

### The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation



Jessica Frazier

The Oxford Handbook of Meditation

*Edited by Miguel Farias, David Brazier, and Mansur Lalljee*

Subject: Psychology, Cognitive Psychology Online Publication Date: Feb 2021

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198808640.013.21

### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter outlines a theory of meditation as an art of self-shaping, by emphasizing meditation's efficacy as a tool for sculpting the "plastic" structures of the mind. First, it considers modern views of meditation as a form of healing that brings the mind "back" to its natural functioning. This stands in contrast with most traditional views of meditation as a way to change the self in permanent—and sometimes radical—ways. Second, it sketches a model of the mind's "architecture of attention"—exploring the role of selective attention in cognitive processing and the cumulative structures of the self. Third, given this model of the mind, it considers some examples of how absorptive, deconstructive, and narrative forms of meditation shape the inner world of the practitioner. From this examination of meditative functions, there emerges an ontology of the self that recognizes its self-creative malleability. Less an atomic individual or an outward-shining power of perception, the self appears as a kind of dynamic weather system that is constantly transformed as it takes up the raw materials of sensory stimulus. On this model, meditation functions as the selective factor that allows different elements of that system to predominate and thereby shape the others. Finally, the chapter reminds that, far from the modern world's concern with individual autonomy, *classical* meditation's subtle artistry aimed to bring the self into alignment with broader realities.

Keywords: self, meditation, Yoga Sūtras, agency, attention, self-transformation

---

## Introduction

So is the name of spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections.

—Ignatius Loyola (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 1)

... technologies of the self ... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

—Michel Foucault (1998, p. 18)

In early ninth century Sūs, the Iraqi Sufi mystic al-Hallaj declared that his deepening absorption in God had led him to union with the divine; this controversial claim later contributed to his execution as a heretic and rebel against the local authorities. At the same time in the narrow limestone caves of Thailand, Buddhist anchorites crawled deep into the dark to devote motionless hours to cleansing their consciousness. Meanwhile, further west, Christian monks sat in their cells reciting the scripture in a Hesychastic practice of letting the divine light sink ever deeper into their hearts. These and many other types of “meditation” through history go far beyond the widespread focus on mindfulness, attesting to a widespread desire to curb and craft the self through mental practices. It is on this model of meditation as art of self-transformation that this chapter will focus.

## Meditation as Self-Shaping

Meditation raises powerful questions about the nature of conscious life: what if there were a way to control and shape the “self,” that mysterious bundle of perceptions, reflections, feelings and actions that we *are*, but which seems to be forever running away with us? What forms of practice might we adopt to change our own thoughts and desires? What is the nature of our agency over ourselves, and what might we want to do if we could transform the very experience of which our lives consist?<sup>1</sup> Meditation traditions help individuals to circumscribe their mental life within a particular habitus; there it can be understood, reshaped, and harnessed to more discriminating goals. In this sense it opens up a whole new resource for living that is hidden from those who must passively receive their mind’s content as it comes to them.

The nebulous modern notion of “meditation” is a synthesis of European and Asian ideas such as *meditari*, *theoria*, *contemplatio*, *yoga*, *dhyāna* and its correlates *chan* or *zen*. What this cluster of terms shares is reference to a prolonged constructive engagement of the mind aimed at transforming some facet of experience. The *Yoga Sūtras* (YS; ca. 300 BCE–300 CE) are probably the earliest existing manual of meditation, in the sense that they outline a disciplined program (*sādhana*, or “regular” practice’) aimed at cultivation of an extra-ordinary state of experience (*samādhi*, or “absorption”) that in turn can help one to achieve a spiritually or psychologically beneficial transformation of the self (*kaivalya*, or “pure isolation”). This text begins by defining yogic meditation as “the stilling of the movements of the mind” (YS 1.2), and it prescribes meditation as a way of harnessing the mind to valuable human goals (“yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root “*yuj*,” which is cognate with “yoke,” link or join). Thus yoga epitomizes the function of meditation that we will examine in this chapter: its use as a tool to transform the self in some important way. Like so many other traditions of meditation, classical yogic practice is rooted in a *theory*

of what the mind is, resulting in a *map* of how it functions, and a kind of inner “*engineering*” of how it can be manipulated and reshaped. The world’s varied cultures of meditation rely on different mappings of the structure of the self and different practices for achieving change—but what they share is that each helps individuals to take some creative control of their inner world.

Despite extensive theorizing about the self during the last century and a growing seriousness about meditation in the human and natural sciences, relatively little scholarly work has been done at the intersection of meditation and selfhood.<sup>2</sup> This chapter lays some foundations of a theory of meditation by emphasizing the centrality of mental plasticity and meditation’s efficacy as a tool for self-shaping. First, we will consider modern views of meditation as a medicine for healing the malaise of modernity by bringing the mind “back” to its natural functioning. By contrast, we will then look at the way older traditions have used meditation not to restore our everyday self, but to *change* it in some crucial way. Given the diversity of meditative traditions, the notion of creative self-shaping provides an interpretive framework; in particular, the notion of “attention” in cognitive processing and the making of our mental structures reveals the fundamental plasticity of the self and its potential for change.

## Modern Meditation: From Creativity to Healing

Yet traditional goals of meditation vary widely across cultures: they include trained visionary journeys in Kabbalistic Merkavah mysticism, visualized sacred-sexual encounters in tantric Tibetan Buddhism, rational analysis of one’s motivations in Christian moral self-examination, patient logical ascents into the conceptual realm in Plato, and the attempt to purify one’s whole consciousness in Patañjali’s classical yogic meditation. Such traditional approaches effect “structured transitions in the inner world of the living subject” (Shulman & Stroumsa, 2002, p. 1). In doing so, they serve as what Michel Foucault called “technologies of the self,” practices by which individuals “effect ... operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and ways of being” (Foucault, 1998, p. 18). In his analysis of classical spiritual practices, Foucault emphasized the complex, versatile self-“governmentality” that classical practices bestow on individuals who are normally the passive recipient of their own thoughts. With the help of meditative “technologies” one can begin to curate one’s own inner world, craft one of the “different forms of self” recommended by different cultures, and shape the way it expresses itself as a “principle of activity” (Foucault, 1998, pp. 22, 25).<sup>3</sup>

The possibility of recrafting our basic mental material has become a powerful idea in the modern world, where Freudian narratives about the splitting of the personality into fragmented selves (the rational “Ego,” the wayward inner “Id,” and the socially constructed “Superego”) have become commonplace (Freud, 1961). This pathology of the modern psyche is paralleled in the traditions of existential reflection proceeding from Friedrich Nietzsche’s portrait of godless modern man, such as Martin Heidegger’s 1927 *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 2010), Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1943 *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2003),

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

and Paul Tillich's 1952 *The Courage To Be* (Tillich, 2014). These sources were echoed in later classics of psychology like Carl Jung's 1933 *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Jung, 1933/2001), Erich Fromm's 1941 *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm, 2011), or R. D. Laing's 1967 *The Politics of Experience* (Laing, 1990), all of which found Western styles of civilization to have a uniquely repressive effect on the self.

Such views grew partly from philosophical roots in Descartes' definition of the mind as a thing of pure reflective self-awareness. He saw it as being similar to the mechanical automata of the period insofar as it provided motion and life to the body. But it was distinguished from them by its inner phenomenon of luminous reflexivity. For him, then, the self was

a substance the whole essence or nature of which is to think, and that for its existence [has] no need of any place, nor does it depend on any material thing; so that this 'me,' that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and is even more easy to know than the latter. from the *Discourse on the Method* part 4: 33

(Descartes 1997, p. 92)

The self that Descartes arrived at via his unique phenomenological method of inner "meditation" replaced the Christian "soul" substance with the rational self-reflective self of the "I-think" or *cogito*. The self was no longer the reflection of the spiritual nature of God as in Augustine, but was now a mechanical agent with rational cogitation as its own inner "spring." Yet Descartes' philosophy still relied on methods of inner reflection that retained the introspective character of Christian contemplation, and his philosophy retained essentially religious goals.

