



## The Lived Experience of Meditation

by Jennifer Barnes

*Heuristic Phenomenology lends itself well to a relatively naïve exploration of meditative experiences. I began with an interest in knowing more about the nature of the bodily sensations that I experienced during meditation. I aimed to capture lived experiences as they emerged into consciousness, so I bracketed out my expectations, as much as possible, and meditated. I noticed that I could not tape descriptions of my experiences while in a deep meditative state because when in this state, I was not aware of the material world in which my body and the tape recorder existed. I had to be satisfied with describing meditative experiences as I emerged out of them, and regained connection with my body.*

*Meditative sounds, vibrations and light, seemed to be perceived through my bodily senses but I knew they were not of a physical origin. As I focused my attention on these sensations, they increased in intensity. I entered a spiritual place where time, space and materiality were irrelevant. My experience has its own validity, ensured through the application of the phenomenological epoche, granting the ability to be open to whatever occurs to consciousness.*

*I began this research with the assumption that meditation occurs when I apply a particular technique, when I concentrate on my breathing and not on my thoughts. I concluded, with an understanding that meditative and spiritual experiences occurred both in and out of structured meditation processes.*

### 1. Introduction

This paper is a Heuristic - phenomenological investigation of my reflective experiences during meditation. In keeping with the phenomenological tradition, this study was conducted without first reading what others had to say about the experience of meditation.

#### 1.1. My previous experience of meditation

My definition of the term, meditation, has shifted throughout the process of producing this paper. At first, I would have called meditation the practice of a technique that a yoga teacher or a Guru teaches you and calls meditation. In my

case, the yoga teacher had us sit cross-legged and concentrate on our breathing. We were instructed not to pay attention to our thoughts and to breathe naturally. There was no discussion about what we should be experiencing, except the suggestion that we would feel relaxed after performing this procedure. Over the past 18 years of meditative practice, I have come to believe that these sensations have seemed to manifest in my body, but there was also a sense that they were not completely physical.

When I sat and meditated, concentrating on my breath, I noticed “vibrations” that seemed to be

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coming from within the “central core of my body”. These vibrations seemed to “spread to the extremities of my body”, becoming stronger as I concentrated on them. On one occasion, the vibrations were so strong that “I feared I was sitting in the middle of an earthquake”. When I opened my eyes, there was no visible evidence of movement. The vibrations seemed to be on a very small scale, too small to see, like “life force energy vibrating through the cells of my body” (Barnes, Meditation Notes, 2001).

The experiences of light and sound occurred in a similar manner to the vibrations. I would first become aware that there was “light piercing the darkness”. Sometimes this light seemed like “lightning”, and other times it literally lit up the night. One night I was driving home from a Yoga class, marvelling at the daylight that seemed to be occurring at 9 pm at night. When I realised my mistake, I noticed that this light had no glare or shadow like sunlight. “This light gave clarity to darkness” in a way that I could not explain.

Over the past 18 years, I have experienced meditative sounds in formal mediation and also spontaneously. These sounds were like “chimes” or like what it feels like in my body when I chant the word, “OM”. Initially, each of these sensations seemed to occur independently but as I concentrated on these experiences, I realised that they were connected. The sounds seemed to vibrate bodily and the light had a similar frequency to the sounds and vibrations.

### 1.2. The aims of this study

I approached this study wanting to know more about the nature of these meditative sensations. I began my exploration with an Heuristic (Moustakas, 1990) process of gathering experiential data. To capture my lived experience, in all of its alive-ness, I needed to suspend, or bracket out my expectations and be open to what presented itself to consciousness. I found that I had to suspend disbelief in anything that could not be understood logically, so that I

could be open to the intuitive and tacit dimension of awareness. I began the process of meditating and taping the descriptions of the experience. I did this with an open frame of mind, recording raw and unedited experiential data as it occurred to consciousness (Polyani, 1966; Moustakas, 1990).

Upon completion of this study, I discovered that the function of these inner sounds was to connect me to an “inner silence”. I felt an “expansive emptiness”, that filled me with contentment. The boundaries of my self seemed to dissolve. I was “one with the infinite”, connected to everyone and everything. I had a sense of a spiritual self that seemed to have no beginning or end. I knew myself as spirit, and lost all sense of where my body and mind were. Spiritual awareness now seemed inexplicably linked to the meditative sensations of sounds, vibrations, and light (Barnes, Meditation Notes, 2001).

