

Experiences as a tool in contemplative achievements



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Explore the modern focus on ‘experience’ as a tool in the description of contemplative achievements and its hermeneutical value for the study of traditional meditation treatises

This essay considers the complexities of using ‘experience’ to give merit and understanding to the interpretive study of contemplative achievements within a range of meditation treatises, with a primary focus on texts within a yoga genre. Including, amongst others the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad-Gītā, and the Pātañjalayogaśāstra. The essay will consider definitions, traditions and cultures to examine the notion of experience, and will explore how something so ineffable and subjective can be looked at from etic and emic viewpoints.

Experience can be considered as having several connotations; an experience can be participatory, which as Sharf (1995, p276) suggests is relatively easy to comprehend. In terms of contemplative practice, this could be sitting in the classic sthira-sukham-āsanam (Pātañjalayogaśāstra 1935 2: 46) gazing at a candle flame or reciting a mantra. Experience also relates to the processes of contemplative praxis such as stilling the mind or slowing the breath and what might be learned from them. However, an experience can also be the ultimate result of both participation and process. This can give rise to many challenges as experiences are generally indefinable, personal and not easily measurable.

An experience can be considered as an occurrence which leaves an impression but what that impression might be is not always readily determined. H Gadamer (1975) affirms that experience is:

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‘ among the least clarified concepts that we have.’

He regards knowledge in terms of ‘ experience and process’. Thus highlighting the importance of ‘ experience ’as a means and a tool in relation to a hermeneutical approach to meditative achievements.

Although hermeneutically important, applying ‘ experience’ to comprehend traditional meditation treatises is complex. One issue is the difficulty in separating the culturally pre-established descriptions of experience within specific traditions, from the insider experiences of individuals. Sharf (2000) suggests that experiential understanding will be conditioned by the traditions from which individuals belong, as well as their culture, history environment, religious background and training. By questioning practitioners after their experiences and correlating answers some similarities might be determined, however, this can pose complications as to how people might react if there is a misalignment between the experience they have and the one they feel they should have.

Studying traditional meditation treatises to understand the hermeneutical value of experience can prove problematic, some early texts detail techniques and steps for practicing meditation and the struggles that might be encountered during the processes. Overcoming these meditational difficulties is clearly not an easy path. This can be noted in the Pātañjalayogaśāstra where there is considerable detail on the obstacles of yoga including the antarāyāḥ, Kleśha and vrittis. (1935 2: 3-: 9, 1: 30-1: 32, 1: 8) Pātañjali suggests abhyāsa and vairāgyābhyāṃ (1935 1: 12) are the

way forward to experiencing 'yoga' but there is little detail on what that experience might be like.

Meditative achievements recounted by the Buddha give a first-hand insider viewpoint of experience, giving detailed information of what was encountered. We are informed that Buddha attained the four noble truths and he clearly knew without a doubt that he had attained and experienced enlightenment. There is however, scant evidence of early texts that give aspirants on the Buddhist path intimate knowledge of what phenomenological experiences they might undergo themselves.

Placing the study of experience into a Western framework utilizes a variety of methods. Barnard (, 1992, p. 254) suggests a range of approaches, including sociological and psychological explorations and philosophical critiques. Researching the theory of 'experience' might include inquiry into shared meanings of texts, analysis of how texts were used, comparison of content such as rituals, techniques, prayers and hymns. Other methods take into account assessment of social context, consideration in to the

period the texts were compiled and to whom they were intended for.

