ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Anthropology of Consciousness

The dawn of division: For an anthropological theory of consciousness through contemplative ethnography

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Abstract

The article delves into the need for an anthropological exploration of consciousness in the modern context. While anthropology's core focus has always been the study of the human subject, this study argues that consciousness has emerged as a fundamental aspect that underpins all human phenomena. The historical trajectory of anthropology, from its positivist leanings to contemporary shifts like the phenomenological and ontological turns, is examined to highlight the evolving perspective on subjectivity and alterity. The author's ethnographic studies, particularly within the realm of contemplative practices like traditional Buddhist meditation and mindfulness, reveal a crucial connection between consciousness and anthropological inquiry, challenging the inherent bias and dualistic thinking within anthropology, particularly concerning the dichotomy of self and other, evident even in studies of meditation. The proposal of "mindful ethnography" is introduced as a means to transcend this dualism, drawing inspiration from Buddhist philosophy. The study presents consciousness as a central concern for anthropology, calling for a reevaluation of traditional frameworks and the adoption of a more mindful and non-dualistic approach to anthropological research. Through a thorough investigation of consciousness, the article seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of human experience and reshape the trajectory of anthropological inquiry in a modern context.

> A novel, a poem, a painting, or a piece of music are individuals—that is, entities in which the expression cannot be separated from the expressed, whose meaning is accessible only through direct engagement, and which radiate their significance without departing from their temporal and spatial context.[1]
>
> (Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 188, *my translation*)

INTRODUCTION

This article aimed to present theoretical reflections on the topic of consciousness in anthropology, based on my ethnographic experiences centered on the study of contemplative practices, primarily the forms of Buddhist meditation, mindfulness, and other meditative techniques that inspired them.

My ethnography of meditation proceeds in two main phases. From 2018 to 2020, I focused on meditation applied to clinical contexts, while from 2020 to the present, I have investigated meditation to gather subjective experiences related to the theme of consciousness. This is indeed a challenging issue to study and present. For anthropology, which is primarily concerned with the qualitative aspects of phenomena, the focus has predictably been the subjectivity of the meditators, rather than their specific affiliation to a tradition or a particular cultural environment. This does not mean, of course, that the fieldwork has disregarded this fundamental aspect of the cultural background. Additionally, especially in the ethnography of meditation in the European context, where I conducted my fieldwork, important dynamics of transculturation and transformation of an overly complex phenomenon come into play (Lo Turco, 2006; McMahan, 2008; Sharf, 1995). This includes adherence to certain forms of spirituality and frequenting environments, such as Buddhist centers or meditation groups, which have a significant cultural backdrop.

Nonetheless, the specific interest of these reflections does not concern how meditation has been acculturated in Europe. As for the reasons why mindfulness has been turned into a therapeutic or personal investigative tool, this topic deserved a separate study due to its complexity (Divino, 2024a). Indeed, since meditation is already a globalized phenomenon, this in itself would be enough to pose the problem of an ethnography that is multi-sited, but since this reflection focuses on heterogeneous subjectivities and on possible shared analogies on one's own conscious experience in meditation, it is more appropriate to speak of non-localized ethnography as well (Falzon, 2009; Tsuda et al., 2014).

What I present here is an issue that emerged from the main ethnographic investigation, namely the difficulty in receiving subjective narratives of such a composite experience as the investigation of self-consciousness conducted through meditation. What was lacking was a well-defined ethnographic field, which was instead replaced by an intersubjective field that was established each time between me and the subject narrating their story (Feldman, 2011). Facilitating the emergence of this field was the primary task I set for myself, but as already mentioned, the exposition of experiences so difficult to verbalize made the subjects' narratives challenging and rendered my presence ineffective in mediating without pressuring the subjects. I attempted to resolve this issue by making the object of the intersubjective tension between the meditator's narration and my role as a listener an element of elicitation, which would allow the narrating subject to express themselves more freely, removing the barriers of authority that often envelop the role of the "researcher" and can hinder a process of self-narration (Huspek, 1994; Kordeš et al., 2019; Pauwels, 2015, 2019).

This kind of elicitation permits the shifting of the role of the expert from the researcher to the narrating subject. The meditator becomes the maker of visual product resulting from a progressive layering process that follows different meditation sessions. The subsequent

interpretation could only be attributed to the author and creator of that image, making them the sole "expert" and encouraging the process of self-narration. I will explain in more detail what I mean and how I was able to use this methodology for an ethnography of consciousness in meditation.

With the undertaking of the "decolonization" of anthropological perspectives, many innovations have emerged. At present, these studies appear to be the domain of medical anthropology and the burgeoning field of neuroanthropology (Kitayama & Jiyoung, 2010; Lende et al., 2021), a promising branch of modern anthropology that holds immense utility, alongside ethno-psychiatric and ethno-psychological studies, in order to comprehend the possible foundations of consciousness, especially through meditation (Laughlin, 2018).

What particularly prompted my inquiry was the fact that, despite the intention of decolonization, modern anthropology still suffers from a significant bias, an implicit prejudice that applies indiscriminately to all its investigations, no matter how well the anthropologist endeavors to shade their own viewpoint. In fact, the very notion that the identity, the self of the anthropologist, is a distinct subjectivity separate from that of the "other" subject (the anthropologized) carries a heavy bias rooted in dualistic thinking (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The fundamental hypothesis I anticipate here requires, of course, a more extensive treatment, which I intend to present in subsequent studies. Essentially, what has become evident to me through years of ethnography on meditation is that conscious experience is the process through which perception and cognition are organized to determine the objects of the world, which appear to us as separate and distinct (Kitayama et al., 2003). In the same way, the very consciousness that determines the objects of the world is itself determined as an object in the world. Through these processes of division, consciousness establishes a relationship with the objects of the world or with other consciousnesses that, from their perspective as subjects, perceive other subjects in relation to themselves.

The value introduced by the incorporation of contemplative experience into ethnographic practice concerns the overcoming of this dichotomy created by consciousness in favor of a more unifying vision, which I might call awareness. This is useful because it recognizes that this act of division, constantly reiterated in our daily experience, is not a real separation between things and people but is an artifice produced by consciousness, which is undermined by the very relationship itself. When we experience a specific object, we establish a relationship with it; similarly, in dialogue with other subjectivities, we establish an intersubjective relationship. Without this relationality, there could not be the experience of the object or even our own subjectivity. Everything is thus held together by the relationship. This is also the main reason why the anthropology of consciousness can greatly benefit from the study of meditation, which is the exercise of extending consciousness toward relationality until merging with what we previously perceived as separate and distinct from ourselves. To better understand this phenomenology in the context of anthropological theory, I will refer mainly to the work of Ernesto de Martino, whose considerations on consciousness are an excellent starting point.

What has particularly surprised me about employing elicitation techniques in ethnographic contexts is observing how most subjects, when producing an image resulting from a contemplative process, upon encountering the finished drawing during ethnography, through their interpretation and their relationship with that image, evoke this strange sensation of perceived unity or fusion with the very image they had gradually unveiled. This image becomes a sort of testimony of their dialogue with consciousness, a form of relating to themselves which, paradoxically, in the case of visual elicitation, translated into the perception that the image was, in some way, also conscious, engaging in a dialogue with them, and establishing a relationship.

THE RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONCEPT OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC "FIELD"

The types of transformations and conscious dynamics that meditation implies in the subjectivities practicing it leads to reconsidering the idea of identity and the relationship with the socio-cultural world in a new light. I chose to integrate the ethnographic idea of the field with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "phenomenal field" (*champ phénoménal*). His philosophy closely aligns, within the Western intellectual landscape, with engaging in dialogue with Indian non-dualistic thought (*advaita*), which, in addition to being a philosophy, is based concretely on contemplative experiences leading the subject to lose the perception of their separate, distinct being from the observed object.

This experience should also prompt a reconsideration of theoretical aspects of anthropology. We often lend legitimacy to indigenous epistemologies and subjective experiences, but in the case of meditation, which has transcended the cultural boundaries within which it was conceived as anthropotechnics, it also transcends notions of subjectivity. On the one hand, this aligns perfectly with fundamental anthropological theories: identity is a cultural construct attributed by the relational dynamics between social actors, rather than an intrinsic fact of the individual. However, this concept extends to any attributions of identity, encompassing not only social actors but also the nominal identities of the "things" inhabiting the world. These entities, as they enter our phenomenal field, appear to us as possessing their own identities.

