

THE RELEVANCE OF EMBODIED PRACTICE TO PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING: Meditation and Hermeneutic Distanciation



HIERONYMUS WOLD

ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that meditation has a direct bearing upon philosophical discourse by enabling us to distance ourselves from the basic structure of subjectivity that often limits the scope of reason. Recent neurobiological hypotheses are discussed in conjunction with the method of hermeneutic phenomenology to argue that interpretations on the level of our neurobiology underly and construct our experience of ourselves as subjects and the sense of explicit rational understanding that arises from it. This implies that prediscursive embodied practice can play a crucial role in freeing our philosophical understanding from implicit assumptions.



I. INTRODUCTION

In philosophy, the most influential thinkers have been those who challenge our basic assumptions about what is true. In the Western tradition, the predominant method for cutting through misunderstandings to reach the truth has been to engage in rational inquiry and theoretical discourse. Buddhist traditions have similarly emphasized cutting through misunderstandings to reach the truth they obscure, but their primary method has been different, as they tend to de-emphasize rational inquiry in favor of embodied mindfulness practice.¹

While many Buddhist practitioners engage in theoretical discourse outside of meditation, it is often considered a necessary practice alongside discussion. This mode of uncovering the truth requires the suspension of all thought, including rational thought. Unlike Western philosophy, Buddhist philosophy is derived from a nonconceptual truth directly revealed prior to thinking, rather than asserted rational principles. This way of overcoming misunderstanding, which can appear akin to divine revelation, can seem non-rigorous from the standpoint of current Western philosophical standards. At the very least, it may seem to have no bearing upon the project of Western philosophy, especially because enlightenment purportedly cannot be comprehended as an idea or transmitted through language.

In this paper, I will challenge the seeming irrelevance of meditation to Western philosophy and argue that the practice of meditation has a direct bearing upon rational philosophical discourse. I will argue that meditation can enable us to set aside assumptions that cloud understanding more than mental reflection does. I find that the characterization of Western philosophy as theoretical and discursive neglects the role embodied existence plays in conditioning how we reason about the world. Embodied practices like meditation can help us to become directly aware of interpretations of the world prior to thinking which one's take place on the level of biology.

I will argue for the relevance of meditation by exploring three areas. First, I will introduce the Western philosophical method of hermeneutic phenomenology, one of the most compatible Western philosophical methods with Buddhist thought. I will use it as the standpoint from which I frame understanding and truth within this paper. I will then introduce recent neuroscientific theories that suggest that the very basis of reason is influenced by our physical condition. I will also briefly discuss how these theories reveal that meditation is not a strictly mystical practice, but that there is evidence for it engaging directly with our capacity to

understand on a physical level. Finally, I will propose that meditation can facilitate a kind of “hermeneutic distancing” that releases awareness from the constraints of subjectivity and rational thought. I do not do this to argue against the value of conceptual thought, but to highlight that we engage in rational thought more discerningly after meditating.

II. THE METHOD OF HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is the study of the structure of experience prior to any sort of theoretical interpretation of that experience. The development of phenomenology, beginning with Edmund Husserl, is an attempt to ground philosophy in a return to experiences prior to the conceptual categories imposed upon them.² Husserl's phenomenology begins with the method of phenomenological reduction, or bracketing what he calls the “natural attitude,” a tendency to make theoretical assumptions about what does or does not exist. By bracketing, we begin with an awareness of what comes to us in raw experience uninterpreted through abstractions.³ This bracketing is similar in aim to that of meditation, in which thoughts are allowed to dissolve while attention is brought directly to physical sensations without judgment. Husserl and those influenced by him saw this as means to keep philosophy from becoming relegated solely to the realm of mental abstraction.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, in particular, was developed by Martin Heidegger. The introduction of a hermeneutic method to phenomenology was with the aim of correcting a mistake he saw Husserl making, which was assuming it is possible to consciously set aside all prior commitments. Heidegger recognized that it is not possible for us to make sense of experience without a history of understanding upon which sense-making is contingent.⁴ Instead, his hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that how we fundamentally perceive is always shaped by a prior understanding constituted by personal situation, cultural context, and broader historical forces which cannot become fully, consciously explicit to us.

Hermeneutics, on its own, began as the study of how we interpret texts. Philosophical hermeneutics, rather than dealing with texts, deals with the study of interpretation itself. In other words, it is the interpretation of interpretation. It works as a method to integrate with

2 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 50.

3 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to A Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 56–59.

