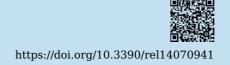IMPACT
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Article

Mindful Apocalypse: Contemplative Anthropology Investigating Experiences of World-Loss in Deep Meditation

Federico Divino

Article

Mindful Apocalypse: Contemplative Anthropology Investigating Experiences of World-Loss in Deep Meditation

Federico Divino [1,2]

1   Faculty of Social Sciences—Visual and Digital Cultures Research Center (ViDi), University of Antwerp, M, Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium; federico.divino@uantwerpen.be or federico.divino@unibg.it
2   Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures/Department of Letters, Philosophy, Communication and Human and Social Sciences—Ph.D. Research Program in "Transcultural Studies in Humanities", University of Bergamo, 24129 Bergamo, Italy

Abstract: This article investigates the challenge of personal crisis during deep meditation, as observed in an ethnographic inquiry into mindfulness and traditional contemplative practices. The study distinguishes between the "crisis of presence" in contemporary mindfulness practices, and the dissolution of the subject–object distinction in traditional Buddhist meditation. By analyzing Ernesto De Martino's concepts of crisis and presence, the article highlights the significance of understanding this phenomenon in meditation rather than perceiving it negatively. The research explores the contemporary evolution of mindfulness and its detachment from original Buddhist contemplative practices, leading to an approach criticized for reinforcing neoliberal and capitalist modes of cognition. In contrast, traditional Buddhist meditation aims for the state of *samādhi*, where boundaries between self and the world dissolve, signifying a serene "end of the world". The study underscores the need for mindfulness researchers to explore this aspect of meditation to derive immense benefits from comprehensive contemplative practice.

Keywords: medical anthropology; presence; De Martino; mindfulness; meditation; contemplative practice; crisis

1. Introduction

In this article, I endeavor to thoroughly examine a challenge intrinsic to meditation, which emerged during my ethnographic inquiry into the applications of mindfulness and traditional contemplative practices for the purpose of deriving personal benefits in the most comprehensive sense, whether as a general remedy or as a form of self-therapy. My investigation revealed that numerous participants encountered a moment of personal crisis upon reaching the profoundest stages of meditation. This experience was predominantly perceived as distressing, and the individuals were unable to cope with it, thereby striving to circumvent it as much as possible.

Nevertheless, insights from more adept meditators, who had successfully navigated this crisis, persuaded me that this phenomenon aligned with what anthropologist Ernesto De Martino described in the context of the "crisis of presence", which had already garnered substantial validation in the burgeoning fields of ethnopsychiatry and medical anthropology. This study, initially published in 2021, is currently undergoing revision and augmentation in light of new data that concentrate specifically on elucidating this challenge intrinsic to the crisis of deep meditation phases. The objective is to heighten awareness among mindfulness researchers who may perceive this phenomenon negatively, despite, as I will endeavor to demonstrate, its integral role in the comprehensive contemplative practice. Rather than being disregarded, this aspect should be duly explored and scrutinized, from which mindfulness studies may subsequently derive immense benefits.

In the years 2018 to 2019, I commenced my ethnographic study on meditation. This inquiry was initiated to meet the requirements of a master's thesis in medical anthropology,

with the purpose of examining the relationship between contemporary forms of meditative therapy, such as mindfulness, and their application in clinical practice and personal health management (Divino 2021). Nevertheless, as the research advanced, the scope of the project broadened, and I began to critically assess meditation as a whole and scrutinize the ethnographic method. This anthropological investigation persisted over the following years and ultimately became a component of my doctoral research. Despite the progress made, certain issues remain unresolved, necessitating a proper academic investigation.

One of the foremost challenges in the ethnography of meditation is the research model itself. How can one examine an ethnographic 'field' that lacks a geographic location? When the domain of interest is interiority, the ethnographic method proves insufficient. It is not a question of prioritizing subjectivity within a clearly defined context, as is the case in medical anthropology where the experience of illness is explored. Instead, it is a matter of surpassing this boundary, as meditation seeks to transcend subjectivity and question it. Moreover, this subjectivity is also in dialogue with historical and socio-cultural dimensions of belonging but transcends it in the contemplative intention of meditation. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate what meditation truly entails today, especially in a world where it is sometimes concealed by other names and forms. I refer to this as "contemplative practice", which denotes the ability to use meditation as a mechanism for transcendence from a 'normal' or 'ordinary' state.

The challenge I confronted, therefore, was to establish a contemplative anthropology from scratch, with its unique methodology and research objectives, which could comprehend meditation not solely within its therapeutic context, but also in a world that goes beyond therapy and aspires towards the ultimate objective of contemplative practicewhich is transcendence. To achieve this, I searched for tools within the anthropological domain that could offer an appropriate theoretical framework to investigate a discipline of identity transcendence like meditation (Pamutto 2017). These tools were discovered in Ernesto De Martino's anthropology and his concepts of "presence" and "crisis".

While I was considering these questions, the book *Mindful Ethnography* was published in 2019, in which the author makes the bold proposal to integrate meditation into ethnographic practice (Orellana 2019). In recent years, there has actually been a notable surge in proposals advocating the integration of anthropology into meditation practice. A representative sample of such works includes the pioneering work on the Mindful Body in Medical Anthropology (Scheper-Huges and Lock 1987). Furthermore, there have been endeavors to incorporate meditative practices into ethnographic investigation or social research (Schipper 2012), proposals for a Zen sociology (McGrane 1993), and a non-identity sociology that draws upon the No-Self principle from Buddhism (Kaufman 2014). These aforementioned contributions warrant particular attention. Additionally, other ramifications of meditation include holistic ethnography (Davis and Breede 2015) and ethnographic studies investigating meditation and its associated benefits (Jung 2014; Kordes et al. 2019; Newcombe 2009; Pagis 2019, 2010; Walsh 1983). The most recent study of notable significance in chronological succession is indisputably that conducted by Orellana.

This literary work makes a valuable contribution to the academic community and educators striving to foster critical thinking in their students. The book offers a distinctive amalgamation of activities and reflections from Orellana, which will benefit ethnographic researchers at all levels of proficiency, and qualitative researchers seeking to investigate the research process. The concept of mindful ethnography is a novel idea, and Orellana's publication provides an insightful perspective on how to combine mindfulness with research methods to address the tension that frequently accompanies ethnographic research. The book, *Mindful Ethnography*, explores the notion of non-duality and strategies for centering researchers when performing fieldwork, drawing from postcolonial and posthumanist frameworks. The seven chapters, including interludes and activities, aim to help readers connect with their lived experiences and transcend the dichotomies that characterize the Western world.[1]

Personally, I also encountered a similar circumstance in my ethnography. The circumstances compelled me to accept other forms of communication, to evaluate hermeneutics differently, to amplify subjective feelings, and to question the sometimes misleading role of subjectivity. Combining meditation with ethnographic experience also entails experiencing a different perceptual sensitivity that prompts one to view oneself from an external vantage point. Where then is the anthropologist? Where is the object under study when the anthropologist's consciousness is outside the anthropologist himself? Such an experience often raises other questions that are not easily answered.

Notwithstanding the utilization of conventional anthropological methodologies, it became evident that they were insufficient in addressing the intricacies of contemplative practice. These intricacies materialized in the intersections between ethnography and autoethnography, the correlation between image and the dissolution of recognizable forms, and the discourse encompassing identity and belonging, particularly regarding 'those without identity'. Consequently, there was a necessity to broaden the ambit of investigation by scrutinizing interdisciplinary fields that have already forged associations with anthropology. The objective of this article is to present a comprehensive analysis of this research and to proffer an innovative perspective for those engaged in the study of contemplative practice. After an extended period of time, I have revisited the examination of certain subjects from my ethnographic research, whose outcomes have previously generated intriguing ideas. The current inquiry will specifically encompass the accounts of two individuals (hereafter referred to as Sarah and Daniel) who were selected from a pool of diverse data accessible to me.

The interest in contemplative practices has been widely studied in relation to clinical models in the field of psychology (Farb and Mehling 2016). However, in anthropology there is still little material on the subject, except for ethnographic research on meditation groups in religious or cultural contexts. The personal practice of meditation during an ethnography of other meditation practitioners has particularly influenced my way of doing anthropology, and has revealed the existence of two radically different types of meditators. On the one hand, there are those whose personal identity is partially forged by their being meditation practitioners. On the other hand are those who show almost total disinterest in matters concerning family, culture, nation, or belonging in general. This proves particularly daring for an anthropologist, as it witnesses the presence of a strong consciousness that is detached from any cultural function.[2]

Before proceeding, it is necessary to provide some disclaimers. This text presents an anthropological study of contemplative practices, assuming a broadly diachronic perspective that may be potentially incorrect from a philological standpoint. As a scholar of meditation, I have focused on its historical contextualization, particularly within the Early Theravāda tradition.[3] I am well aware of the extensive and diverse history of meditation and Buddhist practices, which prevents the generalization or essentializing of varied practices that possess their own definite historical and cultural specificities. Nonetheless, the historical aspect is not the only relevant element here, as the intention is to consider meditation within its contemporaneity. In this context, despite its historical diversity, meditation is commonly perceived as a continuum of analogous and contiguous practices and disciplines that are part of a unified reality. In other words, due to its popularity, especially with mindfulness, practitioners approach the concept of meditation as something that is essentially 'one single product' or a series of interconnected products. This sentiment of commodification has been confirmed by all participants in this ethnography, which has been ongoing since 2018. Particularly, mindfulness practitioners tend to use expressions such as "every [Buddhist] tradition has its specific technique, but in the end, they are all part of the same meditation" or "you can choose the methods that suit you best, but they are just details that make it more useful for you, the essence of meditation has always been the same". These statements may sound like generalizations, and indeed they are from a historical and philological perspective, where it is possible to identify distinct histories and developments of contemplative practices within Indian ascetic traditions and their

subsequent adoption by other Asian cultures, along with their various aspects, multiple contacts with other traditions, and mutual influences and transformations, all of which deserve to be treated as such. However, in the anthropological reality, it is important to consider that this generalization is not only made but is also part of the common usage among meditators. To illustrate this point, Cooper et al. refer to "Varieties of Contemplative Experience" (VCE) in a recent study (Cooper et al. 2021). This term indicates the tendency to approach a multiplicity of techniques with diverse histories and origins as mere options from which meditators can choose. As an anthropologist, I cannot refrain from further reflecting on the somewhat neoliberal aspect of this commodification, where the particularities of different meditative practices do not appear as enrichments of their historical, philosophical, and cultural heritage, but rather as trinkets and gadgets that the meditator–consumer can choose to acquire or disregard as they please. Unfortunately, this is the reality of a portion of the meditator landscape, where individuals who practice not only mindfulness but also other meditation techniques tend to 'jump' from one to another within the wide spectrum of VCE, based on what suits them best. A similar phenomenon can be observed in medical anthropology, and the comparison is relevant here as meditation is *de facto* utilized as a well-being practice and even as a form of psychotherapy in the case of mindfulness. Just as the intersection of the three dimensions of medicine has been studied: traditional (*folk*), official (*professional*), and popular (*lay*), in medical anthropology, it has been observed that these three dimensions do not exist in society as three monolithic and exclusive alternatives (See Coreil 1983; Gaines 1992; Alver 1995; Briggs 2012). Certainly, a traditional healer belonging to their own tradition, recognized and trusted by those who seek their healing practices, has a form of consensus that contrasts with that of a therapist recognized by the state and the biomedical community, which is reinforced by another filter of authority. However, patients do not rely solely on authority or popularity as the sole decision-making method, nor do they necessarily adhere rigidly and dogmatically to only one medical practice. On the contrary, it has been observed that they often 'jump' from one dimension to another, or simultaneously incorporate them into their therapeutic journey. This fact cannot be interpreted as simple commodification, since it involves also the subjective perception and needs as well as a natural and human tendency to utilitarianism: the practice that at that moment gives more confidence or promises more effectiveness is adopted.

2. The Problem of ELSEs

In the study by Cooper et al. the most used metaphors to describe meditative experience are investigated. Unsurprisingly, metaphors related to fluidity (understood as both air and water) are preferred. This is not surprising since, in Asia, terms related to energies have always used similar metaphors (*qì*, *prana*, *rlung*, *cakra*, and so on). Culture changes and adapts everything to itself, and thus to liquid metaphors, electrical metaphors are also added by Westerners, being among the most commonly used. These experiences of energy changes are clearly embedded, and they act not by mere suggestion since they also have concrete effects on the brain. These phenomena, called ELSEs (*energy-like somatic experiences*), can last seconds, minutes, hours, or even longer periods such as days or months (Cooper et al. 2021, p. 12). Such an energy surge is not always positive, however, and in fact "50% reported an increase in overall health, while nearly 20% reported a decrease". This finding is also repeated in other studies, such as Buttner's, cited by Cooper et al., in which again 26% of practitioners analyzed, in this case from the Theravāda tradition, report an abnormal or destructive coenesthetic experience, compared with the majority being satisfied with the results.

Already in itself, this fact represents a problem that should attract the attention of the researcher, who might focus on the motivations that lead these minorities to experience meditation so negatively. However, this problem is, in my opinion, accentuated by the carelessness with which overly varied meditation groups are formed, mixing sometimes very different techniques and traditions, as in the case of VCE (p. 5). This only adds to the

potential confusion even though, fortunately, there has at least been a distinction between experienced practitioners and novices. Regarding the aforementioned metaphors, the most frequent that have been recorded involve, as partly already mentioned, currents, waves, energy, electricity, charge, circuit, voltage, jolts, bolts, flows and vibrations (p. 6); there are then hydraulic and pneumatic metaphors, again waves, flows, winds, drafts, but also onomatopoeic ones such as bursts, blows and tearing (p. 7). The implications of these energy flows are interesting. Just as a river can present a blockage, energies can also be perceived as stagnant. We speak in this case of knots and blockages, but also of mechanical metaphors, such as gears turning badly. Energy can be perceived as being outside one's control, and therefore endowed with independent agency (p. 8).