Meditation also posed a challenge in this regard. In my personal experience, the deepest phases of contemplative practice always involved a perceptual shock. Let us take a classic example: to aid in contemplation, the meditator focuses on an object, a candle, and engages in an exercise of concentration on the image of that object, redirecting their focus to it whenever a distracting thought arises, diverting attention from the candle. If done consistently and persistently, after a certain period of training, the relationship between the acting and observing subject and the object being passively observed is reversed (Dennison, 2022; Sparby, 2022). Or rather, the subject can experience a state of expansion of their consciousness that extends to the (alleged) object—the candle in this case—resulting in a reversal of their perceptions: I am the candle, and I become the observer being observed by the aggregate (*saṅkhāra*, the set of factors constituting an identity according to Buddhist doctrine) observing them.

> The act of sensing constitutes a vital connection with the world, rendering it present to us as the familiar setting of our existence. It is through this connection that the perceived object and the perceiving subject acquire their depth and substance. Sensing can be understood as the intentional fabric that the effort of knowledge seeks to unravel.[2]

> (Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 79, *my translation*)

Where does the "field" fit into all this? How does this necessitate a reconsideration of the entire anthropology of perceptions and sensations, even theoretically? The situation becomes even more complex when establishing a field of intersubjective dialogue where two meditators, an anthropologist, and a narrating subject communicate their experiences regarding this phenomenon of absorption (*samādhi*). What stance should the anthropologist adopt in relation to these narratives, and how can one capture their utmost spontaneity?

It became evident in my autoethnography that the Buddhist theory of consciousness (*viññāṇa*) as an organizing force creating dichotomies and separations and attributing names to every distinct form (*nāmarūpa*) could be an accurate insight (Divino, 2023, p. 2, 16–17).

It will then be the distinct cultural orders that arbitrarily assign names to forms, cultural identities, norms, and social values. This aspect too had been well understood by Buddhist discourses on the relativity of nominal identities. According to Buddhists, what constitutes the problem with this mechanism is that we live in a world which, although it is constructed by consciousness, is believed to be an objective and natural reality.

> But if the essence of consciousness lies in forgetting its own phenomena and thereby enabling the possible constitution of "things," this forgetting is not a mere absence; it is the absence of something that consciousness could make present to itself. In other words, consciousness can forget phenomena only because it is also capable of recalling them; it neglects them in favor of things only because they serve as the cradle of those things.[3]

> (Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 79, *my translation*)

The Buddha himself views this problem—the fragmentation of the world and the construction of things associated with nominal identities starting from the fragments of that unity—as directed by a cultural difference, as evidenced, for example, in the variability of dialects in India during his time (cf. *Araṇavibhaṅgasutta*, Majjhimanikāya 139).[4] But that every culture, regardless of the values it adopts, uses the mechanism of dichotomization at its inception, is a fact that we could say is anthropologically universal. This is also why meditation has fascinated me so much: because its intent is to deconstruct the primordial mechanism of dichotomy, the dawn of division, and is thus effective, paradoxically, even in other cultural environments.

It is precisely in the search for data that the heart of the problem resides. The ethnographer "immerses" themselves in an "other" cultural world, hoping that this full immersion can lead to the discovery of alterity. Asserting that a process of identification can yield data comparable to that of a "native" was already a concern for early anthropologists (Malinowski, 1922; Idem, 1967), but this discussion is perhaps tainted by a certain Eurocentric bias on knowledge and "understanding." We could already question the legitimacy of discussing such a dichotomy (self/other), and we might also discover that we are still grappling with an artificial problem today:

> The crisis of representation, which has destabilized the subject/object separation, while simultaneously complicating the other two dualisms that, like the first, are versions of the Culture/Nature distinction, the quintessential convention of Western ethnology and anthropology: the dualism between people and things (including humans and non-humans) on the one hand, and that between linguistic meanings and extra-linguistic reality (concepts and objects) on the other.

> (Brigati & Gamberi, 2019, p. 278, *my translation*)

The second stimulus concerns the beginning of an ethnography of science and its social application, but, above all, the political use of science (p. 279).

Ethnography is an instrument almost sacralized within anthropology, as it is believed that without it, anthropology would simply lose its sense of purpose. In this logic, ethnography is anthropology, and anthropology is ethnography. This is not an unfounded assertion, as it has been suggested that the entire "anthropological theory has tended to disappear, engulfed by ethnographic particularism" (Brigati & Gamberi, 2019, p. 226). This is even evident in simple de facto observations that can be easily attested by those who experience anthropology in academic settings: anthropological work that is "theoretical" or lacking in ethnography is generally considered of lesser value. Similarly, in many universities, there is a strong

push, sometimes even an obligation, to compose a "fieldwork." This trend is epitomized by the Geertzian manifesto, which has contributed significantly to shaping the "prevailing ethnographic fanaticism" (Matera, 2017, pp. 23–4) we witness today.

This sentiment was also intuited in earlier times, when de Martino sharply criticized the "descriptivism of ethnologists of the positivist era who described in detail the facts of primitive customs, and they created from that an involuntarily ridiculous image, like the technical gestures of swimming repeated by someone who is out of water" (de Martino, 2023, p. 225). This becomes particularly crucial in the question of the ethnographic field as a "bounded area" (Ferguson & Gupta, 1997) in which subjects are studied in their natural environment. Despite criticisms and transformations, the notion of a field is considered essential, otherwise there is no ethnography, and without ethnography, there is no anthropology. Now, let us attempt to replace the idea of a "field" with that of a "laboratory." The space remains delimited and well-defined, controlled. Whether it is controlled a priori, as in the case of a laboratory setup, or a posteriori, as in the arrangement of a setting, the undeniable fact remains: the anthropologist cannot help but envision themselves as a scientist. It seems they cannot escape this deeply ingrained idea that has long dominated the Western way of thinking. Nor does it seem to us that the idea of "field," however undeniably useful, can also be culturally determined. To echo de Martino, "Western (or Westernized) ethnologists take the history of their own culture as a unit of measure for foreign cultural histories" (de Martino, 2023, p. 174). My intention is not to abandon the idea of field entirely, but to accept the possibility that it can also be constituted in forms different from those to which we are accustomed.

ELICITATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

The responses of the initial subjects who participated in my ethnographies and described their relationship with contemplative practice were highly intriguing in this regard. In disclosing their experiences, the subjects of this ethnography reported an issue that was not solely dependent on cultural or social dynamics but pertained to their intimate relationship with themselves. The emerging field was a relational tension that varied each time, encompassing both myself and the meditator recounting their story. Within this relational field, social, educational, and cultural dynamics served as a backdrop, allowing me to understand the subject, establish common references, and share languages. Nonetheless, the recurring issue revealed through their narratives was how their subjectivities were tested in the face of a world collapsing due to the inevitable consequences of contemplative practice.

I hereby present some cases, such as that of Daniel, a fervent meditator and scholar of the Buddhist canon, who chose contemplations of the image of the sky as one of his favorite exercises:

> At that moment, I *am* the sky: I meditate on the *nimitta* [sign, image] of the vast and expansive sky because when my contemplation surpasses a certain stage, I extend beyond the boundaries of my body… it is not like imagining to be the sky… it is becoming it, it is a total inversion of one's perspective… I am here but at the same time I feel extended like the sky… I do not have a body or appendages like hands or legs… I am something immense that embraces everything… it is a sensation of which only a vague memory remains when I finish meditating… and it is also for this reason that sometimes I wish to remain in the bliss of meditation forever.

These experiences recur for Daniel, who is an experienced and seasoned meditator, even involuntarily, as in the case when he told me about when, during a rainy day, he had an experience

like an OOBE, but extending his consciousness to the viewpoint of something seemingly random—a puddle.

> At one point, I was struck by the sound of drops in a puddle, and at a certain point, the separation between cognition and what was being perceived disappeared completely. It lasted a long time, in the order of one to two minutes, but the experience was very extensive. There was somehow an expansion, let's say. The biographical aspect was diluted into a much broader experience, let's call it non-dual, just to give it a name, an approximate name. Then I talked about it with a monk of Burmese tradition.

This is just one of the numerous testimonies that concerned this phenomenon of *loss of division*. At that point, my ethnography of meditation began to take shape, but presented other obstacles. Contemplative practice inevitably leads to a reflection on the self, most properly understood as problematic. Not merely an identity problem of the type "who am I," but "what makes me capable of saying 'I am'?"

