



## Phenomenological Intentionality meets an Ego-less State

by Jenny Barnes

*When using the phenomenological method, one aims to capture the essential structures of lived experiences. It has been my experience that phenomenology does this well, when researching experiences that are lived through our bodily senses and understood with our minds. When trying to capture and describe experiences that are beyond the understanding of the body and the mind, namely experiences of deep meditative states, one is confronted with the limitations of the research method itself.*

*One of the fundamental concepts within the phenomenological method is that of Intentionality. It is assumed that human beings experience themselves and their worlds from the perspective of an individual ego that intends an object of consciousness. This subject-object interaction comprises the contents of consciousness itself. The challenge, in this paper, is to describe deep meditative states, whereby the subject and the object of consciousness become one.*

*The phenomenological epoché is performed so that the researcher can be completely open to how the experiential data itself describes mystical experiences. This means bracketing out all preconceptions, all theories including that of intentionality, so that the researcher can open her/himself up to the essence of mystical meditation. When this is done, the mystical state informs an expansion of intentionality to include the state of oneness.*

### Introduction

As suggested by the title of this paper, my current research about meditative experiences has led me to question the absolute accuracy of the phenomenological notion of intentionality. I have come to question whether in all human experiences there is an interaction between a subject and an object of consciousness and therefore whether “consciousness is always consciousness of something” (Husserl, 1967, p. 12). In meditative and mystical experiences the subject and object merge into oneness (Dupré, 1976; Sharma, 2001; Swami Suddhananda, 2000; Van Der Leeuw, 1938/1963).

Having previously conducted phenomenological research into the nature of lived experiences, I had come to implicitly trust in the effectiveness of the phenomenological method, which I had assumed was Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology (Barnes, 2000 & 2001). I was particularly interested in the work of Clarke Moustakas because his work seemed to present a creative research methodology that was easy to read, relatively straightforward to execute and which remained faithful to the essence of Husserl’s phenomenology. After discovering intentionality’s problem with mystical experiences, I looked to religious

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phenomenology for solutions. I found some discussion of the problem with solutions ranging from doing the analysis anyway, to expanding or changing the understanding of what intentionality actually involves.

To assist the reader in fully examining the problems that I experienced with the concept of intentionality, I will walk the reader through the process that I followed. I begin by presenting the understanding of intentionality that I began through my reading of transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenologists (Heidegger cited in Moustakas, 1994; Van Mannen, 1998; Wills, 2001). Since the methodological problem was with meditative states whereby the subject and object of consciousness merge, I have separated light states from deep states in this discussion. Since I only really encountered difficulty with the method when I was performing the phenomenological reduction, I will then present the relevant sections of my data analysis for the reader's perusal. I include background details of how the co-researchers and their data was selected for this paper. Finally after elaborating on the problems with intentionality in the light of the completed data analysis, I present to the reader an analysis of the solutions that religious also transpersonal phenomenologists have presented to address these problems.

Intentionality, central to the phenomenological method, assumes that the subject and object of consciousness are separate

The phenomenological method has assumed that human beings experience self as an individual ego, using their bodily senses and minds to experience objects as they present themselves to consciousness. These assumptions are reasonable, given the Western psychological view of lived experience. The transcendental phenomenological method is steeped in these ego-centred assumptions of human experiencing. "Every conscious experience is bi-polar: there is

an object that presents itself to a subject or ego" (Van Mannen, 1998, p.182).

"Intentionality, one of the pivotal notions of phenomenology" (Wills, 2001. p.2.), assumes an intentional act, an embodied self, focusing one's mind on something. "This basic premise, called 'intentionality', meant that, in fact, the very act of thinking is an act that affirms the union that exists between the thinking subject and the object of thinking" (Heidegger, 1982, cited in Wills, 2001, p. 4).

While stressing its intuitive, receptive modality, it is important not to overemphasise the receptive nature of this kind of direct knowing. The human knower does not open the shutters of the mind and an image of some object or experience does not physically imprint itself on the psyche. All kinds of knowing require work by the knower (Wills, 2001, p. 6).

"The essence of consciousness, in which I live as my own self, is the so-called intentionality. Consciousness is always consciousness of something. The nature of consciousness includes, as modes of being, presentations probabilities, and non-being, and also the modes of appearance, goodness, and value etc. Phenomenological experience as reflection must avoid any interpretative constructions. Its descriptions must reflect accurately the concrete contents of experience, precisely as these are experienced" (Husserl, 1967, pp.12-13).

Everyday ego-centred experiencing is also difficult to capture and describe

Husserl's intentionality adequately describes the way that most human beings experience self and the world. Most of us, particularly in the West, believe that we are embodied egos, boundaried, separate, interacting with our worlds from a perspective that is uniquely our own. Quantitative and qualitative research is conducted from the perspective of self observing and/or interacting with objects that present to our

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awareness. The challenge in collecting and analysing the data of everyday experiences is in the difficulty capturing lived experiences themselves. Most people find their every day experiences difficult to capture in words. To describe an experience, we must step back from it, observe it, make meaning from it, translate it into words then describe it. The act of description irrevocably changes our experience from the actual experience itself to the act of describing it.