## 2. The methodology and procedures

### 2.1. Map of the stages of experiential data collection and analysis

Stage 1 Initial Engagement
Stage 2 Bracketing
Stage 3 Heuristic Immersion
Stage 4 Heuristic Incubation
Stage 5 Heuristic Illumination

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Stage 6  
Explication  
Return to Phenomenology

Stage 7  
Phenomenological Listing and Grouping

Stage 8  
Repeating three steps

Stage 9  
Invariant Constituents of the experience

Stage 10  
Themes

Stage 11  
Structural Description

Stage 12  
Textural Description

Stage 13  
Combined Structural/Textural Description

Stage 14  
Creative Synthesis

## 2.2. The blending of Moustakas' Heuristics and Phenomenology (1990, 1994)

### 2.2.1. Heuristics

#### Stage 1. Initial Engagement

##### (A) Finding the Question.

I grasped a question that emerged in a conversation with my supervisor. I wanted to

know how I lived my experience of meditation and what was contained within that experience. I was particularly interested in knowing more about the purpose of the vibrating sensations which I experienced while meditating. I felt a passion to know more about meditative sensations, such as sounds, light and inner vibrations.

##### (B) The Collection of Experiential data.

I wanted to create a rich description of the experience, so I chose not to write about past experiences, but in order to capture the experience as it occurred in consciousness, not edited or interpreted, I tried to bracket out past experiences and create fresh data.

In a manner described by Gendlin (1978) I cleared a space, for meditation and data collection, where there would be no interruptions. I sat, and focused my attention on my breath. My only conscious self-direction was that I bring my attention back to my breath each time I notice my mind wandering to other things.

In May, 2001, over a one week period, in three one-hour sessions, I went through a sequence of meditations and then spoke into a tape recorder about my experiences. I also spontaneously created three pastel drawings of these meditative experiences.

##### Stage 2. Bracketing

Since I wanted to be open to whatever appeared to consciousness, not just what I expected to find, I tried to bracket any expectation of what I might experience when I meditated. I was aware that this might not be completely possible, but aimed to bracket what was possible. Since I had no formal religious education, I believed there was little to bracket except the influences of the predominantly Christian culture in which I had been brought up. I also tried not to have any expectations about what I might experience when

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I was taping my experiences as I meditated, for the purpose of this study.

The outcome of this bracketing procedure was the discovery of new information which confirmed my belief that some bracketing was possible and that this procedure did, in fact, leave my mind open to new experiential understandings. For example, I began this study expecting that the experience of meditation would only occur when I sat quietly and placed my attention on my breathing. I expected to experience sensations of light and vibrations, only when formally meditating. I had evidently been successful in bracketing these expectations from my mind because, after beginning this study, I noticed light and vibrations occurring spontaneously when I was not sitting in formal meditation. On each occasion, my attention was not on meditation but on everyday things, such as driving the car or doing the shopping (Moustakas, 1990).

The outcome of bracketing was to find new experiential information that required a change in my method of gathering data. When I realised that spontaneous meditative experiences were occurring on a daily basis, I began to carry a tape recorder and a note pad so that I could collect this data with the same quality of experiential freshness as the data collected from the formal meditation sessions. To collect the descriptions of my experiences as soon as they emerged, I tape recorded descriptions where ever I was. This was sometimes difficult because I felt self-conscious about speaking into a tape recorder in a crowded place, such as the train station, so I sometimes chose the more laborious process of writing my experiences on a notepad. I did not censor anything, but described absolutely everything that came to mind, using the first words that came into my head.

Stage 3. Heuristic immersion.

Once the topic had been identified, it seemed natural to be thinking about the meditative sounds, vibrations and light, many times throughout each day.

Stage 4. Heuristic incubation

“Incubation is a process in which a seed has been planted; the seed undergoes silent nourishment, support, and care that produces a creative awareness of some dimension of a phenomenon or a creative integration of its parts or qualities” (Moustakas, 1990. p. 28).

After I had gathered the data, which consisted of taped transcripts of three formal meditation sessions and three drawings; I mentally set the material aside for ten days before I attempted to analyse it. I was deliberately not thinking about, or doing, meditation.

Stage 5. Heuristic illumination.

