

# Mindful Apocalypse

Subjects: Anthropology

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One of the foremost challenges in the ethnography of meditation is the research model itself. How can one examine an ethnographic 'field' that lacks a geographic location? When the domain of interest is interiority, the ethnographic method proves insufficient. It is not a question of prioritizing subjectivity within a clearly defined context, as is the case in medical anthropology where the experience of illness is explored. Instead, it is a matter of surpassing this boundary, as meditation seeks to transcend subjectivity and question it. Moreover, this subjectivity is also in dialogue with historical and socio-cultural dimensions of belonging but transcends it in the contemplative intention of meditation.

Keywords: medical anthropology ; presence ; mindfulness ; meditation

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## 1. The Anthropological Contribution

De Martino endeavors to provide his own interpretation of yoga within his study on cultural apocalypses ([De Martino 2019](#), pp. 142–43) in which he connects meditation to his theory of presence and consciousness, drawing from what he considers to be a cosmological interpretation of Buddhism. For De Martino, *karma* is nothing more than the way in which the Buddha theorizes temporal becoming: the eternal return of suffering in the human situation. Liberation from karma is ensured by “defined techniques” such as meditation, which promote a restoration to the pre-chronological time (*regressus ad originem*), a return to the time before time (De Martino interprets the yogic concept of *pratiloma* as “in reverse”, “counter-current”). De Martino’s interpretation concludes with a reference to psychoanalysis, which only partially simulates this return to the origin, as it stops at childhood, as the origin of the conscious and present subject, whose becoming in the world begins with a traumatic act.

Marcel Mauss, a French anthropologist, is the first to use the concept of the ‘technique of the body’. He believed that the body is an instrument of knowledge and expression, and he argued that bodily techniques are integral to the formation of a person’s identity. Mauss argued that these techniques are embedded in cultural life and are essential to an understanding of social behavior. According to Mauss, body techniques are the means by which people learn and pass on their cultures. It is through these techniques that people learn how to dress, walk, speak, and interact with their environment.

In cultural anthropology, the technique of the body has been used to study human behavior and culture. For example, anthropologists have studied how people in different cultures use their bodies to express themselves and how they interact with their environment. By studying these techniques, anthropologists can gain insight into how culture shapes individual behavior ([Mauss 1936](#)).

The work of Ernesto De Martino has reconsidered ethnography as a possible cathartic method and one of protection of society that detached itself from naturalistic criteria and was centered on the research of the functioning of consciousness and awareness, which he called presence. De Martino’s work has opened up the possibility for a contemplative anthropology, which looks at yogic and meditative experiences to explore human behavior, and to rethink what ethnography itself is. By studying the techniques of the body, contemplative anthropology could provide an understanding of how the physical and psychological aspects of the human experience interact, and how culture shapes behavior.

In De Martino’s work against Naturalism ([De Martino 1941](#)), the author explains why a strictly objectivist science cannot comprehend the complexity of world’s phenomena. The fundamental theoretical foundation of this work is the belief that modern sciences applied to the study of human behavior and history (the tendency referred to as “Naturalism” by De Martino) are fundamentally ideologically biased and pertain to the unhealthy notion that human history progresses through the acquisition of knowledge, thereby relegating “primitive” societies to a fundamental ignorance. Magic, initially viewed by scholars such as Frazer as the “bastard sister of science”, is instead viewed by De Martino as a fundamental device for the protection of ‘humanhood’. Science, in this sense, is not a progressive evolution of magic, as Frazer suggests, but rather an adaptive evolution. Science is religion adapted to the contemporary, historicized in the current context, but in

comparison to the religion of so-called primitive peoples, it is neither truer nor more reliable. However, these considerations had difficult repercussions on De Martino. This concept is further developed in De Martino's controversial essay "The World of Magic". It is within this work that De Martino's previously vague ideas begin to take shape as a composite theory: the theory of the crisis of the presence.<sup>7</sup>

A famous episode in ethnology reports the experiences of anthropologists who studied the powers of the members of the Na Ivilankata clan of Fiji exhibited during the vilavilareivo ceremony in which the natives manage to pass unscathed through a furnace of red-hot stones. To further complicate matters, this ceremony was also attended by Westerners, and a European dropped a handkerchief. The handkerchief that had been on the stone for fifteen or twenty seconds charred in all the folds that had touched the stone, and otherwise had yellow burns. The feet of four or five performers of the ceremony, subjected to examination, were instead left with no trace of burns: nor were the ornaments on the ankles, composed of dry leaves of tree fern, burned (De Martino 2022, p. 17). Strengthened therefore also by Husserl's reading of another crisis, that of the European Sciences, De Martino invites us to consider the authenticity of these phenomena as they are given (something "is given," in Italian: *si dà*, like in the German *es gibt*).