There is an unavoidable distance created by the time lapse between having the experience and describing it. There is also some difficulty in actually describing lived experiences fully because human beings experience their worlds in multi-modal ways, through their bodily senses of sight, sound, touch and vision. Our minds also cognitively analyse and make meaning from these experiences. Verbal descriptions require the conversion of these experiences to language. The richness of the experience can be lost in the cognitive interpretation into language. If the reader is interested in a more complete discussion on this point, Betensky (1995) examines multi-modal ways of experiencing and analysing experiential data, and Gadamer (2000) provides an excellent exploration of how human make meaning from lived experiences.

Light meditative states are easier to describe than deep states

For many meditators, there is a sense of shifting between light and deep meditative states. The practice of meditation may begin with the experience of a light state that progressively deepens over the time of the practice. One may also find oneself slipping in and out of light and deep meditative states, spontaneously, throughout the day. Buddhist mindfulness as discussed and practiced by Gordon (3.5.2. of this paper) exemplifies the waking state of present-moment awareness whereby one is aware of both the material and the spiritual dimensions of human existence. Gordon walks through his everyday

material existence aware of the spiritual path, which informs each step. While sitting in meditative practice and in a light meditative state, there is still an awareness of the body and the mind. We observe the thoughts flowing through the mind, and are aware of changing bodily sensations. In this light state, the mind is aware of what might seem like two worlds, the material and the spiritual. Since the mind still seems present in this state, it is relatively simple to cognitively appraise meditative and spiritual experiences as they occur in consciousness (Barnes, 2001; Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994).

As the meditative experience deepens, one's attention shifts from the external world of the senses to a spiritual world, which is experienced as independent of the body and mind. There is a sense that the individual ego self is transcended. Self is experienced as boundary-less, expansive, empty of individuality, and merged with the universe. The "duality between subject and object is overcome" (Gifford-May, 1994, p. 124). Some meditators also experience the bliss of Samadhi. The term, Samadhi, refers to a state where there is no longer any subject-object consciousness. This state is difficult to record because the mind seems absent from the experience. When one emerges from this state, the mind seems unable to understand it. Since the experience is not cognitive, it is also difficult to put into words. What one can capture, however, is the profound sense of the mind-less peace that carries into the next few days or hours of embodied experiencing (Barnes, 2001; Gifford-May & Thompson, Patrik, 1994; 1994; Valle, 1998).

Data analysis became difficult when writing the structural description of the experience

When engaged in the phenomenological reduction, specifically when trying to write a structural description of the experience of meditation, I noticed myself writing a long description of what the experience was not, i.e., Deep meditation was not experienced within the

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structures of time, space, place and material relationship. As I became aware of the inadequacy of a description of what the experience was not, I also became aware of the limitations imposed by the assumptions behind a research method that assumes that all human experiencing occurs from the perspective of an embodied ego engaging an external world. Mystical experience seemed light years away from ego-centred experiencing

### **What follows**

I now present whom I interviewed and what was described in the form of a sample of my data analysis. I comment on the points of data analysis in which difficulties arose. I conclude with a discussion of how our understanding of intentionality could be changed so that it is more congruent with mystical experiences.

### **Data collection – Who was interviewed and how**

I interviewed twelve people who used Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Sufi meditative techniques. There were three interviews. The first interview took approximately one and a half hours and I asked the co-researchers what they experienced when they meditated also what meaning they made from those experiences. I transcribed the tapes, then analysed the data to create individual themes of meditative experiences. I mailed these themes to each co-researcher, asking them to correct anything that was not consistent with their experience. The second interview took about half an hour. I asked the co-researchers to discuss their corrections, then to identify the key theme(s) in their experiences. After this interview, I transcribed the tapes then made the necessary corrections to the existing themes. I wrote a new central theme of their experience, followed by structural, textural and combined descriptions, culminating in a creative synthesis. The co-researchers made corrections to all of these stages of data analysis, ensuring the accuracy of my descriptions of their experiences.

I present a selection of two co-researchers' data analysis of. I chose the Swami's material because his experience was closest to the state of Samadhi and therefore the most difficult to analyse. Swami Suddhananda is named because he gave permission for his full name to be used. The other co-researcher (Gordon) did not want me to use a fictitious name but preferred the use of his first name only. For the Swami there was no subject or object of consciousness. He experienced self as unboundaried, one with everything. I have presented the most relevant themes with each following stage of the structural-textural descriptions, culminating in a creative synthesis.

I chose the second co-researcher (Gordon) because he most clearly described a combination of spiritual and body-mind experiencing. I think that many dedicated mediators who live the relatively ordinary lives of work and family commitments could identify with Gordon's experiences. I present Gordon's material as an example of an experience that shifts between experiencing self as a subject observing an object, to later describe self as an unboundaried entity. While analysing Gordon's data, I found it relatively simple to describe his embodied experiences, descriptions of his love of nature or his daily practice of Buddhist mindfulness while going about his daily activities. What both he and I found most difficult to describe, were his deeper meditative experiences of oneness with the infinite. For the sake of brevity, I have presented Gordon's most relevant theme, followed by his combined description and the creative synthesis.

