PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD
AND MEDITATION

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INTRODUCTION

In recent psychological literature on meditation, the terms "phenomenology" and "phenomenological" are sometimes used rather loosely to refer to introspective reports given by experimental subjects about their experiences during meditation. Some psychologists have even developed questionnaires and procedures, characterized as ways of operationalizing phenomenology, so that subjects' introspective reports about meditation experiences can be quantified. There is little, however, in this literature that would qualify as an extended phenomenological description of meditation.

The vast majority of Western psychological studies of meditation either investigate objective measures (such as EEG activity, pulse rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure, responses to light flashes, etc.), or personality traits of the meditating subjects (such as suggestibility, expectations, arousal, tendency to continue meditation practice, responses to chronic pain, self-representation, etc.), or comparisons between meditation and therapeutic techniques (such as hypnosis, self-hypnosis, biofeedback, progressive relaxation, etc.). A few studies summarize categories of mental faculties and stages of meditation that are discussed in classical Eastern texts on meditation (e.g., Visuddhimagga, Tibetan Mahamudra texts, Patanjali's Yoga Sutra).

Generally in Western psychological studies, the approach is not phenomenological in the strict sense, because the experiences occurring to subjects during meditation are not described or analyzed...
in terms of how these experiences actually appear to the subjects themselves. If subjects’ meditation experiences are mentioned at all, they are usually treated as causally related to physiological or psychological traits that the subjects themselves do not directly notice while meditating. Even though many researchers collect experimental subjects’ own introspective reports on what they have experienced during meditation, researchers do not usually summarize these reports either in the subjects’ own words or in terms approaching a standard phenomenological description. In sum, most recent Western psychological literature investigates the physiological or psychotherapeutic effects of meditation, not the subjects’ own reflexive awareness of their meditation experiences.

Although there are methodological difficulties associated with subjects’ introspective reports, several established researchers have started to re-examine the possibility of relying more heavily on subjects’ own reports of their meditation experiences and have called for more phenomenological research on meditation. Responding to this call, a section of this paper offers a phenomenological description of two meditation experiences, following the methodological guidelines developed by Edmund Husserl, the founder of philosophical phenomenology.

Additionally, this paper compares and contrasts Husserlian phenomenology with meditation as methods for observing and studying consciousness. Those who are familiar with both Husserlian phenomenology and Eastern yogic or meditative practices often notice a striking similarity between the phenomenological method and certain meditative techniques. In particular, a step in phenomenology called “the phenomenological reduction” (or “epoche”) resembles meditative procedures of mindfulness by which one becomes aware of the fullness, variety and transiency of experiences in the stream of consciousness. Like mindfulness meditation, the phenomenological reduction is an intentional practice of observing and accepting all experiences, without allowing the usual, everyday attitude of "needing to do something, go somewhere, believe something, etc." distort or organize what is experienced.

Phenomenology and most meditation techniques share the rudimentary methodological aim of carefully observing the contents and processes of consciousness. They differ, however, in their ultimate purpose: phenomenology has the goal of being, in Husserl’s words, “a rigorous science,” which aims to identify the recurring or essential structures of the contents and processes of consciousness, whereas most yogic and meditative practices have an ultimate soteriological goal of spiritual liberation or enlightenment.
COMPARISON OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD AND MEDITATION

Phenomenology was initially developed as a philosophical method for examining and describing consciousness. Unlike many philosophical theories which propose systems of ideas that are meant to explain reality, phenomenology does not claim to have an explanation of the world or human nature; it does claim a method for describing (not explaining) human consciousness. The distinction between description and explanation is, for phenomenologists, the difference between attending to what is immediately given in consciousness (description) as opposed to inferring the causes of what is immediately given in consciousness (explanation)—in other words, description is a detailed account of what appears; explanation an account of what caused that which appears.

