3-20-2016

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Recommended Citation

Burtch, Joanne (2016) "Presence and the Paradox of Love," CONSCIOUSNESS: Ideas and Research for the Twenty-First Century: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 4. Available at: https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/conscjournal/vol1/iss1/4

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Presence and the Paradox of Love

Joanne Burtch

Abstract

Spiritual experiences often seem unrelated to the intellectual orientation of science. However, some discussion of the laboratory study of spiritual practice does attempt to include the mystery and the human experience in its dialogue. An exploration of the paradox of love demonstrates how it might be possible to find a relationship between the scientific understanding of spirituality and the profundity of spiritual experience.

Key Words: spirituality, mindfulness, neurology, consciousness, meditation, presence, non-duality, compassion, love

The profound quality of experience that results from deep spiritual practice seems to have very little to do with the scientific detail found in articles and books about the neurology of meditation. How can a measure of the frequencies in some area of the brain reflect the feeling or the impact of an opening mind and a deepening love? What does an increased sense of resilience and a more accurate ability to notice internal and external events have to do with the gratitude for being that leaves one with an aching urge to be of service?

The mystery and timeless quality of spiritual awakenings communicate themselves more broadly and more easily through metaphor than through graphs. Seeds of compassion and connection sneak in through unseen cracks in perception, growing stronger and deeper until it is too late to uproot or ignore them. At some point, one’s perceptual foundation is split open to the point that repair is no longer possible. When the mind finally awakens, released from the stranglehold of thought, undefeatable freedom rushes the being, washing away conceptual constructs and leaving one to drift in the freedom of surrender. Sometime later, the rush subsides, and one finds that the constructions of thought were not so irreconcilably disintegrated as hoped. However, this is not the end. Later, the heaviness of an opening heart sets in.

The heart bypasses the mind, singing long-kept secrets directly to one’s inner listener about the twisted embrace of worldly horror, indistinguishable from the greater love that makes it nearly bearable. At the end of each song, having left the listener thrashed with the seeming wounds of surrender and heroism, love arrives again on

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a light breeze that inspires the being to gradually flourish with abundance, always with more to give. Joy and light are everywhere.

And still there is more. The story of awakening is individual to each being and takes on unique characteristics in every case. Eventually one finds that there is no end to the opening, only a timeless fall toward the Ground of existence.

To the person who lives it, the quality of the experience of opening does not resemble the smooth mechanical state change of a valve opened and closed with the twist of a handle. The ongoing opening that follows the initial rush comes jumbled with the stories from ancestors, old wounds whispered through undefended visions and dreams. One’s nightmares are projected on to the visible world in plain view so that there is no choice but to see and to reconcile the lamentable hauntings that were carried so long as true, though they were never really there.

These being-altering experiences, evidenced only by the traces of confusion they erase, can be difficult to categorize in the narrative of a single person. How, then, can they be truly represented by a light or a color on an image map of the brain in a laboratory?

**Spirituality in the Laboratory**

Bohm (1996) wrote, “The poet doesn’t like to have the state of tension explained. He feels that the state of tension itself is what is called for. But in science we unfold the meaning of this. We find the similarities and differences and try to state them explicitly” (p. 229).

Visceral satisfaction can arise through the intake of poetic expression, but does the poet’s need for this “state of tension” have such an exclusive right to the capacity for expression that other ways of knowing cannot approach the same exploration by other means?

Some discussion of the laboratory study of spiritual practice does attempt to include the mystery and the human experience in its dialogue. For example, after a detailed description of how the temporal lobes can be stimulated to produce spiritual experiences of non-corporeal entities, and sincere religious experiences of a “Free Evangelical Religions Community” are explained away with PET images revealing “a significant activation of the right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex” (Beauregard, 2012, p. 504), the author of a chapter about neuroimaging and spiritual practice in the Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality (2012) pauses to discuss the limits of physicalism. Citing a convincing, scientifically documented case of an out of body experience, and William James’s proposal that the brain may serve a “permissive/transmissive/expressive function” (p. 510), the author suggests to us that there is likely more to the story of meditation and spirituality than lab study.

It’s a generous gesture, and yet a story remains untold: the one that explains how we are going to restore dignity to those whose life-changing visions of non-corporeal, deceased loved ones and sincere religious experiences were explained away as a trick of the brain. Who knows what fantasies life creates to bring us back to wholeness? Why should there be a tyranny
of the metaphors of science over the metaphors of the spirit?