This continuity with religious meditation would be forgotten as the Enlightenment advanced. A century later, in his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1.4.6) David Hume would counter Descartes' conclusions by arguing that his own introspection revealed not a single substance, but a "bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement" (Hume, 2011, p. 222). Hume's disassembling of the self paved the way for modern "bundle theories" of mind and the view that selfhood is merely a "convenient fiction" providing a "centre of narrative gravity" to the complex processes that we are (Dennett, 1992). Modern philosophers like Gilbert Ryle, Elizabeth Anscombe, Derek Parfit, Daniel Dennett, Thomas Metzinger have helped to build this view of the self as a "bundle" bound together by the bodily locus, misattributed macro-processes, or mere conventions of language. In the Humanities, this model is echoed in contexts such as Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989), Michel Foucault's studies of modern "dividing practices" (1982) by which the self is objectified and controlled, and Paul Ricoeur's account of a "wounded" post-Cartesian self that must continually re-constitute itself through community (1992). The result of these discourses is that scholarly interest in selfhood has largely become a problem-solving exercise aimed at healing the complex of difficulties that Freud saw as an expression of "Civilisation and its Discontents" (1930/2002). Consequently, much Western theorizing

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

has looked nostalgically to the classical “self” of the past as more authentic, healthy center of identity, disposition, and agency. In this light, contemporary narratives of “meditation” often recount a nostalgic mythos about how lost techniques for better living can be rediscovered and ultimately restored to modernity. It has become part of a portfolio of “spiritual” practices in the modern Westernized media and marketplaces, providing a “claimed panacea for the angst of modern living” (Carrette & King, 2004, p. 1; see also Wilson, 2014; Purser, 2019; Illouz, 2007; Schmidt, 2002).

Thus meditation has seemed to offer a solution to tensions within the self. For Jung in 1933 (see Jung, 1933/2001, p. 35) it suggested a way to reintegrate the shadowy unknown regions of the unconscious with the conscious mind. In 1960 the psychologist Erich Fromm welcomed Zen meditation as something that seeks “to save us from going crazy or being crippled ... giving free play to all the creative and benevolent impulses inherently lying in our hearts” (Fromm, 1960/1974, p. 122). One of the pioneers of the formal integration of meditation into psychotherapy was Jon Kabat-Zinn (himself a student of Thich Nhat Hanh, the influential expositor of Buddhist thought to the West). Kabat-Zinn used his medical expertise to develop an interpretation of Buddhist meditation that emphasized its capacity to overcome trauma and unhappiness. Like R. D. Laing’s brand of psychiatry, Kabat-Zinn’s “Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction Technique” sought to reclaim autonomy from the whirlwind of external pressures. It deconstructed the social identity, arguing that

we lock ourselves into a personal fiction that we already know who we are, that we know where we are and where we are going, that we know what is happening—all the while remaining enshrouded in thoughts ... which spin out continuously, veiling our direction and the very ground we are standing on.

(Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. viii)

For Kabat-Zinn, meditation is “simply about being yourself and knowing something about who that is” (1994, p. xiv). Such accounts aimed at the secular goals of well-being have maintained the image of meditation as a practice that resolves inner conflict. On the one hand, this has provided a platform for the trans-cultural resurgence of meditation as a semi-medical technique for restoring the integrity of a “core” self. But on the other hand, it has elided a prior, wider use of meditation as a form of creative reshaping of the self into new forms.

## Self-Creativity: Mapping the Architecture of Attention

One of the most fundamental elements in meditative practices is that they take “ownership” of one’s sensations, feelings, and thoughts in such a way that they can be altered. Pathologies such as schizophrenia, and temporary cognitive dysfunctions such as the “rubber hand” experiment, reveal that it is possible for the mind to lose a sense of what is

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

its own bodily or mental reality and what is not.<sup>4</sup> In radical cases we may experience our thoughts and sensations as distinctly divorced from ourselves, lacking a sense that they have emerged from our own reasons and action. But meditation reminds us that, conversely, we have the ability to lay claim to our thoughts and make them more completely our own.

Recent developments in our understanding of the mind as a neural mechanism can help to provide new “ontologies” of selfhood that map out the lines of influence, showing how our thoughts shape us and how we can turn the tables and learn to consciously shape them. The cognitive sciences retain a tendency to emphasize the kinds of observable, easily testable phenomena that open to laboratory study,<sup>5</sup> and one result is that more complicated, higher-order aspects of mind tend to be emphasized less than basic physiologically evident reactions to physical, verbal, or other sensory stimulus. Yet recent models of cognition give fresh insight into the kinds of higher-order mental causality that makes it possible to consciously alter one’s own mental constitution. In particular, a number of key processes can be identified as necessary for meditation’s transformation of the self in various ways:

- (a) the filtering process of *selective attention* by which our mental processes are focused on a selection of filtered data, which thus shape the contents of the mind and the ways it builds upon them;
- (b) the *plasticity* of the attention-based mind, based on variation in focus, variation in scale and intensity, degrees of stability and change, and the constant mutual influence between the more basic sensory stimuli on one hand, and the broader conceptual functions that are built up from them;
- (c) the *control* that can be cultivated through focus on the overspanning forms of attention, boosted by *introspective* practices that turn attention toward inner experience, and enhanced by *volitional agency* power over one’s own experiences.
- (d) the underlying cosmology, usually containing some model of the self, that determines the *goals* of such transformation.

We will look at these aspects, outlining a provisional ontology of the self as layers of selective attention in a constant dynamic loop of feedback between the higher and lower parts, exploring the way it underpins different cognitive practices of self-shaping within meditation traditions.

### Attention and Plasticity

Work in cognitive science suggests that one of the defining features of consciousness—and one of our most important tools for altering the self—is the capacity of “selective attention.”<sup>6</sup> This is the filter that the mind—and to some extent every living thing—applies to the wide field of stimuli that affect it at every moment. In essence, it is the function of data-sorting determining “directivity and selectivity” of response. As one of the first proponents of the idea put it in 1973:

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

Of the many stimuli which reach us, we respond only to those few which are particularly strong or which appear particularly important and correspond to our interests, intentions or immediate tasks ... the circle of possible sensations, movements, or memory traces is narrowed, the probability of appearance of certain impressions, movements or memory traces becomes unequal and selective: some of them (essential or necessary) begin to dominate, while others (inessential or unnecessary) are inhibited.

(Luria, 1973, p. 256)

In many respects, this selective shaping of the human person works on the same model that shapes all organisms: stimuli are detected in the environment, and processed into a response of some kind. In this sense, the development of conscious life has been formed by the same principles that we see at work in the emergence of biological beings from simple systems of selective chemical reaction: the patterns of filtered chemical response that we see in very simple organisms are the earliest “antecedents of the sense of self” (Damasio, 2000, p. 136). The data-stream of external stimuli is filtered by an “attention spotlight” (Sperling & Weichselgartner, 1995). It is attention that allows a fish to note temperature changes in the ocean and turn toward food; in more complex forms of minds it is attention that lets us bracket out distracting noise and focus on a song in the background or the memories and emotions that it has inspired.

In consciousness, this spotlight of attention has a unique ability to vary its own direction, scope, and intensity, focusing on different things, to different degrees, in different contexts. “Focused” attention helps us hone in on one kind of input, “sustained” attention lets us maintain that focus, “executive” attention helps direct our attentional control and orchestrate the functions of the complex psyche.<sup>7</sup> One can see this by comparing different cognitive processes: a hunter may hone in her senses on the precise tension and spatial awareness needed to string a bow, then turn her attention back “outward” to survey the surroundings as a whole for visual signs of movement, then perhaps turn the mind “inward” to mentally review the abstract “map” of the landscape in her imagination. Each activity involves a different object, scale, and kind of attention, and together they constitute “massively parallel, highly connected and interactive” systems of focus and response (Styles, 1997, pp. 117–118). The changing flow of thoughts and impressions constantly feed into the self, and are processed by the more stable “neural patterns” (Damasio, 2000, p. 154), thus generating ever-higher filters until the inner world of the mind builds up, layer after layer.

