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AT THE EDGE OF THE SENSIBLE

Cultivating doubt in radically engaged anthropology and spirituality

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Abstract: Transformative experiences have long been a central interest for anthropologists studying spiritual phenomena. During fieldwork, many ethnographers have themselves undergone such experiences, caused by and fueling their confidence in radical participation as the soundest approach to understanding spiritual phenomena. These anthropologists inadvertently find themselves faced with the question of the ontological status of such phenomena, responses to which range from embracing them as ontologically real to steering clear of judgement. Arguments pertaining to the authority of the anthropologist follow a similar path, belief either framed as a precondition for understanding such matters or as undermining analytical validity. This article outlines a third position. Based upon radically engaged fieldwork conducted with people dedicated to spiritual and mindfulness-meditation training in Denmark, I explore doubt as a transformative experience. Doubt, I hold, destabilizes both ontological certainty and the alleged analytical invalidity of engaged anthropology, making doubt, I argue, a valuable anthropological disposition.


Keywords: Denmark, mindfulness meditation, epistemology, methodology
“Spirituality. I have no sensory experience of it.” The words were Karen’s. We were in the car, Karen, Camille and I, talking about meditation, mindfulness and, yes, spirituality. It was September 2017, and this was the first of many long conversations, in this car, together, on our way to our mindfulness and meditation training. We were in it together, but rather differently: Camille with a Catholic upbringing and childhood experiences of sensing malevolent spirits; Karen with a mother who throughout Karen’s childhood was engaged in meditative practices, and a sister who showed signs of possessing “special abilities” from an early age; and me with parents who were political journalists and atheists.

While the words were Karen’s, back then, in September 2017, I felt as if they could just as well have been mine. That day, the three of us were traveling towards the first three-day session of our meditation and mindfulness training program, one that would run for just over a year. On the edge of my seat, in the back of the car, I was also on my way to the first major fieldwork event in my new research project exploring the relation between people’s use of spiritual techniques and philosophies and their sense of self in contemporary Denmark.

In my slightly concealed yet enthusiastically engaged position in the back of the car, Karen’s words and her tone of voice resonated with me. Like her, I had had no experiences I would describe as spiritual. I had no sensorial familiarity with spirituality, nor intellectual grasp of what it was, and I felt unconvinced I could ever gain access to what I presumed would be a distinctly different experiential world.

Regardless, I was in this car, with these people, embarking on fieldwork that aimed to do exactly that: gain access, get a grasp and radically engage myself in the ulterior, hopefully coming to sense, experience, and comprehend these people’s spirituality.

A significant tradition of radical engagement exists amongst anthropologists studying religious and spiritual phenomena, many arguing that radical participation is vital for developing a sound analysis of phenomena which, within the scientific paradigm, are often framed as “unbelievable” (e.g., Desjarlais 1992; Favret-Saada 1980; Greenwood 2014; Jackson 1983; Knibbe and Dodgers 2011; Turner 2006). During fieldwork, many of these anthropologists had transformative experiences of spirit presence, trances, healing, or the like, and inadvertently found themselves faced with the question of the ontological status of such phenomena (Desjarlais 1992; Knibbe and Dodgers 2011; Turner 1992b, 1992b). Betwixt and between the world of interlocutors and that of science (Desjarlais 1992, 18), the discussions often indicate a division between those who come to embrace the existence of spirit matters (e.g., Greenwood 2014; Turner 1992b) and those who strive to stay clear of judgement (e.g., Desjarlais 1992; Favret-Saada 1980; Knibbe and Dodgers 2011). With this discussion arises also the
issue of anthropological authority; belief here either framed as a precondition for understanding such matters (e.g., Earle 2007; Turner 2006), or as possibly undermining analytical validity (e.g., Fortes 1987; Gell 1999). I here outline a third stance: a position of sustained doubt.

This article is based upon fieldwork conducted amongst people in Denmark who have dedicated themselves to year-long spiritual, meditative and mindfulness programs, and the facilitators thereof, as well as my own radical engagement in several such programs. The transformative experiences in focus are, however, not spiritual transformations; although these figure as crucial for interlocutors and myself, and as central elements in my exploration of the relationship between doubt and spiritual experiences; rather, it is doubt as a transformative experience that forms the backbone of the article. Exploring my own doubt alongside that of interlocutors, I argue that doubt is a fundamental condition of experience, stemming not least from the sensation of alterity within oneself, a phenomenological fact (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]) which spiritual training cultivated. Focusing on the methodological, analytical, and ethical value of “staying with the trouble” of doubt (Haraway 2016), I show how doubt as a transformative experience for the anthropologist destabilizes both ontological certainty and the alleged analytical invalidity of engaged anthropology.

This pursuit is not least inspired by William James’ radical empiricism (1912a), its articulation in phenomenological anthropology (Jackson 1989), and its recent methodological advances and codification (Davies and Spencer 2010; Stodulka, Selim and Mattes 2018; Stodulka, Dinkelarkar and Tajib 2019). With radical engagement, and radically engaged anthropology, I then refer to a willingness: to “adopt a believing attitude” (James 1912b, 13) during fieldwork, analysis and writing; to engage in fieldwork practices geared at facilitating such an attitude; and to use significant affective experiences alongside traditional empirical material. Yet, this article is not an attempt at further codifying such methodological, ethical, and analytical motions; the ambition rather is to evoke the research process (see Stoller 2019, 350), crystalized through an “epistemic affect” (Stodulka Selim and Mattes 2018), i.e. doubt, and further argue for the value of doubt as an enduring disposition of anthropologists.

In the following then, I sketch the doubt, spiritual and transformative experiences of two people – Camille and myself – supplemented by the voices of other interlocutors including Karen and, not least, Johan – the facilitator who ran the training which Camille, Karen and I undertook together.