The exploration of phenomena that belong to a *given* world requires that the presence of the observer be secured, thus necessitating that the methods used to observe such phenomena cannot be completely adaptable to phenomena from a world that is given and still included in the existential drama of a person in crisis. This leads to the conclusion that paranormal phenomena, particularly for certain and specific subjects, involve a certain level of participation from the observer in the crisis of the person producing them. [...] Consequently, the naturalistic procedure here encounters an unprecedented antinomy: the attitude that is most compliant with the rules of observation may influence the observed phenomenon and cause it to vanish, whereas the phenomenon may appear more easily if the observer somehow abandons the attitude of the observer and becomes, albeit to a limited degree, a collaborator of the medium.

(p. 135)

De Martino has consistently articulated his concern for the neglect of the historical dimension in various instances. This disregard for history can be attributed to both the crisis of modernity and the nostalgia for *ilmo tempore* that is evident in scholars such as Eliade (Geissshuesler 2021, p. 77). Engaging with history, society inevitably exposes itself to the risk of crisis, which entails confrontation with everything that is not systematized, and therefore falls outside the semantic boundaries of society. This poses a constant threat to the stability of order, as the non-ordained, that which remains outside the limited means of human organization, serves as a perpetual reminder of the possibility of existence outside of an order. Society attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible by forming a general category, "otherness," which ultimately becomes threatening, mysterious, terrifying, and annihilating. The figure of the priest serves to manage the border between the margin of society and the world of the sacred, of the non-ordained. The magical-religious devices are employed to ensure human presence in society, and the de-historification "is intended to help individuals and societies overcome critical moments of existence by transporting historical reality into a space outside of time. It operates by temporarily concealing the destructive potential of the crisis by transposing the present events into a metahistorical realm where the incidents are actively mastered and brought under control" (pp. 84–85). The centrality of history is a fundamental aspect of De Martino's thought, as evidenced by his desire to give voice to the marginalized and all those categories "left out" of history. This is also the reason for his critique of the non-historicity of Eliade's thought, that is, the inability to consider the contingency of events. According to De Martino, Eliade's "inability to distance himself from the believer's point of view seriously hampered his hermeneutic approach to religion" (p. 87).

The issue that Croce could not reconcile was the Demartinian effort to liberate Europe from extreme objectivism. In his examination of the ethnographic memory of the missionary Grubb, who was accused of theft by an indigenous person who claimed to have witnessed the crime in a dream, De Martino appears to align with both perspectives: in a distinct relationship between presence and the world than that which is determined in our civilization, which is a part of a historical epoch in which the presence has not yet been clearly decided as a state of wakefulness, and the perceptions of reality also extend to the realm of dream consciousness. In this case, De Martino suggests that the dream is as real as waking, and that it is only through the determination of the latter as the only possible reality for historical consciousness that our culture begins to view dreams as irrational.<sup>8</sup>

Upon examining the other mentions of the term 'yoga' in De Martino's work, it becomes apparent that they are almost exclusively linked to commentary on Eliade's book. In a subsequent review of other works by Eliade, De Martino seems to confirm his convictions regarding his interpretations of the "salvation of presence" (De Martino 1952a, pp. 148–49). It is known that Eliade's idea of "shamanism" was essentially similar to yoga, where both practices possessed an ideal form of asceticism allowed by the simple technique of the body, and a more "lower" or degenerate form of ascetics through the

use of psychotropic substances. However, De Martino disagrees on one point: shamanic asceticism cannot pertain to the theme of escape from history (p. 153). He then emphasizes the distinction outlined by Eliade himself, between shamanism and “classical” yoga, whose aim is indeed escape from the cosmos (p. 154). Subsequently, in his preface to the Italian edition of Eliade’s book, De Martino reiterates his interpretation unequivocally: “because of its nature as a relatively coherent system founded on the rejection of history, the yogic spirituality challenges the historicistic orientation of our civilization to renew its dialogue with itself with particular energy” (De Martino 1952b, p. 10). This is in relation to what De Martino defines, typically according to his style, as the “anguish of becoming”. In this context, De Martino also seems strongly rooted in his interpretation, to the point of disdain for any attempt to free yoga from the constraints of historicism. He later writes, criticizing Eliade not too subtly: “to fantasize about an anti-historical residue of religious experiences, a residue that would undermine historicism, simply means being in some way immediately engaged in that religious paradox that should have only been the object of research and reconstruction” (pp. 10–11). It remains to be seen whether such audacity is not disproved by the facts, which can only be found in the epistemological status of yoga itself, whose intentions, written in the texts in question, are unambiguous and do not require interpretation. Our goal, in this brief examination, is to understand if and to what extent De Martino’s theory is applicable to an anthropological analysis of meditation. The proximity to therapy is not surprising, given that De Martino himself acknowledges this connection: “the religious delirium observable in European clinics was not the same as shamanism or yoga or Christian mysticism, which are cultural products integrated in a specific religious civilization of human history” (De Martino 1961, p. 82).