The aspect of De Martino's anthropology that is most interesting for our discussions is the intersection between healing practices and presence. Today, Medical Anthropology has allowed us to expand the boundaries of what is therapeutic, specifying that the clinic, limited by a specific cultural conception of what is 'medical', does not reduce to everything that has to do with care, healing, or the therapeutic, and that many other areas, outside of medical specialization, can be included.[4] This is the case, for example, of all the magical–religious techniques that for De Martino are ancient devices for preserving presence. But magic is not just a device: it is the common ancestor of various cultural and therapeutic functions. The importance of magic already in ancient Buddhist meditation testifies to a very strong connection between reflections on consciousness and healing practices. If we understand, as Buddhists do, psychological identity as a disease, then yoga is a healing practice because it investigates consciousness, and this investigation corresponds also to the achievement of 'magical' abilities (van Schaik 2020), without taking away from the fact that in these practices there is also the proven ancient origin of systems of thought behind traditional Indian medicine (Divino 2023b), as testimony of how the search for specific techniques aimed at the foundation of a therapeutic method that uses, for example, botanical knowledge or the use of drugs or contemplative exercise (such as prayer and meditation) is also shared by religious practices of presence.

The emergence of a field of study known as cultural neuroscience, as well as a resurgence of interest in cultural studies more broadly, is made possible by the recognition that "non-genetic environmental factors can lead to dramatic changes in gene expression" (Kitayama and Park 2010, p. 111), emphasizing the central role of culture in shaping human behavior and cognition. One key aspect of cultural analysis is the examination of habits and beliefs, and in this context meditation serves as a valuable area of study. Buddhist thought, in particular, emphasizes meditative practices as exercises in cognitive dis-abstraction and immersion in the connections between the realm of the imaginary and the perceived reality.

Anthropological studies of consciousness are closely linked to studies of health (Vyner 2002). The concept of a healthy mind often includes the ability to effectively control the senses, and Buddhism aligns with this understanding, viewing illness as synonymous with cognitive dysfunction. As Vyner notes, "Buddhists pursue the practice of meditation for the very real and concrete purpose of changing the way their mind works" (p. 5).

This last statement may prompt a spontaneous question in our minds: is Buddhism then a spiritual–religious practice or not? In my ethnographic activity, I must say that I have received quite contrasting answers. Surprisingly, in subjects where meditation practice was greater, the sense of belonging and identity, whether it be related to family, nation, or a certain belief, was also weaker, yet, in these subjects, determination to define Buddhism as a "religious practice" was strong. On the other hand, those who practice meditation outside of specific contexts, such as Buddhist temples, spiritual circles, or where the specific context is therapeutic (for example, mindfulness), the proportions are reversed: these subjects show a strong adherence to the idea that meditation is not 'religion' but 'science', and at the same time they take care to separate these practices from the religious sphere. However, I have also had to note that discussions related to identity are much more frequent, and often it is the practitioners themselves who defend the right to have an 'identity', relegating the matter of the Buddhist non-self to complex and convoluted philosophical speculations,

'non-practical' matters that are therefore not interesting for the well-being and inner peace identified as the goal of mindfulness.

An important recent contribution to contemplative studies is by Dennison. His approach to meditation outlines a notion of consciousness that he believes is related to psychoanalysis and is represented at the biological level by a set of dynamic functions that would also allow interaction between individuals (Dennison 2019). He calls this neural function DC (Default Consciousness). Dennison found that a subjective component is essential to the DCs for the dynamic neuronal balance between the external world and our body, and its resonance with past experiences stored in memory. This view of consciousness is implicit in psychoanalysis, from Sigmund Freud's Project for a Scientific Psychology to the clinical experience of psychotherapists and psychoanalysts. They observe a perpetual resonance between present and past experiences retained in memory, which comprise memories of reciprocal roles that store data concerning the emotional influence of occasions on the "I" or "self".

One of the main issues in contemporary meditation studies is the objectivist approach. In recent years, neurologists and psychologists have used quantitative methods to study the benefits of contemplative practice and the development of the feeling of 'presence' (Baldini et al. 2014; Zhu et al. 2017; Childs 2007; Kestly 2016), aiming to investigate measurable facts. While these investigations produce valuable data, they are primarily focused on recognizing concrete facts and are not sufficiently concerned with the relationship between meditation, culture, and individual consciousness. In contrast, the anthropological theory of presence, introduced by De Martino, provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding aspects of meditation that are not illuminated by quantitative research.

Moreover, the possibility of using Demartinian anthropological contributions to investigate the age-old question of conscience is nothing new, as it has already been advanced by Geisshuesler. In one of his studies in which he analyzes the question of parapsychology between De Martino and Eliade, he states that despite the 1956 controversy surrounding the use of parapsychology in the study of religion between Mircea Eliade and Ernesto De Martino, both scholars shared a common vision for the role of religious studies as a discipline of cultural recovery. This notion received its most radical expression in their writings of the 1930s and 1940s, when Eliade himself shared De Martino's enthusiasm for parapsychology as an invaluable tool for the study of the efficacy of religious phenomena (Geisshuesler 2019a). In the specific case of Buddhism, Geisshuesler's studies were mainly applied to the *rDzogs-Chen*, demonstrating that "psychological-mental" techniques of self-transformation can have tangible historical effects on socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, and this paper reinforces the broader idea that the combined study of psychology and history can provide novel insights into both disciplines. (Geisshuesler 2019b, p. 15).

De Martino's critique of the ethnology of the time and naturalism is not limited to methodological issues, but rather reflects a desire to reform the study of the human being by placing anthropology at the forefront as a discipline that is uniquely suited to the task. In this sense, De Martino's concept of the intellectual is of paramount importance for society, as it is envisioned as a guardian of humanity during times of crisis. As he states, "intellectuals can only overcome crisis if they are willing to generate a "unity of thought" that overcomes our culture's tendency to think in "separate entities" ("compartimenti-stagni")" (Geisshuesler 2021, p. 5).

The concept of separating entities brings to mind the issue of isolation. According to Heidegger, the human mind can only conceive the world as manipulable (*zuhandenheit*), but in order to manipulate, one must utilize a will to power that isolates the entity. As a result of this isolation, the entity becomes nothing. De Martino posits that the most distressing form of pain is also linked to forced isolation of the being. In this process of isolation, the impossible death of the being is yearned, and the inevitable sense of anguish is obtained, which is a proclamation of the incompatibility of Being with the will to power that seeks its transformation. De Martino refers to this as "pure anguish of becoming" which "constitutes a psychopathological experience that involves all the moments of becoming

itself, regardless of their content" (De Martino 2019, p. 235). He further suggests that the ultimate defense against this anguish is the rejection of any relationship with the world, ultimately resulting in the immobility of catatonic stupor.[5]

This complex system establishes a 'world', a world in which Being is "made present" as being-there. However, although "presence" is precisely "being-in-the-world", De Martino also affirms that presence sustains its *ethos* only in transcendence, that is, in "going beyond the situation, improving it according to the coherence of Being, and emerging from the situation itself through this transcendence of improvement" (De Martino 1995, p. 102), a personal presence can be lost. Forgetting that it is a world-in-the-world, a presence is made into a thing that is valorized by a sociality that can cause it to become isolated. However, by isolating a part from the whole, the part loses its meaning, and therefore the presence isolated from Being can also cease to be be-there (p. 105). This experience leads to anxiety, malaise, madness, and a whole series of phenomena that De Martino identifies as the "crisis at the end of the world". Against this risk, various religious, ritual and philosophical devices are instituted, such as real techniques of preservation of presence (pp. 110–38).

Now, the question is not whether or not it is possible to stem this "end of the world" to avoid the crisis of its presence, but to what extent De Martino's speeches can explain the similar "end of the world" (*lokanta*) of the Buddhist system. I addressed this issue during my first ethnography devoted to meditation for personal healing purposes. Numerous meditators have witnessed to me an experience that they literally defined as "the end of the world", and I found this same wording in the Pāli canon as a central element for the purposes of meditation (Divino 2021, pp. 253–22). In particular, what appeared evident both in the texts and in the ethnography is that this sense of apocalypse of one's own private world coincided with experiences of deconstruction of one's own identity, which were experienced as nefarious and damaging if such deconstruction occurred in an "accidental" or "unexpected" way, and as pleasant and satisfactory if instead one followed a path that consciously and deliberately aimed at that intent. The first case concerns almost exclusively mindfulness practitioners, while the second mainly involves "traditional" meditation practitioners. Nizamis believes that the problem of identity in Buddhism can also be analyzed from a phenomenological perspective (Nizamis 2012). In Buddhism, totality (*sabba*) as an indivisible set of phenomena is of fundamental importance. Human cognition, however, segments this totality to organize its parts into a world (*loka*) of elements dominated by a normative order (Divino 2023a). For this reason, there is a link between the whole (*sabba*) and the world (*loka*) that we can recognize by comparing, for example, the *Sabbasutta* (SN 35.23) with the *Lokasutta* (SN 12.44). However, there is also a *Pahānasutta* (36.3), that is, 'abandoning'. Abandonment is nothing but a renunciation of those cognitive habituation and attachments that generate the world. Moreover, it is a fascinating axis that also builds on the possession, the idea of dependence on damaging factors. Nizamis believes that the concept of *pahāna* is comparable to that of *epokhḗ*, which is a Husserlian concept for the drastic suspension of one's own 'natural attitude' (Gutland 2018), which we might also address as 'cognitive habituation'. The fact is that we "are born into, live, and die within a certain 'pregiven' and unquestioned attitude toward and assumption about 'the world' and their relationship to 'the world'" (Nizamis 2012, p. 215). The world has for the Buddhists a twofold meaning: being both a dimension of suffering whose boundaries cannot be surpassed even by traveling, and the limit that must be transcended to be freed from suffering. In other words, "in the quest to find an escape from 'the painful' (*dukkha*), even if one could travel forever, one would never reach the limit or end (*anta*) of the 'world' (*loka*)" (p. 217, my emphasis). However, the expression *lokanta* "world's end" and *lokuttara* "world's transcendence" are both the most ancient ways of indicating the state of *nibbāna*, being "the attainment of that which is 'absolutely beyond' the 'spatiotemporal world' as such" (p. 218), thus, Nizamis explains, "[n]ibbāna is transcendental with respect to all phenomena: its nature is such that it is absolutely non-phenomenal". Actually, the best way we can describe this position is reported by Nizamis (2012, p. 230) from the Udānas, and I specifically want to use Nizamis' translation

which recites: "[t]he removal of the concept/conceit 'I am': that, verily, is the ultimate bliss". Although it is true, as Nizamis also mentions, that the idea of ego is grounded in the pre-linguistic as the first intentional form of consciousness, it is also true, as is evident from these Buddhist discourses, that meditation means language and construction of psychological identities as proceeding from identical processes of cognitive designation and image appropriation.

Moreover, the role of the "agency" (p. 232) is equally important for the meditative practice, which sees the path of liberation in the process of self-analysis of this agency. This mosaic constitutes a more varied image, that of personal identity, the deconstruction of which is a goal of meditation. The thesis I advanced in the study published in 2021, and which I expand on here, is precisely this: the experiences of crisis or collapse of the present experienced by certain meditators are nothing other than elements already foreseen by the Buddhist system, and they are precisely the approach to the state of the end of the world (*lokanta*).[6] The conceptual framework that ancient Buddhism provides for transcending worldly concerns, articulated in the seminal delineation of *lokiya* and *lokuttara*, is fundamentally rooted in its foundational anti-dualistic philosophy (Divino 2023a, p. 16). This notion was informed by the profound realizations that emerged from meditative introspections, which illuminated the quandaries inherent in the bifurcation of subject and object. Engaging with this topic from an anthropological perspective, it becomes apparent that the conventional anthropological conception of a 'world' is critically challenged by the meditative approach. This approach compels us to reevaluate our sense of self as inherently discrete from the 'other' we face. The query then arises: how might we construct an anthropology of the 'other' in the absence of a clearly defined 'other'?

For a long time, anthropology struggled with the problem of ethnocentrism, which was considered a stain on its epistemology. De Martino, quite notably, was among the early vanguard to challenge entrenched ethnocentrism, pioneering the path towards a more critical anthropology (Satta 2018). He postulated the inherent difficulty, if not the outright impossibility, for an anthropologist to establish a genuine and absolute separation from the culture and people under scrutiny. He proposed that this aspiration, often cloaked in an air of pretentiousness, is an insurmountable endeavor, thereby invoking a significant reassessment of conventional anthropological methodologies.

It eventually believed that the hermeneutic turn was a way to overcome ethnocentrism and restore the anthropologist's ability to study human beings without the weight of this controversial chapter in their history. Currently, there are two dominant trends in academic science: homogenization and the flattening of knowledge to universal laws or extreme particularization, where each case is treated as an exception and there are no general laws or trends (Stanghellini and Ciglia 2013). Now meditation challenges again the problem of ethnocentrism prompting us to reconsider a non-dualistic anthropology as an overcoming of ethnocentrism.

To date, meditation is being studied by neuroscientists, psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers and philologists (Esch 2014; De Silva 2014). Science has shown that meditation is variously connected to gray matter development, although the areas vary according to the type of meditation practiced. Generally, the decline in gray matter that is linked to aging may be slowed in meditation-practicing subjects whose brains are younger (Travis 2020, p. 3). All brain areas except for the primary sensory cortices are activated by meditative practice. *Samatha* meditation activates the fronto-parietal network related to attentional skills, and deactivates regions related to conceptual thought and emotions (p. 4). *Vipassanā* is linked to the rostral anterior cingulate cortex (attention, allocation, decision-making skills and motivation) as well as the dorsal medial prefrontal. Mindfulness, on the other hand, is related to the activation of lateral prefrontal cortices (particularly involved in working memory, reasoning, and planning), and deactivation of the medial prefrontal is usually related to complex cognitive behaviors such as sociality and personality, the so-called "discursive self" which is associated in the medial prefrontal cortex of both hemispheres (McGilchrist 2021a, p. 117). Furthermore, "whereas the 'experiential' self, the 'self in the

present moment', the self 'sensing what is occurring in one's thoughts, feelings and body state, without purpose or goal, other than noticing how things are from one moment to the next', the self that is recruited by mindfulness, is associated with widespread right hemisphere activations" (*ibidem*).