**Encountering doubt**

This first car trip that Camille, Karen and I undertook together was one of five travelling to and from the training sessions that formed part of the program we followed. Camille drove, Karen was in the
front seat, and I sat in the back, often on the edge of my seat, deeply engaged in the conversations, writing feverishly in my notebook. At other times, we were all exhausted, leaning into our seats, focused on driving or gazing aimlessly out the windows. This was how we travelled the near four hours across the country and back, as the seasons changed from autumn 2017 to winter and spring, and finally gave in to the summer of 2018, when the joint part of our training concluded after a five-day silent retreat. These car rides were always intense. Not only were they a valuable fieldwork opportunity for me and a space for personal reflection and developing friendship, but they also felt like an extension of the training, as we pored over one another’s experiences with genuine curiosity and mutual guidance.

Camille was 46 at the time and had in the previous year established a physical rehabilitation practice along with her business partner, which had required great dedication and excessive work. She had, in her own words, “severely overworked” herself, resulting in stress and a period of sick leave. While she was glad about her accomplishments, she felt that committing herself to meditative training could help her stay connected to the “deeper values” in life: being and developing as a good person and in this way affecting the world around her. She often felt “swept away” by her drive to do her absolute best in every avenue of life and her continual burning desire to develop herself professionally and personally. She felt this drive was an ambivalent force, an “intense fire” that made her continue to develop, igniting pleasurable and sensual experiencing, but one with the potential to burn out of control.

I was 35 at the time and had just finished my Ph.D., moving straight into a postdoc position after a month’s summer break. I was exhausted and uncertain about my desire to continue working in academia, not least as the work often undermined dearly held values of living slowly and spending time with my children and husband, friends, family, and in nature. Finding myself uncertain and open, I was happy this fieldwork project aligned comfortably with my desire to cultivate a slow, contemplative, experience-centered mode of living aimed at potential change. I was open to change, I felt, whatever it might be, although spirituality made me slightly uneasy.

For me, spirituality referred to something partly supernatural, partly uncanny: haunted houses, malevolent spirits, beautiful misty landscapes with ambiguous ominous presences – it tantalized and unsettled me. I was familiar with versions of New Age spirituality, those inscribed in health food and mystic stores, in magazines and online horoscopes. Having grown up in a rural area that also accommodated a dispersed sojourner hippie community of which my family was loosely a part, I knew this spirituality to be more concerned with self-realization than experiences of spirit presence and interconnectedness with the world. While my parents had taught me to appreciate spiritual beliefs and
practices, they also criticized them as avenues for self-realization at the expense of the welfare of the children involved and engagement with political struggles.

My parents’ concerns echoed critical depictions of contemporary spirituality in anthropological studies and more recent popular academic and media portrayals of these phenomena in Denmark (e.g., Bovbjerg 2001; Brinkmann 2014; Salamon 2002, 2007). According to these and other voices, the reason this spirituality has been on the rise, while institutionalized religions have been declining, lies in the broader subjective turn (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). This turn is said to involve a moral individualism whereby the individual’s subjectivity and inner experiences “become a, if not the unique source of significance, meaning and authority,” due to traditional roles and authorities losing their former import and power (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 3-4). This kind of spirituality is understood to center on individual self-development, and self-transformation at the expense of the broader goods of social relations, society, and ethical imperatives implied in traditional religions (Bovbjerg 2001; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Nonetheless, regardless of the emphasis on self-transformation and individual truths, the relationship with spiritual beings and dimensions are important to many people in this movement, as is their sense of interconnectedness with and responsibilities in relation to the world (Greenwood 2014; Steffen 2015). In her research on Danish spiritualism, Vibeke Steffen, for example, points out the paradox that the ideas and practice that underwrite contemporary spirituality highlight interconnectedness rather than separateness of selves and “challenge images of autonomous individualism” while simultaneously making “privately experienced self-transformation and self-validation” pivotal (Steffen 2015, 236). Was it this conundrum and her awareness of these critical public portrayals of spirituality that informed Camille’s hesitance to describe herself as spiritual during our first car ride – moving from saying that the training was part of her “spiritual path” to pondering whether, for her, these practices had more to do with “deep values,” “meaning,” or “compassion and humanity at a deeper level”?

A few months after that first car ride, I visited Camille to conduct an interview in her family home, a stylish, spacious house in an affluent suburb. As she served me herbal tea in their living room, pointing to the dates and dark chocolate on the low sofa-table between us, she told me she had had a solitary childhood. Camille’s parents’ relationship had been fraught with difficulties, and as neither of them could talk to Camille about these issues she had when young found support and comfort in her conversations with God, prayers, and an inner world of experiences. This experiential world was, however, not only comforting; Camille also sensed ghosts and spirits. A certain voice was particularly prominent – it frightened as a child, as she perceived it as a spirit who tried to control her actions and
thoughts. One day she simply had enough; she summoned all her strength and told the spirit to leave her alone. In response, the spirit knocked over a candle and started a small fire in the living room.

Recalling the frightfulness of the experience in the comfort of her living room all these years later, a shiver still seemed to run down Camille’s spine. Sometimes, she told me, she pondered whether this voice and her sensations were simply psychological mechanisms, expressions of her solitude as a child; mocked in school and with no real friends besides her relationship to God, she had been alone with her feelings and her parents’ emotional instability. This changed in her early teens when she realized that none of the popular kids were religious and forewent her religious beliefs, ultimately developing friendships. Yet her drive to understand herself and others and, not least, to feel better, soon made her seek alternative circles, self-help literature, clairvoyant mediums, healing, and meditation. The meditation in particular had stayed with her as part of her “journey” towards becoming a better person – yet she remained uncertain whether this was a spiritual or psychological “path” for her. Maybe the distinction between the spiritual and the psychological did not matter so much, she reflected, adding,

But I do feel that the trees and the universe in some way or another are helping me. And I feel so incredibly privileged in life. I feel so, so lucky. You know, I really feel that there’s been something which has carried me and helped me in life. And again, I do not know what it is. But I guess it is a certain kind of spirituality; that’s what I’m talking to out there [when walking meditatively in nature] or in my head. It’s helped me ever since I was a child. Whether it is God, or the trees, whether it is energies, whether it is my imagination…

While my interlocutors shared their experiences, sensations, and feelings of spirit presences and other extraordinary experiences in vivid detail, I also continued to encounter their uncertainty and doubt. I wondered whether this was an expression of the methodological choices I had made, the programs I followed, the people these attracted. Maybe, but the people and programs were varied: some focused mostly on mediumship and clairvoyance; some on meditative practices; some drawing on different ancient philosophies and cosmologies from Native Americans, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and so on; some attracted people from lower- to middle-income homes; others appealed solely to people in the high-income bracket. Yet one thing they all shared was feelings of doubt and uncertainty. Maybe the doubt and uncertainty would change along the way, if we trained ourselves sufficiently?