The reader should note that my choice of the co-researchers was on the basis of clarity of description of meditative states not because of their religion. I have reported the relevant co-researchers' religions to provide the reader with a context from which to view their use of language and imagery. I have not excluded Christians, Jews, Sufis, Atheists, or other categories of meditators for any reason other than my need to

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provide the best description of a deep meditative state from amongst the people that I have currently interviewed.

During the Interviews, deep meditative states were recalled sometime after they had occurred

In my own experience of deep meditative states, my attention is focused inward and I lose awareness of my body and my mind. Thoughts seem to slow, become more distant, then to cease. In this state, there is no verbal material in my mind, from which to form the words necessary to describe the experience. There is also no sense of the body and therefore no vehicle in which to form the sounds of words. Apart from the disrupted mechanics of thought and speech there is no will, no desire, to be or do anything. One simply exists in the oneness of universal consciousness (Barnes, 2001).

Gordon reflects upon similar experiences in the current study. "It was really like a sense of feeling united with the stars. The boundaries between "me" and the stars seemed to become less. It was just a wonderful feeling, a deeper experience of love. Something that would bring tears to your eyes, it was that beautiful". Gordon has described past experiences of Samadhi for this study, as it is not a state that he can will himself into. Samadhi occurs spontaneously, either within or outside formal meditative practice.

To describe these experiences of deeply meditative states, one must first emerge from that state. When one regains a sense of body and mind, one can reflect on the experience as it fades in memory. The more time that there is between actually having the experience and describing it, the more details of that experience are lost.

The exception: the Swami could describe deep meditative states as they occurred

Swami Suddhananda was the only person that I interviewed whom seemed able to stay in a deep meditative state while simultaneously describing his experience of it. He was able to simultaneously experience and describe a state of "boundary-less existence" of being "the meditation itself" (Swami Suddhananda, 2001). Perhaps this Samadhi saturated existence is the next phase for those meditators that dip in and out of Samadhi as they go about their daily lives.

#### **The Data Analysis: The themes, structural - textural descriptions and the creative synthesis**

For the sake of brevity, I will not describe the stages of phenomenological reduction, in any detail. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the specific areas of difficulty that occurred because of the mystical nature of the research. The reader should be able to get a sense of the process from the following description. If the reader wants more detail about how I used the phenomenological method, s/he can refer to Barnes (2001) and Moustakas (1994).

#### **The process of data collection and analysis**

Data collection and analysis involved first bracketing, as much as possible, my expectations about what the co-researchers would discuss. I tried to be as open as possible to the experiences of the co-researchers so that I could discover aspects of the meditative experience that I had not expected to find.

I analysed the data using the stages outlined below. The interview tapes were transcribed, key words and sentences were extracted, meditative themes were created, key themes were identified and these were used as the central component in creating the structural, textural and combined descriptions of meditative experiences. Finally the creative synthesis was written to express the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994 & 1990).

### The Themes

This stage of data analysis involved identifying the themes of the lived experience of meditation. The “themes” are “the structures of the experience” (Van Mannen, 1998, p. 79). A theme is not merely a concept that repeats itself throughout the text, it is in fact a major meaning structure within the phenomenon under investigation. Themes are “like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived though meaningful wholes (Van Mannen, 1998, p. 90).

Swami Suddhananda’s themes indicate the Spiritual nature of meditative experiences, which are beyond material structure and what is perceived through the senses. Self is Ego-less, not encased in the body but is immersed in oneness. To write such a theme, I had to change my understanding of what I thought were “the structures of the experience” (Van Mannen, 1998, p. 90). While I took the conventional view of an experiential structure, I found myself writing that the experience of meditation did not fit into the usual structures of time, space, place, and human relationships. I did not want my entire description to be about what the experience was not so I expanded my understanding of structures to include timelessness, the spiritual space/place of emptiness that is also full of connectedness with everyone and everything.

Gordon’s theme is included in this paper to give the reader a sense of how one might analyse experiential data when this material contains both spiritual and embodied experiencing. This Spirit-Body mix is often the case, as much of the meditation literature uses interviews from average and advanced meditators, who are not yet always immersed in Samadhi (Barnes, 2001; Gifford-May and Thompson, 1994; Patrik, 1994; Valle, 1998; Valle and Mohs, 1998).

Swami Suddhananda: Reality is beyond what you perceive with your senses.

True reality is beyond what you perceive with your sense organs. “Once you recognise this, then you recognise everything”. You know that more exists than what your senses take in. Your “mind” knows a reality that is beyond “the senses”. For example, when your eyes see a horizon, “your mind knows” that the world is round and therefore there really is no horizon. “The knowledge of the round Earth doesn’t change your perception of flatness”. In the same way, “your perception of flatness doesn’t effect your knowing the reality of the round Earth. “Exactly the same way as when you are meditation, you know yourself. You are meditation. The body will continue, the mind should continue, the thoughts will continue”. “What you know, in answer to these changes, is that there is a changeless reality. Your eyes see changes; your mind sees changeless” reality.

Meditation is “not a vision”, nor is it a transient experience that changes over time. “Meditation is your awareness, you yourself, all times, all places, all conditions”. It is about the self that is completely changeless.

