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PROLEGOMENON TO A PHILOSOPHY OF MEDITATION

ABSTRACT

This prolegomenon sketches issues central to a philosophy of meditation, develops only some of them here, and refers readers to other works where some not covered here are addressed. A complete philosophy of meditation would include accounts of: the differences between meditative practices, states, and traits; religion-based meditative traditions; novel contemporary meditative practices and research; meditative practices that are and aren't philosophical practices and vice versa; 'McMindfulness'; whether any such practices reveal metaphysical truths or lead to enlightenment; what physics/metaphysics might make the paranormal corollaries of mystical experiences possible; and the pros and cons of these issues. The author shares some personal experiences, speculative hypotheses, and arguments for the central claim that meditative practices are one of the most powerful forms of spiritual and philosophical practice.

KEYWORDS

ecology of practices, McMindfulness, meditation, mental autonomy, paranormal, philosophical counseling, philosophical practice, philosophy as a way of life, philosophy of meditation, philosophy of spirituality

Introduction

This writing lays some groundwork for a philosophy of meditation,¹ and builds upon my edited collection, the *Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Meditation* (2022). Some philosophers resist the claim that there is a philosophy of meditation (e.g., Davis 2022), or even reject the concept (e.g., Evan Thompson does, in Vervaeke, Repetti, and Thompson 2024). I view the Routledge collection as implicitly demonstrating a modal-logic argument to the contrary:

1. If X is actual, then X is possible.
2. X is actual.
3. Thus, X is possible.

Here, 'X' represents the claim that "there is a philosophy of meditation". Premise 2 is supported by the fact that the Routledge collection engages in

¹ I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, which inspired several changes and ideas.



the philosophy of meditation throughout its 27 chapters by as many authors, each addressing some relevant aspect of the philosophy of meditation, including whether there is, can be, or ought to be a philosophy of meditation (Repetti 2022a, 2022b), as well as chapters in sections on the relationships between meditation and philosophy, meditation and epistemology, meditation and metaphysics, meditation and values, meditation and phenomenology, and meditation in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions.

Given that wealth of material, while I will outline a number of issues that I think ought to be addressed in a more complete account of the philosophy of meditation, hence, a prolegomenon, here I will selectively focus on only a handful of ideas that I think will help to forward the discipline. One central idea is that meditation and philosophy may be construed as overlapping species of some larger genus of endeavors to understand ordinary experience and existence: both may be understood as heightened attention to, and/or examination of, experience, and the concepts, language, beliefs, and views arising in or from experience. I explored this line of thought in greater depth in the Routledge collection (Repetti 2022a, 2022b). For similar reasons, the philosophy of meditation may be construed as part of a broader philosophy of spirituality, with significant overlap with the philosophies of mysticism, of psychedelics, and of related topics. What I think all these endeavors have in common is that their aspirations aim at understanding ultimate reality, rendering those who undertake them ‘ontonauts’,² as opposed to merely ‘psychonauts’, explorers of inner space, which latter term connotes that the explorations are entirely subjective. Whether they are entirely subjective, objective, intersubjective, or transjective are precisely questions explored by all of them, in some sense. Thus, while I will not say much more about it here, in the same way that the Routledge collection demonstrated the existence of a valid field of philosophical inquiry, to the extent that much of that work may be considered part of a broader philosophy of spirituality, so too it is my aspiration that the Routledge collection and this article will inspire a similar demonstration of the existence of the philosophy of spirituality as a valid field of philosophical inquiry.

One reason this work is important to me is that I am convinced that meditation practices, understood philosophically, can be among the most powerful engines of sapiential growth, transformative insights, and other forms of *metanoia*. In the same way that thought experiments in philosophy can engender figure/ground gestalt frame-shifting in understanding, functioning as what Daniel Dennett aptly termed ‘intuition pumps’ (2013), I have argued that meditation practices can function as consciousness-raising pumps that can have profound *metanoia*-generating philosophical impact (Repetti 2022b).

² See my presentation on the concept of an ontonaut as part of my argument that the naturalism/supernaturalism dichotomy is a false dichotomy (Repetti, Pascal, and Dempsey 2025).

Some of these issues that I'll partly elaborate here include accounts of some of the differences between: meditative practices, states, and traits;³ religious meditative traditions; contemporary meditative practices; meditative practices that are and aren't philosophical practices, and vice versa; secular mindfulness; 'McMindfulness'; exceptional experiences (EEs) associated with meditative practices;⁴ the possible physics or metaphysics that might explain EEs; whether meditative experiences reveal truths; and whether they lead to enlightenment.

I will devote a section to each, consider some hypotheses, share personal experiences and understandings, and conclude that a philosophy of meditation is essential in a philosophy of spirituality. Issues identified, but not elaborated on in their own sections here, include: contemplative science;⁵ an anthropological perspective;⁶ comparative religious studies and comparative philosophy;⁷ and scientific research on the paranormal (I address this in a few sections).⁸

In the classical metaphor of the elephant and the blind men, touching the tusk, one says it is a spear, another touching the tail says it is a rope, and so on for the leg, ear, torso, trunk. In Jainism, the elephant represents reality; the blind men represent how different beings perceive aspects of reality from different vantages with different senses, depicting aspects of a complex reality. The metaphor supports *anekāntavāda*, the Jain doctrine of non-one-sidedness. In Hinduism, the elephant represents Brahman (God), and the blind represent different religions. In Buddhism, it is used, among other uses, to represent Buddhism, and the blind represent its different forms.

3 See Repetti (2020).

4 See Osto (2024), chapter 5, for an account of many of my EEs.

5 See Vago 2022 for a comprehensive overview of scientific research on meditation over the past 50 years. See Goleman and Davidson 2017 for a meta-analysis of the top 50 cited research papers on it. See Mago, Miller, Repetti, and Vervaeke 2024 and Miller, Repetti, and Vervaeke 2024 for discussions of new research on it. See Letheby 2022, 2024 for the philosophy of, and scientific research on, psychedelics and meditative states. See also Vervaeke 2019/2020 and Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Abramian 2024 for the perspective from 4e cognitive science on the topic.

6 See the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness*.

7 See the journals *Sophia*, and *Philosophy East and West* for comparative religious studies and comparative philosophy.