In more complex creatures, the wider and more complex systems of data-filtering gradually achieve increasing levels of conceptual abstraction. This “large-scale neural integration” operates at every moment in daily life in the processes of event perception, “which can unify a blur of millions of individual sensations of sight, sound, touch, taste, smell and emotions into unitary event-percepts” (Donald, 2006, p. 4; see also Donald, 2001). In cognitively complex species it can also integrate subtler data like memory, mental models of the self, and the world, yielding the kind of abstract inner world that we experience

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

“within.” We are also able to share indicators that both describe and prescribe this inner world through culture. But the growth of the abstract mind is not a one-way street: once formed, the “higher” systems of selection such as memories, identity, values, and so on proceed to exert their own influence over the “lower” levels of selective attention to data that shaped them, creating a constantly transforming loop of selective attention. The variability of the attention spotlight and the dynamic loop of influence between “higher” and “lower” responses mean that attention is an essentially *variable* building block of consciousness that underpins the malleability of the mind.

### Introspection and Agency

While much of the mental world’s plasticity is involuntary, it also has a volitional capacity for self-control. Early advocates of attention as a broad explanatory theory noted a “gap ... between elementary, involuntary forms of attention, on the one hand, and the higher, voluntary forms of attention on the other” (Luria, 1973, p. 258; see also Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977 on “automatic” and “controlled” systems of consciousness). The more complex, overspanning filters such as concepts, memories, or culturally embedded beliefs—many of which help to constitute the network of mental dispositions that we think of as personality—possess a degree of control over the more basic, local filters such as perceptions and motor responses. In this way attention builds a tiered causal structure of summative and subsidiary systems of attention. In this sense, self-reflexive control over our own attention is really a higher order “metacognitive” function (Styles, 1997, p. 59), shaped by our conceptual map of the world and the intentional practices that we adopt to train our attention. Developing new “habits of attention” (Claxton, 2016, p. 56) can yield substantial changes in the self.

But one of the most sophisticated and powerful forms of attention is the process of introspectively surveying, filtering, and voluntarily shaping one’s thoughts. Introspection has been a controversial area for cognitive modeling because its study relies on subjective linguistic reports from the person him or herself (see Lyons, 1983; Varela & Shear, 1999 for surveys of this issue). Yet it seems to be analogous to mechanisms of *interoception* (direct awareness of our own bodily feelings),<sup>8</sup> and *proprioception* (“ownership” of our thoughts and sensations). In interoception, the human somatic experience of “interior” sensations sets up a contrast between the “inner” and “outer” worlds, and lends us a spatio-temporal anchor for our thoughts: we feel that we can “locate” the very processes that constitute us. The concurrent unity of visual, auditory, and gustatory senses in the head confirms this locatedness, and the difficulty of verbally expressing sensations, emotions, and other qualia only adds to this sense that there is a wall between the outside world and the “inner citadel.”

Thus meditation implicitly always activates of our self-reflexive agency, and inserts it between the “core and contingent” layers of personhood (Frazier, 2017, p. 69), prying apart what Damasio calls the “core consciousness” (Damasio, 2000). Volition draws upon ownership of certain of these features as self rather than other, the recognition of initiative-related experiences analogous to motor-control, and consciousness of high-order process

of deliberation—multiple aspects that, when combined, we experience as “self-agency” over our own minds (see Gallagher, 2007; Jeannerod, 2003 on physical agency). Like a person at a loud party who focuses on attending to a conversation, the meditative practitioner “blinds” herself to certain phenomena (distractions or unwanted thoughts and desires) and selectively attends to what is culturally, philosophically, or emotionally relevant. The selective data can then be processed more richly, and through repetition it becomes enshrined in the stable, long-term parts of the memory, where it will further inform our judgments and shape our attention. Self-reflective introspection, strengthened through meditative attention, interposes a heightened awareness and causal control over our directing of attention; in this way our existential experience of life can be changed at its phenomenological roots, along with our sense of who we are and what we seek.

## The Art of Self: Practices for Crafting Experience

Meditation thus serves as a tool with which we consciously explore the resources of those systems that define us; it “retrains attention” (Goleman, 1988, p. 107) in a way that increases our ability for “self-regulative mind-control.” It is thus concerned with a particular kind of “inner agency” that the mind has over itself—potentially altering the usual human parameters of the will by reflectively attending to its motives, constraints and possibilities (Repetti, 2018). This open-ended changefulness is usually constrained by cultural ideas that “form a subjectivity” and “encode” the self in “tradition-specific and text-specific ways” (Flood, 2006, p. 13).

In addition to giving the practitioner an opportunity to become someone new, meditative practice also opens up a new territory for discovery: it turns human attention away from the treasures that can be gained by exploration of the outer world, toward an equally laborious, skilled project of finding corresponding treasures “within.” Many traditions highlight the importance of consciously prioritizing interiority. The depiction of the self as a little-visited place waiting to be explored, often using the metaphor of a room or cave into which we can enter, is found widely in traditions of Asian origin and has a distinctive place in Christian contemplative traditions. Texts exhort us to enter into our “inner space” with clear vision and full volition: Jesus advises his followers to “go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen” (Matthew 6:6), and this biblical image is mirrored in Anselm’s Benedictine instruction in the opening of the *Proslogion* to “escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts ... enter into the inner chamber of your soul” (Anselm 1998, p. 84). Such spatializing images set up the goal of introspection in concrete, comprehensible terms. In their use as the first stage of a journey toward the divine, they further imply that

the inner memory [is] like a vast inner landscape ... a great chamber containing not only images of the past, but the forms of knowledge; a place where all images

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

are stored and, above all, the place where God is found—the ultimate meaning of human life.

(Flood, 2013, p. 84)

The self is thus a resource in which the spotlight of attention may find valuable ideas and motivations, and also aims at a transcendence of restriction in the face of the external pressures of society (Flood, 2013, p. 193).

Ascetic practices are invaluable partly because they loosen the ties of the automatic forces in the body and mind, bracketing them sufficiently for the “higher” filters of selection to trigger a more considered kind of action. For instance, impulses may be bracketed in favor of longer-term plans, and scattered, distracting perceptions condensed into focused attention on a single object, idea, or emotion. This liberating feature is widely acknowledged within religions with strong meditative traditions: when the Russian Orthodox thinker Nicolas Berdyaev described asceticism as “the liberation of the human person” through “a concentration of inner forces and command of oneself,” he captured the notion that human freedom actually requires a refined form of self-control—an interpretation that has also been given to Indian yoga (Berdyaev in Ware, 1998, p. 3; see Eliade, 1958/2009 on yoga as “freedom”). Thus while the “asceticism of the mind” found in many forms of meditation can be interpreted as a denigration of worldly and bodily life, it can also be taken as a tool for escaping the perceived “demons” of automatic, obsessional attention to things like food, pleasure, anxiety (Graiver, 2018, p. 182). The biographical accounts of ascetics sometimes recount this process: in *The Seal of the Saints*, the ninth-century Uzbek Sufi mystic al-Tirmidhi described his journey toward the spiritual life as being grounded in the adoption of repeated practices of solitary meditative prayer, memorization, and trained desire:

I pursued my fasting and prayer, until at last [I] ... was thus guided to some knowledge of the discipline of the soul. I took up this practice and God helped me. Inspired to deny myself my desires, I found that I could train myself to do one thing after another, even to the point of denying myself cool water.

(al-Tirmidhi, 2015, p. 396)

Here al-Tirmidhi describes a life in which continuous prayer, reading, memorization, and solitude allow him to train his basic impulses—even of thirst. Later he writes that social castigation was the last ascetic experience that allowed him to “purify the heart,” “mortify the soul,” and “push aside” his desires, so that he “discovered strength and awareness” in himself, and his soul “was humbled, and obeyed” through the course of rigorous self-training (al-Tirmidhi, 2015, pp. 397–398).

Al-Tirmidhi’s subjective account of inner transformation through assiduous “internal work” is typical of many such autobiographical records of meditative practice. Yet the techniques and philosophies of such work differ widely across the globe. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss all, or even a representatively wide range of them; in-

stead we look at key themes in the operation of selective attention and consider its relation to absorptive sensory, rational, and emotional meditation, and to deconstructive and narrative techniques.