In this regard, Husserlian phenomenology and meditation are similar, for they are both methods, rather than explanatory metaphysical theories. They are to be performed, practiced and, over time, refined within one’s own consciousness. One cannot truly understand either meditation or phenomenology without actually doing them. Moreover, neither of these methods necessitates a commitment to a specific philosophical theory of reality. In the East, meditation has accompanied a wide range of philosophical theories (Vedanta, Samkhya, Buddhism, Jainism, etc.) or has been practiced independently of any religious or philosophical theory. Similarly, phenomenology’s explicit use of the phenomenological reduction (described below) amounts to a deliberate attempt to abstain from metaphysical commitments.

Perhaps the most important similarity between meditation and philosophical phenomenology is that they are both methods for studying one’s own consciousness. It is in this sense that both methods differ significantly from most Western psychological theories, which attempt to develop an objective, scientific approach to consciousness by studying—not one’s own consciousness (at least not primarily)—but somebody else’s. Most Western psychology is empirical and requires treating human consciousness as though it were a real object or occurrence, existing in a world independent of the researcher’s mind and equally accessible to all scientific observers. Consequently, most psychological theories are based on interviews or experiments involving subjects other than the researchers themselves. Even if psychologists study their own consciousness (i.e., dreams, emotions, behaviors), most of them proceed as though this consciousness could as easily have belonged to someone else, as though introspective findings are equivalent to findings derived from the study of someone else. In contrast, meditation and Husserlian phenomenology can only be practiced...
on, and they only disclose, one's own consciousness; they lose their methodological purity as soon as one imagines that they can be performed or practiced on someone else.

What distinguishes philosophical phenomenology from other methods for describing consciousness (including most introspective methods) is a set of two basic techniques, which Husserl called the phenomenological reduction and the eidetic reduction.

The phenomenological reduction (or epoche) distinguishes phenomenology from most other descriptive methods used in psychology. It is a methodological step of stripping introspective data of their status as mental facts occurring within the real world. Phenomenology suspends the presumed metaphysical correlation between introspective data and a real world that is either "out there" or "in the mind"; in other words, introspective data are not treated as reports coming in from a real external world or even as contents of a real internal world. Instead, introspective data—or, more strictly, phenomena—are examined and described in their own terms, regardless of "where they might have come from" or what they may indicate about reality.

By suspending belief in any real world that the phenomenon "may have come from," the phenomenological reduction removes from consideration both the (presumed) reality status of the phenomenon and any possible causal link between the phenomenon and something else. Once engaged in the phenomenological reduction, the phenomenologist can neither attribute a reality status to the phenomenon under study nor infer the existence of something else as a cause or effect of the phenomenon. (The phenomenologist cannot even attribute reality to himself or herself.) Neither the content that is experienced nor the subjective processes of experiencing are regarded as either real or unreal; they are not regarded as clues for something real "beyond" them.

This methodological step of phenomenological reduction disengages consciousness from its customary attitude of assessing whatever is experienced in terms of how real it is. Instead, the phenomenologist becomes aware of the phenomenon itself, as it appears in conscious experience, with all of its qualitative richness. This qualitative richness is observed and described by phenomenologists without resorting to the concepts or categories that we usually reach for, which reflect the reality status of what is conceptualized or categorized. In fact, many of our concepts and categories are formulated because they organize our thinking about what is real; thus, for example, we have many more concepts (words) for material objects than for transitory emotional processes and sensation pulses because we tend to credit the former with more reality than the latter. By loosening awareness away from the typical ways that...
we describe things, the phenomenological reduction also equalizes phenomena, because they are no longer observed and described with an underlying motive of ranking them according to reality status.12

Consequently, after the phenomenological reduction is enacted, hallucinations, dreams, perceptions, etc. are all accepted equally; there is no attempt to determine which experiences are real and which are illusory. This is one of the important implications of the phenomenological reduction for research on meditation. Meditation sometimes includes experiences that depart from our normal notions about reality (these experiences are usually judged to be hallucinations or waking dreams by the standards of ordinary consciousness), but the phenomenological reduction guarantees that all meditation experiences receive the same watchful acceptance.

When applied, the phenomenological reduction not only allows one to receive all meditation experiences equally, but it also bears some resemblance to the discipline of maintaining open awareness, which is developed in various meditation practices. The phenomenological reduction can be applied to meditation, and it is also kin to meditation.