8 See Kripal 2024, 2019, Radin 2018, 2013, 2006, and Wargo 2018; these authors demonstrate that while the scientific consensus remains blind to the paranormal, demonstrable evidence is overwhelming. The underlying physics remains open, but one parsimonious explanation is that time, like space, admits of a nonlocal (quantum entangled) dimension (Wargo 2018). I highlight this one rather idiosyncratic explanation of precognition despite so much that has been written on alternative explanations of the broad range of psi phenomena which include precognition as but one type simply because it strikes me as most challenging insofar as its being the most parsimonious explanation poses a challenge to all its less parsimonious competing explanatory hypotheses, which latter I would prefer to be true, but as a follower of the principle of parsimony and a truth-seeker, I think it is important to draw attention to it. On the blindness of the current scientific consensus, see Frank, Gleiser, and Thompson 2024. On paranormal phenomena among practitioners of Buddhist meditation, see Osto 2024.

Anekāntavāda entails the view that the more perspectives on the elephant we grasp, the greater our understanding. In my use of the metaphor, the elephant represents spirituality; meditation represents one of its parts, say, a leg. I focus on the leg but don't think it is the entire elephant, spirituality, but one of the most powerful ways into that elephant, if not *the* most powerful, based on my leg-encounters. I address some pros and cons of the 10 issues listed, but begin by sharing some personal experiences.

My Leg(-up) on Meditation

William James (1902) identified several characteristics of mystical religious experiences, which may or may not occur in meditative contexts, including: ineffability; noetic quality (*gnosis*); transiency (brief, but lastingly impactful); passivity (absence of agency, as if from a higher power); unity (dissolution of separateness, oneness); and religious feeling (awe, reverence, sacredness, divine love).

David Yaden and Andrew Newberg (2022) update James' work, focusing more broadly on spiritual experiences, rather than religious experience, using contemporary methods, and they identify several characteristics, some of which (both James's and Yaden and Newberg's) overlap with mystical, psychedelic-induced, shamanic, and other similar types of experience: numinous (awe, reverence, sacredness, divine presence); mystical (unity); transformative; ecstatic; transcendent (beyond self); paranormal; and guidance (receiving direction as if from a superior source).

All of these phenomena constitute much of the data that a more complete theory of spirituality should explain. Their research shows that meditation practitioners report the greatest quantity and quality of such experiences: they happen most often to long-term meditators, and with the greatest intensity (2022). Thus, these phenomena constitute the main data that a more complete theory of meditation should explain. My focus here on meditation as justified at the core of spirituality, among other reasons that I hope will become clear as we proceed, is because the phenomena that these leading researchers of spiritual experiences focus on, according to their data, are produced in the greatest numbers and in the greatest intensity by long term meditation practice. Of course, correlation is not causation, but this fact alone drove my interest, and the idea that this correlation can be one of causation is dramatically confirmed in my own case.

Rather than repeat their research, I refer the reader to Yaden and Newberg for their comprehensive account, and again to Kripal (2024, 2019), Radin (2018, 2013, 2006), and Wargo (2018) for their accounts of paranormal phenomena particularly experienced by meditation virtuosos.⁹ Their combined work is essential to a philosophy of meditation and spirituality, and demonstrates that psychic phenomena are real. This should be a major news headline, but it is not.¹⁰

⁹ See Repetti 2019 on the phenomenal abilities of meditation virtuosos.

¹⁰ For the reasons why not, see Frank, Gleiser, and Thompson 2024.

At the end of my first yoga class, in deep relaxation, I had an out-of-body experience that changed my life. I soon found meditation teachers,¹¹ and began having intense EEs of all the sorts listed above. During my period of intense meditation practice I had countless EEs.¹² I will say more about these things later on, but suffice it to say here that my intensely mystical, gnostic, noetic, precognitive, and related EEs all seem to be byproducts of my highly disciplined meditative practices, all of which led me to philosophy, and to the importance of introducing and advocating for a philosophy of meditation.

Meditative practices, states, and traits

Elsewhere I have sketched the basic differences between meditative practices, meditative states, and meditative traits (2020).¹³ I have also explored such differences on the Integral Stage podcast (Alderman, Pascal, and Repetti 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). I will be somewhat more systematic here.

Meditative practices

Meditative practices are *procedures* one engages in to approximate meditative states, analogous to using training wheels to approximate bike riding. They come in many forms, for attentional focus is universal in meditative practice and anything can be its object.

Either of two basic skill types are typically employed in meditative practice: a narrow or broad focus. Of course, there is a spectrum here, with a mid-range. Narrow focus is often called *concentration*, *one-pointedness* or *focused awareness* (*FA*, in research literature): attention is restricted to a narrow range, e.g., a spot on a wall, candle flame, or breath at the nostrils. Broad focus is often called *mindfulness*, *witnessing* or *open monitoring* (*OM*, in research literature): the whole field of awareness is the focal range. In my view, both are sides of one coin: focusing attention on an intended range (narrow or broad), noticing when it slips out of the intended range, and restoring it. There are many differences in instructions around this process. E.g., some prescribe labeling any ‘distraction’ with an ‘-ing’ word: emoting, wanting, planning. Others prescribe auxiliary tools, e.g., counting breaths and starting again when the mind wanders, use of a mantra, etc.

11 Hilda Charlton, Joya (aka Ma Jaya), and Ram Dass (aka Richard Alpert).

12 For an account of some of my paranormal experiences, see Osto 2024, chapter 5, in which Osto presents me as the poster boy for his research into paranormal phenomena among practitioners of Buddhist meditation; see Alderman, Pascal, and Repetti 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, for discussions of meditative EEs, the philosophy of meditation, and meditative typologies, respectively; see Repetti 2022, forthcoming a, for my philosophy of meditation, and forthcoming b, for a full account of my paranormal experiences and philosophical analysis of them.

13 And also between contemplative practices, contemplative studies, and contemplative pedagogies (Repetti 2010b).

In my view, there are no ‘distractions’ in either approach: what’s being cultivated is the skill of noticing when attention wanders and restoring intended focus. These two, focusing attention and mind wandering, are features, not bugs – default mechanisms with survival value going back to pre-human ancestors who needed to zoom in (focus narrowly) on prey and zoom out to scan the environment (focus broadly) for predators.

