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# On the Veiling and Unveiling of Experience: A Comparison Between the Micro-Phenomenological Method and the Practice of Meditation

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## Abstract

Both Buddhist meditation and micro-phenomenology start from the observation that our experience escapes us, we don't see it as it is. Both offer devices that allow us to become aware of it. But, surprisingly, the two approaches offer few precise descriptions of the *processes* which veil experience, and of those which make it possible to dissipate these veils. This article is an attempt to put in parentheses declarative writings on the veiling and unveiling processes and their epistemological background and to collect procedural descriptions of this veiling and unveiling processes. From written and oral meditation teachings on the one hand, micro-phenomenological interviews applied to meditative experience and to themselves on the other hand, we identified four types of veiling processes which contribute to screen what is there, and ultimately to generate the naïve belief in the existence of an external reality independent of the mind: attentional, emotional, intentional and cognitive veils. The first part of the article describes these veiling processes and the processes through which they dissipate. It leads to the identification of several “gestures” conducive to this unveiling. The second part describes the devices used by meditation and by micro-phenomenology to elicit these gestures.

## Keywords

phenomenological psychology – micro-phenomenology – meditation – lived experience – *épochè* – *avidyā* – experiential structures

## Introduction

Meditation as practiced in the Buddhist tradition and micro-phenomenology are two methods of empirical investigation of lived experience. Meditating is “training oneself”, the Sanskrit says, to “seeing what is there”, namely to recognize what we are living, instant after instant. Micro-phenomenology is a method of descriptive phenomenological psychology allowing us to become aware of the unfolding of singular lived experiences and to describe it finely, by means of interviews or “self-interviews”. For both methods, the objective is to become aware of our experience, to recognize it. But why would we need methods to become aware of our experience? Both meditative and micro-phenomenological practices start from a surprising and disturbing observation: our lived experience, in other words what is most intimate and closest to us, escapes us. Our awareness of it is not only partial, but mistaken. We do not see it as it is, we need training, apprenticeship to learn to recognize what, nevertheless, is there.

What prevents us from seeing what is there? The classical phenomenological tradition incriminates the “natural attitude,” our implicit and fundamental belief in the absolute existence of a pre-existing objective world independent of our experience (for example Husserl, 1982: 5). Bracketing or suspending this belief in order to go back “to the things themselves” – that is performing the *epochè* – is the starting of the phenomenological endeavor to identify the structures of our relationship to the world.

In the Buddhist tradition, the lack of consciousness which afflicts our experience is called *avidyā*,<sup>1</sup> “ignorance” or “nescience” which has the power not only to hide, to veil, to obscure reality (the true nature of phenomena), but to superimpose on it the appearance of a solid world distinct and independent from a solid subject, an illusion which is the source of deep suffering. The goal of meditative practice is to break free from this illusion by becoming aware of the processes through which subject and object are co-constituted, and ultimately recognizing “the natural state of the mind”.

The objective of meditative training as well as micro-phenomenological practice is to become aware of the veiling processes and to dissipate the veils.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, it is an essential common characteristic to the two approaches, it is not a question of transforming the experience, of replacing it with another experience, for example one that is more fluid, spacious and comfortable, but of recognizing, with lucidity and precision, what is there.

This article is an attempt to identify and describe the different types of veils, how they are created and how they dissipate. The aim is to describe the dynamics of these processes in their procedural dimension. It turns out that in the classical phenomenological tradition, and to a lesser extent in the Buddhist tradition, the vast majority of writings and teachings are of the declarative type. For example, many pages have been written to try to define the *époque* conceptually, but very little has been said about how this suspension is performed, about the acts that its practice involves. Almost nothing is said on the origins of the natural attitude, which remains “the greatest of all enigmas” (Husserl, 1970, 180) for phenomenologists. The situation is a little different in the Buddhist tradition, which gives for example a dynamic description of the chain of causes and effects – *pratīyasamutpāda* or “conditioned co-production” - which, from the *avidyā*, generates the illusion that we take for real. But the inventory of the “links” in the chain is not accompanied by a precise experiential description of the processes that create them, nor of those that untie them. Meditation textbooks offer many “skillful means” to elicit the gestures enabling one to untie these links, but few descriptions of the gestures themselves.

We therefore took the deliberate decision to put in parentheses, to suspend the declarative writings on the veiling and unveiling processes and their epistemological background. On the (almost) exclusive basis of procedural descriptions that we have read, heard, or collected ourselves through micro-phenomenological interviews and then analyzed (Petitmengin 2006, Petitmengin *et al.* 2018), we discriminated four types of veiling processes which contribute to screen what is there, and ultimately to generate the naïve belief in the existence of an external reality independent of the mind. The first part of the article describes these veiling processes and the processes through which they dissipate. It leads to the identification of several “gestures” conducive to this unveiling. The second part describes the procedures used by meditation and by micro-phenomenology to elicit these gestures.<sup>3</sup>

This article does not claim to be exhaustive, it reports on preliminary work, a first imperfect and incomplete attempt to open up a still little-explored avenue of investigation.

## 1 The Different Types of Veils

As the meditation and the micro-phenomenological interview practitioner both discover, often with much surprise, a large part of their experience escapes them. Living an experience does not necessarily mean recognizing it,

being fully present in it, being fully aware of it. The terms used to name this lack of consciousness are borrowed either from the visual register (our experience is veiled, obscured, we are blind to it), from the tactile register (we are cut off from it, we are not in contact with it, we lose touch with it), or from the auditory register (we are deaf to it).

In this text, we use the term “veil” (in Sanskrit *āvaraṇa*: “what covers”) to designate what cuts us off from our experience, prevents us from being present to it. This term fits with the occulting effect of the veil (the veil hides experience, prevents seeing what is there), as well as with its distorting effect (the veil superimposes something on the experience, makes one see something that is not there).<sup>4</sup> In both cases, the veil is a *veiling*, an active process mobilizing usually unnoticed “micro-gestures”. The challenge of becoming aware is therefore not only to recognize what is hidden by the veil, but to recognize the micro-gestures that create and maintain the veil and to stop doing them.

From written and oral meditation teachings mainly from the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions<sup>5</sup> on the one hand, and micro-phenomenological interviews<sup>6</sup> applied to meditative experience and to themselves on the other hand, we have identified four main types of veiling: attentional, emotional, intentional and cognitive veils.<sup>7</sup>

We will try to describe for each kind of veil: 1) the process of veiling, what is veiled, and the effect of this veiling on the way experience appears and 2) the process of unveiling and the effect of that unveiling.

## 1.1 *Mind Wandering – the Attentional Veil*

### 1.1.1 Loosing Contact with Experience

The most easily recognizable cause of absence from experience is mind wandering. How many times do we realize, arriving at the bottom of a page, that we have read it without reading it, or arriving at our destination, that we have been “absent” for most of the trip? This phenomenon had escaped scientific research, until a recent study showed that we spend at least half of our time leaving the situation we are experiencing to replay in thought scenes from the past or projecting ourselves into the future, without even being aware of having lost contact with the present reality (Killingsworth & Gilbert 2010). Under the name “agitation” (in Sanskrit *nimaganāudattya*), mind wandering has been known for 2,500 years in Buddhist meditation textbooks,<sup>8</sup> where the mind which jumps from thought to thought is compared to a monkey tirelessly jumping from branch to branch.

It is possible to identify in the phenomenon of mind wandering two interwoven but distinct processes. The first is the process by which attention leaves the present situation, without awareness of having left it. This is how during

the writing task that I am doing, I often happen to “be absent”, and to realize after a more or less long time that my mind was busy with anything but writing. Even more frequently, I can return to writing without even being aware of my momentary absence. This absence is accompanied by the fading of consciousness of current sensations: the visual and auditory environment, the contact of my fingers with the pen, the tensions in my back ... and of the involuntary ceasing of my activity of writing.

The second process involved in mind wandering is the generation of a virtual scene or a succession of virtual scenes during the wandering episode (Petitmengin et al., 2017, 2019), on which attention is (paradoxically) concentrated. The excerpt below comes from an interview that allowed Lise, a meditation practitioner, to become aware of and describe the process of generating a virtual scene during a meditation session:

A thought occurs, which involves several characters. It's like a kind of space that opens, the term “bubble” fits well. A bubble which starts from my head, at the front, top and left. The volume of this bubble is sustained by my inner speech, just as light is sustained by the engine of a dynamo and varies with changes in the engine speed. I see the characters as through my eyes, but I do not take my body into the story. It is as if my head was cut off from my body.

LISE

In the described situation, it is inner speech and visual imagination that play the role of “engines” in the generation and sustainment of the virtual “bubble”. Other collected descriptions confirm the importance of inner discourse in this process: monologues taking the form of comments or judgments on the imagined experience, evaluations or justifications, or recollected or anticipated conversations. The role of “engine” or prompt can also be played by micro-movements “mimicking” innerly an evoked or anticipated bodily movement. The above excerpt also highlights the mode of awareness of the sensations aroused by the evocation of the scene. During the drift episode, Lise seems to have some awareness of her visual sensations, since she is able to evoke them during the interview: “I see the characters”. However, she is not fully present to them since, absorbed in the virtual scene, she does not realize that her attention has drifted away. We decided to name this particular mode of unawareness “mind wandering unawareness” (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2017).

Several experienced meditators described to us the early stages of the emergence of a “thought”, before it becomes amplified to become a virtual scene (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2017). Their descriptions suggest the following

micro-dynamics. A thought first emerges in the form of a tiny “impulse” that one of the meditators locates in her chest:

Not so much an image, but a felt sense that something arises. Like a little movement ... a perturbation. It's not a thought yet. It's just a kind of a stirring. Something is about to happen.

ANNA

This micro-impulse is immediately followed by a tension towards this first movement, which seems localized in the head, closely associated with breath retention and tightening of the throat:

A tension corresponding to the intention to do something, comparable to the feeling of scrutinizing something visually, of making an effort to see better something far away, which gives a sensation of tension inside the skull.

