

Article

Did Socrates Meditate? On Some Traces of Contemplative Practices in Early Greco-Latin Philosophy

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Abstract: Following insights by Pierre Hadot, I suggest that although explicit discussions of practices of breath control and other psychosomatic techniques of contemplative attention management are conspicuously absent in early Greek thought, there are some signs that analogous practices did exist, perhaps as early as Socrates. The combined evidence of Aristophanes and Plato suggests that Socrates may have engaged in a practice that has key features in common with meditative practices and experiences as attested in Zen Buddhism. This technique consists in two stages: an initial practice of top-down, voluntary, egocentric focused meditation resulting in a state of “absorption” or abstraction from all sensory input, followed by the practice of a more bottom-up, open, other-centered (allocentric) form of meditation, intended to provide a more global or universal perspective, in which the practitioner situates herself as a part of the cosmos. This paper includes discussion of “withdrawal” into oneself as a contemplative practice in Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Evagrius Ponticus, and Gregory Palamas.

Keywords: meditation; neurophysiology; contemplative studies; Plato; Socrates



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*Etenim quomodo utique adjaciet indicibilissimo
omnium aliter quam soporans quæ in ipsa garrulamina?*

For how else could it [the soul] approach the most
ineffable of all things than by putting to sleep the chatter in it?

(Proclus, *On Providence and Fate*, 31, 14, in [Steel 2007](#), p. 56, translation Steel slightly modified)

In one of his earliest papers, given in 1953, Pierre Hadot wrote of the lasting influence of the Stoic idea of tonic motion (*tonikê kinêsis*), a “vibrational movement proceeding from the internal to the external, and from the external to the internal” ([Hadot 2019](#), pp. 45–52). For Hadot, this conceptual scheme “beyond the Stoics, goes back to more primitive intuitions concerning vital rhythm, and particularly respiration” ([Hadot 2019](#), pp. 45–46). Hadot saw this conceptual scheme, involving a stage of inward-directed motion followed by one of outward-directed expansion, as constitutive of many aspects of Greco-Roman thought. When, more than twenty years later ([Hadot 1993, 1995](#)), Hadot first set forth his analysis of ancient philosophy as consisting in spiritual exercises (SEs), he divided these exercises, in accordance with this distinction between internally and externally directed orientations, into what Christoph Horn has analyzed as SEs intended for concentration or self-development, and those intended for “self-renunciation” ([Horn 1998](#), p. 39). For Horn, SEs intended for concentration may be seen as corresponding to Hadot’s movement of contraction from the external to the internal, while what Horn calls SEs of self-renunciation, but I would prefer to call SEs of self-transcendence, would correspond to the reverse process, or movement of expansion from the internal to the external¹.

In what follows, I will develop this and other insights by Hadot, in order to suggest that while it is true that explicit discussions of practices of breath control and other techniques of contemplative attention management are conspicuously absent in early Greek thought,

there are some signs that analogous practices did exist, perhaps as early as Socrates. To set the stage for this discussion, however, I will begin with some considerations derived from the findings of modern cognitive science and neurophysiology.

1. Prelude: The Neurophysiology of Focused and Open Meditation

Experimental cognitive scientists have identified two main pathways of our visual and auditory attentional networks (Austin 2009, p. 29f. and Table 4; 2011, p. 42f.). The starting point of both pathways is in the occipital lobe at the back of the brain; yet from here they diverge. The dorsal pathway begins by transmitting information to the upper portions of the parietal cortex, along what has been called the “where? pathway”, which serves to identify the position of objects in space in relation to us, and in this sense, it can be called egocentric or self-referential. It is activated by voluntary, intentional efforts on the part of the subject, and can therefore be considered “top-down” (compare Harter 2018, pp. 155–56). The ventral pathway, in contrast, runs from the lower occipital region along the temporal lobe, and thence to the lower frontal lobe. It follows the so-called “what? pathway”, the attentional stream that is concerned with answering questions concerning objects independently of their relation to us, and can, therefore, be designated as other-oriented or allocentric. It responds automatically and pre-consciously to external stimuli.

It is interesting to compare the itineraries of the dorsal/parietal and ventral/temporal attentional streams with what is known as the brain’s “default mode network” (DMN): those regions of the brain that always remain metabolically active, even when we’re at rest, and which neurologists often identify as the seat of our usual awareness of our self (Davey et al. 2016)². The dorsal/parietal attention network—egocentric or self-referential—runs right through one of the two main regions of the DMN³. The ventral/temporal attentional stream, in contrast, runs south of these centers and largely avoids them (Austin 2009, p. 61).

On the basis of such experimental findings, some neurologists who are also practicing meditators, such as James Austin, have proposed that by gradually quieting the chattering, word-oriented, self-centered dorsal/parietal attention network and activating the pre-linguistic, bottom-up, allocentric ventral/temporal attention stream, we may facilitate access to a peak experience that is deeper and more transformative than the mere “internal absorptions” that can be triggered by focused attention alone. In Austin’s words, such an experience “combines the total absence of the old psychic Self with (...) the stunning realization of coidentity with the world”⁴ (Austin 2016, chp. 2, n. 10).