Ernesto De Martino first came into contact with the religions of the Asian world thanks to his first mentor Macchioro, who encouraged him to study Eliade’s text on *Yoga*. As we read in a letter from 1938, Macchioro sent the book to De Martino, defining it as “an excellent book [...] on Yoga that should interest you”, and then, in another letter from 1939: “I believe you will find Eliade’s book interesting. I do not know if I ever spoke to you about this my singular Romanian disciple, who was drawn in my wake by Orphism, wrote some studies about me in newspapers and magazines in Bucharest, and then went to India”. These investigations pique the interest of De Martino, who displays a keen eagerness to delve deeper into the correlations between religious practices and paranormal experiences. Specifically, Yoga emerges as a valuable resource for De Martino, as it aligns with his transcultural theory of magic.

According to De Martino, the origins of madness (*folia*) stemming from feelings of self-loss (*perdita del sé*) can be attributed to three main factors. The first is the perceived threat of impending nothingness. Secondly, the danger of losing the ability to construct a form arises, as noted in Lesce’s study (Lesce 2019, p. 179), and this concept of form is also present in Buddhism (*rūpa*) as the foundation of the chain of knowledge production that shapes the world. Lastly, the inability for the restless presence to transcend critical contents within the ideal community form is also a contributing factor. This final aspect is achieved through asceticism. For Buddhists, the goal of asceticism is the transcendence of the world and the attainment of a worldly state that is neither of this world nor of another (Divino 2023b). De Martino refers to the “magic person” as one who is able to overcome these cognitive deceits, in which “the self and the world are not definitively given as distinct and guaranteed values”. This figure bears resemblance to the *samaṇa* ascetic in Buddhism.

His interest as an anthropologist in these practices is evident and explicit, as well as his attempt to apply his own explanation on consciousness and human presence to them. However, we should better examine the topic of De Martino’s interpretation of *yoga*, in which we can clearly recognize his need to appropriate, to some extent, the Indian contemplative practice in order to expand and solidify the foundations of his own theory on presence. The first impact will produce the following outcome, represented by the review that De Martino publishes in *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* concerning the 1948 edition of the aforementioned work. For De Martino, Eliade’s work “responds very well to the general need of Western culture to broaden its own humanism and renew its own problematics through the understanding of forms of spirituality ideally distant from our own” (De Martino 1948, p. 130). In light of what we will see shortly, these words should be understood as De Martino’s legitimate interest in finding new cultural channels that would strengthen his emerging theory. He was indeed so interested in it that he summarized his own theory of presence in the review of Eliade’s text, a necessity in his opinion to expose the weak points of the text under examination. De Martino asserts that Eliade’s interpretation is undoubtedly suggestive and fascinating, however he finds problematic the interpretations on the existential drama from which the “refusal to let oneself live” arises and the paradox of the “abolition of history”. Since De Martino considers the situation properly ‘magical’ as characterized by the fragility of presence, by the continuous exposure to the risk of not-being-there, magic would be configured as a system of safeguards opposed to the intensity of this risk. Religion relates to the experience of being as limitation and finitude, as an anguishing, hateful given that must be abolished.<sup>9</sup> The magical–religious polarity is precisely the polarity of ‘presence as a problem’: now in the act of defending oneself from the world that threatens to overwhelm it, now in the act of freeing oneself from the world in which one experiences a state of anguishing rejection (p. 131).