ANNA

This tension causes a feeling of disconnection of the head and the body, often felt in the throat, which generates a subtle feeling of discomfort:

A kind of, a subtle numbness. It is as if life is not flowing completely freely in the body. A feeling, a kind of discomfort. Not like feeling nauseous or anything like that, but the same kind of thing.

HELEN

Unrecognized, the initial tension amplifies to give birth to a virtual scene. The disconnection of the head and the body elicited by this tension then rigidifies to result in a total loss of consciousness of bodily sensations.

In summary, attentional drift conceals the awareness of current sensations as well as the awareness of having drifted away. It also conceals the process of generation and sustainment of the virtual scene as well as the awareness of the virtual sensations thus generated. In this process, the loss of contact with experience lies in leaving the present situation without being aware of doing it, and also in investing in a virtual situation without being aware of doing it.

### 1.1.2 Coming Back to Experience

Usually, the return to present experience takes place in a random and uncontrolled manner. The virtual scene may be interrupted by an event which is external to the drift episode, such as the eruption of a noise or a body pain,

which temporarily brings attention back to the current situation. Or it may be interrupted by an event internal to the episode, for example an unpleasant emotion that coming back to the present situation makes it possible to avoid. The virtual scene may also vanish due to the exhaustion of inner speech or of the micro-gestures that were sustaining it. Going back to the current situation can be accompanied by the awareness of the episode of absence, but also without it having ever been recognized.

A real attentional stability requires very specific skills: (1) “vigilance” or the capacity to become aware of having been absent; (2) the ability to “let go” or stop sustaining the virtual scene;<sup>9</sup> (3) the ability to bring attention back to the current situation; (4) “concentration” or the ability to sustain this attention. The attentional stability that these acts allow is the prerequisite for becoming aware of the other veiling processes and the dimensions of experience they conceal.

The ability to notice the distraction (1) implies that the trigger for awareness of the drift is not random and extrinsic but intrinsic. For example, for several experienced meditators we interviewed, it is the subtle feeling of discomfort aroused by the disconnection of the head and the body, and even the tension that generates it, which triggers awareness of the drift.

Disengagement from the virtual scene (2) involves stopping the micro-acts which generate and maintain it. The quicker the awareness of the drift is, and the earlier the phases of the microgenesis of the virtual scene that become accessible to consciousness are, the more quickly the acts involved in this microgenesis are demobilized. Experienced meditators able of perceiving the initial micro-tension thus have the capacity to voluntarily carry out a set of micro-gestures to facilitate its release such as breathing deeply, loosening the tension in the head and throat, opening up attention and adopting a peripheral vision, or accentuating awareness and density of the back and lower body (micro-gestures which will be described more precisely in section 1.5).

This release provokes the disappearance of the emerging thought, a reconnection of the head and the body, a feeling of fluidity and warmth, a feeling of connection between oneself and the world and the dissolution of the rigid border ordinarily perceived between the two, which create a deep sense of relief (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2017).

## 1.2 *Desire and Aversion to the Content of the Experience – Emotional Veils*

### 1.2.1 Loosing Contact with Experience

Even when mind wandering does not lead us to get lost in the past or in the future, different types of tension cut us off from our immediate experience. A

first type of tension appears when we experience an unpleasant or pleasant sensation or emotion.

In the first case, if for example we experience pain or sadness, we immediately seek to protect ourselves from it, and without even realizing it, we surreptitiously interpose a tension to try to keep this pain or this sadness away, to avoid feeling it. This tension has the effect of “compressing” this emotion, of solidifying it, a bit like a gas which would be compressed in a reduced space. We are then neither aware of the veiled sensation or emotion, nor of the tension that cuts us off from it, that takes place without our knowing it and that we do not recognize.

Another way to cut ourselves off from an unpleasant experience is to try to transform it, by replacing it with a pleasant or less unpleasant experience. For example, during a meditation session (but this can happen in any circumstance of life), we try to replace the present experience of agitation with the memory of the experience of calm experienced during a previous session.

If, on the contrary, we encounter a pleasant experience, we may also try to transform it, striving to maintain it or intensify it through a subtle anticipation.

In all cases, an abstract, impoverished and petrified representation of the desired (or repressed) experience surreptitiously superimposes itself on the immediate experience, preventing us from feeling the latter in all its nuances (Genoud, 2017). We are then neither fully aware of the present feeling nor of the tension towards another experience which cuts us off from it.

The following interview excerpt describes the tension towards the memory of a past experience, experienced during a meditation retreat:

There was a tension towards the memory of this experience. Before it happened I had a waking dream where I was with the Lama, at the end of which I had the experience. So I replayed this dream hoping that it would bring me back to the experience.

There is a tension but I am not aware of it. A slight movement in front of the whole head, the chin straightens a little, and something presses behind the eyes, like a finger that presses a little between the eyebrows. In fact towards the mental images of the Lama. There is also tension in the lumbar, mid back and trapezius muscles, and a little thing in the sternum that pushes forward a little too. The perineum contracts a little bit. With a kind of “excited joy”. It is not the joy of practice, which is relaxed and calm. It’s excited, agitated, it’s a desire. It was all in order to retrieve the experience.

PAUL

### 1.2.2 Coming Back to Experience

When a feeling of sadness (or discouragement, or doubt) appears, and a tension is interposed to avoid it, to be present to the experience is not to force oneself to come into contact with the feeling, but recognize what is there, that is the tension (or aversion or fear). It is not about eliminating or correcting the tension, but about coming into contact with it, “dwelling in it” (Genoud 2017). Surprisingly, this contact has the effect of removing its rigidity, loosening it. This allows you to enter into intimacy, in a precise and gentle way, with the experience of sadness which the tension cuts us off from. Coming into contact with the particular “texture” of this sadness will in turn have the effect of removing its density, of diluting it as a gas is diluted in the air, of melting it a little like a block of ice.

When we are tensed towards the representation of a desired experience, to be present to the experience is to be present to this tension, a presence which also has the effect of loosening it.

It lasted for two days. It was the pain in my back that made me aware of this tension. I let go on the afternoon of the second day (of retreat). I had back pain, I stopped meditating, looking for something, I thought of something else. The next day I was no longer in pain.

PAUL

This loosening has the effect of dissolving the representation of the evoked, anticipated or repressed experience, and of allowing us to come into contact in a much more precise way with the fluidity of the present experience. It supposes a demobilization of the gaze and a descent of the attentional center of gravity from the head into the body (micro-gestures which will be described in section 1.5). It elicits a feeling of relief, the feeling of regaining one’s integrity in a way.

## 1.3 *Absorption into the Objective or Content – Intentional Veil*

### 1.3.1 Loosing Contact with Experience

Another type of tension that screens immediate experience arises when we are engaged in an activity. The tension towards the objective or result, the “what” of the activity, by creating a narrow attention tunnel, obscures the activity itself, the “how”. This process concerns our physical activities as well as our cognitive or social activities. For example, when I make a movement, my interest in the object to which this movement is directed (the ball, the apple) obscures the movement of my arm, which itself obscures the internal sensations that I experience in the muscles and joints that actually initiate the movement of my arm.<sup>10</sup> When I am engaged in a discussion, the absorption of

my attention in the content of the ideas conceals for example the emotions aroused by the exchange and the gestures which accompany it, whether mine or those of my interlocutor (Rimé 1984, p. 441). While writing this article (at least when my attention is not drifting), I am absorbed in the content of the ideas I am trying to express. During this time, I am neither aware of the contractions in my back, nor of the contact of my fingers with the pencil or the computer keys, nor of the rapid succession of inner images, light emotions, comments, appreciations and comparisons ... which constitute my writing activity. I am aware of them “in action” (Piaget, 1974), since I am writing, but in a “prereflective” (Husserl 1950), or “direct” (Vermersch, 2000) way.

The absorption into the “what” of the activity (the content of the ideas to be expressed in writing) obscures the “how” (the micro-acts involved, and the dimension of the experience in which they take place). In addition, neither this concealment of the “how”, nor the focusing of attention on the “what” which elicits it, and results in a tension often experienced in the eyes, the head and the upper body, are recognized. In other words, not only do we not know (how we go about accomplishing actions), but we are not aware that we do not know, or that something could prevent us from it.

On the contrary, we believe that we know, that is to say that an abstract representation of our activity replaces its actual unfolding, which makes it all the more difficult to become aware of it. Such representations are notably conveyed and reinforced by our language, and particularly by the metaphors we use, which have the power to structure very deeply the representation we have of our experience and constitute a considerable obstacle to its awareness. For example, when an idea emerges in awareness, our attention is usually absorbed into its content, we pay very little attention to the experience of its genesis.<sup>11</sup> The reduction of the idea to its content expressed in verbal form, and the lack of awareness of its genesis, has the effect of reducing our understanding of it to a disembodied cognitive mechanism. We represent our ideas as thought processes taking place in a “mind” endowed with two main characteristics: on the one hand it is localized *in the head* and separated from the body, on the other hand it is localized “*inside*” and separated from outside. Whereas in the lived experience of ideation, as we shall see we do not encounter this distinction.

### 1.3.2 Coming Back to Experience

Becoming aware of the dimensions of experience obscured by the tension of attention towards the objective or content of an activity means recognizing this tension and releasing it. This “letting go” requires an opening up of the attention span, often described as associated with the displacement of the attentional center of gravity from the head to the body (which will be described more precisely in section 1.5).

This dissolution of the tension towards the “what” then allows the unveiling of the “how” which it separated us from,<sup>12</sup> thanks to the adoption of a receptive attention position.<sup>13</sup> It is not a question of simply redirecting attention from the “what” to the “how”, but of letting the “how” emerge, and of putting oneself in a position to welcome it. The verb “to observe” which is often used is in this respect unsuitable. Firstly because the gesture of “letting go” which allows this receptive attentional disposition supposes a demobilization of the gaze. In addition, “observing” a phenomenon implies disengaging from it and distancing oneself from it, whereas “recognizing” it means, on the contrary, reducing the distance, approaching it,<sup>14</sup> becoming intimate with it. It is not about directing the focus of attention towards the phenomenon, examining it from a distant “point of view”, but of feeling it, of dwelling in it. The following excerpt describes the recognition of this attentional mode.