Correspondingly, contemplative studies scholars have distinguished two quite different styles of meditation: on the one hand, focused or concentrative; and, on the other, open or receptive (Austin 1998, pp. 75–76; 2006, p. 29ff.; 2009, p. 3ff.; 2016, p. 13, Table 1.1), sometimes designated in recent literature as “convergent” and “divergent” respectively⁵ (Austin 2016, p. 14). In the former, one begins by focusing one’s attention on a single external location, if meditating with one’s eyes open, or, if one’s eyes are closed, on the breath and the rhythmic motions of the abdomen that accompany it. The main goal of this focused, concentrated, top-down, egocentric attention is to quiet the incessant chatter of thoughts—Proclus’ *garrulamina*—which usually fill our minds and distract us from whatever else we are doing. In some Buddhist traditions, however, this stage, which can lead to a brief state of “internal absorption” (Austin 1998, pp. 467–518)⁶ or state of more or less complete lack of awareness of one’s surroundings, is only a preliminary. The second stage can be interpreted as the reverse of the first: it is a state or process of open receptivity. Here, instead of narrowing our attention, we expand it to take in the sights, sounds, and all other sensory perceptions that reach us from the outside world. Open and inclusive, this mode is characterized by bottom-up processing and allocentric or other-related attitudes, and activates the ventral attention stream instead of the dorsal one. Years of balanced training in both meditative techniques, can, according to Zen adepts, lead to a diminution of the dominance of the egocentric system, and a reawakening of systems of allocentric processing: in other words, a shift from thinking primarily about oneself to thinking about others. This, in turn may facilitate the experience designated by the Japanese word *kenshō*

見性: literally “seeing the nature (of reality)”, a fleeting experience of insight into the world as it really is objectively, sometimes referred to in the literature as an experience of the world as “just this”, “thusness”, or “suchness” (Austin 2014, p. 21)⁷.

It may seem far-fetched to suggest that something akin to these two approaches of focused and open meditation may be attested as far back as Greco-Roman Antiquity, and perhaps even in the historical Socrates. Yet I want to propose here that this, in fact, may be the case.

2. Socrates in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo*

As Pierre Hadot has pointed out (Hadot 1993, p. 32), Socrates seems to have been “capable of extraordinary mental concentration”. At the beginning of Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates is on his way, together with Aristodemus, to a banquet at Agathon’s house, when he starts to lag behind, because he “somehow directed the attention of his intellect to himself”⁸. At the end of the dialogue, Alcibiades tells how once, when on military campaign at Potidaia, Socrates stood lost in thought. To the amazement of his fellow soldiers, he remained transfixed on the spot all night, thinking about something (*phrontizōn ti*, *Symposium* 220a), and stayed that way until dawn of the following day. The Latin author Aulus Gellius (c. 125–180 CE) describes the incident as follows (Aulus Gellius 1927, book 2, chp. 1):

Socrates habitually practiced this: he would stand, so the story goes, in one fixed position, all day and all night, from early dawn until the next sunrise, open-eyed, motionless, in his very tracks and with face and eyes riveted to the same spot in deep meditation (*cogitabundus*), as if his mind and soul had been, as it were, withdrawn from his body⁹.

What is going on in such episodes, in which Socrates could be said to “have his mind elsewhere”? Some scholars have supposed that Socrates, like several other early Greek thinkers, was engaging in a technique of meditation that involved controlling the breath (Hadot 2002, p. 180ff.)¹⁰. We cannot know for sure, of course, but it could well be that Socrates was engaging in a mental practice in which, as James Austin writes, “our attention turns internally and shifts into Self-referential (egocentric) tasks” (Austin 2009, p. 99), a state that may be best characterized as a state of “internal absorption”¹¹:

Internal absorption is a relatively early state [along the Path of Zen], a further surge in amplification into hyperawareness. Simultaneously, it deletes vision, hearing, and the sense of one’s physical self-image. These sensate losses seem referable to an inhibitory blockade down at the level of the ventral thalamus, mediated by the back of the thalamic reticular nucleus. (Austin 2009, p. 387)

On this interpretation, then, in the episodes Plato relates, Socrates may have been engaged in a form of focused meditation, characterized by top-down, voluntary concentration of the attention that activates the dorsal attention stream. This type of meditation is particularly apt to lead to episodes of absorption; but it is not the only kind of meditation which Socrates may have practiced. As we shall see, it may have been merely a preliminary stage towards another, more open, less voluntary, bottom-up form of meditation that activates the ventral attentional stream.

Equally influential for the Western philosophical tradition was Plato’s depiction of Socrates in the *Phaedo*. I won’t go into the question of the extent to which Plato’s portrayal of Socrates corresponds to the historical Socrates: scholars have spent entire careers on this question and have not yet, to my knowledge, reached a definitive conclusion. In any case, in the *Phaedo* Plato portrays the Socrates as an Orphico-Pythagorean ascetic. Just before the famous passage in which he defines philosophy as a training for or exercise of death (*meletē thanatou*), Socrates speaks as follows:

Doesn’t purification (*katharsis*) then, as the ancient account would have it¹², turn out to be the separation of the soul as far as possible away from the body, accustoming it to gathering itself (*sunageiresthai*) and collecting itself (*athroizesthai*)

by itself, withdrawn from all parts of the body¹³ and living as far as possible both in the present circumstances and in the future alone by itself, released, as it were, from the chains of the body?". (Plato (2017), *Phaedo* 67cff., translation Jones-Predy modified)

This text is rather enigmatic. In it, Socrates tells us that this separation of the soul from the body¹⁴ is to be accomplished by accustoming the soul to "gather itself up (*sunageiresthai*) and collect itself (*athroizesthai*) by itself". Oddly, classical philologists and historians of philosophy have typically paid little heed to this strange terminology. It was left to historians of Greek religion and medicine to call attention to it, especially the late Marcel Detienne (Detienne 1963), who devoted an insightful discussion to the passage.¹⁵ Detienne was surely right to observe that this terminology, especially the verbs *sunageiresthai* and *athroizesthai*, which also occur elsewhere in the *Phaedo*,¹⁶ "clearly indicates a vocabulary which we may call technical, and there is no doubt that the *Phaedo* here echoes a very ancient religious vocabulary". In 6th century CE Alexandria, the Neoplatonist Olympiodorus explains Plato's terminology with reference to the Orphic myth of the tearing apart (*sparagmos*) of the infant Dionysos by the Titans:

What is the meaning of this pleonasm? Surely the words are not linked together for nothing (...) 'to gather itself together' (*sunageiresthai*) means to turn away from corporeal life, and 'to collect itself' (*athroizesthai*) means to turn away from the faculty of opinion. Is it not obvious, moreover, that Plato is giving a parody of the Orphic myths, which tell how Dionysus is torn to pieces by the Titans and is made whole by Apollo, so 'collecting and gathering itself together' means passing from the Titanic life to the unitary life? (...) Plato, indeed, gives parodies of Orpheus everywhere. (Olympiodorus 1976, pp. 113–15, translation Westerink, modified)

Olympiodorus thus identifies two components in Plato's definition of purification: *epistrephesthai* denotes withdrawing from corporeal life, while *athroizesthai* designates the act of turning away from the faculty of opinion¹⁷.