Different traditions parse meditative practices differently, and many who are relatively new to meditation come exposed to only one or two conceptions or paradigms.¹⁴

Meditative states

Meditative states are a type of altered mental and/or psychophysiological state that may arise spontaneously, but are more likely to result from meditative practices. Just as there are many meditative practices, there are many meditative states. Some ‘flow’ states are experienced as involving a felt meditative sense, a fluid, heightened awareness coupled with the activity that triggered them, e.g., ‘runner’s high’, but which can arise from diverse activities such as dancing, singing, musical improv, hiking, mountain climbing, poetry, and other activities creatives may describe as having “found their Muse”, which conjures James’ ‘passivity’ element, when the source of inspiration seems exogenous. Many meditative states are best described as attainments of the practices employed to bring them about, e.g., one-pointedness practice, when successful, leads to a state of one-pointedness – trance-like absorption.

In the *Yoga Sutras* (Bryant 2017), the orthodox Hindu meditation manual of two millennia ago, Patanjali parses one-pointedness into categories that constitute two of the eight limbs (*ashtanga*) of Yoga (union, nonduality), namely, *dharana* and *dhyana*. *Asanas* (poses) and *pranayama* (breathing exercises) are but two preparatory limbs of Yoga, designed to stabilize mind and body for lengthy meditation. *Dharana* is the discipline of exercising otherwise intermittent attentional focus on one object, noticing when it wanders, and returning it to the target. *Dhyana* is the attainment of sustained one-pointedness without mind-wandering.¹⁵ *Samadhi*, the eighth limb,¹⁶ is the state of nonduality in which the subject/object distinction – attention-directing awareness and object of attention – dissolves, along with the broader mind/world distinction, bringing about a state of transcendence that is described as cosmic consciousness. Patanjali also distinguishes a number of different levels of *samadhi*, and Buddhism distinguishes between several stages of *jhanas* (states between Patanjali’s *dhyana* and *samadhi*).

14 For hundreds of my own free guided meditations, see Repetti 2020-2025.

15 Note that “*dhyana*”, Sanskrit, is translated as “*jhana*” in Pali, the language of the early Buddhist canon, “*chan*” as Buddhism migrated to China, and “*zen*” as it migrated to Japan.

16 Note that “*samadhi*”, one-pointedness, is also the eighth ‘fold’ in the Buddhist Eight-fold Path.

Thus, meditative states are not easily defined, as there is a great variety among them, but they may be understood readily as altered states, insofar as they are distinct from ordinary waking states. Meditative states can involve any of the following characteristics, many of which were identified by James (1903), and added to by the research of Yaden and Newburg (2022): relaxation, tranquility, concentration, focused awareness, mental quiescence: conscious mental activity ceases, from established one-pointedness,¹⁷ open-monitoring,¹⁸ groundedness, centeredness, passivity (the feeling that experiences are arising independently of volition), ecstasy, lucidity, luminosity, fluidity/flow states, energy (a felt force), *gnosis*, temporal fluctuation (time felt as slowing down), ineffableness, transcendence, revelatory or precognitive visions, out-of-body experiences, interconnectedness, sense of the sacred, awe, guidance (orientation from outside the agent), and inspiration.

Just as there are blended, mixed, or unclassifiable meditative practices, and for mystical experiences in general, so too with meditative states. For example, one might be a passive, guiding, ecstatic, inspirational, gnostic, awe-inspiring vision of a holographic universe of ineffably luminous, concept-transcending ideas – a description applicable to Proclus’ description of the *Logos* (Proclus and Taylor 1994),¹⁹ the first layer of intelligibility emanating from the One,

17 Patanjali’s treatise opens with the claim that yoga (nondual union) is attained by stopping all mental fluctuations (Bryant 2017).

18 Goleman and Davidson 2017 describe one advanced Tibetan yogi named Migyur Rimpoche whose EEG shows a high amplitude brainwave pattern of global (all-brain) ‘gamma’ synchrony during his open monitoring practice that lasts throughout his meditation but which is normally only briefly seen during moments of multi-sensory convergence, i.e., when one perceives the same object through three or more senses.

19 I had that experience, years before I read about this. Dodds’s translation of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology* (1963) is considered superior by some, but does not provide a direct experiential, visionary passage in precisely my terms. Proclus’s account of the *Logos* as the first layer of intelligibility emanating from the One is central to his metaphysical system and is analyzed throughout Dodds’s introduction and commentary. The mystical, visionary, and ecstatic experience described – ineffably luminous, concept-transcending, and awe-inspiring – corresponds most closely to Dodds’s discussion of Proclus’s theory of the intelligible cosmos (the *Logos*), which appears in the lengthy philosophical introduction (see pp. xv–xlviii), especially “Mystical Epistemology” and “The Structure of Emanation”. In the translation and commentary, propositions relating to the *Logos* and its role in cosmic emanation, unity, and intelligibility are found in Propositions 6–14 and discussed in the pages immediately following each proposition, often with Dodds’s own philosophical analyses. These can be found around pp. 6–30 of the Dodds translation. Dodds also addresses the Christian Neoplatonic reinterpretation of the *Logos* – especially in the commentary and footnotes to the relevant propositions (e.g., 20, 23, and 29), where he discusses the *Logos* as the Word made flesh in Christian metaphysics. For the most direct engagement with visionary, gnosis-like experiences and their relation to Neoplatonic metaphysics, see Dodds’s introduction (especially the section on mystical experience and illumination) and commentary on early propositions. For the specific Christian *Logos* connection, Dodds discusses these themes in his notes to higher propositions and the introduction.

which Christian Neoplatonists reinterpreted as the mind of God, according to which Jesus was the Word (the *Logos*) made flesh.

Meditative traits

Just as meditative states are not guaranteed by meditative practices, so too meditative traits are not guaranteed by meditative practices, but long-term meditative practice is likely to contribute to their cultivation, even if the practices are not engaged for such purposes. Even short-term mindfulness practices yield increases in detachment, as evidenced in a number of research protocols, one of the most researched of which involves the eight-week Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, as seen, e.g., on the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS) (Lau et al. 2006).