I am realizing that in fact, when I bring back my attention to the nostrils, I do not shift (my attention). There is no shift from one point to another, at least in my experience there. It is not: there is no awareness of the nose, and then all of a sudden there is awareness of the nose. In fact, the awareness of the nose, of the air, is already there, but what I do is to strengthen it, to intensify it. It's like a movement, but I cannot find a starting point for this movement. There is a strengthening, an intensification of density. At first sight I would have said that I switched my attention. But this is not true.

PAUL

The tactile metaphor “coming into contact” therefore seems to us more appropriate than the visual one for describing the recognition of a previously unnoticed phenomenon: not only because it suggests getting closer and not distancing, but also because it suggests a possibility of progressiveness, while vision implies immediacy. This metaphor can be refined to better suggest the receptivity that characterizes the propitious attentional disposition: it is more a question of letting something come than going to look for it, or exploring it in a frontal, active and deliberate way, more a question of “letting oneself be touched” by it than of “touching” it. The transition from a tensed attention to a receptive one has been described to us as follows:

Suddenly, I felt what it was actually to see. To see isn't casting your gaze towards something, projecting it, holding it out, but really it's letting the thing imprint itself in you. You are completely passive, and you let the color, the landscape, come to you. You aren't going to look for it, you

welcome it. You're there and you receive it. And you have the impression that the color or the landscape imprints, imprints itself inside you.

MONIQUE

This receptive mode of attention does not mobilize a particular sense but the whole body, or rather as we will discover, a dimension of experience where the sensory modalities meet.

It is important to note that releasing the tension towards the objective and adopting this receptive mode of attention do not guarantee the immediate disclosure of the dimensions of the experience that were veiled. These gestures are often followed by a period of latency, of silence, by a "gap" that it is tempting to fill prematurely with a representation of the experience. But the unveiling of experience is not an act, it is a process that occurs at its own time, in an unpredictable manner, without being possible to force it (Vermersch, 1994/2010).

### 1.3.3 The "Felt" Dimension

Loosening the focus on the result or static content of the experience, and adopting this receptive mode of attention, allows the emergence in awareness of previously unnoticed microdynamics: the focus on a content leaves space for the unfolding of a microgenesis. For example, relaxing the focus of my attention on the content of the written text allows me to gradually become aware of the micro-operations that I am carrying out to write, as well as the prediscursive "thread" which I am relying on and its evolution: making contact with a non-verbal "felt meaning", letting the felt meaning mature, letting words emerge, confronting them with the felt meaning, which results in the transformation of the initial felt meaning (Gendlin, 1962; Petitmengin, 2007).

In the dimension of experience in which such microgeneses unfold, the apparent solidity of experience dissolves. This dimension is made up of subtle "felt senses", which are strictly speaking neither visual, nor auditory, nor tactile, nor kinesthetic. They are instead characterized by precise submodalities, such as intensity, movement and rhythm, which are "transmodal", i.e. they are not specific to any sensorial modality but transposable from one modality to another.<sup>15</sup> In the "felt" dimension, the border usually perceived between the different sensory registers seems to vanish.<sup>16</sup>

The recognition of this felt dimension has the effect of dissolving the representations which contributed to obscuring it, and in particular the very deeply anchored representation of a separation between "body" and "mind". Let us return to the example of ideation. Becoming aware of the process of emergence of an idea reveals that corporeality plays a major role in it, or more

exactly that the distinction between “thought” and “body” is meaningless. This separation does not work at the level of the state which fosters the emergence of the idea, characterized by the displacement of the center of attention from the head to the body and the concomitant abandon of the abstract and discursive mode of thought for a visual and kinesthetic mode. This separation does not work either at the level of the emerging idea, which most often takes the form of a transmodal and gestural felt meaning, unfolding in a “landscape” which is endowed with a certain texture and a certain density, and animated by contrasts of rhythms and intensities (Petitmengin, 2007b, 2016).

Under this word, there is the idea, which is a special inner space, with a special density and texture, an orientation, a direction, tensions, inner movements ... The space of this idea is quite different from the space of the other idea.

LISE

In other words, when loosening the fixation on the thought contents allows the microgenesis of meaning to unfold, in the experience of the “lived body” (*Leib*), the rigid separation that we usually think we experience establish between “body” and “thought” dissolves.

To sum up, the dissolution of intentional veils supposes the adoption of a receptive mode of attention, which allows the recognition of usually unnoticed microgeneses concealed by the absorption of attention into the content or objective of action. Whether it is a question of thinking, writing, remembering, deciding, or carrying out very concrete actions, these microgeneses seem to unfold in a dimension of experience where the separation usually perceived between the senses and between body and mind softens.

#### 1.4 *The Emergence of Duality – Cognitive Veil*

##### 1.4.1 Loosing Contact with Experience

At the very heart of perceptual events, tiny tensions create a subtle cognitive veil which has the effect not only of concealing, obscuring the immediate experience, but of superimposing on it the false appearance of a subject-object duality. Buddhist texts provide incisive declarative-type statements of the co-constitution of the perceiving subject and the perceived object, notably in Madhyamika texts such as “Someone is made known by something. Something is made known by someone. How could there be someone without something and something without someone?”. (Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakārikā* 1X, 5, quoted in (Bitbol 2006, p. 143). However such statements describe the result of the process rather than the process itself. The present section relies on

micro-phenomenological investigations of this process, starting with the example of auditory perception.

When I hear a sound, my instant reaction generally consists of focusing on the physical event at the origin of the sound to characterize it. In a fraction of a second, I recognize the phenomenon as a sound, then as the song of a black-bird on the plum tree, coming in through my office window, without paying any further attention to the particularities of this song nor to the way I feel it. In this process, the name of the event at the origin of the sound, often accompanied by an image or visual evocation of a scene representing the event, immediately obscures the experience of the sound. Moreover, in the very movement where the sound is covered by a name and an image, it is somehow “put at a distance” out there, far from me here. This distancing, while creating a separation between “me” and the object that emits the sound, gives the two poles a location and an appearance of solidity (Petitmengin *et al.* 2009).

The same type of process is found in visual experience. For example when I watch a landscape, the identification of objects out there (poplar trees, a stream), cover the immediate experience of the landscape, made of subtle feelings which are difficult to locate. This act of identification is inseparable from a tiny movement of distancing, usually unnoticed, which creates a separation between the objects discriminated out there and the “point of view” of a perceiving subject located here.

In tactile experience too, a subtle movement of distancing, involving tiny movements of the fingers<sup>17</sup> and a tension at the level of the gaze, seems to create and maintain a boundary between the touching body and the object being touched.

To create a separation, I have to make tiny movements with my fingers ... that I barely feel. I feel that if I don't make small movements, there is no object, I don't feel the object outside of me. There has to be an exploration.

LISE

There is a very slight tension at the level of the gaze, as if I see or try to see something. I feel a very small tension in the eyes, the eyeballs, maybe a very small frown, probably it can't be seen from the outside.

LISE

These subtle visual and kinesthetic micro-movements seem to elicit the emergence and stabilization of the perception at the level of the skin of a border between an “inner” space and an “outer” space.<sup>18</sup>

The same type of distancing process, supported by the gaze, seems to occur when a bodily feeling emerges. A subtle effort has been described to “go towards” the feeling and to locate it, a micro-movement which is “led by the gaze”:

It's like I was watching the feeling, it is my eyes that leads me toward my hands. It's like I was going to fetch my hands with my vision.

MICHEL

The eyes become fixated, and there is almost like a tension in the eyes. Although I'm not looking at anything visually, but the visual sense gets engaged as if looking.

ANNA

This visual micro-tension has the effect of distancing the immediate feeling while superimposing on it a mental image that screens it. A kind of bodily “geography” whose “point of view” is located at the eye level substitutes itself for the emerging feeling. Naming the feeling contributes to freezing it. For example, immediately characterizing a feeling as “sadness” has the effect of superimposing on it a generic mental image which surreptitiously screens the particular nuances of this particular experience and its fluctuations.

These different examples highlight a set of micro-acts which, by distancing the initial feeling, by superimposing to it an image and sometimes a name, substitute it with the appearance of a distant, localized and substantial object, which gives in turn to the perceiving viewpoint an appearance of existence, a kind of relational or borrowed existence.

During this process, a representation of space and a representation of the body, conceived as disjoint, surreptitiously superimposes itself on the experience being lived, a subtle screen which induces a feeling of disconnection of the head and the body, associated with a feeling of numbness and discomfort (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2017).

#### 1.4.2 Coming Back to Experience

The dissolution of the cognitive veil which obscures immediate experience by superimposing on it an appearance of separation between a perceived object and a perceiving subject requires the demobilization of “tense” gaze and speech, as well as the cessation of visual and tactile micro-movements which create and sustain this separation from moment to moment. The dissolution of this separation requires to stop any movement, not only the movement of “going towards” or “touching”, but also the movement of “being touched by”. Because if this last gesture blurs the border and the distance between subject

and object, it still implies the expectation of *something*, of a “filling in”, and what is received can in turn become an object.

When I turn my attention from the chair to the hand and the sensations inside the hand, there is no longer an external object, but there is still a well localized object, it is the sensation in the hand. This feeling becomes an object. There is still a certain tension towards an object ... an internal tactile object.

LISE

In the same way, stopping “listening” to the source of the sound to let the sound come to you, to be receptive to the feeling of the sound, does not prevent apprehending the latter as an “object”, which is localized somewhere even if the border between inner and outer space has softened. Any “felt sense” received in the open mode that enables one to become aware of it can thus be taken as an *object* of investigation.