These are studies that do not focus on one meditative tradition in particular, and where they differentiate between different practices found in a group of studies, they do not focus on cross-referencing historical and experiential data, forgetting that of certain meditative traditions we possess detailed descriptions of the intended effects. Generally, however, we know that the practice of focused attention is related to the development of perceptual awareness, selective attentional capacities (gamma-activity), and also related to intra-regional communication between neurons (Travis 2020, p. 7). Another practice studied is so-called open monitoring. The effects recorded here also relate to functional connectivity in cerebral regions (Fujino et al. 2018), but differences were found between novices and experienced practitioners, showing that inner mental processes related to midline frontal theta varied according to the subject's experience in meditation (Travis 2020, p. 7). What is unusual is the presence of a mention on transcendent meditation of *rDzogs-chen* tradition, which is of Tibetan elaboration. In any case, this meditation has been linked to the inhibition of cognitive processes such as attention, working memory, and cognitive flexibility (frontal executive processing). In this article, we have tried proposing a model of anthropological investigation of meditative practice from the investigation of consciousness.

A study conducted by Ataria has previously connected meditative experience to trauma (Ataria 2018). The subjects who took part in this research were all mindfulness practitioners and chose to join voluntarily, taking part in ethnographic interviews. The method used in this study had strong elicitation interview roots, and the interview techniques were implemented in order to enable subjects to let go of their old beliefs, and increase their awareness of the way they conduct a given cognitive process and explain it in detail. The results of the study showed that meditative experience was marked by the disappearance of sense of ownership, where the subject felt as if someone else was undergoing the experience. This is similar to what is experienced in traumatic situations, when the sense of agency decreases. Additionally, the meditative state leads to a lack of distinction between real and unreal, alongside the vanishing of the 'autobiographical self' which is formed over time through memory and expectations of the future. It is evident that mindfulness and trauma do not constitute the same phenomenon, but the phenomenological analysis does reveal some shared features between them. These similarities are likely due to alterations of consciousness (ASCs), as both meditation and trauma involve narrowing of attention, a reduction in sensory stimulation, and a decrease in bodily activity, which arise from perceptual deprivation and can consequently lead to ASCs.

3. The Anthropological Contribution

De Martino endeavors to provide his own interpretation of yoga within his study on cultural apocalypses (De Martino 2019, pp. 142–43) in which he connects meditation to his theory of presence and consciousness, drawing from what he considers to be a cosmological interpretation of Buddhism. For De Martino, *karma* is nothing more than the way in which the Buddha theorizes temporal becoming: the eternal return of suffering in the human situation. Liberation from karma is ensured by "defined techniques" such as meditation, which promote a restoration to the pre-chronological time (*regressus ad origenem*), a return to the time before time (De Martino interprets the yogic concept of *pratiloma* as "in reverse", "counter-current"). De Martino's interpretation concludes with a reference to psychoanalysis, which only partially simulates this return to the origin, as it stops at childhood, as the origin of the conscious and present subject, whose becoming in the world begins with a traumatic act.

Marcel Mauss, a French anthropologist, is the first to use the concept of the 'technique of the body'. He believed that the body is an instrument of knowledge and expression,

and he argued that bodily techniques are integral to the formation of a person's identity. Mauss argued that these techniques are embedded in cultural life and are essential to an understanding of social behavior. According to Mauss, body techniques are the means by which people learn and pass on their cultures. It is through these techniques that people learn how to dress, walk, speak, and interact with their environment.

In cultural anthropology, the technique of the body has been used to study human behavior and culture. For example, anthropologists have studied how people in different cultures use their bodies to express themselves and how they interact with their environment. By studying these techniques, anthropologists can gain insight into how culture shapes individual behavior (Mauss 1936).

The work of Ernesto De Martino has reconsidered ethnography as a possible cathartic method and one of protection of society that detached itself from naturalistic criteria and was centered on the research of the functioning of consciousness and awareness, which he called presence. De Martino's work has opened up the possibility for a contemplative anthropology, which looks at yogic and meditative experiences to explore human behavior, and to rethink what ethnography itself is. By studying the techniques of the body, contemplative anthropology could provide an understanding of how the physical and psychological aspects of the human experience interact, and how culture shapes behavior.

In De Martino's work against Naturalism (De Martino 1941), the author explains why a strictly objectivist science cannot comprehend the complexity of world's phenomena. The fundamental theoretical foundation of this work is the belief that modern sciences applied to the study of human behavior and history (the tendency referred to as "Naturalism" by De Martino) are fundamentally ideologically biased and pertain to the unhealthy notion that human history progresses through the acquisition of knowledge, thereby relegating "primitive" societies to a fundamental ignorance. Magic, initially viewed by scholars such as Frazer as the "bastard sister of science", is instead viewed by De Martino as a fundamental device for the protection of 'humanhood'. Science, in this sense, is not a progressive evolution of magic, as Frazer suggests, but rather an adaptive evolution. Science is religion adapted to the contemporary, historicized in the current context, but in comparison to the religion of so-called primitive peoples, it is neither truer nor more reliable. However, these considerations had difficult repercussions on De Martino. This concept is further developed in De Martino's controversial essay "The World of Magic". It is within this work that De Martino's previously vague ideas begin to take shape as a composite theory: the theory of the crisis of the presence.[7]

A famous episode in ethnology reports the experiences of anthropologists who studied the powers of the members of the Na Ivilankata clan of Fiji exhibited during the vilavilareivo ceremony in which the natives manage to pass unscathed through a furnace of red-hot stones. To further complicate matters, this ceremony was also attended by Westerners, and a European dropped a handkerchief. The handkerchief that had been on the stone for fifteen or twenty seconds charred in all the folds that had touched the stone, and otherwise had yellow burns. The feet of four or five performers of the ceremony, subjected to examination, were instead left with no trace of burns: nor were the ornaments on the ankles, composed of dry leaves of tree fern, burned (De Martino 2022, p. 17). Strengthened therefore also by Husserl's reading of another crisis, that of the European Sciences, De Martino invites us to consider the authenticity of these phenomena as they are given (something "is given," in Italian: *si dà*, like in the German *es gibt*).

> The exploration of phenomena that belong to a *given* world requires that the presence of the observer be secured, thus necessitating that the methods used to observe such phenomena cannot be completely adaptable to phenomena from a world that is given and still included in the existential drama of a person in crisis. This leads to the conclusion that paranormal phenomena, particularly for certain and specific subjects, involve a certain level of participation from the observer in the crisis of the person producing them. [. . .] Consequently, the naturalistic procedure here encounters an unprecedented antinomy: the attitude that is most

compliant with the rules of observation may influence the observed phenomenon and cause it to vanish, whereas the phenomenon may appear more easily if the observer somehow abandons the attitude of the observer and becomes, albeit to a limited degree, a collaborator of the medium. (p. 135)

De Martino has consistently articulated his concern for the neglect of the historical dimension in various instances. This disregard for history can be attributed to both the crisis of modernity and the nostalgia for *illo tempore* that is evident in scholars such as Eliade (Geisshuesler 2021, p. 77). Engaging with history, society inevitably exposes itself to the risk of crisis, which entails confrontation with everything that is not systematized, and therefore falls outside the semantic boundaries of society. This poses a constant threat to the stability of order, as the non-ordained, that which remains outside the limited means of human organization, serves as a perpetual reminder of the possibility of existence outside of an order. Society attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible by forming a general category, "otherness," which ultimately becomes threatening, mysterious, terrifying, and annihilating. The figure of the priest serves to manage the border between the margin of society and the world of the sacred, of the non-ordained. The magical-religious devices are employed to ensure human presence in society, and the de-historification "is intended to help individuals and societies overcome critical moments of existence by transporting historical reality into a space outside of time. It operates by temporarily concealing the destructive potential of the crisis by transposing the present events into a metahistorical realm where the incidents are actively mastered and brought under control" (pp. 84–85). The centrality of history is a fundamental aspect of De Martino's thought, as evidenced by his desire to give voice to the marginalized and all those categories "left out" of history. This is also the reason for his critique of the non-historicality of Eliade's thought, that is, the inability to consider the contingency of events. According to De Martino, Eliade's "inability to distance himself from the believer's point of view seriously hampered his hermeneutic approach to religion" (p. 87).

The issue that Croce could not reconcile was the Demartinian effort to liberate Europe from extreme objectivism. In his examination of the ethnographic memory of the missionary Grubb, who was accused of theft by an indigenous person who claimed to have witnessed the crime in a dream, De Martino appears to align with both perspectives: in a distinct relationship between presence and the world than that which is determined in our civilization, which is a part of a historical epoch in which the presence has not yet been clearly decided as a state of wakefulness, and the perceptions of reality also extend to the realm of dream consciousness. In this case, De Martino suggests that the dream is as real as waking, and that it is only through the determination of the latter as the only possible reality for historical consciousness that our culture begins to view dreams as irrational.[8]

Upon examining the other mentions of the term 'yoga' in De Martino's work, it becomes apparent that they are almost exclusively linked to commentary on Eliade's book. In a subsequent review of other works by Eliade, De Martino seems to confirm his convictions regarding his interpretations of the "salvation of presence" (De Martino 1952a, pp. 148–49). It is known that Eliade's idea of "shamanism" was essentially similar to yoga, where both practices possessed an ideal form of asceticism allowed by the simple technique of the body, and a more "lower" or degenerate form of ascetics through the use of psychotropic substances. However, De Martino disagrees on one point: shamanic asceticism cannot pertain to the theme of escape from history (p. 153). He then emphasizes the distinction outlined by Eliade himself, between shamanism and "classical" yoga, whose aim is indeed escape from the cosmos (p. 154). Subsequently, in his preface to the Italian edition of Eliade's book, De Martino reiterates his interpretation unequivocally: "because of its nature as a relatively coherent system founded on the rejection of history, the yogic spirituality challenges the historicistic orientation of our civilization to renew its dialogue with itself with particular energy" (De Martino 1952b, p. 10). This is in relation to what De Martino defines, typically according to his style, as the "anguish of becoming". In this context, De Martino also seems strongly rooted in his interpretation, to the point of

disdain for any attempt to free yoga from the constraints of historicism. He later writes, criticizing Eliade not too subtly: "to fantasize about an anti-historical residue of religious experiences, a residue that would undermine historicism, simply means being in some way immediately engaged in that religious paradox that should have only been the object of research and reconstruction" (pp. 10–11). It remains to be seen whether such audacity is not disproved by the facts, which can only be found in the epistemological status of yoga itself, whose intentions, written in the texts in question, are unambiguous and do not require interpretation. Our goal, in this brief examination, is to understand if and to what extent De Martino's theory is applicable to an anthropological analysis of meditation. The proximity to therapy is not surprising, given that De Martino himself acknowledges this connection: "the religious delirium observable in European clinics was not the same as shamanism or yoga or Christian mysticism, which are cultural products integrated in a specific religious civilization of human history" (De Martino 1961, p. 82).

Ernesto De Martino first came into contact with the religions of the Asian world thanks to his first mentor Macchioro, who encouraged him to study Eliade's text on *Yoga*. As we read in a letter from 1938, Macchioro sent the book to De Martino, defining it as "an excellent book [. . .] on Yoga that should interest you", and then, in another letter from 1939: "I believe you will find Eliade's book interesting. I do not know if I ever spoke to you about this my singular Romanian disciple, who was drawn in my wake by Orphism, wrote some studies about me in newspapers and magazines in Bucharest, and then went to India". These investigations pique the interest of De Martino, who displays a keen eagerness to delve deeper into the correlations between religious practices and paranormal experiences. Specifically, Yoga emerges as a valuable resource for De Martino, as it aligns with his transcultural theory of magic.

According to De Martino, the origins of madness (*follia*) stemming from feelings of self-loss (*perdita del sé*) can be attributed to three main factors. The first is the perceived threat of impending nothingness. Secondly, the danger of losing the ability to construct a form arises, as noted in Lesce's study (Lesce 2019, p. 179), and this concept of form is also present in Buddhism (*rūpa*) as the foundation of the chain of knowledge production that shapes the world. Lastly, the inability for the restless presence to transcend critical contents within the ideal community form is also a contributing factor. This final aspect is achieved through asceticism. For Buddhists, the goal of asceticism is the transcendence of the world and the attainment of a worldly state that is neither of this world nor of another (Divino 2023b). De Martino refers to the "magic person" as one who is able to overcome these cognitive deceits, in which "the self and the world are not definitively given as distinct and guaranteed values". This figure bears resemblance to the *samaṇa* ascetic in Buddhism.

His interest as an anthropologist in these practices is evident and explicit, as well as his attempt to apply his own explanation on consciousness and human presence to them. However, we should better examine the topic of De Martino's interpretation on *yoga*, in which we can clearly recognize his need to appropriate, to some extent, the Indian contemplative practice in order to expand and solidify the foundations of his own theory on presence. The first impact will produce the following outcome, represented by the review that De Martino publishes in *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* concerning the 1948 edition of the aforementioned work. For De Martino, Eliade's work "responds very well to the general need of Western culture to broaden its own humanism and renew its own problematics through the understanding of forms of spirituality ideally distant from our own" (De Martino 1948, p. 130). In light of what we will see shortly, these words should be understood as De Martino's legitimate interest in finding new cultural channels that would strengthen his emerging theory. He was indeed so interested in it that he summarized his own theory of presence in the review of Eliade's text, a necessity in his opinion to expose the weak points of the text under examination. De Martino asserts that Eliade's interpretation is undoubtedly suggestive and fascinating, however he finds problematic the interpretations on the existential drama from which the "refusal to let oneself live" arises and the paradox of the "abolition of history". Since De Martino considers the situation properly 'magical'

as characterized by the fragility of presence, by the continuous exposure to the risk of not-being-there, magic would be configured as a system of safeguards opposed to the intensity of this risk. Religion relates to the experience of being as limitation and finitude, as an anguishing, hateful given that must be abolished.[9] The magical–religious polarity is precisely the polarity of 'presence as a problem': now in the act of defending oneself from the world that threatens to overwhelm it, now in the act of freeing oneself from the world in which one experiences a state of anguishing rejection (p. 131).