The second methodological step that is central to phenomenology is the eidetic reduction. With the eidetic reduction, the phenomenologist attempts to identify the essential structures of human consciousness, rather than the ephemeral content or the purely personal features of individuals' consciousness. In brief, the eidetic reduction is a method of imagining possible variations of the phenomenon under study. Although all the variations of a given phenomenon could not be realistically imagined in a phenomenological study, since they are probably infinite, as many of these as possible are imagined."

What the phenomenologist looks for throughout this process of imaginative variation are two kinds of variations of the initial phenomenon: either (1) variations that no longer appear to be the phenomenon under study (i.e., counterexamples and limiting cases), or (2) variations that still seem to be examples of the original phenomenon, even though they include different features. The first kind of variation helps identify the limits of the phenomenon's essence, and the second kind helps reveal the phenomenon's essence. The essence or eidetic structure of the phenomenon includes all of its features that cannot be eliminated by imaginatively varying the phenomenon. Such features remain evident throughout the imaginative variation process despite attempts to imagine examples of the phenomenon that would lack these features. The essence is arrived at through the method of eidetic reduction; it is an accomplishment, rather than a pre-given fact.
For example, if a phenomenologist is studying night vision, she or he would perform an eidetic reduction by first having an actual experience of night vision and then by imagining a series of visual experiences which are variations of that first experience. Such variations will alter certain features of the first night vision experience; for example, one might imagine night vision in the desert, far from civilization, on a moonless, cloudy night; imagine night vision while driving; imagine night vision while orbiting in outer space; imagine night vision as synaesthetic with night hearing, etc. When the imaginative variations are similar enough to the first, actual experience to be experienced as examples of night vision, then the features they share with the first night vision experience will be potentially part of the essence of night vision, because these features have not yet been eliminated through the method of eidetic reduction. The features that are not shared are not part of the essence of night vision, since they can be eliminated by imagining an example of night vision that lacks those features. If the imaginative variations become so dissimilar that they no longer seem to be examples of night vision at all (e.g., imagining night vision while sitting on the sun, imagining night vision while dazed by a flashlight), then they are counter-examples or limiting cases. Such counterexamples and limiting cases reveal that the variation has been pushed too far, to the point of abandoning an essential feature of night vision.

This method of eidetic reduction is an experimental method in the sense that a working phenomenologist must actually imagine a large number of variations of the phenomenon, without knowing ahead of time how the phenomenon will appear in all of these variations, or which of its features will be resistant to variation. Philosophical phenomenologists do not examine the consciousness of many different people in order to arrive at statistical data or empirical generalizations about human consciousness; instead each phenomenologist observes his or her own consciousness, and then imaginatively varies it, looking for structural patterns that seem constant. A further step is reporting any discovered patterns to other phenomenologists, who also undertake the method of imaginative variation in order to test and corroborate the reported essence.

Are there methodological analogues to the eidetic reduction in meditation? In general, meditation techniques increase awareness of one's own current experience and discourage imaginative flights away from one's current experience. The kind of imagination occurring in daydreaming, for example, is usually considered an obstacle to meditation. Eidetic reduction is not daydreaming, however, since it includes deliberation about what features to vary imaginatively, as well as memory of the results of variation; eidetic reduction is a more systematic and controlled use of imagination.
Still, systematic imagining of a series of variations of whatever one is currently experiencing during meditation may be construed by meditation teachers and students as thought distraction or entertainment. Instead of remaining focused on one's current meditative experience, a phenomenologist treats the experience as a baseline experience that would then be varied in imagination. Thus, at least on the surface, the eidetic reduction violates most meditation instructions.

There are, however, occasional techniques used in various meditation traditions that approach imaginative variation. For example, a metta meditation practiced in the Vipassana tradition (e.g., at the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts) proceeds through a series of imaginative variations on the intended receiver of metta. The meditator is instructed to imagine sending loving kindness first to someone they love, then to someone they have just met, then to someone they may have only seen, then to strangers around the world. Although the purpose of this metta practice is to develop a subjective capacity, rather than to vary features of an experienced phenomenon in order to identify its essence, it does share phenomenology's eidetic procedure of moving methodically through a series of imaginative variations. Other examples from other meditation traditions could be mentioned.

