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Consciousness and identity: who do we think we are?[☆]

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Abstract

This article proposes that the epistemological concerns raised by the inherent incoherence of thought requires a dialogical approach to understanding consciousness and identity. It is argued that such an approach leads to (a) a fundamentally spiritual view of self, (b) a radical view of consciousness as a non-local field that shapes the limits of our perception, and (c) a determination of the degree of gap between reality and thought's representation of it. A method of measuring this kind of consciousness is examined, and examples of insights gained through this methodology are provided. Implications of this perspective are explored, and conclusions arising from this inquiry are presented. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Who are we? Who do we *think* we are? How are these two questions different? The question of how our concept of identity subtly shapes our approach to the study of consciousness is one that is seldom addressed. A lack of consensus can easily be observed among researchers today about the nature, or essence of consciousness, and this variety of views can be seen as arising from differences in the way we perceive and conceptualize “self”. The conception of self we assume will shape the nature of the questions we ask, investigations we make, evidence we give validity to, and a host of other considerations. Our conception of self will be grounded in assumptions about the nature of reality that we are often unaware of, with those we are aware of generally being ones that we take to be obvious truths, or facts. The purpose of this article is to

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undertake an inquiry into the processes involved in the construction of these assumptions, to then describe a method for evaluating the domains of validity of these assumptions, and to report on the conclusions arrived at through my engagement with this process.

1. Epistemological concerns

Pribram states that the hard problem of consciousness is not “any easier or harder than other epistemological issues. Each of us is conscious of our own experience. We begin with this experience and from there build a body of knowledge by a series of trials” (p. 206, this issue). We build up knowledge based on this experience and how it is transmitted to us from others. In time, we come to experience that “our perceptions are not necessarily all that we know” (Pribram, 1998). As we come to explore areas of reality beyond the bounds of our direct perception, we have to rely on metaphors, or models and images of reality. The process of constructing these metaphors or images pervades everything we “know”, but it is very challenging to sustain an open inquiry into whether or not this process of imaging is an accurate, or true measure of reality.

Bohm (1980, 1994) talks about reality as viewed through his exploration of quantum physics. He concludes, (in accord with many other physicists), that at the most essential level, the universe is an undivided whole. To measure an aspect of it is to draw a line where none ultimately exists in reality. However, the images thought creates of reality require these kinds of measurements, as thought is inherently limited, and unable to grasp the oneness, or undivided nature of reality. Bohm (1980) notes that the root of the word measure is the same as the root of the Indian word *maya*, or illusion. Thus there is something inherently illusory about the process of image construction that thought engages in. It is our lack of awareness of this problem that allows it to grow, as we do not keep track of where this incoherence enters into our perception. For epistemology, this creates some very deep challenges for most of the assumptions we have about how, or even if, we can come to “know” anything.

Similarly, Lear (1998) talks about the problems associated with this process of thought creating images of reality:

We think we are looking at something “obviously true”. What we do not understand, ... is that we are being persuaded, not by obvious truth, but by the force of our own projective identifications. We are creatures who cannot help but create mythic accounts of how our mind works, of how we hook onto the world, of what reality is really like. We project this imaginative activity onto the world and then mistake it for ‘the way things really are’. In this way, we systematically mistake a bit of ourselves, our imaginative activity, for the world. (p. 12)

This view of how we construct images of reality challenges us to look closely at what we assume to be “obvious facts” about the “world out there”. Bohm’s view extends this to questioning the “obvious facts” about our identity as well. Sustaining an inquiry into how this imaginative activity constructs our self image, or identity, is

difficult, as it goes against the stream of our taken for granted experience of self and the world.