Interviews with Laura, a nurse in her mid-40s, and Linn, an HR consultant in her late 40s, gave me some confidence in this early analysis. Both these women described their experiences of “connecting
with” or “meeting” their own soul and the souls of others as beyond doubt: “Once that door has opened then you cannot shut it again,” Linn emphatically explained on several occasions. For both Laura and Linn certain experiences offered a space beyond doubt. As I quizzed Camille more about her uncertainty, she ventured that she was not uncertain about the existence of some greater power, describing it as “energy”; this was what she sensed in her walks in nature, in her relations with other people and beings, the “something” that carried her. Energy was beyond doubt for her; she sensed it clearly.

To my interlocutors, therefore, the existence of a spiritual dimension was beyond doubt, although their own experiences and abilities sometimes gave rise to it. Laura explained this by referring to the Freudian term, the Ego, her Ego was “talking things away from the immediate experience” by judging the quality of her experiences and abilities. “To be able to perceive some things, sense and interpret them correctly and understand them,” Laura continued, “that has a lot to do with training.” One needed to be trained, not only to sense, but also to make proper sense of and, not least, to trust one’s senses – rather than letting the Ego “talk things away.” Maybe Camille, Karen, and I would all end up not only sensing more, but enabled to make better sense of and feel more certain about our own spiritual sensations, as we trained ourselves further? Maybe the training would offer experiences that fortified a space beyond doubt for us, similar to how Laura and Linn’s sensorial experiences of “meeting souls” had consolidated their belief in spiritual dimensions? Maybe.

**Training selves**

The Ego and the soul. These were only a couple of the ways in which people in this field spoke about themselves and their selves. The soul was also called “the essence” or the “authentic self,” while the Ego formed part of one’s personality, which was also thought to include the other Freudian personality elements; the Id and the Superego, and interlocutors’ own manners of referring to different aspects of themselves, such as the judge, the mother, the soldier, the scared child, and many more. Everything but the soul was understood to have been shaped by biological-genetic conditions, personal history, social relations, environmental circumstances, and, not least, the confines and demands of contemporary society. Once again, except for the soul, this multitude of characters embedded in one’s personality materialized as fear, desire, anger, and other forceful emotions or as appeals to reason, in manners often harmful to the self. It was e.g. fear that drove the Ego to “talk” Laura away from her experiences, appealing with fear and reason: “It could be somewhat overwhelming if what one experiences were in fact real,” as she expressed it. The self was, in other words, multiple: a soul and a “clubhouse of characters,” as Johan, who facilitated the training that Camille, Karen, and I undertook, frequently put
it. One of the main effects of this training, we were told was to become conscious of both the soul and the multiple characters of which one consisted.

In this program, meditation and mindfulness were often called “consciousness training” and formed the bedrock of instruction. If one trained with dedication for at least 30 minutes a day, one might experience what Johan called Shamata and Vipassana (referring to Tibetan Buddhism) or simply described as a “quietening of the mind” and “insight into the nature of reality.”

And that is when we suddenly see all these characters, the members of the clubhouse. Suddenly they stand forth – but what is it then that sees them? That is the self, which is untouched, fundamentally untouched by the characters, and at the same time the characters are integrated into the self. But the self is not integrated into the characters because [the characters] are created through separation. [For them] it is always me and you, it is always us and them – you know, the stuff suffering fundamentally stems from. And when that separation falls, then it is easy… And in many ways that is what spirituality is very much about. That is when the self awakens, or that essence awakens, and becomes clearer, so that it can take care of all these characters with extremely great care, presence, love.

If one can become conscious of the characters and experience the soul-self – that is, when “essence awakens” – then “separation falls”; in other words, fleeting moments of the real interconnectedness of us all as can be experienced as perceived boundaries between self and world dissolve, an experience Johan called “non-duality.” In order to have such experiences, one cannot and should not try to rid oneself of multiple characters, despite all the damage they might do; they are inseparable parts of the self. Instead, one must be compassionate with these inner parts of oneself. Compassion was an embracing of, a “making peace with,” while “ridding oneself” was of an act of separation that would only enforce suffering. Compassion was a crucial component of the training for Johan, one related to his preference for compassion-meditation, inspired as he and many participants were by Tibetan Buddhism. Here, consciousness training was not enough; one also had to cultivate compassion: in relations with loved ones, with oneself, with people one felt neutral about, people with whom one had severe difficulties – whether father, boss, or a prominent political figure – as well as “all being.” Johan spoke of it often as “heartfulness”: an “inner melody,” a “vibration,” an “inner atmosphere.” One could tease this feeling out, he explained, summon it, by visualizing a dear person, place, or event, but
as soon as the feeling was inspired, the visualization should cease, “to avoid projection,” the sensation instead resonating in the body. Heartfulness was a path of acceptance, of becoming “whole,” of awakening “essence.”

We learned that the essence or soul-self was somewhat unknowable; it did not exist as an entity in the concrete sense of the word, nor was it easy to explain. The soul-self could, however, be experienced as an emotional, sensorial encounter with the perfectness of oneself, as Linn and Laura explained – or, as Johan often phrased it, as “that which experiences.” The soul, or true, inner, or authentic self, was thus understood as beyond and at the same time the very essence of the self, unbounded by time, space, and physicality and often depicted as energy forming part of all other beings and instantiated in all beings and elements of the world – much like how Camille spoke of her belief in “energy” as “something greater.” Therefore, one could also experience “non-duality” through the perspective of the soul-self; the soul-self was in the essence of all.

This myriad of selves and the simultaneous non-duality of experience could seem paradoxical to the probing mind, and it was only by training one’s consciousness, not least by surrendering “attachment” to categorization and instead “staying in the experience” that one could have such experiences of non-duality or spirit presences. Yet more than simply cultivating consciousness and inner senses such as heartfulness, the training depended upon psychological, bodily, and relational work.