Despite many similarities between phenomenology and meditation as methods for observing one's own consciousness, the two differ significantly in terms of their stated purposes. Phenomenology aims at observing one's own consciousness for the purpose of identifying and describing the basic structures of the processes occurring in consciousness, as well as the basic structures of the objects that one is aware of through these processes. "Objects" is meant here in the broad sense of any thing, event, quality, etc. of which one is conscious. Phenomenologists call the first kind of analysis, which focuses on subjective processes, "noetic analysis," and the second kind of analysis, which focuses on the objects of consciousness, "noematic analysis."

Meditation also aims at observing one's own consciousness, but, as in Theravadan mindfulness practice, for the purpose of quieting the processes occurring in consciousness and, ultimately, for the purpose of achieving molqa [omnivarna]. Even though meditation is used to identify the basic patterns of consciousness, this is an intermediary step on the way to longer range goals of releasing the mind from patterns productive of suffering and illusion. In other words, phenomenology's basic aim is to describe consciousness, whereas meditation's basic aim is to change or purify consciousness.

It is possible to use phenomenology and meditation together. Specifically, one can apply the phenomenological method to medita-
tation in order to describe what happens when one meditates, and in order to identify basic patterns or structures of consciousness occurring in meditation experiences. A thorough phenomenological description of meditation experiences would be a three-fold description of (I) the conscious processes occurring during meditation, including any essential structures inherent in these processes (noetic analysis); (2) the objects one is aware of during meditation, including the essential structures of such objects (noematic analysis); (3) the correlations between noetic processes and noematic properties. A rigorous phenomenological description would also have to maintain the phenomenological reduction throughout, thereby eliminating presumptions and inferences about the reality statuses of (1) and (2).

Although less than a thorough phenomenological description of meditation experiences, the following section offers a descriptive sketch of two meditation experiences. Despite its incompleteness, it is phenomenological in method because it uses the phenomenological reduction and foregoes explanation in favor of description. What it does not include is a series of imaginative variations on the processes (noeses) or objects (noemata) of consciousness; in other words, it does not undertake eidetic reduction. Such variations were not performed at the time the two experiences were occurring. To try to perform them now, much later, would be methodologically slack.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF TWO MEDITATION EXPERIENCES

Pre-phenomenological Note

Although it is not within this author's competence to provide a description of experiences occurring at advanced stages of meditation practice, it is possible to describe meditation experiences occurring at a more rudimentary level. The two meditation experiences described in the following pages occurred within the context of a meditation practice developed (on and off) over a fifteen year period; at the time these experiences occurred, this practice involved sitting in concentrative meditation for at least an hour a day. These are still beginner's experiences, according to the standards of Eastern meditation traditions such as Transcendental Meditation, Tibetan Buddhism, Southeast Asian Vipassana and Zen Buddhism. This neither negates nor devalues them as meditation experiences; they are what they are.

There are many kinds of meditation experiences, of which the following two probably provide a fairly representative range. The
first is an experience achieved during normal sitting meditation practice. Although fairly simple, this first kind of experience may not occur in every meditation session; it does not seem inevitable or even typical for beginners. It does, however, seem to occur increasingly with practice, so that one comes to recognize it as an experience that has happened before, during meditation, and as an experience that might occur again during any meditation session, without special techniques for inducing it.

The second meditation experience is a rarer kind of experience, which does not seem easily achievable or sustainable by the beginning practitioner; its occurrence seems more unique and surprising than the first experience. It is an experience in which one's perceptions are intensified and integrated into a harmonious whole. In my own case, this experience lasted about an hour and faded off gently during the next two or three hours. It occurred midway through a meditation retreat, which involved eleven to fourteen hours of sitting or walking meditation each day for nine days. Briefly, this second, “heightened awareness” experience seems closest to an experience of the “buzzing, blooming confusion” that William James spoke of, minus the confusion. Instead of confusion, there is a sense of balance and blending in the experience. During a heightened awareness experience of this kind, at least one mode of perception (in this case, hearing) seems to become more alive and comprehensive.