The kind of activity we undertake in our inquiry into consciousness is especially prone to this imaginative activity. We are in essence dealing with something that is paradoxical, in that we cannot directly perceive it with our senses, yet we apparently experience it most of the time. If we say that we begin with our conscious experience, as Pribram does, what do we take this to mean? Our conscious experience can already be seen to be filtered by the limitations of our sensory apparatus. We depend heavily on sight, yet we know that we see only a very narrow band of the full spectrum of electromagnetic radiation. Even within what our eyes can see, the amount of sensory data is more than our brains can process. What does this say about our conscious experience? Is it really enough to start with? Is it solid ground? Or do we go on a Cartesian journey of doubt, wandering through the ruins of our deconstructed epistemology, looking for a new solid ground? How can we trust “I think therefore I am” if we are calling the process of thinking into question?

2. A dialogical approach

Even as I write this I am *thinking* about what to say. Bohm (1994) inquires into dealing with this by trying to slow down, and observe the process of thought constructing our perceptions. He talks about how we have proprioception, or an immediacy of awareness, of the movement of our physical body, yet seem to lack this with thought. Bohm initiated a type of inquiry called dialogue that aimed at aiding our ability to observe this process. Dialogue uses a group process of conversation grounded in attempting to suspend our judgement, and illuminate the assumptions grounding our thinking. By engaging in this process collectively, people can have an opportunity to listen and observe this process in action in the group conversation. It is always much easier to see the limitations of other's thoughts than to see our own, but by sustaining this kind of conversation participants can gradually have their own assumptions revealed to them. A sustained inquiry of this nature leads to insights into the process of thought that allow one to perceive beyond the normal limitations imposed by the kind of everyday strict adherence to the assumptions taken as a factual grounding of reality. It also offers the kind of approach needed to get beyond dealing with our images of consciousness, to having the possibility of glimpsing our lived experience more directly.

This leads to a view similar to Lear's, in that Bohm sees the process of thought constructing images of reality also giving shape to the limits of perception. It is virtually impossible for us to constantly hold in mind that the world we are observing is limited by the gap between reality and our image of that reality. Instead, we slip into taking the constructed image thought presents to us as a direct perception of reality itself. If this is the process by which thought operates, then what are the implications for the assumptions we have about reality? What does it say about human nature, and our inquiry into something as fundamental as consciousness? What other assumptions might we be unaware of in this inquiry? Western science, with its primarily visual

modality, is seen to focus on the content of consciousness to such a degree that awareness of the context disappears. The collective and relational aspects of how this context is constructed is also lost in this reduction of reality, leaving a great deal of room for assumptions to be uncovered.

From this view of the limitations present in the scientific discourse on consciousness, we can see that human nature leads to us talking about consciousness in a way that turns a blind eye to the nature of the assumptions framing the discussion, its context, and the limitations of the process being used. Not only does this arise from the difficulties inherent in sustaining an awareness of the gap inherent in thought between image and reality, but it also appears to arise from a deep seated desire to avoid any perspective that questions, in a fundamental way, the image of reality we have assumed to be factual. Bohm talks about the automatic defensive reflexes thought uses to perpetuate its own images. This function of thought results in a tendency to put limits on the range of inquiry available for researchers investigating consciousness. However, these limits are self imposed, and different researchers come up with different approaches to the question of consciousness based on the degree of limitation of perception, or image of reality that they assume to be factual. The issue then becomes gaining an understanding of not only how we can sustain our awareness of the intrusion into our perception of a gap between image and reality, but also how we can map out the paradigmatic frameworks that shape the boundaries of our perception at each level. While traditional methodologies such as analysis and synthesis may help to some degree with this task, it is important to balance our inquiry with dialogue.

Pribram (1998) begins to address the issue of moving beyond traditional methodologies when he talks about abduction as a process for gaining knowledge. He describes induction as the gathering of facts, that is making them and then organizing them. Deduction is seen as our attempt to put some kind of formalism on these facts we have gathered and arranged. Abduction is the process of analogy and metaphor, whereby we see the need to get outside of the system, or even outside of ourselves. In this view, dialogue can be seen as a process of abduction. But what is it to get outside ourselves? How could something like that be possible? Is it not a contradiction in terms? We use language in this manner, but do not always allow ourselves to consciously examine the implications of what we are saying. If we are questioning the image of self thought constructs as being illusory, then is there even a self to get outside of?