When signing up for the training program and during its first day, Johan was careful to point out that meditation brought up psychological issues and that some of us might need to seek other kinds of therapy to support the processes to which it gave rise. In his view, spiritual transformation required a willingness to work through both psychological and somatic issues, and simultaneous dedication to an “earthly life” of paying bills, doing the laundry, and myriad complex social relations. This psychological and somatic work, along with the dedication to the everyday minutiae of life, was an important part of ensuring that you did not fall into psychosis, which all knew to be a risk of major spiritual transformation. More pertinently for most participants, the work entailed integrating the training and insights into everyday life and relations with others – both dealing with the troubles of everyday life and relationships and allowing the everyday to be meditative and spiritual. Johan often said that being mindful and spiritual during training and retreats was “easy”; the more significant training occurred in the complexity of the everyday and human relationships.

The training of our selves did not simply happen on the “insides” of the self, in relation to our multiple characters and watched by the soul, but with our bodies and senses in a social field, in nature and
beyond the formal training. Consequently, we trained in groups in one- to five-day classes and retreats, in study groups and in consultation with likeminded communities, professionals, and psycho- and body therapists, and grounded ourselves in all our social relations and worldly affairs. The programs also involved exercises related to Contact Improvisation, dance, play, medicine walks, shaking-meditation, individual and community-based silent retreats, shamanistic drum trance, channeling, dancing, mediumship, yoga, therapeutic body training, and a great deal of literature, ranging from that by the New Age icon, Rhonda Byrnes, through the work of the father of mindfulness, Jon Kabat-Zinn, to books written by Tibetan nuns and monks. Training, therefore, was solitary, social, corporal, kinesthetic, mindful, affective, and sensorial; it involved cultivating inner senses such as heartfulness and the imagination, and often transpired in nature, as nature was believed to be a valuable anchor and carrier of transformations.

The training allowed us to become conscious of the different selves: the soul, the essence, the personality, the ways our Ego materialized in fears, desires, judgements, and so forth. The training also affected the way we experienced the world; we developed a clearer sense of our bodies, feeling their different parts and the pain and pleasure they held with greater nuance. Our perception of relations with others shifted, and we sensed a stronger connection with nature. Many also felt they sensed things and people more forcefully; trees and rocks, animals and other beings all emanated a special “feel” or “energy” that my interlocutors and I felt more strongly as the training proceeded. Yet, regardless of the training, doubt and uncertainty kept surfacing in conversations and remained in me.

**Learning to believe?**

Transformative experiences have long been a central interest of anthropologists studying spiritual and religious phenomena, where moments of conviction, healing, possession, and trance have been shown to have transformative effects on people’s lives (e.g., Csordas 1994; Obeyesekere 1990). Part of this trend, anthropologists employing “radically engaged” methodologies have played a significant part in showing how people’s transformative and spiritual experiences do not arise out of thin air and cannot be tied to questions of belief alone but, rather, are conditioned by specific cultural sensibilities (e.g., Desjarlais 1992; Luhrmann 1989). Anthropological work has often focused on the question of belief when exploring spiritual and religious communities (Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015) and, in the preoccupation with belief, has approached the aspect of experience as a taken-for-granted ability of people in such communities (Luhrmann and Morgain 2012, 359-362). In contrast, radically engaged anthropologists have since the 1980s been pivotal in showing that having spiritual experiences requires a learning process that encompasses the entire body (e.g., Desjarlais 1992; Luhrmann 1989). With the
notion of embodiment, such research has approached the body as “a living entity by which, and through which, we actively experience the world” (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 89). Cultural sensibilities should likewise be understood as residing not simply in the flesh or mind but rather as involving all the senses and cognition: kinesthetic practices, feeling, taste, touch, smell, hearing, thinking, seeing. This understanding entails that when training the body or the mind, it is not simply body or mind that changes; so does how we experience the world. Tanya Luhrmann has more recently shown that experiencing God in Evangelical Christian traditions is a skill specifically developed by “cultivating inner senses,” “seeing in the mind’s eye, hearing with the mind’s ear, smelling with the mind’s nose” (Luhrmann and Morgain 2012, 362). Experiencing God, goddesses, deities, spiritual, and other extraordinary phenomena thus involves learning and refining particular cultural sensibilities and inner senses.

For anthropologists these sensibilities are often so different to those they have hitherto perceived as sensible that it requires a dedicated learning process to comprehend and embody them – and many come to argue that comprehending spiritual phenomena requires radical engagements (Desjarlais 1992; Favret-Saada 1980; Knibbe and Droogers 2011; Jackson 1989; Turner 1992a, 2006). What is shared by these anthropologists, whether taking on the more formalized role of apprentice (e.g., Desjarlais 1992; Favret-Saada 1980) or simply immersing themselves in people’s lives and communities of practice (e.g., Knibbe and Droogers 2011; Luhrmann 1989), is their willingness to subject themselves to a radical engagement to learn what it takes to embody such sensibilities and beliefs.

Radically engaged anthropologists often have experiences interlocutors would deem spiritual (e.g., Desjarlais 1992; Luhrmann 2010; Turner 1992b). Such experiences inadvertently present the anthropologist with the question of the ontological status of spiritual phenomena; both within the anthropological discipline and in the field, the anthropologist’s position on this matter often becomes associated with issues of authority (Ewing 1994; Goulet and Miller 2007; Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015). Anthropological views roughly divide between those who argue that belief potentially undermines anthropological knowledge (e.g., Fortes 1987; Gell 1999) and those who hold that without believing in what interlocutors deem true and real, the anthropologist may miss out on significant elements of these people’s worlds (e.g., Ewing 1994; Goulet and Miller 2007; Turner 1992a, 1992b, 2003, 2006). Edith Turner has been an especially staunch and prolific proponent of this latter position, arguing that anthropologists who study spiritual communities should take the “fatal step of going native” in order to “achieve a breakthrough to an altogether different worldview to obtain certain material which can be gathered in no other way” (Turner 2003, 146-148). Based on her experiences of seeing a spirit during a
Ndembu ritual, Turner asserts that “there is spirit stuff. There is spirit affliction” (Turner 1992b, 9). Writing in the same era, and between these polar positions, Robert Desjarlais rejects the “mysticism” of his trances and divinations, instead describing them as “crystallised embodied forms of knowledge” to be “read” as embodied cultural sensibilities (Desjarlais 1992, 26). Where Desjarlais and others sidestep the question of ontological status by focusing on experience and how experience itself is always culturally contingent and infused (e.g., Favret-Saada 1980; Luhrmann 1989), Turner and proponents of the new anthropology of experience (e.g., Earle 2007; Goulet and Miller 2007) see their spiritual experiences as an expression of the ontological truth of spirits.