There are many popular variations on MBSR, such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention, Mindfulness-Based Pain Management, and, among others, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Most of these are considered somewhat more effective than traditional forms of psychotherapy, which latter suffer from what psychologists themselves refer to as the ‘Dodo Effect’, meaning, most therapies are relatively equal – or equally ineffective – as “mechanisms of change” (Henriques and Galha 2024, Repetti 2025a).

In my own research using the TMS on my philosophy students, I created a Pre- and Post-Course Questionnaire (PPCQ) consisting of several philosophical statements to which students agreed or disagreed (on a Likert Scale), on the first and last days of class, such as:

I am confident in my understanding of the nature of reality.²⁰

I am confident in my understanding of the nature of knowledge.

I am confident in my understanding of the nature of values and value judgments.

The intervention tested the number of times we experienced basic mindfulness meditation in different sections of the same course (over a few years), between zero (control group) and 12. The more times students practiced meditation, the greater the average changes on the PPCQ, which showed up even in classes that only practiced meditation twice, and the greater changes increased in proportion to the number of exposures to meditation.²¹ My speculative conclu-

²⁰ Note that these statements are not intended to be valuable philosophical outcomes of meditation, per se. If they were, I doubt “confidence” would be such a good outcome. Rather, a better outcome would be a more self-questioning philosophical attitude. And as the results of these surveys – given at the start and at the end of a semester of philosophy classes engaged in meditative practices – show, there is a correlation between greater shifts away from confidence about such statements and greater exposure to meditation.

²¹ See Repetti 2010a on the implications of this study for a contemplative pedagogy.

sion is that meditation is a philosophical activity that engenders a philosophical state in which the possibilities for altered perspectives, frame-shifting, belief-revision and attitude-revision are phenomenologically activated: a meditating mind, at least in my experience with hundreds of my students, is intrinsically philosophically curious, open, receptive.²²

The so-called ‘Big Five’ personality traits, also known as the ‘Five Factor Model’, include Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism, are generally unalterable dispositions. Studies support the claim that meditation is one of the few things people can do to bring about changes in the Big Five. Openness to Experience, for example, refers to an individual’s willingness to engage with new ideas, experiences, and alterations in perspective. Research suggests that meditation practice can be associated with an increase in Openness. Meditation enhances self-awareness, which can lead to greater appreciation for new experiences and perspectives, potentially increasing Openness.

There are other ways in which meditation can increase putatively desirable traits, and decrease undesirable ones, although what counts as a desirable or undesirable trait is itself a matter to be explored in a philosophy of meditation, if not in virtue epistemology, among the Big Five and others. Here are some intuitive reasons meditation may help:

- reduce traits associated with Neuroticism, which can create a more open, adaptable mindset
- foster cognitive flexibility, making us more willing to try new things and adapt to changing circumstances, characteristics of Openness
- promote curiosity and exploration, which aligns with Openness, encouraging us to explore new ideas and experiences
- develop self-discipline, focus, and organization, all components of Conscientiousness
- promote attention regulation and commitment to tasks
- enhance emotional stability, reduce anxiety, stress, and mood swings, leading to a more balanced emotional state
- foster empathy and compassion, traits linked to Agreeableness
- increase self-awareness, helping us understand our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, fostering personal growth
- build resilience against stress, allowing us to cope with challenges
- enhance ability to live in the present moment
- reduce rumination
- increase life satisfaction and overall well-being

22 See, however, Struhl (2022), on the circular relationship between meditation instructions within traditions and the ways those traditions engage in ideological priming in those meditation instructions.

Many of these ideas are supported by research, e.g., long-term *metta* (loving-kindness) meditation practice increases neural activity and neural matter in the empathy center of the brain (the left prefrontal cortex), and long-term one-pointedness practice increases neural activity and neural matter in the attention centers of the brain (Begley 2007, Goleman and Davidson 2017, Vago 2022). While these are perhaps more specifically elements of a neurophilosophy of meditation, in my view, the various sciences of meditation ought to be considered aspects of the philosophy of meditation.

The monastic lore in all religions and spiritual traditions contains overwhelming testimonial evidence to a much longer list of traits altered by meditative practice (Ainslie 2001, Repetti 2010a).²³ These include, but are not limited to:

- prudence
- judiciousness
- forbearance
- benevolence
- generosity
- kindness
- compassion
- altruism
- peacefulness
- focus
- equanimity
- wisdom
- detachment
- centeredness
- fearlessness
- patience
- moral purity
- joy
- intuition
- mental/emotional freedom
- effortless self-control (*sophrosyne*)

23 There is a growing body of literature addressing some of the potentially negative consequences of meditation practices, but while this research is clearly relevant to a more complete philosophy of meditation, given my purpose of advocating and sketching a philosophy of meditation here, I will simply note this, but also share my intuition that insofar as in my view meditative exercises are simply exercises of our own awareness ideally oriented at more clearly seeing and understanding our own awareness and its relationship with reality, because such risks exist *tout court* in almost any related enterprise, they are not unique to meditation, but common to virtually all sentient existential conditions. In support of an almost universally pro-attitude toward meditation, see Repetti (2016).

Of course, the somewhat different versions of the *summum bonum* postulated by the world's contemplative wisdom traditions are all believed to be threshold-crossing attainments of human perfection made possible by various meditative and/or contemplative practices:

- *ataraxia* (tranquility, freedom from distress) – the goal in Epicureanism and Pyrrhonian Skepticism
- *apatheia* (equanimity, freedom from passions) – the goal in Stoicism
- *eudaemonia* (flourishing, well-being, fulfilment) – the goal for Plato and Aristotle, from the attainment of virtue
- *nirvana* (liberation from suffering) – the goal in Buddhism
- *satori* (sudden enlightenment, awakening) – a key concept in Zen Buddhism
- *moksha* (spiritual liberation) – the goal in several Hindu philosophies
- salvation (spiritual redemption) – the goal in the Abrahamic religions

All of these traits may be seen as elements of epistemic and/or moral virtues, that is, qualities of minds that intuitively foster sapiential growth and human excellence. Meditation virtuosos are universally revered as paragons of virtue, sages.