This is another area that Bohm's engagement in dialogue produced some very interesting insights. In the course of sustaining an inquiry into how thought constructs an image of the world, and then relaxes into perceiving that image as being "reality as it is out there", Bohm extends this process to the construction of our identity. If thought functions by constructing images of reality, or taking a measure of it, then it must also engage in this process to construct an image of who we are. The same principles apply, in that the tendency is to take the image to be the real thing. This self image, or constructed identity, is central to how we perceive and act in the world. Pribram talks about "the cognitive ways the organization of the brain which we have learned through our experience produces a certain configuration, probably in the

actual chemistry of the brain that leads to difficulty in communicating to each other” (Pribram, 1998). In this view, we become “hardwired” so to speak through our experiences. The image of who we are and what reality is, proceed from being images constructed to help us measure an inherently immeasurable world, to obvious truths about reality as it is. Communication gets filtered through this hardwiring, which can be seen to have an inherent incoherence in its creation. As thought proceeds to maintain its creations, attachments to this hardwiring grow. We vociferously defend our incoherent hardwiring, adding emotional intensity to the defensive reflexes of thought. Our world is reduced to communicating about the tiny bits of reality on the surface that we can see through our now diminutive (relative to the possible whole), conscious experience. Dialogue aims to counter this reductive tendency of our intellectual apparatus.

3. The “I” of being

This deconstruction of the process of thought, and the relegation of its products to an inherently illusory status, begs the question, if who we think we are is not who we are, then who are we? Or do “we” even have existence? Is it as some eastern teachings propose, that there ultimately is no self, at least not in the terms of personality that we are accustomed to? Common sense tells us that “I” exist, and experience life. But how often is our awareness or attention on the thoughts we have about our experience rather than on the immediacy of the experience itself? The moment of our lived experience can be taken as a qualitatively different element of time than the past or future. From this perspective, thought appears to operate within time as it exists in relation to past and future, and not as it is in the present. Pribram talks about thought as “ruminating through our memory traces” (Pribram, 1998). When we think about the future, it is always grounded in the context of what we have experienced in the past. From this, one could view the “I” that we experience in two contexts. One is the image constructed by thought which cannot exist in the present, but only in the past or future. The other is the “I” that is always and only in the present, and as such, not part of thought.

Deikman (1996) talks about this as “the subjective sense of our existence” (p. 350). He equates “I” with awareness. He distinguishes between I and self, saying that “This ‘I’ should be differentiated from the various aspects of the physical person and its mental contents which form the ‘self’”(p. 350). He goes on to note that “our sensations, our images, our thoughts — the mental activity by which we engage and define the physical world — are all part of the observed. In contrast, the observer — the “I”— is prior to everything else” (p. 352). For Deikman, who we are is awareness, the “I” that observes, and experiences the content of our consciousness. Pribram states that perception is about the contents of consciousness, as opposed to the states of consciousness. If this is so, it still needs to be grounded, as Deikman does, in a state of being, or consciousness that allows for the construction of the images of content that we perceive. To say that awareness is this ground of consciousness, and that “I” is this awareness, goes beyond traditional ways of framing the issue in substantial ways, as

Deikman (1996) notes by stating; “Knowing by being that which is known is ontologically different from perceptual knowledge” (p. 355). Bohm (1984) approaches this same perspective by saying that “the point is to have the notion of a creative being, rather than of an identified being” (p.169).

