

The Noun-ification of Mindfulness: From Practice to the Egoless State

1. Introduction: The Central Inquiry—From "Doing" to "Being"

The practice of mindfulness is often described as an active, volitional endeavor—a "verb" that denotes a person implementing specific techniques and strategies. This report addresses a penetrating inquiry: when does this active practice transcend its volitional nature and become a "noun," a state of being where the subjective sense of a separate "I" is no longer present? The core of this investigation lies in understanding the transition from the "doer" of a technique to a state of being in which the distinction between "self" and "other" has dissolved. This phenomenon, referred to as the dissolution of the self, is the culmination of various psycho-spiritual practices and is explored through a comparative analysis of several distinct traditions.

The scope of this report encompasses the doctrines and methodologies of Zen Buddhism, Sufism, Advaita Vedanta, Christian Mysticism, and Radical Dzogchen. It aims to elucidate the philosophical underpinnings, practical approaches, and phenomenological characteristics of this egoless state across these diverse frameworks. Key terms are defined for clarity: the "self" as the conditioned, narrative ego; the "True Self" as the non-conceptual, unchanging essence often described as pure awareness; and "ego dissolution" or the "unitive state" as the experience of the temporary or permanent loss of this subjective sense of self. The report's analytical approach integrates insights from comparative phenomenology, metaphysics, and contemporary neuroscience to provide a comprehensive understanding of this profound transformation.

2. Zen Buddhism: The "Swinging Door" of Anatta and Emptiness

Philosophical Foundations

At the core of Buddhist thought lies the doctrine of the Three Characteristics of Existence: *Anicca* (impermanence), *Dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *Anatta* (non-self).¹

Anatta is the central tenet for understanding the dissolution of the egoic self. The term is a composite of *an* (not) and *attā* (self-existent essence), and is more accurately translated as "non-self" rather than "no-self".² This distinction is critical: it is a doctrine not denying the existence of a self, but rather denying the existence of a permanent, unchanging, and independent essence within any phenomenon. The Mahayana concept of

Śūnyatā (emptiness) further elaborates this idea, positing that all things are "empty of a separate self," thereby emphasizing the interconnectedness of all phenomena rather than a nihilistic void.³

Practice as the Verb

The path to realizing *Anatta* is through practice. Zen meditation, or *zazen*, involves volitional techniques that serve as a bridge to a non-volitional state. For instance, Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes the twin practices of 'stopping' (concentration) and 'observing' (insight).¹ Through conscious breathing, the practitioner aims to unify the breath, body, and mind, regaining a sense of composure. This deliberate focus is the "verb" of the practice. The gentle calming of the mind is encouraged to create a space for observing sensations and mental formations.¹ The practitioner, such as one following the teachings of Ajahn Sumedho, engages in a sweeping awareness of the body, allowing phenomena to arise and pass away in an open spirit of "letting go".¹ This intentional act of observation and release is a strategy to disengage from the ego's habitual patterns of clinging and identification.

The Noun-ification of Experience: Realizing Anatta

The transition from the "verb" of practice to the "noun" of being occurs when the sense of a separate "doer" or "experiencer" dissolves. Zen master Suzuki Roshi's analogy of the "swinging door" perfectly illustrates this point: "If you think, 'I breathe', the 'I' is extra... What we call 'I' is just a swinging door, which moves when we inhale and when we exhale".¹ The practitioner moves from the volitional act of "I breathe" to the non-volitional, effortless reality of "breathing." The "I" becomes a superfluous concept superimposed on the direct experience of reality. This is the realization of

Anatta, where there is no independent observer apart from the observed.¹ The phenomenology of

this state is characterized by "tremendous joy and bliss, a great clarity of understanding and complete freedom".¹

This process challenges the fundamental Western, Cartesian assumption of the self as a stable, enduring substance. The Zen perspective reveals that the self is not something to be destroyed but a cognitive habit to be seen through. The experience of *Anatta* exposes the self as an "extra" concept, a narrative that the mind adds to the flow of experience.¹ The profound consequence of this realization is the liberation from suffering, as attachment to this illusory self is a primary cause.³ The result is not a state of being an "empty head" or a lack of feeling, but rather a greater sense of interconnectedness and compassion.³

3. Sufism: Fana—The Annihilation of the Ego

The Doctrine of Fana

In Sufism, the concept of *Fana* (Arabic: فناء *fanā'*) is a central doctrine referring to the "passing away" or "annihilation" of the self.⁴ It is poetically described by mystics like Rumi as "to die before one dies".⁴

Fana is inextricably linked to the concept of *Tawhid* (the oneness of God), serving as the means by which a practitioner can achieve a lived, direct experience of the divine.⁵ The process involves the eradication of the ego and the individual identity, allowing for a deeper sense of unity with God.⁵