Contemporary research depicts substantial evidence in support of many such traits, including biomedical ones, altered by meditative practice, a number of which overlap with the monastic lore. These include, but are not limited to:

- reduced stress and anxiety
- improved emotional regulation
- enhanced focus and attention
- greater self-awareness
- increased compassion and empathy
- better memory and cognitive function
- lower blood pressure and improved heart health
- slower aging of the brain
- better sleep quality
- pain reduction and increased pain tolerance
- stronger immune system
- reduced symptoms of depression
- overall well-being and happiness
- greater neuroplasticity

(Begley 2007, Goleman and Davidson 2017)

Technically, with this list, the focus moves away again from philosophy per se, toward health and the psychology of meditation, but a complete philosophy of

meditation, in my view, ought to address all the aspects of meditation that matter to the philosophical and other dimensions of the wellbeing of human beings.

My philosophical research on how certain meditative practices count as training exercises for the cultivation of meditative traits has focused on how metacognition-involving forms of meditation contribute to the cultivation of what Thomas Metzinger calls ‘mental autonomy’ (2015) and I have termed ‘mental freedom’ (2010a, 2019). The idea, in short, is that by cultivating attentional control in connection with practicing observing, detaching from, and taking mental contents (thoughts, emotions, desires, etc.) off-line, we approximate what the Buddha – the exemplar of mental freedom – claimed, namely, that he could have or not have any thought, intention, resolve, etc., that he wanted or did not want to have, what I’ve called “the Buddha’s mental freedom claim” (2019). The ancient Greeks aspired to similar freedoms, in the form of *ataraxia*, *apatheia*, *eudaimonia*, etc., which can be understood as ‘freedoms from’ – from false beliefs, suboptimal emotions, desires, actions, and the like. I have argued extensively that the two primary practices that the Buddha advocated toward this end, *FA* and *OM*, the last two ‘folds’ in his Eightfold Path, are intuitively and empirically effective in increasing mental autonomy, freedom of the mind (2019).

Long-term meditative practice, as mentioned earlier, is also related to the cultivation of propensities to experience paranormal phenomena or the cultivation of psychic powers, which, as mentioned earlier, Patanjali detailed in an instructional manual for them thousands of years ago, although scholars are in some disagreement about the exact dating of the text (Bryant 2017). It is not necessarily the case that long-term meditation practice reliably causes these phenomena, but individuals who experience these phenomena more frequently or intensely than average are typically long-term meditators (Radin 2018, 2013). Psychic dispositions are not necessarily virtue-related traits, but they are traits related to long-term meditation practice.

Virtue epistemology emphasizes the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues as keys to an optimal epistemology. The sapiential traits and abilities linked with long-term meditation practice render it one of the most powerful practices in any virtue epistemology toolkit. While increasing psychic powers are traits associated with meditative skill, they are universally regarded as both unnecessary collateral results of long-term practice and to be avoided for sapiential and soteriological purposes. The relationship between serious meditation discipline and virtue epistemological and related sapiential cultivation is a key subject for philosophical inquiry, but it can only be mentioned here as essential to a more complete philosophy of meditation.

Traditional-religion-based and related meditative traditions

What are the differences between paradigmatic forms of meditation from the world’s many religious traditions, where practitioners kneel in prayer in the West, or sit in Buddha-like postures in the East, between explicitly meditative

practices like one-pointedness and mindfulness, between more or less implicitly meditative practices like yoga, tai chi, Sufi whirling, tribal dance, shamanic journeys, entheogenic journeys, and between the host of diverse activities that engender altered states, e.g., sensory deprivation, runner's high, flow states (as with artists creating, mountaineers, hikers, bikers, skaters, dancers, etc.)? These taxonomic, conceptual questions need to be addressed in more comprehensive philosophies of meditation and spirituality. I sample some of them here that directly pertain to meditation, just to reveal some of the complexity of this issue.

As my analysis of differences and similarities between *FA* and *OM* above ought to make clear, these categories admit of multiple interpretations between and even within each of the two traditions that revolve around them, i.e., Buddhism and Hinduism. Buddhism is a heterodox species of the larger genus of Hinduism, itself an umbrella term that refers to six orthodox and several heterodox religious philosophical traditions of India, each of which includes many variants. Nonetheless, the primary mode of meditative practice prescribed and practiced in most forms of non-Buddhist Indian philosophy is of the *FA* type, whereas all forms of Buddhism prescribe both *FA* and *OM*, since these are the last two factors in the Eightfold Path, which itself constitutes the last of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, which doctrines constitute the doctrinal core of all forms of Buddhism. Yet within the many forms of Buddhism, there are differences in the interpretation of *FA* and *OM* that manifest as differences in instruction and in philosophical understanding.

I do not wish to suggest which interpretation makes more sense, but simply to illustrate such differences. On one interpretation, e.g., mindfulness of bodily sensations is prescribed as the first step or foundational practice, as a prerequisite to later practices. This may be interpreted as a 'body sweep' or 'body scan' in which attention is directed sequentially throughout each bodily region, focused on proprioceptive/somatic sensations in each area. It may be interpreted as periodic exertions of *FA*, since attention is held on one part of the body and its sensations at a time, for a time. It may be interpreted as mid-range *OM* directed at a bodily region that involves more than a single focal point. Some interpret *FA* and *OM* as only conceptually – but not phenomenologically – distinguishable.

One metaphor for the subtle difference is that attention directed at a region or even a single point, such as the point where air enters the nostrils, is analogous to a spotlight shining light on that target, where the spotlight's lens control mechanism enables the practitioner to adjust the lens so it fits the contours of its object exactly, which is *FA*, and where the degree, intensity, brightness, or luminosity of the light directed at the target is the degree of mindfulness or *OM* attending to the target. Keeping the intended scope of the target is the goal of *FA*, and how mindful or aware one is of what is perceived within that scope is the degree of *OM*, and the goal of *OM* is to attain the highest degree of attentive awareness of the object or field being monitored. By analogy, while we can describe the difference between a circle of light cast exactly or inexactly

on a circle on an otherwise dark wall (the range of *FA*) and the greater or lesser intensity of the light, or lumens (the degree of *OM*), these cannot be separated physically. Some traditions instruct separate trainings for each of these two features; others insist they are both always being practiced, sometimes with emphasis on one or the other aspect.

