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Visions of An Inner Life

The Performative Techne of Spirit

Abstract

Visual imagery, a performative *techne* of doing and perceiving, mediates the sense of an invisible inner life by giving it visible form. In doing so, visions of inner life establish relationships between an inner life and an outer world. This article takes up the relationship between the performative doing of imagery and notions of an inner, spiritual life. Contemplation, meditation, and introspection are ways people access an inner life. How do visual images perform an inner life of spirit in relation to an outer world? The first section links key ideas: inner life, spirituality, contemplative practice, and the performativity of visual images. The second section reviews inner life cultivated in a range of contemplative practices. The third section reads three genres of visual images, each of which represents inner life, with an eye to how these images establish a relationship between inner and outer. Though each could be discussed as a specific, contextualized representation, the images included here are intentionally generic, intended to illustrate broad patterns in representing inner life.

The first genre of images, the infinite regress of representation, derives from the Western intellectual tradition of representation (Figure 1). It performs inner life as introspection and reflection, a kind of theatre in which the cognitive mind sees itself seeing itself, representing but never directly perceiving the world *outside* the mind. The second genre performs the act of contemplation as postures associated with Buddhist and Yogic traditions, the outward sign of an embodied inner life (Figure 2). The third genre brings the two together. In this genre, a Buddhist monk wearing an EEG cap seeks to answer the phenomenological question of how we can know the insides of other people by promoting a materialist, technologically mediated view of the mind embodied as the brain (Figure 3). In each of these genres, visual imagery works as performative *techne* to show what cannot be seen.

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Visual images and the performative techne of inner life

The Western intellectual tradition offers many names for humans' sense of an inner life within the boundary of their bodies. Among these are soul, awareness, psyche, consciousness, self, mind, and energy. The word "spirit" captures this sense in current secular discourse, as a property or quality of a person's ephemeral, inner recesses. Still, the term spirit may be the most "deeply puzzling" way of talking about inner life, complicated by its association with religion, even as academic studies of spirituality seek concepts and definitions (Heelas 2012: 3, 5; Skjoldager-Nielsen 2018: 181-82). Rather than try to define spirituality, this inquiry looks to performative techne, specifically the skillful construction of visual images, that hold out knowledge propositions about inner life, the site of spirit, and its relationship to the outer, material world. By 'techne,' I mean the particular techniques or technologies used to evoke or explore the inner life; a focus on these techniques and their work is an alternative to ontological attempts to define the nature of the inner life.[1] The techne of performance (know-how) allows us to take spirit (know-that) seriously.[2]

Performativity's focus on doing and showing, on events happening for spectators, on perception-affect dynamics, and especially on materiality seems at first orthogonal to abstract concepts of an inner, spiritual life. Perhaps paradoxically, the sense of spirit begins in the body, whether the body is the site of internal experience (as in contemplative practice) or represented performatively (as in visual images of bodies) (Irigaray 2012: 289). Contemplative practice, a means through which some people cultivate "spirit," makes the body the site for cultivating an inner life and a point of entry for imagining inner life.[3] Cultivating inner life involves bodily techniques that can be rendered visually: a Cistercian monk's prayer regimen, Buddhist nuns creating and destroying a mandala, and a Zen master's delivery of a koan are all embodied actions, themselves performative and subject to representation. Even the paradoxical action of non-doing prominent in Daoist and some yogic meditation practice requires a body. Performance gives internally-perceived spirit form in images representing outsides and insides of bodies.

The perceiving, acting, doing, showing, representing, and affect that canonically define performance also involve internal processes of thought, emotion, and feeling. These inner recesses can slip out of view in the materiality of performance. The medium for performativity remains the material, social world of expression, embodiment and sensory perception, in which representations structure what cannot be seen (inner life, spirit) in order to make it knowable. Inner life, the dwelling place of spirit, thus relies on metaphor, allusion, symbolism, and apophatic description to convey a sense of something other to or more than the matter of performance (Chambers 2017: 10-11). Images such as an icon or mandala associated with a meditative practice may even compel transcendent, apophatic, or spiritual experiences for devotees (Battista 2018: 99-100; Chambers 2017: 9). Following Chambers, the materiality of performance and the inner sense of spirit both conjure presence that eludes the seeming epistemological certainty of writing, imagery, and form. However, in ways explored in this paper, the performativity of visual imagery negotiates the seemingly orthogonal zones of matter and spirit by bringing inner life into relationship with the materiality of performative representation. Visual imagery shapes spirit's valences of transcendence, the sacred, the holy, the numinous, divinity and mystical experience into matter (Chambers 2017: 260).

However contested definitions of inner life or spirit might be, visual imagery performing the ineffable, internal sense of spirit reveals not inner life itself but, as I suggest here, the *desire* to know inner life, or spirit—the urge to know that which escapes form. This framework moves discussions of "spirit" away from concepts, experiences and definitions toward a more open-ended inquiry into inner life, where spirit registers. Representations of spirit in visible form need not reduce spirit to matter or refuse spirituality's transcendent and soteriological aims (LaMothe 2016: 27). Rather, they invite grappling with how to know what is invisible, how to see what cannot be seen directly, and question why we want to see it in the first place.

The very materiality of performance shows us the edge between what can and cannot be accessed through the means of performance (Chambers 2017: 47). In performance philosopher Claire Marie Chambers' thinking, performance constitutes a "critical unknowing," the "chasms unearthed when knowing is ceaselessly stripped away" (Chambers 2017: 259). Chambers' apophatic metaphor for performance parallels the process by which contemplative techniques strip away familiar perceptions, leaving body and mind in what the anonymous fourteenth-century English author of a katophatic treatise on contemplation called the "cloud of unknowing" (Johnston 1973: 40). Paradoxically, where Chambers takes performance to negation, science philosopher Michael Polanyi might identify performativity as the phenomenal structure of tacit knowing, of knowing *more* than we can tell, an excess beyond performance (Polanyi 2009: 4, 11; see also Nelson 2013). Either way—negation or excess—we can ask what forms offered by performance convey about what they cannot show directly. Both modes of performativity allow people to unknow the familiar.