### The Swami’s Second Theme

The idea that I am the body, or the thought, is the worst indoctrination.

Many people have been indoctrinated, into believing that they are what they are not. They think that they are their bodies and/or their thoughts. The truth of our existence is that we are the meditation itself. If we believe that we are our bodies and our minds then we can be convinced that we, as human beings, are separate from each other and also separate from God. From these assumptions of separation, wars and social injustices occur. The tragedy of human existence is that we are living on one Earth yet we create artificial boundaries that are then used to determine the lines of war. From our separate standpoints we imagine “transgressions” which then predispose us to the abuse and murder of our fellow human beings.

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The truth is that God is always there. God can be named many things; “consciousness”, “Atma”, “Brahman”, “oneness”. Regardless of the label, it (God) is always there. When you think of yourself as the “body”, then you falsely believe that you are “separated from the creation”. It is your “reason” and your “ignorance” that isolates you. Human beings do not incarnate into bodies and become separate from God. Meditation does not bring us back to God. We are always there, always have been and always will be one with God.

### **Gordon’s Theme**

#### **The practice of meditation gives Gordon insight into the real nature of himself and his existence.**

There is a sense that one is beyond the body. The self is comprised of a spirit that will live unchanged as the body ages and eventually dies. Gordon’s certainty in this spiritual belief system sometimes wavers with the knowledge that no one can know with certainty what occurs after bodily death. However, he hopes his beliefs will carry him through death so that he will be anxiety free and make the best Karmic choices on the spiritual journey.

What Gordon knows is that the reality of his existence does go beyond the physical form and that there is a greater spiritual purpose to bodily existence. Gordon practices this conviction in his daily life. He bares attention to the present moment and is also of service to others. When he helps reduce the suffering of others, he notices spirituality manifesting in materiality.

### **The Structural Descriptions**

The “four essentials of lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relation to the other can be differentiated but not separated. They all form the intricate unity which we call the lifeworld – our lived world” (Van Mannen, 1998, p. 105). The structures of the lived experience are assumed to be experienced through the “lived body” assumed to be a “phenomenological fact” that “we are always bodily in the world” (Van Mannen, 1998,

p. 103). Through our bodies and our minds, we relate to others as embodied beings. Space is experienced as the material space in which we find ourselves. “Lived time (temporality) is subjective time” which appears to slow or speed up depending upon whether we are focusing on something pleasant or unpleasant (Van Mannen, 1998, p. 104).

To create a structural description of the experience of meditation, one needs to expand upon the understanding of concepts such as time, space, place, and relationships. People who meditate are embodied, so they may describe their experience from the perspective of an individual ego that is observing her/his world through the senses. It is when the meditators describe experiences where the self merges into oneness that phenomenological structures need to expand to incorporate the spiritual dimension. For example, when describing the concept of space, there needs to be some recognition that space can be either finite or infinite. If it is a material form of space, it can be either measured using the senses or mathematical calculations. If the co-researcher is referring to spiritual space, it may need to be described using concepts that tap into an intuitive or felt sense of these dimensions, such as a sense of expansiveness that is both full and also empty.

### **Swami Suddhananda’s Structural Description**

Meditation is something that seems to have no structures. It is beyond the material structures of time, space, or physical location. One would also be careful about using the word “experience”, when referring to the awareness of meditation, because this word assumes a felt sense of something that shifts and changes over physical time.

Meditation is the sense of whom we are, the deeper level of the self, the soul who lives in an unchangeable state of divine meditation. It is not suggested that meditation is always understood by every human being to be an experience of the

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divine but many people do experience it that way. Illusions can occur when one sees the many manifestations of God which people often interpret as divine experiences. While the meditation is real, the bodily visions and sensations that one experiences are a distraction from the meditation.

One does not do or practice or perform meditation; it is not an activity. Meditation is at the core of every human being. It is that deep sense of inner peace, contentment and fulfilment inside everyone. When one is in meditation, this fulfilment results in compassionate and generous actions towards others. Compassion flows from the self, it is not something that can be taught or conditioned.

The greatest disservice that human beings have done to each other is to convince each other that they are the body. In the context of this belief, one believes that the structures of one's experience are contained in the material dimension of time, body, and material environment. When this myth is exposed, one knows oneself to be the meditation itself. The true self is timeless, an immortal soul that does not die with the body but appears to be born and re-born into another body.

The most enduring and accurate picture of whom and what we are as human beings, is the knowledge that we are the Self that is the meditation itself. The meditation has no material structures. We are boundary-less entities, temporarily experiencing the material dimension of existence. We are and always will be the meditation itself. It is merely our material form that shifts and changes.

#### **The Textural Descriptions**

The texture of an experience is less concrete than the structural description and therefore more readily accommodates meditative experiences. The textural description usually involves trying to capture how the experience looks, what one

thinks and feels in an embodied sense. The experiential texture can be described in terms of qualities such as dark or light, rough or smooth, sharp or flowing, colourful or plain (Moustakas, 1994).