Meditation changes, overturns, and questions the perception of the world and one's subjectivity, or rather, of one's socio-cultural identity and how those same values that identify us also shape the world. The dilemma at this point was, rather, to define an ethnographic methodology capable of accounting for these transformations. The ethnography that was taking shape also prompted me to investigate the possibilities of a "contemplative anthropology" (Divino, 2023), which integrated the non-dualistic experience of contemplation into ethnographic practice. There have indeed been critiques regarding the feasibility of implementing a non-dualistic perspective at the methodological level (see Venkatesan et al., 2013). Nondualism is often regarded as an essentially philosophical concept. More specifically, there is concern about the potential diminishing of the significance of historical and socio-cultural processes. However, as the critics themselves note, a balanced integration of philosophical aspects and ethnographic practice can address this issue ("philosophize ethnographically"). In my opinion, the issue of a non-dualistic ethnographic methodology warrants a separate discussion, which I intend to undertake following this study, where the non-dualistic aspect is explored through ethnographic experiences. Additionally, I emphasize the primary focus on the anthropology of consciousness, and thus, for the time being, the presentation of the collected data and the related philosophical-anthropological reflections will primarily concentrate on the subjects' experiences, their consciousness, subjectivity, and contemplative practice, and on how I have introduced visual elicitation to ethnographically investigate these aspects more effectively.

To achieve this purpose, I had to address a significant issue: the difficulty in expressing such experiences in words. Another ethnographic subject, particularly skilled in art, provided me with the solution. The role of the anthropologist often intimidates the interviewee, no matter how confident they are: sometimes it is difficult to conceal the aura of "judge" or "expert" attributed to us, and this can influence the spontaneity of responses. This, combined with the difficulty of describing the experience, led me to embrace the suggestion to minimize the use of language where possible and use a visual elicitation technique (Bahn & Weatherill, 2011; Pauwels, 2019; Roger & Blomgren, 2019).

Asking the subject to draw, before expressing themselves in words, has numerous advantages: Firstly, it puts them in the role of a privileged speaker, becoming the architect of a product of which they can be called an expert interpreter (who better than the artist knows their work?) and this removes the anthropologist from the implicit burden of the expert role. The only questions I allowed myself to ask concerned the interpretation of the drawing, which was always left to the artist. No technical skill was required to produce these

contemplative drawings, nor—I made it clear to all participants—was a "right" or "wrong" way of representing or interpreting what they produced expected from them.

Meditation is a complex and varied exercise, which produces multiple results as it is practiced. Therefore, producing a single image would not do justice to this complex journey. Nor was I satisfied with the idea of having them produce a different image at the end of each meditation session, which would have required a significant expenditure of energy. The solution was that of the mosaic: a composite image, created progressively, adding details as the meditative journey progressed. For this reason, inspired by Moody's recent work on auragraphs (Moody, 2023), I chose to have the subjects draw a maṇḍala. I developed this methodology over the course of several months and presented the first results in another study (Divino, 2024b). Here, I summarize the main points of the methodology and present new considerations.

The advantages of maṇḍala elicitation are manifold: being drawings composed of multiple layers and sections, the subjects would complete their drawing in multiple phases over weeks or months, adding layers at the end of each contemplative session and judging the drawing only once completed, as a unique yet composite work.

Subsequently, we would revisit together their contemplative experience through the interpretation of the produced mandala, of which only the meditator was authorized to advance hypotheses about the meaning of certain symbols, shapes, or colors chosen. During the layering of individual elements, the meditator was asked to maintain the "empty" state reached at the culmination of contemplation, and thus draw freely, without preconceptions or a desire to represent certain experiences with certain visual meanings. The results were encouraging, but here I can only present a few examples, accompanied by the most interesting considerations that the subjects gave me regarding their contemplative experience.

Once this visual element was introduced, the meditative experience of the subjects further progressed toward a breakdown of dichotomous perceptions. The path of maṇḍala elicitation was not a simple exercise in representing one's moods, but an authentic extension of the meditative practice in which, surprisingly, the experience of expanded consciousness was also applied to drawing. I also chose to participate in the exercise in auto-ethnographic form (see an example in Figure 1). As I wrote in my journal, "It's not like drawing anything else. There's a moment when I realize I'm not exactly drawing but being drawn. There's another part of me that emerges in the form of the maṇḍala that I'm contributing to draw, but it was already there, always, before. I'm just becoming aware of it, and when I unveil this thing, it's like discovering a part of oneself or one's body that one had never seen before, and that's the finished *maṇḍala*." Joseph, one of the participants in this ethnography, was among the first to articulate this sensation by interpreting one of his *maṇḍala*s and describing it to me as a truly peculiar sensation. The following excerpt comes from an ethnography I conducted during the interpretation of three of his maṇḍalas, including the one in Figure 2 which was a sort of prototype with which Joseph experimented with this exercise for the first time.

> It also happens when I meditate with mental images, but here it's different because the process of excavation… I don't know what to call it but this name comes to mind… it's a bit of a process of progressive unveiling… but it's the same thing… only that the meditated image is not immediately visible, but progressively… and then there's that I got lost in this maṇḍala… literally… it's not a representation, it's a concrete, tangible thing, in which I can enter… it speaks to me… it's me. I don't know how else you could reach such a state… by drinking half a bottle of white wine? [Laughs]
>
> Anyway… this can only happen when I manage to reach the state of emptiness… every time I feel like an observer I have to eliminate the observer… if
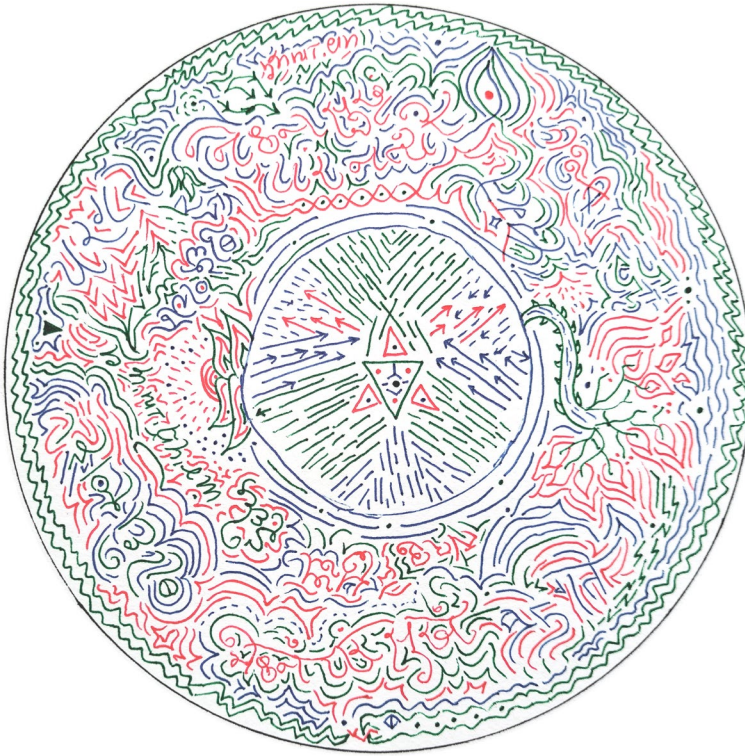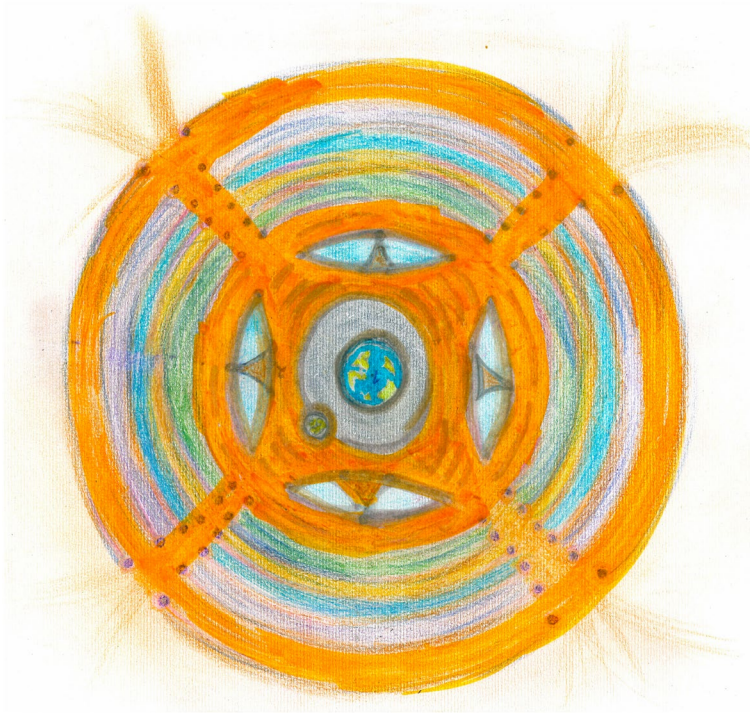
FIGURE 1 Example of my *maṇḍala*. Courtesy of Federico Divino © 2024. This image is published under exclusive permission for the *Anthropology of Consciousness* Journal and may not be reproduced, distributed, or used in any form without explicit authorization from the copyright holder.

