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**Awareness without Time[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Abstract**

Recently, philosophers with an interest in consciousness have turned their attention towards “fringe states of consciousness”. Examples include dreams, trances, and meditative states. Teetering between wakefulness and non-consciousness, fringe states illuminate the limits and boundaries of consciousness. This paper aims to give a coherent conceptualization of deep meditative states, focussing in particular on phenomenal temporality during meditation. Advanced meditators overwhelmingly describe deep states of meditation as atemporal and timeless; however, they also report being continuously alert while meditating. I intend to give a coherent interpretation of this apparent contradiction. After introducing some candidate interpretations, I shall argue that during (deepest) meditation, the subject experiences ‘pure duration’ without temporal structure. This, I argue, explains best why meditators describe deep meditation as ongoing but timeless awareness. A central part of the paper will expand on an account of phenomenal duration without phenomenal succession. The conclusion points towards some further avenues of research.

Keywords:

Time, Temporal experience, consciousness, meditation, attention.

**1. Introduction**

In recent years, contemporary philosophers with an interest in consciousness have turned their attention towards ‘fringe states’ of consciousness. Examples may include dreams, trances and deep meditative states. Teetering between wakefulness and non-consciousness, fringe states illuminate the limits and boundaries of consciousness. This paper will focus on “fully absorbed” deep meditative states. If we take reports about meditation by meditators seriously, then deep meditative states seem to constitute ‘pure consciousness experiences’, experiences that are wakeful but contentless. According to Thomas Metzinger (2020), these experiences might be ‘minimal phenomenal experiences’ (a term introduced by Jennifer Windt in 2015) which may be integral parts of any experience but can occur on their own in meditation. The hope is that investigating deep meditation states might reveal more about minimal phenomenal experiences, the nature of consciousness itself and what it is to be conscious. In the context of this broader relevance, this paper aims to contribute to this program by focussing on the phenomenal temporality during meditation.

There are countless reports from as early as the Upanishads to present day mindfulness centres describing advanced “fully absorbed” meditative states as, on the one hand, wakeful states of complete timelessness, and on the other, as states during which one is ‘throughout’ and ‘continuously’ awake. A ‘wakeful state of complete timelessness’ suggests that subjects are conscious without being conscious of any temporal feature. But if one is aware of being ‘continuously’ awake, then one must be aware of being awake for some time. This appears to be contradictory. My aim is to provide a coherent interpretation of this apparent contradiction. Essentially, the argument is that we should think of deep meditative states as states that are experienced as having some (minimal) temporal features, yet in such a way that it is still natural enough to describe them as timeless. That feature, I suggest, is duration.

I shall begin with a characterisation of deep meditative states as pure consciousness experiences, briefly addressing two initial problems in section two. In section three, I argue that our standard psychological model to explain duration experience in humans does not seem suited to explain temporal experience in the deep meditation case. In section four I introduce and develop the idea that meditators experience duration without temporal structure or what I call an ‘extended phenomenal now’. I propose that this best explains why subjects describe deep meditative states as timeless and yet continuous and ongoing. I then develop the account by arguing that at each moment during the meditation, a subject experiences sustained alertness. I finally suggest that the feeling of sustained alertness gives rise to a sense of duration without sense of temporal structure. The conclusion points towards some further avenues of research.

**2. Meditation as Pure Consciousness Experience**

Meditators from various traditions, cultures and epochs report experiencing a peculiar type of awareness during highly advanced, fully absorbed meditation. What they describe is a conscious state that feels alert but devoid any content. This is often referred to as a ‘pure consciousness state’, ‘pure awareness state’ or ‘pure consciousness experience’. Prominent examples include the Advaita Vedanta school (Gupta 1998), Yogācāra Buddhism (Lusthaus 2014), Tibetan Buddhism (Fremantle 2001), Christian mystical traditions (Forman 1990, 1998, 1999; Shear, 1998) as well as reports from secular mindfulness practitioners. Philosopher Walter Terence Stace (1961) describes the pure consciousness experience as follows:

There would be no mental content whatever but rather a complete emptiness, vacuum, void. One would suppose *a priori* that consciousness would then entirely lapse and one would fall asleep or become unconscious. But the introvertive mystics—thousands of them all over the world—unanimously assert that they have attained to this complete vacuum of particular mental contents, but that what then happens is quite different from a lapse into unconsciousness. On the contrary, what emerges is a state of *pure* consciousness— “pure” in the sense that it is not the consciousness of any empirical content. It has no content except itself. (Stace 1961: 86)

The Upanishads, in one of the earliest writings on states of consciousness, mention four states: wakefulness, dreaming, sleep and a pure consciousness state (*turiya*).

They consider the [pure consciousness state] (…) neither as perceiving nor as not perceiving; as unseen; as beyond the reach of ordinary transaction; as ungraspable; as without distinguishing marks; as unthinkable; as indescribable; as one whose essence is the perception of itself alone; as the cessation of the visible world; as tranquil; as auspicious; as without a second. (Olivelle 1998: 475 quoted inSrinivasan 2020: 1)

Buddhists mention four ‘planes’ of consciousness, where the fourth (‘*nirvana’*) is supposed to be ‘unintentional consciousness’*,* or a ‘pure awareness state’ (Forman 1999). According to Yogācāra Buddhists, in *Samadhi* meditation one’s consciousness is said to persist as some form of ‘contentless and attributeless consciousness’ (Forman 1999). In the Christian mystical literature, St. Teresa of Avila writes of what she calls the ‘orison of union’:

During the short time the union lasts, she is deprived of every feeling, and even if she would, she could not think of any single thing… She is utterly dead to the things of the world…I do not even know whether in this state she has enough life left to breathe. It seems to me she has not; or at least that if she does breathe, she is unaware of it…The natural action of all her faculties [are suspended]. She neither sees, hears, nor understands. (Forman 1998: 365)