## 2. Towards a Contemplative Anthropology

The link between anthropological practice and contemplative practice is not the result of a recent convergence. Williams already sees in Lévi-Strauss a meditative attitude, evidenced by her witness A's remarks to her about the "essential emptiness of anthropological study" (Williams 2007, p. 90). Lévi-Strauss himself makes a Buddhist-inspired statement when he speaks of the deconstruction of the anthropologist's object of study, but he also anticipates De Martino's work by speaking of presence, which emerges as the only stable and enduring fact since the perpetual deconstruction of cognitive objects also lets the absence of meaning fade away. Indeed, I was surprised to hear mention of an "anthropology of presence" (p. 91), a flawless Demartinian definition, as a possible solution to cognitive anthropology.<sup>10</sup> This indefectibly leads anthropology to share the same path as ontology, but also toward possible reunification with the hard sciences. For while the object as an entity independent of the experienter's consciousness is something that is no longer tenable, it is also true that the experiential subject also needs deconstruction (p. 96). Thus, we discussed some significant ethnography that investigated deep meditation experiences, but we found how in several cases a damaging and distressing experience took over, which we related back to the "end of the world" experience. It must be said, that many meditators link this distressing experience to unpreparedness in approaching the deeper stages of meditation. Fortunately, this fact is also acknowledged by the authors: "Meditators sometimes found that they did not possess an adequate interpretive framework to enable them to manage their ELSEs at the time they occurred" (Cooper et al. 2021, p. 13). This has not, however, rid Buddhism of its name as a nihilistic philosophy, an inaccurate prejudice that we intend to rid ourselves of to enable a more effective anthropological investigation of meditative experiences. Buddhism has often been accused of having a nihilistic outlook. Instead, Buddhism proposes a physics of complexity, in which nothing that 'is' can be destroyed, but simultaneously, it cannot be isolated from its network of complexity. In the conception of becoming "an entity does not arise from nothing nor does it perish into nothing, but is a transition from one baseline state to the next" (Brown 1999, p. 264).

As observed, numerous accounts in the scholarly literature report instances of crisis emerging throughout various contemplative practices. These phenomena, which were also documented in my ethnography, warrant further investigation. It is proposed that adopting the Demartinian model of the crisis of presence will facilitate accurate interpretation of these phenomena, as well as shed light on potential resolutions. The abdication of identity is inherent within a philosophical framework that views the formation of the ego, and consequently one's presence in the world, as a "subjectivity" capable of asserting itself (De Martino would refer to this as "being in history") as a precarious condition. This condition relies on the acknowledgment of others and is subordinate to social, cultural, and linguistic norms. The yogi relinquishes this instability because the identity thus established is impermanent and ephemeral. Their practice is not concerned with reinforcing presence but rather with unraveling it, without succumbing to nihilism. Instead, it leads to the emergence of a profound self, devoid of identity.

Having established these premises, it is worth noting that the ethnographic context presents an entirely distinct perspective on yoga. The incorporation of yoga into the scope of body anthropology supports de Martino's hypothesis, and it is congruent with the narrative that yoga instructors convey: "Because... yoga was already fundamentally significant to me... I mean, simply... being a very restless, very... restless mind... I genuinely required something that would ground me in the present, allowing me to stabilize... body and mind, and yoga provided this somatic anchor" (Interview with Alice, 21 March 2019). Far from being a practice dedicated to a form of social anti-normativism, contemporary yoga actively participates in the preservation of presence, presently in the guise of personal well-being and "self-care", without excessively scrutinizing social structures. Instead, it often reinforces adaptation to them.

"...the primary benefit, which is also attained through a good yoga practice, is, let's say, the foremost and perhaps most apparent: the enhancement of one's connection with oneself. Through this connection, it is as though you are tuning in to... just like adjusting the... frequency of a radio, right? There used to be dials on radios, and you would fine-tune to find the exact frequency of a transmission. It might sound somewhat hipster to discuss, but it's not like that; it's a connection with... with oneself. And what is the advantage of this connection? Everything becomes more harmonious, so one's life experiences less friction in general... So, the benefits are undoubtedly mental, promoting greater harmony with... with life events and... and this."

(Interview with Valentina, 7 February 2019)

The ethnographic accounts generally corroborated the inclusion of yoga within a specific self-care framework, but they also unveiled a striking parallel with the crisis of presence. There is no mention of this phenomenon in the texts; however, the modernized yogic practice, as it were, perceives the transcendence of certain boundaries as positioning oneself on the verge of this crisis. Particularly notable among the published testimonies are those of Alice: "You begin to observe this

candle... and simply... concentrate on the candle. And then... but... how to express... without providing me with substantial tools... she had merely instructed me to do this... and I recall performing this action... and it led to a peculiar experience, akin to de-realization... somewhat dissociative as well, right? No... not... not positive, so to speak... in the sense... it bore no relation to meditation..." (Alice in [Divino 2021](#), p. 254); Lucia (p. 261): "Because you know, in moments of intense concentration... after years of practicing, and when you are immersed in meditation... it is as though everything is absorbed into you, as if the world around you ceases to exist... you remain alone in this void..."; and Elisa (p. 273): "At times, I felt like nothing, and the term I associated with this sensation was 'nothingness'".