While the materiality of performance conjures perceptions of spirit that elude form, cultivating an inner life requires retreating from form. One of the ways people cultivate encounters with an inner life or the domain of spirit, is through contemplative practices (Komjathy, 2018: 93-95). Contemplative practice is a broad, inclusive term for techniques that direct a person's attention inward, shifting perception to access knowledge or awareness not otherwise available. Philosophical, cultural, and theological frameworks give this inward-directed attention meanings, placing value on certain kinds of inner experiences and techniques. Religious contexts, for example, give inner life cultivation soteriological aims. In the Christian religion, knowledge of God gives meaning to inner-life practices of the contemporary Catholic Centering Prayer, the Jesuit monastic Lectio Divina, and recitation of the Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Catholicism.

Meditative techniques are skilled 'doings,' involving the body, mind, and senses. Key to these practices is the presence of an inner life which is not dependent on the outside world of matter and form that makes performance tangible, or invested in the "showing doing" of performance and its tension between imitation and reality (Schechner, 1985: 36). In practice, this sense of an inner life as co-present with the world of form and matter involves new or different perceptive sensations. Contemporary dance meditation practitioner Dunya McPherson, for example, refers to seeing with "inner eyes" directed toward an "inward gaze" (McPherson 2008: 37-38). Contemplative literature across traditions describes "inner eyes" and "inner ears" as distinctly different from the eyes and ears that perceive the actions and representations of performance (Molleur 2011: 19-20). Rolf Sovik, a Western practitioner of Himalayan Buddhist meditation, describes contemplation as "the blossoming of spirit—an individual call from within" in response to "spiritual yearning" (Sovik 2005: 1). This sense of an

internal spirit opening like a blossom, of a yearning that moves of its own accord independent of external conditions, evokes a numinous dimension of interiority, sensed or felt in ways not dependent on the outside world. Such a dimension requires modes of perception beyond the common senses, such as the ability to look at and sense the interior of one's body and mind as easily as one might look at a painting or text. Shamanic drummer Martin Klabunde, for example, writes from first-person perspective of a form of sound that "can be heard by those who practice deep levels of detachment and transform their perceptions of the mundane world […] who can see and hear beyond the veil of the material, those who see with inner eyes and hear with inner ears" (Klabunde 2011: 45).

Since the 1970s, contemplative practices outside of formal religious traditions have become widely popular in societies that place high value on social interaction, self-presentation, media representation, rapid cognitive processing, and performance (Bush 2011: 3-4; Komjathy 2015: 3-4). Cultivating an inner life in this context contrasts sharply with the effects of technology and social media, which demand self-performance (Williamson 2010: 13). In non-religious contexts, practices such as "mindfulness" approach cultivation of inner life as therapy, often conflating spirituality with healing and wellness (Sun 2014: 25-26). Cultivating an inner life not dependent on external forms or stimuli may in fact ameliorate the discomfort of living in the highly representational world of late capitalism, in which authentic presence is always mediated (de Zengotita 2005: 175). Even the soteriological aims of a religious practice such as Centering Prayer, which merges the theology of the Christian Desert Fathers with Buddhist meditation, recognizes silence and solitude as a counter to distinctively modern stress (Ferguson 2010: 60-61). Ironically, the current promotion of contemplative practices as stress-relief therapy situates an inner life of spirit solidly in the very conditions that produce the need to turn inward (Wilson 2014: 13). Within those conditions, the act of cultivating an inner life may be understood as an antidote to stress, which can itself become a soteriological aim akin to that of religious meditation.

The secularity of Western intellectual tradition tends to assume an inner life as an internal process governed by introspection and representation consistent with the study of performance and performativity, moving increasingly to a non-dualistic model of person-world interaction (Putnam 1999: 10-11; Gibbs 2005: 16), This model of inner life posits a constant flow of stimuli from the environment entering the body through the sense organs, to be filtered and interpreted by the brain, and re-presented internally (as an image) or externally (as performance). Some of the flow remains inaccessible in the "un" or "sub" conscious in the domain of the autonomic nervous system, characterized as a lower order of bodily awareness not subject to rational control. Somewhat tautologically, consciousness has been understood as whatever of that flow comes to awareness and can be rendered as communication (Wallace 2000: 91-2). This widely accepted framework views inner life is an ongoing process of turning consciousness outward into material forms, where other people can in turn perceive and process it. Visual imagery is an examples of such a material, performative form.

While inner life or spirit might be bracketed and set outside this framework, performativity raises a phenomenological question about visual images of inner life: "[H]ow," asks religious studies scholar Anne Taves, "do we know the minds of others?" (Taves 2009: 67) Even if we connect culturally determined, socially inscribed bodies with what physical brains are doing and model brain activity, "[h]ow do we know other minds?" asks neuroscientist

Catherine E. Kerr in pursuit of neurological processes by which people access and assess mental conditions of other people (Kerr 2008: 205). If we accept that the transcendent or numinous quality of inner life may not reduce to material signs, "[h]ow," asks scholar of Asian religions Edward Slingerland, "do we know the insides of other people" and "communicate an inner life?" (Slingerland 2008: 27, 151, 304)

From the interiority of contemplative practice, performance expresses the internal sense of spirit, pressing it out into external, material form (Sellers-Young 2013: 85-86). Silvia Battista's autoethnographic discussion of Vipassana (Insight) meditation as a theatre of introspection describes the performance of contemplative practice with precision in her analysis of Ansuman Biswas' performance piece *CAT*. In that performance, Biswas is in a hollow black box inaccessible to view, juxtaposing the secular-scientific image of Scrödiger's cat in a box with the *via negative* of a meditating ascetic (Battista 2018: 99-134). Performance itself may also be a vehicle for transformation of consciousness akin to that associated with contemplative practices. Deborah Middleton and Franc Chamberlain, for example, trace an inward shift in perspective during actor training in Alexander technique as the practice shifts from focusing on outward expression to perceiving inner states (Middleton and Chamberlain 2012: 95-112). In these examples, inner life is situated in the materiality of performance (a person-world interaction), even as inner perception yields a sense of something quite distinct from both the materiality of the external world, and even of the body itself.

Visual images of inner life, however, work differently. They present the form of the body, from which they imagine and model inner life (Noë 2012: 102). They make epistemological statements. Three genres of images considered in this paper—the Cartesian theatre of infinite regression, the ubiquitous image of a cross-legged meditator, and Buddhist monks in EEG caps—cannot provide access to first-person perception or to the sense of inner life. Nor do visual images represent the absence or impossibility of inner life, as a sensual substitute for or sign of inner life. Rather, I suggest, visual images of inner life perform the collision of materiality and form with what people sense as immaterial, unseen, and known only by inner experience. Pictures, as Alva Noë writes, "are made *for us* […] they are made with our particular perceptual and cognitive capacities in mind. They are made to be easy for us to make sense of" (Noë 2012: 103). In the act of seeing, visual images of inner life mediate that interior, eliding the boundaries between inner and outer. This does not always happen easily, however. As a foundation for parsing these three genres of images, the next section offers an overview of inner life cultivation as embodied practice. It provides a foundation for the discussion of how visual images perform the phenomenological problem of knowing the insides of other people when that ephemeral but palpable presence has no material form of its own.