Meister Eckhart describes something similar as ‘rapture’ of St. Paul, and what Walshe calls

the ‘archetype of a transient mystical experience’: ‘(…) In this case…memory no longer functioned, nor understanding, nor the senses, nor the powers that should function so as to govern and grace the body…In this way a man should flee his senses, turn his powers inward and sink into an oblivion of all things and himself.’ (Walshe 1987: 7)*.*

There are also phenomenological reports from contemporary meditators:

‘I experience pure consciousness as a state of unboundedness and total ease and deep relaxation. (…) There is no notion of time or space, but my mind is fully awake and perfectly clear.’ (Alexander, 1988, p. 3)

Metzinger (2020) points to crucial common denominators in reports about the phenomenology of pure consciousness experiences:

* Wakefulness: subjects feel alert and wakeful.
* Low complexity: there is little or no content at all to the experience.
* Non-cognitive: non-symbolic, non-conceptual
* Non-egoic: no self-location in time or space
* Non-spatial: any orientation within space is lost
* Atemporal

Although largely negative in character, we may take these features as guides to what the state in question is supposed to be like, or, perhaps more demandingly, as criteria for what a pure consciousness experience would have to be like to count as one. It is important to note here that the features are not meant to be characteristic of any mindfulness exercise. Meditation practice can be experienced at varying degrees of immersion, ranging from “light meditation” to highly advanced states of profound absorption. During less intensive levels of meditation, something I imagine many readers have experienced, subjects attempt to relax, let go of thoughts, concentrate on a particular perception or sensation, for example their own breathing. Only some of the criteria above may be partially or fully realized. In contrast, during highly advanced, fully absorbed meditation, all of the above criteria are supposed to be fully realized. I shall call such fully absorbed states of meditation ‘Meditation\*’ and all other, less immersive meditative states ‘meditation light’.

Is Meditation\* possible? One approach is to dismiss the reports and reject their validity. However, considering the abundance of existing reports across a wide range of cultures, traditions, and historical periods, I suggest that such a dismissal would be contrary to the principles of philosophical inquiry, progress, and intellectual curiosity. Another approach is to try and make sense of the reports in the framework of philosophy and science.

There are, however, two immediate worries that one might have about the methodology of any such project which I wish to address briefly. First there is the ‘theory contamination’ challenge (Metzinger 2019: 8/9). It is unavoidable that experiences and reports are influenced through cultural context, tradition, and practice dependent expectations, in the sense that cultural practices may describe ever more what one “should” experience during meditation. The worry is that this knowledge may turn into a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ by changing the way information is processed and reported, resulting in meditators experiencing roughly what they are expected to in Meditation\*. One way to counteract this is to take a large variety of cultural contexts and historical epochs into account to find common features across cultures and times. (see Metzinger ibid.)

Then there is the epistemic challenge. How can one provide an accurate account of meditation experiences when meditation is characterized by the absence of memory and a sense of self? It appears questionable whether an experience with these features can be fully integrated into autobiographical memory and subsequently reported on. The challenge arises from the fact that only the transition into and out of meditation can be recollected, while the actual meditative episode remains disconnected from the individual's personal narrative. In answer to this challenge, Metzinger proposes that there might be subconscious mechanisms that can generate unconscious memories, even of episodes of complete absorption. Certain regions of the brain could potentially store selfless experiences, while others subsequently reinterpret them in a format that fits into one's autobiographical framework, as if they were experienced by a self. Afterwards, individuals incorporate expressions such as ‘I’, ‘now’, or ‘here’ in their references to the contents of their own memories. The mental or linguistic representation of an event introduces the notions of spatio-temporal self-location and subject/object distinction, even though these characteristics were absent during Meditation\*. (see Metzinger 2020:15).

Aside from these methodological issues, there might also be a fundamental conceptual problem.

Pure consciousness experiences, of the sort we assume to be realized during Meditation\*, is supposed to be an experience with phenomenology (simply *qua* being conscious) albeit without content. How are we to understand experiences which have phenomenology, i.e. there is ‘something it is like’ to have them, which are not experiences of something? Traditionally in philosophy, all awareness is understood as awareness *of something,* as famously articulated by Franz Brentano:

‘Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what (…) we could call, although in not entirely unambiguous terms, the reference to a content, a direction upon an object (…)’. (Brentano 1955: 124)

For Brentano, intentionality, directedness towards something, is precisely what distinguishes the mental from the non-mental (see Aquila 1974). One way to solve this problem is to think of pure consciousness experiences as having content but in such a way that subjects would naturally but falsely describe them as ‘empty’ or ‘without content’. Metzinger for example argues that “pure consciousness” has some form of non-conceptual content namely its own ‘tonic alertness’ (Metzinger 2020: 24 pp), which in turn is experienced as wakefulness. Top of FormBottom of Form

Neuroscientists and in particular sleep scientists argue that when we are conscious, our brains are always in a state of ‘tonic alertness’, a state of sustained baseline wakefulness and attentiveness. Tonic alertness describes a general minimal readiness to respond to stimuli, as opposed to ‘phasic alertness’ which represents short-term increases in arousal in response to specific stimuli. One might say that tonic alertness is a fundamental and minimal condition for consciousness. Normally we are not phenomenally aware of being in that state, since its phenomenal character (‘wakefulness’) is obscured by the contents of our minds (perceptions, sensations, thoughts, etc.). In a state of pure consciousness, when the mind is empty of such contents, we only experience tonic alertness. Such experiences may therefore plausibly (but falsely) be reported as having no content at all (Metzinger 2020). In other words, the claim is that during Meditation\*, the pure consciousness state is one of reflexive awareness. The intentionality challenge is avoided since the awareness is awareness *of something*, namely of itself, and even though it is strictly speaking false, it is in some sense natural for a subject to describe these experiences as without content since there is no other object of experience, no object that is extraneous to the experience itself.