Western translations and commentaries on texts can vary widely exposing the reader to a plethora of interpretations of experiential contemplative practices. As these practices can be many and varied it can pose the question of, how is it possible to know if people experience meditation in the same way? The term qualia can be usefully used here to consider how things are subjectively perceived by different people when the same experiences

appear to the outsider as identical but emic descriptions define and interpret them differently,

' In short, qualia refer to the way things seem' . (Dennett 1992)

This need to understand ' experience' became apparent during the 20th century and meditation practices once shrouded in mystery became something to illicit deeper inquiry and study. Proudfoot (1987 p Xiii) affirms this by stating

' The turn to religious experience was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions and grounding it in human experience'

It was after the parliament of religions in 1893 that interest in Eastern religions began to expand and interest developed in their contemplative aspects. With the subsequent teachings of Kavalayananda, Yogananda and followed later by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi with his Transcendental Meditation movement in the 1950's and 60's, curiosity from the west increased and contemplative experience was seen as a multi-layered phenomena to be explored. Robert Sharf (1995) was the first scholar to examine the notion of ' experience' with a somewhat provocative although detailed stance. He affirms that ' experience' has played a fundamental role in the study of religion and in the spiritual occurrences of individuals within particular modes of contemplative practice, including yoga, Hinduism and Buddhism. Sharf argues that few scholars have questioned the role and nature of

specific experiences revealed by practitioners, espousing that adepts may experience 'altered states' but they might perhaps be more ideological than exact reference points to the Buddhist path. He is clear in that experiences have a seemingly inconsistent nature. (Sharf 1995 p228). Jonathan Shear (2006 x-xii) concurs with Sharf and advocates inquiry into experiential contemplative achievements and considers differing approaches including evidence, phenomenological experience and clarification from both etic and emic viewpoints.

Phenomenology founded by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) considers the study of the formation and structure of experiences and consciousness, including embodied awareness, memory, imagination, thought processes, emotions and perception amongst others. By their nature, these experiential achievements benefit from a hermeneutic approach as they are dependent on differing interpretations. Phenomenology provides a method for probing into embodied experience and consequently provides a means to express elements of the experience with clarity and without judgement. Lack of clarity or ignorance is termed *avidyā* In the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* (1935 2: 3). As one of the five *Kleśha* or distortions of the mind (1935 2: 2), *avidyā* is said to hinder a true 'experience' of yoga. Although Husserl (1929 in Salmon) considers that consciousness is the starting point of phenomenology even to Patañjali conscious experience of *Samyama* was not an easy path to clarify.

Proudfoot (1987 p232) states that understanding the idea of religious experience was shaped by the conflict between religion and the growth in scientific knowledge. Scientific approaches of enquiry in to experience use similar principles to contemplative approaches, however the focus is on <https://assignbuster.com/experiences-as-a-tool-in-contemplative-achievements/>

measurable results, such as EEG activity, pulse rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure, and responses to light flashes etc. (Linda E Patrick, 1994 The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology) Feuerstein (2006 p114) suggests that the western Newtonian model rejects notions such as subtle planes of being and 'lifeforce.' Consequently difficulties arise within contemplative practices as a scientific approach cannot express or explain an individual encounter or verbalise a mystical experience. Hence why hermeneutical approaches can be so valuable in the study of experiential contemplative meditation treaties.

The word meditation or contemplation is not apparent within the treaties of pre-classical yoga. Sharf (2000 p71) makes suggestion it perhaps was not such a central theme as once reputed. The Ṛgveda term of dhī- (brahman) later develops as dhyāna (meditation) within the Upaniṣads giving a first glimpse at contemplation and sense withdrawal. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad states'

' meditation (dhyānam) is indeed greater than thought' (Deussen, 1980 6. 1 p180).

Dhyānam is also mentioned within other early Upaniṣads including the Śvetāśvatara

' Practising contemplation (dhyānam) and devotion' (self surrender and yoga) they saw the power of the self '(Deussen 1. 3 p305)

The Kāṭha Upaniṣad confirms the difficulty in explaining the experiential knowledge of a samadhi like experience.

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‘ he is not easy to understand even though repeatedly thought over’

(Deussen, 1980, 2. 7 P282)

In his commentary Deussen also confers that deep knowledge is hidden mysterious and deeply concealed. The Upaniṣads were conveyed orally by ‘ seers’ who were experiencing states of deep meditation, these ‘ seers’ had a deep knowledge and an unexplained understanding of their transmission. The seers would teach by means of hymns and prayers and gave instruction and partook in dialogue and debates with their students. This form of transmission or saṃvāda was a way to exchange ideas and experiences, evidencing the difference between ‘ experiences’ that can be mutually shared and agreed upon, and ones that are solely private or internal. Oviedo (2006 p391-401) Suggests that having a common ground and a mutual understanding allows religious experience to not only be a private affair of the mind but;

‘ a shared category with a broader epistemic statute’ .