Phenomenological Description of a "Quiet Focus" Experience

It is an experience in which thoughts quiet down, making it relatively easy to concentrate on a single focus. This quiet focus experience seems to require some achievement, or at least patience, on the part of a beginning practitioner, in the sense that it may not occur right away during a session but may occur only fifteen to thirty minutes into a session, if it occurs at all.

Usually the quiet focus experience is preceded by a different kind of experience, which is very common during meditation and which is characterized by a stream of thoughts that seem to be spoken in the mind—i.e., chatter inside the mind. When this inner chatter experience occurs, it is usually difficult to focus on something other than the thoughts being immediately chatted in one's mind; one needs to use effort to turn one's attention away from the chattering thoughts back to one's chosen point of focus. But when the quiet focus experience occurs, it seems as though an alteration occurs within consciousness—though the mind shifts gears—because the mind seems to become so much quieter in contrast to the (silent) noise of thoughts in the preceding kind of inner chatter experience.
Noetic Analysis  Some thoughts still occur during the quiet focus experience, but they seem to fade into the background and become a faint whisper that is not as distracting as the noisy chatter that preceded it. Moreover, the thoughts that do arise during the quiet focus experience seem to be more slowly paced and even seem to be within one's own control, so that if one wants to eliminate them, one can, but if one wants to allow them their say, one can do that, too, without being drawn off focus. In general, then, the quiet focus experience differs qualitatively from what usually precedes it in consciousness by its overall hushed calm and by its more controllable focus.

More specific details about the nature of the conscious processes that occur in this quiet focus experience include the ease, naturalness and steadiness of focusing. One's attention centers with relatively little effort on some chosen point of focus (for example, the sensations in one's abdomen or nostrils); it seems to happen as easily as flipping a switch—all of a sudden, one can focus on the chosen point without deliberately trying to focus on it. There is still some felt sense of skill being needed to hold attention balanced on the point of focus, not allowing it to slip away, yet this skill seems almost effortless.

The naturalness of the experience is the sense that one's attention rests on the focal point with a natural kind of inertia; it seems as though there is an inner, non-material gravity keeping one's attention where it should be, so despite small jiggles due to soft-spoken, background thoughts and to physical sensations in the body, attention does not stray from the focal point. There seems to be "nowhere else to go in one's thoughts, nothing else to do," except to attend to the chosen focal point; it just seems to be the right thing to do, and so it feels natural.

The steadiness of focusing seems related to its ease and naturalness. With the onset of the quiet focus experience, attention becomes prolonged; attention seems to hover rather than flit from thought to thought. This steadiness seems to be responsible for a kind of absorption in the focal point; the longer attention holds on the focal point, the more it seems to embrace the whole of the focal point. This steadiness of focus is a very satisfying feeling; the experience seems so calm and so complete that its continuation is smooth.

Time seems to become irrelevant in the sense that there is no felt need to get on with things, no felt need for a sequence of thoughts, especially not for a sequence that implies progress or movement of thought. What was past and what might be future seem to be there in suspension but not truly needed. One almost has the sense that one could continue in the experience indefinitely; bodily sensations
do not alarm one enough to consider ending the meditation session; notions of what one planned to do that day seem fictional. (Eventually, however, when the quiet focus experience is "lost," that is, replaced by another kind of experience, one returns to a sense that time matters and that a sequence of activities needs to be performed in the time that remains, i.e., in the meditation session, in the day, the week, the year, one's lifetime, etc.)

**Noematic Analysis**  
One interesting feature of the object of awareness, when one's focal point is the abdominal rising and falling of the breath, is that between an exhalation and the next inhalation there can be a fairly lengthy period of no movement, only deep hush. Each breath, comprising both an inhaling and exhsling phase, seems to be wrapped in a soft package of soundproof cloud, separated from the next breath; and it hangs there suspended until finally a new inhalation phase starts up. It almost seems as though one could stop breathing for a long time and nothing would happen—no damage to consciousness. Thus even though breathing continues without deliberate effort, one wonders if and when the next breath will happen. Also it makes breathing seem like a sequence of separable events, each breathing phase surrounded by a void.