One might have concerns regarding Metzinger’s responses to the challenges. The question of whether we can ultimately make sense of reflexive awareness is a subject of significant debate in the literature.[[2]](#footnote-2) There is certainly more to say about the methodology of research involving the phenomenology of meditative states too. Perhaps there are different, even better ways to tackle the problems mentioned. However, to this point I have merely introduced what one may call Metzinger’s model, i.e. his particular conception of Meditation\*, to show that it is *in principle* possible to overcome initial methodological and conceptual challenges. Although I am sympathetic to the model, I shall not be arguing for it here. A full defence of Meditation\* and pure consciousness experiences is a much more ambitious topic for another time. This paper merely intends to look at one small part of the puzzle, namely whether (and if so, how) it is possible to have an experience that seems completely timeless, i.e. without any temporal feature whatsoever. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that Meditation\* is possible, and that episodes of Meditation\* constitute pure consciousness experiences which are reflexively directed towards their own tonic alertness, which, in turn, has the phenomenology of wakefulness to the subject.

**3. Awareness without Time?**

Throughout various epochs, cultures and traditions, numerous meditators have consistently identified timelessness as a fundamental characteristic of Meditation\*. Here is, for example, Zen Buddhist Daisetsu Tetaro Suzuki:

‘*There is no time*, no space, no becoming, nothingness. . . when the mind is devoid of all its possible content’ (Stace 1961: 109, my italics).

In Vedic psychology, transcendental meditation is supposed to achieve a state of transcendental consciousness, which is characterized by being ‘unbounded in space and time’ (Alexander 1988). Here are some quotes from meditators reporting about their experience:

I experience pure consciousness as a state of unboundedness and total ease and deep relaxation. (…) There is *no notion of time* or space, but my mind is fully awake and perfectly clear. (Alexander 1988: 3, my italics)

‘[...] a state of complete rest, full consciousness without content and *unbounded in time* and space.’ (Severeide 1990: 1570, quoted from Bachmann 2014: 52, my italics.)

Metzinger, for one, seems to take these reports literally when he says that during Meditation\* ‘subjects are not oriented in time at all’, and that ‘there is no experience of “nowness”, duration or abstract temporal structure’ (Metzinger 1919: 43). The way I understand Metzinger, which is also the most straightforward way to understand the quotes, is in terms of a state during which the subject is conscious without being conscious of any temporal feature intrinsic or extrinsic to that state. This is presumably also what Metzinger means with ‘not oriented in time at all’. That is to say the meditator is not perceiving order or succession of anything in the world, nor are they aware of the meditative state following on from another mental state, or have expectation of it being followed by another, or of its internal temporal structure in terms of successive temporal parts. They are also not aware of the state’s beginning or end (‘unbounded in time’). In brief, the subject is not aware of the state’s ‘abstract temporal structure’. Moreover, an experienced complete timelessness implies no awareness of duration (neither determinate, in the sense of knowing how much time has (roughly) passed, nor indeterminate, in the sense of knowing that time has passed), nor of a phenomenal now “moving through” the meditative period. The central question of this article is whether it is possible to have an experience of this kind. In other words, completely timeless i.e. without any temporal feature whatsoever, where ‘any temporal feature whatsoever’ is shorthand for what I have stated explicitly above. My answer will be ‘strictly speaking ‘no’’, although it is natural enough for subjects to describe the experience as ‘timeless’. In that sense, the reports are not incoherent.

There may be a straightforward empirical explanation for the experienced timelessness during Meditation\*. Duration distortions occur when we experience time as passing faster or slower than it actually does, or when we retrospectively judge a duration to have lasted longer or shorter than it in fact did. Such distortions are standardly explained with the internal clock model.[[3]](#footnote-3) Said model posits an internal clock whose function is to generate signals or ‘pulses’ (neuronal events of some sort). The perceived duration depends on the number of pulses registered by an ‘accumulator’ during a given period. How many pulses are generated and subsequently registered depends on (i) level of brain arousal and (ii) what our attention is directed to. To simplify:

More stimulation🡪 higher brain arousal 🡪 more pulses being generated.

The more we attend to the passing of time (watching the clock)🡪 more pulses are subsequently registered 🡪 time seems to pass slower.

fig.1

Interval of 3s feels like 5s long.

t2

t3

t1

Objective time

Fewer stimulation🡪 lower brain arousal🡪 fewer pulses are generated.

The less we attend to the passing of time 🡪the fewer pulses are registered. 🡪 time seems to pass quicker.

fig.2

Interval of 3s feels like 2s long.

Objective time

t3

t1

t2

Experiments have shown that intervals spent in meditation light are systematically judged shorter than intervals without any engagement in meditation (Doit-Volet *et al.* 2018). This is coherent with the internal clock model explanation:

Meditation Light:

Relaxed state🡪 fewer stimulations🡪 lower brain arousal 🡪 less pulses are generated.

Subjects attend less to the passing of time 🡪 fewer pulses are counted by the accumulator.

fig.3

Meditation interval of 3s feels like 2s long.

Objective time

t3

t2

t1

All these factors result in the meditation period being judged shorter afterwards. If we follow this logic, the model may explain the appearance of complete timelessness in Meditation\*:

No stimulations at all 🡪 No pulses are counted by the accumulator🡪 no experienced duration.

fig.4

Empty box: no experienced duration at all?

Objective time

t3

t2

t1

The problem with this explanation is that it is difficult to make sense of an experience that is literally without any duration whatsoever. Focussing on the phenomenology, one might think that if my state appears to have literally *zero* duration, it does not appear conscious. It does not appear at all. It is hard to make sense of someone stating that they felt awake and conscious, and this lasted exactly—no time at all.[[4]](#footnote-4) In fact, it seems to express the opposite fact: if there is no time at which I am awake and conscious, well, then I am *not* awake and conscious. The internal clock model interpretation appears to easily explain the felt timelessness of Meditation\*, but it merely supports a statement which is contradictory: it cannot be the right way to explain what is going on.