When all tension stops, even the subtle tension consisting in receiving, the border between inner and outer space vanishes. This experience is usually easier to recognize in the tactile mode. Stopping any micro-movement aiming at “touching” as well as “being touched” has the effect of stabilizing the attention at the point of contact. At this point, the separation between inner and outer space dissolves. The external “object” loses all solidity, all existence, it disappears. As the exterior object disappears, the space usually perceived as “interior” vanishes. The sensation being felt neither in an interior space nor in an exterior space, loses its localization. The tactile sensation or the bodily feeling is no longer felt as being localized at a precise place in the body, which therefore loses its “geography”.

I feel tingling, I feel heat, but I have left my knee or my chest or my hands. There is no longer the knee, or the chest, or the hands. It's just a feeling.

MICHEL

After a moment ... of immobility, it is no longer inside or outside. And it is no longer localized. There is still a sensation, but there is no longer separation, it is much more difficult to locate in space.

LISE

In the visual and auditory modes also, when all tensions dissolve, the sensation emerges in a space which is perceived neither as inside nor as outside, neither as subjective nor as objective.

There was less separation between perceiving and what's being perceived. Just a sense of just seeing. This barrier between ... this kind of separating ... between "this is outside", "this is inside", that changes.

ANNA

The sound, it abolishes the limit between me and the outside.

LISE

In this space with no interior or exterior, the perception of distance, of depth vanishes.

Visual perception becomes almost 2D ... I lose the depth of the scenery, of the objects. It somehow feels flatter than the normal perception. (...) Maybe not a complete change of depth, but less depth. (...) It's as if I lose the figure/background segregation.

ANNA

Concomitantly, the sensation of perceiving from a "point of view", from a "perceptual position" disappears. The following three extracts are attempts to describe this experience of no longer being "faced" with things, but rather being "enveloped" in sensations.

Everything becomes incredibly touching. It's as if the space between things becomes denser, brighter, more vibrant, and that there is nothing more than this space,

LISE

There is more a sense of being enveloped by visual images, rather than having them in front of me.

ANNA

I feel like I am in a bath of sensations.

DAN

The dissolution of the perceptual position is accompanied by a fading of the sense of agency – the sense that I am the one who is generating the phenomenon, as well as the sense of ownership – the sense that this idea, this feeling is my idea, my feeling. The experience is no longer felt as mine. In summary, as the previous interview excerpts suggests, the release of tensions has the effect of dissolving the structural characteristics that define an "object", such

as distinction, distance, location and substantiality, and simultaneously those that define a “subject”, such as the perceptual position, the sense of agency and the sense of ownership.<sup>19</sup>

This “subtilization” of the subject–object couple may occur gradually as meditative practice progresses. As more and more subtle tensions loosen, the emergence of the phenomenon and its resorption become closer and closer, until becoming simultaneous. First comparable to a drawing engraved in stone, the world of appearances becomes similar to a drawing made by a stick in the water, then finally to a drawing made by a stick in the air.<sup>20</sup>

This experience of dissolution of rigidity can also happen instantly, out of the blue, when any tension is released, for example in a moment of surprise, or when waking up, or when walking in the forest. A sound occurs, and for a moment, you don’t know who you are, where you are, you don’t even know it is a *sound*. It is just a moment of awareness suspended in the air, very bright and clear.

In such moments, vision sees, hearing hears, without a seeing subject and a seen object, a hearing subject and a heard object being constituted. All what remains is a non-localized sensation. It is this experience that this famous *sūtra* seems to describe:

In vision, there is only vision, in hearing, only hearing, in thought, only thought. When in vision there will be only vision, in hearing only hearing, in thought only thought, when you will be neither here nor there nor in between, you will be freed from suffering.

*Khuddaka Nikāya*

When in vision there is only vision, only a pure self-knowing quality, a pure lucidity remains (*svasaṃvedana*, Tibetan *rang rig*). A tiny adjustment<sup>21</sup> then allows this self-knowing quality to recognize itself, to realize its nature of consciousness. A breath of wind, a burst of sound or color, a perfume ... are an opportunity to recognize the clarity of consciousness, naturally and spontaneously present. All the senses reveal it,<sup>22</sup> in it they are resorbed.

Sitting facing the wall,  
burning incense, legs crossed,  
a spring morning,  
as the day breaks,  
a bird sings, joyful,  
see for yourself, this is it.<sup>23</sup>

Initially intermittent, this recognition can stabilize for longer and longer periods. All phenomena – sensations, tensions, emotions, memories, thoughts, speech, acts ... are recognized as made of the same “water” (in the sense we speak of the “water” of a gemstone<sup>24</sup>), of the same luminous transparency. It is “the ordinary mind” (*prakṛt jñāna*), the natural and fundamental state of the mind, always present but so close to us that usually we do not recognize it.

Each thought is an opportunity for the mind to see itself, a kind of indication from the mind to the mind as to its own, creative, luminous nature and its empty essence.

GUENDUNE RINPOCHÉ 1998, p. 71

However when this nature is recognized, meditation manuals still describe a great number of steps before this recognition stabilizes and any fixing or clinging, even minute such as a very subtle reification of the clear and transparent aspect of mind, dissipates.

### 1.5 “Going Down into the Body”

The four veils that we have identified all seem to be elicited by a tension towards “something else” – virtual scene, desired experience, objective or object – whose representation is superimposed on immediate experience. In all cases, the dissolution of the veil requires recognizing and releasing this tension, as well as giving up this representation, in other words a gesture of “letting go”. This gesture of letting go has been described as closely associated with a shift of the area usually perceived as the source of attention – the head, the eyes – towards the body.

The feeling that I can have is to go down inside of me, and then, at that moment, I am there. I am no longer there [she shows her head], I am there [she shows her belly]. There, everything is there.

SYLVIE

This “descent into the body” has often been described as initiated by a subtle adjustment towards the back of the skull.

Being more aware of the back of my body, rather than just what’s at the front.

ANNA

- At this moment of meditation, I go down into my body.
- How do you go down into your body?
- I go towards the back of my head, I move the center of gravity of my attention from the front of my head towards the back of my head.

LISE

I'm going to put my consciousness a lot more towards the back of the skull. I think it's a kind of sliding. I'm sliding in the back. The whole body is involved in this adjustment ... It's tiny, very subtle.

JUDEE

This adjustment demobilizes the gaze. It causes densification of the area at the back of the head and back of the body.

It's as if I demobilize the gaze, I demobilize this area. I feel more the back of my skull, which becomes more dense. And at the same time, quickly, this density goes down all over the back of the body, along the spine.

LISE

The demobilization of the gaze is accompanied by a widening of attention, which from focused, becomes panoramic, peripheral, diffuse.

I am no longer focused on an object with the front of my head and my eyes, it's the back of my head that watches, so it's much vaster. The field is open to the maximum.

LISE

As soon as I have done it (this sliding backwards), it's the feeling that if I open my eyes, I will have a much wider vision, it will be less sharp, less directed towards what is immediately in front of me. It's as if by placing myself at the back, I have a vision that goes until the corner of my eyes, much more peripheral.

JUDEE

This open attention does not mobilize a particular sense – vision, hearing – but the whole body.

It is another way of looking, of apprehending, than visual. It is no longer only visual, it is something vaster than the only visual. It is as if I was

looking with the back of my body. (...) It is a gaze that is a kind of feeling of the space.

LISE

The sensation that my ears start to live at the level of my whole body. That is to say the sensation of hearing with my whole body. There is a globalization of listening, as if my body became a big ear.

ANTOINE

Adopting this embodied mode of attention gives rise to a feeling of gathering and reunification, and at the same time of relief and warmth, as if life started to flow again.

It is as if my shoulders, my spine, my kidneys started to come back to life, to feel. And when the sigh comes, well-being extends to the level of the chest, which aerates, which opens. Breathing also revives the front of the body.

LISE

This embodied attention mode is also accompanied by a feeling of reconnection between oneself and the world and of fluidity of the border usually perceived between the two.

## 2 The Devices of the Two Methods to Elicit the Awareness Gestures<sup>25</sup>

Analyzing the descriptions that we have collected of the veiling and unveiling processes made it possible to highlight four attentional “gestures” which seem to be essential to the process of unveiling and recognizing experience:

- stabilizing attention
- letting go and going down into the body
- refining the granularity of attention
- adopting a propitious attentional position

In this section, we try to identify the devices used in meditation practice on the one hand, in the micro-phenomenological interview on the other hand, to induce these gestures. For this, we rely mainly on oral and written instructions on the practice of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* given in the tradition of Dzogchen / Mahāmūdra, on the description of micro-phenomenological interview techniques given in different articles and books, as well as on our practice of teaching micro-phenomenology.

It is important to note that the two methods were created in very different contexts and with different objectives. The initial objective of the explication interview (Vermersch 1994/2010), source of the micro-phenomenological interview, is to elicit the awareness of action, in a learning or knowledge transfer context.<sup>26</sup> The objective of meditative practice is to become aware of the very nature of reality, in a spiritual context. On one side, the objective is pragmatic, on the other one it is soteriological. The micro-phenomenological interview is therefore by construction more adapted to the recognition of intentional veils, while meditation is more adapted to the recognition of affective and perceptual veils. However micro-phenomenological investigation, by applying the interview method to fields other than that of action (such as ideation, emotion, pain, sensory experience or perceptual illusion) became closer to the areas of experience explored by meditation. In addition, both methods aim at becoming aware of unrecognized *micro-dynamics*: the micro-dynamics of action on the micro-phenomenological side, the micro-dynamics of constitution of appearances on the side of deep vision (*vipaśyanā*). This is the reason why, despite the difference in their initial objectives, it is useful to compare the devices of the two methods.

## 2.1 *Stabilizing Attention*

What are the devices used in meditative practice and in the micro-phenomenological interview to elicit the four “gestures” allowing one to stabilize attention (described in section 1.1.2): becoming aware of having been absent, “letting go” or stopping sustaining the virtual scene, bringing back and maintaining attention on the current situation?

