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.