Contemplative Practice: Doing but not Showing

In contrast to the emphasis on affect and audience in performance, contemplative practices cultivate unconcern for outside observers. Certainly there is no shortage of films, pictures, paintings, displays, rituals, and demonstrations of people engaged in meditation, which can be discussed as performance. However, the practices themselves, almost by definition, eschew affective reciprocity with witnesses, spectators, or audiences. Performance may be an epiphenomenon of practicing contemplation, but it is necessarily irrelevant to the

practice. Yet, performativity's oscillation between doers and perceivers does speak to the embodied action of contemplative practice. Caught in the eye of someone else, a person doing the seated stillness of Zen meditation, or walking the disorienting patterns of a Christian labyrinth are techne of performance, even as they are actions for cultivating inner life.

Read as performative, contemplative bodies encode cultural, social, religious, aesthetic, spiritual, and political meanings. As techniques of inner life practice, however, the embodied actions of contemplative practice shift the techne of performance from bodies perceiving other bodies to bodies perceiving an otherwise inaccessible life within the body. In contemplative practice, the conventional senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch) may be quieted or heightened; consciousness may be focused on an object or open to receive stimuli from the environment without attaching concepts to the stimuli; the mind may be cleared of language and images, fixed on a word or image or open to non-judgmental observation of the present moment. Mindfulness techniques—the ubiquitous distillation of Buddhist meditation for therapeutic purposes—infuse internal perception with everyday actions such as eating or walking.

As noted above, contemplative techniques may engage visual and aural images (meditating on the meaning of a painting or icon, contemplating a dead body, staring at a candle flame, immersion in an artistic performance, attending to sounds without naming them, internalizing a word). Through meditative techniques, focusing the outward-directed senses on external stimuli serves inner life by dissolving cognitive concepts of objects, eliminating excess mental activity, and breaking attachments to external stimuli, as in the non-thinking of Zazen. Mental and physical patterns cultivated in contemplative practice take awareness in the opposite direction of performativity's celebratory engagement with affective response to external stimuli. Certainly, the effects of cultivating compassion, inner peace, a sense of God's presence, the ability to pause before acting, reflective detachment from thoughts and emotions, and so on may be understood to have effects beyond individuals, as in Buddhist-derived Compassion (Loving Kindness) or Bhramavihāra meditation. However, whether done in communal settings such as monasteries, retreats and meditation groups, highly individualized practices or as the foundation for social activism, an affective dimension does not generally play a role in inner life cultivation. In that way, contemplative practice yields an unknowing of performativity and performance.

The action of inner life practice turns away from performativity, from responses and affects, analytical thinking, and self-identities to know a different dynamic between action and perception than that proscribed by performativity. Yet at the same time, while introspection, self-reflection, and "looking within" identify processes by which people engage inner life as the dwelling place of spirit, the visible surface of the body makes that process available to perceivers as performative action. The techne of performance meets inner life practice in the presence of the body. Without the body there is no transcending the body, and transcendence always requires the body, which is inherently performative. Cultivation of inner life invariably involves flesh, bone, blood and tissue in rituals, dietary restrictions, sleep regimens, codes of behavior, breathing techniques, physical postures, and physical movement such as walking or dancing as well as sitting in stillness.

The body might engage in visual experiences as a conduit for the mind's receptivity to spirituality, such as internal visualization (Pure Land Buddhism), gazing at anthropomorphic

religious icons for their deeper meaning (Eastern Orthodox Christianity), at ritually enlivened objects such as a statue of the Buddha, or at a dead body to instantiate the principle of impermanence. Senses might be engaged in fingering beads (rosary in Catholic Christianity, mala beads in Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Buddhist practice), repeating words, mantras, or names of God (contemporary eight-point Passage meditation, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation, japa in Southeast Asian traditions, Zikr in Islamic Sufism and Kabbalah in Judaism), chanting (Mantram meditation), or taking psychedelics (ayahuasca or peyote in shamanic traditions). Contemplative practice may also involve physical activity on the order of artistic expression, such as shamanic drumming, creating a mandala, creating a labyrinth, rituals or trance dancing.

The conceptual frames that give soteriological value to contemplative techniques may construe the physical body as divine (as in medieval Advaita Vedanta), as an impediment to divinity (as in medieval Christianity and Patañjalian yoga), or as a vehicle for instantiating divinity (as in Tantric Yoga). A practice such as Zen Buddhist meditation requires effort to achieve the effortlessness of stillness. Mevlevi Sufis spin the body around its axis, along with music and chanting, in meditative union with Allah (often done as concert or tourist performance). Tibetan Buddhist meditation uses forceful breathing and breath retention to clear the body of impediments to pure perception. In Taoist meditation practice, attention to breathing becomes part of the stillness of sitting. The Jesuit Christian internalization of sacred words in Lectio Divina and the yogic Nada Brahman find sound in the body. However construed or constructed, the body is present in and central to contemplative practice.

Contemplative practices with therapeutic and self-care goals do not generally aspire to transcendence or heightened knowledge as they are not situated in soteriological frameworks. These practices focus on immediate experience of body and mind, promoted in numerous mainstream books by authors such as Richard Rohr (American Franciscan), Haemin Sunim (Korean Buddhist), Thich Nhat Hanh (Vietnamese Buddhist), Mathieu Ricard (French Tibetan Buddhist), Pema Chödrön (American Tibetan Buddhist), Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg (American Vipassana) and the leading figure of the modern mindfulness movement, Jon Kabat-Zinn among many others. Mindfulness, which involves learning to focus consciousness non-judgmentally on and in the present moment, is arguably the most widely known inner life practice today. American physician Jon Kabat-Zinn developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in the 1970s as a scientifically based technique for improving health, well-being (Schedneck 2013: 52). As Maharishi Mahesh Yogi distinguished Transcendental Meditation (TM) from Hinduism in the 1950s to give transcendence universal appeal, Kabat-Zinn stripped MBSR of references to Buddhism to give therapeutic care and overall well-being a similar universality (Sun 2014: 11-12).