4 Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

1 Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 11.



phenomenology because it takes coming to understand something as a process of appropriation, or to “bring close the far.”⁵ Appropriation is the process of integrating new meanings into the larger context of what has been previously interpreted. The process of interpretation takes the structure of a “hermeneutic circle” in which new meanings are related to the whole of what is already understood and used to reconfigure the meaning of that whole in light of what has been learned. This new overall understanding serves as an increasingly detailed and holistic standpoint to make further interpretations as the process goes on. Rather than starting from a foundational principle and then building upon that, philosophical hermeneutics begins interpreting what is given “in medias res” and works backwards to increasingly clarify our underlying interpretations. By taking the way we make sense of the world as inherently appropriative, hermeneutic phenomenology is able to take into account that how we make sense of experience is already influenced by our history and situation. The goal of phenomenology becomes to clarify those conditions beginning within the given situation, rather than assuming it is possible to make sense of experience outside of our situatedness.⁶

The significance of this method in contrast to other Western methods is that it calls into question the pursuit of philosophical truth on positivistic grounds. A hermeneutic phenomenological method can bring increasing awareness of the conditions that structure our thinking and judgments and renders a clearer apprehension of experience possible without relying on the basis of an objective foundation. Furthermore, it implies that beginning from an objective basis may actually obscure the nature of how we come to understand things in the first place.⁷ For these reasons, hermeneutic phenomenology is especially useful for discussing the nature of understanding within the Buddhist tradition. It can frame the process of coming to understand reality as a non-dualistic phenomenon in which the knower and known transform each other, a perspective which is not facilitated by popular epistemological approaches. Finding truth is the process of unpacking the conditions already immanent in experience and therefore does not necessitate closing a gap between the subject as knower and a noumenal, objective truth.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, however, has limits. The method itself recognizes that it is incapable of fully clarifying understanding. It can engage the conditions of understanding by bringing them to light

5 Paul Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” *Noûs* 9, no. 1 (1975): 92–93, 10.2307/2214343.

6 Balveer Singh Sikh and Deb Spence, “Methodology, Meditation, and Mindfulness: Toward a Mindfulness Hermeneutic,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 15, no. 1 (2016): 10.1177/1609406916641251.

7 Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” 88–89.

only discursively. I will draw a distinction here between what I will call “discursive” and “nondiscursive” or at other points “prediscursive.” What is discursive can be brought to light through conscious, conceptual thought and transmitted to others through language, while what is nondiscursive or prediscursive cannot be captured by conceptual thought and, at best, can only be indirectly gestured at with language. What hermeneutic phenomenology points to is that the conditioning of our conceptual thought runs far deeper than any sort of rational presuppositions and stretches down into the realm of the nondiscursive. While Heidegger worked to uncover the structure of what conditions our understanding of existence, he could only uncover what could be brought to light through written work and verbal discussion. The clarity of understanding facilitated by meditation is not arrived at this way.

Is there, therefore, any way to gain clarity about the prediscursive conditions of experience beyond the limits of concepts and language? I will now argue that embodied practices like meditation can do precisely this by illuminating understanding beyond the limits of what hermeneutic phenomenology can uncover. Meditation can help us to become directly aware of prediscursive interpretations of the world that take place on the level of the nervous system. These conditions must be encountered on an embodied and sensuous, rather than a linguistic or conceptual level. The practice of meditation is a process of reaching clarity of understanding which can work as a nondiscursive counterpart to hermeneutic phenomenology.

III. MEDITATION AND NEUROBIOLOGY

Meditation, specifically *samatha-vipassana* meditation, has been connected to phenomenological reduction by others.⁸ The Buddha is said to have returned to “a first-hand test of lived experience” to counter the Hindu reliance on written texts and teachings.⁹ The difference between meditation and phenomenological reduction, however, is that meditation is the involuntary cessation of all thought via changes in neurobiological responses rather than just a voluntary setting aside of all conceptual assumptions.¹⁰ Although there are plenty of Buddhist teachings that discuss this involuntary cessation from a firsthand perspective, contemporary theorists in neuroscience can help explain the possibility of this cessation as rooted in our biology. They show that

8 Nathalie Depraz, Francisco J. Varela, and Pierre Vermersch, *On Becoming Aware: Advances in Consciousness Research* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003), 205–31.

9 Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch, *On Becoming Aware*, 208.

10 Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch, *On Becoming Aware*, 215–16.



prior to thought, there are neurobiological responses that condition how we interpret the world. They also suggest that meditation is a way to decondition and gain a greater awareness of these responses.