When Socrates advises his interlocutors to habituate the soul to "gather itself (*sunageiresthai*) and collect itself (*athroizesthai*) by itself from all parts of the body", then, I want to suggest this represents an instance of concentrative meditation, which may or may not have involved exercises of controlling the breath. At any rate, it certainly seems to consist in a voluntary, top-down process of focusing and narrowing down the attention, which, as we have seen, can lead to a state of absorption in which input from the senses is diminished or all but eliminated.

3. The Doctrine of Innate Ideas

Marcel Detienne also had the merit of pointing to a text which has not often been seen as what it is: a commentary on, or at least development of, our *Phaedo* passage and its parallels. It comes from the *Letter to Marcella* by Porphyry, which takes the form of a letter the Neoplatonist philosopher wrote in the late 3rd century to his wife Marcella, an indigent widow with several children whom he had married in his old age. The letter was intended to console Marcella for the fact that unspecified patriotic duties had forced Porphyry to leave her behind after only a few months of marriage. Porphyry writes as follows:

(...) you could best encounter me in a pure way, present and with you day and night, in the most pure and beautiful of unions, without it being possible for me to be separated from you, if you practice rising up to yourself (*eis seautên anabainen*), collecting (*sullegousa*) from your body all your dispersed (*diaskedasthenta*) limbs, which have been cut up (*katakermisthenta*) into multiplicity, from the state of union that had, until then, prevailed in the greatness of its power. You could gather together (*sunagein*) and unite (*henizein*) your innate ideas, trying to articulate them (*diarthroun*) in their confusion, and bring them to light, now that they have been plunged in darkness. It was starting out from these [innate ideas] that the divine

Plato carried out his recalling from sensible things to the intelligibles. Moreover, if you remember them, you could articulate them (*diarthroîês*). (Porphyry 1969, c. 10)

Here, as in later passages from Olympiodorus and Damascius, the Orphic myth of Dionysius and Apollo seems to be lurking in the background¹⁸. Porphyry advises Marcella to exercise or train herself (*meletan*)¹⁹ to

(i) rise back up to herself (*eis seautên anabainen*); and (ii) gather together from the body (*apo tou sômatos sullegein*) her scattered (*diaskedasthenta*) [interior] limbs, which have been dispersed (*katakermisthenta*) from the state of unity that once was theirs. It looks, then, that there at least a strong analogy between Plato's advice to habituate the soul to "gather itself (*sunageiresthai*) and collect itself (*athroizesthai*) by itself, withdrawn from all parts of the body" and Porphyry's advice to "gather together (*sunagein*) and unite (*henizein*) your innate ideas." Yet Porphyry also goes further than Plato, and tells Marcella how she is to accomplish this process of almost literal *re-collection*: by working on her innate ideas (*emphutous ennoias*). This work in turn consists of a three-part operation:

(iia) these ideas are to be gathered together (*sunagein*) and united (*henizein*); then,

(iib) from the state of confusion (*sunkekhumenas*) in which they are currently, they are to be articulated (*diarthroun*), and then

(iic) from their current state of darkness, they are to be brought to light. Here, Porphyry reminds Marcella that this technique of reactivating the innate ideas was precisely the one Plato used to call us back from the sensible to the intelligible world (cf. Hadot 1995, pp. 84–85; 112, n. 33; 113 n. 44). Finally,

(iii) Marcella is to solidify and preserve the precepts she has learned by putting them into action.

With Porphyry's passage from the *Ad Marcellam*, let's compare a passage from Augustine, who has often been suspected of tacitly using Porphyrian doctrines (*Confessions* 10.XI.18):

Therefore, with regard to those things whose images we do not draw in through the senses, but see them within, without images, as they really are and in themselves, we find that learning (*discere*) them is nothing other than this: those things which memory contained scattered and without order, by thinking them (*cogitando*), we, as it were, gather them together (*colligere*), and, by directing our attention to them (*animadvertendo*), we see to it that, whereas they previously lay hidden, dispersed and neglected, they are now made readily available (*ad manum posita*), and easily come forward by the familiar kind of effort (*familiari intentione*). (Augustine 1969, vol. 2, p. 253)

For Augustine in the *Confessions*, the Latin verb for thinking (*cogitare*) derives from the "gathering together" (*colligere*) of memories: "so that what is gathered together (*colligitur*), that is, is forced (*cogitur*), is properly called 'to cogitate'" (Augustine 1969, vol. 2, p. 253). Augustine's discussion of innate ideas here is remarkably like that of Porphyry in several respects. In both cases, we have to do with notions that we do not obtain through the senses, and which, therefore, do not consist in, and are not accompanied by, images transmitted by the faculty of representation or imagination (Greek *phantasia*). The process of learning accordingly consists in "gathering together" (Porphyry: *sunagein* or *henizein*; Augustine: *colligere*) these notions which are already stored in our memory, but are in a state of dispersal and disorder (Porphyry: *sunkekhumenas*; Augustine: *passim atque indisposite*). For Augustine, by thinking about (*cogitando*) and directing our attention (*animadvertendo*) to these confused ideas, which previously lay hidden (*latitabant*), dispersed (*sparsa*), and neglected (*neglecta*) in the memory, we are to take care (*curare*) that they are henceforth "at hand" (*ad manum posita*). The end goal of this process is that our innate ideas, initially confused, scattered, and hidden, have now been brought to light, and have been set in order or articulated (Porphyry: *diarthroun*) within the memory, so that they will henceforth be easily accessible to habitual acts of voluntary attention (Augustine: *familiari intentioni*).