In summary, the ethnographic evidence highlights a distinct vision of yoga, demonstrating its incorporation within a self-care framework and its connection to the crisis of presence. Though the texts do not explicitly mention this phenomenon, modern yogic practice appears to encounter the crisis of presence as practitioners push their boundaries. The accounts of the ethnographic subjects offer valuable insights into these experiences, emphasizing the need for further investigation and understanding of the intricate relationship between yoga, self-care, and the crisis of presence.

The challenge of defining contemplative anthropology is just beginning, and this article represents the initial proposal in this direction. Naturally, such a contemplative anthropology compels us to radically reconsider all the traditional problems of anthropology, particularly entailing a revision of the ontological turn in my view. However, this is not the time to delve into this challenge. Here, I would like to share what my personal experience has shaped thus far in my perception as an anthropologist and scholar of the human being. Specifically, anthropology today faces a new challenge: ethnographic dualism. The modern anthropologist is confronted with the hypertrophy of isolating cognition, which has been masterfully defined by McGilchrist as the overpowering dominance of a mode of reasoning and worldview represented in neuroscience by the operational modes of the left hemisphere over another more holistic and comprehensive mode of reasoning ([McGilchrist 2021a](#)). Anthropology has already faced this challenge in the form of debates on embodiment, ethical and emic dimensions, and, above all, the relationship between the anthropologist and the 'anthropologized', seeking a solution by relinquishing claims of objectivism and acknowledging that anthropology can only admit an interpenetration and mutual influence between subjectivities. Furthermore, in the disorientation experienced by the anthropologist who abandons their cultural world to assume that of another, there is certainly no possibility of seeing things in their entirety as one who is not, as it would mean negating oneself. However, when the anthropologist adopts the contemplative tool, they acquire a non-dualistic dimension that is equally problematic. In other words, non-dualism compels us to take a further step beyond this idea, as it leads us to consider the division between subjects, and even between objects, no longer acceptable. Taken to the extreme, the consequence of this reflection, which is worse than the shock of cultural disorientation, can only have two possible solutions: either the complete abandonment of anthropology as there is no recognizable 'otherness' left to study, or the transformation of anthropology from the study of alterity to the study of overcoming dichotomies. We must accept the challenge of ethnographizing the problem of division itself, recognizing its manifestation as a deception of our cognitive faculties. The "world of mirrors" that McGilchrist has aptly described in his recent studies ([McGilchrist 2009](#)), which is the result of the isolating reasoning performed by the left hemisphere (Heidegger's *Rechnendes Denken*), is nothing but the paroxysm of a methodology that forces us to admit the bitter truth that anthropology has not truly decolonized. Given that the relationship between neurobiological and cultural aspects has already been widely acknowledged ([Lende et al. 2021](#); [Han and Northoff 2008](#); [Kitayama et al. 2003](#)), the work of McGilchrist and its potential applications in the so-called human sciences and within the framework of a non-dualistic anthropology appear even more significant today.

Rather, the world has become even more fragmented, resembling Lacan's *corps morcelé* but appearing to us as a mosaic in which academic scholars, increasingly specialized, focus their expertise on a single fragment, failing to see the bigger picture. In this hyper-specialization, there is the paroxysm of isolating cognition and the ego/other reasoning, and anthropology has not been exempt from this worldview, defining itself even as the study of alterity. While this was commendable until now, in the context of an envisioned contemplative anthropology, the non-dualistic perspective compels us to completely abandon this division of self/other. At this point, as previously stated, the contemplative anthropologist has two choices: to abandon anthropology or to transform it. My idea is to redefine anthropology not as the study of alterity but as the study of the problems caused by the assumption of alterity as a real fact, thereby engaging in a struggle against dualisms, categorizations, and dichotomies that manifest in various ways across all cultures. Anthropology must also adopt a critical stance toward these dualisms, acknowledging their devaluation of the human being and advocating for a more complex understanding of human existence and being-in-the-world, a vision that transcends the veil of categorical distinctions. However, this does not imply that everything is indistinct or equal; such a claim would be an extreme paroxysm in the opposite direction. The multiplicity and richly varied cultural manifestations are undoubtedly part of the human experience, but focusing solely on them as objects does not distinguish the anthropologist from the mechanistic thinker who views phenomena in the world as separable parts of a machine. In a sense, this mechanistic view that has dominated the West, which only now, when applied to the subjectivity of the

individual, leads to a crisis of presence and a sinking into disorientation described by De Martino as the exit of the human being from history and their context. When objectified, a part is extracted from its inseparable connection to the whole, and in this compartmentalization and isolation, the part loses its reason for being, which was its being-in-the-whole. Placed under scrutiny and analyzed as a fragment by the scholar, it is dead, a mere absence.

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