The distinction between the constructed images of thought, or the contents of consciousness, and the ground of being as awareness is also explored by DeMello (1990). DeMello uses “I” in the same way Deikman does, talking extensively about awareness. He also reflects the same kind of process of thought as Bohm, Lear, and even the hardwiring to which Pribram refers:

When we look at a person, we really don't see that person, we only think we do. What we're seeing is something that we fixed in our mind. We get an impression and we hold onto that impression, and we keep looking at a person through that impression. And we do this with almost everything. If you understand that, you will understand the loveliness and beauty of being aware of everything around you ... In awareness is healing; in awareness is truth; in awareness is salvation; in awareness is spirituality; in awareness is growth; in awareness is love; in awareness is awakening. Awareness. (p. 103)

This builds on Deikman's position by describing the terrain of awareness. DeMello's view reinforces the notion that a fundamental shift in our way of inquiring into life is necessary in order to get beyond images of reality. In addition, he shows how allowing our attention to detach itself from images, to the being of awareness, opens up a myriad of possibilities of experience.

4. A method of mapping states of consciousness

Thus the question of *who we are* appears to require an answer that is fundamentally different than the answer to the question *who do we think we are*. The range of conceptions conventionally used to describe self have generally been within the framework of the image creating process of thought. Conventional psychology, medicine, philosophy, and other fields have all used thought to attempt an understanding of self, without recognizing the limitations inherent in the methodology. From the standpoint of the ideas presented here, the apparent failure of these inquiries to come up with a description of self that can adequately explain the fullness of human experience can be grounded in the inherent limitations and incoherence of allowing the process of thought to be the only valid methodology for such explorations. A context is needed in which the process of thought can be grounded and evaluated. This context must provide a meaningful understanding of how the sense of identity thought constructs varies across the full range of views espoused. It must also show how this sense of identity is connected to our perception of the world at large.

Such a context has been created through the research of Hawkins (1995). Hawkins describes how, during the 1970s, Diamond expanded on the discovery of Goodheart of the kinesiological muscle response. Diamond found many interesting phenomena

to be testable in this manner, including finding that subjects tested weak in the presence of lies, and strong in the presence of true statements. Hawkins followed this insight, and spent 20 years experimenting with the technique. Hawkins discovered that every thought, emotion, or action leaves a trace of energy in what he describes as the unitive field of consciousness. This is described as being similar to Jung's concept of collective unconscious (Hawkins, 1995). This field approach to describing consciousness allows for it to be seen as beyond the domain of thought. Thought, described here, is bound by time and space. The field of consciousness being described here is non-local, in that it exists beyond these parameters. This is also tied to the description of the present moment as being in a sense timeless. It also allows for recent advances in non-linear dynamics to be used to help our understanding of the nature of consciousness. Due to this non-local nature of the field of consciousness, measurements done through the use of kinesiology are not restricted in terms of time and space. In this sense, the testing is accessing a domain that transcends thought, bypassing it through our body's more intuitive, or direct connection with the non-local domain of consciousness itself (Hawkins, 1995). The importance of this is that it ties the process of consciousness to the reality of our lived experience, and not to the inherently incoherent images constructed by thought.

With this methodology, Hawkins was able to create a map of consciousness, using the relative energy levels, or frequencies, of various states of consciousness to contextualize the entire range of human experience. In this way, any statement, concept, belief, and so on, can be evaluated in terms of its context, paradigm, or degree of coherence with the immediacy of our lived experience. This can be extended to include concepts of identity, providing us with a tool to critically evaluate and analyze the frameworks from which we ground our dialogues on consciousness.

The measurement of the energy levels of various states of consciousness has been converted by Hawkins into a logarithmic scale. This scale, or map, begins with death at 0, or with bare existence at a calibration of 1, and goes up to the limits of human consciousness at 1000. Using this scale, he calibrated the relative energy level of shame to be 20. At this level life is viewed as miserable, and felt as humiliation. At an energy level of 30, we experience guilt. Here we view the world as evil, and feel blame for our situation in life. At 50, we experience apathy, feeling despair and viewing life as hopeless. At 75, we experience grief, view life as tragic, and are filled with regret. At 100, we experience fear, feeling it as anxiety and viewing life as frightening. At 125, we experience desire, feeling a craving for life that generally leads to disappointment. At 150 we experience anger. The emotion here is hatred, and we see life as antagonistic. At 175 we come to pride. Here we feel scorn, and see life as demanding.