As an alternative to this discussion, Kim Knibbe and André Droogers have developed the position they term methodological luddism (2011, 285-291). Their idea is that through “serious play,” oscillating between the guiding principles “as if” and “as is,” the anthropologist can entertain what is often understood to be opposing world views simultaneously – such as the spiritual and the scientific – taking both to be equally plausible ontologically (Knippe and Droogers 2011, 284). During fieldwork, however, the “game” becomes real; “playing” is swiftly overshadowed by living according to the new world view (Knippe and Droogers 2011, 294-296). Issuing a sound warning against the potential personal consequences of seriously playing with alternate realities and their truth claims (Knippe and Droogers 2011, 298), Knibbe and Droogers analytically settle for the position of “as if,” the more serious “as is” being understood as a “necessary intermediate stage to learn a new way of ordering the world” which, as a game, also requires an end (Knippe and Droogers 2011, 294-296).

This position is not dissimilar to that of other radically engaged anthropologists, as they note by quoting Desjarlais’s reference to himself as “caught in a no-man’s-land betwixt and between cultures” (Desjarlais 1992, 18; Knippe and Droogers 2011, 295). But if the “game” necessarily ends with the analytical process, does the betwixt and betweenness then not also end? In refusing to continue to “entertain the doubts and indecision that are part of the habitus of a ‘believer’” (Knibbe and Droogers 2011, 295), as understandable as this refusal is, what might be lost? Let me be clear: my point is not to argue for methodological theism, nor is it to speak from some imagined “higher moral ground” of engagement; I am capable of neither, nor do I believe either necessarily enables clearer vision. The point is rather to echo the personal and professional trouble of staying in the in-between, while also advancing this position’s qualities as an anthropological disposition.

While the literature on spiritual and religious communities increasingly fills with descriptions of doubt (e.g., Hanks 2016; Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015; Pelkmans 2013), doubt has long held a conspicuously
shadowy position in accounts of how the anthropologist comes to understand spiritual phenomena. Instead, doubt is often presented as a cultural artefact from another world: that of science, secular or differently religious societies (e.g., Earle 2007; Turner 1992b) – a disposition of disbelief one must temporarily move beyond by learning the proper cultural sensibilities to craft valid analyses (e.g., Knibbe and Droogers 2011; Klin-Onor 2015). Or, doubt is regarded as an expression of the (young) fieldworker’s professional uncertainty (e.g., Cook 2010; Pollard 2009). Recently, doubt has made it into the literature on the epistemic potential of affective field experiences, as in Gerda Kupier’s (2019) description of how her own doubts about witchery attuned her to the ordinariness of both doubting and believing in witchcraft in Tanzania (see also Abdullah 2019; Cook 2010; Keilbart 2019). In fact, what the rising number of ethnographies discussing doubt highlights is exactly this point: that doubt is not a hindrance to spiritual or religious practices. Rather, they show how “doubt and belief are intertwined,” how “belief and disbelief implicate each other in important ways” (Pelkmans 2013, 2) – as they do, I would add, in methodology, ethics, and analysis. Yet, while recent work has positioned fieldworkers’ doubts in the literature on spiritual and religious matters as an affective state of epistemic potential, it stops short of exploring doubt’s potential as an enduring disposition of the anthropologist. As such a disposition, doubt may appear a quintessential problem when striving to establish the authority to speak on behalf of others and ensure that the seemingly dubious practices of both others and the anthropologist herself are rendered intelligible. What I am after here then, is not only to explore doubt as an epistemic affect in my research and writing (Stodulka, Selim and Mattes 2018), but also to argue for its broader anthropological potential. Staying with doubt can be a transformative experience that teaches us something significant about the experiences of people in the field, about experience itself, and about the value of doubt as a fundamental anthropological disposition.

Faking it

“I saw him.” We were in the car again, this time about five months after our first training session. Camille’s voice was quiet, unsurprised. “What?!” Karen and I were astounded. Camille had seen the dead boy, the 3-year-old son of another participant whose tragic death this woman had told us about the previous night. “He was playing amongst us,” Camille recounted. The spirit of a dead boy played amongst us while we were caught up in meditation and mindfulness training earlier that day. Really? Had she really seen him? Or was Camille’s vision of the three-year-old an emotional response to the horrific story of the car accident and all-too-early death of a child? Her way of coping with the unbearable possibility of children dying? These were her questions, and mine, and she did not know the answer.
Whether or not these were of a spiritual nature, as the training proceeded Camille was increasingly having experiences that seemed out of the ordinary. For some participants the training did not give rise to such experiences. Amongst those for whom it did, the type, frequency, and vividness of their experiences differed. How could this be? Independent of my musings, an interlocutor brought up this question during a class with a clairvoyant facilitator, whose response was adamant: “Everyone has these abilities as we are all spiritual beings.” Such abilities may, however, be distributed differently, she explained. “Someone might have a strong flair for clear vision, whilst another hears all her messages – and so it goes for all the senses,” conceding also that, “some people might be especially or specifically gifted: talented.” It seemed that all agreed with this explanation; some people simply had spiritual experiences more easily, frequently, and more vividly, a difference understood to result from “special abilities,” “talent,” or “flair.”

Tanya Luhrmann has referred to the flair or talent for experiencing the extraordinary as a person’s proclivity, “a difference in the capacity for and/or interest in having such unusual sensory experiences” (Luhrmann 2010, 228). She shows there is a connection between having vivid spiritual experiences and “someone’s willingness to allow him- or herself to be absorbed in internal or external sensory experience for its own sake” (Luhrmann 2010, 229). While uncertain about whether her abilities and experiences were spiritual or psychologically driven, Camille strove not to concern herself with defining her experiences – and succeeded at least when in the immediacy of them. In other words, she knew how to “surrender to the experience,” as we were repeatedly advised in all the training programs, surrendering to the joy, comfort, guidance, sensuality, and vibrant energy of her experiences, instead of trying to make sense of or classifying them as spiritual or not. “Does it matter?” she once asked me. And I began wondering.