> I feel 'something' then I'm localized, and I'm distinct from other things… like the maṇḍala in this case… but if I eliminate this judgment, this sense of 'being something', then I can easily reverse my position… look at myself through the maṇḍala… but it's not a metaphor, it really happens! I see myself, I mean I see what I usually think is me, in my bodily form… but at the same time I don't identify with it, so I think 'look at this person'… I don't know how to explain it to you… it's like looking at a stranger that you believe you've already met and you have a sense of vague memory… but in that moment I am the maṇḍala… do you understand? For me, this means becoming empty… beyond dichotomies and contradictions… all these nonsenses… into which I fall back when I have to return to my everyday life… I wish I could be non-mental, without logic, without thinking, like I do afterwards, that 'emptiness is already something so it's not empty'… then in practice, when you disintegrate everything… it's different.

In this case, Joseph experienced a complete detachment from his own body image, thus his psychophysical identity. However, what Joseph experiences here, as he himself specifies, is not a simple reflection, nor a projecting of his own consciousness outside of himself. The estrangement from his identity is concomitant, as in Daniel's case, with the extension of his consciousness beyond his bodily limits. This extension of the limit also collapses the perception of an identity boundary between objects (or subjects).

F I G U R E 2   Example of Joseph's *maṇḍala*. Image by Joseph (pseudonym), copyright granted by the author. This image is published under exclusive permission for the *Anthropology of Consciousness* Journal © 2024 and may not be reproduced, distributed, or used in any form without explicit authorization from the copyright holder.

> My visual field indeed encompasses objects in the distant regions around my head, but as one approaches the eyes, it detaches from the objects, creating a quasi-space among them that they cannot penetrate. […]
>
> The presence and absence of external objects are merely variations within a primordial field of presence, a perceptual domain over which my body holds sway. The permanence of my body is not merely a particular instance of permanence within the world of external objects; rather, the latter can only be understood through the former. Similarly, the perspective of my body is not simply a specific case of the perspective of objects; rather, the perspectival presentation of objects is comprehensible only through the resistance of my body to any perspectival variation.[5]

<div align="right">(Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 121, my translation)</div>

This meditative deconstruction of one's subjectivity, understood as a viewpoint localized within a certain set of psychophysical aggregates, applies not only to objects but also to other subjects. Therefore, it is necessary to question the old paradigm according to which the anthropologist, no matter how hard they try, can never completely shed the garments of their cultural habituation, as a contemplative gaze may also urge us toward a similar decolonization of our perspectives.

A fundamental proposal in this regard has been articulated by Orellana (2019), which has been a fundamental inspiration for me in attempting to outline a contemplative anthropology.

Orellana has arrived at conclusions remarkably similar to mine, emphasizing the advantages of adopting non-dualistic thinking by the anthropologist. It should be noted that this could also benefit desires to decolonize this practice, which still reflects the era when great empires used it to strengthen their cultural hegemonies.

> Academic disciplines arose out of those dualisms, arguably in efforts to control, regiment, categorize, regulate, dominate, master and contain the social and natural world. Such order has its place. It also reigns us in. […] Dualisms are anchored in socially constructed ways of understanding the world devised by humans; they are not inherent in the world itself.

> (Orellana, 2019, pp. 30–1, 33)

Orellana's pioneering work marks the inception of a genuine trend aimed at integrating contemplative practice across various humanistic disciplines to enhance their experience. To date, the bulk of data is available in the field of educational sciences, where the experiments of a "contemplative class" have yielded excellent outcomes (Imoto, 2022).

HOW TO INTERPRET MAṆḌALAS

The purpose of maṇḍala elicitation is not to obtain material subject to some analysis of the subject's unconscious, following, for example, Jung's model of collective archetype research. I do not doubt that the maṇḍala drawn during a contemplative exercise is full of symbolic and archetypal elements, but the purpose of this exercise is rather to provide a pretext for the meditator to interpret themselves, thus ensuring greater clarity in understanding their experiences, also facilitated by the adoption of the non-dualistic perspective by the anthropologist who also practices "contemplative ethnography" and is both a meditator and a social scientist.

As mentioned earlier, the analysis of the image is not meant to produce a form of artistic critique. The real purpose of the visual elicitation exercise is promoting the ethnography of contemplative practice. The loss of distinction or perception of separation between oneself, one's identity construct to which we associate, and the perceived object is probably the most significant data of this ethnography. It does not concern all subjects, or at least not immediately. Many initially described to me quite a different experience, as they mainly focused on the visual "product" of their contemplation, still held back by forms of artistic judgment that they had probably internalized and projected onto themselves: "the relationship with what I'm drawing is not very good… it's ugly, and I'm ashamed of such ugliness. If it comes from within me when my mind is 'emptied,' does it mean my mind is so awful? Is this re-evaluation?" (ethnographic interview with Sophie, interpreting her maṇḍala, see Figure 3). Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that even a "bad relationship" with the process of meditative drawing tells us something important about the subject's consciousness. For instance, when asked what likely reason could explain this perception of "ugliness" Sophie sees in her drawing, she responded,

> I know it's not an esthetic judgment whatsoever… it's more about *my* idea of judgment, the way I judge myself almost all the time… I cannot hide from this unconscious attitude when I meditate, and I tell you, it's almost bothersome… I know, if I reflect more upon this… perhaps it depends on how I was raised… but it's *unaware*… I'm harsh with myself most of the time, but it's an unconscious attitude… I don't like it, but meditating it's difficult since I'm constantly reminded
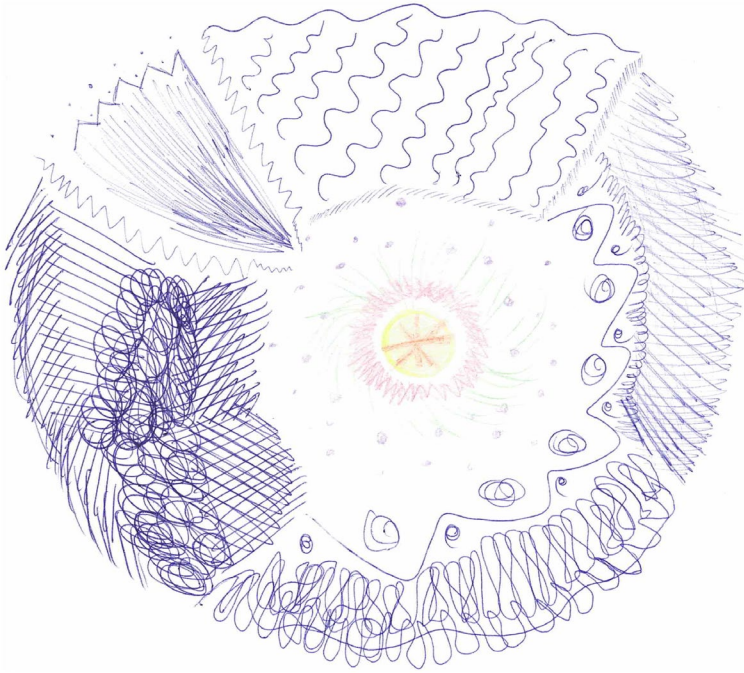
FIGURE 3 Example of Sophie's *maṇḍala*. Image by Sophie (pseudonym), copyright granted by the author. This image is published under exclusive permission for the *Anthropology of Consciousness* Journal © 2024 and may not be reproduced, distributed, or used in any form without explicit authorization from the copyright holder.

> of these bad feelings towards myself… and I admit perhaps I don't want to know why I'm like this… this might be the reason why I don't like this drawing.

Daniel reported a remarkably similar experience to me on several occasions. "I find it extremely difficult to draw because I have a bad relationship with drawing in general… I judge myself, and it's hard for me to draw something without feeling the pressure of aesthetic judgment… I know I shouldn't and that it's not important." Interestingly, Daniel and Sophie's maṇḍalas are remarkably similar on a structural level, something that Sophie also noticed when I showed her Daniel's drawing (see Figure 4). The common structure in this circumstance is that of the vortex aspect that rotates around the central nucleus.

After overcoming this initial hurdle, however, the testimonies are like those I have outlined above. Leo also helped during this ethnographic journey. He loves to express himself artistically, and drawing has always been a fundamental means of his expressiveness, like art in general. His meditations, from a total novice at the beginning of this study, led him to a conclusion very similar to those who experienced the reversal of their perspective: "everything is a relationship… in the sense that everything is in reciprocal relation… and so there are no separate things, not really… my identity, it's not there… it's only in the relationship, in the relation between different things from which I decide to isolate a part."

