plan. Rhetorically impressive, timely, much-needed — but not more than a very first step. It is time to follow up and go to work.

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**James Austin**
*Selfless Insight:*
*Zen and the Meditative Transformations of Consciousness*
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It would seem that, when it comes to writing about Zen and the brain, James Austin is incapable of writing a short book. Thankfully, he also tends to write very good books. His latest, *Selfless Insight: Zen and the Meditative Transformations of Consciousness*, is no exception. A 345-page 'slender sequel' (p. xxiii) to *Zen and the Brain* (1998) and *Zen-Brain Reflections* (2006), Austin writes in buoyant prose, deftly integrating cutting-edge brain research with personal anecdotes and Zen teaching and practice. The result is a rich and readable study that helpfully crystallizes Austin's previous work while indicating new directions for future research. Though the reader would perhaps appreciate a more nuanced philosophical treatment of some of the many important, and potentially controversial, issues discussed within, the book nevertheless stands as yet another example of how contemporary consciousness research can benefit by undertaking a serious and sustained engagement with non-western contemplative practices.

The reader unfamiliar with Zen Buddhism will find basic principles presented in a clear, straightforward way, supplemented with myriad quotes from Zen teachers old and new. However, the unprepared reader may find the accompanying blizzard of neurophysiological data somewhat overwhelming. A sympathetic author, Austin recognizes the complexity of both Zen and the brain as topics of enquiry and thus invites the reader to 'read slowly, skim when appropriate, and to refer often to the figures, tables, glossary, and mondo summaries at the

end of each part' (p. xxii). This reviewer took Austin at his word and found the approach to be a helpful strategy. The result is a work that invites — and can indeed accommodate — modes of readerly engagement both intense and casual.

Despite the wealth of material covered, the book is relatively well-organized. Aside from a brief introduction, it consists of seven main parts, each organized around a particular theme and encompassing many shorter chapters. The first six parts of the book helpfully conclude with a short *mondo* (i.e. question and answer exchange) in which Austin summarizes the main points of the previous chapter in a conversational manner. These short exchanges are welcome moments to digest and take stock of the preceding analysis. The book helpfully cross-references Austin's previous books, allowing the interested reader to explore many topics in greater detail by consulting the earlier texts. There is also a short glossary of relevant Zen and neurophysiological terms.

*Part I: On the Varieties of Attention* surveys different forms of attention, their neural mechanisms, and discusses how Zen mediation facilitates fine-grained attentional training. Specifically, Austin is keen to show that different meditative styles (focused, concentrative *vs.* open, receptive) train both top-down (dorsal) and bottom-up (ventral) forms of attention. Meditative practice isn't an 'all or nothing' homogenous affair but rather a diverse set of distinct practices, each of which potentially harbours distinct neurophysiological consequences.

*Part II: On the Origins of Self* considers a theme central to Zen: self-consciousness. Here, the main suggestion is that the parietal lobe cortical networks tend to orient toward egocentric processing, whereas temporal lobe networks are more oriented toward allocentric processing. A central idea is that self-centred processing dominates everyday experience — it underwrites the primitive sense of self we seem to carry with us throughout our lives — but that, under certain conditions (e.g. rapid attentional shifts in response to brisk sensory stimulus), self-referential processing is deactivated and other-referential processing dominates. This shift hints at a physiological basis for understanding the cultivation of Zen states of selfness.

*Part III: Toward Selfness* explores these states in detail — specifically the experience of selflessness characteristic of *kensho* states, or the fleeting surges of allocentric processing in which the sense of self drops out and attention is wholly focused on seeing things 'as they really are' in their presentational immediacy. Extensive neuroscientific research is surveyed. A suggestion is that, instead of comprising an entirely new way of looking at the world, *kensho* states are

rather the cultivation of ongoing covert processing — and thus that this selfless seeing may be cultivated and refined into an ongoing character trait.

*Part IV: On the Nature of Insight* explores insight and its role in fostering human creativity. Insight is said to be a sudden act of seeing clearly and comprehensively. Austin claims that insight is an aspect of general intelligence devoted primarily to the solution of seemingly intractable problems; and, additionally, that insights are progressive refinements along the broad continuum of creative intuition.

*Part V: On the Path toward Insight-Wisdom* explores the extent to which the principles governing ordinary insight extend into the more privileged realms of *insight-wisdom*, i.e. the intuitive knowledge accessed via fleeting *kensho* experiences. Specific consideration is given to the attitudinal changes that result from such experiences and the knowledge attained therein: for example, an appreciation of the interrelated nature of all things, heightened compassion, and the ability to see through various *I*, *Me*, *Mine* constructions into the ultimately empty nature of the self.