We were barefoot, standing in a half-circle in the great white meditation hall, 22 of us and the female facilitator, with her back against the windows, instructing us in a bodily meditation. The sun’s rays fell through the tall windows behind her, tracing the polished wooden floorboards and casting a golden shine on the awkwardly composed centerpiece: a woven basket full of blue and turquoise silk blinds, a black bucket, and a role of tissue papers. The blinds, the facilitator explained, were so that we focused on our own processes. The role of tissue paper was for whatever bodily fluids should flow from these “processes” and for clearing our nostrils before it all began. The bucket was for ridding ourselves of paper and fluids.
It was an hour-long meditation, consisting of five phases; each phase came with music, and lasted ten minutes. Taken together they were composed to allow participants to liberate the self. In the second phase, catharsis, we were meant to “act out all your madness”: freeing all our forbidden and difficult feelings and emotions by acting them out. “Maybe you don’t feel there is any madness in there?” Or maybe you just didn’t know what physical expression to give it, the madness. “Fake it till you make it,” the facilitator smilingly advised us. Just play along, pretend, give it a voice, lend your body to imagined emotions, and real feelings will soon take over.

“Fake it.” The words provoked me. If one could just fake it, how would one ever know what were real experiences, and what were but powerful imitations? Yet, the facilitator’s words struck a chord, resonating awkwardly with my budding experience of the porosity of the boundaries between the “spiritual” and “psychological” that Camille’s question had set in motion. Maybe the spiritual and psychological were not mutually exclusive experientially? Maybe the uncertainty I had encountered in myself and interlocutors spoke to the complicity of spiritual experiences and doubt? Maybe cultivating cultural sensibilities also involved a grain of “faking it” that in effect “made them”? Maybe.

Eight months into my fieldwork, in June 2018, I noted in my diary I clearly sensed “in my body” that a silence retreat was approaching, continuing, “It will be hard work. But it is becoming increasingly clear to me that it won’t be fieldwork.” At least it was not fieldwork in classical terms; having spent eight months in the field, I felt I could afford to tune into another kind of fieldwork, dedicating myself to “surrender to the experiences.” So, I took considerably fewer notes on this retreat than before; I relaxed my multidirectional attention (to the others, to the content and form of the training, to the facilitators) and dedicated myself to playing along, taking things more to heart, giving my body over to the bodily meditations and exercises, accentuating feelings and experiences. I began to fake it.

On the third day of the five-day silent retreat, I was in my tent, by the murky, algae-covered lake, under the great weeping willows. It was pitch dark. The middle of the night. I woke up because three wolves were licking my feet. They were giant. Blue-grey. Deep blue-grey. I drew my childhood dagger at the sight of them, showing them its edge. They retreated slightly, displaying their teeth in hissing fierceness. And in respect. We became a pack that night. Sitting by my side, their heads reached my shoulder. They were mine, and I was theirs. We were one. And not only that.

It was a dream, and as I awoke, I had all but forgotten it. It came to me later in the day, and I loved the feel of the wolves visiting me – my dagger, our pack-ness – and recorded it with a sense of importance in my notebook. The next few days, I paid little attention to the dream or the wolves, and yet I had a
faint feeling that they were there. On the last day, everyone gathered in the meditation hall to break the silence, bit by bit, and finally share our experiences of the retreat. It was a sunny day, bright light reaching us from the large windows in the ceiling, but as I began my sharing, dark, gloomy clouds gathered above our heads and as the wolves entered the story a thunderstorm erupted. The experience was powerful, as if the elements were supporting and accentuating the importance of the dream. I felt the approval of the others and the facilitator. Karen was especially enthusiastic, sharing with me in the months to come wonderful, extraordinary images of women and wolves, lending me beautiful books on archetypes and old wolf fables, speaking about the power of the pack, communities, and fierceness, what the wolves meant to her. All these ideas resonated with me, with things I wanted to nurture, things I felt characterized me. Yet, rather than following my own and my interlocutors’ inclination to make sense of the wolves as symbols with particular meanings, and my impulse to categorize the experience as either spiritual or not, I instead “surrendered to the experience”; I decided to nurture the wolves by summoning them in meditation, imagining how they followed me as I walked, increasingly sensing how they were always there and could also lead me, if only I would follow them.

“Faking it” thus became a cue for developing a methodological path which enabled me to know how to “surrender to” and “stay with the experience” (see Varvantakis and Nolas 2019). Faking the experience, I realized, could be mimicking it; it could be an enactment of possible experiences, a shifting of perspective and bodily abilities to grasp the world of others (Taussig 1993; Smith 2017) – whether humans, wolves, or spirits. Faking it then is not fake; rather, it is potentially transformative. Engaging our mimetic faculty is how, in Michael Taussig’s words, we “explore difference, yield into and become Other” (Taussig 1993, xiii). By radically engaging myself as an embodied being, cultivating my inner senses and devoting my mimetic faculty to practices of “make-belief,” I learnt how to “surrender” to what were, to me, radically other experiences. In hindsight, this methodology provided me with the kinesthetic, sensorial, mental, and affective attitudes and abilities I needed to have extraordinary experiences; it provided me with the cultural sensibilities (Desjarlais 1992) to “surrender.” Rather than a surrender, however, I think of this motion as one of making myself available.