After all, we’re all just doing the best we can with what we have to explain our experiences. No one really knows what’s ultimately true. What makes sense to the human mind is not reality; it is only what seems to make sense to us with the capacities that we have for perceiving (Bohm, 1996, p. 224). “It is a proposal, perhaps to be regarded as a kind of working hypothesis, to be used as long as it leads to coherence and general harmony.” (Bohm, 1996, p. 230).

**General Harmony**

There is something about compassion that seems to lead authors to musical metaphors. One seminal meditation study has a very specific focus on general harmony in the form of “neural synchrony” (Davidson & Begley, 2012; Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard, & Davidson, 2004). Advanced meditators were asked to engage in compassion meditation so that its effects on their brains could be measured in the laboratory. The study found that this meditation created a phenomenon called “high-amplitude gamma-band oscillations and phase-synchrony” (Lutz et al., 2004, p. 16369). Inspired by their findings, Davidson’s & Begley’s (2012) own musical description of neural synchrony suggested to them a vision of dancing girls:

Since the size of the gamma wave is related to the number of neurons firing in sync, this was evidence for massive, far-flung assemblies of neurons firing with a high degree of temporal precision, like Rockettes kicking as one from one side of the vast Radio City Music Hall stage to the other (p. 213).

Playful visions of dancing girls aside, this study does more than highlight the biological responses to meditation. It also hints at a relationship between lab studies on meditation and the deeply personal experience of spiritual transformation. At the heart of it is a paradox. Well, actually, two paradoxes.

**Passive Pursuit**

Keeping in mind the life-altering experience of spiritual opening, it can be hard to imagine how people who sincerely seem to want to understand spirituality can limit their exploration to images on a screen in a laboratory. How can a data point on a spreadsheet capture the ache of a growing sense of love that seems to follow devoted practice?

Laboratory studies in the literature seem to be focused almost exclusively on “mindfulness.” “Mindfulness” is a skill or a chosen activity that can be developed with practice. It refers to the degree of a person’s attentiveness to what is happening in the moment, and to their conscious attention to value-driven response. Kabat-Zinn describes it as such: “Mindfulness refers to an alert and open mode of perceiving and monitoring all mental content from moment to moment, including perceptions, sensations, cognitions and affects” (as cited in Raffone & Srinivasan, 2010, p. 1).
What is the proposal of the laboratory study of mindfulness? Cautionary advice appears in some of the literature written about the study of meditation in the laboratory. In a 2003 article, John Kabat-Zinn reminds researchers that the practice of meditation comes from a spiritual tradition with context, and that “mindfulness” has a specific definition. He elaborates on the irony of how the mindfulness being studied in the laboratory in search of results is difficult to cultivate when there is attachment to outcome:

From the outset of practice we are reminded that mindfulness is not about getting anywhere else or fixing anything. Rather, it is an invitation to allow oneself to be where one already is and to know the inner and outer landscape of the direct experience in each moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 148).

In a later article outlining the difficulties of building scientific literature on mindfulness, Davidson (2010) remarks upon how the term “mindfulness” is used differently in the context of several different articles about the study of mindfulness within the same issue of the same journal. As the study of mindfulness “progresses” in to the future, the term has now come to be interpreted as a “state,” a “trait,” and an “intervention” technique.

Davidson’s own approach to the study of mindfulness has a specific aim of its own: to show the value that meditation has for our emotional health. Having located the center of emotion for six dimensions of well-being in the brain – resilience, outlook, social intuition, self-awareness, sensitivity to context, and attention – he then set upon the task of identifying the impact that specific types of meditation had on each of these emotional centers. Studies were completed on subjects with a vast range of experience with meditation to show what the impact looked like at different stages of mastery.

The results are impressive. Davidson was able to show that each of his identified dimensions of well-being could be influenced through meditative practice (Davidson & Begley, 2012). What’s equally notable is how he managed to get reclusive advanced practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, those with upwards of 10,000 hours of practice, to work with him in the laboratory.

Meditation leading to mindfulness is one aspect of contemplative spirituality, but as mentioned earlier, there is a messier, more confusing side of the experience. What about the deeply emotional quality of profound awakenings, such as the opening of the heart that require more active engagement than “mindfulness”? Generally, the active engagement of spiritual seeking can have a more dissonant quality. Truly, the stories of those who answer the spiritual call to awakening can reach operatic drama in their unfolding.

The sheer amount of active, dedicated work that it takes to face illusion so that one can be present is not something that could easily go unnoticed by the practitioner. The brains of advanced meditation practitioners show significant differences from non-practitioners (Davidson & Begley, 2012), but unless these practitioners had the enormous good fortune to be born fully awakened, it probably wasn’t just the mindfulness meditation that
got them to their state of emotional equilibrium. They probably were, as described, mindful in the sense that they are attentive, resilient, positive, intuitive, self-aware, and sensitive. I haven’t met any of the advanced practitioners that were studied, but I’m willing to bet that they also have humility and an inviting radiance. This is more than a relatively resilient good mood. This is presence.