4. Towards a Contemplative Anthropology

The link between anthropological practice and contemplative practice is not the result of a recent convergence. Williams already sees in Lévi-Strauss a meditative attitude, evidenced by her witness A's remarks to her about the "essential emptiness of anthropological study" ([Williams 2007](), p. 90). Lévi-Strauss himself makes a Buddhist-inspired statement when he speaks of the deconstruction of the anthropologist's object of study, but he also anticipates De Martino's work by speaking of presence, which emerges as the only stable and enduring fact since the perpetual deconstruction of cognitive objects also lets the absence of meaning fade away. Indeed, I was surprised to hear mention of an "anthropology of presence" (p. 91), a flawless Demartinian definition, as a possible solution to cognitive anthropology.[10] This indefectibly leads anthropology to share the same path as ontology, but also toward possible reunification with the hard sciences. For while the object as an entity independent of the experiencer's consciousness is something that is no longer tenable, it is also true that the experiential subject also needs deconstruction (p. 96). Thus, we discussed some significant ethnography that investigated deep meditation experiences, but we found how in several cases a damaging and distressing experience took over, which we related back to the "end of the world" experience. It must be said, that many meditators link this distressing experience to unpreparedness in approaching the deeper stages of meditation. Fortunately, this fact is also acknowledged by the authors: "Meditators sometimes found that they did not possess an adequate interpretive framework to enable them to manage their ELSEs at the time they occurred" ([Cooper et al. 2021](), p. 13). This has not, however, rid Buddhism of its name as a nihilistic philosophy, an inaccurate prejudice that we intend to rid ourselves of to enable a more effective anthropological investigation of meditative experiences. Buddhism has often been accused of having a nihilistic outlook. Instead, Buddhism proposes a physics of complexity, in which nothing that 'is' can be destroyed, but simultaneously, it cannot be isolated from its network of complexity. In the conception of becoming "an entity does not arise from nothing nor does it perish into nothing, but is a transition from one baseline state to the next" ([Brown 1999](), p. 264).

As observed, numerous accounts in the scholarly literature report instances of crisis emerging throughout various contemplative practices. These phenomena, which were also documented in my ethnography, warrant further investigation. It is proposed that adopting the Demartinian model of the crisis of presence will facilitate accurate interpretation of these phenomena, as well as shed light on potential resolutions. The abdication of identity is inherent within a philosophical framework that views the formation of the ego, and consequently one's presence in the world, as a "subjectivity" capable of asserting itself (De Martino would refer to this as "being in history") as a precarious condition. This condition relies on the acknowledgement of others and is subordinate to social, cultural, and linguistic norms. The yogi relinquishes this instability because the identity thus established is impermanent and ephemeral. Their practice is not concerned with reinforcing presence but rather with unraveling it, without succumbing to nihilism. Instead, it leads to the emergence of a profound self, devoid of identity.

Having established these premises, it is worth noting that the ethnographic context presents an entirely distinct perspective on yoga. The incorporation of yoga into the scope of body anthropology supports de Martino's hypothesis, and it is congruent with the narrative that yoga instructors convey: "Because ... yoga was already fundamentally significant

to me . . . I mean, simply . . . being a very restless, very . . . restless mind . . . I genuinely required something that would ground me in the present, allowing me to stabilize . . . body and mind, and yoga provided this somatic anchor" (Interview with Alice, 21 March 2019). Far from being a practice dedicated to a form of social anti-normativism, contemporary yoga actively participates in the preservation of presence, presently in the guise of personal well-being and "self-care", without excessively scrutinizing social structures. Instead, it often reinforces adaptation to them.

> " . . . the primary benefit, which is also attained through a good yoga practice, is, let's say, the foremost and perhaps most apparent: the enhancement of one's connection with oneself. Through this connection, it is as though you are tuning in to . . . just like adjusting the . . . frequency of a radio, right? There used to be dials on radios, and you would fine-tune to find the exact frequency of a transmission. It might sound somewhat hipster to discuss, but it's not like that; it's a connection with . . . with oneself. And what is the advantage of this connection? Everything becomes more harmonious, so one's life experiences less friction in general . . . So, the benefits are undoubtedly mental, promoting greater harmony with . . . with life events and . . . and this." (Interview with Valentina, 7 February 2019)

The ethnographic accounts generally corroborated the inclusion of yoga within a specific self-care framework, but they also unveiled a striking parallel with the crisis of presence. There is no mention of this phenomenon in the texts; however, the modernized yogic practice, as it were, perceives the transcendence of certain boundaries as positioning oneself on the verge of this crisis. Particularly notable among the published testimonies are those of Alice: "You begin to observe this candle . . . and simply . . . concentrate on the candle. And then . . . but . . . how to express . . . without providing me with substantial tools . . . she had merely instructed me to do this . . . and I recall performing this action . . . and it led to a peculiar experience, akin to de-realization . . . somewhat dissociative as well, right? No . . . not . . . not positive, so to speak . . . in the sense . . . it bore no relation to meditation . . . " (Alice in Divino 2021, p. 254); Lucia (p. 261): "Because you know, in moments of intense concentration . . . after years of practicing, and when you are immersed in meditation . . . it is as though everything is absorbed into you, as if the world around you ceases to exist . . . you remain alone in this void . . . "; and Elisa (p. 273): "At times, I felt like nothing, and the term I associated with this sensation was 'nothingness'".

In summary, the ethnographic evidence highlights a distinct vision of yoga, demonstrating its incorporation within a self-care framework and its connection to the crisis of presence. Though the texts do not explicitly mention this phenomenon, modern yogic practice appears to encounter the crisis of presence as practitioners push their boundaries. The accounts of Alice, Lucia, and Elisa offer valuable insights into these experiences, emphasizing the need for further investigation and understanding of the intricate relationship between yoga, self-care, and the crisis of presence.

The challenge of defining contemplative anthropology is just beginning, and this article represents the initial proposal in this direction. Naturally, such a contemplative anthropology compels us to radically reconsider all the traditional problems of anthropology, particularly entailing a revision of the ontological turn in my view. However, this is not the time to delve into this challenge. Here, I would like to share what my personal experience has shaped thus far in my perception as an anthropologist and scholar of the human being. Specifically, anthropology today faces a new challenge: ethnographic dualism. The modern anthropologist is confronted with the hypertrophy of isolating cognition, which has been masterfully defined by McGilchrist as the overpowering dominance of a mode of reasoning and worldview represented in neuroscience by the operational modes of the left hemisphere over another more holistic and comprehensive mode of reasoning (McGilchrist 2021a). Anthropology has already faced this challenge in the form of debates on embodiment, ethical and emic dimensions, and, above all, the relationship between the anthropologist and the 'anthropologized', seeking a solution by relinquishing claims of objectivism and acknowledging that anthropology can only admit an interpenetration and

mutual influence between subjectivities. Furthermore, in the disorientation experienced by the anthropologist who abandons their cultural world to assume that of another, there is certainly no possibility of seeing things in their entirety as one who is not, as it would mean negating oneself. However, when the anthropologist adopts the contemplative tool, they acquire a non-dualistic dimension that is equally problematic. In other words, non-dualism compels us to take a further step beyond this idea, as it leads us to consider the division between subjects, and even between objects, no longer acceptable. Taken to the extreme, the consequence of this reflection, which is worse than the shock of cultural disorientation, can only have two possible solutions: either the complete abandonment of anthropology as there is no recognizable 'otherness' left to study, or the transformation of anthropology from the study of alterity to the study of overcoming dichotomies. We must accept the challenge of ethnographizing the problem of division itself, recognizing its manifestation as a deception of our cognitive faculties. The "world of mirrors" that McGilchrist has aptly described in his recent studies (McGilchrist 2009), which is the result of the isolating reasoning performed by the left hemisphere (Heidegger's *Rechnendes Denken*), is nothing but the paroxysm of a methodology that forces us to admit the bitter truth that anthropology has not truly decolonized. Given that the relationship between neurobiological and cultural aspects has already been widely acknowledged (Lende et al. 2021; Han and Northoff 2008; Kitayama et al. 2003), the work of McGilchrist and its potential applications in the so-called human sciences and within the framework of a non-dualistic anthropology appear even more significant today.

Rather, the world has become even more fragmented, resembling Lacan's *corps morcelé* but appearing to us as a mosaic in which academic scholars, increasingly specialized, focus their expertise on a single fragment, failing to see the bigger picture. In this hyper-specialization, there is the paroxysm of isolating cognition and the ego/other reasoning, and anthropology has not been exempt from this worldview, defining itself even as the study of alterity. While this was commendable until now, in the context of an envisioned contemplative anthropology, the non-dualistic perspective compels us to completely abandon this division of self/other. At this point, as previously stated, the contemplative anthropologist has two choices: to abandon anthropology or to transform it. My idea is to redefine anthropology not as the study of alterity but as the study of the problems caused by the assumption of alterity as a real fact, thereby engaging in a struggle against dualisms, categorizations, and dichotomies that manifest in various ways across all cultures. Anthropology must also adopt a critical stance toward these dualisms, acknowledging their devaluation of the human being and advocating for a more complex understanding of human existence and being-in-the-world, a vision that transcends the veil of categorical distinctions. However, this does not imply that everything is indistinct or equal; such a claim would be an extreme paroxysm in the opposite direction. The multiplicity and richly varied cultural manifestations are undoubtedly part of the human experience, but focusing solely on them as objects does not distinguish the anthropologist from the mechanistic thinker who views phenomena in the world as separable parts of a machine. In a sense, this mechanistic view that has dominated the West, which only now, when applied to the subjectivity of the individual, leads to a crisis of presence and a sinking into disorientation described by De Martino as the exit of the human being from history and their context. When objectified, a part is extracted from its inseparable connection to the whole, and in this compartmentalization and isolation, the part loses its reason for being, which was its being-in-the-whole. Placed under scrutiny and analyzed as a fragment by the scholar, it is dead, a mere absence.

5. The Crisis of Mental Images

In the context of his ethnography on Neapolitan *jettatura* ("evil eye"), De Martino testifies to a couple of surprising experiences. Paul, who tells the story of his looking in the mirror, almost falls into a kind of trance, oscillating between the narration of his experience and the image that seemed to reproduce it in the mirror: "He was frightened at himself. It

seemed to him that his glance, reflected by the mirror, returned to him like a poisoned arrow. Imagine Medusa looking at her own hideous yet charming face in the ruddy reflection of a brazen shield!" (De Martino 2015, p. 169). The mirror seems in fact an important element, albeit neglected, in the anthropologist's experience in the southern world, between almost shamanic-loke dances to exorcise the tarantula's disease and magical songs recited by old peasant women. I choose to mention this experience because the reflection on the mirror involved my meditative experience in the first place. The question of the 'image' is a central problem in Buddhist analysis and it can also be related to the anthropology of consciousness, since "how a given object is culturally interpreted and represented in memory should importantly influence and even determine how one thinks about the object" (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 231).

Cognition and the flow of thought are a constant proliferation of images, and these images are acquired, associated, assimilated, modified. Visual anthropology can find a valuable medium in contemplative ethnography, precisely from the study of the workings of these cognitive images. Buddhist traditions more advanced than the ancient one will reflect deeply on the problem of referential imaging (*ālambana*) and whether meditative practice produces a detachment of the thinking mind from the process of constant referencing (Esler 2017, p. 436).

We have seen how, in De Martino's theory, the present lives in a world of "things and names" organized out of an "economic" will, which for De Martino means nothing other than the possibility of dividing the phenomena that appear in the world into a series of distinct entities.

Such distinct entities are imaginal, visual-perceptual, coenesthetic in nature, in association between the sensible and formulable data. Of course, the visual metaphor is only the most preponderant. We could speak, as linguistics does, of 'acoustic images', but following Buddhism, we see that the favored visual metaphor is also applied to describe the attainment of transcendence, which is a kind of transparency, or invisibility.

> All percepts and concepts have become transparent to such a degree that he or she sees *through* them with his all-encompassing vision. Hence, his non-referential gaze—which is neither attentive nor inattentive, neither fixed nor unfixed—knows no horizon. (Esler 2017, p. 437)

Consciousness in Buddhism is defined as a 'frame'. Imagine looking at a vast territory; mountains, rivers, and forests stand out before your eyes. Taking a picture of this vast environment can only place it within bounded, and therefore limited, boundaries. The frame gives boundaries to the territory, nor is it a codification. Consciousness is defined by Buddhists as *viññāṇa*, which literally means to organize knowledge (-*jñāna*) through divisions (*vi*-). Moreover, the image plays a key role in defining identity for Buddhists, as cognition (*sañjānāti*) is the association (*saṃ*) of the previously divided knowledge (the verb *jānāti* 'to know' is from the same root as *jñāna* 'knowledge'). This experience of Sarah helps us better understand what I mean. In the 2 November 2022 ethnography, she described her meditation as populated by images, but there are functional images and distracting images. The same definitions, in terms of "useful" and "misleading" images, will be given to me by Daniel in the following interview. She (Sarah) also speaks of "mental films" as automatism halfway between dreaming and waking that can arise as daydreams when meditation slips into a distraction. The term "mental film" is clearly interesting, but so is the border with the dream, distinct from the "film" for Sarah, because in the dream, the identity of the subject is totally unaware of being in a dream.

> So mental films . . . that is . . . are these kinds of processes that I lead more or less unconsciously, that is, I mean . . . I am sitting in meditation early in the morning and I say 'now, when I am finished and I make breakfast, I put this on, I put that finished soy milk, I have to go and buy and I start thinking about the things I have to do next . . . ' And so on, I see pictures of what I have to prepare. I see how I want to arrange the table with the cup, I make coffee with things. Then the

desire for coffee arises. [. . .] There are mental and very practical films, actually. Or are they just fantasies? I think I would like to go to Thailand, I would like to go and see that monastery, I would like to go and see the museum . . . It's like a speech I make to myself but with images. [. . .] At a certain point one lets go a little and the attention opens there. I don't have a physical image, but a feeling of openness and space, a feeling of . . . How can I explain? Of open space, however, I never get an image well inside of you, but I really get a feeling of spaciousness.