The idea of availability echoes James Davies’ understanding of the analytical potential enclosed in the personal feelings of dissonance and distress – the “culture shock” – often involved in anthropological fieldwork (2010a). While necessary at times, Davies also suggests that the strategies anthropologists use to “steady our sense of self” in times of disorientation and distressful fieldwork may “perform a self-protective function and thus become hard to disavow, impairing the ability to advance new theoretical formulation in the light of fresh observations” (Davies 2010, 85). This argument builds on William
James’ central empiricist assertion that all which science holds as facts must be “liable to modification in the course of future experience” (James 1912b, 5), an assertion radicalized not least by asking that scientists adopt “a believing attitude in religious matters” (James 1912b, 13). This attitude is central as it “gives the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions” (James 1912b, 362). To those acting with “the will to believe,” the worlds studied are other worlds than those accessible to the scientist unwilling to believe (James 1912b, 42-43). To “fake it” and “surrender” are acts born from a will to believe that makes one available to the experience of something radically other, of alterity, by not simply refusing to steady oneself personally with the known and familiar, but by setting aside the scientific pursuit of “generating data” (Jackson 1989, 135) and letting oneself and one’s beliefs be overthrown and reconfigured by “pure experience” (James 1912a). “[M]uch of our ethnographic research is carried out best when we are ‘out of our minds’” Johannes Fabian offers, “that is, while we relax our inner controls, forget our purposes, let ourselves go” (Fabian 2001, 31).

If “available,” if “out of our minds,” if setting aside scientific pursuits, does doubt then not necessarily succumb to belief? James dispels this as a necessary trajectory, commenting that adopting a “believing attitude” may happen “in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced” (1912b, 5). As such the will to believe entails a degree of doubt; doubt not only of the hitherto taken as factual world, but also of the new world’s ontological status – a status which yet new experiences may destabilize. Similarly, while I made myself available for transformations by engaging in something akin to serious play – a mimicry of the possible facilitated by newly learned sensibilities – this transformation was neither absolute nor definite. In the programs and with interlocutors, I at times felt proud, at others, ambivalent or shy about my wolves, but there were other circles and moments where they made me feel downright silly. Silly, that, in the first place, I had dreamt of and kept nurturing this imagery, wolves being one of the 1990s most iconic representations of New Age spirituality. Could I not have come up with something less embarrassingly stereotypical, a bit less nineties, a bit more unique and personal? Silly, that I felt such affinity with the wolves. Of course, I would; they were part of my sensory apparatus. I was “faking” and “making” them. Silly that I stubbornly kept bringing them and similar experiences into my academic work and conversations, despite often being met with skepticism and implicit formulations of how I had gone native. Nonetheless, there was something about the discrepancy between the implicit accusations within the discipline, and the intensity of the experience and people’s appreciation in the field, that in all its ensuing dissonance, uncertainty, and trouble felt significant. I thought of “staying with the experience” as a “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) –
for me not only an ethical motion but also a broader plea to cultivate doubt, analytically and as a professional disposition.

**At the edge of the sensible**

During the five-day silent retreat, when I was dreaming of wolves, Camille was having extraordinarily powerful experiences of “connecting with nature.” In the sharing circle at the end of the retreat, she described how, in the intensity of a storm, she had “roared with the elements” and felt a deep connection, beyond words. In sharing this story, I saw her steady herself, knuckles white, gripping the chair. “Now I get so dizzy again,” she whispered faintly, asking for a moment. “Ground yourself,” the facilitator empathetically implored. On our way back from the silent retreat, Camille voiced concerns about the increase in and intensity of the extraordinary experiences she was having, which often left her dizzy and unsettled. Not least, she was worried about how such mounting spirituality might affect her relationship with her husband, a doctor, who was “strictly atheist.” She feared that she might be “swept away” by spiritual transformations. Affected by her worries, we explored the matter together, and Karen advised Camille to seek a new spiritual teacher who could guide her through this expanding world. Camille appeared to be reassured this might help.

With the training coming to its end in the autumn of 2018, I visited Camille again to talk about her experiences since our first encounter. She told me she had now sought a “very spiritual man,” and while she was not sure she subscribed to his universe of angels and other spirits, a flock of butterflies had begun “coming to” her. She had only told three people about it, but had decided to tell me, as she felt it might prove important for my research. At first, she had only sensed one; a female admiral, a mostly brown butterfly with orange, white, and black markings – one of the most common butterflies in Denmark, as she noted, adding, “And then she looks like me. In a way it’s me in a butterfly version.”

The butterfly was not human size, but almost, and would come to Camille when Camille needed solace, support, or guidance. Her new spiritual teacher had pointed to other butterflies surrounding Camille and suggested that she asked the large female butterfly for her name. “Shakti,” the butterfly had responded, without speaking directly, but somehow letting Camille know, as Camille similarly wordlessly had asked her. The other butterflies were less vivid for Camille, Shakti being the primary presence. Camille felt she could literally lean on Shakti, and the butterfly might then stroke her on the cheek or hair. However, regardless of the vividness of the experiences and her affirmation that, “It IS a butterfly”, Camille remained hesitant about describing these experiences as spiritual.
Why this continued hesitation in the face of such powerful, extraordinary experiences? Camille explained it as partly stemming from the unease her childhood experiences of malevolent spirits had left with her, partly from her worry about how it might affect her relationship with her husband, partly from the difficulty of articulating these experiences to make them intelligible for others, and partly from the mismatch between spiritual experiences and the perceived secularity of Danish society. In Denmark, it mattered if one classified oneself as spiritual, she felt, and it was in her experience seldom unproblematic. While she said at times it did not matter to her whether her experiences were spiritual or psychologically driven, she also described how she kept circling back to ponder this issue.

In my eyes, this enduring doubt speaks to a more fundamental disjuncture: that between experience itself and its afterlife. Anthropologists and phenomenologists commonly refer to the difference between immediate non-reflexive experience and its retrospective and reflexive counterpart using the German terms *Erfahrung* and *Erfahrung*, (e.g., Buber 2004)." Doubt sneaks in through the cracks when one slides from one modus of experience to another – from “being in the experience” to trying to make sense of it, as my interlocutors explained – however fleeting the slide. This slide is often understood, by anthropologists and interlocutors, as occurring in attempts to articulate experiences to others. According to Roy Wagner, doubt is the reflex of subjectivity, caused by the inescapable disjuncture between an “internal self-perception” and the “external means” at this self’s disposal for communicating experiences and perceptions (Wagner 1991, 39). Or, as John Berger eloquently puts it, experience simply “outstrip our vocabulary” (1987, 77; Gammeltoft and Bregnbæk, this issue). Yet doubt does not need either reflection or language; it travels with the body, awakening in the experience of the particularity of one’s embodied perspective and this perspective’s difference to that of other bodies (Dalsgård 2018). Doubt then also arises with grounding, as when Camille reaches to steady herself. It brings her back to herself as multiple, present in a room with others who are themselves multiple: an experience that is immediate. Doubt, therefore, resides within the immediacy of the experience of the self as different to others and as in itself multiple.