The texture of the experience of meditation is not of a fleshy or bodily substance. Meditation cannot be adequately described in terms of bodily-felt sensations or external relationships and conditions. The texture, touch, taste, qualitative feel of meditation, cannot be experienced or expressed with the bodily senses. The texture of meditation is understood on a felt level. It can be described as felt on spiritual or intuitive level of awareness. One's relationship with meditation is not experienced in the material world of people and things rather, it is about a relationship with a more universal understanding of one's self. When the concept of 'relationship' is viewed without presupposing a bounded self that relates to others who are also bounded selves, it can take on the meaning of the spiritual interconnectedness of everything. The subject and the object of consciousness become one on an intuitively deep level, not touched by the body but by the soul (Moustakas, 1994).

#### **Swami Suddhananda: Textural Description**

Meditation is the natural state of every human being. It is the core of what all of us are in truth. We are one with God and any other way of interpreting who we are is based in misunderstanding and illusion.

Meditation does not have the texture of the body or the material world. It cannot be touched with the hands, seen with the eyes, heard with the ears, or felt with the skin. It is not an experience of or through the flesh. Meditation is known and felt with an inner sense. It is understood as one's connection with the infinite. Even the word "connection" is limited because it assumes two separate entities. There is in reality no separation between the meditation and the soul, which is our



true self. Meditation is experienced as unchanging. It is the oneness that is infinite.

On this level there are no words to describe what it is to be in and of meditation. Words belong to the body, the voice-box and the mind. There are no words in meditation; it is filled with silence. This silence is not empty but full of oneness with God. Meditation presents the self with a reality that cannot be perceived with the senses. It is beyond the body and the material world. Meditation is in the place of the unseen, the infinite, the unchangeable, yet it is somehow felt with a sense that is not of the body.

Every human being is in meditation. It is possible to know oneself as an “un-boundaried entity”. This is an expansive state. There is a sense of fullness, contentment and satisfaction that is not of the body or the mind. Meditation is the place where the true self lives, the unseen and the infinite place of God. It is an immortal changeless existence, which is unaffected by bodily and worldly changes. “I am stillness” and that is “all pervasive”, and “I am the meditation itself”, said the Swami.

The meditation gives one a sense of the true self. One can know a self that is changeless over time and there is a sense of certainty and security in this knowledge. Meditation brings what was unknown, the true self, into what is known. There is as a deeper truth about oneself, which is unchangeable.

#### **The Combined Structural-Textural Descriptions**

This description aims to combine the structure and the texture of the experience, to come to an integrated description of the experience (Moustakas, 1990). Once the methodological problems were resolved with the structural and textural descriptions, the combined description and the creative synthesis were simple to create.

#### **Swami Suddhananda’s Combined Description**

Meditation is what all human beings are. We are all in and of the meditation itself. The birds, animals, oceans and forests, all of creation is in meditation. The embodied state is impermanent, changeable and yet necessary if we are to perceive the material creation. Embodiment is a state that one can love, enjoy and nurture yet we must accept that it is temporary. The greatest disservice that human beings can do to each other is to perpetuate the illusion that we are our bodies. One can love the body but should not be so attached to it that one cannot see the truth of our human existence. We are the meditation itself, permanent, unchanging, blissful, one with God.

Meditation is not of the body nor is it known or perceived through the body. It is at the core of who and what we are as human beings. We are infinite beings temporarily occupying a material form. We are the meditation itself, changeless, infinite, one with God. This is the one ultimate truth about us as human beings. When one knows this truth, there is a sense of completeness, safety and happiness. This knowledge frees the self from the suffering of the world and brings the spiritual purpose to life. With this sense of fullness within the meditation, compassion for others flows naturally.

When one helps others, one serves oneself as the material boundaries are a fictional dimension.

We are the meditation itself, there are no real boundaries, only the illusion of separateness. When one knows reality, one also knows oneself is a boundary-less entity. Everyone and everything is in meditation and to know that truth is to be infinitely blissful.

#### **“Gordon’s” Combined Structural-Textural Description**

The experience of meditation can seem to have many layers but in essence, it is about knowing and feeling what it is to be an embodied soul. As

one moves through life, there is a sense of a spiritual purpose that is lived out within the context of a material existence.

Meditation itself is a simple process of bearing attention to the present moment. That moment can be located in a meditation retreat where one sits cross-legged on a cushion, applying oneself to a teacher's instructions. It can also occur spontaneously when sitting with nature and noticing the beauty of the material creation. Meditation can occur when doing a mundane domestic chore, while bearing attention to the present moment. The commonality between these seemingly different experiences is in what is experienced and how it is experienced. What is experienced is a Samadhi laced material existence. How it is experienced, is spontaneously and also in the present moment. One can never predict when or where Samadhi will be experienced but past experience has created an expectation that Samadhi is always accessible.

The experience of meditation cannot be described fully within the structures of time, space or place as these concepts are grounded in the material world. Nor can it be adequately understood through the bodily senses because meditation connects one to the soul's experience, which is beyond the body. While meditation is an embodied experience, something that one does while in a body, meditation is not contained or created by the body. Nor is meditation completely experienced through the body. When one meditates, bears attention, to the present moment, there is an action of concentration that is consciously performed with the mind. What is experienced through the senses, the pleasure felt when the beauty of the natural world is perceived through the eyes, the skin, and the ears, is only one part of the experience. It is the state of Samadhi that emerges from the soul's connection with the infinite, which gives these experiences value and meaning.