Some Buddhist traditions outline several stages of meditative practices leading to several stages of meditative trance absorption, e.g., the *jhanas*, whereas others gloss over or simply circumvent such differences and insist on instantaneous enlightenment. Others insist we are already enlightened, and the illusion of non-enlightenment is a slight dust covering our vision, our pure consciousness, or inherent Buddha nature, whereas some claim that enlightenment takes up to seven lifetimes after attaining the first state, ‘stream entry’, characterized by one of the *jhanas*. Others assert that it takes countless lifetimes of good karma from living in accordance with Buddhist teachings.

The same sorts of differences appear in non-Buddhist forms of Indian philosophy. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (Bryant 2018) outlines similar stages of meditative absorption on the path. *The Bhagavad Gita* (2000), one of the most beloved Hindu scriptures, lists a handful of major spiritual paths and many others leading to liberation, each involving a meditative component. Two major versions of Vedanta assert opposing claims about the enlightened state, namely, ‘Advaita’ (‘nondualist’, the identity of the soul with the supreme being or ultimate reality) and ‘Dvaita’ (‘dualist’, their non-identity), and yet a third version asserts ‘Vishisthadvaita’ (‘qualified nondualist’, a non-identity that allows for their communion). Swami Vivekananda (1895/2017), for example, argued that the difference between the dualist and non-dualist is simply a matter of spiritual evolution, asserting that only the more evolved experience nondualism. Others argue that dualism is the higher state because it enables the greater bliss of devotional ecstasy.

These are but a few of the many similar sorts of differences to be found just in Buddhism and Hinduism, the two traditions that most prioritize meditation. Daoism is among the world’s leading religions, philosophies, or religious philosophies that advocate meditation, as do the mystical and monastic elements within the three main monotheistic Abrahamic religions. Each of these divergent orientations diagnoses the human condition differently, adopts a different metaphysics about the person, the path, and the goal, prescribes a different set of practices with distinct instructions about otherwise curiously similar practices, and thus contributes to the so-called ‘jingle-jangle problem’ in the philosophies of meditation and spirituality, that is, the problem of the same word having different meanings in different traditions, on the one hand, and the same concept being identified by different words in different traditions, on the other hand.²⁴

24 The jingle-jangle problem is not limited to spirituality, but infects philosophy and the sciences (Vervaeke 2019/2020), and all communication (Repetti and Gleason 2022).

It is enough here to identify these issues and explain the need for them to be addressed in more comprehensive philosophies of meditation and spirituality. By analogy, detailing and examining a variety of claims widely considered to be forms of knowledge might be one way to go about trying to figure out what knowledge is, and such items might be relevant as data points for any theory of knowledge, but a lot more philosophical work would need to be engaged to formulate an adequate epistemology, rather than a summary of putative samples of knowledge. Thus, when it comes to the philosophy of meditation, merely enumerating the ways various traditions conceive and practice it is perhaps necessary but insufficient for a complete philosophy of meditation.

Novel forms of contemporary meditative practices

Recall the many popular meditation apps that millions of Westerners use, the many variations on MBSR, and the many different technological devices functioning as meditation enhancers, just to mention a few broad categories each of which admits of as many variations, interpretations, prescriptions, and instructions, and thus of as many jingle-jangle possibilities, as do the many forms of Buddhism and Hinduism. Likewise, it is enough for a prolegomenon to a philosophy of meditation to note their relevance to, and the need for them to be addressed in, more comprehensive philosophies of meditation and spirituality.

Meditative practices that are or aren't forms of philosophical practice²⁵

Some meditative practices are forms of philosophical practice; others are not. What makes the difference?

A ham sandwich is not normally, but can be, the object of philosophical inquiry, if, e.g., one is curious about its non-kosher nature versus that of 'turkey-ham'. Sitting upright in a chair, still, relaxing, need not be, but may be meditative, depending on whether one does so because one's blood pressure is being measured or because one is intending to meditate. Some forms of contemporary meditation are not philosophical if, e.g., they are engaged to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, relax, zone out, or take a waking nap. These are not necessarily spiritual practices either, but they can be part of a spiritual path that encourages an "ecology of practices" that includes them for overall health and wellbeing.²⁶ Similarly, one can engage in yoga for similar non-philosophical, non-spiritual reasons, e.g., body sculpting, cardiovascular health, etc., or

25 This section is admittedly of utmost importance for a philosophy of meditation. Considerations of space for this writing, however, constrain the extent to which I can go into each relevant aspect of the topic. For more on this topic, see Legum (2022), the Introduction to Repetti, ed. (2022), and the chapter by Repetti in Repetti, ed. (2022).

26 See Vervaeke 2019/2020, 2023/2024 and Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Abramian 2024 for comprehensive arguments in support of an ecology of practices in a sapiential life path.

for explicitly philosophical and spiritual reasons. One can engage in meditative practices to explore altered states of consciousness, raise consciousness, approximate a spiritual or philosophical version of the *summum bonum*, e.g., *ataraxia*, *apatheia*, *sophrosyne*, *nirvana*, enlightenment, etc.), better understand consciousness, cultivate virtues, examine the self, the mind/body relationship, agency, the agent/arena or organism/environment relationship, the nature of time or space, and/or any other existentially relevant aspect of reality or being.

One of my meditation teachers, Dhamma Dena (aka Ruth Dennison), once remarked that “mindfulness is just extra-ordinary attention to ordinary experience” (2004). As touched upon in the opening section of this writing, in my view, philosophy and meditation are perhaps species of a shared genus: Philosophy is just extra-ordinary *examination* of ordinary experience. Thus, I see meditation and philosophy as species of a larger genus – albeit one without a name, as yet – that includes both. This greater genus includes an orientation of reciprocal, recursive interplay between discriminative attentiveness to the elements of experience and a critical examination of the concepts, beliefs, and perspectives arising in experience, toward the improvement of epistemic/metaphysical/existential convergence, the perfection of wisdom, or enlightenment. It transcends but includes observation and analysis, fostering a rich integration where introspection meets lived reality. This enables a transformative process that deepens the understanding of existence, enhances personal growth, and cultivates wisdom derived from both reflective practice and experiential learning.

