

# Meditation - Becoming More Conscious of Consciousness

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*The practice of meditation incorporates a training in the use of attention, or applied consciousness. Its value as an approach to the study of consciousness lies in the knowledge gained from the experience in meditation and the consequent development of being. Meditators become more conscious of consciousness.*

In essence, the practice of meditation is a systematic process involving internal discipline which enables human beings to develop a holistic sense of what it means to be conscious. Consciousness is our common human heritage, and it has been the object of investigation ever since humans first became self-aware. Various lines of enquiry are employed: science, philosophy, religion each have particular viewpoints, although there is overlap. Complementary to these, as well as to other approaches, is one commonly known as meditation. The purpose of this article is to give a flavour of how meditation can contribute to the study of consciousness.

Over a period of many years, I have noticed that people who meditate become, *inter alia*, more aware, more perceptive and more compassionate. These qualities manifest in many ways: meditators seem to embrace large-scale world-views; moments of choice have a sharper focus; and 'hearts open'. It is also evident that the meditator's conventional sense of self, or ego, seems to become subordinate to a greater or more 'real' self, one less susceptible to everyday feelings and fashions for example. A re-structuring of 'being' takes place, as if the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual bodies become more integrated. Such transformation is a result of experiences in meditation.

What is meditation? There are many different approaches depending on context, tradition, technique, etc. However, generally, it can be described as an introspective practice which requires the sustained application of focused attention on a specific object, for example a sound, or an image, or the breath. The instructions invariably emphasise the need to bring the attention back to the object whenever the meditator becomes aware that the mind has been distracted. Regular, systematic practice is necessary: 20-30 minutes, once or twice daily is usually recommended, with longer and more frequent periods on intensive courses or retreats.

Although the practice may sound simple, implementation is not easy. Setting time aside everyday to practice any discipline, for example learning a musical instrument, can be difficult. Putting the mind under conscious direction within the meditation practice so that it is denied the stimulation of external sensations or its own self-generated musings presents additional challenges. It can often feel as if one is swimming against the currents set up by the ceaseless ebbs and flows of mental commentary that seem to pervade our conscious existence. However, perseverance and patience gradually develop a 'body' of meditational experience, which slowly matures as a result of day-to-day, year-by-year repetition. It is the *knowledge* of this experience that contributes to the study of consciousness.

What is a 'body' of meditational experience? At the outset, it is important to note that experiences in meditation will vary from person to person, both in content and in description, just as people's predilections and predispositions differ. Also, language can have its limitations: it is a representation of what is intended to be communicated, but the vocabulary is sometimes inadequate; each individual will have his/her own perspective which is reflected in the language used, and often what is not said is just as significant as what is. This needs to be borne in mind when listening to or reading about people's meditational experiences, including mine! Despite that, I hope the three examples I have chosen will cast some light on the question.

Firstly, meditating involves what I call 'consciousness-in-action' or applied consciousness, *viz.* the moment-by-moment, focused attention on the object of meditation, which acts like a regular 'drip, drip, drip' of water on a stone. This, combined with the absence of distractions (in theory), enables the mind to become relatively still, quiet and non-attached (except to the object of meditation). Eventually, with regular systematic practice, the meditator becomes increasingly aware of, amongst other things, the potential for a 'gap' between thought and action, and the difference between meditative states and the everyday preoccupations of the mind.

Secondly, meditation is like a journey during which an overview of the terrain through which the meditator 'travels' is gradually revealed - a 'mind-scape' similar to the landscape viewed by the mountaineer. With repeated and frequent practice, the meditator learns to recognise and become familiar with features of the mind-scape - we might call them 'mind-marks' - just as one learns the relationship between landmarks on the ground and the respective symbols on a map. It is as if such recognition, and the growing awareness mentioned in the previous paragraph, combine in ways that facilitate understanding; like a map and compass, both of which are key to navigation.

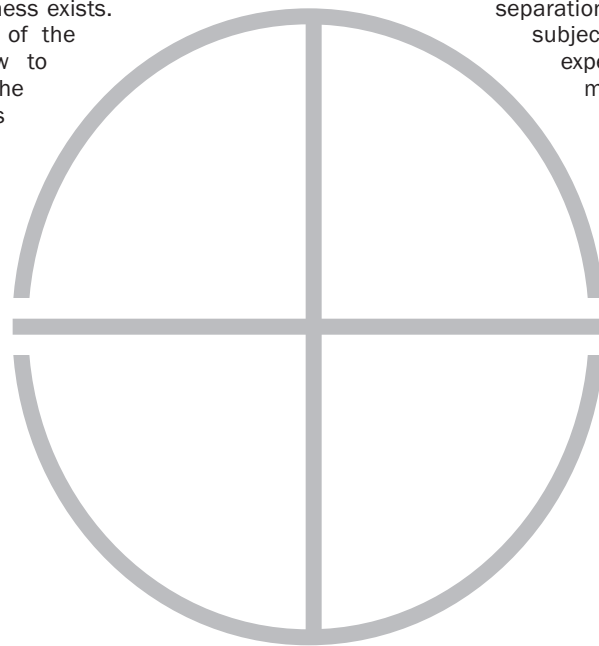
Thirdly, many meditators will have had direct experience or had intimations of what might be called 'something beyond' or the numinous or the unknown. This is a level of (un-)consciousness with qualities which seem to transcend normal space and time - attributes such as infinite, eternal, etc. are common - and which are often described in terms of myth, metaphor or analogy. Nevertheless, it is likely that meditators from most traditions will recognise a sense of a 'reality' about this state - a sort of common ground as it were. The repetitive process of the meditation practice seems to act like a key in slowly unlocking the gates to this realm, such that not only does it become familiar, but its awesome and mysterious qualities seem to be amplified.