In sum, a quiet focus experience seems discontinuous with the experiences that precede it during meditation; it is characterized by relative silence, by ease and steadiness of focus, and by a sense of naturalness. Although a generally pleasant experience, it does not seem particularly rare or striking. One has a sense that this kind of experience can be repeated, and that it has, in fact, recurred, in a meditation practice that extends over months or years. In other words, it seems to be an accomplishment that comes with practice.

**Phenomenological Description of a "Heightened Awareness" Experience**

It seems as though nothing escapes being perceived, and it even seems as though a limitless number of sounds could be included within attention—almost as though all sounds in the world could be embraced within consciousness at the same time—making the experience seem very full and rich. The experience seems to overflow with perceptual content and yet there is no sense of strain or frenzy in the experience; instead there is a feeling of security that all perceptual data, no matter how varied or voluminous, can be easily accommodated within the experience.

Moreover, all sounds are received equally; none seems to be given more attention than the others. All sounds seem equally vivid and important; none are heard as louder or softer, and none are conceived as more important or less important than others. In other
words, there does not seem to be a distinction between background sounds and foreground sounds (i.e., the sounds actually focused upon). Instead of such a sharp distinction between foreground and background sounds, there seems to be an expansion of awareness so that all sounds can be focused upon at once, without requiring a ranking for attention’s sake. Thus the experience seems to be a pure hearing without preference or judgment.

Although the experience includes some identification of perceptual data (e.g., awareness that the sounds are of a cricket chirping, a car or airplane passing, a bird flying), there does not seem to be a commitment to identifying and cataloguing the sounds. Thus whatever identification there is, seems somewhat lackadaisical or superfluous. The sounds just seem to “come in and go out” without any attempt to retain them in consciousness or to examine their causes or significance. Moreover, there is no attempt to identify patterns in the sounds-for example, no effort to discover repetitions or causal connections amongst sounds. There is virtually no use of memory or anticipation in the experience; instead of searching for patterns in the sounds, one is simply immersed in perception, completely attuned to the full impact of the present moment, with all that it contains.

In such a heightened awareness experience one’s surroundings appear to be a seamless unity of objects and sensations; not only is there no sensed distinction between different things (even when one can identify each individually), but there seems to be no distinction between a perceived thing, one’s perception of the thing, and one’s own consciousness. For example, the sounds appear to have different qualities of pitch, rhythm, etc., as well as the individuality of tones beginning and ending at different times. Yet the sounds also seem to belong with one another, as though they are part of a universal symphony; there is no conflict between the sounds. Further, there is a seamless quality in the experience such that everything perceived, including oneself, seems glued together into one huge bubble of experience. One seems to be inside this bubble, surrounded on all sides by a wealth of harmonious perceptions, while at the same time part of this bubble as well. Another way to describe this peculiar seamless quality of the experience is that one seems to be immersed in a highly active medium. What one experiences (e.g., sounds, the objects supposedly producing those sounds) are also part and parcel of this medium—they are not distinct from this medium—just as oneself is part of this medium. Thus there is an overall sense of blending, merging, integration and harmony of all ingredients of the heightened awareness experience—one’self, all perceptual data, and all the objects being perceived (e.g., a melting together of oneself, all the sounds of chirping, roaring, laughter, and all the birds, airplanes, people, etc.) into a unified, yet limitless whole.
One offshoot of this sense of seamless merging and "surrounding-ness" is that one seems to lose one's normal sense of space and direction during the heightened awareness experience. Sounds do not seem to come from any specific direction; one does not seem able to locate the direction from which the sounds supposedly come. Instead, all the sounds seem all around. It is as though one is immersed in water and the sounds are simply in the water, too, rather than coming from a specific part of space. Distance seems less relevant than in normal perceptual experiences; one feels as though one can perceive things near or far with the same kind of awareness.