Neuroscientist Stephen W. Porges designated the term “neuroception” to refer to unconscious judgments our autonomic nervous system makes about the environment.¹¹ These judgments play a foundational role in how we construct our worldview and greatly influence how we act and think prior to making rational decisions or conscious observations. Neuroception is selective about what we do and do not pay attention to, what we are likely to emphasize about the environment, and the information we receive from others. This varies depending on the amount of stress we are under, the conditioning of the nervous system from past experiences, and whether or not we are conscious of them.¹²

Other neuroscientists including John Yates and James H. Austin have specifically discussed these unconscious judgments and how meditation alters them.¹³ Austin, in his hypothesis on “selfless insight,” which is similar to ego death, in the Zen tradition pulls from studies of the experiences of monks to correlate changes in attentional structure during meditation with physical changes in parts of our nervous system.¹⁴ These include the dorsal and ventral attentional networks, which are respectively responsible for voluntarily directed focused attention and unconscious panoramic scanning of the environment.¹⁵ *Samatha-vipassana* is hypothesized to relate to the dorsal and ventral networks and is proposed to decondition neuroceptive judgment, leading us to more awareness of how conceptual judgements and basic perceptions are unconsciously shaped by our attentional networks. During *samatha-vipassana*, all attention is directed towards physical sensation. One is not willfully doing anything, mentally or physically, other than being there in the present moment. This results in a “progressive synchronization between the field of the mental and that of the body.”¹⁶ This full synchronization of mind-body is a concrete, nondiscursive state of

11 Stephen W. Porges, “Neuroception: A Subconscious System for Detecting Threats and Safety,” *Zero to Three* 24, no. 5, (2004), 19–24

12 Stephan W. Porges, “The polyvagal theory: phylogenetic substrates of a social nervous system” in *International Journal of Psychophysiology* 42, no. 2 (2001), 137, 10.1016/S0167-8760(01)00162-3.

13 John Yates, Jeremy Graves, and Matthew Immergut, *The Mind Illuminated: A Complete Meditation Guide Integrating Buddhist Wisdom and Brain Science* (Chicago: Dharma Treasure Press, 2015).

14 James H. Austin, “The Thalamic Gateway: How the Meditative Training of Attention Evolves toward Selfless Transformations of Consciousness,” in *Effortless Attention: A New Perspective in the Cognitive Science of Attention and Action*, ed. Brian Bruya (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010), 375–77.

15 Austin, “The Thalamic Gateway,” 374–75.

16 Depraz, Varera, and Vermersch, *On Becoming Aware*, 215–17.

experience prior to the split categories of mind and body generated by discursive thought.

This prediscursive sense of awareness is neurobiologically explainable according to Austin. Discursive thinking is facilitated by the dorsal attentional network. It is the part of the brain that facilitates our ability to think conceptually and to delineate ourselves as beings separate from the environment, enabling the phenomenological experience of being a self. The focused breathing and posture directed by the dorsal system during meditation tells the autonomic nervous system that we are in a safe environment. By downregulating the autonomic nervous system over time, neuroception is conditioned to interpret stimuli in more open and flexible ways. In contrast, the ventral attentional network is nondiscursive. It is not connected to the language center of the brain, and perceives space allocentrically, meaning that it is aware of the environment without reference to things as discrete objects or to the self as a discreet individual. Austin hypothesizes that in some particularly powerful meditative experiences, the dorsal attentional network can go offline entirely, leaving only the ventral attentional network online. This results in a nondual, thoughtless, wordless, and selfless pure awareness.¹⁷ This also entails that conscious awareness is not necessarily tied to a self, meaning it is possible to gain a direct awareness of reality unmediated by subjectivity.

Does this mean that meditation is a way to fully transcend the limits of subjectivity and gain an “objective” view of reality? While both firsthand accounts of practitioners and findings in neurobiology support that it is a way to directly apprehend existence free from reference to the self, to call this view objective would be a misnomer because objectivity as a concept only makes sense in relation to subjectivity. What these theories suggest meditation does, instead, is allow awareness to transcend the subject-object dichotomy that is the basis of abstract and discursive thinking.

IV. MEDITATION AS DISTANCIATION FROM THE SELF

This opportunity to see beyond the constraints of rational thought and gain selfless awareness is valuable to the project of philosophy because it can help us to gain distance from the most basic frameworks through which we are doing philosophy—the thinking subject. Even when meditative practice does not result in a complete cessation of self, the

17 Austin, “The Thalamic Gateway,” 385–86.



theories I have mentioned corroborate that practicing *samatha-vipassana* in any capacity helps to decondition neuroception by downregulating the autonomic nervous system, which enables a fundamentally less judgmental basis upon which we are perceiving the world. When complete cessation of discursive thought happens and the self drops away, however, the cessation can be thought of as radical phenomenological bracketing on the level of neurobiology. Along with any rational or emotional judgements, what is “bracketed” is the very foundation of one’s perspective. I propose that this kind of distance and how it is integral to clearer understanding can be understood hermeneutically as a kind of “distanciation.”