One way to make the internal clock model interpretation coherent is to think of Meditation\* as a state at the entering of which only a *single* pulse is registered by the accumulator. Instead of thinking no experienced duration equals no experienced time at all, no experienced duration may also mean one has an experience that lasts for just a moment. Maybe entering the novel consciousness state (the Meditation\* state) is stimulating enough for a pulse to be generated and subsequently registered. This makes sense if we think of entering into Meditation\* as a phenomenological change that the subject is aware of. If only a single pulse were registered, subjects might report a conscious experience that seems to lack duration: Meditation\* would just be experienced as a momentary flash of consciousness. Such a state may be brief but at least not inherently incoherent.

Alternatively, Meditation\* may be constituted by a succession of such moments. Although Meditation\* would in fact last longer than just a moment, it would be unlikely to be reported as having lasted. This is due to the fact that during Meditation\*, the meditator’s memory faculties, long- and short term, seem to be suspended, which is sometimes reported as complete loss of orientation within objective world time as well as loss of orientation in one’s own personal timeline (Ataria *et al*. 2015). With suspended memory faculties, the meditator would be unaware that they are actually experiencing a progression of different moments. From one moment to the next, they would simply not remember having experienced a different moment from the currently experienced one.

Although these two interpretations are not inherently contradictory or fraught with conceptual or metaphysical issues, they present other challenges. In particular, they do not sit well with meditator reports. It is hard to see how anyone could be aware of (and subsequently describe) the phenomenology of a strictly momentary experience (other than, maybe, that it seemed momentary). On the contrary though, meditators are able to describe the phenomenology of Meditation\*, and they do so in widely consensual ways. This in itself is good support against the idea that the pure consciousness experience instantiated during Meditation\* is experienced as strictly instantaneous.

Looking at the content of the reports, a curious sort of incoherence is noticeable. Here is, for example, a quote from T.L. Borghardt, an experienced meditator for over forty years:

In retrospect, I can remember having been *awake the entire time, but there was no sense of time.* (Costines *et al.* 2021: 5, my italics)

The meditator asserting that ‘there was no sense of time’, is presumably one quote indicative of many examples which led to ‘timelessness’ or ‘atemporality’ being one of the defining criteria for Meditation\*. However, there is also a preceding part in the quote where the meditator states that he remembers having been awake ‘the *entire* time’, which suggests an experience of duration. This is supported by other reports for instance this one from Robert K.C. Forman in which he characterizes Meditation\* as a state of ‘unbroken continuity’ and speaks of consciousness over a period of time:

First, I emerge with a quiet, intuited certainty that I was *continually present,* that there was an *unbroken continuity* of experience or of consciousness *throughout the meditation period* (…). (Forman 1999: my italics)

In yet other reports, subjects describe Meditation\* as a state that seems ‘unbounded’:

I experience pure consciousness as a state of *unboundness* and total ease and deep relaxation. (…) There is *no notion of time* or space, but my mind is fully awake and perfectly clear. (Alexander 1988: 3)

A plausible assumption about what subjects mean when they talk about consciousness ‘unbounded in time’, or, more carefully, what we can infer about the phenomenology from their statement, is that they may not be aware of the (temporal) boundaries of the experience. This phenomenological datum too seems incompatible with the assumption that Meditation\* appears momentary to the meditator. It is not particularly controversial to hold that what makes one experience some event as momentary is precisely that one is aware of its closely set boundaries.

We find ourselves facing a dilemma at this point. Our initial approach to conceptualizing Meditation\* was based on the sincere consideration of first-person reports from meditators. One of the features of Meditation\* which seems to coincide in meditator reports is that it is experienced as timeless. However, if what I have argued is on the right track, then it makes no sense to think of Meditation\* as an experience that seems completely timeless, i.e. without any temporal features whatsoever. I have also argued that it is implausible that the experience seems strictly instantaneous to the meditator, i.e. as having no other temporal feature but, perhaps, temporal location. A way out, I suggest, may be to take a similar route as Metzinger has taken to resolve the problem of allegedly contentless experiences. That is, we should think of Meditation\* as a state that is experienced as having some (minimal) temporal features, but in such a way that it is still natural enough (though strictly speaking false) to describe Meditation\* as timeless. That feature, I suggest, is duration. In what follows, I will explore ways to develop this idea.

**4. The Extended Now Interpretation**

I suggest that Meditation\* does not appear to have any temporal content or structure at all, apart from duration. Meditation\* is not phenomenally atemporal. It is experienced as a duration without succession, or what I will call an ‘extended phenomenal now’. I will refer to this view as the ‘Extended Now Interpretation’ (ENI), which I argue is compatible with the reports and makes the most sense. This section is divided into four subsections. I start by arguing that we use the word ‘timeless’ ambiguously to sometimes refer to absolute atemporality and sometimes to a period of time without structure. In 4.2. I shall suggest that meditators may experience Meditation\* as precisely such structureless periods of time, which I will call the phenomenal NOW. In 4.3. I introduce my account of how meditators experience the phenomenal NOW during Meditation\*. Finally, in 4.4., I will show that my account is compatible with the fact that meditators have suspended memory faculties during Meditation\*. Since the view relies on a phenomenology of agency during Meditation\*, the last section of this paper will address the challenge of having such phenomenology without thereby having a phenomenology of oneself as agent.

**4.1. The ambiguity of ‘timeless’**

It is hard to make sense of the idea that there is something it is like to be in Meditation\* with that phenomenology entirely lacking *any* temporal features whatsoever. We are trying to make sense of the fact that Meditation\* is standardly described as ‘timeless’ by meditators. However, it is not clear to me that the term ‘timeless’ universally implies complete and absolute absence of time. In ordinary language, ‘timeless’ can be used somewhat ambiguously. It may refer to a complete absence of any temporal features. Or it is used to signify periods which are, or are experienced as, without temporal structure i.e. without internal temporal order or succession. I suggest the reports about Meditation\* are better understood in the latter sense. Take this quote from Borghardt:

Timeless awareness during meditation is an awakening. It has neither beginning nor end. This *timeless time* is plunging into a being in which no comparison takes place. Comparisons always involve relationships between before and after. (Costines *et al.* 2021:5, my italics.)