There is much more to say on this topic of innate ideas and their crucial importance in Neoplatonism²⁰, but for now, let us merely note the similarities between the passages we have studied from Plato's *Phaedo*, Porphyry's *Letter to Marcella* and Augustine's *Confessions*: Plato speaks in terms of *sunageiresthai* and *athroizesthai*; Porphyry uses the verbs *sullegein* and *henizein*; and Augustine uses expressions like *colligere* and *animaduertere*. Our three authors do not use identical terminology. Nevertheless, they are close enough to allow us to suggest the Porphyry probably had the *Phaedo* passage in mind when he came to elaborate his doctrine of innate ideas, and that Augustine was thinking of Porphyry's doctrine when he came to discuss closely related themes in his *Confessions*.

4. Aristophanes' Testimony on Socrates

It is well known that in his *Clouds* (Aristophanes 1998), Aristophanes satirizes Socrates and the advice he supposedly dispensed in his school, which the comic poet derisively refers to as Socrates' "think-tank" (*phrontistêrion*). In another passage discussed by Pierre Hadot (1993, p. 32f.), Socrates is advising Strepsiades on how to come up with a method to avoid paying his debts. The account is, of course, intended to ridicule Socrates, portraying him as both an unscrupulous Sophist and an impractical, head-in-the clouds intellectual. Yet in order for Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates to be perceived as funny, the audience must have been able to recognize a kernel of truth, or at least plausibility, in the depiction. Some of Socrates' advice seems to be quite consistent with methods we later find described and recommended in the Platonic dialogues. For instance, Strepsiades is advised to "correctly divide and examine" (διαίρων καὶ σκοπῶν) the question at hand (Aristophanes 1998, verse 742). To be sure, Kenneth Dover, the most influential modern commentator on the *Clouds*, states peremptorily that this advice "has no bearing on the *diairesis* which is introduced by Plato" (Dover 1968, p. xliii), but he does not adduce any arguments or evidence to justify this pronouncement. However, if we approach the matter from a philological perspective, we find a close parallel to the advice given to Strepsiades in Plato's dialogue *The Statesman* (285A)²¹:

For in a certain way all things which are in the province of art do partake of measurement; but because people are not in the habit of considering things by dividing them into classes (σκοπεῖν διαιρουμένων), they hastily put these widely different relations into the same category, thinking they are alike; and again, they do the opposite of this when they fail to divide other things into parts. (Plato 1925, translation Lamb modified; cf. Oberhammer 2016, pp. 224–25)

Plato recommends a similar method in the *Cratylus* 425a,b:

Our job—if indeed we are to examine all these things with scientific knowledge—is to divide (σκοπεῖσθαι αὐτὰ πάντα, οὕτω διελομένων) where they put together, so as to see whether or not both the primary and derivative names are given in accord with nature. (translation C. D. Reeve in Plato 1997)

Likewise, in the *Laws* (658A), the Athenian Stranger says:

Ah, my fine fellow, such a conclusion 'may be' rash! We must make some distinctions, and examine the question (διαιροῦντες αὐτὸ κατὰ μέρη σκοπώμεθα) rather like this. (translation T. Saunders in Plato 1997)

Thus, the advice Aristophanes attributes to Socrates that Strepsiades "correctly divide and examine (διαίρων καὶ σκοπῶν) the question at hand" bears a remarkable resemblance to the actual method of division (*diairesis*) which Plato recommends and attributes to Socrates.

Another piece of advice given to Strepsiades in the *Clouds* is that, if he comes to a dead end, he should stop, return to his starting point, and approach the issue from another angle (Aristophanes 1998, verse 703f.; 743f.):

whenever you hit a dead end, quickly jump to another line of thought (...) if you hit a dead end with one of your ideas, toss it aside and abandon it, then later try putting it in play again with your mind and weigh it up.

Here, Dover concedes that this method “is Socratic”; yet he goes on to declare that it also so banal as to be “characteristic of any active intellect” (1968, p. xlv). Yet several modern scholars have viewed this method as being characteristic of the Platonic dialogues²². The ancient scholiasts on *Clouds* 703, at any rate, had no doubt that Aristophanes was alluding here to Socrates’ method. Thus, for instance, the scholiast in Ms. E (Estensis α. U.5–10, 14th cent.), explains:

Here he attacks Socrates because this is what he did in his investigations. (*Scholia to Aristophanes* 1977, p. 197)

Thus, we see that the testimony of Aristophanes probably does give us reason to believe that at least some doctrines and methods familiar from the later Platonic dialogues were already believed to be typical of Socrates’ teachings during Socrates’ lifetime. Most interesting for our purposes, however, is the fact that Strepsiades is given two additional pieces of advice, in this order: First, Strepsiades is to

... think and contemplate, twirl yourself every way and concentrate (φρόντιζε δὴ καὶ διάθρει πάντα τρόπον τε σαυτὸν στρόβει πυκνώσας). (*Aristophanes* 1998, verse 700, translation Henderson)

Once again, Aristophanes’ language is obscure here, and was hard to decipher even for later Greeks. Yet the ancient scholiasts largely agreed that the word *puknōsas* (aorist participle of the verb *puknōn*, “to make solid, contract, condense” (*Liddell et al.* 1996), which Henderson renders by “concentrate”, was a technical term. They provided several synonyms to elucidate it, including the Greek verbs *sphingein* (“to bind, tighten up”), and *katapuknōn* (“to condense”). In this regard, a scholium attributed to Thomas Magister and to Triclinius (both ca. 1300 CE) is particularly interesting:

“Having condensed (*puknōsas*): that is, having gathered together (*sunagein*) your entire intellect” (πυκνώσας] ἤγουν συναγαγὼν πάντα τὸν νοῦν σου. (*Koster* 1974)

A bit later in the play, Strepsiades is given new piece of advice:

Now don’t keep winding yourself up in your thoughts; rather, unreel your mind into the air, like a beetle leashed by its leg with a thread (μὴ νυν περι σαυτὸν εἶλλε τὴν γνώμην ἀεὶ, / ἄλλ’ ἀποχάλα τὴν φροντίδ’ εἰς τὸν ἀέρα / λινόδετον ὥσπερ μηλολόνην τοῦ ποδός). (*Aristophanes* 1998, verses 761–63, translation Henderson)