Interpretations and Methodology

There are two primary interpretations of *Fana* within Sufism, which represent a crucial internal debate about the nature of the egoless state⁴:

1. **Fana as Vision (*Mushahadah*):** Mystics such as Al-Ghazali and Al-Junayd al-Baghdadi held that the ultimate goal of Sufism is the vision of the divine. In this view, *Fana* is interpreted as the abandonment of self-consciousness, which is then replaced by contemplation of God alone.⁴ The self does not merge with God but recognizes God as the "sole agent of the Universe".⁴ This is a state of profound surrender to God's will, where the individual's will dissolves, and they become a pure instrument of the divine.⁴
2. **Fana as Union (*Ittihad*):** This more controversial interpretation, advocated by mystics like Al-Bistami and Al-Hallaj, posits that *Fana* is a total union with the "One" or the "Truth".⁴ This

view suggests a complete annihilation of the human ego, which leads to an "absolute awareness of an intrinsic unity (Tawhid) between God and all that exists, including the individual themselves".⁴

The Psychological Process

Regardless of the philosophical interpretation, the psychological process of *Fana* follows a clear, structured path.⁵ The journey begins with an **initial detachment** from worldly desires and ego-based identity. This leads to a state of **spiritual longing** for a deeper connection with the divine. The **ego annihilation** stage is the core of the experience, where the individual's ego is gradually dismantled, which can be unsettling and even terrifying, but ultimately leads to a sense of liberation and freedom.⁵ Finally, the individual undergoes a **spiritual rebirth**, entering a new state of consciousness characterized by unity and oneness with the divine.⁵ The Sufi model, therefore, provides a clear, stage-based map for the dissolution of the ego, framing it within a devotional and relational context focused on a personal God, which is a key distinction from the impersonal nature of reality in certain Eastern traditions.

4. Advaita Vedanta: The Non-Dual Reality of Atman and Brahman

Core Concepts

The Hindu tradition of Advaita Vedanta is centered on the principle of "non-secondness" (*Advaita*), which posits that there is no reality other than Brahman, the supreme, non-dual reality.⁶ The core tenet is that the individual experiencing self (*Jivatman*) is ultimately pure awareness and is non-different from *Ātman* (the highest Self) or *Brahman* (the highest Reality).⁶ The apparent difference between the individual self and the ultimate reality is considered an illusory appearance, or *maya*.⁶ Liberation (*moksha*) is attained not through an action of the ego but through knowledge (*vidyā*), specifically the realization of one's true identity as *Atman/Brahman*.⁶

The Path to Realization (*Sādhana*)

The path to this realization involves a form of spiritual discipline (*sādhana*) that includes preparatory qualities such as mental tranquility (*śama*) and self-restraint (*dama*) to quiet the mind and senses.⁶ The central method is self-inquiry, which aims to lead the practitioner to an intellectual and experiential conviction of the

Mahāvākyas ("Great Sayings") of the Upanishads, such as "*Aham Brahmasmi*" ("I am Brahman") and "*Tat Tvam Asi*" ("That Thou Art").⁶ The egoless state in Advaita is thus not the annihilation of a

substantial self, but the dissolution of a false identification with the body-mind complex and the notion of "doership".⁶ The self was never separate to begin with; it was simply obscured by ignorance.

The Phenomenology of the Egoless State

Advaita Vedanta describes three ordinary states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and deep sleep—and a fourth state, *Turiya*, which is the egoless state.⁶

Turiya is pure, undifferentiated, self-luminous consciousness.⁷ In this state, the "ego" is absent, but the "Self" (*Ātman*) persists as an "unrelated, attributeless, self-luminous, omnipresent entity" that is distinct from the changing, embodied personality.⁷

This metaphysical framework stands in direct contrast to Zen Buddhism. While Zen's doctrine of *Anatta* denies the existence of a permanent, unchanging self², Advaita's doctrine of

Ātman affirms an eternal, unchanging Self.⁷ The paradox is that both traditions point to a state beyond the ego, yet they do so from opposing ontological premises. Advaita's approach highlights the power of knowledge and intellectual conviction as a means of liberation, positing that suffering is rooted in a fundamental conceptual error about one's identity.