### Absorptive Meditation: Sensory, Rational, and Emotional Techniques

One important theme in meditation is the focusing of attention on something so that the mind is filled with a particular phenomenon. This might be a mandala or crucifix, the sound of a bell or chant, a sensation such as breathing, an emotion of love or even a concept of permanence, balance, compassion, or perfection. Viewing an image is common as a way of encountering deities or remembering some historical event or theological idea; but the *meditative* viewing of it cultivates a more intense focus so that the whole subjective experience becomes oriented to and *absorbed by* it. This meaning is expressed in the Sanskrit term *dhyāna* (the source of the term “zen” in Japanese Buddhism), which refers to the intentional absorption of consciousness in some object of focus. It is also reflected in the early Christian medieval use of “meditation” to mean complete attention to, and assimilation of, a reading “gone over with concentrated intensity ... with the goal of absorbing the complete meaning of the text, implanting it in the memory for future use” (Bestul, 2012, p. 158). In other cases, the same idea is applied to intensely visual images that were available through the arts of the church and illuminated manuscripts; for mystics like Julian of Norwich “her practice of meditation trained her eye and focused her powers of visualisation” (Baker, 1994, p. 44). These practices all imprint an object on the self, using attention to transform its fabric.

One of the most intense forms of absorption in Western traditions is the Eastern Orthodox practice of hesychasm, a threefold meditation on the Divine Nature believed to “simplify the mind, bringing it from fragmentation to unity” (Ware, 2014/2017), and ultimately to produce “changes in human nature” (Flory, 2015, p. 2). Formalized in the writings of Evagrius of Ponticus and Macarius the Great, this practice united the biblical idea of prayer as a process of entering the “inner room” within, with the Greek idea of *theoria* as the interior vision of an idea. This synthesis resulted in a form of meditation that purged distractions through relentless watchful care of one’s thoughts (*catharsis*), pure contemplation of the divine nature through repetition of the “Jesus Prayer” (*theoria*), and the unceasing direction of the mind toward the divine—understood as pure light. Through stages of ascent the mind was believed to take on the form of what it contemplated (*theosis*)—in this case the divine light of God. Just as Plato’s practice of rationally “seeing ideas” such as Goodness aimed at guiding the soul to assimilation of the idea, so *theosis* applied a similar method. It was only one example of a broader wave of visionary inner disciplines that spanned the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim worlds. They became a central meditative tool for Western traditions, although the ontological implications—that humans could change the subjective fabric of the self, identified in religious thought as the *soul*, perhaps reshaping it as the divine—were controversial. While self-shaping was excit-

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

ing for the practitioners, it could also be destabilizing for accepted ideas about the place of humans in society and the cosmos. Indeed, Hesychastic practice has found a place in the modern Western secular practices for psychological well-being, much like yoga and mindfulness (Johnson, 2010).

While this tradition of trained attentional absorption could elevate the self into what it observed, it could also take a more radical form in kenotic traditions of “emptying” out the self in favor of the intended object. One can see the extreme devotion of the Islamic Sufi practice of *fana* or annihilation as a willing “submission” of one’s whole mental content. This idea not of *forming* the personality, but of *emptying* it in order for it to be replaced with new content, heightened the controversial ontological elements of self-transformation. It was through this approach that the tenth century Sufi mystic Mansur al-Hallaj attracted censure by identifying himself with God (Mansur al-Hallaj, 2009, p. 20). He described his meditative practice in poetic terms that emphasized the role of the mental “eye” in harnessing the heart’s desire to give intentional direction to his movement through “the waves of thought”:

I guide my sight with the eye of knowledge  
Unadulterated by doubt ...  
I ride on the waves of thought  
Like an arrow undeterred;  
My heart flies with the wings of desire  
Carried by the wind of my intent ... (Mansur al-Hallaj, 2009, p. 20)

Al-Hallaj is famous for his execution: he was considered to have arrogantly claimed to have “become” one with the divine—and thereby lent authority to political powers of revolution. In a sense he illustrates the radical implications of absorptive self-formation. In contrast to society’s mediators between the realms of reality, absorptive meditation offered a direct ontological bridge between the individual person and any reality it could imagine.

### Rational Meditation

Implicit in many such practices of immersive attention is the idea that the mind uses a kind of inner “sight” to “envision” things when it holds them intentionally in its gaze. In “rational” forms of meditation the objects of the mental gaze may also be abstract concepts (e.g., of goodness or a logical form). Plato’s account of *eros* in the *Symposium* treats our perception of virtue in this way. By directing the mind to a particular instance of value and leading us to focus ever more upon it, the self thereby acquires that value until no further external instance is necessary. It is in a similar way that philosophy’s logical debates are seen to cultivate the immortality of the soul in Plato’s most explicitly “salvific” text, the *Phaedo*.

Where Plato favored the training of attention onto values of goodness and beauty, some traditions of “rational” meditation trained attention onto wider cosmological-metaphysical ideas. In the centuries predating the composition of the *Yoga Sūtras*, the earlier Up-

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

aniṣads, core texts of classical Indian philosophy, develop an idea that the person who internalizes a comprehensive understanding of the world as a whole is himself expanded by that understanding. The *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* speaks of a knowledge by which one can “become the whole” (1.4.9), and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* chapter six describes a pedagogical process of training the self to identify with the being, essence, or overall unity of the universe (see Frazier, 2019). Here the scope of the self is dilated so that it sees, feels and makes decisions from the perspective of reality as a whole—rather than merely in terms of the individual personality. The practitioner thereby eludes the particular concerns of individual life, rising instead to an unprecedented freedom and largesse of selfhood. Pierre Hadot has famously made the argument that philosophy in ancient Greece and Rome originally functioned in this way, providing a prolonged “lived” practice of seeing the world according to the “view from above,” and this enabled the philosopher to achieve a mental “conquest of space” superior even to the conquering emperors of the day (Hadot, 1996, p. 243). Hadot interprets the Stoic meditations of Marcus Aurelius as just such a constant rational practice, reading his *Meditations* as the diary of his efforts in the “inner citadel” of the mind; some scholars have taken contemporary cognitive behavioral therapy to entail a similar process of rational self-shaping (e.g., Robertson, 2010; Murguia & Diaz, 2015).

These are kinds of conceptual meditation that activate our cognitive capacity to orient toward overarching ideas, thereby “expanding” the scope of the mind and lending it the capacity to choose from a range of sub-ideas, identities, and desires (Frazier, 2017, pp. 135–138). While the cognitive study of meditation tends to prioritize sensory perceptions because their effects are easier to test empirically, some have argued that “we perceive through our sensory organs, to be sure, but no less through our concepts; in other words, we perceive not just physiologically but also intellectually” (Hofstadter & Sandler, 2013, p. 171). In such cases of classical Indian and Greek *rational* absorption, meditation recognizes the therapeutic potential of philosophy for elevating the self and bypassing the sources of anxiety that haunt mortal individuals. Agency remains, but rather than struggling with limited goals, it redirects its attention in the knowledge that “humanity as *mind* is free, mutable and empowered ... to transform itself into anything it comprehends, however vast and however abstract” (Frazier, 2017, p. 129).

### Emotional Meditation

One of the most pervasive forms of absorptive meditation is that which emphasizes *emotional* immersion. Emotions are interesting contents of experience because many kinds seem to function less as objects of awareness and more as somato-sensory colorings of the whole of experience, directing what we perceive and think (Damasio, 2000, p. 80),<sup>9</sup> and affecting our interpretations of it. In short, they function much like intellectual filters but in an even more visceral, responsive, holistic, and energetic way—often undercutting or operating separately of conscious processing (Jonides, 1981). Emotion has its own *intensifying* power over our experiences, and affective focus is a kind of selective attention that gives drastically increased weight to particular sensations, ideas, activities, memories, concerns, or goals. One effect is that intentional objects may be absorbed more im-

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

mediately and wholly into the self, becoming associated with our wider range of memories, beliefs, motivations, and values.

This is a very widespread tool of meditation; as David Haberman put it in his study of disciplined Hindu devotional practice, one sees affective meditative at work in any cultivated tradition

that greatly values the tremendous power of emotions. Intense emotions, such as passion, produce an intense concentration on the object of the emotions, drawing subject and object together ... Passion, therefore, is held to be a highly valuable instrument for spiritual endeavours.