Consider the phrase ‘timeless time’ in the quote. Avoiding flat contradiction, ‘timeless’ cannot just mean ‘without time’, as in complete negation of anything temporal. More plausibly, it refers to an absence of *temporal structure* as in succession (no ‘before and after’), order and change in Meditation\*, whereas ‘time’ in the second occurrence refers to the *duration* over which the Meditation\* takes place. Here is another quote by Borghardt, which seems to support this interpretation:

In retrospect, I can remember having been awake the entire time, but there was no sense of time (Costines *et al.* 2021: ibid.)

Again, on pain of contradiction, ‘time’ must refer to different things. My suggestion is that Borghardt refers to duration with the first ‘time’ and to (the absence of) temporal structure with the second. I suggest that the reason that meditators report Meditation\* as “timeless” may be due to the fact that they are not aware of any temporal feature whatsoever—no succession, no temporal order, no change—except for duration.

The sense of timeless as ‘duration without temporal structure’ is known from other contexts. For example, in the philosophy of religion, Deng (2023) credits Stump and Kretzmann (1992) with the contemporary version of the view that a timeless being experiences a life of ‘atemporal duration’.Consider also this quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein:

If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present. (Wittgenstein 1961: 6.4311).

I borrow Wittgenstein’s quote here form an article by Mauro Dorato (2021) in which he points out that Wittgenstein’s quote shows that ‘timelessness’ can also be understood as a (psychological) ‘eternal present’, in which we have no memories and no anticipations anymore (see Dorato 2021: 6). An eternal present in that sense would not be atemporal; it would simply be a period without anticipations nor memories, thus without awareness of before and after, without succession or order. It almost suggests itself to apply Wittgenstein’s ‘eternal present’ to Meditation\*: while not eternal, Meditation\* is a period that is phenomenologically without change or succession. There are no memories and no anticipations, thus no before and after during that time, and it is in this sense that we can speak of Meditation\* as an extended present or extended phenomenological now.

The ambiguity of the word ‘timeless’ explains how the reports make sense, even if meditators are aware of Meditation\* lasting for some time. This may be particular to duration. To see why, briefly consider the different temporal features a subject may usually be aware of in experience. (1) succession, (2) order, (3) temporal boundaries, (4) determinate duration (how long something lasts), (5) indeterminate duration or temporal extension (that something lasts). Awareness of duration, in the indeterminate sense, is fundamental to being aware of any other temporal feature. I cannot have a sense of how long something lasts, without also having a sense that it lasts for some time since there cannot be a determinate length of time without temporal extension as such. Further, there are no boundaries without extension. If I am not aware of something as lasting for some time, it makes no sense to ask when it starts or ends either. Succession and order both require at least two items that follow each other in time: this logically implies duration. In other words, one can only be aware of features (1)-(4) if one is also aware of (5), indeterminate duration. (1)-(4) depend on (5), but (5) does not depend on (1)-(4). An experience can be accurately described as timeless, I argue, if it lacks features (1)-(4) but still has (5). For ease of reading, I will simply write ‘duration’ when I refer to indeterminate duration unless otherwise noted.

**4.2. The extended phenomenal NOW**

ENI, which I shall defend here as the most plausible characterization of Meditation\*, is the view that Meditation\* occurs over an interval that is experienced as an extended present, in the sense that there is no awareness of before and after within Meditation\*. I shall stress that I am not talking about the metaphysical present in the A-theoretical sense but a phenomenal present or now. To avoid any misunderstandings, I shall call this phenomenological present, i.e. the time that is merely experienced as present in the specific sense that I set out above, the NOW.

There is some similarity between the NOW and the better-known ‘specious present’, a brief period where experiences are supposed to be diachronically unified in one phenomenal field (see Dainton 2000). However, there is reason to distinguish the notions. While the specious present and the NOW are both experienced as having duration, they differ in how they are experienced and in their theoretical role. The concept of the specious present is supposed to explain how we perceive changes and successions. According to its theory, we are perceptually aware of movement and change. We do not need to infer that something has moved, say, from (instantaneous) perceptual and memory contents. A single perceptual experience can represent what happens over a brief interval, the specious present. A subject S’ sense of duration comes from (is explained by) S’ representing successions *as* successions—even if S is aware of the entire succession in one go, head to tail as it were. In contrast, there is no change or succession a meditator M is aware of during Meditation\*, so M’s sense of duration cannot come from representing it. That said, if someone were to deny that experiences of change and succession are essential to the specious present, then they may identify the two notions. Nothing much in the account that follows hangs on it.

During NOW, there is no awareness of change, succession, temporal order, beginning or end. This is consistent with the fact that subjects describe Meditation\* as ‘timeless’, since ‘timeless’ so conceived merely refers to the absence of temporal structure, not to the absence of duration. The obvious challenge that remains is to explain how meditators experience duration without before and after, without change or succession.

In a recent article, Windt (2015) argues for the existence of ‘dreamless sleep experiences’, episodes of dreamless sleep during which the sleeper is, contrary to orthodoxy, conscious. Such experiences, she writes, are candidates for minimal phenomenal experiences: mental states that fulfil just the absolutely necessary conditions to classify as a phenomenal experience and not more. According to Windt (2015:1), a dreamless sleep experience is a ‘phenomenal experience characterized only by the phenomenal now and the sense of duration, but devoid of any further intentional content.’ There are some clear conceptual parallels between Windt’s sleepless dream experiences and Meditation\*. Just as the dreamless sleep experiences, if they exist, Meditation\* experiences qualify as minimal phenomenal experiences. As such, both experiences seem to be phenomenally very similar, if not identical, distinguished only by how and when they occur. And I have suggested, similar to Windt’s description of sleep experiences, that Meditation\* is characterised only by a phenomenal NOW, a duration without any further temporal structure. It may thus be illuminating to look at what Windt has to say about the nature of the extended phenomenal now in dreamless sleep experience.