“The process of illumination is one that occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition” (Moustakas, 1990. p. 29). When I was not formally meditating, I began to notice meditative sounds that had no material source. I realised that meditation was not just the sounds, nor did it only occur when I applied particular techniques. I did not always come to meditation, sometimes it came to me. “Illumination.... adds something essential to the experience” (Moustakas, 1990. p. 30).

Stage 6. Heuristic explication. I return to Moustakas’ Phenomenology (1994).

In this phase, the relevant themes become the material for explicating the “various layers of meaning” (Moustakas, 1990. p. 31

### 2.2.2. Phenomenology

Stage 7. Phenomenological listing and primarily grouping – horizontalisation.

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When reviewing the written and drawn material, I listed expressions that were relevant to the experience. At this stage I listed the horizons of the experience, not regarding any one word or sentence to be more important than another. I listed every word or sentence that was relevant to understanding and describing the experience of meditation.

Stage 8. I work and re-work next three stages of experiential data analysis.

The first set of Key words, themes, and structural description intuitively seemed wrong. They lacked a sense of the core elements of the experience. A visual map of the relationships between each word and theme helped me to tie the material together. See Appendix I for a sample of this map.

Stage 9. Determination of the invariant constituents of the experience.

In this stage I aimed to find the elements of the experience that seemed consistent throughout the experience of meditation. I re-read the material from my transcribed tapes and drew the words and connections as I read. What emerged was a sense that this experience did not have the finite boundaries that I was drawing. Spirituality was infinite, and its manifestations were interrelated.

Stage 10. Cluster of the invariant constituents into themes.

The creation of themes involved the use of both cognitive and intuitive levels of processing. With the distance of a few weeks from the stages of data collection, I read and re-read the original material. I looked beyond the actual words, to a sense of what was most meaningful about the experience.

Stage 11. Structural Description of the experience.

I chose to deviate slightly from Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological sequence, by creating and presenting the structural description before the textural description. I did this because I wanted data analysis to shift, from cognitive to intuitive descriptions. When I use the word, intuitive, I mean an inner felt-sense of knowing that can not be described in words.

The structural description seemed to require more cognitive processing than the textural one. It described the structures of the experience in concrete concepts, such as time, space, context and human relationships.

When I had awareness of space and time, I was not in meditation. It was, in fact, the absence of these structures that defined meditation.

Stage 12. Textural Description of the experience.

Meditative experiences were understood on a bodily and intuitively felt level. These sensations were represented visually in the first drawing and it was central to the experience of meditation. Spirituality, and non-materiality, was visually described using materiality in the form of drawing materials. In the drawing, what was seen was as important as what was unseen.

Stage 13. Combined textural and structural description of the experience.

I combined the structure and texture of the experience, looking for a balance between the two. The presence or absence of material textures or structures determined the material and spiritual natures of the experience respectively. There was a sense that much of this experience was beyond words.

Stage 14. Creative Synthesis.

The creative synthesis emerged. It was not written in the same way as the rest of the material. It was not laboured over, but seemed to

emerge on the page. I did not need to alter this description, like the other stages. I wrote, and stopped writing, when I had an inner sense that it was complete (Moustakas, 1990).

### Results of experiential data analysis

The data was: three drawings, transcribed tapes of three formal meditation sessions and written descriptions of six spontaneous meditative experiences. The tapes were transcribed, drawings were reviewed, and key words and images preceded the creation of themes, which in-turn provided the foundation for textural-structural descriptions and a creative Synthesis (Moustakas, 1990, 1994).

For the sake of brevity, I have presented the final stages of data analysis. I used a mind map to visually distil the transcribed material into key words. A section of it is in Appendix I. A summary of the themes created from this map is in Appendix II. What follows are the structural textural and combined descriptions, and the Creative Synthesis.

### 3.1. Structural Description

The experience of meditation is loosely structured around a sense that my awareness of who and what I am shifts between bodily and not-bodily understandings. Concepts such as time, space, context and finite relationships seem absent, and this, in itself, is significant.

I first notice that I am in a meditative state when my attention is drawn to sensations that are experienced with my body. Typically, there will be an overlap between the sense that I am my body, and knowing that I am not of my body. In this overlapping state, my awareness of myself seems split between spiritual and material understandings of myself. I am both body and spirit, and I experience this place as one where opposites are understood to tell the complete story of my existence. I understand myself to be a combination of body and spirit.