From early on in my ethnography, the problem of *which* meditation to analyze came before me. The methods today are varied as their names and related traditions, and many claim a supposedly greater antiquity as a guarantee of their authenticity. Among them, undoubtedly, the combination of *samatha* (tranquility) and *vipassanā* (insight) techniques are often presented by the Theravādin in this sense. However, they are also considered as the basis of even modern *mindfulness* itself. What I want instead to try to show in this brief discussion is that, contrary to today's common idea of seeking calmness and inner peace meditation (or performance enhancement in the case of mindfulness), in the most ancient texts, the initial and utmost important stages always focused on aspects of identity and analysis of image-making processes: focused concentration at a single point (*ekaggatā*) using images portrayed on external media (*kasiṇa-bhāvanā*) is a key aspect. Such image-making is then used to study the complex process of introjection and incorporation: from the analysis of the external image, one moves on to the image of the image inside the mind, transported, 'copied' into one's mental space. But in the end, which of the two images is truer? Are they not both the result of processing? If, therefore, the image can be 'transported' from outside to inside one's mental space, it is evidently an empty, deconstructible structure. For this reason, ancient meditation also focuses a great deal on signs (*nimitta*), which are used by the meditator in various ways and forms, from the luminous elements designed to 'purify' cognition to spheres containing syllables and linguistic elements (Crosby 2020, pp. 155–61) that harken back to another pivotal element of ancient Buddhism, namely the centrality of language and reflection on identity (*attā*) as a set of associated and 'acquired' images, 'grasped' by cognition and placed in relation. The question of language also arises in texts such as the *Arahantasutta* (SN 1.25), where the word is directly linked to the perception of identity: the "renunciation of thought/conceptualization" (*pahīna-mānassa*) liberates from any knot, and the wise one, freed of it, can still use expressions such as "I speak" (*ahaṃ vadāmi*), "they speak to me" (*mamaṃ vadanti*), but these are only "designations in the world" (*loke samaññaṃ*), and the sage who knows makes use of them without being served by them, they as "mere expressions" (*vohāra-mattena*).

The meditation that I practice is predominantly . . . precisely, *samatha* meditation, especially when . . . when I am in retreat, also when I am not in retreat. [. . .] Images are very important because in my experience meditation basically leads to images that can be *nimittas*. For example, in this case of *metta* meditation, you start by evoking an image or memory of a person, a situation that has a content akin to a sense of . . . benevolence, kindness, tenderness. I used for some time the image of a puppy, a kitten, a friend of mine, because as soon as I thought of that immediately the sense of caring tenderness emerged. And that emerges as its own, as a *nimitta*. It is not only a visual *nimitta*, but it is also a tactile *nimitta*. In some ways. It can be sometimes, for example, a sense of softening almost muscular softening of the body. I have a sense of expansion. Or the feeling of a smile arising. And that is the thing, so to speak . . . The *nimittas* are understood as a full-blown sign. It actually is, in fact. It is a sign that arises in correspondence to the manifestation of a mental element, in this case the arising of the inner state of *metta*. As for constructed imagery, however, for example . . . skeleton meditation. That skeleton meditation . . . I constructed for months, so I studied. I bought myself an anatomy book, started to study the parts of the body, started first with the skin, then with the muscles, then with the skeleton, with all the individual bones. So, I kind of built this mental image a little bit similar to what you do in

Tibetan Buddhism with *maṇḍalas*. So you visualize the levels and so on and so forth. I always had from childhood an attraction to the image of the skeleton. So instinctively, when I saw a skeleton it gave me a sense, it always gave me a sense of peace, tranquility. It is quite unusual and so this meditation also came quite easy to me. There are two there. Then one is the image that you construct through the visualization of the skeleton. (Ethnography with Daniel, 11 March 2021)

An important aspect of the meditative techniques found in the Yogāvacara tradition that has recently been of interest to scholars is the technique of visualization of signs (*nimitta*) through imaginative evocation, or by taking up meditative exercises that make use of physical supports (*kasiṇa bhāvanā*) and introjecting them into cognitive images. Precedents for these techniques can be found in the texts AN 4.142 and AN 1.49-52, which involve spontaneous and evocative *nimittas* and symbolic substitution exercises (*lopa*), as well as light exercises (such as SN 35.96 and MN 128) and the attainment of a luminous consciousness (*sobhana citta*), and visual exercises on colors (AN 8.65). Although these texts may not be of archaic formulation, they certainly attest to practices comparable to those modern contemplative studies are investigating. That *sati* is only one of the first stages to be attained on the meditative path is also confirmed by its function. Proper *sati*, in fact, is that which operates in everyday life and is not lost during experience, a kind of full awareness or 'mental presence' of the world around us, but which is not simply reduced to attention or inner peace (Kuan 2008, pp. 50–51). The discourse on *sati*, however, is complex and elaborate, notoriously in a path of four phases (*satipaṭṭhāna*) which are also identified as the signs (*nimitta*) of *samādhi* (p. 65).

One particular study of meditation collects evidence that in some respects falls into the ethnographic, but the value of the individual's experience is too limited to the search for specific patterns to be ethnography, nor does it claim to be one. The study focuses on ELSEs, but one aspect in particular caught my eye, namely the mention of so-called "meditation sickness" (Cooper et al. 2021, p. 2) as it was reminiscent of experiences I had already had during my first ethnography, in which some subjects who had exceeded certain standards in meditative practice testified to unpleasant and disturbing experiences, or even of "the end of the world". In the case of one subject who was a student of mindfulness, the negative experience was immediately redacted by the instructor, who had specified the risks of deeper meditation. The general idea was that going "deep" (this the ubiquitous metaphor in such circumstances) could also lead to losing control, which is perceived as the opposite intent of mindfulness practitioners. Such a loss of control, however, did not sit well with me. Talking to a practitioner of traditional Theravāda meditation, I received the opposite feedback, in that going mindful was presented to me as the authentic intent of meditation, which, far from seeking placid calm and 'Zen' harmony, was intended, according to one of respondents, to put the meditator in crisis because only through crisis would he be able to delve into his unconscious, his traumas and his problems of attachment and misconceptions.

The analysis of consciousness presents a fundamental problem already recognized by the Buddhists, namely, that consciousness cannot exist in itself. Consciousness exists only as consciousness-of-something, but if the object to which consciousness is directed is itself, this introflexion leads to a *reductio ad infinitum*, in which consciousness (*a*) considers itself as a relation between *a'* and *a''*, potentially going to infinity. I believe that the problem of the perceived split between inwardness and outwardness is nothing but the result of this misrepresentation. The Buddhists have denied any distinction between the self and the world, yet they do not give up speaking of inwardness or objects 'outside' the mind. This, however, is not their inconsistency: the constant splitting of cognitive entities is precisely what must be understood to free oneself from this mechanism. Therefore, in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* (MN 10) we read of a "body in the body" and a "sensation in the sensation", since in the presumed internal/external axis (*ajjhattaṃ vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati, bahiddhā vā kāye kāyānupassī viharati*), neither side is truer than the other (Nizamis

[2012](#), p. 221): a liberated mind does not focus (*abhinataṃ*) its attention on anything nor introverts it (*apanataṃ*).

I believe that the best way to understand this is to have recourse to visuals. In topology, the possibility of surfaces in which it is impossible to determine the inside and an outside has already been postulated, so if I were to define the conception of the body-mind or, more properly, of the relationship between the cogitating body and the cogitated world in Buddhism, I would say that it is like a *klein bottle*: the mind for Buddhists is a non-orientable topological surface.

As for the famous *samatha*/*vipassanā* binomial, on the other hand, it must be said that in the older suttas, it is impossible to find an exact definition ([Cousins 2022](#), p. 98), and thus the narrative that would have these two terms as indicating precise and very ancient techniques of meditation difficult to sustain. In fact, the two terms appear to have a fairly general and non-technical usage, as appears to be the case with others. Their technicality perhaps derives from the Abhidhammic construction, which presents *samatha* as equivalent to *samādhi* and *vipassanā* as an equivalent of *paññā* (p. 99). These are thus later elaborations, following in the wake that begins constructing patterns and equivalences as early as the composition of the *nikāyas* (p. 97). This does not mean that it is impossible to reconstruct a prototypical meditation idea for Buddhism.

The hermeneutical descriptions of *jhāna* indicate that it is disconnected from traditional consciousness experience, as it surpasses the temporality conditioned by conscious experience ([Dennison 2022](#), p. 23; [Cousins 1973](#)). The *presence* in the state of *jhāna* is thus closely related to the notion of *regressus ad originem* ([De Martino 2019](#), p. 142) hypothesized in cultural-apocalypse anthropology.

It is important to note that, in Buddhism, the *jhāna* practice is intended "only as a means to prepare the mind for understanding" and it is "not a goal in itself" ([Cousins 2022](#), p. 5). Furthermore, even though there are five 'hindrances' that this practice intends to remove as its purpose, this removal "is no mean task in itself" (p. 6). The meditation by four absorptions (*cattāri jhānāniti*) is traditionally described as the basis for the *samatha* meditation. Since the *samatha* meditation possesses this old-fashioned façade, the four jhanas are also perceived to be quite archaic. Essentially, this fact is not historically accurate. The *samatha* meditation is indeed an elaboration of Buddhaghosa ([Bucknell 1993](#)), who commented and developed his theory certainly starting from the Pāli canon. However, the four *jhānas* cannot be found as a system or as a definition anywhere in the old texts. Both *samatha* and *vipassanā* appear quite incoherent if they are deemed to be different phases of meditation or distinct techniques, and this is precisely because of their later development from the canon.

Among others, *jhāna*, also *samādhi*, and even *yoga* are legitimately considered valid as terms indicating 'meditation'. Upon closer analysis, however, it appears that these terms denote specific stages or aspects of meditative practice. Although *jhāna* is the term most often considered to represent 'meditation', Buddhists use to denote the practice as a whole the lemma *bhāvana*, which Cousins translates as "bringing into being" ([Cousins 2022](#), p. 3). Nevertheless, this term possesses a broader meaning, "much more than just a mental technique" and contemplative practice is internal to a system that makes no distinction between the physical and the psychic, acting on both daily habits and the deeper mechanisms of reasoning and perception. The elements of the noble eightfold path are the elements of daily habit that must be 'adjusted' by meditation: vision, intention, language, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and *samādhi*. Already, therefore, these last two aspects are internal to an idea of meditation that is more complex, and are not reduced to meditation itself. The word 'meditation' itself possesses a history of its own in European languages, and in its translational use it may carry a different semanticity of which we need to be aware: although the Latin *meditārī* indicates to some extant contemplation, its Indo-European root **med-* is connected to the idea of measurement, a concept that in Buddhism might be quite problematic. As Cousins notes (p. 4), this term was initially adopted by Svāmi Vivekānanda as a translation for *dhyāna* and *dhāraṇā* ("concentration").

Consequently, the translation of *jhāna* as "meditation" is improper, as the term that best captures the contemplative practice in its entirety is *bhāvanā*, of which *jhāna* is a technique. However, the division of *jhāna* into four levels of contemplative absorption (*rūpa jhānas*) is a later development that is not found in the earliest sources.

Thus, mindfulness is not meditation itself, but one of the first stages of meditation practice, which also includes other stages, including the more advanced *samādhi*, whose goal is to remove the idea of separation between the perceiver and perceived (Divino 2021, pp. 95–101). Can this removal lead to an experience of 'world's end'? If the world is a complex construct of our cognitive habits and convictions, what does remain after its deconstruction due to meditation?

> There's this feeling of disappearing, of being about to disappear. It's like being on the edge of a cliff, somehow. It's happened a few times. One time in particular, at a retreat, there was a strange visual experience. There was a whole path in the early days of the retreat, until at a certain point, in a knot of aversion with myself, it dissolved. At that point, the mind became more and more pacified. All sensory references disappeared, so the body, sounds ... The disappearance of the body is something quite familiar to me. With sounds, not so much. It doesn't happen to me often, in fact, it happens very rarely and only after a period of intensive meditation. So, I no longer had the sensory references that the image I had was to be. And my identity, let's call it my perception, because I didn't have the perception of a body, so it was like the cognition was flush with the sea. There was a full moon reflected on the water. The water was completely still. It had slight fractures. In moments, it became completely still. And I stood there for a few hours, swinging between a deeper letting go and a subtle fear of losing identity or something, so I was always there, floating in this state. When I then came out of the formal session, the mind was beatific, having a state of righteousness and great acuity. So I remember, I was sitting on a swing outside this retreat center. And there was this bee on a dandelion flower. I felt like I was there by the water and observing it . . . . a very, very intense situation, I would say. [...] So much so that at the end of the retreat, I really struggled to start talking again. Not that I was aphasic; however, the problem was formulating a thought and expressing it in words. It was really tiring, and that was an experience ... another experience. And here, I connect to the image talk and the identity talk. The other experiences were almost all outside of the meditation session. That is, in the meditation sessions, there was still a subtle level of tension that prevented the mind from letting go of the end of the world the moment the session ended. People allowed themselves to let go like that. I was in Australia. I was sitting on a bench and looking at the sky. The sky plays a very, very, very important role for me in meditation. Just in archetypal terms, both in terms of spaciousness and sharpness. Sharpness is a quality of the mind that I personally find extremely pleasing. So the experience, the element that ... if you want, intimacy, that indicates the depth of experience is sharpness, sharpness, and spaciousness in some way. Even in that circumstance, I could see the surface of the water with the moon reflected there. The experience was of extraordinary sharpness. The experience was also out of the visual, on a visual level, and on its own perceptual level. Of what happened, I was there sipping tea at one point. It's like that thing that's constantly spinning and reminding us of who we are, reminding us of a minimum of biography, of experience, it fell off. Very, very, very far away. And so there was a sense of ... almost a lack of meaning. As I looked at the sky, there was just the vastness of the sky. In an instant, I remembered that I was somebody, fear emerged, and instantly the whole world came back. Let's say it is true that there was sky, there was a visual element, there was definitely a conceptualization of the sky, but there was a whole part, let's call it biographical, that was apparently disappearing. (Ethnography with Daniel)

At this point, I had two quite different models in front of me: for Daniel, the distressing and negative experience of "the end of the world" derived from that crossing of boundaries was a counter-indication of those who, entering territories they were not prepared to enter, were overwhelmed. It was theoretical unpreparedness, in Daniel's critique, that caused the disorientation, and not a negativity in itself of meditation.