Windt explains that in such experiences, subjects lose a sense of selfhood, a feature that we have also found characteristic in reports about Meditation\*. Without a sense of self, she writes,

‘[T]here is no phenomenal *here* and thus no orientation within a larger phenomenal space. In brief: without sense of self there is no sense of space: orientation within a spatial framework seems to have some simple form of self-other distinction written into it. (…) By contrast, the phenomenal *now* does not appear to carry the same conceptual commitments. At least intuitively, the notion of a form of temporal experience that is independent of and perhaps more basic than the experience of being or having a self seems more acceptable than that of [a] (…) selfless form of spatial experience. (Windt 2015: 17)

This quote highlights an interesting difference between spatial and temporal perception. In visuo-spatial perception what a subject sees depends on where they are located in space. Since things are seen from a certain angle, and that angle changes with the subject’s gaze, it is evident to the perceiver that what is seen is dependent on their own position in that space. This is presumably what Windt means when she says that in spatial perception and orientation there is a ‘self-other distinction’ written into it. Temporal perception is different. As Christoph Hoerl puts it,

[w]hen we experience an event, we experience that event to the exclusion of others that happen earlier or later, but nothing in our experience signals that this is due to anything to do with us... there is a sense in which what we experience is just the bare occurrence of that event. (Hoerl 2018: 146)

Hoerl calls this the ‘lack of temporal viewpointedness’ (2018:130). The lack of temporal viewpointedness means that experiences in general do not come with a temporal perspective on whatever is experienced. This grounds the intuition that an experience can still be temporal even if it lacks any awareness of oneself as subject of experience.

However, it is not clear how the lack of temporal viewpointedness is supposed to make the extended phenomenal present more palatable. To this point, Windt writes that

[w]e can at least conceive, it would seem, of a phenomenal *now* that fails to be differentiated from or clearly located relative to a larger temporal reference frame. (Windt 2015: 17)

This allows a better understanding: a phenomenal now that ‘fails to be located relative to a larger temporal reference frame’ is one that is not embedded in a temporal structure. There is no chain of present moments that can be experienced as succeeding each other. Instead, the NOW is just one moment that, as it were, “fills out” the entire duration of Meditation\*. And it seems that way to the meditator since they are not aware of anything during Meditation\* which instantiates temporal relations with anything else: there is no awareness of before, after or simultaneous with. In this sense, the NOW becomes the temporal reference frame. The NOW has phenomenal duration without phenomenal succession.

Fig.5

Objective time

NOW

t3

t2

t1

Windt writes that we can ‘at least conceive’ of the NOW. But can we? The idea of a phenomenal duration without phenomenal succession may seem somewhat problematic. Although it is neither logically nor metaphysically impossible to conceive of a single time that has a non-zero duration, we are very used to understand durations in terms of a succession of instants. This is particularly the case on the phenomenological level. What it is like to experience some length of time is to experience more than just one moment. Hence, we need more illumination of this notion.

**4.3. Maintaining Alertness**

In a recent article, Young (2022) addresses a slightly different but related issue that may help. How do we form the belief that time passes? Where does it come from? A popular answer in the literature is to say we form the belief from experiencing change. However, Young wonders, what if we don’t experience any change? Would it not be possible that one could be in a state where one does not experience any external change, nor any change in sensations or even thoughts? Taking this possibility seriously, Young then argues that it is plausible that we would still have a sense of time passing which would indicate that our belief in time’s passing is dependent on something other than experiencing external or internal change.

Like Young, I am reflecting on a state where a subject does not experience any change whatsoever. Unlike Young, I am not so much concerned here with the belief that time passes.[[5]](#footnote-5) Instead, I want to know how a meditator could have an awareness of duration without experiencing any form of change. However, temporal passage, understood either in a metaphysically “robust” way as a change of what time is objective present (which Young is interested in), or just in the profane “casual” way of moments succeeding each other, implies duration. And so, if Young tells a convincing story about how we come to believe that time passes even when we do not experience change, then we may have the beginnings of a story about how meditators may be aware of duration without being aware of any change.

Young’s intriguing answer is as follows. Starting with the thought that attention and awareness are forms of mental agency, he argues that we always experience ourselves as agents.[[6]](#footnote-6) Even when we do not move, as long as we are conscious, we are aware of something, paying attention to something, shifting attention, or even just maintaining attention. Thus, crucially for us, maintaining attention is for Young also a form of agency.

Consider also the experience of actively directing and maintaining one’s attention: you can shift your focus from the ice cream that you are holding to the feeling of your feet on the ground, or effortfully maintain your attention on what your companion is saying, despite the noisy park’s myriad distractions. (Young 2022:13-4)

Each moment we can either keep attending to whatever we have been attending to or change focus. At each moment I can either continue to listen to you or focus my attention on something more interesting in the background, like my itching foot. In that sense maintaining attention is a form of agency.

Young’s point is that, whether we keep focus or shift attention, at each time, I, the subject, will have to do *something*—for example, maintaining attention or not. Being aware of this agency is being aware of oneself as bringing about change (even if what I am doing brings about an exactly similar state). We act every moment afresh, without option to pause the course of events. Since we are powerless in that way—we cannot take a break from agency while conscious—we search the reason for this outside ourselves in some objective feature of the world. This is when, according to Young, we form the belief that time passes.