Decoupled from the soteriological aims of liberation from the self in Buddhist meditation, modern western mindfulness owes as much to the legacies of Christian transcendence and scientific objectivity as it does to Zen Buddhism. Its spiritual aspirations remain hidden amid a focus on the suffering of physical and psychological pain, life-stress and trauma. Its goals are practical, immediate and often instrumental: improved psychological functionality (focused attention, heightened awareness, increased concentration, mental clarity) and well-being (stress reduction, relaxation, mental and physical calming, physical or psychic healing, pain relief). The therapeutic function of "mindfulness" follows modern scientific realism in its approach to contemplative practice, linking mind to the physical brain,

reinforcing the brain's physical nature while understanding consciousness as embodied (Kabat-Zinn 2011: 35-36).

At the first-person level of experience, contemplative practice intertwines inner life and the physical body in ways familiar taxonomies do not quite capture, but which the visual images discussed in the next section suggest. "Body awareness" suggests the mind's observation of the body, "the subjective, phenomenological aspect of proprioception and interoception that enters conscious awareness, and is modifiable by mental processes including attention, interpretation, appraisal, beliefs, memories, conditioning, attitudes and affect (Farb, et al. 2015: 1). "Mindfulness" privileges a mental capacity over physical sensation, as "[…] attention and awareness oriented to the present moment that varies in degree within and between individuals, and can be assessed empirically and independent of religious, spiritual, or cultural beliefs" (Black 2011: 1). **'**Embodiment' privileges the body as a site of experience, against the conventional primacy of mental capacity in culturally Western contexts, and has been a central theme in the study of performance and performativity. Anthropologist Thomas Csordas proposes embodiment rather than mind, as "an indeterminate methodological field" with bodily experience as "the existential ground of culture and self" (Csordas 2002: 219, 241), requiring the critical cognitive capacities that typically characterize performance studies to view and analyze it.

Contemplative practice thus creates an opening for visual imagery as a performative techne of spirit. Though the body may be the source perception of an inner life, performativity as a mode of seeing the body cannot *not* be caught in the representational conundrum of turning (or trying to turn) the interior of the body outward into representation. Acknowledging inner life as always present in the act of performance gives audience-spectators the power to perceive bodies crafted by inner life practices as a discourse on inner and outer, unseen and seen, spirit and matter. As visual images make inner life available for perception by other people, they perform the paradoxical unity of actor and perceiver, a key perceptual shift (often a soteriological goal) in many contemplative practices. In this way, the presumed gap between image and referent may be no greater for spirit than for any other subject-object, action-perception dynamic.

Envisioning an Inner Life

Inner life is intimately bound to the physical, performative body in ways visual images make explicit. The visual representations considered here envision the collision of materiality (the body), the senses (vision) and the sense of an unseen and immaterial inner life (spirit). They perform the inner gaze of contemplation by shaping, in the evocative words of Claire Marie Chambers, the chasms of knowledge unearthed by contemplative practice into representation. Familiar genres of images signifying inner life—the Cartesian theatre of infinite regression, the ubiquitous image of a cross-legged meditator, and Buddhist monks in EEG caps—cannot provide access to first-person perception or sense of inner life, the phenomenological query posed by Anne Taves, Edward Slingerland, and Catherine Kerr. They can, however, reveal relationships envisioned between body and spirit, the exterior of the body and an inner life.

It is important to distinguish these performative, representational images from images that function as objects of meditation, icons, or artistic renderings of inner experience (Faure

1998:770). Cast in conventions of viewing that read them as documentary, these images perform specific relationships between inner and outer, body and spirit, materiality and the numinous. As visions of inner life, these genres perform inner life as the sense organ of spirituality, the unknowing of the material world. In these images, the body does the performative work of modeling inner life, whether as a mental theatre of representation, in still-life, or as an object of scientific study. In doing so, the performative techne in these visions of inner life reveal modern perceptions of the relationship between body and spirit.

Images may not tell us how we can know the minds or inner lives of others, but as performative techne their propositions about the nature of inner life help overcome what Alan Wallace famously called the "taboo" of subjectivity. As images render visions of inner life through the physical form of the body they perform knowledge of interrelationships among the physical body, inner life, and external world (Putnam 1999: 100-102). Visually, they refer to the perceptible material world, rather than the apophatic or symbolic language of spirituality. They open space for thinking into the interior dwelling place of spirit. While seeing with the "inner eyes" of contemplative practice allows for insight not accounted for in the performative techne of doing and perceiving, each genre performs a distinct vision of inner life. The next section puts those visions in dialogue with contemplative practice by analyzing three genres of images that represent inner life.

The first genre of images is the infinite regress of representation, a critique of substance dualism (Figure 1). This image performs inner life as a kind of theatre in which the cognitive mind sees itself seeing itself, never perceiving the world *outside* the mind directly. The infinite regress vision of inner life models the visual dynamic of performance, in which an observer (in this image, self-represented as a body embodied in the mind) perceives representations of the world. The second genre performs the meditation posture associated with Buddhist and Yogic traditions (Figure 2). The body sits with legs crossed in front. This familiar genre performs the external signs of an embodied inner life. As a performance, the physical form of the Lotus posture implies, rather than reveals, inner life. Third and finally, a more recent genre of images depicting a Buddhist monk wearing an EEG cap (Figure 3). This third genre answers the phenomenological question of how we can know the insides of other people by promoting a materialist, technologically mediated view of the mind embodied as the brain. The image implies that inner life can be known by mapping matter of the brain. This genre represents body and mind as knowable; the electrodes promise a direct look at the workings of the brain, however mediated by technology. This vision of inner life assures that the realism of scientific materialism will find and define inner life in graphic representation.

I. The Embodied, Bodied and Representational Mind

In A. O. Scott's description of Lupita Nyong'o performing two characters in the 2019 horror film *Us,* "she doubles the doubling, locking eyes with herself in an infinite regress of identification…." (Morris 2019: 47). The image of infinite regress envisions mind this way, as a site of visual representation. (See Figure 1.) Its vision of mind-as-body-in-body maps the contested parameters of the "mind-body" problem. This genre of images, from Gilbert Ryle's 1949 critique of Cartesian dualism, envisions a "ghost in the machine," an embodied spirit within the physical body processing visual images and controlling cognition as well as motor functions. A critique of Cartesian substance dualism, as well as a logical fallacy, the image of an infinite regress of visual doubling also reflects discourses on mimesis, imitation, quotation,

simulacra, referentiality, citation, ghosting, intertextuality, and recycled images prevalent in performance studies (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991: 135).

