scene, and the "trace" it leaves: what is the "trace" of the virtual scene like? Does it have a sensory form? For how long does it persist and allow "refreshing" and "reactivation"?

The descriptions we have collected show that as soon as the premise of a thought arises in the form of a tiny "impulse", a subtle tension, as least sometimes, may have the effect of producing a sense of disconnection between the head and the body or a feeling of discomfort ("numbness"). When in the course of the process of mind wandering the emerging thought is transformed into a virtual scene, this loss of bodily awareness can intensify up to a complete loss of consciousness of bodily feelings. This elicits a kind of rigidification and partitioning not only between the head and the body, but between "internal" and "external" space, between the subject and the environment. Conversely, coming back to the present sensations allows life, warmth to flow again. It causes a reunification of mind and body, self and world, that creates a feeling of deep relief and liberation.

It seems to us that these descriptions offer a very interesting avenue for explaining the unhappiness which is elicited by mind wandering, as well as possible therapeutic effect meditation. The discomfort generated by attentional drift would not be explained by the (pleasant or unpleasant) content of the virtual scene, but by the very loss of contact with the intimacy of experience, notably bodily experience. The therapeutic effect of meditation would not be explained by the attainment of a particular experiential content, but by the fact of regaining contact with experience, regardless of its content. In both cases, the effect would be due not to the content of experience (in the virtual scene or thought), but to the structural features of the dynamic process of becoming (un-)aware itself. It would be very interesting to deepen these lines of description 1) of the process of loss of contact with experience and of separation between oneself and the world, considered in the Buddhist tradition as the very root of suffering, and 2) of the reverse process of coming back to experience and vanishing of duality, which leads to its liberation.

### **3.2 Usefulness of the interviews for meditation practitioners and teachers**

According to the "post-interviews" we led with the practitioners, micro-phenomenological interviews were interesting and useful for them, because they helped them to refine their awareness of what happened and what they actually do during their practice. It is like "going on a journey of discovery" (Helen).

However some of them expressed a concern about the ability of words to express experience accurately: words do not fit exactly with experience, or may break the flow of experience. All the practitioners nevertheless agreed on the fact that the interview "unfolds" the experience:

"I have the feeling to be able to open the experience, like a crumpled sheet that you can unfold through this inquiry." (Elisa)

"Before the interview, I had the feeling that my meditation of this morning was not a great one ... I thought this was not interesting, there was nothing in it. But during the inquiry I realized there was enough stuff in it to fill an entire life. This is a huge abyss ... Thank you!" (Linda)

This "unfolding" is due to the fact that practitioners become aware of elements of their experience they had not noticed before:

"The work of elicitation has drawn my attention to those little moments I would perhaps overlooked. This refines my awareness of the process" (Joëlle)

"It gives greater wakefulness. It does. A greater awareness of the transitions. Of what happens. More subtlety. [ . . . ] It takes apart the different constituent parts. And that gives a richness that actually is there all the time, but makes it more accessible, yes." (Helen)

These unnoticed elements may be subtle feelings or the location of these feelings:

"I became aware that the emergence of the thought is associated with a little 'impulse' at the level of the chest. This is interesting for me because I had not noticed it." (Lise)

"This sense of wanting to get somewhere different from where I was... I was surprised and sort of intrigued by that sense of... "oh, it's coming from the top of my head! Very much on the right and not in the centre." (Anna)

"I was not so aware that the tightening was around the throat. That's something I became aware during our interview. Because I naturally would have thought it's another tightening in the head. But it's not. It's from the throat." (Anna)

It was a key point feedback of most of the practitioners we interviewed that they became more aware not only of feelings, but also of subtle micro-gestures, in other words of what they actually do when they practice:

- on the one hand, micro-gestures involved in the process of emergence and sustainment of thoughts: from the tiny tension towards the first impulse of an emerging thought, to the micro-gestures which generate and sustain a virtual scene in which the practitioner becomes absorbed;

- on the other hand, micro-gestures involved in the process of vanishing of thoughts, such as the releasing of the tension on an emerging thought and the gesture of "going down into one's body".

In the following excerpt, the interview enables the practitioner to refine his awareness of what he actually does when he "brings back his attention towards the nostrils".

"I am realizing that in fact, when I bring back my attention to the nostrils, I do not shift (my attention). There is no shift from a point to another one, at least in my experience there. It is not: there is no awareness of the nose, and then all of a sudden there is awareness of the nose. In fact, the awareness of the nose, of the air, is already there, but what I do is to strengthen it, to intensify it. It's like a movement, but I cannot find a starting point for this movement. The end point is the intensification. But for now I have not found a starting point. So, when I move my attention, there is a strengthening, an intensification of density. And there is an action to do so. (...) Thanks to the interview, I realized that this is not a shift of attention. It's almost a discovery for me. This is not a discovery that surprises me, because in fact this is my experience. But at first I would have said that I moved my attention. But this is not true." (Paul)

What enables subjects to discriminate these sensations and gestures in their experience are the specific devices used by the interviewer:

1) the precision of the questions, that draw the practitioner's attention towards specific moments or dimensions of the experience

"- And what makes you aware of that?"