Once again, Aristophanes’ vocabulary is terse and obscure enough to allow a variety of interpretations. Verse 761 centers around the verbal form εἶλλε, second person singular imperative of the verb εἶλω, a verb which has many forms and meanings, although the imperative form εἶλλε occurs only here in all of Greek literature. The verb’s meanings include “to enclose”, “to press, to concentrate”, “to collect” or “to wind round”, among others. The ancient scholiasts (*Tzetzes* 1960) suggest as synonyms the verbs στρέφε (“turn, twist”), σύγκλειε (“enclose, shut in”), σύσφιγγε (“bind close together”, “hold in”), while the Suda proposes ἀπόκλειε (“shut up, confine”), or ἔφελκε (“attract to oneself, draw or pull in, draw a breath”). *Liddell et al.* (1996), for their part, admit that of the texts in which forms of the verb εἶλω occur, “some passages are doubtful in meaning”, and they eventually propose, reasonably enough, that the Aristophanes passage means “do not roll or wrap your thought round you, or do not confine your thought within you.” The first half of the advice to Strepsiades thus seems to amount to “stop thinking about yourself;” “stop confining your thought to yourself.” In terms of modern contemplative neuroscience, we could perhaps paraphrase the meaning here as “stop practicing a concentrated, self-centered mode of thought.”

The second verse of our passage from the *Clouds* is equally enigmatic. The rare verb *apokhalaō* which occurs in it is translated by Liddell et al. (1996) as “to slack away”, the meaning of which is not much clearer than that of the original Greek. The *Diccionario Griego-Español* (n.d.) gives the more illuminating translations “soltar, dejar libre, relajar.” Once again, the ancient scholiasts propose several helpful synonyms: *endidou/endide* (“give in, allow, grant”), *epaphie* (let go), *aphiei/aphes* (“let go, let loose, release”), and *apolue* (“loose, set free, release”). Particularly interesting is the explanation of one late scholiast, who paraphrases Aristophanes’ advice as follows:

Unreel . . . air: that is, *dissolve yourself* (εἰς διάλυσιν δίδου σαυτόν). (Koster 1974, to verse 762β)

Aristophanes’ image is burlesque, of course, and intended to make fun of Socrates and the methods he supposedly taught in what Aristophanes calls his “think-tank” (*phrontistêrion*). Nevertheless, is it too far-fetched to perceive here an echo of the open, receptive approach to meditation? After an initial stage in which Strepsiades’ thought or attention has been concentrated on a specific inner object—in this case, apparently, the meditator’s own thoughts, awareness, or “self” (“winding yourself up in your thoughts”)—, he is now encouraged to relax this focused concentration and allow his thought to “soar into the air” (ἀποχάλα τὴν φροντίδ’ εἰς τὸν ἄέρα).

5. Εἰς ἑαυτὸν συνειλοῦ: From Aristophanes to Marcus Aurelius

What about the posterity of these ideas? Do any later Greek or Roman thinkers echo what I have proposed may have been Socratic practices of a kind of two-stage meditation?

In early Greek monastic literature, the verb *anakhôrein* and the verbal noun *anakhôrêsis* (Guillaumont 1991) came to mean respectively “to withdraw from the world in order to lead a religious life” and “withdrawal from the world, solitude, as aid to the spiritual life” (Lampe 1961), i.e., to become a monk or a hermit. Thus, a person who carries out *anakhôrêsis* is an *anakhôrêtês*, i.e., an anchorite or a hermit. In early Patristic literature, Evagrius of Pontus (345–399 CE) uses the term *hoi anakhôrountes* to mean “monks”, while he defines *anakhôrêsis* as “training for death and the flight from the body” (Ponticus 1971, Section 62)²³:

Separating body from soul belongs solely to the one who joined them together; but separating soul from body belongs also to one who longs for virtue. Our fathers call *anakhôrêsis* a training for death (*meletê thanatou*) and a flight from the body.

Basil of Caesarea (330–379), for his part, defines *anakhôrêsis* as follows (Basil of Caesarea 1957–1966, Epistle 2.2):

anakhôrêsis from the world does not mean coming to be outside of it in a bodily sense, but breaking off the soul from its sympathy with the body.

Both these definitions by two of the founding 4th-century fathers of the Eastern monastic movement are, of course, inspired by Plato’s *Phaedo*, either directly or through the intermediary of Plato’s Neoplatonic commentators, such as Porphyry.

The verb *anakhôreō* is ancient, often occurring in Homer, where it means “to go back, return, withdraw, retire” (Cunliffe 1963). The noun *anakhôrêsis* first occurs in Thucydides, with the meaning of a military “retreat”. We find it once on Plato, who, in the *Philebus* (32b), defines pleasure as the “passage and return of all things to their own nature.” However, the most influential Platonic use of the verb *anakhôreō* is no doubt the following, from the *Phaedo* (Plato 2017, 83a):

It [viz., philosophy] persuades it [viz., the soul] to retreat (*anakhôrein*) from these senses except where it is necessary to use them, and encourages the soul to gather and collect itself together (*autên de eis autên sullegesthai kai athroizesthai*) and trust nothing else but itself in itself, whichever of the realities alone by itself it thinks about alone by itself.

Here, in a passage that recommends the same practice of “gathering together” or “collecting” the soul from the various parts of the body which we have seen earlier in the dialogue, we find Socrates advising the philosopher to make the soul retreat from the senses, i.e., to abstain from using them as far as is possible.

Plato’s use of the term *anakhôrêsis* seems to have had little echo in Hellenistic philosophy, although Seneca does attribute a similar idea to Epicurus (Seneca, *Epist.* 25.6 = Epicurus fr. 209, [Usener 1887](#)):

Epicurus, in another passage, suggests: “The time when you should most of all withdraw into yourself (*in te ipse secede*) is when you are forced to be in a crowd.”