> So, another time, it was a day like today, it was raining, an autumn day. I was walking in Padua, not in a particularly beautiful place. And I was waiting for the time to go to dinner with a friend. 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. [. . .] Another time, again in Australia, it was triggered by a strong feeling of compassion. I basically sat down, and a very, very noticeable visual limit appeared. Here too, the sky returns, so it was as if there was no body too, there was no auditory perception. And it is also a practically soundproofed place. So it means a lot. But, in fact, there was this perception of being in the middle of a blue sky. And with a strong emotional connotation of the possibility of compassion. And from then on, for the rest of the retreat, there was always this. (Ethnography with Daniel)

In this context, we are not engaged in examining the composition of the *jhānas* as independent entities, as they appear to be somewhat disconnected from the meditative thought system found in the ancient canon. Upon assuming that this organization is related to texts such as the Visuddhimagga, authors like Buddhaghosa seem to have placed additional emphasis on terms like *vitakka* and *vicāra*, *pīti*, and so on, which exist in the Pāli canon but are not of much systemic significance. Despite this, the meditative techniques are believed to have preserved ancient traditions and values, and possibly even certain things which were not mentioned in the canon but have been preserved in the practical tradition. This can be evidenced in texts such as MN 118 and MN 10 or DN 22, which emphasize the importance of breathing exercises and the proposed exercise related to the allotropic splits of the body, sensation, cognition, and norm, anticipating the discourse on the origin of the world (*loka*) as a perceptual systematization structure.

6. A Note on the Ecstatic Experience

The ecstatic experience is absolutely not irrelevant to Buddhism, and is indeed an integral part of its meditative tradition. Terms such as *pīti* and *sukha* are often mistranslated as 'joy' or 'blissful' where they may instead be ancient reminiscences of ecstatic experiences. Incidentally, the Buddhist tradition also goes to great lengths to distinguish these feelings of bliss from the ephemeral pleasure derived from the satisfaction of earthly drives and desires (*sāmisa*). Thus, holding as valid the distinction between the mundane (*loka*) and the ultra-mundane (*lokuttara*), the bliss achieved in transcendence from the world is such precisely because it is incomparable to a 'dualistic' good, which is good only because it is opposed to evil (*nirāmisa*). The description in the Pāli canon and other ancient texts of this joy transcending the limits of worldliness seems at least comparable to the shamanic experience: "[i]t is clear that *pīti* refers to all the stages of joy between a mildly pleasurable interest and ecstatic transport of delight" (Cousins 2022, p. 14). Nevertheless, recent modern studies on meditation have also successfully noted the attainment of states definable as "ecstatic" (Chattopadhyay 2021). An example of a meditative path leading to ecstatic experiences is the exercises of the eight spheres of transcendence (*abhibhāyatanāni*), which, starting from the core elements of perception of external objects, achieve the transcendence of perception itself (Shaw 2006, p. 93). It is out of doubt that the term *jhāna* (Sanskrit: *dhyāna*) indicating the meditative technique, can be intended also as an ascetic practice that involves trance and mystical experience (Arbel 2016, p. 24). The use of this term in

India, also outside the Buddhist context, seems to confirm this hypothesis (pp. 26–29). Cousins also confirms this theory: "*jhāna* is not conceived of as an ordinary state of quiet thinking—it is clearly described as a state of contained ecstasy" (Cousins 2022, p. 34).

There is no doubt that Buddhism, since its most archaic formulations, has had a psychological interest in the analysis of cognitive processes. Its basic points are the following: the five senses (plus a coordinating sixth sense, namely thought) process cognitive data. Each cognitive organ corresponds to a cognitive consciousness; for example, the eye (*cakkhu*) generates an eye-consciousness (*cakkhuviññāṇa*). These six consciousnesses operate in a fiber-like manner and process the data related to the perceived object. This perception (*saññā*) is not immediate, but apperception (Kuan 2008, p. 19), which is part of a problem called conceptual proliferation (*papañca-saññā-saṅkhā*). One of the first phases of meditation, defined as mindfulness (*sati*), aims at preventing the propagation of concepts and analyzing the chain of production that starts from the contact between the cognitive organ and the object (p. 22).

Coming to the somatic effects, it is necessary to mention how Buddhism is heavily entangled in medical practice. As demonstrated in a previous study, medicine is the very essence of ancient Buddhism, and meditative practice is understood in a therapeutic sense just as the ancient *samaṇas* considered themselves physicians (Divino 2023b). Thus, we should point out that a physiology of energy flows is already provided for in the Buddhist medical literature, which, however, does not seem to be known to meditators who manifest negative experiences. In the case of a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, we witness an attempt to massively unblock a perceived amount of stagnant energy stuck in the chest area. Such a constriction impeded flow in the body, and thus increased body energy that was disharmonious, like "having drunk 50 cups of coffee" (Cooper et al. 2021, p. 9). This testimony is aware of physiological mechanisms theorized by Buddhists. In contrast, in the case of another reported experience in which a perceived energy stored in the body was massively unlocked, the subject experienced a state of exaltation, moving from an initial moderate euphoria to the unlocking of all trauma "followed by affective and cognitive changes" to end with an experience of mania, "feelings of paranoia", and "multiple hospitalizations for what she described as psychosis" (p. 9). These, and other experiences reported by Cooper et al. testify that the line between insanity and transcendence is indeed very thin, yet the results of slipping into one or 'transcending' into the other are indeed outstandingly different. How then to explain this puzzling difference?

Although, therefore, the study on ELSEs refers generically to various meditative techniques, we can say that it at least highlights how meditative practice is generally related to the possibility of manipulating or unblocking certain body energy flows that, however, if unskillfully managed, lead to disadvantages.

> One Zen Buddhist practitioner first experienced "energy" on a retreat and found it challenging to manage until she found a teacher who offered her a series of remedies that she could apply. In the 33 years since, ELSEs have continued to occur each time she does retreats, but they never persist into daily life. The difference has been that she now has tools to work with the "energy" and so, rather than being uncomfortable and distressing, it moves in a way that is gentle and that aids her practice and dissipates when the period of intensive practice ceases. (Cooper et al. 2021, p. 10)

But such experiences are also connected with self-awareness and what is called "sense of self", as other accounts attest. Traumatic or negative experiences are sometimes an initial impact of practice (p. 11) that can be corrected with time. In most cases, we speak of real energetic imbalances, excesses that are difficult to manage, and persist even at night as a cause of sleeplessness (p. 12). Accounts related to strong ELSE experiences in a negative sense involve hallucinations, psychosis, insomnia, mania, and episodes that, in the case of *kundalini*, practitioners of traditional, Theravada, and Tibetan meditation describe as misleading, unrelated to enlightenment, sometimes even dangerous (p. 18).

Similar to what Cassaniti notes in his anthropology of supernatural experiences in Thailand, the perception of energies is closely related to emotional experiences. It has often been testified that such energy is phantasmatic (Cassaniti 2015, p. 135), which cannot help but bring to mind the old theory of the bicameral brain, and how voices in the head or mystical experiences of contact with subjectivities other than oneself were once thought to be due to the dual nature of the brain (McGilchrist 2019). I do not want to reduce such a complex phenomenon to such an explanation, but certainly such phenomenology has also become part of the meditative experience, which is full of experiences with energies. In a testimony to Cassaniti, a monk identified precisely in meditation the ability to eliminate ghostly energies (Cassaniti 2015, p. 138).

The deconstruction of identity is a problem yet to be solved in the study of Buddhist thought. In the past, I have suggested that meditative intent should be interpreted rather as an initial disabuse from cognitive patterns (Divino 2021). However, the interpretation of what is an identity and a non-identity remains controversial. Some argue that self-forgetfulness coincides with the perception of a consciousness inherent in all things (Williams 2007, p. 74), which would be concordant with a possible holographic theory of Buddhism (Divino 2023c). However, one should understand what actually deconstructs meditation, before jumping headlong into conclusions. Certainly, the sense of interconnectedness with a kind of infragmentable totality is too frequent an experiential datum in meditation to be brushed aside, yet today it has morphed into a "mystic's sense of interconnectedness, of at-one-ment with the universe" (Williams 2007, p. 80) that would be due to the sacralization of technology as a tool for rapid access to such experiences.

Consciousness can be described as the ability to recognize the existence of an object, but in the case of self-consciousness, the object of consciousness is consciousness itself, and it is therefore a special phenomenon. Wanting to be more thorough, what consciousness testifies to is the arising and bringing out of the plane of appearance of a phenomenon contextually with a flow of consciousness that is constant. This is also the description given by the Buddhists that led Vyner to reflect on self-consciousness, which seems to attest to the appearance of a double: an observing mind and an observed mind. One that is part of the meaning-producing conscious fluid, and another that "knows and responds to those meanings" (Vyner 2002, p. 9). This fact, which Vyner calls "*experiential duality*", has been carefully analyzed by Buddhists as a phenomenon of cognitive allotropy, and has been the subject of my own in-depth study. Vyner thus reflects on this duality and is also reproduced in self-consciousness:

> The watcher is simply the awareness that watches and responds to the meanings that appear in the stream of consciousness. The stream of consciousness is the temporal sequence of thoughts, images, emotions and feelings that appear as the stream of consciousness to the watcher. (Vyner 2002, p. 9)

From his interview with Lama Choje Rimpoche we learn some basic things: first, that a stream of thoughts can manifest as images, words, emotions and feelings, and that these phenomena are connected with the experiential dimension. Consistent with the Buddhist psychology of perceptions (*sañña*), the identity of any object or person appears to be related to a designatory dimension, such as the semantic association principle itself (Divino 2021, p. 187). This principle can be 'disrupted' by meditation, reversing signifiers with signified-s, as Lama Rimpoche testifies, "It can be trying to think that red is yellow and yellow is red" (Vyner 2002, p. 10). Phenomenal experience appears in consciousness spontaneously; it is not necessarily made to appear or constructed by meditation (p. 11); likewise, it is constituted of pleasant or unpleasant elements, which can be accepted or rejected. Most importantly, the dualistic aspect of perceptions, ranging from the semantic referent/meaning pair to the identity pair of me/you, is something that tends to disappear in the more advanced stages of meditation. The perception of an object as separate from the subject is related to early stages of contemplation, and then "the watcher becomes awareness itself and is free of habits. It's free of ego" (p. 12). Thus, we must remind ourselves of how dishabituation from contextual factors (historical, social, cultural) is the

first goal of meditation, and how identity itself depends on the conception of separateness of a part (identified) from the whole (excluded), and subsequently of a part from other parts, whose mutual opposition generates identity attribution (a is a because not-b and vice versa). This is also confirmed by another Vyner interviewee, Lama Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who defines the possibility of an egoless mind as a non-dual mind, thus implying that the egocentric mind is such because it is linked to dualistic conceptions of the semantic organization of reality. However, there is no unanimity among monks about whether a non-dual mind is also devoid of internal appearances or not (p. 13).

Concerning the dual mind, an ethnographic experience conducted by Brummans among Tibetan Buddhists in Ladakh should be mentioned. Brummans explicitly refers to Vyner's work, with which he partially disagrees. His meditative experience leads him to think that his ego was not the observer of the stream of experience, nor that the ego was or had a mind (p. 139). What is interesting is the connection with the light in which he feels his awareness is absorbed during meditation. Light is a fundamental element of ancient Buddhism and remains a symbol in all subsequent schools. However, light is more than a mere representative metaphor in early Buddhism, and acts as a unity between the physical and conceptual dimensions. Light is the same totally liberated awareness, as well as the ultimate goal of meditation practice (Divino 2023a, cf. notes 11 and 21). Brummans' meditation master himself re-presents this fundamental conception, according to which light is the very basis of matter and of the body that takes solid form, and which can be freed again through meditative practice:

> Every particle of the residue will be converted into light. This is one method of getting enlightenment. In this way enlightenment is possible . . . the focus is pointed toward light. We meditate and solid body can be converted into light. (Brummans 2008, p. 140)

The metaphor of light possesses special importance in Buddhist meditative experience and is connected with the achievement of understanding the most immediate and purest stage of phenomena. We can assume a connection between light and the idea of clarity, of revelation of what is covered by darkness, but light is also understood as the real substance of sensible and thinkable phenomena. In analyzing any phenomenon, what remains at its base, and thus what is manifest to attention, is always pure light or clear light (*pabhassara*, *obhāsa*). I only point out that each concept is understood here as a frame, a confinement, placed in the clear light, but Buddhists also acknowledge that it is impossible to understand this limitation without a description, the use of metaphors and words. Therefore, "concepts are necessary to help people rid themselves *of* concepts" (p. 142).

7. Further Considerations on the Contemporary Status of Mindful Attention

There are several elements to be considered in this research, and I would like to dedicate at least one section of commentary to the material presented here in order to clarify future prospects for research dedicated to meditation and contemplative practices in general. Meditative exercises have evolved and substantially changed over time. However, never before has the very purpose of Buddhist meditation been structurally modified as in the case of mindfulness, which is a valuable exercise in synchronizing the perceptual faculties described by the two cerebral hemispheres, as demonstrated in Iain McGilchrist's celebrated work on the nature of the brain and the differences between the two hemispheres (McGilchrist 2019). The author elucidated that the distinctions between the two cerebral hemispheres are not germane to functional capabilities in a general sense. Rather, they pertain to the manner in which humans engage with their surroundings. To elucidate, both hemispheres are equally implicated in domains concerning language, comprehension, artistic expression, imagination, and technical skills.