The critical point in terms of moving from negative, or life suppressing, to positive, or life supporting, states of consciousness comes at 200. Here we experience courage, seeing life as feasible and feeling affirmed. The process associated with this energy level is one of empowerment. Moving up through the positive energy levels, we come to a state of neutrality at 250. Here we feel trust, and view life as being satisfactory. At 310, we experience willingness, viewing life as hopeful and feeling optimistic. At 350 we come to acceptance, experiencing forgiveness and seeing life as being harmonious. At

400 we come to reason. Here we feel we understand life, and it becomes meaningful for us.

The next major level of energy comes at 500, where the limits of linear reason and logic give way to the experience of love. We feel a deep reverence for life, which we view as benign. At 540 we come to the state of joy, seeing life as complete and feeling serene. At 600 comes peace, in the sense of a peace that passes all understanding. Life is seen as perfect, and emotionally we experience bliss. From 700 to 1000 are the levels of enlightenment, where our emotions are ineffable, and life just is.

Hawkins' map of consciousness, along with the use of this methodology, allows us to determine the relative value of any frame of reference. Higher levels of energy, or states of consciousness, can be viewed as providing one with a greater context, or less of a restrictive boundary on how self and life are perceived. It can also be viewed as describing the degree to which our perception is coherent with the reality of our lived experience. It describes the degree to which our perception is bounded by the constructed images of thought. The lower the calibration, the thicker the layers of these images are, and the more they disconnect us from the perception of our immediate lived experience. At the same time, each level of consciousness has a domain of validity, where the views held tell us something about life as we experience it at that level. This gives validity to all perspectives, but not in an equal manner that would send us into a kind of relativism. Problems can be seen to arise when any given perspective tries to stipulate that it alone determines the validity of other perspectives. Wilber (1997) describes a four quadrant model of consciousness, and in talking about the need for correlating the relations between approaches states that this process is "in no way trying to reduce any to the others" (p. 88). The ability to associate these frames of reference with a numerical scale allows us to empirically assess various concepts of identity, especially as they relate to our paradigmatic assumptions about reality as a whole, and consciousness in particular.

5. Some examples

To provide some examples, one can use this methodology to evaluate the various schools of thought regarding consciousness research that Wilber (1997) delineates. Wilber lists 12 such schools of thought, and the calibrations that follow are based upon Wilber's descriptions:

1. Cognitive science; 490.
2. Introspectionism; 480.
3. Neuropsychology; 440.
4. Individual psychotherapy; 535.
5. Social psychology; 485.
6. Clinical psychiatry; 420.
7. Developmental psychology; 485.
8. Psychosomatic medicine; 520.
9. Nonordinary states of consciousness; 540.

10. Eastern and contemplative traditions; 655.
11. Quantum consciousness; 575.
12. Subtle energies research; 640.

One could examine these various perspectives to see what are the underlying assumptions about reality that they are based on. The ones that calibrate lower tend to deal more with the constructed images of self and the physical embodiment, while perspectives calibrating higher tend to deal more directly with the less material aspects of our being.

Another example of how this scale can help to evaluate the domains of validity of various theories is in looking at three interpretations of quantum theory. Bohr's view, as seen through his contribution to the Copenhagen interpretation, calibrates at 535. Bohm's (1980) implicate order interpretation calibrates at 565. Goswami's (1993) consciousness based view of quantum theory calibrates at 740. The classical Newtonian paradigm of physics calibrates at 499. This shows that the underlying assumptions of classical physics pushed the limits of reason and logic within a mechanistic view. The advent of quantum physics required a new kind of logic, and some fundamentally different assumptions about reality. Bohr helped raise the domain of validity of the theory with his understanding of the interconnectedness, or inherent wholeness of quantum systems. Bohm went a bit further in trying to articulate somewhat deeper assumptions of wholeness. Goswami challenged a fundamental assumption of both Bohr and Bohm, when he looked at having consciousness rather than matter as the ground of reality. Goswami's theory is viewed as invalid by physicists and others who still assume matter as the fundamental ground of being. Yet it rings true from many spiritual perspectives. This also coincides with the earlier calibration and analysis of the perspectives Wilber lists.