(…) [O]n my account it is the bare occurrence of our own agentive restlessness which leads us to believe that the instant is in some special sort of flux. Experiencing the irresistible flow of our actions leads us to believe that we are being swept along by a changing present. (Young 2022:16-7)

There is much to be said for Young’s proposal. It may well be that the never ceasing phenomenology of agency which we find ourselves unable to hold while conscious generates in us a belief about time itself. One might however wonder how such ‘agentive restlessness’ gives rise to more than simply the idea that times (and our temporal perspectives) are ordered successively with one moment following the next. It seems not obvious, to me at least, how we come from there to believing that time passes, in an A-theoretical robust sense. But this is for another discussion.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In any case, we do not need to accept that part of Young’s proposal in order to apply some of his ideas to our problem about being aware of duration without being aware of change. Here is how. Alertness as found in Meditation\* may be described as poised attention or, at the very least, a condition for attention. As with attention in everyday life, as time goes on, a meditator M can either stay alert, or ‘doze off’ into a less attentive state, or allow distraction.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus, for each moment during Meditation\* there is sustained (tonic) alertness. Since the option of staying alert or not presents itself anew for each passing moment, M is aware of time passing, that is to say, aware of a *period* of time. Even without change in inner poise or focus of attention, without any awareness of change at all, Meditation\* seems to go on for some length. Importantly, this does not require M to consciously keep track of a succession of moments. Maintaining alertness during Meditation\* may be enough to give M an awareness of duration even without an awareness of succession.

One might worry that, given this proposal, meditator M still has some sense of succession.[[9]](#footnote-9) (Note that an analogous objection can be made about Young’s account). Even if maintaining alertness over time is different from consciously keeping track of succession (by counting moments say), the worry would be that the former suffices for some awareness of succession. Indeed, if what we meant by ‘maintaining alertness’ entailed that M remembers previous moments of alertness this was a justified worry. But, as noted before, M’s access to any form of long- and short-term memory seems to be suspended.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is not entirely clear from the literature what that means. In the strong sense, it could mean that M neither forms new memories during Meditation\*, nor has access to already formed ones. Without memory, no awareness of succession. In the weak sense though, it may still be possible that the brain unconsciously forms memories of the temporal structure of Meditation\*. If this were the case, M would have some awareness of succession after all, albeit retrospectively.[[11]](#footnote-11) The issue with this is that it stands in tension with the reports. Meditators describe Meditation\* as timeless, lacking temporal structure yet continuous and ongoing. If they were aware of succession during Meditation\*, even only after the fact, then why would they try to express this contrast between temporal structure and duration? If we take the reports seriously, then M is not aware of any form of succession during Meditation\*, not even retrospectively. This immediately opens up a potentially bigger problem though: if M really is only ever aware of one moment at a time, then where does the sense of duration come from? While the option to stay on track or doze off may present itself each moment afresh, without any awareness of previously made choices of this sort, it is not obvious a sense of duration would emerge. In other words, without memory, how is M aware of *sustaining* alertness as opposed to simply being alert right now? Some sense of retention still seems needed. I will turn to this part of the puzzle in the next section.

**4.4. Retention without Reminiscence**

In what follows, I shall draw on Phillips’ (2008) account of perceiving temporal properties to argue that there is some form of retention present during Meditation\* which is compatible with the thesis that meditators have no access to memory during Meditation\*, at least when we understand ‘memory’ in the standard sense, i.e. types of memory such as episodic memory, semantic memory, procedural memory, short-term memory, working memory, sensory memory and prospective memory.

This particular form of retention, which does not rely on memory faculties, allows meditators to have a sense of duration during Meditation\*. Consider, to begin with, G.F. Stout’s distinction between ‘retentiveness’ and ‘reminiscence’ as illustrated in his famous example of hearing the postman knock:

There is successiveness: the first knock is heard before the second. There is also retentiveness: the individual’s experience, when the second knock occurs, has a character which it would not have if he had not heard the first. Further there is no reminiscence. (…). [T]here is no remembrance of the past as such. (1930: 170)

In this short passage, Stout identifies two distinct ways of retaining past experiences. On the one hand ‘retentiveness’, on the other ‘reminiscence’. Reminiscence is roughly what I referred to with ‘memory in the standard sense’: memory in terms of remembering, recollecting or ‘recovering knowledge by mental effort’ (Simpson and Weiner, 1989, as quoted by Phillips, 2008). On the other hand, ‘retentiveness’: the idea that my experience of the second knock would have had a different character, had I not heard the first knock just before. Especially notable is Stout’s claim that retentiveness can occur without reminiscence. Phillips (2008) offers a helpful way of understanding it. According to Phillips, Stout’s claim makes sense if we accept the idea that the way things are presented or represented in experience makes a difference to the phenomenal character of the experience. In other words, two qualitatively identical objects or events may seem different to us if we (re-)present them differently in experience. A knock can be represented as following on from another knock, as part of a larger auditory event, or as singular event emerging from silence.[[12]](#footnote-12) ‘In this light’, Phillips argues,

Stout’s distinction can be understood as a distinction between two ways in which a single kind of cognitive contact can be preserved. In reminiscence, the retained or preserved contact is manifested in distinct acts of episodic memory. In retention, in contrast, past cognitive contact is preserved or retained as part of the character of a fresh act of acquaintance with a present object. The very encounter with the present itself is a way in which cognitive contact with the past is preserved because the way in which the current object of perception is encountered is constitutively dependent upon past experience. (Phillips 2008:19)

Phillips’ paper continues with a discussion of whether retention in that sense is a form of memory at all. But even if one answers that question affirmatively, as Phillips does, we can note that the two forms of preserving the past are different enough to warrant the thesis that retention could occur even in the absence of mental recall functions. Stout’s retention is a retaining of the past experience merely in the character of the present experience and that does not require actively recollecting or ‘recovering knowledge by mental effort’.