- That you ask me. That you ask me to find out what happens just before. That you keep returning to that. What happens just before? That you point at a split second and ask me: what happens there? And then attention has to go in and investigate it and sense, what happens there? What happens there? What happens there? And what do I do, what do I do? What kind of response does that give in the body? What happens with attention there? What happens, what does it look like, how does it

feel? That you ask, that you point at a specific point that is sufficient. Perhaps I simply would have overlooked it." (Helen)

2) the power of the evocation process:

"It was in connection with that zooming effect that I felt that it actually worked. It was in connection with some places where sensing into that again actually re-established the state so precisely that I could recall something more about it than I would have been able to just moments earlier. So that was really interesting." (Martin K)

3) and the very effort to try to find words:

"I think it is interesting to notice to what a great extent practice can be there and be sharpened at the same time as words are put on it, almost as a consequence of putting it into words." (Marcus)

"One thing I find with elicitation is that it sharpens your awareness, the clarity about what is actually going on. And the sharpening lies in the work that goes into finding words. Finding words and then discovering, at least some times, that that wasn't quite precise enough and then seeking to refine that further." (Helga)

These testimonies show that what is important in the micro-phenomenological interview is less the description as a result than *describing* as a *process*, that is to say the inner gestures of discrimination that the participant performs, as "perlocutionary effects" (Austin, 1962) of the questions and prompts of the interviewer.

In this perspective, verbal descriptions are nothing else than "handles" that enable the practitioner to discriminate subtle aspects of experience which might have vanished without their help. They do not necessarily express experience, nor reflect it nor display it, but rather "point" to it<sup>5</sup>.

In spite of their inadequacy, words have also the power to trigger an act of recognition in the listener or reader. In the following excerpt, an interviewer observes that the word used by a practitioner interviewed previously allowed her to recognize in her own meditative experience an element that she had not noticed:

"The interview yesterday with Paul when he described this "impulse" allowed me to become aware of it, even though it was already familiar. The word 'impulse' suits me well, I think I recognize the experience that it points to." (Lise)

The recognition of the experience which is pointed to by the word, and the adoption of this word by the researcher, mark the beginning of a possible intersubjective agreement on that word to designate this subtle movement. In other words, the indicial function of words does not prevent the creation of a shared specialized vocabulary to communicate about meditative experience.

"Among people who have lived experiences, words... this is a little like poets. Poets use words, but words of poets point to something which is far beyond words. There is a resonance of speech, which points to something else. So to make someone understand that to which we want to point, we use words, knowing that words are only directions we give" (Daniel)

Also advanced meditators recognized that the interviews helped them to become aware of unnoticed elements. This answers one of the questions we had at the start of the project: meditation already aims at "seeing things as they are", at developing awareness of one's experience, presence to one's experience. Under these conditions, how useful can micro-

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<sup>5</sup> As Heidegger wrote, "phenomenological concepts cannot communicate their full content, but only indicate it" (Zahavi 2003, p. 173).



phenomenological methods, which also aim at developing awareness of one's experience, be for meditation practitioners? Our study shows that even skilled meditators, who have developed a very fine attention to their experience, are not necessarily fully aware of every dimension of this experience, and of all the micro-gestures they perform to be present to it. Being encouraged and supported in describing these gestures very precisely allows them to acquire a finer awareness of them, and then to perform them more accurately. In other words micro-phenomenological methods might support the process of discrimination performed by *vipashyanā*.

Another concern of the practitioners we interviewed is that the interview may introduce a tension in their practice. On the one hand, meditating with the knowledge that there will be an interview may create a tension to watch better. On the other hand, meditating with the knowledge that there will be an interview may create an effort of memory to remember.

However, as one of the interviewees has noticed, it is possible that this tension to watch better is in fact always there in the practice, and that the interview situation only helps one to become aware of it.

Moreover, once an interview has allowed the practitioner to recognize previously unnoticed elements of her experience and practice, the awareness of these elements persists in future meditations, and the tension to watch better that is induced by the interview situation can be relaxed. It is not necessary to maintain the discriminating tension in every meditation session. For example, if an interview has led the practitioner to become aware of a little "impulse" at the level of the chess before the emergence of a thought, she will be able to recognize it in future meditation sessions without mobilizing a discriminating tension. There is a "learning effect" of the interview: the increased awareness provided by the interview brings more clarity and precision in subsequent meditations and even outside of meditation sessions.

"It is true that it has impacted my meditation. It provoked in me something that makes me more focused during my meditation. Since the last time, it is clear that I am more able to discriminate what happens, I am more accurate." (Michel)

"It sharpens the clarity aspect in consciousness. It was as if, it was clear that – the image may be a silly one, but it was clear that the mirror had been polished." (Marcus)

"In fact, I like it a lot ... because even this week (between the two interviews), it makes me more aware of what is going on in me." (Daniel)

Meditation instructors who have been trained in the micro-phenomenological interview testify that it is also useful for them in the context of their teachings. On the one hand, a more refined awareness of their own practice helps them to refine their meditation instructions. On the other hand, doing interviews with their students helps them to obtain a better sense of the different ways in which those actually practice, to identify better the difficulties they meet, and therefore to improve their teaching. They develop a richer palette and more precisely tailored specific instructions to particular individuals.

## **Conclusion**

This pilot study allowed us to collect fine-grained descriptions of meditative experiences, to identify their parameters and to highlight their structure. Hypotheses emerge from this work, that it will be possible to assess by creating appropriate experiential protocols.

This study shows that meditative experience is a wholly owned research object, that presents an invaluable interest to 1) understand the processes that are involved in meditation; 2) understand their effects, including their therapeutic effects; 3) refine the teaching of meditation. This micro-phenomenological investigation is not a mere heuristic detour intended to provide keys for interpreting brain activity, which alone would be credible and interesting to understand meditative processes. On the contrary, the knowledge of the experiential structure of meditative processes is a prerequisite for researching and interpreting its possible neuro-physiological correlates. Meditative experience is primary, and its disciplined micro-phenomenological investigation provides an irreplaceable and irreducible understanding of this experience.

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