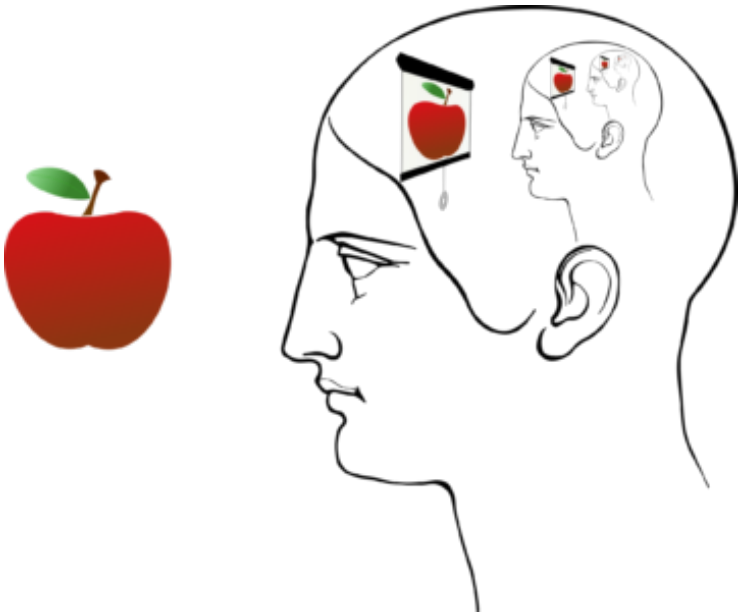

Fig 1. Infinite regress of mental representation. Image from https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2021/10/the-von-neumann-mind-constructing-meaning.html. Accessed 3 November 2023.

This imagery poses a problem for an understanding of introspection as the replay of perception (Lyons 1986: 151-152; Wallace 2000: 76- 78). The problem is that, in this vision, inner life relies on external stimuli. The inside of the cranium mirrors the external world, organizing perception and emotion into representations of that world and an embodied self functioning in it. Without input from the perceivable matter of the world, inner life is empty; there is nothing for 'inner eyes' to see. This may in fact be the aim of some meditation practices in which the mind's activity is stilled so that there is only seeing. The picture of a representational mind-in-the-brain also poses a "theatre of the mind," or in Antonio Damasio's (1994) more recent metaphor for the body as the brain's theatre, a "movie in the brain."

This representational metaphor, the pictorial essence of performative spectatorship, questions how an internal picture is generated in the mind and who generates the picture—how the brain generates the sense that there is an observer who sees the movie or picture (Damasio 1994: 11). Internal representation in this model depends on observation of the outside world: objects, people, texts, performances, and so on (Rupert 2011: 101-102). Envisioning "looking within" as endless repetition of representations forecloses on the possibility of fusing perceiver and perceived, perceiver with the numinous, or contemplative states of self-dissolution valued in meditative traditions such as, for example, Laya yoga.

The image of the mind as a body in the mind also encodes a deeply rooted suspicion of the reliability of mental phenomena (Wallace 2000: 80). The inner life proposed by the infinite regress raises the introspective fallacy, the fear that the self is indeed composed only of accumulated stimuli encoded and re-encoded within the confines of the cranial theatre, or that there is indeed no identifiable self at all (a perspective that aligns with a Buddhist soteriological framework, but not with a South Asian yogic or Christian framework). This image also raises the critique of any subjective experience that does not reference social conditions. Philosopher William Lyons captures this anxiety around the validity of inner life in his observation that "we are much less certain" about the sense data and mental conditions we experience than we are about objects in the material world around us (Lyons 1986: 55).

Recent approaches to embodied consciousness have redefined the problem of an inner life, perhaps injecting a bit of certainty to it. Rather than isolating mind or consciousness

as the thing to be observed, perspectives such as those of Raymond Gibbs (2005) see the entire body as organizing perception, translating input and sensory data from the external, material world holistically, as a kind of immersive theatre. Still, for consciousness studies scholar David Chalmers, the limits of cognition's ability to perceive the inner workings of mind presents the "hard problem of consciousness:" "[h]ow can the mechanism for introspection at the same time be the object of introspection" (Chalmers 1995: 200)?

The idea of mental events as physical processes known by their representation of the outside world depicted in the infinite regression genre of images renders direct experience of inner life a perceptual fiction. Contemplative practices propose direct access to inner life, validated by the effects of techniques and shaped by soteriological, spiritual, or therapeutic discourses. Contemplative practices in general collapse the theatrical model of the perceiver with the object of perception at the level of first-person experience. They transform performativity's oscillation between actor/doer (object) and spectator (perceiver) into a condition of perception within the body that receives and represents sensory input. This collapse is an explicit goal in certain Indic and Himalayan contemplative practices, where this philosophical problem becomes a soteriological goal of meditation: the seer perceives seeing, the mind perceives itself.

In this way, the internal sense, or "inner eyes," cultivated in contemplative practice undoes the spectral orientation to the world represented in the image of infinite regress, or focused on external, material objects. In practice, this cultivation may be achieved and given meaning in a variety of ways depending on the tradition: withdrawing the senses to perceive a stable or divine reality (as in Patañjalian "classical" Yoga or Eastern Orthodox Catholic Hesychasm), focusing on visual images to dissolve conceptual thinking (as in Theravada Buddhist Vipassanā or Mahāyāna Buddhist Dzogchen), sensing the divine through devotional prayer (as in Hindu Bhakti or Christian Centering Prayer), using sensory stimulation and intoxicants to transcend into a spirit world (as in indigenous shamanism and neo-shamanic traditions), sensory immersion in theatrical events (as in Christian Franciscan Live Nativity scenes or Vaishnava Hindu Rāmlīlā performances), or complete immersion in sound (contemporary Kuṇḍalinī gong meditation). These inward-directed mental and embodied practices challenge the performance of inner life represented in the infinite regress image. Practice offers a different perspective on this already well-critiqued model of mental process. Contemplative practice dismantles the representational model of the mind, just as the unconcern for an external witness dismantles the perceiver-perceived dynamic of performativity.

II. The Shape of an Inner Life as Still Life

Performativity, solidly situated in the domain of physical objects in the world around us, focuses attention on the material conditions and discourses that construct people's experience. As psychologist Russell Hurlburt observes, "[g]enerally, we care more about physical objects in the world around us, and about our and others' situation and prospects, than about our conscious experience […]" (Hurlburt 2007: 49). In the context of material culture, the inward turn of contemplative practices undermines the investment in expressive forms so vital to performance and performativity. Contemplative practices, while not immune to discursive and cultural constructions, propose a different orientation to the materiality of performance. They ask: "what are the conditions of our being *within* those constructions"?