6. Experimentation with this methodology

My introduction to this research inspired me to use Hawkins' book as the text for a seminar. During the seminar, we began to experiment with kinesiology, learning as we went along the finer points of the methodology. We wanted to test out, and verify for ourselves what Hawkins was saying. We soon learned the importance of precisely defining what we were measuring, as differences in results were eventually traced to imprecise wording of the statements being calibrated, or differences in their subjective meaning. As we progressed in our understanding of the technique, we began to verify for ourselves the results Hawkins describes.

One of the statements that Hawkins makes in his book is that simply reading and understanding the material presented in the book can raise one's state of consciousness by as much as 35 points. In conjunction with this, we had begun testing people's states of consciousness in terms of this scale. I found that my own state of consciousness had remained the same over my entire life, a somewhat disheartening insight. In class we discovered that this is the common state for the great majority of people, and that changes of consciousness generally occurred at the time of death, or during near

death experiences. One implication of this was that we had not understood what Hawkins was saying, and in particular, we had not understood what was meant by consciousness. As we inquired into the nature of our lack of understanding, we began to clarify the issue, increasing our insight into the subject. This led to an understanding of consciousness as somehow being beyond thought. Through experimenting with the testing of various statements, we came to understand *consciousness* as being *soul's relationship with embodiment*. We used the term soul to represent what has been described as one's higher self, spirit, transpersonal beingness, or the essence of our lived experience. Embodiment represented the individual system of thought in Bohm's terms, in that it describes an integrated system of thoughts, emotions and physicalness, that are viewed as different aspects occurring in different contexts. Consciousness, in this sense, is viewed as a filter of sorts, shaping the boundaries of our embodied perception in terms of paradigms and deep seated assumptions about identity and reality. Other items such as values, beliefs and so forth, were seen to arise out of these deeper assumptions, and to be part of the reflexive, embodied system of thought.

7. Implications and insights

The most important implication of this finding for me was an empirical validation of a spiritual awareness, namely that the reality of self is not grounded in the physical body, nor even in the mind. Instead this finding indicates that self is essentially spiritual in nature. In this context, the term consciousness needs to be viewed, not in the everyday sense of the term, but as being grounded in the realm of the essence of our lived experience, or the spiritual realm. Examples of a dictionary definition of consciousness is "the mental activity of which an individual is aware", or "all the thoughts and feelings of a person" (De Wolf, Gregg, Harris & Scargill, 1997). This view places consciousness within the realm of thought, whereas the understanding arrived at here implies a view of consciousness that is somehow transcendent of thought, yet connected to it in the manner of providing the level of energy by which thoughts, emotions and other activities, (including physical) are generated. It also generates the boundaries of perception. Another way to view this is to see the common conceptions and usage of the term consciousness to have a domain of validity that is a limited approximation of this way of using the term. This is analogous to viewing Newtonian physics as an approximation of relativistic and quantum physics.

In this way, we can conceive of the spectrum of consciousness as being accessed at whatever level of energy, or frequency of consciousness, we are operating from. The question that arose almost immediately in the seminar regarding a person having the same state of consciousness throughout their lifetime, was that we can all relate to having experienced a wide range of states of consciousness. We have all been angry, depressed, fearful, desiring, courageous, reasonable, joyful and loving. In attempting to address this issue, we first came to see that we experience life through relationships. While our individual state of consciousness may reflect the fundamental grounding of our perception of reality, we are most often in relationship with the world around us,

and even with our subjective world of images, impressions and thoughts. We have relationships with people, things, ideas and ideologies. Each of these items that we come into relationship with has a level of energy, or state of consciousness associated with it, that can filter our experience. The relationship itself can also be calibrated, revealing the grounding of its essential nature.