(Haberman, 1988, p. 70)

In devotional meditation, emotions are often directed toward some item of great value, and the self is thus enabled to be guided by, identify with, or become that thing. But the emotions involved need not exclusively be pleasant ones; the classic Indian range of cultivatable emotions or *rasas* include anger, fear, disgust, and awe, as well as vigor, humor, compassion, and love. Anxiety and fear have been shown to be some of the emotions with the greatest cognitive power, diverting attention in a particularly urgent way. Elevated into awe, earnestness, care, compassion, and flight from danger into higher concerns, negative emotions have the power to effect uniquely powerful transformations. Indeed, fear and suffering, when *chosen* in pursuit of affirmative goals in self-sacrificial ascetic practices, can form part of a process by which we “bestow value” in life (see Frazier, 2013).

Western tradition tends to conceive of emotions on the model of the passions—as unruly and uncontrolled forces that “enter” the self from without and overpower its will. This is a model with roots in Plato’s image of the person as a chariot carried away by wild horses against the intentions of the charioteer. This notion is similar to the classical Indian idea of emotion as craving or “thirst” (*tṛṣṇā*), a kind of mental phenomenon that threatens the discriminating mind with its power. But many Indian traditions of devotion are influenced by aesthetic theories that explore the way that certain kinds of cultivated emotions or *rasas* can be built up with care out of a complex combination of factors. They span and elevate sub-affects into higher emergent ones: as a delicious curry may incorporate seasonings such as fiery chili, bitter ginger, sour lime, and sweet sugar, so one’s overall happiness may incorporate elements such as delight, courage, gratitude, pleasure, admiration, novelty, comfort, and so on. The analogy between *rasa* emotions and spices ready to be combined into complex flavors is found in the Indian dramaturgical manual, *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. 300 BCE–300 CE), and subsequent Hindu religious guidebooks advised on the application of “*rasa*-theory” to mental exercises of focused attention. The arts served as a kind of spice cabinet for judicious recipes of image, poetry, song, and story. This dedicated technology of affective mood has been likened to the “affectivity of the actor’s art” in the Stanislavski technique used by professional modern actors; it is effectively a “ritual process formulated in terms of aesthetic experience” and involving identity transformation (Haberman, 1988, pp. 67–69).

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

In such traditions, the “passivity” of the passions is replaced by a craft of subtly blending attention to different affective objects in order to reshape the moods of the self. Emotional meditation thus serves to draw attention away from local, particular concerns and to widen attention to broader truths and values. This process correlates with studies indicating that where negative emotions decrease the attention we give to other concerns, the positive emotions “broaden and build” our capacity for attention, expanding the base of consciousness and allowing it to integrate our experiences into a total affective response (Frederickson, 1998, 2001).

## Deconstructive and Narrative Meditation

The absorptive practices above allow the material of the self to be transmuted into something new. But in some of its most radical forms, meditation seeks to disrupt or destroy the structure of selfhood. Having done so, it can even restructure the ideas and patterns that lend coherence to the self, creating a new structure of personality or mind. The style of Indian meditation found in the *Yoga Sūtras* is one case of this—rather than cultivating devotion or knowledge, the goal is to still, focus, and purify consciousness of *all* content so that it becomes wholly condensed and divested of the processes that shape personhood and the most basic nature of thought. As Larson notes, the development of a yogic ideal of wholly stilled consciousness idealized a state in which “one dwells in pure translucent consciousness ... radically emptied of all content” (Larson, 1969, p. 208). Here yoga is a form of mental discrimination that can still the fast and unwieldy movement of thought, turning awareness into a single undifferentiated mass. It is

the stilling of the turnings of consciousness, so that the seer dwells in its own nature. Otherwise it will take the form of those turnings ...

(YS1.2; in Patañjali, 2009)

Here the bipartite structure of agency—hierarchically divided between the decision-making self and the subsidiary mental phenomena it controls—is pried apart so that the “higher” self becomes free from the sway of body and emotion. Attention is focused on no object but the pure qualia of awareness itself, thus “breaking the ‘bonds’ that unite the spirit to the world” in order “to do away with the dispersion and automatism that characterize profane consciousness” (Eliade, 1958/2009, p. 5). Understood in terms of the mind’s attention systems, classical yoga is a higher form of self-reflexive attention to one’s own inner activity. But it aims to empty out the usual stream of data from our subsidiary systems of perception and calculation, so that one can attend primarily to cognitive attention itself, that is, to the basic structures of “consciousness.”

The resulting still, one-pointed, awareness is very far from any of the normal characteristics of the self that we routinely experience. Radical Tibetan Buddhist practices cultivating the “‘clarity’ and ‘stability’ of awareness” (Thompson, 2015, p. 76) similarly seek to minimize personhood, reversing the cohering functions of reason and systematically deconstructing the apparent unities of apperception, conceptualization, self-reflexive men-

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

tal ownership, memory and personal narrative—so that no centralized structure of selfhood will be left. In such cases, Buddhist meditation aims at a kind of non-self that is neither a “person,” nor “conscious,” in any way that we would normally recognize. Johannes Bronkhorst has argued that these goals of creating a clear, still form of consciousness are linked to a little-acknowledged cognitive capacity to achieve “more or less dense” forms of consciousness (Bronkhorst, 2017, p. 6) that may seem alarming when we are invested in the narratives of quotidian selfhood, but possess their own qualitative appeal once the processes of consciousness are freed from the framework of the “self.”

Some meditative traditions teach practitioners to inhibit agency itself as much as possible, minimizing the top-down control of the mind in ongoing everyday life. Daoist texts, for instance, speak of the sage who “keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action,” allowing the natural influence of the environment to work through him in a way that is unimpeded by the analytical mind and the volitions that it generates (*Daode jing* 2–3). Here, to “weaken the mind” yet “strengthen the belly” is to reduce our resistance and discontent in relation to the world. So too, the “no-mind” of Zen, for instance, is not a selfless state so much as a dissolving of differentiating boundaries:

no-mind or no-thought is a state of consciousness in which the dichotomy between subject and object, experiencer and experienced is overcome ... the function of no-mind is to respond immediately to present experiential data ... it is an active, responsive awareness of the contents of experience as directly experienced (before the intervention of complex intellectual activity).

(Kasulis, 1981, pp. 47–48)

Agency in this Japanese Zen-Daoist context is a kind of automatic raw action: “the Zen ideal is to act spontaneously in the situation without first objectifying it. The person is not something that *has* meaning or *has* relationships: rather, one achieves meaning through relationships” (Kasulis, 1981, p. 132). The goal of this tradition is that natural action in the world should come to constitute the self, and agency’s job is to control itself enough to “step aside.” Yet even this requires a very refined form of meditation in which the self *weakens* itself, and gives rein to the natural processes around and in us.

Yet some approaches aim not only to “deconstruct” the self, but also to creatively “re-construct” it into a new person or *persons*. On the “ownership” and “attention” models there is nothing to stop one re-claiming other new and different identities, since selfhood simply involves claiming ownership of particular streams of experience (see Smith, 2006; White, 2006; Frazier, 2016). An attentive model alerts us to the way that in focusing on particular dispositions and desires, memories and kinds of event, we can construct a narrative of “one-self” as a particular personality, experiencing a particular sort of world. This identification with a narrative of the self is implied in much affective meditation: adopting the identity of Majnun, the mad Sufi lover of God, or a servant of the Hindu deity Kṛṣṇa, or of Christ himself as he struggles to exemplify good and sacrifice for others,

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

involves empathetically letting another imagined narrative of experiencing replace one's "own."