It comes as something of a surprise, then, when, despite this apparent lack of proximate Greek antecedents, we find the term *anakhôrêsis* used to designate a spiritual, inner retreat in the *Meditations* of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE) ([Marcus Aurelius 1944](#), 4.3, translation Farquharson):

People look for retreats (*anakhôrêseis*) for themselves, in the country, by the coast, or in the hills; and you too are especially inclined to feel this desire. But this is altogether un-philosophical, when it is possible for you to retreat into yourself (*eis heauton anakhôrêin*) at any time you want. There is nowhere that a person can find a more peaceful (*hêsukhiôteron*) and trouble-free retreat than in his own soul, especially if he has within himself the kind of thoughts that let him dip into them and so at once gain complete ease of mind; and by ease of mind, I mean nothing but having one’s own mind in good order. So constantly give yourself this retreat (*anakhôrêsis*) and renew yourself.

This text, with its notion of a retreat into the self as a kind of fortress, seems to represent something new in Greco-Roman philosophy and spirituality. In a sense, it marks a turning point between paganism and a certain tendency of inward-directed Christianity. Another similar passage in Marcus runs as follows ([Marcus Aurelius 1944](#), 7.28, translation Farquharson):

Withdraw into yourself (Εἰς ἑαυτὸν συνειλοῦ): the reasonable governing self (*hêgemonikon*) is by its nature content with its own just actions and the tranquility it thus secures.

In his excellent *Commentary on the Meditations*, Farquharson (in [Marcus Aurelius 1944](#), vol. II, p. 733) writes that “the exact meaning of συνειλοῦ is doubtful”, but, after discussing some alternatives, he decides that this word, which, as the second-person middle imperative of the verb συνειλέω, is unattested elsewhere in Greek literature, probably means *sese colligere*, “to collect oneself”; similarly, Dübner translated Marcus’ συνειλοῦ by “Contract yourself within yourself” (*in temet ipsum te contrahere*) ([Marcus Aurelius 1840](#), p. 38). [Liddell et al. \(1996\)](#) suggest the possible meanings of “crowd together, bind together”; adding that the verbal noun συνειλησις, literally “to roll oneself up like a hedgehog”, can mean “synthesis”, in which sense it is opposed to ἀνάπλωσις, “unfolding.” Everything indicates, then, that the *hapax legomenon* συνειλοῦ in Marcus Aurelius means “collect or concentrate yourself into yourself.” Yet we have already seen something akin to this rare verbal form συνειλοῦ, middle imperative form of the verb συνειλέω. Almost 600 years prior to Marcus, Aristophanes had used the imperative form εἶλλε of the verb εἶλω, also a *hapax*, to describe Socrates’ advice to Strepsiades in the *Clouds*. Marcus’ *hapax* συνειλοῦ is, then, roughly equivalent to Aristophanes’ εἶλλε, except that while εἶλλε is transitive and takes a direct object in the accusative, συνειλοῦ is in the middle form and is preceded by the prefix συν-, “with.” In both cases, the context is analogous: we probably have to do with an inner-directed “spiritual exercise” or technique, intended to achieve concentration of one’s thought.

6. Conclusions

This entire discussion has been highly speculative. However, the preceding discussion strongly suggests the following results:

The combined evidence of Aristophanes and Plato suggests that Socrates may have engaged in a practice that has important features in common with meditative practices and experiences attested, for instance, in Zen Buddhism, at least on Austin's account²⁴. As we have seen, it consists in two stages:

Stage 1. the practice of top-down, voluntary, egocentric focused meditation resulting in a state of "absorption" or abstraction from all sensory input.

Stage 2. The practice of a more bottom-up, open, other-centered (allocentric) form of meditation, intended to provide a more global or universal perspective, in which the practitioner situates herself as a part of the cosmos.

The best example of this latter practice, which Pierre Hadot has described as an exercise of imaginative physics, closely linked to what he has called the "View from Above", and intended to achieve a state of "cosmic consciousness", is a passage from Plato's *Republic* (486a) which is—perhaps not coincidentally—quoted by [Marcus Aurelius](#) (1944, 7.35, p. 132, translation Farquharson modified):

"Do you then think it is possible for the thought to which belongs greatness of soul and the contemplation of all of time and all of substance to regard human life as something great?"

"No, that's impossible." he replied.

"Such a person then will not consider death as something terrifying either?"

"No, not at all."

The posterity of these ideas can be traced right down to the end of the Byzantine period. It can be shown, I believe, that the technique of beginning by concentrating oneself upon oneself or "gathering together one's soul from all the parts of the body" in order to achieve, first, self-knowledge, and then a spiritual ascent that can lead as far as identification with the First Principle or God, is present throughout later Neoplatonism ([Chase 2019](#), p. 19ff.) and culminates in Byzantine Hesychasm of the 13th-14th centuries, where, unlike in the Ancient Greek texts that have come down to us, this technique is explicitly combined with the adoption of specific bodily postures and practices of breath control. In a text by Gregory Palamas, for instance, written in 1332, we find echoes of several of the themes we have encountered in Aristophanes, Plato, and Marcus Aurelius. In his life of the Hesychast Peter of Athos, probably Palamas' first work, written c. 1332, he describes ([Palamas 1992](#), *Oratio ascetica* part 2, section 17), how Peter

produced remarkable intensity for his intellect, and rendered his heart a truly divine vessel and another heaven, a dwelling-place more beloved than the heavens, for God, by means of exact attention in accordance with quietude (*kath' hêsukhian*)²⁵. That is, in brief, the intellect's conversion and convergence to itself (*tou nou pros heauton epistrophê kai sunneusis*)²⁶, or rather, amazing as it may sound, the conversion of all the faculties of the soul toward the intellect (*pasôn tôn tês psukhês dunameôn (...), pros ton noun epistrophê*) and activity according to it and according to God.