### 2.1.1 Meditation

The meditative practice, common to all the schools of the Buddhist tradition, aiming at developing the stability of attention is the practice of “mental calm” or “quietude”, in Sanskrit *śamatha* (where *śama* means “peace” and *tha* “to stay, to remain”). The practitioner is invited to sit with his back straight, his head straight, his chin slightly tucked in. She can seat on a meditation cushion, the legs arranged in lotus or half-lotus, but also on a chair, feet placed flat on the ground. The hands are placed on the knees, or in a gesture of meditation (*dhyānamūdra*) of which there are some variants. The gaze is relaxed, directed downwards, in the extension of the nasal bridge. The lips are relaxed and the teeth loose, breathing is natural, without effort or constraint. Meditation supports can be either external, of a visual kind (a stone, a candle, an image) or auditory kind (the sound of water, the recitation of a mantra), or internal (a

mental image). But the most common support is breathing. The practice is to focus attention on breathing, without tension or effort.

When her vigilance allows the meditator to become aware that her attention has left the breath, and that she has let herself be carried away by a train of thoughts, she is instructed to “let go” these thoughts, and to gently bring back the attention on the support and keep it there with concentration (*smṛti*).

The cessation of all activity, the posture of the body and the attention to breathing are “skillful means” to train the meditator to perform these four interior gestures. It is common for the novice meditator to have the impression that during meditation sessions her mind is much more restless than usual. In fact, it is the cessation of all physical and intellectual activity that makes her aware of the frequency of the drift phenomenon, which her absorption into action had prevented her from noticing until then. In addition, the adoption of a particular bodily posture and the invitation made to the meditator to readjust it each time she realizes that she has deviated from it, as well as the concentration of attention on the support of breathing, greatly facilitate the recognition of the drift. By drawing her attention to her current bodily sensations, they lead her to become aware of the loss of contact with these sensations, loss of contact which plays, as we have seen, the role of intrinsic trigger of awareness of the drift.

Attention to posture and breath, by bringing the practitioner to leave the visual and discursive levels to “go down into the body”, also facilitates the disinvestment of the virtual scenes generated during the drift, of which speech and visual imagination, as well as subtle micro-movements, are the motors.

From session to session, thousands of times, the meditator repeats these micro-gestures, which allow her to develop an increasingly sustained vigilance. The increasingly early recognition of the tensions, initially minute, which generate the drift, has the effect of releasing them more and more quickly, then immediately: the distraction ends up vanishing even before the attention has left its support. At first like a cascade rolling on a very steep mountain slope, the mind becomes comparable to a torrent, then to a gently flowing river, to use metaphors often used in Buddhist meditation textbooks.<sup>27</sup> The ability to recognize distraction intermittently is gradually transformed into a vigilance that is both sustained and open, i.e. not focused on a particular object, but sensitive to the smallest attentional and proprioceptive variations of the experience.<sup>28</sup> This mode of attention is specific to the practice of *vipaśyanā*, deep vision, which consists in “observing” with precision the way in which the phenomena emerge, acquire an apparent solidity and vanish.

### 2.1.2 Micro-Phenomenological Interview

In the micro-phenomenological interview, there is no time especially dedicated to training the stability of the interviewee's attention: the interviewer is the guarantor of this stability, it is she who holds the attentional expertise. She uses different devices for this.

First of all, the very framework of the interview, which it is important to specify in advance, helps to maintain the subject's attention on the experience to be explored: "We are here together for a given time, with a specific objective, which is to collect the description of this particular experience." The interview situation, and the simple presence of the interviewer, plays throughout the interview the role of "container" for the attention of the interviewee, helping her to stay within the limits of the singular experience she explores. The regular recapitulation of the elements of description collected on the experience and its context, of which the interviewer asks the interviewee to verify the accuracy, also helps her to stabilize her attention. The verbal description of the experience plays an important role as well: a word makes it possible to "point" a variation or a subtle nuance, to isolate it in the flow of the experience, like a "handle" which helps to maintain this aspect and stabilize attention on it. This role can also be played by a very generic word or group of words, such as "this", "this sensation", "this weird thing",<sup>29</sup> but also by a gesture of the interviewee, which will be taken up by the interviewer to help her become aware of the underlying feeling or "inner gesture", and hold attention on it.

However, most of the time this framework is not sufficient to prevent the interviewee from escaping from the description of the experience towards comments, explanations, appreciations about it, or towards the evocation of other experiences increasingly distant from the explored experience, which are the equivalents during the interview of the "attention drift" encountered in meditation. One of the methods used to help her leave these "satellite" dimensions (Vermersch, 1994/2010) consists in asking questions which bring the subject back, with both delicacy and firmness, to the experience being investigated, for example:

If I understand you well, because you belong to the category of "geometer mathematicians", you create a mental image at that moment. I propose, if you agree, to go back to this image. What is its size?

These different devices for stabilizing and bringing back attention correspond to an expertise developed by the interviewer. However, we noticed a learning

effect in the subjects who were interviewed several times. From the second interview, many of them know how to distinguish the description of the experience from comments, judgments and digressions which distract from it, and to go back much more quickly to the experience. However, the interview alone does not, unlike meditative practice, enable the interviewee to stabilize her attention on very fine levels of detail of her experience.

## 2.2 *Refining the Granularity of Attention*

The more subtle the veils which obscure experience, the more the recognition and the dissipation of these veils suppose a sharp attention, likely to discriminate tiny nuances and movements, sensitive to the finest discontinuities. Which devices do each method use to refine the granularity of attention?

### 2.2.1 Micro-Phenomenological Interview

The micro-phenomenological interview has been compared to a “psychological microscope”. Its particularity is to enable the interviewed subject, guided by the prompts of the interviewer, to “replay” the same experience several times, while exploring each time a finer and finer diachronic and synchronic mesh. Pierre Vermersch (2012) distinguishes, for example, five increasingly narrow typical “attentional windows”: landscape, courtyard, room, page, jewel. I propose to add an even more subtle and evanescent level, that of the snowflake. Diachronic refinement or “segmentation” consists in guiding the subject’s attention in a precise way towards the different phases of the experience, through questions such as: “How did you start?”, “What did you do just before?”, “What happened right after?”, “When you did this, what did you do?”. The same type of question is then reiterated for each phase, then for each sub-phase, in order to guide the subject’s attention towards an increasingly fine diachronic granularity.

- At that moment, the thought vanished.
- What happened just before?
- I loosened, I loosened my tension on that thought.
- And when you loosened your tension on that thought, how did you go about it, what did you do?
- In fact I loosened a tension in my head.

The questions “Where exactly was this tension in your head?”, “How intense was it?”, “What was its volume?” then allow the subject’s attention to be drawn to the location, intensity and volume of this tension – synchronic characteristics of this aspect of his experience at that given moment. The description which will be given can be further refined either synchronically by a question of the type: “This sensation that you feel at the front of your head, how deep do

you feel it?”, or diachronically: “Is the intensity of this feeling constant or evolving?”. The iteration of the evocation, regularly “refreshed” at the instigation of the interviewer, is essential to allow this process of progressive refinement of the attentional mesh.

Wording also plays an important role in this refinement process. By playing the role of “handle” allowing the interviewee to identify and stabilize a subtle aspect of her experience, a word enables her to go further in the discrimination of its nuances or variations. For example, identifying the location of the “felt sound” made it possible to refine the awareness of this location by distinguishing the “height” from the “depth” of the felt sound. Identifying “inner micro-gestures” allowed us to distinguish between active *micro-gestures* (like clinging to a thought) and *micro-movements* characterized by their spontaneity and unpredictability (like the emergence of a thought).

It is important to note that a micro-phenomenological interview is only a step in the process of becoming aware. Firstly, an element of experience that has been discovered in the evocation state in the context of an interview can be verified subsequently “in real time”. For example, if an interview enables a meditation practitioner to discover that a thought first emerged as a “tiny impulse” in her chest, she can verify this in later meditation sessions for other thoughts.<sup>30</sup> The possibility of “real time verification” answers to one of the main criticisms against the micro-phenomenological interview technique. Secondly, the refinement of the attentional mesh can be done within the same interview, but also gradually from interview to interview, when it is possible to recall or to generate several experiences of the same type – such as the emergence of a perception or a thought. The awareness and description of an aspect of experience which is recognized during an interview may thus be refined in subsequent interviews.

### 2.2.2 Meditation

In meditation, it is practice that helps to refine attention. The attentional position adopted from the practice of *śamatha* onwards – not to feed the phenomenon, not to foster, sustain it – has the effect of slowing down or even stopping its microgenesis, thus giving access to its early phases and to the subtle feelings which unfold there. The phenomena, recognized increasingly close to their source, become more and more lightweight and transparent. While in the interview, systematic “backwards” questioning processes such as “What happens before? (...) And before?” allow access to the microdynamics of a phenomenon, in meditation, it is the disinvestment of the phenomenon and the “subtilization” and progressive rarefaction of experience over practice which allows this access. The practice of *vipaśyanā* then consists, in this rarefied

experience, in “observing” the game of emergence, stiffening and vanishing of phenomena, even sometimes by voluntarily arousing an emotion or a thought. In this context, the systematic questions of the interview might be used with profit in addition to meditative practice to help practitioners become aware of these processes and the micro-acts they mobilize.

### 2.3 *Letting Go and Going Down into the Body*

It is in this two meter-long body  
 With its perceptions and thoughts  
 That there is the word,  
 The origin of the world,  
 The cessation of the world,  
 And the path leading to the cessation of the world.

*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:45

As we noticed in section 1, the four veils are created by a tension towards “something else” (virtual situation, desired experience, objective or object). Dissolving the veil requires releasing this tension, which supposes a gesture of “letting go”, closely associated with a demobilization of the gaze and a “descent” of the attentional center of gravity from the head into the body. How do meditation and interview techniques induce these two gestures?

#### 2.3.1 Meditation

The practice of *śamatha*, by inviting the meditator to stop pursuing a distracting thought as soon as it is recognized, constitutes in itself a learning process of the gesture of letting go.<sup>31</sup> By inviting the meditator not to set a goal, an “agenda”, but to remain simply receptive to all phenomena that may arise, without seeking to transform or do anything with them, *vipaśyanā* instructions invite her to extend this gesture.