Let us apply this to ENI. At each moment during Meditation\*, M maintains alert. At each moment, the experience of being alert has a particular phenomenal character which would have been different had that experience not been preceded by a qualitatively identical experience of alertness. To M, each momentary alertness seems to follow on from another alertness. Differently put, the current alertness seems *sustained* to M rather than arising freshly from a state of distraction or non-attentiveness. This is the case, even though M lacks access to their cognitive recall abilities. The combination of (in fact) sustaining alertness at each moment during Meditation\* and experiencing the alertness as being sustained, are together the root causes of the phenomenology of duration or, as one meditator puts it, ‘unbroken continuity of experience or of consciousness throughout the meditation period’. (Forman1999:16)

To summarize the points made, my suggestion is that Meditation\* occurs over an interval that is experienced as an extended present, the NOW, during which there is no awareness of any temporal feature (change, succession, temporal order…) except duration. This is consistent with the fact that meditators describe the Meditation\* experience as ‘timeless’, since ‘timeless’ refers to the lack of temporal structure within the NOW, not to the absence of duration. Thus, although there is no phenomenology of succeeding times during Meditation\*, there is a phenomenology of duration. It is brought about by the meditator sustaining alertness throughout Meditation\* and experiencing each momentary alertness as continuing or following on from a previous alertness without having to engage memory.

**5. Agency Phenomenology Without Agent Phenomenology**

A final problem that I wish to address is that of agency phenomenology without phenomenology of self or experiential ownership. Standardly, these are thought to come hand in hand—one cannot have an awareness of agency without also having an awareness of oneself as agent. Here is for example Young on this matter:

Consider also the experience of actively directing and maintaining one’s attention: (…). There is no reason to doubt that experiences of self as source accompany these inner actions […]. (Young 2022:13-4)

Since it is crucial for my account that there is an awareness of maintaining alertness during Meditation\*, one could argue, along with Young and others, that there must also be an awareness of oneself doing so. However, the lack of a sense of self or ownership seems to be one of the defining features of Meditation\* that meditators widely agree on.

However, not everyone agrees with this idea. It gains intuitive support from the stronger thesis that the self is the author or owner of its own thoughts and actions, or the cause of their intentional actions (see Lowe 2008: 162). Jonardon Ganeri (2017) has recently developed an account of attention as mental agency which is fundamental and prior to (the phenomenology of) self-hood and authorship, in effect denying both, the self as author as well as agent causalism for mental agency.[[13]](#footnote-13) According to Ganeri, while it is intuitive enough to view the body as the agent of physical action, it would be a mistake to apply that picture to the self as agent of mental action. In support Ganeri cites a long tradition in Buddhist philosophy where thinkers reject ‘a self-entity as the agent of experience’ (Karunasada 2010: 70), a ‘central controller’ (Dreyfus & Thompson 2007: 92), or a ‘center of agency’ (Garfield 2014: 171). In Ganeri’s own words,

[a] human being is not like a drone, with a detached if now internalized control centre, but more like a self-driving vehicle whose various complex perceptual, motor and planning systems enable it to navigate its environment. There is no driver, no charioteer, no inner magician, but rather a complex of mutually interacting components. (Ganeri 2017: 19)

Note that denying that there is a phenomenology of oneself as agent does not imply denying that oneself is the author or cause of (one’s) mental agency. Ganeri seems to reject both. This is at least plausible: if there is no self, or if the self is not causally responsible for the actions of the person, it is (not impossible but) much less plausible that an awareness of agency necessarily comes with an awareness of oneself as agent. At the very least, rejecting a self as cause of mental agency would do much to motivate rejecting the idea that there is something it is like to be a (mental) agent. This is not the right place to argue against the self as author or agent. I simply remain by pointing out that there are existing coherent accounts which deny a phenomenology of oneself as (mental) agent. If we employ some version of it, then the resulting view is that in Meditation\* there is something it is like to sustain alertness due to the fact that at each moment, alertness seems to continue on rather than arise freshly, even without the meditator’s awareness of themselves as agent staying alert. The plausibility of my thesis, which aims to make sense of meditator reports about apparent timelessness during meditation, might well depend on the feasibility of denying a phenomenology of oneself as mental agent. This may not be so much a weakness as a direction and call for further reflection and inquiry.

**6. Conclusions**

The account I have given of Meditation\* requires us to accept attention as a form of mental agency and to reject the idea that we are always aware of ourselves as agents when we maintain attention during Meditation\*. Attempting a defence of those views in their own right would go beyond the scope of this paper. However, I hope I have at least shown that it is possible to sketch a coherent picture of the temporal phenomenology of Meditation\* in line with what meditators say, and revealed the broader assumptions about the mind it would depend on.

Investigating phenomenal temporality for fringe states of consciousness will give us deeper insight into how time is experienced. From a broader perspective, a thorough theoretical analysis of deep meditative states and other unusual mental states can provide us with profound insights into the nature of consciousness itself and the inner workings of our minds.

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1. Akiko Frischhut, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for example Kriegel (2009) and Gennaro (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Internal clock models go back to the psychophysical studies of Creelman (1962) and Treisman (1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Windt (2015) makes a similar point. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Elsewhere I have thought a lot about this question (Frischhut 2015; Frischhut 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Young is relying here on Watzl`s (2017) account of attention as mental agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Frischhut 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. If, as some people argue, ‘states’ are characterized by having ‘no essential temporality’, whereas activities come, evolve, develop, persist and go, then Meditation\* is strictly speaking not a state but an activity (see Watzl 2017: 55). Soteriou (2013: 45pp) includes an interesting discussion where the distinction between state and activity originates from. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing me towards it. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ataria *et al*. 2015. See also Metzinger 2020:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Metzinger employs this thought with regards to the non-egoic aspect of Meditation\* and M’s ability to report the experience as their own retrospectively (2019: 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I understand the account as neutral between different theories of perception (representationalism, naïve realism etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The stronger thesis would be to deny that there is any such thing as the self. Note that my account only needs the weaker one whereby a phenomenology of attention does not require a phenomenology of selfhood. I am not sure which of the claims Ganeri is arguing for. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)