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How does it feel to lack a sense of boundaries? A case study of a long-term mindfulness meditator [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the phenomenological nature of the sense of boundaries (SB), based on the case of S, who has practiced mindfulness in the Satipathana and Theravada Vipassana traditions for about 40 years and accumulated around 20,000 h of meditative practice. S's unique abilities enable him to describe his inner lived experience with great precision and clarity. S was asked to shift between three different stages: (a) the default state, (b) the dissolving of the SB, and (c) the disappearance of the SB. Based on his descriptions, we identified seven categories (with some overlap) that alter during the shifts between these stages, including the senses of: (1) internal versus external, (2) time, (3) location, (4) self, (5) agency (control), (6) ownership, and (7) center (first-person-egocentric-bodily perspective). Two other categories, the touching/touched structure and one's bodily feelings, do not fade away completely even when the sense-of-boundaries disappears.

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1. Introduction

A recent study examined the sense of boundaries (SB) among a unique group of twenty seven long-term (>10,000 h) contemplative practitioners of the Buddhist Theravadan tradition (Ataria, 2014a). Based on the phenomenological accounts provided by the participants in this study, it argues that (a) the SB is not equivalent to the boundaries of the physical-body (body as object) and (b) that the SB should be defined in terms of flexibility, rather than in terms of location.

In essence, to argue that the SB is flexible is to define it as a dynamic experience that exists on a wide spectrum ranging from rigid and closed to flexible and open (for a wider discussion see Blaser, 2014; Blaser, Zlabinger, Hautzinger, & Hinterberger, 2014). Yet, much empirical work is required in order to describe the experience of a greater vs. a lesser, open vs. closed, flexible vs. rigid SB. This paper takes a step in that direction by presenting an in-depth phenomenological account.

A recent theoretical study focused on the involuntary shift from the regular daily experience to a sense of rigid and closed SB during trauma (Ataria, 2014b, 2015a). In contrast, this paper focuses on the other end of the same continuum: the shift between the (so-called) regular state and a voluntary lack of, or flexible and open, SB. In so doing, it seeks to tackle the

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question of *how it feels, phenomenologically, to exist without an SB* or, in other words, to define the *nature of the SB experience when the SB is completely flexible*. As such, it does not deal with physical boundaries (see Ataria, 2014a) but rather with the sense of boundaries (SB) or, more precisely, its absence.

Tackling this question requires the study of an individual who is able (a) to remain stable in a conscious state lacking an SB, (b) to move of her own volition between the *different stages* (between the “normal, default state” and the lack of an SB experience) and (c) to describe this experience in real time and in detail. However, given that the experience of a lack of SB is very difficult to produce, let alone maintain or describe in detail, these requirements present a serious methodological challenge.

S, who has accumulated approximately 20,000 h of Vipassana meditation practice, met all these requirements (for more details see Section 2, below). S's unique ability to alter and maintain a lack of SB at will, as well as his capability of describing this experience in detail, enabled us to shed light on the subtle experience of a lack of SB from a phenomenological perspective. Yet despite S's abilities, it is important to remember that this paper is based on a case study of one individual. In accordance, both the results and the discussion must be treated with requisite caution. Having said that, we are nevertheless convinced that in presenting a very rich description of SB, this paper is not only innovative but also advances the much wider project of in depth phenomenological study which, in turn, may serve as the basis for a wider and richer theory of the human experience. In this sense, the paper has significant methodological and research ramifications.

While this paper concentrates only on the phenomenological aspects of the experience, it is part of a wider neuro-phenomenological study which seeks to generate a fruitful dialogue between first and third person data (Varela, 1996). Thus magnetoencephalogram (MEG) recordings of S's brain activity were made during the experiences studied (this data will be published in a separate paper). This affected not only the experimental setup (see Section 2) but also the study's goal of analyzing neural information.

2. Methods

2.1. The participant

2.1.1. Introspective abilities

S, a male aged 64, is a long-term practitioner of mindfulness according to the Satipathana and Theravada Vipassana traditions (he has practiced for about 40 years, and accumulated over 20,000 h). S was chosen for the present study for two reasons: (1) his proven skill in both producing – on demand – unique states of consciousness and (2) providing detailed and articulate descriptions of his experiences in real time (see Sections 2.1.2 and 2.3). He was able to accomplish these feats under experimental conditions (see Sections 2.1.3, 2.1.4, 2.1.5), which introduce a set of constraints and pressures including limitations on time, body position, movement (since the subject is connected to machines), and privacy (being constantly observed by a number of people). These constraints can make it difficult even for experienced practitioners to perform as they would in normal conditions.

2.1.2. The choice of S – Phenomenological considerations

S is the most senior practitioner among a group of twenty seven long-term practitioners of Vipassana meditation interviewed in a previous phenomenological study (Ataria, 2014a). In addition, a total of five interviews conducted with S yielded descriptions of his inner lived experience that were exceptionally rich, articulate, and (relatively) accurate compared to those of the other participants. Since it is recognized that “well-trained subjects can provide accurate and useful introspective reports” (Fox, Zakarauskas, Dixon, Ellamil, & Thompson, 2012), and S is undoubtedly very-well trained in giving non-judgmental reports, this is not surprising. Indeed, S possesses a number of unique qualities that make him an outstanding interviewee, including his abilities to recreate the same experience repeatedly, of his own volition and describe in rich detail the bodily experience as it occurs.

S has trained in the Buddhist traditions over a long period. It is well established that these traditions “have accumulated a vast amount of expertise in training the mind and cultivating its ability for reflection and introspection” (Varela & Shear, 1999, p. 8) and with this in mind scholars have argued that “it would be a great mistake of western chauvinism to deny such observations as data and their potential validity” (Varela & Shear, 1999, p. 8). Likewise, as Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch (2003) established, well-trained meditators have the ability to introspect upon their own experience while it is happening, with minimal interference, and are thus able to provide a more objective assessment of their own experience and greater introspective accuracy compared to other subjects (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). Others have supported this notion: “Expert meditators showed significantly *better introspective accuracy than novices*; overall meditation experience also significantly predicted individual introspective accuracy. These results suggest that long-term meditators provide *more accurate* introspective reports than novices” (Fox et al., 2012, our emphasis).

In sum, even though introspection, in its most naïve form, can be considered at least partly unreliable, expertise in it can be acquired (Petitmengin, Remillieux, Cahour, & Carter-Thomas, 2013). In particular, the practice of mindfulness allows the subject to become an expert in the introspective technique (Depraz et al., 2003; Fox et al., 2012).

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