We need a term that might capture the larger genus that encompasses both species. One neologism could be ‘ontosophy’, from *ontos* (being) and *sophia* (wisdom): the wisdom of being, or of how to best be, being wise, or wisening – aspiring to be wise. Seneca’s term for the sage was ‘*sapiens*’. The Greeks’ term was ‘*sophos*’, so perhaps ‘sophistry’ could work, the art of wisening, but that’s too close to ‘sophistry’, which has a negative connotation.

An alternative approach includes meditation as a form of philosophy, since in most major Asian traditions (barring Confucianism, although if ‘meditation’ is understood as a form of attentiveness, then including Confucianism) meditation is considered one of the highest forms of philosophy, and in the Western monastic traditions it is engaged towards the attainment of the *summum bonum*, which is a philosophical/spiritual aspiration, the attainment of the highest spiritual wisdom. Along this line of thought, Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault (Hadot 1995), otherwise odd bedfellows, have argued for a return to the ancient Greco-Roman emphasis on spiritual exercises as key components in *philosophy as a way of life*, which approach to academic philosophy was periodically dropped in the history of the West, but which was never dropped in the East.

Along these lines, Vervaeke has resurrected the Greek, “*philia sophia*”, ‘love of wisdom’, to differentiate it from its current denotation of *academic* philosophy, and to intend his interpretation which prescribes an ecology of such practices in a sapiential way of life (Vervaeke 2019/2020, 2023/2024, Vervaeke, Mastropietro, and Abramian 2024), or, if you will, in ontosophy. We are analyzing

meditative practices that are or aren't philosophical, but, conversely, *philia sophia* includes philosophical practices that are meditative and contemplative.

Socrates saw philosophy as “care of the soul”, *therapy*.²⁷ He and Plato also saw it as therapy of belief. Both were also martial artists – Socrates was a soldier, Plato, a wrestler – they exhibited an ecology of practices. The Stoics sought to internalize Socratic dialectic, as the therapy of assent/belief, desire, and action – ‘three disciplines’ aimed at *apatheia* – and explicitly included meditation as part of that therapy. According to Hadot (1995, Ch. IX), the Stoics saw physical exercises, e.g., fasting, willful adversity, etc., as important philosophical practices alongside dialectic and contemplation, part of the ‘third discipline’ (of action), as did Plotinus. Epicureans saw dialectic as therapy for superstition (aiming at *ataraxia*). Pyrrhonians saw dialectic as therapy for dogmatism (aiming at *aporia* or *agnosis*). Neoplatonists saw dialectic as anagogic therapy, the royal road to transcendence, including meditation.

Stoicism is *philia sophia*. There is a resurgence of interest in it in the West. This Western reclaiming of ancient Western *philia sophia* is part of a growing ‘philosophical practice’ movement that includes ‘philosophical counseling’ as an alternative to psychotherapy, or ‘therapy for the sane’, as one of its pioneers’ book titles puts it (Marinoff 2004).²⁸

Secular mindfulness

Secular mindfulness practices have become so popular in so many domains in the West in recent decades that they have been dubbed ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser and Loy 2013), to convey the idea that their spread is analogous to the spread of fast foods, like McDonalds. McMindfulness may not be philosophical, e.g., if one engages it to lower blood pressure, though it may produce collateral philosophical or spiritual benefits. I will respond to this topic in the next section.

Critiques of McMindfulness

Slavoj Žižek (2012), for example, construes McMindfulness as a new opium for the masses. Critics from the religious right accuse mindfulness of stealth Buddhism and ‘McYoga’ of stealth Hinduism. Orthodox Buddhist and Hindu critics

27 The word ‘therapy’ comes from the Greek ‘*therapeia*’, which means ‘healing’ or ‘treatment’, derived from ‘*therapeuein*’, meaning ‘to serve’ or ‘take care of’. Historically, ‘*therapeia*’ referred not only to medical treatment but to broader care and service, including of mind, body, and spirit. In modern use, ‘therapy’ covers many fields of treatment, e.g., psychology, physical rehabilitation, and holistic health, emphasizing restoration or improvement of well-being.

28 See Repetti 2025a for an argument in support of philosophical therapy; Repetti 2025b for an overview of philosophical counseling, consulting, therapy, and related ‘public philosophy’ practices; and Repetti 2023 for a sampling of such practices. For forms of the practice I developed with two groups of colleagues, see Socratic Counseling n.d. and the Philosophical Counseling Working Group n.d.

accuse them of being ethically-neutered Buddhism or Hinduism. I have argued extensively in support of McM mindfulness and against such critiques (Repetti 2016), so I will only summarize the main point of my account here: McM mindfulness is practice reducing *mindlessness*, which is implicated in most errors.

EEs associated with long-term or intense meditative practices

EEs, in paranormal research literature, include all the experiences mentioned above in connection with those studied by James and by Yaden and Newberg.²⁹ To the extent meditation is the greatest cause associated with EEs, followed by psychedelics, an account of EEs is required in robust philosophies of meditation and spirituality. While most literature on EEs has been positive, there are negative EEs, as has been brought to light in recent years by a number of researchers, significantly sparked by the work of Willoughby Britton and colleagues (Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen, and Britton (2017)).³⁰ I briefly discuss both types.

People with undiagnosed or borderline forms of mental illness, unaddressed traumas, or diagnosed forms of mental illness such as PTSD, might be at greater risk of negative EEs by engaging in meditation practices, which can inadvertently trigger episodes of their pathologies, just as psychedelics can, outside controlled psychotherapeutic settings. So, just as those with physical health issues should consult physicians before engaging in new exercises, those with fragile psychological health should consult mental health counselors before engaging in meditative practices. It's important to recognize that basically 'healthy' persons can have negative experiences and reactions, can experience altered states that leave them disaffected; e.g., by detaching from thoughts and cultivating an impersonal stance towards them, one may experience depersonalization, a dissolution of the sense of self. Some aspire to experience this as a sign of spiritual growth, under the Buddhist belief that the self is an illusion we should transcend, but others who lack this aspiration can experience it as pathological. As with everything, it depends.

As for positive EEs, for example, I have had so many – in every category above – that if I could redistribute each one to different people who never had one, hundreds who are agnostic about them may be converted to gnostics thereby. I describe a few of them here to partly explain my vocal advocacy of their importance in any robust philosophy of meditation or spirituality. I have experienced dozens of precognitive dreams, each of which involved dozens of sequential 'hits' – improbable non-trivially-correct predictions – the

²⁹ To be clear, James is specifically characterizing mystical experience, not setting out categories of EEs. And EE is broader than the spiritual experience. Psi, for instance, isn't necessarily a spiritual experience for some who have it.