Meditative experiences can begin spontaneously, as I become aware of sounds that I associate with meditation. These sounds seem like combinations of notes, which seem to be made by chimes, or crickets. Sometimes these sounds can remind me of the quality of sound experienced when chanting OM. On this level, I find myself looking around for the external source of the sound. I can find myself laughing when I realise that the sound is not heard with my ears, this is when I notice my attention shift inward. I experience a sense of physical and mental relaxation, and a general feeling of wellbeing.

At what seems to be a deeper level, I notice vibrations within my body. These are not physical vibrations, as I might have originally believed. When I look at my body, I can see no physical movement, yet the vibrations feel so strong that I sometimes wonder whether I am in the middle of an earth-quake.

These vibrations seem to begin in the core of my body, located near my heart and diaphragm. This place seems like the centre of my physical and metaphysical being. In these moments, I experience the vibrations in rhythm with the sound. In these moments, I lose all sense of myself as a physical being. My body is no longer important or central in my life. I could die in this moment, and my sense is that nothing would change. I am one with everything and everyone. My body is not the container for my life, it is my connection with everything that seems to contain my sense of the self and therefore, in this context, I feel that what is me will exist after bodily death.

This state that I call "meditative" can occur at any time. When I began this study, I thought the procedure and technique I had been using had caused me to experience meditation. When I sat down in a quiet room, cross-legged, and concentrated my attention on my breath, I experienced sounds, light and vibrations. This was what I called meditation. I was surprised to discover that these experiences began to occur

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between formal (sit-down) meditation sessions. In a similar fashion to the above descriptions, while driving my car, I noticed light that was not seen with my eyes. At first, I found myself marvelling at what I thought was daylight at 9 pm. I could see my surroundings with the clarity that I usually associated with daylight. It took a few moments for me to realise that what I was seeing was not possible, the sun could not be up at that hour. I then noticed that this light was different from sunlight. There was no point of origin, no shadows, and there was no glare. In this light, I could see with perfect clarity in the darkness, which appeared as light as the light of day.

The experiences of light, sound and vibrations were not separate but interwoven. They were, in fact, the same experience, that I interpreted in a bodily way. These experiences were the beginning point from which I experience myself as a Spiritual being. I do not just think or believe this to be true. I know it with every cell in my body.

During these experiences, my sense of who and what I am shifted from Bodily to Spiritual. My physical body suddenly seemed unimportant, as what I experienced was not of the body. Reality was not understood as bodily, or cognitive, and thoughts seemed to become confused as they faded into nothingness. I experienced myself as being in a thoughtless and timeless place, which was understood on a felt level. I understood myself to be infinite, expansive, empty, and also full of a sense of myself as being connected with everything that lived.

My communication with others was not through my mind and vocal cords but through our collective connection with the infinite, which I experienced as chords of vibrating light. My sense of others with whom I was connected, was that some of them had bodies and others did not. I was surprised by my own words, when I reviewed what I had said. However, I felt a sense

of clarity about this experience and I intuitively knew this was the truth.

As I spoke into the tape recorder about the experience of shifting from a meditative to a non-meditative state, I gathered evidence of the non-bodily nature of this experience. As I emerged from meditation, there were moments and minutes where it took time to shift from an infinite to a bodily level of awareness. In these moments, I had difficulty thinking and moving my body. I intended to reach for the tape recorder so that I could tape my meditative insights. I was surprised by the amount of time that it took me to recognise that box in my hand as a tape recorder. I was also surprised that I had to consciously focus on my mind, so that I could get it to tell my hand to grasp the tape recorder and press the buttons. Once fully present in my body, these physical tasks seemed to occur as if they were automatic.

As I was speaking about my experience of the infinite, I noticed that my memory of it faded quickly. By the next day, when I transcribed the taped experiences, I recognised my thoughts but I did not recognise much of the spiritual content. I did not feel expansive anymore, I felt rather ordinary. I was back to my logical self, the one that I could easily understand. The contents of the tape seemed “alien”, “strange” and a little “unsettling”.

My awareness was focused on my thoughts and feelings, but after having these experiences I could no longer completely believe that my body was central in my life. Even on a cognitive and material level, I have to admit to myself that I am a spiritual being living in a body. It seems that I live on two levels simultaneously, the bodily and the spiritual, and what I experience depends upon what I focus my attention on.

### **3.2. Phenomenology. Textural Description**

The experience of meditation has a quality that is quite different from non-meditative experiences.