Here, in this notion of "converting all the faculties of the soul toward the intellect", we seem to have a clear reminiscence of Socrates' advice to "separate the soul as far as possible away from the body, accustoming it to gathering itself (*sunageiresthai*) and collecting itself (*athroizesthai*) by itself, withdrawn from all parts of the body". In his second work written at Mount Athos, the *Discourse on the entry of the Mother of God into the Holy of Holies*, probably written around 1335, Palamas prefaces a brief excursus into Neoplatonic epistemology by the following remarks:

Come, noble friends, those who do not prefer earth, which is easily available, to gold, which is hard to procure, and, each of you gathering together the intellect into itself (*ton noun (...) eis heauton sunagagontes*), as people do with their robes when traversing narrow places, raise it up intently toward the grandeur of thought. ([Palamas 1986](#), Homily 53)

Future work should be directed toward pursuing parallels to these techniques in such Eastern philosophical religions as Buddhism, trying to identify the neurological correlates of the experiences they describe, and, perhaps, studying the possible historical pathways by which techniques originating in Indian Buddhism eventually reached Byzantine Greece and Islam. Yet the main question I have sought to underline is not that of historical priority. I do not intend to argue that the Greeks “invented” meditation. Instead, like “mysticism”—another ill-defined and misunderstood term—I wish to maintain that meditation is a cross-cultural phenomenon that recurs throughout human history in widely different times and places. Its prevalence is likely due, more than to particular instances of historical diffusion, to the universally invariant structure of the human sensory-motor and cognitive apparatus.

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Notes

- ¹ Here one may usefully compare the Buddhist doctrine of the triple wisdom (cf. [Deroche 2021](#)): wisdom born from reading or listening, wisdom born from thought, and wisdom born from contemplation or cultivation (Sanskrit *bhāvanā*). Within this third stage, Buddhist theorists distinguish between focused meditation (Skt. *śamatha*), aimed at states of calm and absorption or concentration (*samādhi*), and insight meditation (Skt. *vipaśyanā*); the latter form is characterized by openness. M.-H. Deroche (personal communication) suggests that these two forms of Buddhist meditation may correspond to Hadot’s exercises for the concentration and expansion of the self respectively.
- ² Both FAM and OMM meditation tend to decrease activity of the DMN by down-regulation and by gating or tuning respectively; cf. ([Raffone et al. 2019](#)). On the DMN as correlated with “self-referential processing”, and showing reduced activation during mindfulness meditation, cf. ([Tang et al. 2015](#), p. 220).
- ³ Key centers of the DMN include such midline brain structures as the medial prefrontal cortex, anterior precuneus, and the posterior cingular cortex ([Tang et al. 2015](#), p. 220).
- ⁴ Compare [Gehin \(1998, p. 175\)](#), who points out that in Buddhism “when calm and insight meditation are brought together (...) the unconditioned may be experienced”.
- ⁵ The two approaches to meditation are often designated as FAM (Focused Attention Meditation) and OMM (Open Monitoring Meditation) respectively; cf. ([Lutz et al. 2008](#); [Raffone et al. 2019](#)).
- ⁶ Austin classifies internal absorptions as stage VIb in a nine-level division of “Extraordinary Alternate States of Consciousness” ([Austin 1998, p. 312](#)). More advanced states include kenshō or Insight-Wisdom (VII), Ultimate Being (VIII), and the State of Ongoing Enlightened Traits (IX).
- ⁷ The notion of “suchness” in the thought of the Zen master Dōgen (c. 1200–1253) attracted the attention of Pierre Hadot, a few years before his death; cf. ([Hadot 2004](#)).
- ⁸ τὸν οὖν Σωκράτη ἑαυτῷ πως προσέχοντα τὸν νοῦν κατὰ τὴν ὁδὸν πορεύεσθαι ὑπολειπόμενον. Most translations banalize this remarkable expression *prosekhein ton noun*, which literally means “to direct the attention of one’s intellect”. Cf. Plato, *Meno* 96d: “So our first duty is to direct our intellect to ourselves (προσεκτέον τὸν νοῦν ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς), and try to find somebody who will have some means or other of making us better”.
- ⁹ Compare the story of Master Hanshan (16th century), who “sat immobile on a bridge absorbed in *samadhi* for a day and a night, unaware of his surroundings” ([Austin 2006, p. 322](#)). Compare the description by the 6th-7th century CE Christian Johannes Climacus (*Scala Paradisi*, chp. 5, ed. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* vol. 88, 756A), of the Monastery of Repentance, where the monks engaged in sometimes spectacular self-mortification: “I have seen some of these innocent guilty stand under the open sky all night, until the morning, with their feet immobile”. Here, of course, the point of the monks’ practice was not to obtain insight into the nature of reality, but to inflict suffering upon themselves with a view to expiating their sins.
- ¹⁰ [Hadot \(2002, p. 181\)](#) himself does not exclude the possibility that Socrates may have been engaged in exercises of breath control in the passages from the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo* that speak of exercises for “concentrating the soul”.