5. Christian Mysticism: The Unitive State of Grace

The Mystical Journey

Christian mysticism is a tradition focused on the direct, transformative presence of God.⁸ The journey is classically mapped in three stages:

Katharsis (purification), *Theoria* (illumination), and *Union* (*Theosis*) with God.⁸ The primary practice, or "verb," for this journey is contemplative prayer, described as a "wordless, trusting opening of self to the divine presence".⁹ This is a movement from a "conversation" with God to a "communion" with the divine, a state of being rather than an act of doing.⁹ Techniques such as Centering Prayer, which involves the use of a sacred word to let go of distracting thoughts, serve to clear the mind and descend with the mind "into the heart" where one encounters a presence that is the "True Self of your self".⁹

The Unitive State: Union, Not Identity

A crucial distinction in the Christian tradition is its understanding of the unitive state as relational rather than monistic. While Eastern traditions may express non-duality as "I am that," Christian

mysticism describes it as a "mystical marriage" or a state of "union" where "two become one," but not an identity where the self becomes God.¹¹ In this state, the former sense of self dissolves, and a capacity to live a "flowing, unboundaried life" arises as the person becomes "one with God".¹¹ The *Cloud of Unknowing*, a 14th-century work, describes this as a "transcendent 'seeing,' beyond the usual activities of the mind" ¹⁰, a form of *apophatic* theology that knows God by asserting what He is not.⁸

This tradition demonstrates that the egoless state can be framed not only as a philosophical truth or a psychological liberation but as a loving, relational experience. The unitive state is a profound experience of love and communion that re-orient's being toward God and others.⁸ The method of clearing the mind through contemplative practice is remarkably similar to that found in Eastern traditions, but the ultimate metaphysical goal—a profound communion with a transcendent, loving presence—provides a distinct and equally valid path to self-transcendence.

6. Radical Dzogchen: Cutting Through to Rigpa

Defining the Path

Dzogchen, or the "Great Perfection," is considered the apex of Tibetan Buddhism, a path to absolute liberation from conceptual fetters.¹² The core of this tradition is *Rigpa*, or "gnosis," which is described as the innate awareness or "pristine nondual brilliance" that is the fundamental nature of the mind.¹³ The path is considered "radical" because it posits that this state of natural perfection is already present, and therefore, "nothing can be done to facilitate its advent".¹³

The Paradox of Practice: Non-Meditation

The primary method in Dzogchen is *Trekchö* (Cutting Through), which is a spontaneous function of the mind.¹³ The instruction is to "let go and be happy in the natural state," engaging in "nonmeditation" and doing nothing.¹³ This presents a powerful paradox: a purposeful act is required to cease all purposeful acts. The "verb" here is the cultivation of a state of mind that allows for the spontaneous recognition and rest in *Rigpa*.¹⁵ It is the letting go of all mental constructs that allows for the direct recognition of the egoless nature that has been present all along.¹³

The Phenomenology of Dissolution

This practice leads to a state "utterly devoid of both meditator and something meditated upon".¹⁵ The intellect is rendered redundant in the face of the immediate insight into the "flow of experience as compassionate emptiness and light".¹³ The Dzogchen view emphasizes the "absence" of all concrete

reality, stating that phenomena are "empty forms" and "intangible images of light".¹³ The dualistic, egoic mind is what proliferates ideas and creates a universe of "specific things," and liberation lies in seeing this process for what it is.¹³ The tradition promises an "immediate dissolution of samsaric dichotomy" for those who receive the transmission.¹³ Dzogchen provides a radical perspective on the egoless state, not as something to be achieved, but as something to be recognized. It serves as a potent antidote to "spiritual materialism," the tendency to treat spiritual practice as a means to acquire a new, better self.¹⁶

7. Comparative Analysis: Mapping the Terrain of Self-Dissolution

The comparative analysis reveals that while the metaphysical frameworks and terminology for the egoless state vary widely, the phenomenology and the process of dissolution are strikingly similar. The journey from the "verb" of practice to the "noun" of being is a universal theme.

The Spectrum of Identity

A central point of comparison is the nature of the "self" that dissolves and the ultimate reality that is revealed.

- **Buddhism** posits that the self is a cognitive fiction (*Anatta*), and reality is "empty" of inherent existence (*Śūnyatā*).
- **Advaita Vedanta** asserts that the self is an illusion caused by misidentification (*maya*), and reality is the permanent, non-dual *Atman/Brahman*.
- **Sufism and Christian Mysticism** frame the self as an obstacle (*nafs* or the "lower self"), and reality is a transcendent, personal God.
- **Dzogchen** sees the self as a "vestige of self-consciousness" and reality as the innate, pristine awareness (*Rigpa*).