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When I notice myself experiencing a meditative state, there is a sense of sliding into a comfortable and familiar place. The thoughts and feelings that had previously occupied my awareness faltered, became jumbled, then slipped out of awareness.

Over time, I experienced myself shifting spontaneously between meditative and non-meditative qualities of awareness. There was a sense that I was not consciously in control of the shifts of my attention between meditative and non-meditative awareness. In one moment, body was everything. The material aspects of my existence seemed of central concern. For example, at one time, when I was lying in the Spa, my awareness was consumed by muscular tension, and work related concerns. In that moment, my body and my mind were central to my awareness of self.

In the next moment, without any conscious will or effort, my attention was drawn to a meditative sound, which seemed to be coming from somewhere in the Spa. In a way that was subtle and almost indescribable, I noticed myself become gradually aware that the sound was neither external nor physiological in origin. In that moment, the quality of my experience of my self shifted. The external world of the Spa, and the mental world of work related concerns faded into the background.

What surprised me about this process was that at no point in time did I make a conscious decision to enter a meditative awareness. It was a state that I just seemed to slip into. I seem to notice this state as I am in it, and as I slip more and more deeply into it. I seem to shift into a self-reflective state of awareness that deepens as I focus my attention upon it.

In the state of meditation, whether brought about spontaneously, or through the practice of meditative techniques, outward concerns are replaced by inward looking experiencing. In a

meditative state, I feel a deep sense of emptiness in which I feel full, fulfilled in an inexplicable way. It seems as if my awareness has expanded into a place of emptiness that is both me and yet not me. The meditative sounds that I have been hearing, paradoxically sound like a silence that seems to emanate from within me. Yet what is self, is now understood as part of the infinite which seems to be both the silence and the emptiness.

I know myself to be the sound, the vibration, and the light. All of these sensations are manifestations of the infinite. In this moment I understand myself within this space, to be complete. I seem to attain wholeness by embracing paradoxes that my mind can not understand. I am all, yet I am nothingness. I am filled with emptiness and yet feel full of contentment. I am the self that is separate from others but know I am actually without boundaries, infinitely connected. I am my mortal body, yet am also immortal and infinite. With others, I am separate and I am also one. God is outside and inside me. We are all together.

In that meditative state, I embrace the universe as it surges through my body. My mind is empty of thought as I relax into a rhythm and flow that seems natural and bodiless. I notice that the universe and I are one, and feel my heart expanding with the joy of infinite connectedness. I am not anything or anyone in particular, I just am. There is no sense of an intention to be in this space or any other. I just flow with what is - expansive, silent, awake and empty of self; full of the infinite.

Again, without conscious intention, my sense of body returns. I am disappointed that I have returned. Spirituality overlaps with materiality as I notice that my thoughts reappear, then change. I feel uplifted and less concerned about issues in my material existence. I am more positive in my outlook and notice that my thoughts come more slowly than before the meditative experience. I

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am silently at peace with myself as I slowly become aware of my body and my location. I wonder how long I have been away. My muscles seem more relaxed now, and I notice that I can't remember what I was last thinking. It doesn't seem important now.

### 3.3. Phenomenology. Combined Structural and Textural Description.

Meditative experiences occur spontaneously, without being wished or willed. I have spent much of my life, since childhood, slipping in and out of spontaneous meditative and spiritual experiences. I have practised yoga and formal meditation techniques since 1983. I haven't thought about it much, nor have I sought out spiritual experiences. I have simply, just recently, noticed that I am aware that I exist simultaneously in two quite different worlds.

These worlds contain two distinct understandings of myself and of my life. I value life above all else, but the definition of what is "life" is at the core of my inquiry. While having a meditative experience, I understand myself as expansive, infinite and connected to everything that is living. I am connected with others through our collective connection with the infinite. What has been astounding about this experience is the awareness that these "others" may or may not currently have bodies. Paradoxically, within this meditative experience, I know myself to be uniquely myself also inexplicably one with everything else. The word "other" is problematic because, although I have a sense of "I" and therefore of "other", I do not have a sense of separation from other forms of life.

In the other world, the one of people and things, my life, my existence, is material and bodily. My daily routine of showering, dressing, eating, working and attending to family needs is central to my life. I do not ask myself questions about the nature of the universe. My attention is on getting through the numerous tasks of the day while attending to my bodily needs of food and

rest. Life is cognitive, rational and biologically based.