To have a shared understanding or to discuss mutual or individual experiences, is dependent on the language used to convey them. Paul Ricoeur (1995, p46) states that this gives rise to differing interpretations rather than the direct experience itself. It appears then when it comes to the hermeneutical value of experience, language can in one sense be a valuable tool as with saṃvāda but can also give premeditated ideas that can colour understanding and place cultural constraints on to experiences, this is confirmed by Brockmeier (2002, P. 82) where he suggests descriptions of

experiences are often individual interpretations that can be culturally constructed through language.

The hermeneutical value of using experience as a tool to describe meditation is apparent within the major Hindu treatise of the Mahābārata and the Bhagavad Gītā, Radhakrishnan argued that

' if experience is the soul of religion, then Hinduism is closest to that soul precisely because it is not historical but based directly on the inward life of spirit' Sharf (1937 p137), One of the central themes of The Mahābārata and the Bhagavad Gītā is the moving inward toward a spiritual life. The Bhagavad Gītā within its narrative framework of the dialogue between Lord Kṛṣṇa and the Pandava Prince Arjuna, discusses (notably in Chapter 6) the experiential nature of meditation and the difficulties that can arise. Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna.

' I agree it is difficult to attain by him whose self is uncontrolled' , (Winthrop Sargent 1994 Bk V1. 36 P 307)

Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna what struggles might evolve during meditation and gives teachings on what Arjuna needs to do and what he might encounter. He suggests to Arjuna that he should not think of anything (BK V1. 36) Arjuna is clearly concerned that his personal experiences do not match the lofty heights of Krishna.

' An evenness of mind, Krishna, I do not perceive' (Winthrop Sargent 1994 Bk V1. 33 P 304).

The Bhagavad Gita ranks meditation above intellectual knowledge (Winthrop Sargent, 1994 Bk X11 v. 12 p519). This corresponds with the importance of <https://assignbuster.com/experiences-as-a-tool-in-contemplative-achievements/>

contemplative intentions of the emergent culture of śramanas coming out of Greater Magadha at a similar period of time. The Śramanas developed divergently from vedic and Brahmanical traditions and as Mallinson(2017) suggests although they rejected vedic ritual and brahman authority it is conceivable they were somewhat influenced by them. The śramanas sought the permanent experience of liberation (nirvana, mokṣa) (Mallinson p287) and lived outside the norms of society with ascetic practices and rituals. This ascetic śramana movement gave rise to Buddhism, Jainism tantra and Haṭhayoga, wherein contemplative achievements played an important role.

Contemplation was an integral part of Buddhism, however Sharf (1995, p. 228) contentiously asserts that the role of experience in the history of Buddhism has been substantially exaggerated. People drew on accounts of the Buddha as the gold standard of experiential practice. Although there were some texts with discourses on Buddhist contemplation including the Visuddhimagga, which in part recount the actual experience of the Buddha rather than what an aspirant might encounter on a path of contemplation (sharf 1995 p272) People were left somewhat in the dark as to what it actually was that was they were supposed to be undergoing during meditation practices. Consequently as there was little textual information, interested individuals sought out teachers of meditation with a hermeneutic approach to the treatises. This manner of study was to not open to laity, you either became a monk or nun or worked as a lay practitioner if the second path was taken there would be very limited knowledge of experiential practices. Buddhist monks and nuns would often work within their local

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communities, they were not always meditating as is often thought. Sharf (1995, p. 242) argues against scholars like Conze who view meditation as ‘the very heartbeat of the religion’, instead concluding that

‘ meditation plays a minor if not negligible role in the majority of Theravada Monks’. Sharf (1995, p. 242)