Even though this kind of heightened awareness experience is primarily perceptual, it does not exclude reflective thoughts about the experience itself. The vitality, intensity and comprehensiveness of the experience are usually noticeable within the experience. While on the one hand, one is alertly attentive to a wealth of perceptual data, on the other hand, one recognizes the qualitative difference between one's immediate experience and the more typical kinds of perceptual experiences one has had in life. Thus even though one's attention is engrossed in perception, one is able to reflect upon the altered nature of the experience and judge it as a heightening of awareness. There is a quality of surprise (at least for the beginning practitioner) in this reflective acknowledgement that the heightened awareness experience is truly different from the vast majority of perceptual experiences; one is rather awe-struck at the peculiar nature of the experience; one even wonders how the experience is possible at all.

This particular kind of heightened awareness experience does not, however, seem to be a mystical, ecstatic or extraordinary experience. The content of the experience is ordinary; the only thing remarkable about the experience is the quality of one's awareness—not what one actually perceives. For example, one hears the same old sounds as one usually would—birds singing, wind blowing, people walking—only these sounds are heard all together so that they seem richer, fuller and more integrated than they would in a typical hearing experience. Even though the heightened awareness experience is satisfying, and usually one does not want it to end, the experience does not include positive emotions of joy, delight or ecstasy; the experience actually seems neutral in its emotional tone. Thus, during the experience, one even becomes convinced that such heightened awareness is accessible at any time, despite its rarity in one's own experience. One imagines that perhaps it is an underlying level of all perceptual experience, only we just do not notice it.

A final important characteristic of such a heightened awareness experience is that it is relatively uninterrupted by thoughts. During
the experience, one's mind seems empty of the usual worries, memories, desires, daydreams and other kinds of thoughts that supplant one another in fairly rapid succession in one's stream of consciousness and that tend to unsettle one's concentration on a focal point. There are still thoughts, in addition to perceptions, during the experience, but they seem faraway, as a kind of muffled, undercurrent voice. They seem "weaker in voltage" than thoughts usually do in normal consciousness, so that they do not disturb or shake awareness of sounds. Also the thoughts seem trivial, like a passing breeze that does little more than flutter the edges of things. Thus, the heightened awareness experience seems to have openness and emptiness, not in the sense of being nothing at all; rather, it is an emptiness which allows everything in. Because the heightened awareness experience is not interrupted by distracting thoughts, it is fuller and more continuously smooth than typical perceptual experiences. There is a vivid plenitude of perceptual data without the mind feeling strained or overloaded-the "buzzing, blooming confusion" but without the confusion.

In sum, the kind of heightened awareness experience described above is a sustained perceptual experience characterized by a greater richness of perceptual data, by a relative absence of distracting thoughts, and by an overall sense of merging. During the experience, one seems to be aware of all perceptual data equally, without a ranking of data in terms of their relative importance, and without a sense of how near or far the perceived objects are. The experience seems rarer than other kinds of meditative experiences, and includes recognition within the experience of its unusual nature. Its effects last beyond the "official" end of a meditation session, gradually diminishing over the course of a couple hours.

Conclusion

It is tricky to combine meditation and phenomenology, but possible. Their common ground lies in their training of attentiveness to the processes and contents of consciousness. They both dispense with attitudes that allow "real world concerns" to dominate one's thoughts, emotions, body at the expense of reflexive awareness. They both are primarily practices rather than substantive theories.

What trained phenomenologists can bring to meditation is a similar practice of observing one's own consciousness closely, a methodological familiarity with suspending the demands, enticements and commitments of a supposedly real world, and an experimental procedure (eidetic variation) that can, when appropriate, be used to stretch and to test what one experiences while in meditation. What trained meditators can bring to phenomenology is a disciplined
patience and a subtle attunement, by means of which the finer details of the processes and contents of consciousness can be observed.

What may prove to be the biggest obstacle to their collaboration is the difference between the meditator's need to sustain meditation unbroken and the phenomenologist's need to experiment upon meditation experiences by intervening with eidetic variation. Meditators sustain their meditation for the long-range purposes of uncovering truth, and of changing or clarifying deeper levels of consciousness. Perhaps the ideal is represented by Gautama Siddhartha's uninterrupted meditation under the Bo tree. Phenomenologists, on the other hand, wish to identify and analyze the subjective processes and the contents of meditation experiences; especially by performing the eidetic reduction, they run the risk of interrupting meditation in order to make their analysis methodologically complete.

