

Verifying Contemplative Experiences: First-Person Science and the Headless Way

Brentyn J. Ramm

Published in InZicht, Vol 26, September 2024: <https://inzicht.org/>

In the early Buddhist tradition, awakening is claimed to require a supreme effort. It may in fact take many lifetimes. It hence is virtually unobtainable for the ordinary person. There is a tradition in Zen however of 'sudden' awakening in which the only thing keeping you from seeing your true nature right now are your delusions. The originator of the sudden school of Zen was reputedly the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Hui Neng. Hui Neng, like many of the early Chinese Chan masters describes one's true nature as like a void. He says:

The capacity of the mind is as great as that of space. It is infinite, neither round nor square, neither great nor small, neither green nor yellow, neither red nor white, neither above nor below, neither long nor short, neither angry nor happy, neither right nor wrong, neither good nor evil. Learned Audience, the illimitable Void of the universe is capable of holding myriads of things of various shape and form, such as the sun, the moon, stars, mountains, rivers, worlds, springs, rivulets... Space takes in all these and so does the voidness of our nature.

Seeing that your true nature is void-like (also known as kenshō) is to simultaneously see that you are completely one with the world. There are no dualities of self and other, inside and outside. Despite its importance, kenshō is rarely reported by practitioners of traditional meditation techniques. However, if Emptiness describes your essential nature, then this nature should be present at every moment, whether we notice it or not. The question hence arises if there are methods which are more reliable at assisting us to recognise their true nature? From anecdotal reports, a modern meditation technique developed by Douglas Harding, the Headless Way may provide just such a method.

That which sets this approach apart from traditional methods is the use of experiments. In particular, apparatus such as pointing fingers and mirrors are used to direct one's attention inwards. Douglas Harding was inspired by the scientific method and hence used the term 'experiment' in the same sense as used in science. The goal of these exercises is to test in your direct experience two competing hypotheses: whether you are: (1) a thing (merely a person) or (2) not a thing. We are very good at being objective about things that we observe out there, but when it comes to ourselves (the observer), we are apt to superstition and flights of fancy. We assume that what we are is just a person. However, that is to take on the third-person perspective—that is what we look like for others from over there. But what is it like to be you right where you are? What we need, rather than taking others' word for it, is to be scientific about what the observer is like in our own first-person experience. What we need is a first-person science of consciousness.ⁱ

To assist you to attend to where you are looking from, please do the following exercise – the pointing experiment. As you do so, drop imagination, memory and common sense and just *look*:

Point at a distant thing such as a pot plant. Notice its shape and colour. Notice that it is opaque. You cannot see through it. Now point to the floor. Again, notice the coloured expanse and its textures. Now point to your foot. Again, it is a shaped and coloured thing. Point to your chest and notice its colours and shape, perhaps there is movement from your breathing. Now by contrast point to where you are looking from. Remember to attend to what you are pointing at rather than the finger itself. In your present experience are there any colours here? Any shape? Any texture? Any opacity? Any movement? Are there any eyes, cheeks or mouth here?



Pointing Outwards



Pointing Inwards

I find that my finger is pointing at 'nothing'. It is a vast emptiness with no boundaries. But it's not a mere nothing as it is awake and full of the world. The common sense belief that I am an 'observing thing' separate from other things turns out to be fictitious. Is the same true for you in your present experience?

The void-like nature of the Mind has been reported in many contemplative traditions across different times and cultures. Despite this, such a realisation has yet to be accepted into the scientific discourse, let alone into the common sense vernacular. Rather it has remained mostly in the realm of religious traditions. A further challenge is that it is difficult to separate these contemplative experiences from meditator's religious/spiritual beliefs. Such a sceptical position is vigorously advocated by Steven Katz. He holds that there is no universal mystical experience, rather mystical reports vary greatly depending upon context and are driven by prior religious beliefs and concepts. Particularly relevant is his claim that Buddhist and Christian mystics mean quite different things when they refer to an experience of 'nothingness'. His challenge is:

There are major, perhaps insuperable, problems involved in the issue of trying to verify mystical claims, if by verification we mean the strong thesis that independent grounds for the claimed event/experience can be publicly demonstrated. (Katz, 1978, p. 22).ⁱⁱ

His critique of mystical claims comes down to the fact that they are not scientifically verifiable. Contemplative practices take place in a religious or spiritual framework. But if the essence of the mind is indeed void-like, then this should be verifiable independently of any religious or spiritual doctrine.