³⁰ Cf. Huebner Hayman 2022. Note, however, that the academic recognition of negative mystical experiences goes back at least as far as James, and negative NDEs have been identified by researchers for a long time.

probabilities against which are roughly equal to the odds against selecting one atom in the visible universe. Some such dreams were shared by others, which only multiplies the incredibly high improbability. Some such dreams foretold events which only came true independently of my agency, on the one hand, but because I dreamt them, somewhat paradoxically, on the other hand. Researchers call these ‘time loops’ (Wargo 2018). I will give just one example.

After having a dream about it, I was invited to attend an invitation-only secret meditation group that I never knew existed. I only learned of it after informing two members of it about my dream. In my dream I experienced the route to a house where the group met, its secret location at an exact intersection in a place I never visited, its stoop, front door, inside spiral wrought iron black staircase leading to its basement, the design of the meditation room, its altar, the platform on which the teacher sat, her identity, the people in attendance in meditation poses facing her, the meditation led by this woman, etc., all to the amazement of the members to whom I described the dream. The group was at maximum, due to the small space in the teacher’s basement, but when my dream was related to her, she invited me. One detail in my dream that I did not relate to these two members before I went there was that at the end of my dream, a blonde, green-eyed woman I recognized from a much larger meditation group I belonged to, but didn’t know personally, asked me how I liked the meditation. In real life, right after the meditation, instead, she said she dreamed that I came there. I replied, “So did I”.

I have had numerous precognitive dreams of this complex, paradoxical nature, and numerous mystical, gnostic, and related EEs that demand philosophical explanations. I am convinced that most of them were not functions of confusion, mistaken memory, or other forms of error.

Possible metaphysics that might make mystical experiences, psi, NDEs, etc., possible

As I have argued elsewhere (Repetti, Pascal, and Dempsey 2025), if the latest theoretical physics models are coherent, e.g., if spacetime is not fundamental, if nonlocality (quantum entanglement) affects not only space but time, or if time is like a fourth dimension in a timeless block universe, then these experiences are not supernatural,³¹ and the whole natural/supernatural dichotomy is a false one. It is enough to emphasize here the importance of developing credible epistemologies, physics, and metaphysics to account for these phenomena. Unfortunately, due to considerations of space, I cannot develop this line of inquiry further here in this admittedly limited prolegomenon, but only point to its importance in a more complete philosophy of meditation.

³¹ See Wargo 2022 on the paradoxical ‘time looping’ physics that would make this possible.

Can meditative experiences reveal metaphysical truths?

Contemplative traditions suggest that meditative experiences reveal metaphysical truths about the nature of consciousness, self, ultimate reality, etc. The two most obvious problems here are the blatant contradictions between them and the circularity problem within each of them: the accounts in different traditions often contradict each other, and within each tradition the alleged methods of supporting these claims are often circular insofar as their meditative instructions presuppose the metaphysics that they train practitioners to experience (Struhl 2022). As with the conclusion of the previous section, it is enough to emphasize the importance of developing credible epistemologies and metaphysics to account for these phenomena, some attempts at which appear across several chapters in my edited collection on the topic.

Can meditative experiences lead to wisdom, mental freedom, enlightenment?

According to many wisdom traditions, meditation is the royal road to the highest wisdom, sometimes referred to as enlightenment. However, this conclusion faces the same contradictions and circularity problems. What is enlightenment: the realization of the Self, no-self, the Dao, God, etc.? Is there really an enlightening threshold which, once crossed, is irreversible? If so, why the disagreement about it? Again, it is enough to emphasize the importance of developing credible epistemologies and metaphysics to address these issues in a prolegomenon to the topic.

Conclusions

How does all this inform the broader subject, the philosophy of spirituality? The better part of the answer is implicit in everything above. This is only a prolegomenon to a more complete philosophy of meditation, itself a central component in a philosophy of spirituality. I aver that we need a robust philosophy of meditation and spirituality, and that the above supports that claim. I conclude with the claim I opened with: that meditative practices are one of the most powerful forms of spiritual and philosophical practice, if not the most powerful. What exactly does ‘powerful’ mean here? Transformative? This must be left vague. Impressive experiences may certainly shake one out of conventional views, but how is the hard work of spiritual development performed? By sweeping floors, as the Zen teacher might say? In relationships, including raising children well? By engaging in social action for the benefit of other beings? In line with my use of the metaphor of the elephant and the blind, I leave these as open questions for now, and I am open to each of them and countless others being enlighteningly valid in some sense or other. Again, this is my metaphorically partial access to one leg on the metaphorical elephant of the philosophies of meditation and of spirituality, based on my personal leg-up on meditation and the many EEs that it apparently generated in my practice.

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Prolegomena za filozofiju meditacije

Apstrakt

Ova prolegomena skicira pitanja koja su centralna za filozofiju meditacije i razvija samo neka od njih, a čitaocce upućuje na druga dela u kojima su obrađena pitanja, koja nisu pokrivena ovde. Potpuna filozofija meditacije obuhvatila bi prikaze: razlika između meditativnih praksi, stanja i osobina; religijski zasnovanih meditativnih tradicija; novih savremenih meditativnih praksi i istraživanja; meditativnih praksi koje jesu i nisu filozofske prakse, i obrnuto; „Mekmajndfulnessa“ (McMindfulness); toga da li i u kojoj meri takve prakse otkrivaju metafizičke istine ili vode ka prosvetljenju; kakva fizika/metafizika bi mogla učiniti mogućim paranormalne korelate mističkih iskustava; kao i prednosti i nedostatke svih ovih pitanja. Autor deli neka lična iskustva, spekulativne hipoteze i argumente za centralnu tvrdnju da su meditativne prakse jedan od najmoćnijih oblika duhovne i filozofske prakse.

Ključne reči: ekologija praksi, Mekmajndfulness, meditacija, mentalna autonomija, paranormalno, filozofsko savetovanje, filozofska praksa, filozofija kao način života, filozofija meditacije, filozofija duhovnosti