- 11 Elsewhere (Austin 1998, pp. 468–519; cf. index s.v. Absorption), Austin speaks of “internal absorption” as cases in which (1998, p. 278), the “visual grasp reflex”, originating primarily in the superior colliculus of the midbrain have been overridden and amplified by the “gaze centers” in the frontal lobe. Internal absorption constitutes phase VI-B in Austin’s scale of nine “ordinary and meditative states of consciousness”; cf. the tables in Austin (1998, pp. 300–3).
- 12 The reference in ὅπερ πάλαι ἐν τῷ λόγῳ λέγεται is probably to an ancient (*palai*) soteriological doctrine (*logos*), presumably Orphic, Pythagorean, or a combination of the two. On the expression *palaios logos* as designating “some Orphic poem in Plato (ap. Platonem quoddam Orphicum carmen)”, cf. (Bernabé Pajares 2004, p. 47), 2nd apparatus criticus to line 7.
- 13 I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to an interesting parallel from the *Hippocratic Corpus*, Regimen IV on Dreams (Hippocrates 1931, p. 421, translation modified), which may help to understand in what way the soul, in its waking state, is dispersed throughout the body: “When the body is awake, the soul (*psukhê*) is its servant; it never comes to belong to itself (*ou gignetai autê heoutês*), but is partitioned among many things (*epi polla merizomenê*), assigning a part of itself to each faculty of the body—to hearing, to sight, to touch, to walking, and to acts of the whole body; but thought does not come to belong entirely to itself (*autê d’ heoutês hê dianoia ou ginetai*). But when the body is at rest, the soul, being set in motion and awake, manages its own household (*dioikei ton heoutês oikon*), and itself performs all the acts of the body. For the body when asleep has no perception; but the soul when awake has cognizance of all things—sees what is visible, hears what is audible, walks, touches, feels pain, ponders”.
- 14 χωρίζειν ὅτι μάλιστα ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος τὴν ψυχὴν. In a highly influential text (Sentences 7–9), Porphyry distinguishes between the process by which nature binds the body within the soul and releases the body from the soul, and that by which the soul binds itself within, and then separates itself from, the body. The former kind of separation or release is natural death, the latter is philosophical death. See the text, translation and commentary in Brisson (2005, vol. I, pp. 310–11, vol. 2, pp. 394–400).
- 15 Cf. (Detienne 1963). Unfortunately, Detienne and others went on to attribute the terminology in question to Pythagoreanism which, he thought, itself represented a vestige of primordial shamanism. These are murky waters: not much is known about ancient Pythagoreanism, as opposed to later Hellenistic reconstructions and forgeries of its doctrines. As for shamanism, for which great claims of historical importance have been made, I cannot judge, although I am sceptical of claims for its all-pervading universality, as was Hadot (1995, p. 116, n. 79; 2002, pp. 181–85).
- 16 Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 83b, discussed below. In subsequent Greek philosophy, these two terms are among those used to denote the process by which, according to Aristotle, individual sense impressions are “gathered together” or “collected”, in order to give rise to the formation of universal concepts (*Metaphysics A*, *Posterior Analytics* 2.19); cf. (Helmig 2012, pp. 31–32).
- 17 Likewise, for Augustine (*De genesi ad litteram* XII.xxvi.54), it is possible to ascend from the vision of spiritual realities that resemble bodies to the region of intellectual or intelligible realities, which have no resemblance to bodies and are not obscured by the clouds of false opinions (*nullis opinionum falsarum nebulis offuscatur*). Since Middle Platonism, opinion (Greek *doxa*) is identified as the faculty that allows us to perceive and recognize sensible objects.
- 18 Similarly, Proclus (*Commentary on the Timaeus*, vol. I, p. 198, 11ff. ed. Diehl) reminds us that Apollo is “the god who collects (*sunagôn*) and reunites (*henizôn*) the dismembered limbs (*ta meristhenta melê*) of the lad Dionysus in accordance with the will of the father”.
- 19 On *meletê*, which Hadot translates by “meditation”, cf. Hadot (1995, pp. 84–86, 87–89 (Epicureans), 96–97 (Platonic), 133–34 (Christian)). Hadot defines *meletê* as “an attempt to control inner discourse, in an effort to render it coherent” (*ibid.*, p. 85). Above all, meditation, for Hadot, is “the practice of dialogue with oneself” (*ibid.*, p. 91).
- 20 The doctrine of innate ideas is essential to Neoplatonic thought, although it has not been sufficiently studied. It originates in the myth of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, when the souls, prior to their incarnation within a human body, follow the chariots of the gods and contemplate the Platonic Ideas that are found in the supracelestial place. They are thereby filled with wisdom, but when they fall down to earth to be incarnated in a human body, the vestiges of this divine knowledge they carry within their souls in the form of innate ideas, often described as a spark of the intellect, becomes, as it were, cooled off and buried under a heap of ashes. Only with the healing that results from personal tutoring by a skilled Neoplatonic teacher can these buried sparks be fanned until they burst into flame again, at which time they can serve as steps in ladder that can help the soul to rise back up to the intelligible world whence it came. The best presentation of these themes remains Hoffmann (1987); cf. (Chase 2014, p. 85f).
- 21 Stallbaum (Stallbaum 1841, p. 239) compares *Phaedrus* 265Eff., *Sophist* 253C-D; *Republic* 7, 532Aff., and astutely remarks that what is alluded to here is nothing other than the method of analysis and synthesis, on which see (Chase 2015).
- 22 Hadot cites Schaerer (1969, pp. 84–87), who views it as characteristically Platonic. For Hadot (1993, p. 53), this method of approaching a problem from several starting-points was extremely influential: it is likely to have been important in the Academy, and scholars such as Ingemar Düring have argued that it one of the most characteristic features of thought of Aristotle.
- 23 The distinction between separating body from soul (designating natural death, the time and place for which reserved for God) and separating soul from body (designating the Platonic exercise of training for death) goes back to Porphyry, *Sentences* 7–9; cf. supra n. 14. On the use of Porphyrian material by Evagrius, cf. (Pirtea 2019).
- 24 It should be emphasized, of course, that the ascetic aspects of Greek meditation, largely directed as it was to separating the soul from the body, which is viewed as an obstacle to knowledge and true awareness, is totally foreign to the embodied, holistic viewpoint of Zen.

- ²⁵ On *hêsukhia*, cf. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.3, cited above (*hêsukhiôteron*).
- ²⁶ For the expression *eis heauton/eis heautên sunneuein*, where the meanings of *sunneuo* include “contract, converge, concentrate” (Lampe 1961), cf. Porphyry, *Sentence* 43; Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, vol. 4, p. 110, 13; vol. 5, p. 22, 16 ed. Saffrey-Westerink; Proclus, *Commentary on Alcibiades I*, p. 247, 14–15 ed. Westerink; Simplicius ? *In De an.*, p. 103, 4; 229 12, 273, 33 ed. Hayduck; Simplicius, *Commentary on the Manual of Epictetus*, preface line 65 ed. I. Hadot; Michael of Ephesus, *In EN IX* p. 603, 17 ed. Heylbut, etc.

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