Do the Headless Way methods provide such independent evidence? Are they reliable means of realising the void-like nature of the mind? I would like to report the results of a recent psychology

study by my colleagues and myself, which provides preliminary evidence that they are. There have been many anecdotal reports by those who do the Headless Way exercises of experiencing a 'void' or 'emptiness'. However, these reports are usually made in the context of informal spiritual contexts – workshops. My colleagues and I investigated whether subjects do these exercises they would spontaneously describe void experiences when not supplied with this language.ⁱⁱⁱ

The study was a phenomenological interview with 20 participants who had no prior exposure to the Headless Way experiments. It was conducted by Zoom and in-person and took between an hour to an hour and a half. Participants completed 9 Headless Way exercises and were asked to describe their experience. They were told that they were going to be guided through exercises to explore what it is like to be themselves from their first-person subjective experience.

In addition to the pointing experiment, another powerful Headless Way exercise is the Tube Experiment. In the version used in the study, participants looked down a tube at their face in the mirror and were asked to contrast the two ends. For example, whether there is a face at their end, any shapes or colours and whether their end is open or closed.



The Tube Experiment

It was found that 12 out of the 20 participants described an experience of void when carrying out the experiments, particularly for the Pointing and Tube experiments. Some of their descriptions are below:

Participant 20 (Pointing Experiment):

R: Yeah, it's really weird. It's sort of like, it kind of makes you realize like on a perceptual level, it's like your head doesn't really exist. (laughs) There, it's almost like your head is just a space where it's all happening. Like, cause I'm not... I'm pointing at my head, but all I'm seeing is a hand pointing. I'm not actually seeing a head I'm pointing at—it's almost like it's shooting right through me. There's nothing to even point at. It's just sort of a finger-pointing. (laughing) Cause even like seeing the nose, I feel like that's still just an appearance there. It's not really, it's like it's not even attached (laughs), and it's very strange though.

Participant 16 (Pointing Experiment):

R: It was that similar kind of experience of disappearing in a funny way. Yeah. And even looking at my chest, I can't really see it. And doing this again, it's that feeling of not being there in a funny way, or being here but not tangibly. It's very strange, isn't it? Yes.

Extraordinary. I'm not at all used to focusing really on my own flesh and blood—are we?

I: Yeah. Any other descriptions of what you seem to be pointing at?

R: It's just complete... well, it's empty. It's a kind of an emptiness. Not in the Zen understanding of emptiness, really. But it's just as though there's nothing here really in a funny way. It doesn't seem to be a 'me' there. (both laughing). If I normally do this, I'm pointing at (participant name), but because it's so focused, I'm sort of aware that there isn't. I don't know what I'm pointing at, really. So, interesting.

Participant 15 (Tube Experiment):

I: And what do you find when you attend back in that direction?

R: Nothing. Yeah. So, like empty, just empty space. Like it was nothing solid. The solid was when I was looking at the other end—when I go back in, when it's coming back in this end, there was nothing to actually necessarily see. But like you say there... I think you asked what was more alive or what have you, was definitely this end, even though there was nothing actually... It felt like there was nothing, no body sort of thing. It still felt more vibrant.

Participant 13 (Tube Experiment):

I: Did you find a big difference between the face and the end you were looking from?

R: I do. Yeah. And that surprises me. I just lose all tangible sense of anything at this end, apart from my thoughts and awareness, but physically, it seems like everything's at the other end of the tube.

Participants used various terms to describe the place they are looking from, including void, emptiness, nothing, blackness and space. Some also noticed that this location was awake or aware, with participant 15 in the tube describing the emptiness at their end as 'alive' or 'vibrant'.

Importantly, this study took place outside of a religious or spiritual context. Rather participants were guided in a phenomenological investigation of what it was like to be the first-person. Although further studies are needed, the findings converge on contemplative reports of the first-person subject being empty or void-like and totally open to the world. The study provides preliminary evidence that the Headless Way exercises are reliable at eliciting these experiences. The findings also arguably provide some independent grounds for mystical claims, in the manner sought for by sceptics such as Steven Katz. Of course, further studies are needed, including with control groups to fully control for potential biases and pre-conceptions of participants. The Headless Way experiments arguably open up the mystical dimension of human experience to scientific investigation. Even more importantly they provide a means for the ordinary individual to see their true nature *right now* (not after decades of meditation)—at least, this is the claim for you to test for yourself. Does your face or in fact anything at all get in the way of this words?

ⁱ Harding, Douglas Edison. 2001. *The Science of the 1st-Person: It's Principles, Practice and Potential*. London: The Shollond Trust.

ⁱⁱ Katz, S. T. 1978. Language, epistemology, and mysticism. In S. T. Katz (Ed.), *Mysticism and philosophical analysis* (pp. 22-74). New York: Oxford University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ramm. B. J, Lumma, A, Sparby, T, Weger, U. 2024. Seeing the Void: Experiencing Emptiness and Awareness with the Headless Way Technique. *Mindfulness*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-024-02341-6>