In certain Hindu traditions, devotees are encouraged to construct a new "spiritual identity" within the history attributed to their chosen deity. Followers of Kṛṣṇa, for instance, draw on emotionally intense narratives about being a "lover" of god, aided by affective practices such as listening, singing, reading, visualizing, or otherwise "remembering" (*smaraṇa*) the intensity of other lives (Haberman, 1988, p. 128). Imaginal journeys are also a staple of narrative traditions, constructing experiential templates by which diligent readers could re-orient their own personalities. Jewish hermeneutic tradition transformed the nostalgic histories of an exiled community into a "Merkavah" practice of intensely imagined spatial journeys often patterned on the voyage of the prophet Ezekiel from Jerusalem to Babylon and thence to the foot of the divine throne. Undertaken in painstaking detail as a regular and protracted mental practice, the self was changed by these carefully curated experiences. The new self thereby constructed was frequently capable of more dramatic and satisfying achievements than that previously constructed in the physical world.

Possession traditions place narrative shifts in identity at center stage. Frederick Smith's (2006) study of South Asian deity and spirit possession demonstrated the magnetic appeal of adopting alternative or multiple selves. Where possession in Western literatures was typically seen as a sudden hostile takeover by an unwelcome mind, Indian literature often speaks of possessions that are positively welcomed. To use Ganeri's terminology, it is by "performing" other life stories, that ownership of a new self is claimed, and one's ties to the *merely bodily* streams of experience are loosened (Ganeri, 2007, p. 128). The familiar identity to which we awaken daily, and to which we feel irrevocably tied, is revealed to be contingent: meditation brings into reach new selves, limited only by our resources for planning who we would like to be. In this respect all protracted stories in which we are invited to identify repeatedly with a character's inner life are forms of self-transformative "meditation."

## The Ontology of the Meditative Self

In these varied examples, the disciplines of meditation allow their practitioners to sculpt specific aspects of mind. As tools of self-reshaping, they include *absorptive* meditations that use selective attention to direct our experience toward specific content and alter our mental content accordingly; these may be *sensory* meditation that use image or sound, *rational* meditation that alters our conceptualization of the inner and outer worlds, systematically putting the operations of "reason" to work on them so that their significance for us are also changed at the phenomenal level, or *affective* meditation that intensifies the emotional intensity and scope with which we process the products of our attention. We also see practices of structural change, including *deconstructive* meditation by which we disengage cognitive structures in order to selectively deconstruct features of consciousness or "selfhood" as a whole, and *narrative* meditation that shifts the data that we nor-

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

mally “own” as part of our identity, to an alternative personality reconstructed anew on fresh patterns. This list is by no means exhaustive, and other operations of cognition and kinds of meditation are also found within the wide range of the world’s cultures.

But what we learn by applying the attentional model to these cases is that the mind is capable of more forms than daily life and conventional psychology seem to suggest. It is an intrinsically malleable complex of dynamic and intra-causal processes, shaped both by local filters of attention to particular things, and also by overspanning filters that watch and regulate the subsidiary ones. These are colored throughout by wide-reaching concepts and values, all of which continuously shape the self’s fabric. Meditation’s value is that it activates a structure of agency within this cloud of mental processes and enhances its ability to reflect on and alter itself. But this can never be a fully objective process; meditation is rather like “riding the rapids” of experience since agency is being constituted by the very mental processes that it shapes. Indeed, there is a double dynamism at work in the meditative self as it constantly shapes itself into something new, and thus constantly revises what it wants to become. In contrast to the centralized, stable, and coherent *cogito* implied in Descartes, the ontology of the meditative self is self-creatively dynamic—it is less like a “lamp” that looks out onto a changing world, and more like a weather system that is constantly interacting with itself.

But in the original cultures of meditation, there was a further dimension of this ontology: meditative traditions typically “share a notion of the truth within that is connected to the cosmos without: the macrocosm is recapitulated in the microcosm” (Flood, 2013, p. 28). Meditative selves were often seen as being “open bodies” (Böhler, 2009), intrinsically embedded and participating in the surrounding environment of physical forces, other minds, abstract concepts—and in many cases, spirits, energies, or divine powers. In light of this view of the self as a point of transition into different dimensions of the wider cosmos, meditation usually aimed “outward” at some larger goal than merely the autonomous satisfaction of the self. It was only the first stage in a larger project of accessing some broader truth, for example of alignment with the will of God, or opening to supernatural forces or spirit worlds, or immersing the self in its fundamental material of consciousness, or deconstructing itself altogether in order to make space for other truths. This stands in contrast to purely “secular” modern uses of meditation, styling themselves as a practice with the professional neutrality and universality of medicine. There is a striking contrast between medieval mystics’ theological projects, and William James’s modern account of mysticism as subjective, psychological, separate from cosmological assumptions (Harmless, 2008, pp. 14–16). Recognising this shift in modern interpretations of such practices toward “Eastern” models, a Vatican letter sought to clarify that Catholic practice must always remain focused on divine relationship, and on God rather than self. Proper Christian meditation is

a flight from “self” to the “You” of God. Thus Christian prayer is at the same time always authentically personal and communitarian. It flees from impersonal techniques or from concentrating on oneself, which can create a kind of rut, imprison-

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

ing the person praying in a spiritual privatism which is incapable of a free openness to the transcendental God.

(Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1989)

As Taylor notes, the modern excision of metaphysics from our ideas of self can result in “a drive to make ourselves the centre of our world” (1989, p. 138). Most early meditative innovators themselves typically took not the Self but the reality beyond it to be the end-goal. This direction of outward meditative gaze is exemplified by Rabia of Basra, a ninth century female Muslim mystic who expressed eloquently the open and outward dissolving character formerly attributed to our private inner space of the self:

In  
my soul  
there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque, a church  
where I kneel.  
Prayer should bring us to an altar where no walls or names exist ...  
In  
my soul  
there is a temple, a shrine, a mosque,  
a church  
that dissolve, that  
dissolve in  
God. (Rabia al-Basri, 2009, p. 12)

Rabia al-Basri’s words highlight shifting conceptions of meditation and its goals. If the *attentional self* is a “climate” of filtering processes governed by macro-filters of concept, affect, and volition, then the *meditative self* is like a structured “weather system” in which the stratospheric upper tiers have enhanced power to guide the system as a whole. Where the modern meditative self follows more self-contained patterns, the classical meditative self typically contained a drive not only to regulate itself, but also to open *outward* toward some larger force—of values, truths, communities, or beings—with which it sought to become aligned.

## References

- Anselm, (1998). B. Davies and G.R. Evans (Eds), *The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baker, D. (1994). *Julian of Norwich’s Showings: From vision to book*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Barrett, L. F., Quigley, K., Bliss-Moreau, E., & Aronson, K. (2004). Interoceptive sensitivity and self-reports of emotional experience. *Journal of Personality Social Psychology* 87, 684–697. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.87.5.684.

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

Bestul, T. (2012). Meditatio/meditation. In Amy Hollywood & Patricia Beckman (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Christian mysticism* (pp. 157–166). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blanke, O., & Metzinger, T. (2009). Full-body illusions and minimal phenomenal selfhood. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 13, 7–13.

Böhler, A. (2009). Open bodies. *Paragrana, Internazionale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie* 18, 119–131.

Bronkhorst, J. (2017). Can religion be explained? *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 29, 1–30.

Campbell, J. (1999). Schizophrenia, the space of reasons, and thinking as a motor process. *Monist* 82(4), 609–625.

Carrette, J., & King, R. (2004). *Selling spirituality: The silent takeover of religion*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Ceunen, E., Vlaeyen, J. W. S., & Van Diest, I. (2016). On the origin of interoception. *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, 743. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00743.

Claxton, G. (2016). How conscious experience comes about, and why meditation is helpful. In M. West (Ed.), *The psychology of meditation* (pp. 49–72). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Congregation for the doctrine of the faith. (1989). Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian meditation. Retrieved from [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19891015\\_meditazione-cristiana\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html)

Craig, A. D. (2002). How do you feel? Interoception: The sense of the physical condition of the body. *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience* 3(8), 655–666.

Dahl, C. J., Lutz, A., & Davidson, R. (2015). Reconstructing and deconstructing the self: Cognitive mechanisms in meditation practice. *Trends in Cognitive Science* 19, 515–523. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2015.07.001.

Damasio, A. (2000). *The feeling of what happens: Body, emotion and the making of consciousness*. London: Vintage.

Dennett, D. (1992). The self as a centre of narrative gravity. In F. Kessel, P. Cole, & D. Johnson (Eds.), *Self and self-consciousness: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 103–115). Hillsdale: Erlbaum.