NOTES

'Some authors who use the terms "phenomenology" or "phenomenological" refer to psychological theories of introspection developed by Wundt and Titchener, rather than to the branch of psychology that, in a stricter sense, has developed under the name "phenomenological psychology." This latter, more technical kind of phenomenology can be traced back to the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Giorgi (1983) and Ashworth (1976) distinguish phenomenological psychology in the stricter sense from other branches of psychology that are loosely referred to as phenomenology in the psychological literature.

2See, for example, the "Profiles of Meditation Experience Form (POME)" questionnaire, outlined in Malieszewski, Twemlow, Brown and Engler (1981); the "Profile of Trance, Imaging and Meditation Experience (TIME)" questionnaire mentioned in Forte, Brown and Dysart (1987-88); and the "Phenomenology of Consciousness Questionnaire (PCQ)" applied in Pekala and Levine (1982a), Pekala and Levine (1982b), and Pekala, Levine and Wegner (1985).


4Summaries based upon Eastern texts include Mishra (1963), Goleman (1972), Goleman (1976), Brown (1977), Brown (1986), Brown and Engler (1980), Epstein (1990). Although many Eastern texts discuss the kinds of subjective experiences occurring during meditation, as well as the progressive stages of meditation, most classical texts tend to be condensed synopses of many meditators' experiences, rather than extended phenomenological descriptions of each kind of experience. Western summaries of these texts do not themselves take a phenomenological approach, but take an approach comparable to an historian's approach; they recount and outline the categories of mental functions and stages of meditation, described in Eastern texts, as though these are reported facts about psychological processes. In other words, the psychologists summarizing these classical texts do not, as they write, attempt to replicate and describe the experiences referred to by Eastern texts.
Examples of Western psychological studies that discuss or summarize experimental subjects’ own descriptions of their experiences during meditation include Deikman (1963) and Suler (1990).


In philosophy, the Husserlian tradition of phenomenology is called "transcendental phenomenology."

"There are, of course, exceptions, e.g., Tart (1971); Walsh (1977 & 1978). Tart (1971) has recommended that meditators be trained in psychological research methods so that they may analyze their own meditation practice.

Husserl continually re-addresses these two techniques in his works in an attempt to formulate them more clearly. But for an initial account of the two techniques, one may consult his work Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology; the eidetic reduction is described in chapters 2, 6, 7 and 10, and the phenomenological reduction in chapters 3-6.

The phenomenological reduction is used to counteract the kind of automatization that Deikman (1966) describes; it is meant to suspend our habitual, virtually automatic ways of framing our experiences with categories, concepts, labels, etc.. The emphasis in the phenomenological reduction, however, is more narrowly focused on suspending our almost automatic presuppositions about the reality status of what is experienced (Husserl calls this "suspension of the natural attitude"); whereas Deikman's concept of de-automatization is broader in range, since it covers a shift away from all abstract categorization.

The phenomenon under study could be anything. For example, in a study of meditation, it could be the subjective processes occurring during meditation (e.g., thinking, feeling, sensing, remembering, phantasizing, etc.), or the objects concentrated on during meditation (e.g., mantras, candle flames, mandalas, inhalations/exhalations, etc.).


Ssofar as meditation can be practiced during any activity, the reverse situation could also occur: one could meditate while doing phenomenology.

Husserl defines noetic and noematic analyses in Ideas, chapters 9-10.

The descriptions themselves were written shortly after the two experiences; the first was written less than an hour after the meditation experience ended, and the second was written less than a week after the experience occurred. (The second could not be written earlier because the author was on retreat, under restrictions that forbade writing.) Both descriptions have been edited since they were initially written. Strictly speaking, tile descriptions are of remembered meditation experi-
ences, The author is not yet at the point of being able to write phenomenological descriptions while still in meditation.

"The following description combines noetic and noematic analysis because the nature of the experience, at the time that it was happening, made it difficult to discriminate between the content of consciousness (noema) and subjective processes of consciousness (noesis).

REFERENCES


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