The last expression, it must be clarified, is certainly influenced by his background as a physicist and lover of mathematics, but certainly, to use his own words again, "The essence is that consciousness processes seem to me to be identity processes… you know, in that repetition of information… what definition would you give of consciousness? What do you think of consciousness as the identity process of information in the subject?"

Leo was the subject who has participated most actively in this ethnography to date, producing the largest number of maṇḍalas, all different and unique, except for a detail he
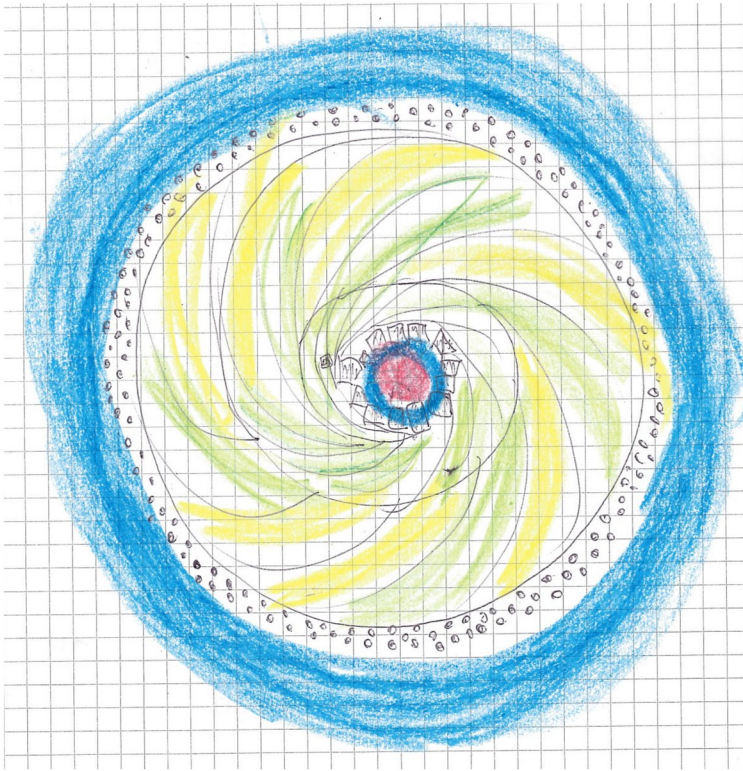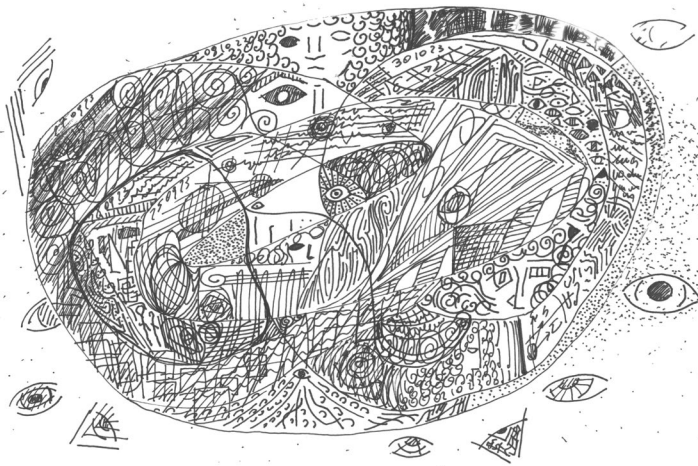
FIGURE 4   Daniel's maṇḍala. Image by Daniel (pseudonym), copyright granted by the author. This image is published under exclusive permission for the *Anthropology of Consciousness* Journal © 2024 and may not be reproduced, distributed, or used in any form without explicit authorization from the copyright holder.

recognized himself: Most of them somehow represent the theme of dismemberment or decomposition. An example of this can be seen in one of his latest maṇḍalas (see Figure 5), where it is possible to notice a human face at the top, several eyes inside and outside the maṇḍala, and some stylized hands. In more than one case, he even went so far as to represent dismembered parts of his own body in some layers of the maṇḍala, almost reminding me of a shamanic initiation ritual, but Leo did not have a macabre vision: the dismemberment of the body, like other elements of his memory (his own house, beloved places, elements that appeared as "pieces" in his maṇḍalas) were a progressive "refinement," that is, "digging deep into consciousness as a mechanism, to reach the pre-conscious," which he understood as a sort of pre-reflective consciousness.

RELATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Whatever the nature of the subjective experience of meditation, it appears to be constructed along a relational axis, and elicitation facilitates narration by highlighting a process of self-relation. The ethnographic field here is a *relational field*, where meditators can intermittently reflect on their own vulnerabilities, experiences, fears, and identity constructions through the weaving of a relational field with themselves. This field is mapped by the elicitation process, and the ethnographer inhabits this field, becoming part of it as an interlocutor in this dialogical consciousness. The drawings appear to be "alive" to some extent; they are dialogical, speaking with those who gradually unveil them, revealing themselves as part of

FIGURE 5 Example of Leo's maṇḍala, courtesy of Leo Caliandro. Image by Leo Caliandro, copyright granted by the author. This image is published under permission for the *Anthropology of Consciousness* Journal © 2024 and The *Journal of Contemplative Studies* © 2024, and may not be reproduced, distributed, or used in any form without explicit authorization from the copyright holder.

the self that explicates in this contemplative dialogue. Where is the distinction between the self and the image? As in the example of the candle, this distinction is an arbitrariness of consciousness that dissipates with the progression of the exercise.

In my case as well, the main theme that has engaged my reflections concerns precisely the nature of relationship. As in my own maṇḍalas, the outermost layers, drawn in the initial meditations, were always related to mundane facts, worldly things, parts of the body, objects, situations, while the inner layers became increasingly ethereal, evanescent, linked to "pure" forms or unidentifiable shapes, similarly, the illusion of the independence of my identity was gradually lost as I focused more on meditation.

This does not imply ceasing to exist in any way. On the contrary, meditation cannot perform the impossible task of severing the bonds of relationships that indissolubly connect us to every *thing* and person in the world, but it can make them more evident, to the point of delocalizing us from that specific node where certain relationships converge and where we have brought forth our identity. In mundane situations, on the contrary, we forget about these relationships that underpin every aspect of our existence and tend to believe ourselves separate from others. Identity is this forgetfulness, while the essence that lies behind it is akin to the metaphor of the ink stain outlined by Wittgenstein (1999) in his Philosophical Investigations. A shape, such as an ink stain, appears to us as such, precisely as a "stain" (Flecke), because its contours are delineated against the white background, with which the stain is in an indissoluble relationship (›Paßt‹ *dieser Flecke in seine weiße Umgebung?*, "Does this spot fit into its white surroundings?", cf. Wittgenstein, 1999, no. 216).

There is no stain separate from this background, and the identity of both lies in their reciprocal relationship. The same occurs in human relationships. Interestingly, an almost identical statement (a white stain in a homogenous background), with important consequences for my anthropological considerations too, was made by Merleau-Ponty.

> Consider a white stain against a homogeneous background. All points within the stain share a certain "function" that defines them collectively as a "figure." The color of the figure appears denser and seemingly more resistant than that of the background; the edges of the white stain "belong" to the figure and are

not integrally connected to the contiguous background. The stain seems super-imposed on the background rather than interrupting it. Each part of the figure suggests more than it contains, and this elementary perception is thus already imbued with *meaning*.[6]

(Merleau-Ponty, 1976, pp. 25–6, *my translation*)

Consequently, for my work as an anthropologist, there arises the necessity to define relationship as the foundation of human action and thus of anthropological interest, as well as the foundation of consciousness itself in the context of sense-perception and interconnectedness. The terms used by many subjects describing their *maṇḍala* elicitation in this circumstance are "craving," "sculpting," "finding" and also "unveiling." When the *maṇḍala* is ultimately complete, many subjects also describe a process of "mirroring" or "relate" to the image (see Figure 6).

In our experience, phenomena that subsist without the dynamics of relationship do not occur, have never occurred, and cannot occur; hence, they will never occur. From so-called material phenomena to social dynamics and cultural phenomena too. From the smallest to the largest conceivable scales of dynamics, no phenomenon can transpire independently of the network of relationships. The essence of things does not reside in their mere appearance but in the relational arrow ($\rightarrow$) that connects them to other things, without which their existence as they appear would not subsist. As Orellana also reminds us (2019, p. 35): "*all categories and labels are relational.*" Now, a radical ontology must intervene, to assert that the separation between any A and B lacks any logical, reasonable, or phenomenal sustenance. The division between phenomena does not appear anymore. It is merely a cognitive artifice.