*Part VI: Toward Emotional Maturity* investigates how meditation and Zen practice can favourably influence the normal developmental trajectory of emotional maturity. Meditation is said to assist in suppressing/transforming overconditioned emotional responses, instead allowing one to live more openly, spontaneously, and with greater emotional clarity and stability.

*Part VII: Updating Selected Research* does what it advertises, updating selected studies from the rapidly-swelling field of Zen-brain research since the publication of the previous volume in 2006.

These parts, while thematically distinct, nevertheless (in good Buddhist fashion) thoroughly interpenetrate. Austin often reaches backward whilst moving forward, weaving previously-discussed research with newly-introduced material. While this dialectical approach gives the dramatic impression of a slowly-unfurling narrative, the end result is, at times, somewhat messier. The story Austin wants to tell is long and complex, the supporting material extensive. And while he's a gifted writer, it's occasionally difficult to maintain focus on the larger narrative being woven and to appreciate the immediate salience of each new piece of data presented. There's simply an awful lot of it. A slower, more systematic analysis in spots — for example, the rather brisk analysis of emotional maturity in Part VI — would have helped establish a clearer larger picture.

For all of its emphasis on simplicity of both teaching and practice, Zen harbours substantive philosophical dimensions. As both a serious

Zen scholar and practitioner, Austin is clearly aware of this. However, a failure to engage with these philosophical dimensions in any sustained way is a weakness of the book.

For example, Austin's rich analysis is motivated by an unquestioned reductionism — the idea, in short, that all conscious episodes (e.g. *kensho* flashes, upwelling of other-directed compassion, myriad everyday experiences) can be explained by providing an account of their neural (i.e. physical) basis. This is fine — except that one might question whether or not this assumption is consistent with traditional Zen views about the ultimate nature of mind. The thirteenth century Sôtô Zen master Dôgen, for instance — quoted several times throughout the book — equates mind with 'mountains, rivers and the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars', insisting that 'all things and all phenomena are invariably this one mind — nothing is excluded, all is embraced' (quoted in Kim, 2004, p. 117). Dôgen's view is admittedly subtle and elusive; and Austin, understandably, has concerns other than metaphysical speculation and historical exegesis. However, the point is that it's not at all clear that historical Zen — like Buddhism more generally — is an easy ally of unquestioned physicalism. Moreover, some contemporary authors (B. Alan Wallace, 2007, comes immediately to mind) use Buddhist approaches to consciousness to question the very reductionist programme Austin seems to take for granted. And neurophenomenological approaches (e.g. Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, 2003; Thompson, 2007; Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991; Thompson, 2007) — many of which draw upon Buddhist contemplative practices to develop refined, first-order descriptions of experience that can be used to supplement neuroscientific findings — have also weighed in on this issue. So, it's somewhat curious that Austin doesn't engage any of this literature, or at least pause to acknowledge and defend the philosophical presuppositions informing his reductionist programme.

On a related note, I found the two central chapters on self and self-consciousness (Parts II and III) disappointingly thin in terms of phenomenological description. This is a shame, since descriptions of *kensho* experience — in Austin's terms, a pivotal shift from an egocentric to an allocentric mode of processing giving rise to selfless, nondual states of seeing 'all things as they really are' (p. 117) — surely call out for a nuanced description of the phenomena under consideration. Yes, such states are seemingly 'ineffable', and plagued by linguistic 'inexpressibility' (p. 117). But careful descriptions of these elusive states from the first-person perspective are indeed possible (see, e.g. Albahari, 2006; Shaner, 1985). And while they're certainly

no substitute for the actual experience of the state itself, phenomenological descriptions help us get a grip on some attendant philosophical puzzles. For example, if the *kensho* experience of no-self doesn't entail 'that a person stops witnessing' (p. 117), wouldn't this seem to imply that some sort of residual 'witness self' — i.e. a first-person perspective or phenomenal self (Dainton, 2008; Zahavi, 2005) — endures? What are we to make of this enduring phenomenal self in light of Zen claims about the selfless nature of all things? Might there be experiences where this minimal self, too, dissolves? More careful phenomenological precision might also assist in untangling related claims that 'the anonymous observer is finally graced by the glimpse of an unimaginally [sic] "objective vision"… *into* the eternal perfection of "all things as THEY really are"' (p. 117). How are we to understand the scope of this claim? Is it intended purely to be phenomenological description or rather a stronger ontological claim about privileged access to a 'pure' objective reality? If the latter, what might that actually *mean*? Austin offers few resources for navigating these philosophical waters.

These philosophical quibbles aside, Austin has written another excellent book skillfully linking Zen practice and current brain research. His many readers will be grateful for it. One hopes for yet another entry in this series, 'slender' or otherwise.

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