In *śamatha* as in *vipaśyanā*, this gesture of letting go is fostered by a movement of “descent into the body” (described in section 1.5). In *śamatha*, this movement is elicited by the required attention to posture and breath, which leads the practitioner to fully invest her body, felt as more dense, gathered, unified. Some practices support this “descent into the body” by visualization<sup>32</sup> techniques, such as that of a small sphere of light (*tiglé*) that we imagine descending from the level of the heart in the lower body, down to the earth and even underground (Wangchug Dorje 2009).

While in *śamatha* breathing only plays the role of concentration support, in *vipaśyanā*, the practitioner is asked to feel precisely all the bodily areas mobilized by breathing, its subtle changes in rhythm and amplitude, and to

gradually expand this fine mode of attention to all bodily sensations. In the Burmese tradition, it is customary for the meditation teacher to ask practitioners specific questions to invite them to describe a sensation very precisely, such as: “Is this pain more like a burn, like tingling, like tugging?”. Answering such questions requires practitioners to pay close attention to the sensation in question, to fully experience it, and therefore to fully inhabit their body.

In *śamatha* as in *vipaśyanā*, this descent into the body is also encouraged by the disinvestment of inner speech and of a “tense” vision. During sitting meditation sessions, the field of vision (even the “inner field” of vision when eyes are closed) is open and the gaze relaxed. The demobilization of discursive activity is encouraged by the practice of the “noble silence” during meditation sessions but also in meditation retreats, over long periods of up to several months, where it is also not recommended to read and write.

In most meditation teachings, the invitation to “descend into the body” is indirect, the gesture is not named. But some teachers may give the explicit instruction, accompanied by a gesture of relaxation of the shoulders and arms, to “drop the mind into the body” (oral teachings by Tsokny Rinpoche).

### 2.3.2 Micro-Phenomenological Interview

In a micro-phenomenological interview, the gesture of letting go is fostered by the very structure of the interview. The first key to the interview is indeed to relate to a particular past experience, that the interviewer helps the interviewee to replay, re-enact, “presentify”. In everyday life, when our activity is directed towards a goal, the goal obscures the activity itself. But in the context of an interview, the experience being past, the objective has already been achieved. The interviewee, released from the tension towards reaching the objective, is able to adopt much more easily than in the initial experience the receptive attitude necessary for recognizing the “how” of the activity.

As we saw in section 1.3.2, this receptivity requires an anchoring in bodily experience, which occurs in the interview thanks to the very presentification or “evocation” of the past experience.<sup>33</sup> The specificity of this type of memory is to be involuntary: it does not occur on the initiative of a discursive thought, but spontaneously, thank to a sensory trigger (of which a famous example is “Proust’s madeleine”). In the context of an interview, once a specific experience to be explored has been identified, the interviewer therefore helps the interviewee to retrieve precisely the spatio-temporal context of the evoked scene, and then the visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile and kinesthetic sensations experienced in the scene, until the past situation becomes more vivid for her than the present situation is.

This state of evocation, where the interviewee fully inhabits her body, is the condition of possibility of an “embodied speech position” (as opposed to an

“abstract speech position”) (Vermersch, 1994/2010), which enable her to leave the level of “satellite dimensions” – representations, explanations, preconceptions about the re-enacted experience, to become aware of the evoked experience in all its dimensions, and describe it with her own words. Objective clues allow the interviewer to assess at any time the intensity of the interviewee’s evocation and therefore her speech position. These clues are for example the use of the present tense (the interviewee is re-enacting the situation), short and simple sentences and action verbs, the absence of abstract terms, and the presence of coverbal gestures, which are a strong indication of an embodied speech position, of the fact that the interviewee speaks from her bodily experience. The defocusing of the gaze, typical of the state of evocation, is another clue that the interviewee leaves the abstract and discursive levels to access the felt, prediscursive and embodied dimension of experience.

When the interviewer observes, thanks to these clues, that the interviewee has left the evocation state, one of the devices to bring her back is to ask questions about the (visual, auditory, olfactory) sensory context of the experience, or even about the submodalities of a sensation (“what are the volume, location, density of this feeling?”), to which she cannot answer without refreshing the evocation of her bodily experience.

When the interviewee uses an abstract term, likely to convey a representation, a concept which obscures her immediate experience, one possible device is to formulate a question inviting her to rediscover the concrete experience which is hidden behind this abstract term. For example to the statement “I felt a resistance”, the interviewer can answer with the question: “Take the time to go back to the moment when you felt a resistance. At that time, how do you know that you are *resisting*?”. Such a question invites the interviewee to refresh the evocation of her experience in order to identify the embodied micro-acts which underlie the abstract term “resistance”. In response to the statement “I am sad”, the question “At that time, how do you know that you are sad?”, invites the interviewee to retrieve, behind the abstract term “sadness”, the particular nuances of this feeling, in this specific situation.

These various devices correspond to an expertise developed by the interviewer, who is the guarantor of the state of evocation and therefore of the embodied speech position of the interviewee, which she regulates on the basis of objective clues. However some interviewed persons seem to have, or to develop over the course of the interviews, subjective clues of such a speech position.<sup>34</sup> An interview seems indeed to be a succession of moments when interviewees silently evoke an aspect of their experience, then describe it on the basis of the inner “trace” they keep of it in the form of a “felt sense”. Some

of them know how to detect the moment when this trace fades, when it is therefore time to refresh the evocation in order to keep an embodied speech.

#### 2.4 *Adopting an Attentional Disposition Propitious to the Recognition of What Is There*

As we saw in section 1.3, focusing attention on the objective or result of an activity (the “what”) creates an intentional veil which has the effect of obscuring the activity itself (the “how”). The dissolution of this tension requires the adoption of a receptive attention, consisting in “letting oneself be touched” by the emerging phenomena. This attentional mode allows the emergence into consciousness of usually hidden microdynamics, which unfold in a dimension of experience where the separation between body and mind as well as between the five senses softens. The micro-phenomenological interview, born from the explicitation interview whose objective is to make explicit the implicit dimensions of an action, is particularly suited to the dissipation of intentional veils, for which it has been designed. Meditative practice aims at dissipating even more subtle “cognitive” veils: the micro-tensions by which a separation is created moment by moment between a perceiving subject and a perceived object. Their dissolution presupposes the cessation of all action, however subtle, even the adoption of a position of receptive attention.

What processes do the two methods use to arouse these different attentional positions?

##### 2.4.1 Micro-Phenomenological Interview – Receptive Attention

In order to dissolve intentional veils, the micro-phenomenological interview thus uses devices to arouse a receptive attention. As we have seen, the interview is conducted at a distance from the explored activity. The objective having already been reached, the activity is no longer obscured by the tension towards achieving the objective, and therefore becomes accessible.

Making an effort to remember could however introduce a new tension that would once again obscure its unrecognized dimensions. But it turns out that the technique used in the interview, the evocation, is based on a form of recollection which is involuntary: the memory cannot be targeted voluntarily and directly, but it pops up unexpectedly. All that it is possible to do is to encourage its spontaneous emergence by rediscovering the sensory context of the experience, and by adopting a receptive attentional disposition (where all anticipation of particular contents is relaxed). The interviewed subject cannot therefore give herself the objective of remembering in order to be able to describe the experience, since the tension towards this objective would inhibit the emergence of the memory.<sup>35</sup> The interview can unfold correctly only if she

completely hands over this objective to the interviewer, if she lets herself be guided by her with full confidence. The interview technique therefore consists in freeing the interviewed subject from the objective of remembering by arousing a receptive, passive attention in her, through interventions such as: “I suggest, if you agree, that you take the time to let this moment (this sensation, this action) come back”.

The words “take the time to” are important because they authorize an absence of immediate response, and therefore the time of silence, of latency necessary for the emergence of the memory. They divert the interviewee from the temptation to fill this vacuum hastily with something known and not lived, with the expression of knowledge *about* the experience which would once again be superimposed on it. The slowing down of the verbal flow and the presence of moments of silence are then signs that the person is in this waiting position.

By agreeing to adopt this receptive mode of attention, the interviewees give up the control they think they have over their experience and take the risk of discovering a dimension of themselves that they do not know yet. In order to enter this state of vulnerability and to do this intimate work in the presence of the interviewer, it is essential that they feel the latter totally present, attentive and benevolent. The relationship of trust that is created is the keystone of the interview. The break in eye contact – the fact that the person leaves the interviewer to look at the horizon – is one of the signs, in addition to the very special atmosphere that is created, that this relationship of trust has been established, and that a protected space has been created during the interview.

The emergence of the memory is the emergence in consciousness both of what had been lived without awareness of being memorized, and of what had been lived without awareness of being lived because of the tension towards an objective. Although these two processes are distinguishable in theory<sup>36</sup> (Petitmengin 2014), they are not separated procedurally in an interview, where the first one includes the second.

The emergence in consciousness of what had been lived without awareness of being lived is often accompanied by a feeling of surprise, associated with a feeling of evidence. The interviewees have the feeling of recognizing very familiar aspects, with which they have always lived, but without noticing them.

I pay attention to features that were buried, not really present, not manifest. But actually, this is the experience of music I always live (...). This conforms to what I am sure I have lived, but I was not aware of living at the moment in which I was living it.

ARTHUR

Interestingly, the experience which is recognized in a state of evocation often acquires a particular quality of intensity, depth and freshness, “a whole new value of enchantment and liberation” (Gusdorf, 1950, p. 133). It is as if evocation, by giving us access to the transmodal source of experience, deprived phenomena from their solidity, their density, and gave them a kind of transparency. The evoked experience shows us in a way the transparency of consciousness, which we do not usually see.

