

# The Contemplative Body

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# Structure of the Presentation

- 1. Motivation and Introduction
- 2. What is bodily “cultivation”?
  - Buddhism and the Body
  - “Cultivation” within Japanese Zen Buddhism
- 3. What happens to the “cultivated” contemplative body?
  - Phenomenological and biological transformations

# 1. Motivation and Introduction

- Investigation of the post-contemplative body from the perspective of Japanese Zen Buddhism
  - Japanese Zen emphasizes the soteriological primacy of agency and the situated body (e.g. Dōgen (1200-1253): “The Way is surely attained with the body”)
  - Zen insists that *kensho* and *satori* peak-experiences are, in themselves, “nothing special”. Rather, the post-contemplative, embodied transformations that sustain our “everydayness” are what matter.
- Guiding Question: How is our bodily subjectivity purportedly transformed through “contemplative cultivation” (Jap: *shugyō*)?

# 1. Motivation and Introduction

- *Philosophical Significance*: theoretical insights into the nature of body and self (e.g. narrative vs. minimal accounts of self)
- *Scientific Significance*: testable claims about the neurobiological basis of consciousness and bodily self-awareness (e.g. correlation between reported phenomenal states and their neural correlates (Lutz, Dunne, & Richardson 2007))
- *Normative Significance*: programs for enhancing our self-understanding and interpersonal sensitivity (e.g. moral phenomenology and moral perception (Horgan & Timmons 2005, therapeutic and health value)

## 2. What is bodily "cultivation"?

- 2.1 Buddhism and the body
  - Coarse-grained: Four Elements (Earth, Water, Fire, Wind)
  - “In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element... In this way [the monk] dwells contemplating the body in the body internally, externally, and both internally and externally...” (*Majjhima Nikāya*)
    - Biological Body: Earth (firmness), Water (fluidity, changeability)
    - Phenomenological Body: Fire (body heat, affection), Wind (volition, mobility)
  - Fine(er)-grained: Five aggregates (Skrt: *skandhas*)
    - Biological Body: form (Skrt: *rupa*)
    - Phenomenological Body: feeling (Skrt: *vedana*), perception (Skrt: *samjna*), mental constructs (Skrt: *samskara*), consciousness (Skrt: *vijnana*)



## 2. What is bodily “cultivation”?

- “Radical Embodiment Assumption”: Consciousness (i.e. subjectivity) is rooted in and conditioned by the physical structure of animate body.
- Bodily training (“cultivation”) causally affects cognitive, emotional, affective, and sensorimotor processes (“subjectivity”, broadly construed).

## 2. What is bodily “cultivation”?

- 2.2 “Cultivation” in Japanese Zen Buddhism
- Cultivation (Jap: *shugyō*): a practical, somatically-oriented enhancement of personality and moral skillfulness enacted via ongoing meditative practices.
  - Kukai’s (774-835) “this very body attaining Buddha” (Jap: *sokushin jōbutsu*)
  - Dogen’s (1200-1253) “total body” (Jap: *zenshin*)
  - Kitarō Nishida’s (1870-1945) “acting-intuitional body” (Jap: *kōiteki chokkan*)
  - Yasuo Yuasa’s (1925-2005) “body scheme”
- Not an intellectual training but rather a kind of skills-based habit-formation
- Developed qualities of *composure, readiness, spontaneity, attentiveness, adaptability, and grace* (e.g. archery, calligraphy, musical performance)

### 3. What happens to the “cultivated” contemplative body?

- Phenomenological and Biological Transformations
- Phenomenological Features of the Cultivated Body
  - Shigenori Nagatomo (1992): “felt inter-resonance” (Jap: *kannō dōkō*) or “attunement”
    - mutual responsiveness between embodied self and world



### 3. What happens to the “cultivated” contemplative body?

- “Cultivated” body becomes the “Other-directed” body
- Phenomenological Features:
  1. Clarity and immediacy of perception (phenomenal vividness, attentional stability, perceptual control)
  2. Upwelling of empathic attunement
  3. Enaction of “selfless” spatiality and nondual engagement

### 3. What happens to the “cultivated” contemplative body?

1. Clarity and immediacy of perception (phenomenal vividness, attentional stability, perceptual control)
  - Cultivation of synaesthesia (Walsh 2005)
    - Advanced contemplatives reported the ability to cultivate and sustain synaesthetic perception
    - “In the transformation of the five senses highest mastery is acquired, in the operation of all (five senses) upon all (five) objects...” (*Mahayana-sutra-alamkara*)
  - Control of binocular rivalry fluctuations
    - Advanced contemplatives measurably altered normal fluctuations in binocular rivalry tests both *during* and *after* practicing “one-pointed concentration” (Skrt: *samatha*)(Carter et al 2005)

# 3. What happens to the “cultivated” contemplative body?

## 2. Upwelling of empathic attunement

- Paul Ekman (Goleman 2003): Meditator’s ability to detect “microexpressions” two standard deviations above the norm (i.e. better than lawyers, police officers, psychiatrists, Secret Service Agents, etc.)
  - Enhanced perceptual processing? Uncommon attunement to emotional expression? Both?
- Compassionate equanimity in response to disturbing imagery (e.g. skin being removed from burn victim) (Goleman 2003)
  - Physiological measures indicated relaxation greater than during resting state

# 3. What happens to the “cultivated” contemplative body?

## 3. “Selfless” spatiality and Nondual Engagement

- “losing oneself in practice”
- Inhibition of prefrontal cortex during perceptually demanding tasks (Malach *et al* 2006)
- There exists “a clear segregation between regions engaged during self-related introspective processes and cortical regions involved in sensorimotor processing... during intense perceptual engagement, all neuronal resources are focused on sensory cortex, and the distracting self-related cortex is inactive” (Goldberg *et al* 2006)
- Awareness without self-related representations? How selfless is “selfless”?

# Conclusion

- The phenomenological categories and empirical data discussed above offer a philosophically rich, scientifically testable, and normatively compelling picture of different aspects of our embodied being-in-the-world worthy of further analysis.



Thank you.