Nonetheless, if until recently what mattered to science was a unidirectional relationship $A \rightarrow B$, today we understand that this arrow always points in both directions, that every A moving toward B calls forth a B moving toward A in a semantic network that repeats itself entirely, that truly inexorable, at every scale of reality, awaiting revelation by the investigators of phenomena ($A \rightleftarrows B$).

When considering an object that appears within a space, this phenomenon—the appearance of the object—tends to monopolize our attention on the object itself, because our cognition is accustomed to thinking metaphysically, in terms of objects, as separate or
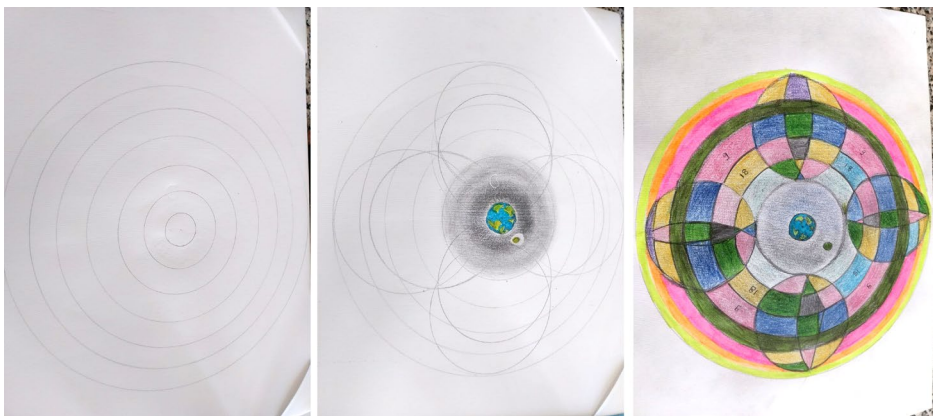
FIGURE 6 Example of a process of progressive *maṇḍala* stratification, from Joseph's experience. Image by Joseph (pseudonym), copyright granted by the author. This image is published under exclusive permission for the *Anthropology of Consciousness* Journal © 2024 and may not be reproduced, distributed, or used in any form without explicit authorization from the copyright holder.

separable pieces of a mechanism. Interconnectedness is indeed a well-known topic in cognitive anthropology (Cohen, 2010; Hubbard, 2002; Ingold, 1995).

The relationship and interaction between objects escape us, except for the effects they have on the objects, which are always the center of our attention. Even less do we realize what forms the background to the existence of objects: the surrounding space, the environment around. Even if we were to imagine a pure and perfect idea, the imaginal archetype of an object, it would be situated in an empty mental space, but is it truly empty? Is space merely there to accommodate objects? Where does space reside?

A fundamental aspect of the placement of things eludes our understanding: that they are primarily in relation to the background of their appearance, which cannot be detached from them. In a background space, a series of objects appear that constitute a set. Space cannot subsist without the set, and each space is inexorably linked to its own set and vice versa.

> The body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it continuously sustains the visible spectacle, animates it, and nourishes it from within, forming a unified system with it. […] External perception and the perception of one's own body fluctuate together because they are two aspects of a single act.[7]
>
> (Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 245, 247, *my translation*)

Ideally, we can imagine the complement of a set from which an object has been subtracted. That presumed empty space, which indicates the absence of that something, is not empty at all. The negative of presence nevertheless assumes the characteristics of a presence, as a footprint in the sand signals the presence, albeit past, of something. The complement of something is the affirmation of something, rather than its negation.

The dualistic discourse is clearly presented from the earliest texts of ancient Buddhism and frequently mentioned with the term *dvaya*, which literally signifies a binary or "dual" nature. It primarily pertains to the issue of worldly perception, and, in fact, akin to de Martino's theory where economic order shapes the "world," establishing a division between presence and nature, in Buddhism too, the dawn of division underlies the very foundation of the world. The concept of the world (*loka*) leads to multiplicity and fragmentation: "dualisms" (*dvayadhammamāhu*, see Suttanipāta 4.12), just as the belief in distinct truths is recognized as the origin of dualism: "true and false" (*saccaṃ musāti dvayadhammamāhu*). Similarly, categorical thought, generating different and seemingly independent concepts, constitutes a complex foundational system of the world grounded in division: concepts, as stated in Saṃyuttanikāya 12.15 and 22.90, find their basis in their opposites, as the cognitive system itself is dualistic: the world is predicated on twofoldness (*dvayanissita*). Hence, all that pertains to the dual (*dvayassa*) is at the very least problematic. However, here emerges the ethnographic experience that further challenges the matter at hand.

Meditative practice leads the meditating subject to deconstruct their own subjectivity, not in a nihilistic or self-mortifying sense, but by expanding the perception that otherwise confines subjectivity to a well-defined identity. In the Buddhist conception, identity is a complex aggregate of factors that collide and, only in their relationship, allow the phenomenon of the "self" to manifest. Removing one of these "bricks" causes the entire structure to collapse (Lévi-Strauss, 1958, 1973), revealing how it is truly "dependent" on the "other" (Nizamis, 2012). However, this does not necessarily translate into a reductionism of self-existent atoms: each minimal element is still and necessarily in relation to the entire system; otherwise, it could not exist. We cannot be isolated. We exist because we are in relation. Yet, the contradiction of identity lies precisely in this: a person perceives oneself as independent. If, on the contrary, we exist because we are in relation, another intriguing fact arises, leading Buddhists to consider the existence of an infinite unity among entities and subjectivities.

It's difficult to describe what I experienced. It felt like I could see my body from an outside perspective. I was the image, or maybe I projected my consciousness onto the drawing process. Did I adopt the image's consciousness? I don't know. The first time, it felt like derealization. I saw myself as if I was no longer in my body. I was both myself and the image. All I know is that in the days following that experience, I didn't feel my body the same way as before. I could clearly observe my actions, and my responses to the world were no longer automatic. I could see the interconnectedness with clarity.

(Ethnographic interview on Joseph's experience of meditative drawing)

How can a meditating subject feel like a flower, a bee, a candle, or even infinite space? Alice, who participated in my ethnographic study before I introduced the elicitation technique, reported a similar experience. I was studying the therapeutic value of meditation, and she was a psychotherapist and mindfulness teacher. She told me of a fearsome experience while meditating on a candle, "a strange experience, almost like a feeling of derealization." It happened all of a sudden, "small images that form on the black background… that move," but immediately after, she said "I had really focused on this image and it was as if I had detached a bit from reality, you know, as if you're projected into a world of… of fantasy… but you detach from reality… to the extent that when I then… had… I had interrupted this focus on these images, I had returned to my body, I had almost had a panic attack." She described in detail this negative experience as "an incredible anxiety because I didn't feel my body anymore… I mean it was real derealization, detachment from reality."

At that time, I did not know about these phenomena occurring during meditation. For some people, they were frightening experiences, like a feeling of "losing the world." Upon further investigation, I associated these phenomena to the anthropological theory of "the end of the world" or the "crisis of the presence" hypothesized by de Martino (Divino, 2023). From a Buddhist perspective, these potentially disorienting phenomena are due to the sudden loss of the dualistic perception to which we are accustomed. A radical transformation of our experience of a world that appears no more as a "world" (*lokassa atthaṅgama*).

A NEW STARTING POINT FOR AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Ernesto de Martino's work emerges within the context of the history of religions. I evoke here his anthropological theory, centered on the concept of presence, as it is the one that I consider closest to the experiences I have reported in ethnography. Although de Martino understood presence (the psycho-social identity construct) as a phenomenon whose loss entailed an always negative regressive crisis, his anthropology still constitutes a valid starting point for understanding even those situations in which, as in the case of meditation, the loss of presence is a benevolent phenomenon.

In this theory of consciousness as a primordial act, de Martino identifies presence as that indistinct part of consciousness which determines itself with its own identity and becomes embedded in a complex network of identities forming the basis of socio-cultural constructs. This entails two fundamental aspects: firstly, that presence is contingent upon this network of mutual recognition, and thus, if deprived of this valuation, it is, in de Martino's terms, "outside of history," consequently regarded as nonexistent. Naturally, consciousness cannot cease to exist, but its state of being present can "change sign," meaning it can become absent, and absence is nothing other than a crisis of presence. It becomes necessary, therefore, for presence to establish "techniques towards itself," namely cultural devices whose purpose is

to safeguard its status as a presence, precisely as something that "stays in history," part of the network of relationships that allow it to become present.

What presence fears is easy to infer; it is everything that reveals its interdependent nature, which, rather than being embraced as the inevitable complexity of being, is seen as the risk that individual existence might dissolve into the myriad complexities, no longer standing out as an identity amidst a network of identities. This is why magical-religious cultural devices utilize what de Martino terms "reiteration of the identical," the constant reassertion of norms that render presence a "present" event, reassuring its stability in the face of the constant threat of becoming lost in history.