Turning the mind and vision inward posits inner life rather than material culture as the ground for experience. The "hard problem" for the performative techne of spirit is not introspection (the problem of who sees what when attention turns inward). The problem becomes how an inner life of a socially constituted body can be explored in ways that do not, in the words of phenomenologist Susan Kozel, reduce "to a series of inner psychic experiences or conceptual abstractions" (Kozel 2007: 5)?

Though seated postures vary among practices, a prominent genre of visual images associated with meditation is that of a body sitting with legs crossed, each ankle resting on the opposite ankle or leg with knees pointing laterally away from the trunk of the body. This cross-legged posture is widely recognized from contemporary yoga as the lotus position (*padmāsana* in Sanskrit). The position derives from mid-first millennium B.C.E. Jain, Buddhist, Brahamanic, and later Tantric meditation practices known collectively as yoga but bearing little resemblance to modern posture-oriented yoga. *In situ,* the shape and symbolism of this seated physical posture references the iconic many-petaled water lily (lotus) that grows in the mud of shallow ponds in South Asia. The lotus is a visual and metaphoric symbol of enlightened consciousness. Though not unique to Indic soteriologies, this seated posture was exported from South Asia and eventually took root in popular, contemporary mind-body exercise systems such as Modern Postural Yoga, as well as Buddhist meditation practices popular outside Asia.

Fig 2. Seated cross-legged meditation posture. Image from https://www.destress.com/relaxation-techniques/meditation/sitting-meditation/ Accessed 3 November 2023

As noted above, without specific cultural histories, religious contexts, conceptual or soteriological frameworks, contemplative practice takes on a kind of universalized spirituality (Schedneck 2013: 52-53). The ubiquitous lotus posture and its variations can be read in this context as evidence of religion losing ground to undefined New Age spiritualities, and of culture appropriated from South Asia now universalized, popularized, and commodified as spirituality without religion. As a genre, the image of this seated position situates meditating bodies in culture and social relations, even as it masks those relations (Wilson 2014: 65). In the West, the prevalence of this image encodes assumptions about Asian meditation, individual personhood, and spirituality universalized as 'mindfulness' associated with mental health and well-being. In practice, the iconic seated body in Lotus moves meditation out of the monastery or retreat center, and into the home, school, and office building. Its ubiquity outside religious contexts offers an antidote to the unfulfilled hope that the material conditions of modern living might soothe rather than exacerbate internal tension. Even as this wide-spread image holds out the promise or ideal of individual inner peace and

perhaps cross-cultural unity, it may also mask social realities, for example structural racism, religious culture, and social inequities (Bush 2010: 5; Kucinskas 2019: 196).

As a vision of inner life, the cross-legged meditator genre is invested in showing the embodied doing of meditation—its performance. The image shows the embodiment of an inner life, its literal physical shape. The image does not, however, purport to show the inner life itself, as the infinite regress image seeks to do. The lotus position image stops at the border of the physical body, content to testify to what cannot be seen and, more significantly, to *accept* that invisibility. Reading this image, the 'insides of other people' remain elusive in the signification of the body's visible surface. The body posture on its own is easily interpreted as a sign for inner life. Following Claire Chambers, the image of a person seated in meditation also marks the absence of an inner life—and mourns its loss.

Imagery of people seated in contemplation, seemingly impervious to culturally-induced interference, suggests a stance against the external, performative world. The body is still and silent, erect and energetic; the spine is straight and long, the muscles balanced between tension and relaxation; the arms and hands are placed to allow an open chest. The countenance, in repose but not asleep, does not seek communication with anyone or reliance on any external object. The face is strikingly indifferent to affect. The eyes gently closed or half open, and the mouth gently turned up in an ambiguously relaxed half smile giving corporeal shape to an inner life that cannot be seen but also need not be seen to exist. The image seems to show the invisible meditating mind focusing into and within the physical body that houses it, the meditator's 'inner eyes' always somewhere other than where an observer stands, never available to meet an observer's gaze. The body's performance of meditation asserts the presence of an inner life without showing it.

The cross-legged lotus position testifies to a kind of lived experience originating within the body. Seen from a third-person perspective, it performs inner life as a condition of embodied experience, invoking the interplay between the materiality of performance and the ephemerality of spirit. The lotus posture image does present a hard problem for performativity's investment in material culture and bodies as the boundary or ground for an inner life. The ubiquitous posture shows inner life as a particular kind of embodied engagement with the world. The image cannot show the interior of the body, but it does more than symbolize or represent inner life. The act of sitting without external stimulation confirms inner life as a possibility beyond the performance itself.

III. Robes and Electrodes: Looking Within from the Outside

Knowing 'the insides of other people,' once a central theme in humanities scholarship, has become the purview of neuroscience and technologies that provide visual images of the physical body's internal workings. The poetics of neuroscience in particular observe and chart that interior, seeking the aesthetics of neural correlates to experiences of inner life and analyzing ways to visualize the data (Loke, et al. 2017: 174). A correlate to the visualization of meditation represented in the artistry of MRI and fMRI brain scans is a genre of images that links the human being—the meditator—to the data.

In studying contemplative practice through the study of the human brain, the goals of rational scientific inquiry and the quest for empirical documentation of phenomena meet the subjectivity of unverifiable spiritual experience. It is not insignificant that both the Buddhist perspective and modern scientific perspective both seek knowledge of the workings of nature,