#### 2.4.2 Meditation – Doing Nothing

As meditative practice in the Mahāmūdra and Dzogchen traditions aims at seeing things as they are (*yathām bhūtam*), at recognizing the very nature of reality, it is particularly suited to the dissipation of perceptive veils. The purpose of *vipaśyanā* is precisely to become aware of the tensions which from moment to moment create the double illusion of solid subjects and objects, and to release even the most subtle micro-tensions. As we have seen, it is not a question of going from a tense attention to a receptive one, from the movement of “going towards” to the movement of “letting come”, but of stopping any movement. While the micro-phenomenological letting go is temporary and prepares for a letting come, a welcoming posture awaiting for a “filling in”, the meditative letting go is radical, definitive. It has been compared to the movement of a bale of straw when you cut the tie that attaches it.<sup>37</sup> It is the “exhaustion” (*kṣaya*) of any hope of finding a solid landmark.

All this is totally hopeless. Hopeless. There is no hope, not the least, of being saved. Non-hope. Let me define this by the term hopelessness. Despair still contains some hope, hopelessness is absolutely hopeless. The ground gives way. We are exhausted.

TRUNGPA 1996, pp. 31 and 36

Ultimate meditation instructions prescribe to stop everything, to do nothing. The body is motionless, the gaze is motionless (an immobility which contributes to dissolving the ordinarily perceived border between interior space and exterior space, created as we have seen by tiny micro-movements). When a phenomenon occurs, do not pursue it, do not elaborate it, leave it “without support”. Even the most abstract treatises, such as those presenting the Madhyāmika<sup>38</sup> dialectic, can be interpreted as performative texts inviting the cessation of all action. For example the tetralemmas of Nāgārjuna can be considered as the description of the fundamental meditative gesture of abandonment, of letting go:<sup>39</sup> give up A, give up non-A; but also give up A and non-A, and even neither A nor non-A. Nāgārjuna describes the experience of giving up

“sustaining” the world, the experience of losing anything to lean on, up to the most subtle.<sup>40</sup> The initial and constantly renewed gesture of “taking refuge”,<sup>41</sup> essential in the Buddhist tradition, by which the practitioner “commits herself” to the Buddha (the awakened guide), the Dharma (the way to awakening), and the Sangha (the community), may be seen as paradigmatic for this gesture of abandonment, of renunciation.

Buddhist texts provide countless descriptions of the absence of substantiality of phenomena, notably in the form of metaphors like: “A circle described by a brand, a fake being, a dream, a magical prestige, the moon reflected in the water, a fog, an echo in the mountains, a mirage, a cloud: such is existence.” (Candrakīrti 1959, p. 136). But meditation manuals do not provide precise descriptions of the process of dissolution of appearances, notably the dissolution of the separation between subject and object. However beyond the instruction to “do nothing”, they offer many types of “skillful means” to foster this dissolution (of which an inventory would go far beyond the scope of this article). One of them, typical of “analytical *vīpaśyanā*”, consists of asking the disciple questions which she is invited to answer not intellectually but from her experience, such as “where does the mind come from?”, or “where is the self located?”. This last question, for example, to which experience does not provide a satisfactory answer other than “nowhere”, has the effect not only of casting doubt on the concept of a self endowed with a point of view localized somewhere, but to weaken the perception of its apparent solidity. But this question does not draw the practitioner’s attention – as micro-phenomenological questions can do – towards the micro-acts which create the illusion of experiencing a point of view.<sup>42</sup>

Other skillful means initiate the process of dissolution of duality through visualization practices. A very widespread practice, the practice of Tonglen or “giving and taking”, invites the practitioner to imagine and feel, while inspiring, that she takes in herself the suffering of beings in the form of a black smoke; and then while expiring, that she gives them well-being, happiness and peace under the aspect of a white light. This practice, which aims at developing compassion, also has the effect of softening the border usually perceived between interior and exterior space, self and others.

Precious procedural clues are also given in oral teachings, to elicit recognition by the mind of its self-cognizing and transparent nature. For example, unlike the declarative statement “Reality is comparable to a reflection in a mirror”, the instruction: “Train yourself to see appearances as reflections in a mirror” is procedural, it gives an indication on the attentional position to adopt to perceive the transparency of the phenomena. The instruction “Train yourself to look at space between things rather than things themselves” (Kunzang Péma

Namgyèl, 1998) elicits the release of the tension towards things. The instruction “Do not look at it (the nature of mind) in front of you. Feel it everywhere.” (oral teachings of Tsokny Rinpoche) elicits the demobilization of the gaze and the movement of going down into the body.

The transmission of the propitious attentional disposition goes through other channels than words. Teachers’ gestures, by consciously or unconsciously “mimicking” invisible gestures – metaphorical gestures of gushing, opening, stepping back, or deictic gestures showing a part of the body – sometimes give very precious clues. Finally, in the Dzogchen tradition, it is customary for the master to show the disciple the nature of mind non-verbally. Within the framework of a particular ritual (Tibetan *ngo sprod*), he gives disciples a glimpse, a taste of it, leads them to adopt the disposition which may allow them to recognize it. Specific skillful means, consisting for example in voluntarily generating an intense emotion to recognize its nature of transparent lucidity, are then proposed to stabilize this recognition.

### Conclusion

Both Buddhist meditation and micro-phenomenology start from the observation that we are absent from our experience, and they propose devices that allow us to become aware of this. But surprisingly, the two approaches offer few precise descriptions of the *processes* which veil experience, and of those which make it possible to dissipate these veils. We used some existing descriptions and tried to collect fresh micro-phenomenological descriptions to give an overview of these two processes. These descriptions are imperfect and incomplete, a lot of work remains to be done to refine them. For example, if the veils which obscure experience are created by subtle tensions, are these tensions of the same nature for the attentional, emotional, intentional and cognitive veils? A finer micro-phenomenological work could probably make it possible to differentiate them. It would also be relevant to describe more precisely, within the cognitive veiling process, the structural characteristics which make it possible to experience an “object”, and their concomitant evolution with those which define a “subject”. It would be essential as well to verify whether the processes of construction and dissolution of duality have a generic intersubjective and intercultural structure, or if there are variants.

Our attempt at micro-phenomenological exploration nevertheless shows that such work is possible. At least up to a certain point, it is possible to become aware of the microprocesses generating the structures of our ordinary

relationship to the world, which the phenomenological tradition calls the natural attitude and the Buddhist tradition calls *avidyā*. It is also possible to describe, to some extent, the microprocesses through which these structures may dissipate. This work suggests that the dissipation of the structures of our relationship to the world presupposes the awareness of their mode of generation: the unveiling supposes the recognition of the veiling process. In this perspective, the liberation from our ordinary mode of relation to the world is not an intellectual decision but the result of an experiential process, not a starting point but an outcome.

The very possibility of recognizing the usual structures of our relation to the world and of freeing ourselves from them has huge implications, which we are only beginning to discover, in all areas of human existence, notably in the educational, clinical and therapeutic, ethical, spiritual, ecological<sup>43</sup> and political domains. This recognition deeply changes our vision of what is thinking, learning, doing science, entering into relationships with other human and non-human beings, living in society, cultivating the land, healing, dying... A collaboration between all the skillful means at our disposal to recognize these structures, and a reflection making it possible to draw from this awareness consequences for our lives, is a crucial issue for mankind.

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## Notes

- 1 *A-vidyā*: Sanskrit term coming from the Indo-European root VID (“to see, to know”), here preceded by the privative prefix a.
- 2 We choose to use the term “veil” to designate what conceals experience, notably because of the existence of the substantive “veiling” which makes it possible designate the *process* of creation of the veil, studied in this article.
- 3 We have come to the identification of “gestures” rather than “dimensions” of meditative experience. The latter approach corresponds rather to that of Lutz *et al.* (2015), who identified the main phenomenological dimensions of meditative experience so as to be able to locate a given practice in this multidimensional phenomenological space. The authors identified three “primary” dimensions: object orientation, dereification and meta-awareness, and four “secondary” dimensions: aperture, clarity, stability and effort.

Our approach has two main differences from theirs. The first is that these authors started from meditation manuals to identify the experiential dimensions of meditation (without giving them a precise phenomenological description), while we started from experiential descriptions to research how these experiences are elicited by meditation instructions. This work allowed us to rediscover the experiential dimensions that were identified in the first study. But – this is the second difference – we did not focus on the static description of these dimensions (for example: what is open attention?), but on the description of their micro-dynamics of appearance and disappearance (for example the processes of opening and stabilizing attention, the process of dereification of experience).

4 In the Buddhist tradition, ignorance or *avidyā* is conceived both as a misunderstanding of reality (*tatve-pratīpattiḥ*) and a false understanding (*mithyā-pratīpattiḥ*) of reality as other than it is: “Nescience (*avidyā*) is ignorance (*ajñāna*), obscurity which offends reality as it is, rigidity (*stimitatā*).” (Candrakīrti 1959, p. 251) A fundamental tendency of being to dispersion (*prapañca*) has the power, as soon as a phenomenon emerges, to superimpose on it the appearance of a grasping subject (*grāhaka*) and a distinct and solid grasped object (*grāhya*). As we have already noticed, this process can be compared to what the phenomenological tradition calls the “natural attitude”, our fundamental tendency to consider (external or internal) perceived objects as “things” independent of consciousness.

5 Mahāmūdra (where mahā means “great”, and mūdra means “gesture”), often translated as the Great Seal, is a Buddhist meditative tradition that emerged in India around the eighth and ninth centuries. The great Mahāmūdra Indian masters were Saraha, Shabari, Tilopa, Maitripa and Naropa. The Mahāmūdra transmissions entered Tibet between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, from Marpa to Milarepa and Gambopa. Most contemporary Tibetan Mahāmūdra masters rely on the teachings that are found in the works of Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (1513–87) and the ninth Karmapa Wangchouk Dorje (1555–1603).

Dzogchen or “Great Perfection”, which designates the ultimate natural state of everything, emerged in India and Tibet in the eight to ninth centuries. Main Indian Dzogchen masters were Vajrapraka (tib. Garab Dorjé), Manjusrimitra, Vairocana, Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra. In Tibet it was primarily transmitted by the Ancient School (Nyingma), through a lineage that includes illustrious masters as Yeshe Tsogyal, Longchenpa, Jigme Lingpa, Patrul Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.