Presence

Presence is sometimes more easily recognized in the academic literature as a description of a quality of being that results from transformation that tends to follow a dedication to spiritual inquiry, meditation, and/or prayer. In the more recent literature, it is more simply called “presence” or “mindfulness.” This would seem to line up with an argument that mindfulness and presence are the same thing. However, I believe that there is a distinction between “presence” and “mindfulness.”

‘Mindfulness’ is a skill or a chosen activity that can be developed with practice. It refers to the degree of a person’s attentiveness to what is happening in the moment, and to their conscious attention to value-driven response.

“Presence,” on the other hand, is an effortless experience of being in a way that is naturally generative to the person with presence and to the people the person with presence is working with. In a way, it is also a relationship skill, but it is one that is embodied so deeply that it requires no conscious thought to promote generativity. It could be argued that mindfulness is a way to practice for presence, but it is no guarantee of developing presence. Presence might sometimes be the result of mindfulness.

One common characteristic of presence is that presence is both paradoxical and transcendent of the paradox. Consider a few of the following descriptions that are reminiscent of this paradox. (The two poles of each paradox are listed in parentheses after the citation).

- Transcending the boundary between subjective and objective realities (Gozawa, 2014). (Poles: subjective and objective).
- Cosmologically one with the material and processes of the universe (Swimme, 2006). (Poles: self and universe).
- Living in the matrix between the manifest and the unmanifest so that your existence and actions in the world manifest in reverence of both (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005, Kindle Locations 3209-3211). (Poles: manifest and unmanifest).
- Existing with the whole being in a relational state (Buber, 1923/2004). (Poles: being and relating).
- “[T]he point where the fire of creation burns and enters the world through us” (Senge et al., 2005, Kindle Location 3370). (Poles: self and creation).
- "[H]e no longer tries to live but, but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity. The Law lives in him"
Each explanation describes the simultaneous performance of two seemingly contradictory actions at once. How exactly does one listen deeply and contemplate the whole at the same time? Simultaneously transcend subjective and objective realities? Be one with the material and processes of the entire universe? Live in the matrix between the manifest and the unmanifest? Exist as a being in a relational state? How could someone possibly, functionally, live with ever-present awareness of the divinity within? And my personal favorite: where, exactly, is “the point where the fire of creation burns and enters the world through us” (Senge et al., 2005, Kindle Locations 3370)?

Paradoxes are transcended by realizing how the polarities that make up the paradox are, in fact, the same and not opposites (Boga, S., personal communication, 2006). Once a paradox has been transcended, the former polarities are integrated within the psyche and do not cause dissonance; therefore, they can be held at the same time without difficulty. What I am calling “presence” begins to develop in the experience of an individual when these particular paradoxes are transcended and integrated. In almost all of the examples listed, the polarities are the seeming opposites of the self and everything else. Presence requires the transcendence of the belief that the self is separate from the rest of existence.

Buber’s transcendence of being and relating and O’Reilley’s definition of listening and contemplating point more toward the transcendence of the self and other in action. Buber “is” while O’Reilley “contemplates,” and Buber “relates” while O’Reilley “listens.” The richer feeling of transcendence in action for each of these writers is clear in the fuller versions of their texts. Each describes relating and listening (respectively) at length. Buber (1923/2004) uses many wonderful phrases such as: “the primary word [I-Thou] can only be spoken with the whole being. He who gives himself to it may withhold nothing of himself” (p. 16), and “the real, filled present, exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting, and relation exist” (p. 18). O’Reilley describes at length her wonderful idea of “listening like a cow,” which she says is deeply transformative. Having grown up in Wisconsin, she had significant personal experiences of working with dairy cows who were apparently very supportive and transformative listeners.

An interesting aspect of Campbell’s (1973) description of the hero’s transformation is that it incorporates context into the description of what happens when the separation between self and other is transcended: “[H]e no longer tries to live but, but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him; he becomes, that is to say, an anonymity. The Law lives in him with his unreserved consent.” (Campbell, 1973, p. 237). Having transcended the boundary between self and other, the hero allows the transcendent I-Thou (to borrow a phrase from Buber) to be his presence, where the “Law” with a capital “L” is what was once the other. Campbell’s definition seems at first to imply that the self in this scenario is obliterated in the transformation,
but the clue about the self-allowed action, the “willing relaxation,” provides inclusion of the “self” aspect of the former polarity.