If one were to believe that the pleasurable images and feelings were the goal of meditation, the path to enlightenment would be lost. When one is in the present moment, not attached to any sensory inputs or outcomes, then an understanding of one's true nature can emerge. While the Samadhi experience makes one's sensory experience of the material creation exquisitely beautiful, the aim of meditative practice is not sensory pleasure, it is Samadhi itself.

### **The Creative Synthesis**

The creative synthesis aims to capture the essential qualities of the experience. One aims to move beyond the aspects of the experience that are specific to any particular person or situation, to capture the central aspect of the experience identifiable to most people. To write a creative synthesis "the researcher must move beyond any confined or constricted attention to the data itself and permit an inward life on the question to grow, in such a way that comprehensive expressions of the essences of the phenomenon investigated is realised" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32).

### **Swami Suddhananda's Creative Synthesis**

Meditation is who and what we are.

Meditation is the truth of human existence.

The whole of creation is in meditation,

Human beings, the oceans, the forest,  
the birds, animals and fish,

Are all in meditation.

Meditation is oneness with God.

It is the emptiness and the silence that  
is full of the infinite.

Meditation is who and what we are.

We are boundary-less entities.

We are temporarily embodied, and  
permanently infinite.

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We are the meditation itself.

### “Gordon’s” Creative Synthesis

I am an embodied soul.

How I know this, is through my meditative experiences.

When I bring my attention to the present moment

I experience Samadhi.

I know this with my body, my small mind and also my big mind.

Samadhi is the blissful state of oneness.

During spontaneous meditative experiences,

The boundary between myself and my environment, lessens.

I live, work, recreate and meditate.

What I do in the material world is directed by a spiritual purpose.

Bearing attention in this moment,

I know that I am one with the universe.

I am the stars, the trees, the bees and the birds.

I know the experience of tree-ness and bee-ness.

I am myself while I am also everything.

I am an embodied soul.

An expanded view of phenomenological data analysis, aimed at accommodating mystical experiences

The difficulty in describing meditative experiences seems to have arisen through the assumption that all lived experiences are those of embodied beings, whom experience themselves as separate from others and also from their environment. Intentionality is an idea that is

central to phenomenological theory. It assumes that in all human experiencing there is a subject and an object of consciousness, self and other, and that meaning is made from this interplay. Since meditative states also include the sense of merging with everyone and everything, it seemed clear that an adequate portrayal of these experiences required an acknowledgment of a state where the subject and the object of consciousness were one. What follows is an analysis of some of the arguments presented by transpersonal, transcendental and religious phenomenologists when attempting to resolve intersubjectivity’s inadequacy when apprehending mystical experiences (Forman, 1999; Husserl, 1967; 1998; Sharma, 2001; Valle, 1998, Valle & Mols; Van Der Leeuw, 1938/1986).

Husserl points to mysticism but doesn’t quite capture it

It was argued by Koestenbaum, who translated Husserl’s Paris Lectures, that Husserl’s “transcendental Ego” was synonymous with the “Atman or Pursha... in Oriental philosophy” (Koestenbaum in Husserl, 1967, p. XLIII). I suggest that while there are some indications that Husserl knew something of these concepts, his theory of intentionality presupposes subject-object separation and also the centrality of the Ego and therefore is inconsistent with Atman consciousness. The confusion emerges as Husserl talks about there being no “I”, of “discovering” his “true self”. He later calls himself the “pure ego” and suggests that this ego “alone does the being in the world”. I suggest a more accurate interpretation of Husserl’s work would be that he uses the phenomenological reduction to allow human beings to gain a deeper understanding of self and the world. What he transcends is the normal everyday way of viewing our reality with all of our biases and presuppositions.

Transcendental phenomenology assists us in knowing more fully the reality of what is actually

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there from the perspective of a self that is an embodied ego. Mystical experiences bring into awareness a different reality whereby we transcend our egos to know an ego less state. The aim and outcome of transcendental phenomenology is quite different to that of the mystic. While the mystic moves to a state, which is beyond ego and mind, the transcendental phenomenologist concentrates on what is presented to her/his ego-mind. The following quote from the Paris Lectures will give the reader an understanding of how Husserl's work may be interpreted as still ego-bound but somehow also touching on the ego-less state of the mystics.

“ The epoché eliminates as worldly facts from my field of judgement both the reality of the objective world in general and the sciences of the world. Consequently, for me there exists no “I” and there are not psychic actions, that is, psychic phenomena in the psychological sense. To myself I do not exist as a human being, (nor) do my cogitationes exist as components of a psychophysical world. But through all this I have discovered my true self. I have discovered that I alone am the pure ego, with pure existence and pure capacities (for example, the obvious capacity to abstain from judging). Through this ego alone does the being in the world, and, for that matter, any being whatsoever, make sense to me and has possible validity. The world – whose conceivable non-being does not extinguish my pure being but rather presupposes it – is termed transcendent, whereas my pure being or my pure ego is termed transcendental. Through the phenomenological epoché the natural human ego, specifically my own, is reduced to the transcendental ego. This is the meaning of the phenomenological reduction” (Husserl, 1967, p.10).