> The forms of vital (or existential) risk of presence are manifold: for example, the collapse of the distinction between self and world, the efflux of presence into the world, or the feeling of being "acted upon", "possessed", "invaded" by the world, experiences of incompleteness and estrangement, and the loss of the sense of the real, the specular imitation of access and the thwarted will of catatonic astonishment, the fragmentation of existential unity into the plurality of simultaneous or successive psychological existences, the cyclical alteration between depression and mania, the uncontrolled discharge of destructive impulses, and so on, specifying according to the heuristic indications provided by psychopathology.
>
> (de Martino, 1995, pp. 59–60, *my translation*)

As de Martino characterizes the "pre-cultural" state (p. 78) as the "world" in which presence has not yet determined itself, one might erroneously assume that he delineates some kind of evolutionary history of human consciousness. This is not entirely accurate. There is no absolute historical moment in which presence does not determine itself as such, but it can be recognized that this possibility is indeed present in all human cultures.

De Martino defines "consciousness" as an immediate historical determination embedded in a network of socio-cultural relations alongside similar determinations. These determinations appear as "divisions," even if they are parts of being. However, none of which coincides "with the entirety of possible being" (p. 99). Yet, they are an inseparable part of it. Determination is nothing more than the arbitrary demarcation of a boundary that cannot sharply trace the continuity of being, which, in its entirety, can only be reimagined by the consciousness that has determined itself as "being there" within specific boundaries, as a residual "beyond" or "other," disconcertingly vast and inconceivable.

When this being is reflected in consciousness, the *presence* emerges as a reason that transcends being in forms of cultural coherence and asserts itself as existence above being. For de Martino, being-in-itself is not problematic to the extent that being exists in every existence, but simultaneously, every existing consciousness is determined by being. Specifically, presence is posited as consciousness that is valued by the collective force of cultural order, which de Martino terms "economic dominance," referring to the concept of the *economic order* (see de Martino, 2023, p. 282).

The primary interest of cultural life, which initiates history, is indeed the management of the totality of presences. Therefore, the determined human consciousness of presence only feels meaningful in the context of history, in its role as a social actor and participant in cultural relations. Outside of these contexts, it lacks legitimacy and falls into crisis. This also highlights the dilemma of the violence inherent in the cultural dimension, capable of bestowing and rescinding "values" from presences.

Consequently, presence, as a particular quality of existence, is *Being-there*—a transcendence of the situation into a value that "appears" to the extent that it decides (and separates), attributing identity-based recognition, and enters a crisis when trapped in a critical situation. This is why presence is dependent on the intersubjective, the network within which

economic dominance operates as a cooperative moment irreducible to the abstract dominion of personal preference. The dualism established here between presence and the world is nothing but a fictitious dichotomy between two aspects of consciousness that mutually interact, collapsing when what de Martino refers to as "culturally conditioned phenomena" emerge.

These phenomena demonstrate the concrete possibilities of presence (consciousness) to act upon reality, advocating for an abolition of the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism. The external reality is critically examined by de Martino's work on the reality of magical powers, just as it challenges the traditional anthropological perspective that, from Malinowski (1948) to Lévy-Bruhl (1927, 1938), implicitly tended to perceive magic as an "unexplainable" occurrence. In contrast, in earlier anthropology, exemplified by Frazer (1894) and Tylor (1867), magic was not merely a mere trick, deception, or a system of pre-scientific nature explanation, but rather stood as a precursor to scientific rationalism, thus rendering religions as the illegitimate siblings of science.

Addressing the concept of magic and the magical constitutes a fundamental aspect of de Martino's theory of consciousness, as it aligns with the horizon of the dawn of presence that de Martino terms as the "historical drama of the world of magic," connecting the problem of the world of magic to the very perception of reality (de Martino, 2022, pp. 9–10). More recent works connecting the phenomenon of magic to the anthropology of consciousness have been published by Susan Greenwood and exhibit remarkable similarities to de Martino's theories (see Greenwood, 2020; Greenwood & Goodwyn, 2015).

The significance of these considerations becomes particularly salient when turning to the realm of ecstatic techniques. These techniques, among which de Martino includes *yoga* and Buddhist meditation (de Martino, 2023, pp. 49–50, 64), serve as the quintessential tools through which the notion of presence surpasses its own boundaries, allowing for a temporary or lasting reversion to a state of indistinct extension, a state emblematic of consciousness in its most fundamental essence. This connection, however, presents a missed opportunity within the domain of the anthropology of consciousness. Only now, through a renewed recognition of this association, can the field fully capitalize on its potential to develop these ethnological considerations with utmost acumen.

In his discourse, de Martino (2022) introduces the concept of the trance technique (p. 92). This term denotes a spectrum of practices or methodologies employed by adept practitioners, including shamans and magicians, to induce altered states of consciousness. These states frequently entail a sense of detachment from conventional reality, accompanied by a transformation in one's perception of self and the surrounding world. Initially, these techniques may ostensibly appear to pursue the dissolution of selfhood and consciousness—a perceived route of escape from the manifold anxieties and constraints inherent in existence. From this perspective, the trance state seems to embody a withdrawal from the realm of full existential actuality.

Nonetheless, de Martino contends that this initial explication is inherently deceiving. He posits that the vulnerability to which the "self" or "existence" is exposed within the trance experience represents merely a fleeting juncture within a broader, magical existential narrative. Concurrent with this moment of vulnerability is another phase, marked by the redemption of existence, the reaffirmation of presence, and the establishment of a coherent world imbued with significance, wherein the practitioner is integrally present. The allegedly antagonistic nature of the trance techniques—ostensibly directed toward counteracting the "beyond" that conditions existence—ultimately serves as a conduit for engaging with the profound existential peril and fragility that underlie being.

De Martino underscores that the trepidation induced by the void, characterized by vanishing presence and a nullified reality, compels the shaman or practitioner to venture unflinchingly into this void, thereby initiating a desperate confrontation. In this audacious endeavor, the practitioner is not met with unmitigated nothingness but encounters an alternative—the

self, regulated and interconnected with "spirits" that extend assistance. This juncture evolves into a triumph of the practitioner, constituting a form of redemption.

Furthermore, de Martino argues that the magical-religious techniques, designed to attenuate the unified presence, do not espouse complete suppression of historical-cultural identity. Rather, a modicum of presence must persist, even within the trance state, to sustain the trance while averting a descent into uncontrollable possession. The invoked and engaged "spirits" necessitate adaptability to the particularities of the session. This equilibrium, though arduously achieved, remains inherently precarious, stemming from an initial state of disquieting disequilibrium. This dynamic equilibrium, encompassing an altered self-perception as the "other" and a reciprocal perception of the "other" as a "guest," retains a pivotal and utilitarian role within the cultural and historical tapestry of the magical tradition. The "other" metamorphoses into an indispensable constituent of the intricate web of symbolism and culture, perpetuating interconnections within the cosmic lattice of relationships and traditions.

DE MARTINO AND BUDDHIST NONDUALISM

De Martino's examination of the trance technique illuminates a perspective that resonates with the intricacies intrinsic to the comprehension of non-dual experiences, analogous to those encountered in the sphere of Buddhist meditative practice. Initially, the trance state, often misconstrued as an attempt to escape existence, bears semblance to the misapprehension surrounding the non-dual encounter within Western contexts—an erroneous construal stemming from the perception of the absence of conventional identity as tantamount to annihilation. Within both contextual dimensions, there resides an inherent fallacy in the conflation of dissolution with negation. Analogously to de Martino's assertion that the vulnerability inherent in the trance state constitutes a transient moment within a broader existential narrative, the non-dual experience exhibits an intrinsically positive quality—an ontologically profound engagement with existence, rather than a negation thereof. This parallelism finds enhanced clarity upon contemplation of the substantive essence of positivity, denoting a state of evident presence, wherein the very conceptualization of non-existence accentuates the unattainability of its purport. The convergent themes of de Martino's explorative endeavors and the foundational tenets of nondualism accentuate the inherent fallibility characterizing dualistic frameworks, and concurrently underscore the transmutative efficacy intrinsic to the embrace of existence's delicate yet resolute constitution.

> Reality is not a privileged appearance that lies beneath others; rather, it is the framework of relationships to which all appearances conform.[8]
>
> (Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 353, *my translation*)

Too often, the non-dual experience described in Buddhist meditative practice is misunderstood by Westerners as the attainment of some annihilation of personal existence. This misunderstanding arises from interpreting the formula "neither A *nor* non-A," which excludes all manifest possibilities of identity A, as de facto destruction of A. However, this aspect is not true, as the non-dual experience of meditation is, in every sense, a phenomenologically positive phenomenon, not negative.