Union vs. Identity: The Great Divide

The distinction between a relational "union" and a monistic "identity" is a key divergence between Western and Eastern traditions. Christian mysticism explicitly defines its unitive state as a "mystical marriage" where two become one but do not become identical.¹¹ This contrasts with the monistic interpretations in Advaita Vedanta and some forms of Sufism, where the individual self is seen as merging with or realizing its fundamental identity with the ultimate reality.⁴

The Role of Practice: Effortful vs. Effortless Paths

The report's analysis reveals a paradox regarding the role of effort. While some paths, like Zen's *Zazen* or Christian contemplative prayer, involve volitional techniques to quiet the mind, others like Radical Dzogchen advocate for "nonmeditation" and "doing nothing".¹³ However, even the most effortless path requires a preliminary effort to "turn aside from the activities and concerns of this life" to cultivate the right disposition.¹⁵ The apparent paradox resolves into a single principle: the "verb" is the cultivation of a state of mind that allows for the spontaneous recognition and rest in the "noun" of being.

The following table provides a comprehensive comparative framework of the concepts discussed in this report:

Tradition	Term for Egoless State	Nature of the "Self" that Dissolves	Nature of Ultimate Reality	Primary Mechanism of Dissolution	Phenomenology	Verb (Practice)	Noun (State)
Zen Buddhism	Anatta/ Śūnyatā	Cognitive fiction	Empty of inherent existence	Seeing through the illusion of self	Absence of observer/observed	Zazen/ breathing	Anatta
Sufism	Fana/Baqa	Ego (nafs)	God (Tawhid)	Annihilation of ego's attributes	Unity with the Divine	Dhikr/ meditation	Fana
Advaita Vedanta	Moksha/ Atman-Brahman	Illusory (maya)	Brahman (True Self)	Knowledge/Disidentification	Realization of oneness	Self-inquiry	Atman-Brahman
Christian Mysticism	Unitive State	Lower self	God	Surrender in love	Relational communion	Contemplative prayer	The Unitive State
Dzogchen	Rigpa	Vestige of self-consciousness	Gnosis (Rigpa)	Cutting through conceptual fetters	Pristine awareness	Non-meditation	Rigpa

8. The Modern Lens: Psychology and Neuroscience

The Phenomenology of Ego Death

The dissolution of the self, a central topic in mystical traditions, has a direct corollary in modern psychology and neuroscience under the term "ego death" or "ego dissolution".¹⁸ This is defined as a "complete loss of subjective self-identity".¹⁸ It has been extensively studied in the context of psychedelic experiences and is described as a "temporary experience of complete loss of subjective self-identity" in which a "complete transcendence" of the self occurs, leaving only "pure awareness

and ecstatic freedom".¹⁸ This modern term for a subjective experience provides a direct, phenomenal link to the mystical concepts explored in this report.

Neuroscientific Correlates

Neuroscientific research provides a compelling explanation for this phenomenon by positing that the self is not a physical entity but a "self-model," a "useful Cartesian fiction" created by the brain.¹⁹ The brain functions as a predictive hierarchy, and it infers the existence of a stable and enduring self to bind and integrate various cognitive and sensory inputs into a coherent whole.¹⁹ The experience of ego dissolution, therefore, is not the destruction of a real entity but the "unbinding" of this predictive self-model.¹⁹ Studies suggest that psychedelics and meditation practices target the neural mechanisms responsible for this "self-binding," thereby leading to the experience of a subject no longer anchored by the usual self-models.¹⁹

The S-ART model, which describes spiritual development through the stages of Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, and Self-Transcendence, provides a modern psychological framework that maps this journey.²⁰ This model illustrates how practices that develop self-awareness and self-regulation lead to a state of self-transcendence, which is characterized by the dissolution of self-focused needs and an increase in prosocial characteristics.²⁰ The convergence of these fields suggests that the egoless state is not merely a philosophical or spiritual belief but a tangible, reproducible psycho-neurological phenomenon.

9. Conclusion: The Egoless Self in the Modern World

The central inquiry of this report—the transition from the "verb" of practice to the "noun" of being—reveals a core insight shared across diverse spiritual traditions and supported by modern scientific inquiry. While the metaphysical maps may differ—whether the ultimate reality is an empty nature, a permanent Self, a relational God, or innate awareness—the territory of the egoless experience is remarkably consistent. The journey, regardless of the path, involves the dissolution of the ego-self, which is seen as the primary source of suffering.

The "noun-ification" of mindfulness signifies that the once-separate "I" that was doing the practice has dissolved, leaving only the practice itself as a spontaneous, unconditioned flow of being. This state is not an escape from life, but a more profound way of engaging with it, free from the self-centered narratives and dualistic thinking that lead to suffering.²¹ The dissolution of the ego leads to a greater sense of interconnectedness, compassion, and spontaneity, allowing a person to respond effectively to the present moment without being preoccupied with a story about who they are.³ The ultimate insight, shared across all traditions and validated by contemporary science, is that the self is a "useful fiction," and true freedom lies in transcending it.

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