An example of this is something I recall experiencing when, upon growing up and leaving home, I developed a sense of identity apart from my parents. Upon returning home for a visit, I found myself unable to “be myself”, finding instead that I reverted back to old patterns of behavior in the context of the relationship. Having grown up in fear of retribution from an authoritarian father, this fear had been deeply embedded enough to dominate the level of consciousness of our relationship. Thus when I was engaged in this relationship, (or have other people who trigger a similar pattern), I felt stifled, fearful, and brought down to a level that I was familiar with, but now was more conscious of its painful nature.

Another example is how we can have a certain ideology impressed upon us during our education. Our level of consciousness is filtered whenever we perceive the world through this ideology, and this perception is generally deeply buried within thought, making it appear to us that we are simply perceiving the world the way it really is. If we firmly believe in a Marxist ideology, we will perceive events in this context rather than as they are in themselves. Our relationship to the ideology will have the effect of lowering our state of consciousness, if it calibrates less than our own. If it calibrates higher, we will comprehend it to the degree of our capacity. In this way we can also see how people that we love can bring our state of consciousness up, as can spiritual or religious beliefs, or perspectives of any kind that have a higher energy level than we may presently be experiencing. This process of raising our consciousness requires us to let go of our attachments to seeing things as we are accustomed to, and being open to going beyond “ourselves”.

Arising from this, a second view of how we experience a wide range of states of consciousness arose. In this view, it is not only our relationship with the *other*, but our *attachment* to people, things, ideologies etc. that affects the day to day, or even moment to moment state of consciousness we experience. The measure of consciousness that we can calibrate for a person is seen to be a calibration of their state of relationship in the immediacy of their lived experience, or as soul, to the limited image of that self as constructed by thought. This is an overarching paradigm that creates deep level boundaries for experience and perception within the embodiment. Our attachment to anything can temporarily shift the amount of energy we experience.

This phenomenon appears to set a limit on the depth to which we can understand anything. This limit will be the overarching state of consciousness we are operating from in the context of embodiment. It will frame the way in which we interpret, or give meaning to, any given perspective, thus explaining contrasting views of almost any perspective. This can explain why some people are better able to grasp certain concepts, while others seem to not quite get the point. If we are trying to understand something which calibrates above our personal state of consciousness, we will need to fit it into the context of our capacity for understanding, limiting the extent to which we can grasp the wholeness of whatever it is. Not only this, but if we are firmly attached

to a view that calibrates lower than we do, we can limit our potential for deeper understanding.

The attachments that we hold on to over time become solidified, and contribute to the construction of the self image by thought. From this we may operate daily at a much lower state of consciousness than we are potentially capable of. Gains in this everyday state of consciousness come from letting go of our attachment to these limiting ideas or images. The number of these images present will determine the depth of, or number or layers of attachments we have to let go of to gain a clear view from our potential. This kind of experience is reflected in meditative and contemplative practices that allow for a centering of attention and perception with a minimum of interference from these lower states of consciousness. The goal of such practices can be seen to be a clear awareness of the immediacy and essence of our lived experience, free of the limitations of attachment to illusory states of identification.

8. Conclusion

Who do we think we are? The image of self created by thought includes identifying our selves as the physical body, emotions, or thoughts. It can also include identifying with our career, nationality, or a host of other things. This article has presented an examination of this topic that leads to a view of self that is none of the above. The common forms of identification listed here have been shown to have limited domains of validity, and a deep and subtle level of incoherence. They become illusory forms of self if we fall into attributing more meaning to them than is appropriate. They are inherently disconnected, through the process of thought, from the beingness of the unmediated, immediacy of our lived experience. *Who are we?* The reality of who we are has been shown to be beyond all of these images and approximations. We are soul, infinite and eternal, and the true ground of our being is the unlimited, infinite realm of spirit.

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