Presence may include the qualities of mindfulness, but it is characterized by the transcendence of the paradox of separation.

**The Symphony of Synchrony**

Paradoxes are transcended through the practice of inquiry – or more subtly – by curiosity that precedes language. Is it possible that there is something about the depth of mindfulness nurtured through practice that creates a tipping point by which transcendence of this most fundamental of spiritual paradoxes, the separation of self from other, is made available?

There is another paradox that is inherent in the development of presence. There is the paradox of separation itself, but the means to transcend the paradox is also a paradox: it is a paradox of surrender and effort. Mindfulness is a form of surrender, and inquiry, in this case, is the effort. In earnest inquiry, driven by yearning, the practitioner balances simultaneously holding the surrender and the effort at the same time. This enables her to confront a paradox of separation.

In his contemplation of “The Pathless Journey of Beauty,” philosopher, designer, and semiotitian Farouk Seif (2012) describes the seduction of Eros that motivates us to confront the paradoxes that gate our yearning to expand into a greater wholeness:

> It seems that the ultimate purpose of life is to seek wholeness and to be nested in a larger whole. This nesting phenomenon of life, which I call wholophilia, is the seductive passion to constantly engage in a co-evolutionary process seeking a larger whole. To this end, the love for wholeness governs both the affinity to create a microcosmic whole and to seek its expansion into an evolving macrocosmic whole...

The enchantment of Eros infuses this sense of wholeness and beckons us with its creative energy. And when Eros brings us together in a union, it negates our separation not by destroying our differences...but through the beauty of our differences and their potential for creative complementarity” p. 99.

This, says Brian Swimme (1985), is “Our most mature hope…to become pleasure’s source and pleasure’s home simultaneously. So it is with all the allurements of life: we become beauty to ignite the beauty of others” (p. 79). The Eros of union and the resulting resolution of paradox by means of surrender and action “negates our separation,” allowing the practitioner to hold two beliefs simultaneously. “You are that” (The Upanishads, 2007, p. 133).

This same type of surrender/action paradox makes up the practice of compassion meditation that Davidson’s work found to be a contributor to neural synchrony and the facilitator of compassion (Davidson & Begley, 2012). The practitioner aims to initiate a feeling compassion, holding the intention while surrendering to its occupation:
This form of meditation does not require concentrating on particular objects, memories, or images; it simply generates feelings of benevolence and compassion, causing them to “pervade the mind as a way of being.” This state is called pure compassion or nonreferential compassion (dmigs med snying rje in Tibetan) (Davidson & Begley, 2012, p. 213).

As a result of short or long term practice, meditators increasingly experience gamma synchrony. These waves, a signature characteristic of advanced meditators, increase proportionately to the number of neurons that fire at the same time, and could be the cause of the changes that frequent and ongoing meditation makes to the brain (Davidson & Begley, 2012). These changes result in, among other things, an increased propensity for empathy and a willingness to help. Davidson & Begley (2012) note, “A sprawling circuit that switches on at the sight of suffering also showed greater activity in the monks. So did regions responsible for planned movement, as if the monks’ brains were itching to go to the aid of those in distress” (p. 214).

These gamma waves associated with compassion could also be a part of deep relating. Bohm said:

I feel that we grasp things through our mind and body going into some state which is analogous to that which we are trying to grasp. This is the intuitive understanding which underlies the formal understanding, although the dominant attitude today is to regard the formal as primary. The intuitive sense of the holomovement suggests something subtle like the movement of a symphony (Bohm, Kelly, & Morin, 1996, p. 228).

Maybe the intuitive sense of the holomovement is the symphony of gamma oscillations. Humans have a tendency toward entrainment, which is one of the reasons that music has such a powerful impact on us. When the heart reaches out to others, it feels as though it is trying to enter “some state which is analogous” to the being it wants to relate to. The heart wants to reflect another so that the entirety of that being can be recognized as beauty.

Relating the paradox of love to the practice and effects of compassion meditation, maybe it is possible to consider a science of kindness. There does seem to be some relationship between the musical and poetic experience of spiritual opening and the findings coming out of the laboratory. Scientific articles in academic journals may not recount the tale of a heart heavy with the ache to be of service, but they do validate the value of practice for the cautious or the weary. They put the physical reality of values into language intended for a mind steeped in the scientific paradigm.

Just as transcending the paradox of separation opens the mind, it seems the heart is also awakened through the paradox of devotion and surrender. With all our heart we wish for the well-being of another, and we surrender to grace in the hope that we may somehow participate in making it so. Transcending our dissonance, we oscillate together in a gamma wave symphony.
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