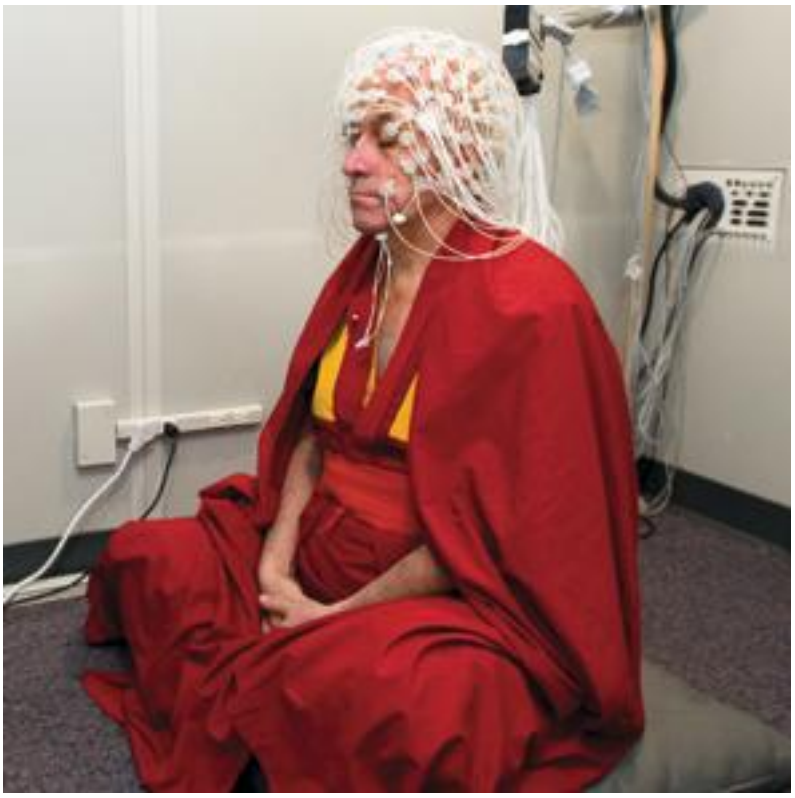

Fig. 3. French monk Matthieu Ricard in EEG cap, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Image by Jeff Miller, published in Richard, Lutz, and Davidson, 2014.

and both posit the mind as a natural phenomenon (Flanagan 2011: 10-11). The resulting vision of an inner life performs two approaches to inner life simultaneously: a lived practice that confirms inner life by experience, and the quest to explain that experience by observing the inside of a body through imaging technology. B. Alan Wallace encapsulates the ensuing problem:

> [F]rom the first-person perspective, consciousness is a prime irreducible datum, but from the third person scientific perspective there is no way of investigating it directly. That is, brain research tells us nothing about why neural processes should give rise to mental experiences of any kind. (Wallace 2000: 75)

Pictures of Buddhist monks in EEG caps are the result of numerous studies conducted in the United States since 2005 at MIT, UCLA, and the Universities of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Stanford and Kent State (see Anderson 2022). Some of these studies were funded by the Tibetan Buddhist Dalai Lama's Mind and Life Institute (McMahan and Braun 2017: 10-11). One of the most frequent images in this genre is the figure of Matthieu Ricard, a French Buddhist monk, popular author of meditation books, and member of the Mind and Life Institute board. Ricard collaborated with neuroscientist Richard Davidson, a pioneer in the study of meditating brains at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in 2008. Early photographs document Ricard, himself a molecular geneticist, in Davidson's lab preparing for an EEG (electroencephalogram) intended to map electrical patterns in his brain during meditation. In the images, he wears the traditional saffron robes of his Vajrayana Buddhist order and, in juxtaposition to the traditional religious robes, a 128-channel geodesic sensor net.[4] (See figure 3.)

The genre of visual images Ricard represents performs the modern scientific quest for the source of inner life in the materiality of brain tissue. Paradigms of knowledge associated with Western empiricism and materialism intersect with monastic commitments of elite Tibetan Buddhist monastics dating from the tenth century of the common era.[5] This genre of inner-life images performs ancient, Eastern spirituality under the surveillance and scrutiny of

Western science (McMahan and Braun 2017: 9-15). A monk in an EEG cap makes a different proposition than the image of a body seated in meditation. The presence of the body in the image also makes an a distinctly different assertion than EEG printouts or color-coded pictures of brains showing where brains are activated in different meditation practices. Neuroscience, these images assert, promises to explain the underlying mechanisms for a naïve or suspect sense of inner life by examining the matter—the physical brain—eschewing the unverifiable perception of inner life asserted by practitioners (Wallace 2000: 21-22; 2007: 39).

The visual image of a monk in an EEG cap conveys that it is not enough to trust that something is going on inside the body by looking at the body's exterior form, or accepting an account from within a meditative tradition as proof of inner life. Intersecting tropes of ancient monastic traditions, modern technologically mediated research, spiritual enlightenment, and empirical knowledge come together in the image of a Buddhist monk wired with electrodes. Matthieu Ricard's image in particular juxtaposes Eastern spirituality with Western materialism, and rational Enlightenment modernity with ancient Eastern religious enlightenment in the person of a European Buddhist.

Visually, the technology of the sensors mimics a capillary bed shaped as a kind of exoskeleton over the cranium. The hard, protective skull becomes the membrane across which vital information about an inner life flows outward for observation, into the domain of performativity. The visual image of a monk covered with EEG sensors makes different assertions about an inner life than the image of a cross-legged meditator or the diagrammatic vision of infinite regress. Whereas the image of a person meditating shows the outer form of the internal experience, images of monks in EEG caps aim to show the pulsing, wet, electrically charging brain as materiality of that experience. Medical technology mediates and is the medium for that visual performance of inner life, negotiating between the inside of the body and the lab. Its visual representation of electrical activity appears more trustworthy than subjective accounts, though like those accounts, is ultimately subject to interpretation and becomes a site for meaning-making within its own (neuroscientific) discourses.

The image of a robed Buddhist monk in an EEG net asserts first that the phenomenological problem of knowing others is solvable through knowledge of the brain, visualized as the effects of electrical conduction in human tissue. The presumption here is that inner life can be shown and thus known when it can be observed as a physical process. Without the ambiguities of first-person reporting—whether the Pali canon, the Cloud of Unknowing, the poetry of Rumi, or the writings of contemporary popular authors—an EEG printout confirms the physical matter of the brain's activity in contemplative states. Truth claims of contemplative inner life need not, says this image, be relegated to the suspect domain of subjectivity and mystical writings.

The vision of inner life offered by neuroscience does not perform representational processes of cognition conveyed by the infinite regress image, nor does it let the meditating body confirm the presence of inner life, as does the image of a person in lotus posture. The image of a meditating monk itself holds the promise that something perhaps profound, mystical, or spiritual is going on within the body. The image of this monk in an EEG cap performs a different promise, that biometric information about a body can indeed reveal the electrochemical workings inside the cranium. This genre merges the two visions by linking the meditating body with the mediating apparatus of the EEG cap promises to turn the inside out, to make the inner life visible to others and knowable. But that visibility—in print-outs

measuring electrical activity in brain regions and color-coded artistic renderings of brains—substitute for a direct gaze into the meditator's inner life. They perform inner life by showing what meditation *does* to the body, and where it exists in physical form.