Although I have been tempted to categorise my experience as two separate realities, the spiritual and the material worlds, the truth is that these boundaries are blurred. My awareness is usually on the grey area between these black-and-white experiences. I notice myself flowing in and out of meditative experiences, often experiencing both a spiritual and a cognitive awareness of self and others. My daily experience is more accurately described as subtly drifting between one experience and the other, or spending much of my time between worlds.

A qualitatively accurate description of this experiential drifting occurred when I was coming out of a formal meditative experience, cognisant of the intention to immediately tape a description of the experience before it faded. In this newly post-meditative state, I looked at the tape recorder but was unable to recognise it as a tape recorder. After some delay I seemed to recognise it, but then had difficulty working out how to use my hands so that I could use it. I seemed acutely aware of the process of looking at something, then searching my memory for an understanding of what that object was. I also clearly experienced the time lapse between thinking of an action, then using the brain to direct the body to take that action. After a few moments, my mind seemed to take control of my body, and these tasks became simple and almost automatic, as I had grown to expect.

When emerging from a meditative experience, I notice the shift from my sense of myself as spiritual and infinite, to something bodily and finite. In the space between these experiences, I find myself unable to complete the most mundane of tasks. I seem to forget how to use my body or how to perceive and manipulate external objects. In the same sense, I intuitively know that there is much about the spiritual dimension that I do not know or understand. My sense is that I am

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moving towards that understanding, and that that knowledge will not come from my rational mind.3.4. Heuristics. Creative Synthesis



Drawing titled: The Sounds of Silence.

I am spirit and flesh. I vibrate with the sounds of silence

I am spirit in flesh.

I am my body, my mind and my senses,

And, I am not of the body.

I am the sounds of silence.

I hear,

But not with my ears.

I see the light of silence.

I see,

But not with my eyes.

I vibrate with the life of silence.

I feel,

But not with my body.

I know,

But not with my mind.

We are spirit in flesh.

And we vibrate in harmony,

With the sounds of silence.

#### 4. Discussion of the Results

##### 4.1. The data of meditative and spiritual experiences.

##### 4.1.1. The data were in the form of verbal and visual descriptions of meditative and spiritual experiences.

The experiential data that formed this paper were in the form of verbal and visual descriptions of meditative experiences. Some of these experiences occurred while applying the meditation technique of focusing my attention on my breath. Other experiences occurred spontaneously, without any action or effort from myself.

For example, when I was sitting on the train station, I noticed vibratory sounds that I usually associated with the practice of meditative techniques. As I focused my attention on that sound, I noticed my body had begun to vibrate with the sound that later seemed to have an internal origin. I had similar experiences when I sat in formal meditation and was focusing my attention on my breath. In each case, when bodily awareness returned, I wrote or taped a description of this experience.

##### 4.1.2. The data were limited to the experiential material that my mind could translate into language.

I could not capture the moments of deep meditation because, while in this state, I could not verbalise my experiences. In a deep meditative state, I had no sense of my body or my thoughts, nor of the material world in which my research project was occurring. As I emerged out of deep meditation, I seemed to be observing my mind shift its attention to my thoughts. In this state, I experienced myself as connected to both the spiritual and material levels of awareness.

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As my spiritual connection seemed to fade and I regained awareness of my body, I was able to gather the data for this paper by speaking into a tape recorder, or writing notes. The experiential descriptions of my experiences are therefore limited by my inability to describe my experiences as they actually occurred. What I described was reflections on an experience which quickly faded as I emerged from it

#### **4.2. My meditative and spiritual history.**

Meditative experiences are familiar after 18 years of practising yoga and mediation. Before learning to meditate, I had meditative and spiritual experiences that I did not know how to interpret because none of my family or friends spoke of similar experiences. Since my parents were highly critical of any form of spiritual or religious practices, I said nothing.

I can recall a number of childhood experiences that I would call meditative and spiritual. The details have been lost in time but the meanings gleaned from each experience have stayed with me. I repeatedly saw pure white light before I learnt to meditate. I did not know what it was, but felt drawn to it, fascinated by difference between spiritual light and sunlight. It was in the late 1970's when I had this experience, and I remember wondering if I was seeing a spiritual light because it was a purer white than sunlight.

#### **4.3. The technique, process and emergent understandings.**

##### **4.3.1. The meditative technique.**

The meditative technique that I applied was a simple yoga breathing practice. I begin by focusing my attention the sound of my breath as it entered and left my body. There was a physical sound, like a hum that drew my attention. Various Yogic texts describe this breathing meditation as pranyama (Yogananda, 1945; Krishna, 1897/1972).