The author of this article has practiced *samatha* and *vipāśyanā* meditations (two methods we will describe later in this text) for more than 25 years in the tradition of Mahāmūdra; more recently in the Dzogchen tradition.

6 Micro-phenomenology is a method of descriptive phenomenology inspired by the “*entretien d’explicitation*” (explicitation interview) initially developed by the French psychologist Pierre Vermersch (1994) for educational purposes. At the instigation of Francisco Varela, the method was adapted to research to describe any type of lived experience (Petitmengin 2006), and complemented by a method for analyzing descriptions and detecting regularities in the form of generic structures (Petitmengin *et al.* 2018, Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Vásquez-Rosati 2019). The particularity of the method is to help the interviewee provide descriptions of the *microdynamics* of *singular* experiences, even in their initially *unrecognized* dimensions. The author of this article has contributed to the development of micro-phenomenology and have been providing training in the micro-phenomenological interview and analysis for 20 years.

7 The Buddhist tradition distinguishes 2 types of veils: affective veils, (*kleśa*, Tibetan: *nyon*), and cognitive veils (*jñeya*, tib. *shes bya*).

8 Meditation manuals distinguish two types of drift: agitation and torpor. In agitation, the mind is powerfully focused on a specific imaginary activity or train of activities. In torpor, the mind is confused, it goes in all directions, without it being possible to identify what is really going on. It is the first type of drift that we study here.

9 Or to continue to sustain it mindfully: for example, I realize that since a few minutes I have left my writing activity to think of my last mountain walk, and I decide to pursue this thought, the virtual situation (thinking of my last mountain walk) thus becoming the current situation.

10 As William James noted (1890/1983, p. 687).

11 This observation is verified at the individual level as well as at the collective level: in the scientific field, the interest usually focuses on the content of the idea and the exploration

- of its consequences, very little attention is paid to the process which made it possible to find it (Holton 1982; Petitmengin, 2016).
- 12 Depraz, Varela and Vermersch (2003, chapter 1.2) identify three phases in the process of becoming aware: 1. a phase of suspension of the absorption of attention into the object of experience, 2. a phase of conversion of attention from “outside” to “inside”, and 3. a phase of “letting go” or welcoming the experience. Regarding the second phase, it turns out that the descriptions we have collected do not mention a change in direction of attention from outside to inside but a coming into contact with experience, made possible by the dissolution of the tension which was maintaining a separation between an “exterior” and an “interior” space. In other words, as loosening the tension dissolves the border between an “interior” and an “exterior”, there cannot be a reorientation of attention from one to the other.
  - 13 This receptive disposition is very close to the gesture which Depraz, Varela and Vermersch (2003) call “letting go”. However, the term “letting come” seems to us better suited to characterize this attitude of receptivity and welcome, and we prefer to reserve the term “letting go” to the initial gesture of loosening the tension towards the object or objective that prepares for this receptivity.
  - 14 This is the reason why the term “pre-reflective”, and the metaphor of the mirror which it induces, do not seem to us well suited to characterize the unrecognized dimension of experience. On the one hand because it assimilates the recognition process to a reflection, and therefore to one of taking distance. On the other hand, because it induces surreptitiously the idea that there is between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness a relation of correspondence, one copying or reflecting the other in a more or less exact way. On the contrary, during the process of becoming aware, a subtle transformation, of the order of a softening, a fluidification and a rarefaction, takes place.
  - 15 Unlike for example temperature and texture which are specific to the touch, or color which is specific to the vision.
  - 16 The French writer Jacques Lusseyran, who suddenly became blind at the age of 7, and who survived his internment in the Buchenwald concentration camp, describes his sensory experience as follows: “All the senses, I believe, come together in one alone. They are the successive accidents of a single perception. And this perception is that of a contact.” (*La lumière dans les ténèbres*, p. 22)
  - 17 A study by Lenay and Sebbah (2001) shows convincingly that distality is not given but actively constituted. The use of a minimal visual-to-tactile substitution (or “prosthetic”) device makes it possible to highlight the usually invisible micro-movements that elicit and sustain the experience of distality from moment to moment, an experience that ceases immediately when these movements stop. The relevance of this experiment to understand the co-constitution of the objective and subjective poles is discussed in (Petitmengin 2017, p. 159–160). As Stewart notes in his commentary to the latter article, this study is reminiscent of the finding that vision is made possible by “micro-saccades” (from 10 to 20 milliseconds) of the ocular muscles – the perceived scene vanishing within a few seconds in the case of immobilization of the image on the retina (Ditchburn 1973; Steinman & Levinson 1990).
  - 18 Ataria *et al.* (2015) make a similar hypothesis. The article describes the gradual dissolution of the border ordinarily perceived between an “internal” and an “external” world in the experience of a highly skilled meditation practitioner. Three stages are identified: “The SB (sense of boundaries) default state”, “The SB dissolving”, and “The SB disappearing”. The SB default state (which roughly corresponds to the ordinary state, characterized by a clear separation between “inside and “outside”) is described as closely associated with

a sense of location, namely “our ability to locate other objects in space in relation to our own position as a center of reference”. And this sense of location is described as generated by the level of sensory activity: “The more sense I use, the more exact are the boundaries”.

The main difference between Ataria’s article and the present one is that rather than describing the characteristics of the different stages of dissolution of the SB· we tried to describe *the acts that generate the transition* from one stage to another

- 19 In Ataria *et al.* (2015), the “sense of boundaries disappearing” stage is also described as characterized by the vanishing of the sense of separation between an “internal” and an “external” space, the disappearance of a first-person egocentric bodily point of view and any sense of location in space, as well as the fading of the senses of agency and ownership. However the description they collected seems to differ from ours in the sense that in their case a very thin sense of touching/being touched remains. Finer procedural descriptions of the micro-acts involved in the process of vanishing of the subject / object separation could enable us to clarify this point. Moreover in Ataria *et al.*, the sense of boundaries dissolution is associated with a disappearance of the sense of time. This is an aspect that we have not explored yet.
- 20 Metaphor coming from *Ngé Deun Gyamtso (The ocean of true meaning)*, meditation manual written by Wangchug Dorje (1555–1603). (Wangchug Dorje, 2009).
- 21 In the Dzogchen tradition, this adjustment is called (*Trekchö*) (cutting through).
- 22 As Anne Klein (2018) notes the root of the Sanskrit word for sensation, *vedāna* is VID: to know. “Perhaps the most important thing to notice as we reflect on the meaning of feeling in Buddhist contexts is that it was always, at least etymologically, regarded as a type of knowing.”
- 23 Excerpt of the poem “Tathata” (Nan Shan, 2001), my translation.
- 24 Metaphor coming from oral teachings of Lama Tsogy.
- 25 While the study described in “What is it like to meditate” (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2017) and “Studying the experience of meditation through Micro-phenomenology” (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2019) aimed at assessing the interest of applying the micro-phenomenological interview to meditative experience, the objective of the second part of this article is to identify and compare the devices used by each method to help the practitioner/interviewee become aware of (unveil) her experience.
- 26 For example, the first studies carried out using the explicitation interview focused on the expertise of nuclear power plant supervisors, and on learning musical scores.
- 27 Different stages of stabilization of *śamatha*, the number of which ranges from five to nine, are described in meditation manuals and oral instructions of the Mahāyāna tradition. (for example Wangchug Dorje 2009, Dakpo Tashi Namgyal 2010).
- 28 From intermittent and (eventually) propositional (“I am not paying attention anymore to my support!”), vigilance or “meta-awareness” becomes sustained and non propositional (Dunne, Thompson and Schooler, 2019).
- 29 Gendlin calls “direct reference” this way of relating to experience (Gendlin, 1962).
- 30 In the same way, in the context of a project on the anticipation of epileptic seizures, which were usually considered as unpredictable, micro-phenomenological interviews helped epileptic patients become aware of subtle clues announcing the onset of a seizure. These clues, discovered in evocation, could be verified in real time during subsequent seizures. This made it possible to start developing a non pharmacological treatment of epilepsy based on the awareness of these clues (Petitmengin, Navarro and Baulac 2006).
- 31 The Sanskrit word for “letting go”, *mokṣa*, coming from the root MUC which literally means “to drop by opening the fingers”, is sometimes used to denote awakening.

- 32 The term “visualization” can be confusing, because in these practices it is not only about  
“seeing” but also about feeling.
- 33 This process falls within “concrete” or “affective” memory (Ribot 1881, Gusdorf 1950), more  
recently called “episodic memory” (Cohen 1989) or “autobiographical memory” (Neisser  
1982).
- 34 These clues have not yet been the subject of a detailed micro-phenomenological  
description.
- 35 In an ordinary action the tension towards the objective inhibits the consciousness of the  
“how” but does not inhibit the action, in the evocation the tension towards the objective  
inhibits the unfolding of the process.
- 36 An element of experience can be lived consciously while being memorized passively.
- 37 Metaphor coming from (Wangchug Dorje 2009).
- 38 The Madhyāmika or “middle path”, a school of Indian Buddhism whose main represen-  
tatives are Nāgārjuna (2nd Century) and Candrakīrti (7th Century), is one of the main  
sources of the Mahāmūdra and Dzogchen traditions.
- 39 “In the treaty, Nāgārjuna does not argue for the love of controversy, he shows suchness  
(*tathatā*) in the view of liberation.” (Candrakīrti 1985, p. 261)
- 40 An interpretation supported in (Petitmengin 2007a) pp. 68, 179.
- 41 The word *śarana*, usually translated by “refuge”, means “point d’appui”, “protection”.
- 42 A line of research would be to describe the respective “perlocutionary effects” of the ques-  
tions of analytical *vipaśyanā* and micro-phenomenology, and to compare them in order  
to explore their possible complementarity.
- 43 (Petitmengin 2021) is a preliminary step in this direction.