Shear (2006 p Xii) states that is little question that contemplative practice has been at the heart of most of the great wisdom traditions across the globe. He also expounds that within Buddhism, Jainism and yoga experience was simply an assumed part of contemplation and the need to scrutinize effects was not the norm (shear 2006 p274). This scrutinization is a western phenomenon where the need to know, to detail and have discourse on experiences is normative. In eastern traditions periods of silence were part of post meditation, sometimes for weeks or years and discussing contemplative experience was not a necessary part of the practice. There was no requirement to measure it or describe it and in some areas discussion of meditational experiences was completely forbidden. (Sharf, 1995, p. 230) states the aim of Buddhism is not to describe contemplative states, but to achieve them. Foucault (1988 p28) suggests that this culture of silence became important with the notion of;

‘ looking and listening to the self for the truth within’

This looking inward for the truth is evident in the Pātañjalayogaśāstra, where the practices of Saṃyama were about moving away from the external with pratyāhāra and dhāraṇā leading toward dhyāna. Which in turn might lead the aspirant to a state of samādhi. (Pātañjalayogaśāstra ch2. 45). One of the <https://assignbuster.com/experiences-as-a-tool-in-contemplative-achievements/>

many questions asked by western yoga students is what exactly is the samādhi 'experience'? Modern yoga practitioners seem keen to unravel this notion of a deep contemplative state to give it credence within a modern culture. One could argue that the modern need to know seemingly surpasses the need to experience.

Within a yoga context samādhi is often discussed as the result of diligent practice as the eighth aṅga within Pātañjalayogaśāstra. The Samādhi pādah teaches that the state yoga is ultimately the 'experience' of Samādhi. Samādhi has many definitions depending on tradition and culture, Mallinson (2017 p324) expounds that Samādhi is commonly defined within vedantic traditions as merger of the jivātman with the paramātman, whereas within Pātañjalayogaśāstra Samādhi the final goal of yoga is separation of Prakriti from puruṣa and tantric texts present Samādhi as union with the deity (Mallinson 2017 p325) Mallinson also discusses that within some Haṭhayoga texts that Samādhi comes to prominence as a 'death like state' in which the yogi is insensible to stimuli. (2017 p327) There are a few accounts of yogis having been re-awakened after their 'experience' and few emic accounts of such states but these accounts are very scant. In both the Pātañjalayogaśāstra and Haṭhayogapradīpikā there is detail of progressive levels of samādhi leading the yogi ever deeper toward the experience of ultimate liberation.

Mystical experience like samādhi are very complex and have rather an incongruous nature, this is evident within differing cultures. For example, a Christian might talk about mystical revelations or witnessing the

holy spirit a Hindu about absorption in to Brahman and a Buddhist about the extinction of the self. (sharf 1995 p 270) Wayne Proudfoot (in Barnard, 1992, p. 247) argues that mystics are mistaken in trusting

they are accessing a greater reality, suggesting that their interpretation is simply just an available explanation.

Arguably One of the Complexities with the hermeneutical value of studying of traditional meditation treatises is that explanations can bring about expectations from the practitioner, which in turn can bring about difficulties and disappointments. The practitioner might be pre- conditioned in to assumptions from many quarters, yet pre-supposed experiences may not measure up to what is anticipated. However Shear (2006 p260) contends that in the field of meditation direct experience is of the essence and it is the insider experience that is most relevant and can bring about profound change and a deeper understanding of the self.

In conclusion research affords a multiplicity of tools to enquire in to meditative, contemplative and mystic experiences which play an integral role within many of the world's cultures and religions. Investigation considers emic and etic points of view, empirical evidence of language, culture and philology. Although Bronkhorst (1993 p102) suggests that;

' for a further understanding of Buddhist meditation philology will probably not be of much help'

Scientific research will no doubt continue to probe deeply to unmask mysteries that prove ineffable it has become evident that religion based on

experience is in part beyond academic as study does not always reach in to the truth it studies, or necessarily value inner revelations that are clearly apparent to the practitioner. Hermeneutical phenomenological does however gives another viewpoint, that lived experience has no real need of categorization and gives merit understanding and a valued method of expression to the ineffable human experience.

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