##### **4.3.2. My attention is drawn inward.**

In the next phase of meditation, there is a sense of moving my attention inward. My attention shifts from those bodily sounds and I begin to notice sensations emerging from within my body. Sounds, light, and physical vibrations increase in intensity. At first, they seemed like separate sensations. Later in this process, I realise the sounds are associated with the light and the vibrations. They are all manifestations of the same spiritual connection.

These vibrations sounds and light, preceded an emerging spiritual awareness. These sensations seemed like a bridge across a corridor of experiential knowing, in which I touched the spiritual aspects of my existence. My sense of an individual self merged into a sense of a "connection with the souls of others" (Barnes, 2001). What I sensed as me, had expanded into a sense of not just being part of the whole universe but of actually being "infinite".

##### **4.3.3. Spiritual understandings.**

What I realised during the actual process of doing this research, was that even though I had meditated for years, I had never really reflected on its effects. Like Wanpen (2001), I had viewed meditation as a stress management tool, through quietening the mind and relaxing the body. I did not expect meditation to give me spiritual insights. I thought spirituality came from understanding religious theories, through listening to priests, saints, yogis and gurus, or reading their books.

When I begun this study and transcribed the tapes of my own experiences I noticed that about 70% of the verbal descriptions were not what I expected. Instead of descriptions of vibrations, sound and light, I had described spiritual experiences. After each session I tried to direct my attention back to the topic of vibrations, sounds and light, but the spiritual material kept flooding in.

I concluded that I was connected to the infinite, whether I applied a meditation technique or not. I had many experiences like the following description. One morning, as I sat on the train station, I had a spontaneous meditative and spiritual experience. I wrote the description as soon as I emerged out of the experience and regained a bodily awareness.

I wrote, “The hum of the train, is also a meditative sound. It vibrates, and those vibrations seem to resonate physically within my heart. I know, in my heart (circulatory pump), that this physical sound mingles with a spiritual sound, which connects my awareness to my spirituality. To that timeless, thoughtless, emotionless place, that fills my heart with contentment... Various unidentifiable physical sounds seem to have spiritual sounds mingled in their frequencies... I wondered if, in the same way that God created human beings, in his own image, if we created machines that ran at a certain pitch, to remind us of our spiritual nature” (Barnes, 2001).

#### 4.4. Living in two worlds.

What seems most central to my experience of meditation is the sense of living in two worlds. In every daily action, I am aware of myself taking in data from my environment. This data comes from two distinct positions and is the material from which I make meaning in my life. I experience myself as simultaneously living in two worlds, the spiritual and the material. These worlds often present me with contradictory data but, paradoxically, I only feel whole when I sense myself as contained within seemingly contradictory understandings. For example, the life of my body is finite and my soul is infinite. When I know myself to be either of these things, excluding the other, I feel unbalanced. Knowing permanence within impermanence seems more holistic and more real.

#### 4.4.1. Table of the lived experience of two worlds.

Material Reality is finite.	Spiritual Reality is infinite.
Time is finite	Timelessness
Physical reality	Spiritual reality
Cognitive thoughts	In a state without thoughts
Individual sense of self or Ego	Ego-less, connected self
Material purpose in life	Spiritual path and purpose
Awareness is in my body	Spiritual and infinite awareness
Sense of bodily space	No bodily boundaries, space is infinite
Striving to achieve something in life	Being still, on a spiritual path
Mental ways of knowing	Spiritual knowing
Life is limited	Life is infinite
Boundaried sense of self	Self is expansive, connected to everything.

On a daily basis, my understanding of who I am shifts between bodily and spiritual understandings. It seems as if there is a pendulum within me whereby most of my experience of self is in the middle of the two worlds. I am a

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spiritual. and embodied being. On some occasions, I think I am exclusively either spirit or body. When this happens I have difficulty completing daily functions because my attention is drawn unevenly to one state or another. In the moments or hours, when I believe myself to be only body, I become anxious about health, death, and making money. Bodily awareness is depressing because life seems to have no purpose other than to accumulate wealth, and death makes that meaningless. In a deeply spiritual state, often created by meditation, the life of the body seems distant and insignificant and I am unable to use my body or mind to maintain my material existence.