Descartes, R. (1997). *Key philosophical writings*. Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions.

Desimone, R., & Duncan, J. (1995). Neural mechanisms of selective visual attention. *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 18, 193–222.

---

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

- Donald, M. (2006). Art and cognitive evolution. In M. Turner (Ed.), *The artful mind: Cognitive science and the riddle of human creativity* (pp. 3–20). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Donald, M. (2001). *A mind so rare: The evolution of human consciousness*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Dunn, B. D., Galton, H. C. Morgan, R., Evans, D., Oliver, C., Meyer, M., ... Dalgleish, T. (2010). Listening to your heart: How interoception shapes emotion experience and intuitive decision making. *Psychological Science* 21(12), 1835–1844.
- Eliade, M. (2009). *Yoga: Immortality and freedom* (W. Trask, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1958).
- Farb, N., Segal, Z., Mayberg, H., Bean, J., McKeown, D., Zainab, F., & Anderson, A. (2007). Attending to the present: Mindfulness meditation reveals distinct neural modes and self-reference. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 2(4), 313–322.
- Farb, N., Daubenmier, J., Price, C., Gard, T., Kerr, C., Dunn, B. D., ... Mehling, W. (2015). Interoception, contemplative practice, and health. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, 763. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00763.
- Flood, G. (2006). *The tantric body: The secret tradition of Hindu religion*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Flood, G. (2013). *The truth within: A history of inwardness in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flory, M. (2015). *Transforming practices: Hesychastic correctives to postmodern apophatic theology* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Denver.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry* 8(2), 777–795.
- Foucault, M. (1998). Technologies of the self. In L. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16–49). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Fox, E., Russo, R., Bowles, R., & Dutton, K. (2001). Do threatening stimuli draw or hold attention in subclinical anxiety? *Journal of Experimental Psychology; General* 130, 681–700.
- Frazier, J. (2013). Sacrifice as value-bestowal: From sacrificial lambs to dedicated lives. In J. Zacchuber & J. Meszaros (Eds.), *Sacrifice in modern thought* (pp. 100–114). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frazier, J. (2016). The overflowing self: The phenomenology of possession in biblical and Indian mysticism. In L. Nelstrop & B. Onishi (Eds.), *Mysticism in the French tradition: Eruptions from France* (pp. 81–100). London: Ashgate.

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

Frazier, J. (2017). *Hindu worldviews: Theories of self, ritual and reality*. London: Bloomsbury.

Frazier, J. (2019). "Become this whole world": The phenomenology of metaphysical religion in Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6–8. *Religions* 10(6), 368. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10060368>

Frederickson, B. (1998). What good are positive emotions? *Review of General Psychology* 2, 300–319.

Frederickson, B. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The Broaden and Build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist* 56, 218–226.

Frederickson, B., & Branigan, C. (2005). Positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires. *Cognition and Emotion* 19(3), 313–332.

Freud, S. (1961). The ego and the id. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The ego and the id and other works: The standard edition*. London: Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (2002). *Civilisation and its discontents*. London: Penguin. (Original work published 1930).

Fromm, E. (1974). Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism. In E. Fromm, D. T. Suzuki, & R. De Martino (Eds.), *Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis* (pp. 77–141). London: Souvenir Press. (Original work published 1960).

Fromm, E. (2011). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Ishi Press.

Gallagher, S. (2004). Agency, ownership and alien control in schizophrenia. In D. Zahavi, T. Grunbaum, & J. Parnas (Eds.), *The structure and development of self-consciousness: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 89–104). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Gallagher, S. (2007). The natural philosophy of agency. *Philosophy Compass* 2, 347–357.

Ganeri, J. (2012). *The concealed art of the self: Theories of self and practices of truth in Indian ethics and epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 2007).

Ganeri, J. (2017). *Attention, not self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Garland, E. L., Farb, N., Goldin, P., & Fredrickson, B. (2015). Mindfulness broadens awareness and builds eudaimonic meaning: A process model of mindful positive emotion regulation. *Psychological Inquiry* 26, 293–314. doi:10.1080/1047840X.2015.1064294.

Goleman, D. (1988). *The meditative mind: The varieties of meditative experience*. New York: Tarcher.

Graiver, I. (2018). *Asceticism of the mind: Forms of attention and self-transformation in late antique monasticism*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies.

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

Haberman, D. (1988). *Acting as a way of salvation: A study of rāgānuga bhakti sādhanā*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hadot, P. (1996). *Philosophy as a way of life: Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (A. Davidson, Ed., M. Chase, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Hakim al-Tirmidhi, M. (2015). The seal of the prophets (D. Reynolds, K. Brustad, et al., Trans.). In J. Miles (Gen. Ed.) & J. D. McAuliffe (Vol. Ed.), *Norton anthology of world religions: Islam* (pp. 395–405). London: W.W. Norton.

Harmless, W. (2008). *Mystics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hattam, R., & Baker, B. (2015). Technologies of self and the cultivation of virtues. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 49(2), 255–273.

Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and Time* (J. Stambough, Trans.). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hofstadter, D., & Sander, E. (2013). *Surfaces and essences: Analogy as the fuel and fire of thinking*. New York: Basic Books.

Horujy, S. (2015). *Practices of the self and spiritual practices: Michel Foucault and the Eastern Christian discourse* (K. Stoeckl, Ed., B. Jakim, Trans.). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Hume, D. (2011). A Treatise of Human Nature. In *The Essential Philosophical Works*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions.

Illouz, E. (2007). *Saving the modern soul: Therapy, emotions, and the culture of self-help*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jack, A., & Roepstorff, A. (2002). Introspection and cognitive brain mapping: From stimulus report to script report. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6(8), 333–339.

Jack, A., & Shallice, T. (2001). Introspective physicalism as an approach to the science of consciousness. *Cognition* 79, 161–196.

Jeannerod, M. (2003). The mechanism of self-recognition in humans. *Behavioural Brain Research* 142, 1–15.

Johnson, C. (2010). *The globalisation of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer: Contesting contemplation*. London: Continuum.

Jonides, J. (1981). Voluntary versus automatic control over the mind's eye's movement. In J. B. Long & A. D. Baddeley (Eds.), *Attention and performance IX* (pp. 187–203). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Jung, C. G. (2001). *Modern man in search of a soul* (W. S. Dell & C. Baynes, Trans.). Abingdon: Routledge. (Original work published 1933).

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation for everyday life*. London: Piatkus Books.
- Kasulis, T. P. (1981). *Zen action, Zen person*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Konik, A. (2016). Reconsidering Foucault's dialogue with Buddhism. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 35, 37-53.
- Laing, R. D. (1990). *The politics of experience and the bird of paradise*. London: Penguin.
- Lang, P., & Bradley, M. (2009). Emotion and the motivational brain. *Biological Psychology* 84, 437-450.
- Lang, P., & Davis, M. (2006). Emotion, motivation, and the brain: Reflex foundations in animal and human research. *Progress in Brain Research* 156, 3-29.
- Larson, J. G. (1969). *Classical Sāṃkhya: an interpretation of its history and meaning*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Lieberman, D. (1979). Behaviourism and the mind: A (limited) call for a return to introspection. *American Psychologist* 34, 319-333.
- Ignatius Loyola (*Spiritual Exercises*, 1).
- Luria, A. (1973). *The working brain: An introduction to neuropsychology*. London: Penguin Books.
- Lyons, W. (1983). The transformation of introspection. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 22, 327-342.
- Mansur al-Hallaj. (2009). I Guide My Sight with the Eye of Knowledge (Mahmood Jamal, Trans.). In M. Jamal (Ed.), *Islamic mystical poetry: Sufi verse from the early mystics to Rumi* (p. 20). London: Penguin Books.
- Mateer, C., & Sohlberg, M. (2001). *Cognitive rehabilitation: An integrative neuropsychological approach*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Mehling, W. (2016). Differentiating attention styles and regulatory aspects of self-reported interoceptive sensibility. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London: Series B, Biological Sciences* 19(371), 1708. doi: 10.1098/rstb.2016.0013.
- Murguia, E., & Diaz, K. (2015). The philosophical foundations of cognitive behavioral therapy: Stoicism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Existentialism. *Journal of Evidence-Based Psychotherapies* 15(1), 37-50.
- Patañjali. (2009). Yoga Sūtras. In Edwin Bryant (Ed.) *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*. New York: North Point Press.