#### **Transpersonal solutions**

Transpersonal phenomenologists understand the need to capture deep meditative and mystical states where there is “consciousness without an object” and also “consciousness without a

subject”. To the view that human beings experience our worlds through reflective and pre-reflective awareness, we need to add the realm of “pure consciousness” where the self is in the stillness and peace of meditation “Transcendent awareness is the “ground” in which our ego awareness operates. It is the experience of self that is behind the embodied sense of self, integral and not separate” (Valle, 1998, p. 277). It is also argued that in these trans-ego states of awareness the object of consciousness is consciousness itself (Valle & Mols, 1998).

It is suggested while Valle and Valle & Mols have brought intentionality closer to describing mystical experiences, they have not managed to shift from a boundaried sense of self to the experience of oneness. “Trans-intentionality” could describe light meditative states whereby there is a sense of a boundaried self that is in the process of merging into the oneness, which could seem like the “ground” of experiencing (Valle & Mols 1998, p. 277). This explanation is however still assuming an intentional interaction between a subject and an object of consciousness, a boundaried self that merges into something else. It seems to overlook the existence of a meditative experience whereby the ego-boundaries dissolve and the self is experienced as oneness, where there is no ability to identify anything as separate (Valle, 1998; Valle & Mols 1998; Van Der Leeuw, 1938/1986).

#### **Religious Phenomenologists**

Religious phenomenologists have also presented a number of arguments about the relevance of intentionality when researching mystical experiences. While they are creative with their use of phenomenological ideas and will accept other research methodologies, they have generally maintained five major aspects of the phenomenological method. These are: 1/ Religious phenomenology is descriptive in nature rather than processing or conceptualising human experiences. 2/ There is an opposition to reductionism. 3/ The phenomenological Epoché

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is used to bracket out or suspend judgement and presupposition. 4/ Eidetic Vision is maintained. Experiences are intuitively reduced to essence. 5/ Intentionality suggests that all consciousness is consciousness of something. (Sharma, 2001)

Some Religious phenomenologists like Sharma suggest that we should be unconcerned about the difficulty understanding and describing mystical states in the same way that we are unconcerned about not being able to know everything about our material reality. “When a mystic says that the ultimate reality cannot be known exhaustively, can only be known incompletely we throw up our arms in omniscient despair; but when we are told we can’t know or don’t know our own car completely we remain totally unfazed! Here again we have a parallel between ordinary experience and mystical experience – both seem to take place in an overall context of incomplete knowledge” (Sharma, 2002, p. 214).

But is the mystic’s claim simply about not knowing everything? What about the sense of merging with the oneness? Sharma (2002) again brings the mystical experience of oneness under the umbrella of everyday experiences by suggesting that it is similar to experiencing a temporary loss of awareness of self in dream states or when focused on something in our external environment. He suggests that as with a mystical state the sleeper cannot describe the experience of sleep until s/he has emerged from it. Self-consciousness involves emerging from the sleeping or the mystical state and then describing our memory of that state. In sleep and also in mysticism, “the subject-object distinction is temporarily obscured” (Sharma, 2002, p. 213).

To accept Sharma’s point, we would need to assume that the experience of mystical oneness is equivalent to temporarily losing a sense of self-awareness while focusing our attention on something else. The ego-boundaries never dissolve they are just temporarily out of our awareness. Would a mystic agree that the sense

of self has simply been lost, not noticed, or obscured by something? Some Christian mystics may in fact agree that a total merging with God may not be possible. “Christian doctrine precludes the possibility of God and the soul of the mystic either being or becoming numerically identical” (Pike, 1992, p. 298). Therefore Christian mystics would interpret their experiences of oneness as incorrect or an illusion and describe them as a union between self and God. Yet there are other Mystics and religious phenomenologists that would suggest that we should find our meaning and reality through our own experiences, not through the dictates of others. Stace suggests that Christian mystics committed a “logical error” when they re-interpreted their experiences to suit the doctrine of their church (Stace cited in Pike, 1992, p. 209).

From the writer’s perspective, it does not seem like sound (or descriptive) phenomenology to have an experience then re-interpret it so that it is consistent with a theory, religious or other. One of the most attractive components of the phenomenological attitude is that it offers all of us the opportunity to distil our experiences to their essential core. It is therefore important to bracket out all preconceptions, including religious ones, when reducing the material of our lived experiences to essence. In this case it is important to stay with the experiences of mystics and therefore to describe the oneness that is experienced not what religious theory may tell us we should experience.

Forman (1999) agrees that phenomenological intentionality is best understood through considering how mystics experience themselves and their worlds. He, however, has little difficulty with the subject-object duality because his meditators have described a sense of living in two states of consciousness. He proposes a dualistic model, with intentionality on one pole and non-intentionality on the other. He suggests that there are intentional and non-intentional

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ways of knowing ourselves, in the inner and outer worlds of mysticism and materiality. His focus seems to be on the process of getting to oneness rather than oneness itself. Mysticism “seems to offer a procedure of unveiling certain deep truths of human existence.... A way to slough off the onion layers of illusion and self-delusion” (Forman, 1999, p.172). What would Forman argue when the self-delusion was completely dissolved and the self was completely immersed in Samadhi? He could not argue for two states when the lived experience was of one merged state.