Against the dualism proposed by the distinction of mind and body, and against reducing consciousness to the materiality of the brain, the imagery of monks in EEG caps proposes a synthesis. Mediation, representation, and authenticity flow across the boundary of the cranium. Performing an inner life as brain matter is ultimately no less reductionist than the ghost in the machine, which renders an inner life a perceptual fallacy. Performing inner life as a physical phenomenon paradoxically reinscribes the status of an inner life, opening space for renewed discussion of inner life as a human phenomenon to be taken seriously.

IV. When we Look Within, We See Light

Ultimately, these three genres of images assert that inner life, the source of spirituality, is material and it matters. The body-in-the mind imagines an inner life as a kind of theatre, endlessly representing an external world. The cross-legged meditator shows us the physical shape of inner life, experienced with 'inner eyes' as independent of external form and representation. The meditator under electrodes assures us that inner life itself can indeed be represented, and that representation yields knowledge. In these images, the desire for inner life in a technologically saturated, highly performative, and socially complex culture meets the desire to know inner life from the outside—that is, to know inner life as performance. Even as the subjective experience of contemplative practice turns away from performativity, these visual images give inner life a performative presence. These visions perform inner life as simultaneously *within* the body, *of* the body, and *as* the body. They bear the burden of revealing inner life by showing how it works, rather than representing qualities of experience or abstract concepts.

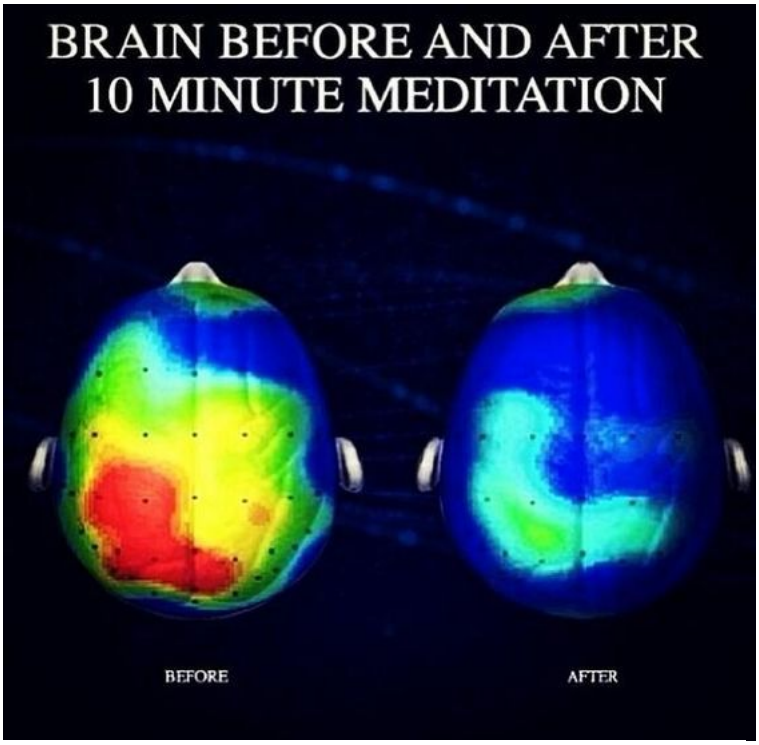

Fig 4. Brain scan representing inner life as illumination with color. Image from https://hotyogaglasgow.com/how-yoga-changes-your-brain/. Accessed 3 November 2023.

In the process of demystifying contemplative practice by making it material and performative, these images speak metaphorically to one of the most profound mysteries of religious and spiritual practices: enlightened perception. Cross-legged, half-smiling meditators perform the authority of experience in which one's mental and physical being is the ground

condition for perception and for action. Monks covered in electrodes assert the authority of scientific inquiry to reveal the physical conditions of consciousness, if not their meaning. Performativity, from theatre and ritual to the performance of everyday life, involves and invokes the experiential reality of inner life, the "sense of perceptual presence of what is hidden, occluded, out of reach (Noë 2012: 95). Real-time fMRI images of meditating subjects offer another performance of inner life. This most recently developed and advanced technology for measuring blood flow in brain tissue envisions inner life in the same way religious art over centuries has represented the inner life of mystics, saints, gurus, and holy people: as light. (See Figure 4) The visual performance of an illuminated brain might in fact be as poetic a vision of inner life as the lotus. As performative techne of spirit, these images cannot show inner life directly. But they can testify to the desire and longing for spirit, and in doing so confirm its significance to human experience, if not its material presence.

Notes

1. The first version of this paper was supported by a fellowship from the Glasscock Center for Humanities Research at Texas A&M. The inquiry into how performative forms of *techne* can shed light on the notion of spirituality is indebted to Josh Edelman and the late Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen.

2. This languge intentionally echoes the language of Robin Nelson's description of the broader ways conceiving and articulating new knowledge in the academy through what is known as practice-as-research (PaR). See Nelson (2013), especially chapter 2.

3. The terms meditation and contemplation are used differently across traditions. This paper uses meditation and contemplation interchangeably, with "contemplative practice" as an umbrella term.

4. For an example of how brain scans re-present first-person experience as well as images of Matthieu Ricard in the context of popular science, see Ricard, Lutz, and Davidson (2014).

5. The availability of Tibetan monks as research subjects in the early 2000s initially tilted neuroscience research bias toward Tibetan Buddhist practices over studies of Christian, yogic, Zen, and other contemplative traditions. Research on meditation in general met with resistance from a significant number of neuroscientists, most notably in 2005 when the Dalai Lama addressed the Society of Neuroscience annual meeting. Resistance hinged on political concerns, the interjection of religion, and the reliance on first-person accounts of brain activity in research methods (Cyranoski 2005: 1130). After 2005, collaborations, meetings, and conferences linking neuroscience and Buddhist meditation motivated a strong uptick in research on meditation, documented in *The Mind's Own Physician*, edited by Richard Davidson and Jon Kabat-Zinn (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2011) mediated by work on intersubjectivity such as B. Alan Wallace's *Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Science Converge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), among others. Critiques of research methodologies that purport to prove the physiological benefits of meditation, remain a necessary counter to the hype around meditation as health modality, for example Nicholas T. Van Dam, et al., "Mind the Hype: A Critical Evaluation and Prescriptive Agenda for Research on Mindfulness and Meditation" (*Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2018, Vol. 13(1) 36-61).

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