It is essential to clarify what is meant by "positive," as it is not inherently tied to any evaluative or dualistic connotations. The opposition of positive to negative is a conceptual construct and psychologically perceived within the dualistic framework. Nevertheless, what nominal identity reveals is distinct from factual evidence, that is, every experience, if manifest and thus perceived, is a positive fact, as the negative, that is, non-existence, cannot exist. What is

nonexistent simply is not, thus it neither appears nor can be perceived. What exists is equally positive (i.e., existing), namely, the concept of the negative. However, by manifesting itself as an existing concept, the "negative" (which can only be the idea of the negative and not the negative itself) attests to the impossibility of the intent of the negative, that is, non-existence.

Dualism, therefore, reintroduces a binary scheme with two concepts in reciprocal opposition. On the contrary, nondualism represents the overcoming of the binary worldview that revolves the psychosemantic perception of reality around reasoning based on antinomies. However, antinomies are merely perceptual modalities, and the cessation of antinomic thought does not cease reality or the existence of the perceiving subject. The non-dualistic experience is, therefore, an experience in itself, not the absence of experiences. It is crucial not to confuse nihilism with emptiness, as these two stand at opposite ends. In fact, the Buddha initially rejected nihilism as an absurd extremism, and it would be senseless to reintroduce it into the theory of non-self, which is, in fact, the cornerstone of ancient Buddhist psychology (De Silva, 1990; Divino, 2023).

The assertions of Buddhist nondualism are also to be taken with caution. While on the one hand, it is true that meditative practice leads to experiencing a state of expansion of one's subjectivity to the point of transcending the very distinction between different subjectivities, it is equally true that Buddhism does not imply that dualism is "false," but rather that it is an active and effective mechanism of living. The same opposition between mind and body is a complex problem that can hardly be simplified by saying that Buddhism radically denies this dualism, since forms of distinction between the cognitive and the physical are still recognizable, without, however, reducing one to the other (Lin, 2013).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Within the present study, I tried to articulate a new pathway for an anthropology of consciousness through the study of contemplative practices and subjective experiences of meditators. The scrutiny of de Martino's evolving perspectives on presence and his progressive multi-phase approach engenders insightful perspectives into the evolution of anthropological thought that can constitute a good starting point for a modern anthropological theory of consciousness. His astute observations on the dawn of the conscious presence of the historical-cultural man challenges the conventional demarcation between "us" and "them," thereby accentuating the universal relevance of these concepts.

During the ethnographic analysis of modern meditators, I accentuated the imperative for a nuanced comprehension of the crisis of presence as a contemporaneous phenomenon, also involving the anthropological understanding of meditation and consciousness. This contemplative reflection prompts a reevaluation of the roles ascribed to anthropology and ethnography in grappling with the intricate complexities of being-in-relation.

In conclusion, the "dawn of division" presented in this article alludes to a juncture or temporal phase characterized by a foundational schism or partition, leading to the genesis of binary or dichotomous cogitation within a specific milieu in the context of our attempt to delineate an anthropological theory of consciousness. The considerations presented here probes into the dichotomies and dualities that manifest in diverse facets of human experience, notably within the domains of cultural elucidation, philosophical paradigms, and the examination of non-duality.

The dualistic framework is ingrained deeply within the human psyche, actively shaping the mode through which we construe and experience reality. Hence, the genesis of dichotomy stands as the nascence of this binary modality of cogitation that undergirds sundry aspects of human culture, language, and perceptual faculties. I presented a scrutiny of the ramifications of this dualistic *Weltanschauung*, both within the precincts of Buddhism and the field of

anthropological inquiry. To better understand this problem, I illustrated how a methodology involving the technique of elicitation can assist in conducting an ethnographic study on the states of consciousness during meditation, facilitating the expression and self-narration of the meditators' experiences. The use of image production and analysis prompted the participants in this ethnography to engage in profound reflections on their meditation experiences. The interpretation of their own images often became an additional meditation, wherein the subjects engaged in a dialogue with what they had created, embarking on a form of hermeneutics in which the removal of perceptual barriers between themselves and the image or object of meditation was achieved.

Within the purview of Buddhism, the construct of non-duality is delineated as an alternate viewpoint that transcends or surmounts dualistic cogitation. Non-duality is proffered as an experiential realm that transcends the confines of binary dichotomies, presenting a more comprehensive and interconnected apprehension of reality. The article concedes the intricacies inherent in non-duality, accentuating that it does not necessarily negate the presence of dualism but instead furnishes an alternative avenue of engagement with it.

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Endnotes

[1] Original: "Un roman, un poème, un tableau, un morceau de musique sont des individus, c'est-à-dire des êtres où l'on ne peut distinguer l'expression de l'exprimé, dont le sens n'est. accessible que par un contact direct et qui rayonnent leur signification sans quitter leur place temporelle et spatiale."

[2] Original: "Le sentir est. cette communication vitale avec le monde qui nous le rend présent comme lieu familier de notre vie. C'est. à lui que l'objet perçu et le sujet percevant doivent leur épaisseur. Il est. le tissu intentionnel que l'effort de connaissance cherchera à décomposer."

[3] Original: "Mais si l'essence de la conscience est. d'oublier ses propres phénomènes et de rendre ainsi la possible constitution des « choses », cet oubli n'est. pas une simple absence, c'est. l'absence de quelque chose que la conscience pourrait se rendre présent, autrement dit la conscience ne peut oublier les phénomènes que parce qu'elle peut aussi les rappeler, elle ne les néglige en faveur des choses que parce qu'ils sont le berceau des choses."

[4] Here is the relevant passage: "Whatever mode of speech is known among these various peoples, you conform your speech, stubbornly insisting, 'this is the only truth, all else is superfluous.' In this way, you insist on commonly used terms, overestimating designations. And how can you not insist on popular language, overestimating designations? When among different peoples you see that the same thing is perceived as 'pāti,' 'patta,' 'vitta,' 'sarāva' 'dhāropa', 'poṇa', 'pisīlava'" (*iti yathā yathā naṃ tesu tesu janapadesu sañjānanti tathā tathā thāmasā parāmāsā abhinivissa voharati: 'idameva saccaṃ, moghamaññan'ti. evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, janapadaniruttiyā ca abhiniveso hoti samaññāya ca atisāro. kathañca, bhikkhave, janapadaniruttiyā ca anabhiniveso hoti samaññāya ca anatisāro? idha, bhikkhave, tadevekaccesu janapadesu 'pātī'ti sañjānanti', 'pattan'ti sañjānanti', 'vittan'ti sañjānanti', 'sarāvan'ti sañjānanti', 'dhāropan'ti sañjānanti', 'poṇan'ti sañjānanti', 'pisīlavan'ti sañjānanti'*).

[5] Original: "Mon champ visuel est. bien l'objet dans les parties éloignées de ma tête, mais à mesure qu'on approche des yeux, il se sépare des objets, il ménage au milieu d'eux un quasi-espace où ils n'ont pas accès […].

La présence et l'absence des objets extérieurs ne sont que des variations à l'intérieur d'un champ de présence primordial, d'un domaine perceptif sur lesquels mon corps a puissance. Non seulement la permanence de mon corps n'est. pas un cas particulier de la permanence dans le monde des objets extérieurs, mais encore la seconde ne se comprend que par la première; non seulement la perspective de mon corps n'est. pas un cas particulier de celle des objets, mais encore la présentation perspective des objets ne se comprend que par la résistance de mon corps à toute variation perspective."

[6] Original: "Soit une tache blanche sur un fond homogène. Tous les points de la tache ont en commun une certaine « fonction » qui fait d'eux une « figure ». La couleur de la figure est. plus dense et comme plus résistante que celle du fond; les bords de la tache blanche lui « appartiennent » et ne sont pas solidaires du fond pourtant contigu; la tache paraît posée sur le fond et ne l'interrompt pas. Chaque partie annonce plus qu'elle ne contient et cette perception élémentaire est. donc déjà chargée d'un *sens*."

[7] Original: "Le corps est. dans le monde comme le cœur dans l'organisme: il maintient continuellement en vie le spectacle visible, il l'anime et le nourrit intérieurement, il forme avec lui un système. […] La perception extérieure

et la perception du corps propre varient ensemble parce qu'elles sont les deux faces d'un même acte."

[8]Original: "La réalité n'est. pas une apparence privilégiée et qui demeurerait sous les autres, c'est. l'armature de relations auxquelles toutes les apparences satisfont."

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