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

- Posner, M. I. (1980). Orienting of attention. *Quarterly journal of experimental psychology* 32, pp. 3–25.
- Posner, M., & Petersen, S. (1990). The attention system of the human brain. *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 13, 25–42
- Posner, M., & Petersen, S. (2012). The attention system of the human brain: 20 years after. *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 35, 73–89.
- Price, C. J., & Hooven, C. (2018). Interoceptive awareness skills for emotion regulation: Theory and approach of mindful awareness in body-oriented therapy (MABT). *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, 798. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00798.
- Purser, R. (2019). *McMindfulness: How mindfulness became the new capitalist spirituality*. London: Repeater Books.
- Rabia al-Basri. (2009). In My Soul (Daniel Ladinsky, Trans.). In M. Jamal (Ed.), *Islamic mystical poetry: Sufi verse from the early mystics to Rumi* (p. 12). London: Penguin Books.
- Repetti, R. (2018). *Buddhism, meditation, and freewill: A theory of mental freedom*. London: Routledge.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another* (K. Blamey, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Robertson, D. (2010). *The philosophy of cognitive behavioural therapy: Stoic philosophy as rational and cognitive psychotherapy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Sartre, J. (2003). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Schmidt, L. (2002). *Restless souls: The making of American spirituality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schneider, W., & Shiffrin, R. M. (1977). Controlled and automatic human information processing I: Detection, search and attention. *Psychological Review* 84, 1–66.
- Seth, A. (2013). Interoceptive inference, emotion, and the embodied self. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 17(11), 565–573.
- Shulman, D., & Stroumsa, G. (Eds.). (2002). *Self and self-transformation in the history of religions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Singer, P., Critchley, H. D., & Preuschoff, K. (2009). A common role of insula in feelings, empathy and uncertainty. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 13(8), 334–340.
- Smith, F. (2006). *The self possessed: Deity and spirit possession in South Asian literature and civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press.

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

Sperling, G., & Weichselgartner, E. (1995). Episodic theory of the dynamics of spatial attention. *Psychological Review* 102, 503–532.

Stanghellini, G., & Rosfort, R. (2015). Disordered selves or persons with schizophrenia? *Current Opinions in Psychiatry* 28(3), 256–263.

Styles, E. (1997). *The psychology of attention*. Hove: Psychology Press.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, E. (2015). *Waking, dreaming, sleeping: Self and consciousness in neuroscience, meditation, and philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tillich, P. (2014). *The courage to be*. Newhaven: Yale University Press.

Varela, F., & Shear, J. (Eds.). (1999). *The view from within; Special issue of the Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6(2–3).

Vuilleumier, P. (2005). How brains beware: Neural mechanisms of emotional attention. *Trends in Cognitive Science* 9(12), 585–594.

Ware, K. (1998). The way of the ascetics: Negative or affirmative. In Vincent Wimbrush & Richard Valantasis (Eds.), *Asceticism* (pp. 3–15). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ware, K. (2017). *The Jesus Prayer* (Kindle ed.). London: Catholic Truth Society. (Original work published 2014).

West, M. A. (Ed.). (2016). *The Psychology of Meditation: Research and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

White, D. G. (2006). “Open” and “closed” models of the human body in Indian medical and yogic traditions. *Asian medicine* 2(1), 1–13.

Wilson, J. (2014). *Mindful America: The mutual transformation of Buddhist meditation and American culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wright, R. D., & Ward, L. M. (2008). *Orienting of attention*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Zohar, A., & Ben David, A. (2009). Paving a clear path in a thick forest: A conceptual analysis of a metacognitive component. *Metacognition and Learning* 4(3), 177–195.

### Notes:

(1.) This chapter has drawn on suggestions from Jonathan Young, Queen Mary’s College, University of London, regarding mechanisms underpinning cognition, selfhood, and self-change. Thanks also go to Lee Ritger and Douglas Frazier.

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

(2.) Approaches tend to divide into either cognitive science-based approaches (see for example the studies in West, 2016), or historical/phenomenological studies such as Shulman & Stroumsa, 2002).

(3.) Foucault interprets Greek thought (extending through Epicurus, Socrates, Philo, and others into early Christian practice) in this way, showing how practical “care” for the self was correlated with the more familiar traditions of “knowledge” of the self (Foucault, 1998, p. 19). Foucault’s analysis agreed in certain respects with Pierre Hadot’s (1996) analysis of Greek philosophy as a “way of life,” and it has been selectively applied to meditative practices beyond the Greek and Christian traditions (e.g., Konik [2016] on Foucault’s interest in Zen Buddhism; Horujy [2015] on Eastern Orthodox Christian hesychasm; Hattam & Baker [2015] on Buddhist compassion meditations).

(4.) There is a wide-ranging body of literature on ownership or first-person perspectival attribution of bodily and mental life. Approaches to failed bodily ownership or “proprioception” can be found in Jeannerod, 2003; Blanke & Metzinger, 2009; Gallagher 2004; Campbell, 1999, and associated literature, and there is also extensive discussion of the role of misplaced ownership in illusions of body-swapping, virtual bodies, out-of-body experiences, multiple personalities, and the “disordered” selfhood found in schizophrenia (Stanghellini & Rosfort, 2015).

(5.) There have been moves to find ways of applying cognitive scientific methods such as brain imaging to subtler “internal” mental phenomena, e.g., Lieberman, 1979; Jack & Shallice, 2001; Jack & Roepstorff, 2002.

(6.) Attention has become a focus of much research into cognitive structures since the popularization of the idea by Aleksandr Luria (1973) in his analysis of attention, memory, and activation as major pillars of neural functioning. Since then it has been used to map brain networks in neuroscience, as a tool in psychopathology, and as a way of explaining the ontology of the self and charting its cognition (see Posner & Petersen, 1990, and its review, Posner & Petersen, 2012, for a summary of this approach; also Posner, 1980; Desimone & Duncan, 1995; Styles, 1997; Wright & Ward, 2008). It has also been linked to Indian meditation-informed ideas about of the constitution of selfhood in Buddhism (Ganeri, 2017).

(7.) The parsing out of different forms of attention has often been based on analysis of the role that attention plays in various cognitive pathologies; e.g., Mateer & Sohlberg, 2001.

(8.) Moves to recognize the importance of interoception of our physical sensations, and coenesthetic awareness of our total bodily feelings as the sense of being in a “body” for constituting key features of selfhood include Ceunen, Vlaeyen, & Van Diest, 2016; Craig, 2002; Mehling, 2016, and studies that show the significance of interoception particularly for emotions, our own metacognitive sense of them, and the way this relates to our reflexive self-conception include Barrett, Quigley, Bliss-Moreau, & Aronson, 2004; Seth, 2013; Singer, Critchley, & Preuschoff, 2009; Dunn et al., 2010. Studies specifically exploring the relation of interoception and meditative practice include Dahl, Lutz, & Davidson, 2015;

## The Self in Meditation: The Art of Self-Transformation

---

Price & Hooven 2018; Farb et al., 2007; Farb et al., 2015; Garland, Farb, Goldin, & Fredrickson 2015.

(9.) There is a well-established literature on the relationship between emotion and attention, largely suggest that attention prioritizes the emotions and whatever is relevant to them (Lang & Davis, 2006; Lang & Bradley, 2009; Fox, Russo, Bowles, & Dutton, 2001, etc.), and may be drawn away from other information by the urgency of negative emotions (Vuilleumier, 2005), or extended more liberally to information that is relevant to positive emotions (Frederikson & Branigan, 2005).

### **Jessica Frazier**

Jessica Frazier is Lecturer in Theology and Religion at Trinity College, University of Oxford and a Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. She is the Founding Editor of the *Journal of Hindu Studies*, and author of *The Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies*, and *Reality, Religion and Passion: Indian and Western Approaches in Hans-Georg Gadamer and Rupa Gosvami*.