Nonetheless, the right hemisphere exhibits an integrative aptitude and a comprehensive perception of reality as an inseparable entity, while the left hemisphere functions via focused and analytical particularizations, adopting an approach herein referred to as "isolating cognition". The rationale for this designation is that the left hemisphere's mode

of particularization is instrumental in facilitating the practicality of objects, aligning with Heidegger's concept of *Vorhandenheit*. Consequently, this permits the conceptualization of the world through a mechanistic lens, characterized by fragmented and detached components that are both comprehensible and utilizable, as well as manipulable as separate elements of a functioning mechanism.

Both functions serve pivotal roles in evolutionary biology. McGilchrist elucidates that the operations of the left hemisphere are indispensable for a myriad of processes, including the procurement of construction materials for shelter, the identification of potential prey or consumable flora, and in the context of human beings, the utilization of tools, focused attention, and technical cognition. Conversely, the right hemisphere possesses the capacity to comprehend implicit connotations, metaphors, and poetic diction, while maintaining a holistic perspective, often referred to as the "big picture" (McGilchrist 2010, p. 507).

In contemporary society, rather than observing an ideal equilibrium between dualistic perspectives, McGilchrist identifies a pronounced hypertrophy of the left hemisphere, which has effectively obfuscated the capabilities of its counterpart. The escalating technicization of society, underpinned by bureaucratic and mechanistic paradigms, not only exemplifies a worldview in which both humanity and the cosmos are construed as machines governed by mechanical principles, but also epitomizes what De Martino has termed the "anthill society" (De Martino 2021, p. 363). Within this societal framework, individual subjects cease to exist, as all components are mandated to operate in accordance with a grandiose, well-orchestrated system, where worker-ants dutifully fulfill the roles designated and dictated by the overarching apparatus.[11]

This discourse bears relevance to our scholarly inquiry for two foundational rationales: the first pertains to the historical evolution of mindfulness. Mindfulness is an offspring of cognitive-behavioral psychology, a paradigm predicated upon furnishing rehabilitative therapies that render the individual apt for the performances and expectations necessitated by contemporary technologically-driven societies.[12] Historically linked to the cognitive-behavioral paradigm (Troy et al. 2013; Singh et al. 2008), mindfulness has divested itself of the majority of components that constituted the original Buddhist contemplative practice. Consequently, the apocalyptic crises examined heretofore cannot merely be ascribed to a flawed mode of meditation; rather, in the case of mindfulness, they would represent an issue intrinsic to the approach itself.

Upon scrutinizing the prescribed modalities for practicing mindfulness, it becomes evident that we remain squarely within the realm of a deliberate hypertrophy of the left hemisphere's faculties, including focal attention, single-point concentration, and the technical repetition of gestures or mental exercises directed solely towards this fragmentary modality of existence: the immediate present, the focal point, and the magnification of self-concentration. This meditative model has already been assailed by Purser as egotistic and fundamentally reinforcing of a distinct neoliberal and capitalist mode of cognition and reasoning (Purser 2019). Consequently, mindfulness, as a byproduct of capitalist society, emerges as an instrument that has undermined its original objectives and proves incapable of grappling with the "end of the world." Instead, it experiences this eventuality as a "crisis" in De Martino's sense.

In contradistinction, Buddhist meditation, or *bhāvanā*, encompasses a diverse range of activities that undoubtedly involve exercises centered on single-pointed concentration (*ekaggatā*). However, these preliminary practices do not solely define Buddhist meditation, and even today scholars acknowledge that a different way to perform mindfulness is possible (Purser and Milillo 2015). Historically, the Buddhist tradition has consistently offered comprehensive exercises that transition from focal concentration to the cultivation of an expanded consciousness, ultimately leading to perceptual fusion, which is characterized by the dissolution of the demarcation between subject and object (*samādhi*). The accurate achievement of this state, where the boundaries delineating distinct entities become indistinguishable, signifies a serene "end of the world". This state, however, is not critical in the

Demartinian sense, as it does not manifest as the termination of one's personal world to which we are deeply connected.

> When one reaches the infinite, opposites coincide and the opposition is resolved (any 'arc' of an infinitely large circle would be a straight line: any straight line infinitely prolonged would become a circle). In Buddhism, one is constantly reminded that true fulfilment is emptiness. (McGilchrist 2021b, p. 1246)

A meditator who has successfully transcended the distinction between self and the world does not experience a sense of annihilation but, rather, perceives themselves as an integral component of an indivisible whole. It is important to note that the state of *samādhi* is contemplated within both *samatha*, which primarily aims for the attainment of tranquility and serenity, and *vipassanā*, which instead seeks to gain a profound insight into reality. Numerous studies have established a correlation between traditional meditative practices and enhanced synchronization of the two cerebral hemispheres (Yordanova et al. 2021).

8. Concluding Remarks

This article has emphasized that contemplative practice risks placing the meditator in a state that can be defined as a "crisis of presence". Meditation has been the subject of intense study by neuroscientists, psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and philologists. The research has shown that different types of meditation practices are associated with various brain activations and deactivations that have potential health benefits. The metaphors used to describe meditative experiences are also highly varied, and they often include fluidity, currents, waves, energy, electricity, charge, circuit, voltage, jolts, bolts, flows, vibrations, hydraulic and pneumatic metaphors, among others. However, some negative experiences associated with meditation, such as the feeling of the end of the world or else, have also been reported, highlighting the importance of proper training and guidance for those seeking to embark on meditative practices.

Moreover, the study of meditation has allowed for a deeper exploration of the role of culture in shaping human behavior and cognition. Meditation practices are not only related to cognitive processes but also to cultural beliefs and habits, such as the Buddhist emphasis on the importance of cognitive dis-abstraction and immersion in the connections between the realm of the imaginary and the perceived reality. The study of meditation also sheds light on the concept of self-awareness and sense of self, with some accounts attesting to strong emotional experiences associated with the perception of energies.

The need for an anthropology of consciousness has been made apparent by the increasing significance of neuroscience, and the growing collaboration between mind sciences and humanists that explore consciousness and cognition, ranging from philosophy of mind to contemplative studies. This has inspired the idea of contemplative anthropology as a form of ethnography that examines the contemplative process. This method can provide valuable hermeneutic insights that have been overlooked due to a purely quantitative and objectivist approach. Contemplative anthropology can thus serve as a platform for the junction between hard sciences and humanities within consciousness research.

De Martino's scholarly pursuits extend beyond mere ethnography, which he regarded as just one of several possible methods of data collection and not even the primary one. Notably, his highly significant contribution, *The World of Magic*, is essentially historical in nature and employs what some may consider "armchair" ethnography or historical-philosophical inquiry. Moreover, in addition to his psychoanalytic interests, De Martino was an active researcher in Metapsychics (Signorelli 2015, pp. 122–24), demonstrating his fascination with so-called paranormal phenomena, which he sought to explain from a normalization perspective. The most crucial aspect of the dialogue with psychoanalysis is not the clinical one. The vision on health and disease is taken up by De Martino mainly from phenomenology and the *Daseinesanalyse*, in dialogue with Jaspers, Binswanger and Italian phenomenologists who have helped to define the problem of *Weltuntergangserlebnis*, a phenomenon that is almost absent in psychoanalysis.

The crisis of presence, in its most problematic form, is considered a pure form of psychopathology. Anthropologists recognize the importance of studying and understanding its manifestations in order to better comprehend the human experience. However, there are also the immediately preceding aspects, namely the attempts to protect the presence from the crisis: preventing the nihilistic fall into anguish, depression, melancholy, neurosis or psychosis, from schizophrenia to paranoia. As Berardini states, "the risk for presence is that of losing the distinction between oneself and the other" ([Berardini 2015](), p. 18).

Furthermore, it can be deduced that presence in De Martino has the character of a "subjectivated" essence. Presence does not stand out as an "object", as a rigid essence capable of imposing itself and determining the lives of others. The presence to which De Martino refers most of the time is a weak presence, which needs the recognition of others in order to exist. Without the dialectical and identity relationship with the other, to which is opposed to define oneself but which at the same time it needs to be "present", it falls into crisis.

From the point of view of Mindfulness, everything is brought back to the "mental presence" that would define a healthy subject. Although this concept of "mindful-ness" is compatible with the Demartinian "presence" as it would define a subject capable of "being there" without falling into crisis, it is fundamentally different from the Buddhist sati, from which however mindfulness claims to derive. The condition that presence wants to avoid at all costs is precisely indeterminacy: a situation in which presence is undecided in terms of cognition or implementation (p. 21). In this sense, it is "oscillating" between the condition of being-there and that of annihilation. Thus, to stem this problem, culture is instituted "to face uncertainty" (p. 22).

> What Freud defines as libido (and which in practice he considers essentially in the form of sexual vitality) is, actually, presence, that is, the synthetic energy that goes beyond situations according to distinct powers of action. When Freud speaks of the fixation of libido at a specific backward stage and assigns it the blame for the potential psychoneurotic regression, he is reaffirming within the context of his theory that psychological illness is a critical content that remains unaddressed and, consequently, returns as an extraneousness of the psyche and as a symptom that cannot be subdued. ([De Martino 2021](), pp. 22–23)

De Martino's assertions regarding the para-clinical concept of presence present a noteworthy connection between anthropology and psychoanalytic work. As he states, "folly as naturalizing oneself of the spirit is precisely the risk of not-being-there as a presence, that is, precisely to withdraw on the level of naturalness, where presence does not take place" (p. 25). It is important to note that presence is a cultural construct, much like the concepts of health and disease. De Martino asserts that "the sick presence is (from the point of view of cultural history of humanity), an 'abstraction,' since the culture is the result of the victorious struggle of health against the danger of disease, that is, against the temptation to abdicate the very possibility of being a presence inserted in society and in history" (pp. 25–26). Furthermore, the presence can also become "sick" through its historicization and culturalization. This "sick" presence, although an abstraction, represents the possibility or risk of a presence inserted in society and in history. However, as De Martino concludes, "this very 'abstraction' is the deadly threat par excellence" (*ibidem*). In this context, De Martino references literature on psychopathologies, specifically Janet's cases of depersonalization and dissociation as experiences of the end of the world or loss of worldliness, as well as Sechehaye's schizophrenia (pp. 27–35). He also uses the term "irrelative world" to describe this condition, in which the feeling of anguish serves as an emotional signal.

> . . . the presence of humans in the world, their individuality (*in-dividuum*), and the mental unity of their 'I' are not yet guaranteed and assured—and this presence encounters uncountable difficulties. The specific cultural forms (myths and rituals) work at the resolution of this drama, destined in particular to give a greater

coherence and continuity to the elements aggregated in this strange composition that is a human person. De Martino's thought thus develops around three interrelated themes: the historicism, the drama of presence, and the (meta)psychological functions of cultural creations. (Dubuisson 2011, p. 48)

Depression, closely related to anxiety, is for De Martino not only an alienation of the self, or a "falling of life" without a "formal horizon," but also, more significantly, "the risk of losing the distinction between subject and object," which is not the risk but the goal of Buddhist *samādhi*. So where is the difference between a loss of distinction between subject and object seen as risk (anguish for De Martino) and hope (Buddhist *samādhi*)? The answer is indirectly given by De Martino (p. 31) when he speaks of an analogous risk that involves the radical crisis of the presence which implies (1) the inability of presence to show itself to historical development, and (2) the loss of meaning and norm. From a Buddhist perspective, the norm (*dhamma*) and the law are exactly what structures the world through the distinctions and divisions of cognitive discernment (*vijānāti*). Obviously, De Martino does not know, but his invocation of the norm indicates exactly the difference between an unconscious end of the world and therefore experienced as anguish and existential crisis (or of presence) of which De Martino speaks, and a conscious end of the world, sought by the meditator and induced by wisdom (*paññā*), of which Buddhism speaks to us.[13] Awareness, therefore, is a substantial difference, which decrees a crisis or a liberation (*mokkha*).

In conclusion, the ethnography of meditation presents distinctive challenges due to its emphasis on interiority and the transcendence of subjectivity. Traditional ethnographic methods, which primarily focus on geographic locations and defined contexts, prove inadequate in capturing the intricate nature of contemplative practices. To overcome these challenges, it is imperative to establish a contemplative anthropology with its own methodology and research objectives that extend beyond the therapeutic context of meditation. The concepts of "presence" and "crisis" introduced by Ernesto De Martino offer valuable tools for investigating the discipline of identity transcendence in meditation.

However, the complexities inherent in contemplative practice necessitate an interdisciplinary approach that surpasses conventional anthropological methodologies. This entails exploring the intersections between ethnography and autoethnography, the dissolution of recognizable forms, and the discourse surrounding identity and belonging. In this sense, this article can be considered as a first proposal, which implies and hopes for the development of future works on this topic and with this methodology. By expanding the scope of investigation, a comprehensive analysis of contemplative practice can be presented, offering an innovative perspective for researchers in this field.

While recognizing the diverse historical and cultural specificities of meditation practices, it is important to consider its contemporary context. In popular understanding, meditation is often perceived as a unified continuum or a series of interconnected products, leading to a sense of commodification. This perception is prevalent among practitioners, including mindfulness enthusiasts, who view different techniques as variations of the same essence. Although this generalization may overlook historical and philological distinctions, it is a significant aspect of the anthropological reality that warrants consideration.

De Martino's "The End of the World" anticipates somehow the forthcoming crisis of the Anthropocene, though not in the terms commonly understood today (Remotti 2022), but most importantly, it seeks to bridge the gap between anthropology and psychoanalysis, and lays the foundation for the evolution of Medical Anthropology and Ethnopsychiatry. Additionally, it provides a philosophical framework that is well-suited for the renewed anthropology, potentially overcoming the divide between Ethnology and philosophical anthropology. Moreover, it proposes a concrete method for making anthropologists active members of society, capable of recognizing the potentials and dangers of the future. In his philosophical works, De Martino delves into profound discussions of the nature of being and consciousness, which were essential for understanding the concrete consequences of a society dominated by technology and the resulting crises of individual presence. De Martino's Anthropology of Consciousness starts with ontological ideas and develops into a

theory of consciousness and presence. The anthropologist, by being aware of the historical, cultural, and social context, can grasp the manifestations of suffering and the culturally-made means to overcome it, particularly in the interpretation of culture-bound syndromes.