I suggest a non-dualistic solution to the problems with phenomenological intentionality, which is in keeping with the non-dualistic state of oneness that we attempt to describe. To stay with the aim of describing the essence of our experiences we should use the phenomenological epoché, bracket out any preconceptions so that we can reduce our experiential material to essence. Re-interpreting our experiences using any theory, including phenomenological theory, should be avoided.

To attend to the primacy of our experiences, I suggest a solution that is consistent with the mystical experiences represented in the current study. Human experiencing shifts and changes over time, as does our way of understanding our selves and our worlds. Intentionality, as a way of experiencing ourselves, also shifts with the relative strength or weakness of the meditator’s experience of their ego-selves. When the self is experienced as bounded and ego-centred, there does seem to be an interaction between a subject and an object of consciousness. When moving more deeply into a meditative state, one does notice the self as it merges into pure consciousness. The boundaries of the self seem to lessen as described by Gordon in this study, but in this moment there is still a sense of self within the ground of pure consciousness.

The transpersonal and religious phenomenologists discussed above seem able to

apply Husserl’s intentionality to both of these states because there is still a sense of self from which one can observe something or merge with something. On the next level of meditative awareness, the self is immersed in the oneness of samadhi. In this state there is no subject-object boundary and therefore our understanding of intentionality needs to expand to allow a description of oneness. A description of the essential structures of this experience of oneness will require a bracketing out of the assumptions of object-subject duality, which are inherent in phenomenological intentionality. A new intentionality emerges from the meditative reality. It is a reality whereby the self merges with the object of consciousness. This is a subject-less and object-less experience where nothing is separate and therefore nothing is interacting. The structures of this experience are materially structure less and there is a sense that the mind is devoid of content. Intentionality must now follow the experiences of the co-researchers in determining how the self is experienced. We can no-longer assume that there is always a subject and object of consciousness or that oneness is a permanent state of awareness. We must view human experiencing as fluid, sometimes shifting between two points, and at other times it is completely immersed in oneness. Van der Leeuw is one religious phenomenologist who has overcome intentionality’s presuppositions.

#### **A phenomenological description of mystical experiences**

Van Der Leeuw (1938/1986) has been able to conduct extensive research into religious experience without being impeded by intentionality’s subject-object presupposition. The book titled “Religion in Essence and Manifestation” has been considered a classic in the field of the Phenomenology of Religion. Van Der Leeuw presents many themes within the phenomenon of religious experience, one of which is that of Mysticism.

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“In mysticism man, desiring to become dominant and to exercise power, breaks down the barriers alike of the self and of the external world. He ceases to experience anything whatever as objective, and both object and subject blend in formless and content-less fusion. Ecstasy, as we have just seen, induced the emptying of the self and the possibility of its being filled with some “Other”. In mysticism, also, an evacuating has its place, but equally of object as of subject. Ecstasy, therefore, is certainly inherent in every mystical experience; but mysticism always goes still further than ecstasy, beyond all frontiers, beyond even the primeval relationship in which man himself subsists; to use the expression coined by Jaspers: in mysticism the schism between subject and object is in principle abolished” (Van Der Leeuw, 1938/1986, p. 493).

#### **In conclusion**

When phenomenologists allow their research method to be informed by the mystical data itself, the researcher’s understanding of intentionality shifts from subject-object separation to a merged sense of oneness. What is then described is a state that is experienced as independent from our sensory perceptions. While mystical experiences also seem to be beyond the mind’s ability to logically comprehend, they bring with them an understanding of the spiritual reality contained within our embodied existence.

“Meditation seems to be the pervading state that at once touches everything in the universe. The vast expanse of jungles and deserts, mountains, and oceans, snow and sand invoke calmness, a

serenity that elevates the human mind into a spectacular oblivion that we call meditation” (Swami Suddhananda, 2000,

#### **About the Author**

Over the past 25 years of work experience, Jenny has changed professions from being a nurse, social welfare worker, social researcher, and TAFE (Tertiary and Further Education) teacher, through to being a Counselling Psychologist. She has spent the last eight years working as a TAFE counsellor with students and staff of Holmesglen Institute of TAFE.

When she began working as a psychologist, there was an inner sense of "rightness" and she knew that she would not need to change professions again. This same sense of "rightness" also occurred when she read her first book describing phenomenological psychology. She had just spent three years studying empirical methods and was becoming concerned that she had entered a profession that denied the existence of things that could not be weighed or measured: At thirty she wanted to know more about the human soul. Later, at the age of 42, another feeling of "rightness" occurred when she began a PhD with Dr Philip Greenway of Monash University as she is interested in the nature and meaning of meditative experience.

A few years later, she discovered Religious Phenomenology thanks to Stuart Devenish. She now wants to know everything she can about the soul 's journey, particularly that of her own soul.

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