Distanciation is a counterpart to appropriation that is a key aspect of understanding. In his work, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” Paul Ricoeur discusses the dialectical process of appropriation and distanciation in the comprehension of something. While I have already introduced appropriation, distanciation is—rather than integrating something new into our understanding—stepping back from something in order to see the distance, or difference between it and what is already understood. Without distanciation, appropriation is not possible because the unfamiliar thing cannot be recognized as unfamiliar, and instead will be obscured by preconceived interpretations. Ricoeur states that distanciation is, fundamentally, a disappropriation of the self from the self, lending to its parallel with the dropping away of the self during meditation.¹⁸

From the standpoint of both hermeneutic phenomenology and Buddhist teaching, because the subject-object divide is not taken as philosophically fundamental, the aggregate of what one knows, understands, and thinks is not different from one’s sense of self. In order for distanciation to happen, a kind of distance from oneself is necessary to recognize something unfamiliar as such. This enables what is unfamiliar to then be appropriated and to then expand and clarify how one understands existence. Meditation can be thought of as a practice of the most fundamental kind of distanciation and can be understood without reference to mystical teachings, as I have endeavored to show with the inclusion of neuroscientific theory.¹⁹

What, then, is appropriated during this extreme self disappropriation? According to Ricoeur, and seemingly paradoxically, the end of this

hermeneutic process is self-understanding.²⁰ In parallel, hundreds of years earlier is Zen Master Dōgen’s well-known statement, “to learn the self is to forget the self.”²¹ This becomes less paradoxical when we consider that from the standpoint of both hermeneutic phenomenology and Buddhism, what is understood and the one who understands are both integral. In coming to understand the world, we better come to grasp conditions that form us. Our body, which is shown to construct the very way we identify as ourselves—and is in turn formed by all the other conditions of corporeal reality—is a clear example of how the world constitutes us. When the mind drops away as something separate and becomes integrated with the body, we gain a direct awareness of the conditions that give rise to our subjectivity, and enough distance from a sense of self to gain a more panoramic awareness of the self as situated in relation to the rest of the world.

Ricoeur’s account of distanciation and appropriation also implies that the process of understanding is inherently transformative, since it requires cultivating enough acceptance to distance oneself from what one knows and embrace something unfamiliar. Meditation, in particular, enables this on a radical level by entirely clearing one’s awareness of everything one has ever thought. This can grant us a fundamentally more down-to-earth perspective when we do return to self-identification and discursive thought. I am not here, however, to further elucidate meditative insight itself. I am simply elucidating how meditation can work as a method to gain clearer understanding in general. To grasp the content of what is understood through this method requires direct experience through practice.

V. CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of philosophy, we find that the most revolutionary philosophical turns—such as Descartes’ radical doubt, Hume’s skepticism, Kant’s transcendental move and Heidegger’s ontological difference—are from philosophers who gained enough perspective on the ways of thinking they were embedded in. They noticed presuppositions that constituted the basis of how philosophy was done. For cultivating more rigorous philosophical reasoning, meditation can, in a similar vein, serve as an indispensable tool to gain enough distance from our most fundamental concepts. Given the combined evidence of

18 Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” *Philosophy Today* 17, no. 2 (1973): 129–41, 10.5840/philtoday197317233.

19 I do not mean “mystical teachings” here dismissively, as I believe the spiritual aspects of Buddhism cannot be dismissed without sacrificing the truth of Buddhist teachings.

20 Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function,” 73.

21 Dōgen Kigen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, trans. Masao Abe and Norman Waddell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 64.



millennia of firsthand accounts and recent correlating neurobiological evidence, there is reason to believe it can help us gain distance from the self as a thinking subject.

In this paper I have used hermeneutic phenomenology as a standpoint to understand how we come to understand existence. In a hermeneutic fashion, meditation can have a direct bearing upon the rigor of philosophy, not because it gives us access to new information, but because it can help us develop a great enough distance from unconscious conceptual commitments. It can be a direct path to cultivating enough flexibility of perspective to embrace what is not yet explicit to our understanding with as little imposition of bias as possible. Because distancing is what enables the appropriation of new understanding, distancing from the foundation of subjectivity can help us to appropriate a holistic understanding of how we situate the self as thinking subjects in pursuit of truth.

I have emphasized that this meditative clearing of perspective happens at the level of the body rather than through rational reflection. This is because to gain distance from subjectivity and reason itself, we must undergo a cessation of the very faculties that would enable us to mentally reflect. The neurobiological possibility that the self and ideas are a construction within awareness, rather than constituting awareness itself, also implies that to properly explore the nature of truth, we should take into consideration cultivating understanding through embodied practice alongside rational discourse.



Hieronymus Wold is a senior at Saint Mary's College of Maryland in southern Maryland. He is a double major in philosophy and English with a minor in anthropology. Hiero plans to study comparative philosophy as a graduate student. His philosophical interests include continental and Japanese traditions, phenomenology, religion, and environmental ethics.