The emergence of contemplative anthropology necessitates a reevaluation of traditional anthropological problems. Ethnographic dualism, characterized by the dominant influence of a mode of reasoning that favors isolation and cognitive reductionism, challenges anthropology to embrace a more holistic and comprehensive approach. It requires acknowledging the interpenetration and mutual influence between subjectivities, moving beyond objectivism. Adopting a contemplative tool can further complicate this dualism, as it raises questions about the division between subjects and objects.

To summarize, the ethnography of meditation demands a contemplative anthropology that addresses the unique challenges posed by the transcendence of subjectivity and the complexities of contemplative practices. By drawing upon interdisciplinary approaches and reevaluating traditional anthropological paradigms, researchers can achieve a deeper understanding of meditation and contribute to the evolving field of contemplative studies.

Disclaimer: This scholarly exploration underscores the increasingly neoliberal tendencies within the sphere of meditative practice, as illuminated by the VCE data set. It is, however, crucial to acknowledge the diverse array of practice communities captured within this dataset. Notably, a significant contingent of participants adheres to the non-commercial tradition of S. N. Goenka. These individuals' experiences may deviate from the neoliberal model of consumption, thus adding a layer of complexity to the interpretation of the data. The VCE study, while offering valuable insights, does not delineate these distinctive communities explicitly. Consequently, the presented analysis can be seen as a more overarching assessment rather than a detailed examination of each unique practice community. This important aspect of diversity within the practitioner communities ought to be borne in mind when interpreting the results and conclusions herein.

Abbreviations

Snp	*Suttanipāta*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
Ud	*Udāna*
It	*Itivuttaka*
DN	*Dīghanikāya*
MN	*Majjhimanikāya*
SN	*Saṃyuttanikāya*
AN	*Aṅguttaranikāya*

Notes

[1] The introduction of Orellana's work acknowledges the apprehension and skepticism for the mindfulness movement and addresses the current era's prevailing political polarization. The author encourages readers to move beyond hierarchies and taxonomies and embrace a non-dualistic perspective that permits them to remain open to surprises and connect compassionately with people who hold different perspectives. The first segment of the book provides "centering" strategies or contemplative practices, to help researchers prepare for entering the field. Reflexivity is highlighted as the key to comprehending our limitations, thought processes, and judgments. This enables us to transcend our normal, visually-oriented interpretations and consider what is not observable in the field site. Orellana's publication explores the significance of compassionate, ethical, and 'mindful' ethnography. It encourages an understanding of the research process that considers the interplay between the mind, heart, and activity. Through this triadic approach, Orellana proposes that researchers can better connect with participants, generate comprehensive and detailed field notes, balance description and analysis, and utilize embodied and creative processes. The book also stresses the need to relinquish perfectionism during the write-up stage, and to accept that one's work may not be perfect but still considered "good enough".

[2] Sarah Williams has conducted an intriguing 'anthropology of anthropology' that also serves as an ethnography of the fundamental elements of contemplative practices. Reflecting on one's discipline, particularly anthropology, has led to the early question of determining whether consciousness is an independent fact or not (Williams 2007, p. 66). Now, consciousness is acknowledged as a subject with its own agency (p. 68), and this must be taken into account due to two main issues: does the agency of consciousness constitute its complete or partial autonomy from the experiencing subject? Can it, or can it no longer, be defined as embedded according to this theory? In personal practice, both autoethnographic and meditating with other practitioners, I can say that the decrease in the importance of these values is directly proportional to the frequency of the practice. Conversely, reducing meditation sees a kind of 'falling back' into certain ways of thinking related to identity associations, feeling part of something that is defined by certain names. In meditators, there normally persists the existence of subjective and personal inclinations such as tastes and preferences. What decreases is the need for belonging. Ethnographic practice is immediately influenced by these facts if the anthropologist is also involved in contemplative practices, and the importance of hermeneutics increases at the expense of interest in defining 'who' and 'how' the subjects studied are. From a practical point of view, it must be said that a huge value of this 'contemplative ethnography' is that it allows one to really look at alterity with less cultural filters and prejudices. However, it also prevents the immersion of the participant's gaze, as it leads the ethnographer to a certain disinterest in identity practices. If, however, identity is not the center of the study, what definitely increases is the ability to be involved in the reasons of the other.

[3] Philological studies in this regard have already been published in the same journal. I will occasionally refer to historical aspects of meditation, while not forgetting that I am investigating aspects that converge in modernity and are somehow cleansed of their historical past through a phenomenon identifiable as "transculturation". In the ancient forms I have examined, I invite the reader to consult a study on the relationship between asceticism and poetic expression in defining the contemplative experience of the early Pāli canon (Divino 2023a) and another study that investigates the relationship between asceticism and contemplative practices of transcending the world, as well as medical traditions transmitted as a heritage of wisdom by a specific group, which are at the core of early Buddhism, certainly contributing to the definition of its contemplative practice (Divino 2023b).

[4] In 1948, Ernesto De Martino (1908–1965) published a book that was considered unusual and, as stated by Carlo Ginzburg, "disturbing" (Ginzburg 2017, p. 77). The text addresses the topic of magic, but does so in a manner that diverges from the perspective typically held by anthropologists of his time. The "World of Magic" (De Martino 2022) therefore represents the initial phase of De Martino's work on the World and on the Apocalypses, as already here we find all the main elements of investigation which will then be taken up again in "The End of the World" (De Martino 2019), from the construction of a cultural world through normativity to the relationship between the world and human subjectivity, the link between psychopathology and the crisis of presence (the annihilation of the cultural horizons of *Dasein*) and finally the reality of magical powers, foreseen as the force of being-there (*presenza*). Ernesto De Martino posits his theory of the World of Magic as an archaic historical period in which humanity was still in the nascent stages of society and was still defining the boundaries of its "being", delimiting them through normalization, in a "being-there". Therefore, "the being that is beyond consciousness paves the way to the presence that always places itself anew beyond being, and that for this reason makes it be as a reality that is valid, as being valued in culture and in history". This process of valorization that founds culture and controls entities by isolating them, is the strength

of technique and science. Society utilizes technical dispositives to establish an "economic order" that is functional in founding institutions. The presence, as defined internally by what De Martino calls "economic power" within the boundaries of being-there, becomes institutionalized. The magical dispositive does not vanish, but instead becomes an institutional force that the economy employs in the forms of magical-religious or mythical-ritual dispositives. According to De Martino, technics is defined as the de-historification of the negative, a technique that "prevents the crisis of becoming through the reiteration of the identical" (De Martino 2019, pp. 134, 399 and De Martino 1995, pp. 107–11). De Martino's theory of a World of Magic as a historical era preceding the categories was partially set aside in his later, more academic and diplomatic work, in order to focus on ethnographic research of concrete sources that at least confirmed his theory about the "crisis of presence". The economic system serves as the normative management of the common good. Normativity is relative and arbitrary and is culturally established, but it does not tell the truth of being, it is not absolute. Living in the cultural world implies the constant risk that this construction collapses.

5   When the subject is in front of the world (*Welt*), it can no longer be conceived as a passive object that undergoes the impersonal laws of mundanity, but as a world that poses itself to and in the world, as every subject is an inner world (*Um-welt*) that is in relation with the outer world. However, the subjective spheres of inner worlds are not separated from the outer world, nor are they separate from one another, and this persuasion of independent identity is the basis of human pain. The attempt to preserve the things of the world from this possible downfall, rather than focusing on the world itself (which would not even need to be 'saved', if we had an understanding of its true nature), led to the foundation of inner consciousness. De Martino noted that the breakdown of reality is associated with the collapse of its boundaries, namely, the internal connections that comprise not a singular reality, but reality in its entirety. The modification of these connections gives rise to various types of reality, whereas their complete dissolution results in the disintegration of reality itself (Campagna 2018, pp. 16–17).

6   According to De Martino, the creation of social boundaries and the limitation of being to the possibilities of being-there not only express presence within cultural limits, but also create an exclusion of a part of Being from itself. This exclusion can result in a pathological moment in which one feels as if they cannot exist in any possible cultural world, experiencing this oppression as an authentic crisis. Furthermore, the inability to conceive of any existence other than the culturally constituted one can lead to the perception of the risk of the end of the world (*Weltuntergang*) as the apocalyptic end of everything and the advance of nothingness. In order to protect itself from this eventuality, culture establishes a series of dispositives, such as ritual and myth, which are institutionalized, controlled by technicized forms of magic. As culture progresses from its dawn to its risk of sunset, magic becomes the technique of presence capable of symbolically reiterating the foundation of the world as a time that cyclically recurs again and again. However, in the event that the ritual and mythical narration fail, a crisis may ensue. The apocalypse can no longer be used as an excuse to generate fear in religious individuals and obtain fidelity through the promise of a ransom and salvation from the imminent end. Additionally, individual apocalypses (*Weltuntergangserlebnis*) may occur, with cultural apocalypses serving as a collective echo of too many subjective afflictions. In fact, De Martino notes in psychopathology an authentic "crisis of the presence" that can be explained through anthropological methods, understanding the importance of being and its protection from the risk of "not being able to be" in any cultural world.

7   Although initially praised in a 1948 review by his teacher Benedetto Croce, the book was then strongly criticized by Croce himself in a subsequent article of 1949 in which he rejected De Martino's theory of magism as a historical age. There are many possible explanations for Croce's rethinking, but I believe that the only valid one is his inability to truly abandon Naturalism or at least a scientific view of history which appears to be essential for his own assertions. We could not explain in any other way the funny, even if a little offensive, accusation of "love for the shaman" brought against him. However, De Martino's position on magical powers is complex and controversial. The phenomenon exists, but for him the explanation cannot be reduced to the simple popular credulity or suggestion of those who witness it, nor to an inability to understand more complex phenomena. Magic may also involve belief, but in itself it is an effective device, and its effectiveness is culturally conditioned. For our modern culture it appears inconceivable and therefore does not manifest itself. This apparent cultural determinism still rejects irrationalism: magic has its own logic and the fact that it works would demonstrate its credibility. De Martino is keen to bring back to the beginning of his thesis as many anthropological studies free from scientist prejudice, which have shown that magic has nothing to do with "primitive" beliefs, as he can.

8   The question arises as to how one might evade the naturalization of historical discourse. Croce, certainly, could not accept such a position within his historicist vision. In response to his master's critique, De Martino changed some of his positions on a historical age of magic and thus, the possibility of historicizing an assumed epoch in which the presence has not yet been defined. He reformulated the concept of magic as a protective dispositive from the crisis of the presence. Furthermore, Croce's critique was heavily naturalistic in that he deemed the impossibility of historicizing the categories which are also the tools with which humans unfold history. It is as if Croce viewed categories as universals, and thus, as if history would disappear if they were contextualized and freed from their immobility.

9   The notion of the magical, as well as the religious and the spiritual, is, according to McGilchrist, something more than mere ritualistic practices, which may be part of left-hemisphere-driven reasoning processes. The extended perception that makes us feel part of a totality is instead more characteristic of the right hemisphere. McGilchrist argues that the right hemisphere, with its holistic and integrated understanding of the world, is essential for an authentic and profound vision of human existence. However, over the past centuries, Western society has increasingly shifted towards a predominance of the left hemisphere, with potentially negative consequences for our understanding of the world and our psychological well-being. The predominantly left-oriented

worldview has led to a reductionist, materialistic, and mechanistic ideology of reality, which overlooks the complexity, depth, and intrinsic interconnectedness of life: "'All is One' and 'All is Many' to the left hemisphere demands an either/or resolution. For the right hemisphere it is a differently structured problem, since, for it, what one might call differentiated wholes—not created by an effort of cognition, so much as by one of recognition—are all that there is. Precisely because the left hemisphere sees what amount to geometric abstractions, and categories, that are snatched from time and embodiment, its analytic bent leads to an abstract, eternally unchanging unity of perfect forms: all uniqueness lost. By contrast, the right hemisphere sees a fractal or holographic world, a multitude of individually unique wholes, or *Gestalten*, that themselves form part of an ever greater *Gestalt*, which is filled with implicit differentiation, not just unitary" (McGilchrist 2021b, pp. 875–76).

10 Geisshuesler proposed the adoption of a sevenfold model of the human mind as the basis for the cognitive study of religions (Geisshuesler 2019c). This model was to replace the earlier "4E" model, which envisioned a fourfold mind divided into embodied, embedded, active, and extended. To these elements Geisshuesler adds an emotional mind, an evolved mind, and an exo-conscious mind. It is hard to imagine that this elaboration is not influenced by his Buddhological studies. Nevertheless, this "7E" model merely creates another subdivision of human cognition, following a typical mechanistic mode that includes dynamics and intersubjective and intracultural exchange only as a possible internal model for this subdivision. Without detracting from these elaborations, which I think are valid in explaining, for example, the separative function of distinction (which Geisshuesler does in the case of the evolved mind), the affirmation of the centrality of presence as a subjective force, both identity-related and cultural-historical, allows for an understanding of consciousness in anthropological–religious dynamics that stands above functionalism insofar as it takes into account the problem of history and being in a specific cultural context.

11 This notion has been previously articulated by Heidegger and then Severino in their incisive critique of technology (Pitari 2023), and further expounded upon by prominent scholars such as Foucault in his analysis of biopolitics, with subsequent consequences for modern neoliberal society of control and performance (Peters 2007), and Agamben in his exploration of the apparatus model (Agamben 2009).

12 Galimberti has offered critiques of technicalistic models of psychology in this context, characterizing it as a technical construct that envisions psychotherapy as a purely technical endeavor (Galimberti 2005, p. 164).

13 Actually, "De Martino attributed higher scientific status to parapsychology than to anthropology as the references to the "reality of magic phenomena" were always closely tied to parapsychological research" (Geisshuesler 2019a, p. 6).

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