How do such experiences relate to consciousness studies? What do we mean by *consciousness*, and what does it mean to be conscious, or conscious of something? A *sine qua non* of our human-ness is that we are conscious beings. In other words, not only are we aware of ourselves and our participation in this universe, we also have the ability to question what this means.

There is as yet no common agreement on a definition of consciousness; indeed, it may be inexplicable. However some context is necessary, and a description which is apt for the human perspective states: 'consciousness is our awareness of our capability to know that we know'. As it stands, this may seem somewhat convoluted, but each phrase has a certain ring of truth about it: consciousness is awareness; as humans we are aware; we are aware of our *capability to know*; and occasionally, we *know that we know!* Note: implicit in this description is the 'presence' of the unconscious, of the unknown, just as something 'includes' nothing. And the possibility exists that the unknown, or the 'something beyond', are in some mysterious way 'known'.

At the level of the personal, I can only say that *I know* something because *I know* that *I exist*. How do *I know* that? Because *I feel* and do things, *I think* thoughts and have ideas, *I am moved*, etc. This knowing is incorporated in the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual bodies which comprise the human being: it includes the mind, which is continuously translating, interpreting and storing data and information; the body which 'knows' how to operate - mostly without apparent conscious intervention; the emotions - that which move us - and which provide 'fuel' for most of what we do, feel or think; and the spirit which represents the essence or totality of what we are. Everything else may be an illusion, but these are the experiences of *my* existence, hence *self-consciousness*, and confirmation, if any is needed, that *I am* a conscious, self-aware participant in this universe.

There is a view that from the moment of human conception a level of consciousness exists. Throughout gestation the cells of the developing embryo 'know' how to reproduce and develop. From the moment of birth, as conscious beings, we gradually become aware of ourselves, other people, our surroundings, the possibility of choice, etc. Throughout our lives, we balance our own perceived needs with those of others, our creative potential with the security of the familiar, and many other conflicts large and small with which we wrestle moment-by-moment, day-by-day. Above all, we try to make sense of our lives through



patterns, models or meaning structures, perhaps as an anchor for the paradoxes and insecurity of the 'something beyond', which we sense underlies our existence. And then death; but does consciousness die too?

What does the experience of meditation tell us about consciousness? The three examples described above provide some clues. Being conscious of a moment of choice gives life a different quality compared with the habitual and mechanicalness of mundane existence. A combination of this with the ability to recognise what I have called mindmarks, means we can now understand the patterns and models which we create to make sense of things, and how they influence the evolution of our world views. This is knowledge gained via experience, rather than just through intellectual analysis; like climbing a mountain oneself as opposed to taking the cable-car.

A challenge of a different order is how meditation 'opens the heart' and helps to cultivate consideration, compassion, love, etc. What seems to happen is that the practice of meditation sensitises the emotional body; it heightens our sense of the awesome mystery of the universe, and reveals something about the 'true' nature of consciousness (including pre-, sub-, semi- and un-consciousness). I am tempted to call this the 'fine-tuning of conscience'. (Note: the French word '*conscience*' means both conscious and conscience.) It might be said that open-heartedness is a direct function of how physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually integrated we are as human beings, even if the precise mechanics of the underlying processes remaining hidden. In the words of the oft-quoted Blaise Pascal, "the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know".

Unsurprisingly, all of this is just the tip of the iceberg. I have said nothing about the consequences resulting from 'being more conscious' - e.g. the impact on morality, ethics, governance of human affairs etc. Nor have I addressed the relationship between meditation and the tensions arising from within the scientific, philosophical and religious viewpoints - separation vs unification, inner vs outer, subjective vs objective, experiential vs experimental, real vs virtual etc. There is much more detail to be explored at greater depths; and more questions posed than answers given.

However, I conclude this brief review by asserting that: meditation is an opportunity for regular, sustained and conscious interaction with and within the 'field of consciousness'; the experience of systematic and long-term practice results in a re-structuring of the meditator's 'being'; and the value of meditation is that participants become more conscious of consciousness.

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