Most of my life is experienced in the middle of these two worlds. I know myself to be both finite and infinite. My material existence is guided by a sense of spiritual purpose. I use my mind to calculate materiality, so that I am on time for work and have enough money to pay my bills. My mind can not understand my spiritual insights, so I instruct it not to try. I often find it difficult to make worldly decisions on the basis of black and white concepts such as right and wrong. The truth usually seems to be beyond good and evil, in a spiritual space where materiality has little relevance.

#### **4.5. What this paper adds to the meditation literature.**

This paper begins to ask questions about what is actually experienced during meditation, and looks for descriptions of the meditative sensations. When I describe the light, sounds and vibrations that I experience while meditating, I wonder how they relate to the spiritual experiences that also emerge. When I acknowledge that I have also had meditative experiences when I have not been applying a formal meditation technique, I wonder whether I need the techniques.

#### **4.5.1. Meditation techniques.**

Meditation techniques are many, including saying mantras and focusing on objects such as candle flames; what they have in common is their ability to bring one's attention inward. For some, the purpose of applying the technique is to connect with God, or a spiritual awareness. For others, physical health and stress reduction may be the intention (Yogananda, 1946; Gawler, 1994; Altshul, 2000).

The Bhagavad Gita (Krishna translated by Sastry, 1897/1977) describes a meditative technique and the place to focus ones mind. "Having in a cleanly spot established a firm seat.... Holding erect and still the body, the head and neck, firm, gazing on the tip of his nose, without looking around" (p.190). The focus of meditation, which the Gita calls "Dhyana-yoga – Yoga by meditation" (p. 179), is on God. As Krishna is quoted in saying – "Therefore at all times do thou meditate on me" (Krishna/Sastry, 1897/1977, p.225).

#### **4.5.2. Meditative bodily sensations connected to spiritual experiences.**

There has been very little written that explicitly explains how bodily sensations during meditation relate to divine connection. Most writers use their spiritual insights to advise how to live and what values to hold (Dalai Lama and Cutler, 2000; Yogananda, 1946; Krishna translated by Sastry, 1897/1972; The New York Bible, 1978).

Yogananda (1946) draws the connection between meditation techniques, sound/vibrations and spiritual experiences. He describes a technique in which he experiences a bodily and internal vibrating sound which he says is also spiritual. "Kriya Yoga consists of bodily discipline, mental control, and meditating on Aum. Patanjali speaks of God as the actual Cosmic Sound of Aum heard in meditation. Aum is the Creative Word, the sound of the Vibrating Motor. Even the yoga – beginner soon inwardly hears the wondrous sound of Aum. Receiving this blissful spiritual

encouragement, the devotee becomes assured that he is in actual touch with divine realms” (p. 245). He describes Aum as the sacred word, translated to Om of the Vedas, Hum, of the Tibetans, and Amen of the Christians. (Yogananda, 1946. p. 245).

#### 4.5.3. Spiritual benefits of meditation.

The outcome of meditation can be to achieve Nirvana, a blissful state where one becomes enlightened. “Thus always keeping the mind balanced, the Yogin, with the mind controlled, attains the Peace abiding in me, which culminates in Nirvana” (Krishna/Sastry, 1897/1977, p.192). There are also instructions for meditation at the time of death, to ensure release from the re-birth cycle. One “meditates at the time of death, with a steady mind endued with devotion and strength of Yoga, fixing the life-breath betwixt the eye-brows, he reaches that Supreme Purusha Resplendent” (Krishna/Sastry, 1897/1977, p. 226).

#### 4.5.4. Is it the technique that connects me to the Divine?

Spiritual and meditative experiences occurred when I used a meditative technique, and also spontaneously. In these two situations, the spiritual insights that occurred did not seem to be different from each other. Therefore, while meditation may not be necessary for spiritual experiences to occur, the technique provides a vehicle for increasing the frequency of those experiences. As indicated by the Gita, meditating regularly may also be a way of deepening the spiritual aspects of one’s experiences (Krishna/Sastry, 18987/1977). Spontaneous experiences seem like a gift because they occur without effort from me. Yogananda (1946) described similar spontaneous experiences, which he believed were facilitated through his Gurus.

#### 4.6. Concluding comments.

The way in which I live my experience of meditation is through planned meditative practice and also unplanned spontaneous experiences. The experience of meditative light, sound and vibration seems to connect me with a sense of myself as an embodied spiritual being.

#### 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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