Describing his understanding of the self as multiple, James remarks, “there may be as much difference between our selves as between self and other” (James 1950, 294; Gammeltoft and Bregnbæk this issue). This alterity of the self is a phenomenological condition; our bodies can never become objects to ourselves in the same way as they are to others. We are, for example, never able to see our own face, only renditions of it in mirrors and images, and this status of the self as never fully objectifiable speaks of our fundamental otherness to ourselves (Leder 1990). The alterity of the self is also a significant experience both for my interlocutors and myself: one of becoming conscious of the multiplicity of our
selves and of “what they are up to,” as Camille once put it (maybe playing their part in faking and making extraordinary worlds, just to tear them all down in the afterlife of experience?). While it might be an existential condition that one never fully knows others or is knowable to them, what I am suggesting here is that one’s own experience of oneself is likewise never fully knowable: an experience which destabilizes certainty and (re)opens a space for doubt.

**In lieu of a conclusion**

Where does this land us in terms of methodology, ethics, analysis? Throughout this article, I’ve upheld the value of a radically engaged anthropology; i.e. engagement in affective and bodily mimetic practices with a willingness to believe, and using significant affective experiences alongside traditional empirical material. The article speaks specifically to the anthropological discussions about the ontological status of spiritual phenomena and the associated debate regarding anthropological authority. But more broadly speaking, my argument is epistemological, contributing to literature on the analytical potential of the bodily and affective experiences of the anthropologist (e.g., Davies and Spencer 2010; Stodulka, Dinkelarkar and Tajib 2019). By tracing the doubts of researcher and interlocutors, I have strived to evoke the analytical, methodological, and ethical value of doubt as an anthropological disposition.

Allow me here to explicate them: doubt is methodologically valuable as it allows some phenomena to defy our comprehension (Stoller 2004, 3) while insisting on how we may still gain access to them, “faking” them till they appear at the edge of the sensible, yet within the grasp of experience. As part of experience, such phenomena may become subject to analysis. Doubt then is analytical valuable as it does not rest with divisions between, for instance, real and fake, does not settle with any separation, but rather stays with the trouble of unruly experience. Where anthropological discussions have tended to either evade or settle the question of the ontological status of spiritual matters, this question remains – to interlocutors, society and the sciences – persistent, irresolvable, and problematic (see Pelkmans 2013). Rather than settling or evading this issue then, I have suggested sustained doubt as an ethically sound path to walk in this field of contested truth claims, one that stays clear of judgement yet engages the issue heads on. More broadly speaking, by staying with the trouble of doubt – in fieldwork, analysis, and writing – doubt may become a transformative experience that destabilizes both ontological certainty and the alleged analytical invalidity of the radically engaged anthropologist. While radical engagement cannot and should not be expected of every anthropologist (Luhrmann 2010), in any field (Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015) maybe doubt could? My argument then is a plea for cultivating doubt as an enduring anthropological disposition.
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Fieldwork was carried out from mid-2017 to early-2019 and was based around a few spiritual, mindfulness, and meditation training programs, their participants, and facilitators. The programs consisted of five to ten modules, spread out over a few months more than a year, each module lasting between one to five days. All participants, including the ethnographer, were expected to develop daily meditation practice, engage in study groups, and do mindfulness, meditation, channeling, visualization, and other spiritual exercises. The programs further involved trance mediumship and clairvoyant readings, meditative dancing, silence retreats, nature meditation, yoga, shamanistic drum dance, and reading of literature on meditation, mindfulness, spiritual practices, and beliefs. Additionally, most participants independently sought out alternative treatments and communities such as healing, body therapies, clairvoyant people and shamans, and, as part of my radical engagement, so did I. Furthermore, I conducted 21 formal two- to three-hour-long interviews with eight interlocutors in their homes. These visits generally lasted three to five hours, while a few times I stayed the night, participating in family meals, walks in the woods, and the like. On other occasions, I simply met these eight and several other interlocutors for informal interviews and participant observation. I moreover, read the course literature of all programs, explored Danish popular and otherwise media portrayals of spirituality, meditation and mindfulness practices and used photography and drawing to capture my sense of places and my own experiences and sense of personal change. The fieldwork was conducted within the auspices of the project “Optimization: The Laboratory of the Self” and, as such, also involved collaboration with two other anthropologist, Dorthe Brogård Kristensen who researched self-tracking in fitness centers and Margit Anne Petersen who studied micro- and macro-dosing of psychodelic substances.

The basic method taught was a “gradual, step-wise meditation” which included eight steps: arriving, grounding, relaxation, cultivating heartfulness, focused attention, open attention, panoramic attention, and finally sharing the “fruits of the meditation” with someone specific or just letting it flow to “whomever and all.”

Some of these training methods and literature proved more helpful than others – a fact which seemed to rely on a mixture of people’s proclivities and their broader cultural preferences and demographic position. For instance, Camille, Karen, and I were all similarly inspired by the readings and movement practices, where several others in the same program felt less moved by either, preferring seated meditation. One of the other programs I followed, appealed less to me personally, exhibiting a more business-like model, and offering readings and methods focusing on positive affirmation and psychology, without the depth, Camille, Karen, Linn, Laura, and I found to be crucial. This course was, however, very popular, especially amongst entrepreneurs, independent and well-known businesspeople.

My fieldwork and analytical practices became inspired by these central emic metaphors (“faking it” “stay with the experience” and “surrendering”) similarly to how Varvantakis and Nolas (2019), within the multimodal genre, have used metaphors generated through field encounters as epistemic and methodological cues.

In a similar vein, Susan Greenwood has described how it was only by “holding in abeyance” her “analytical, classifying mind” (Greenwood 2014: 198) while having spiritual experiences that she was able to explore the spiritual realms of the “nature religions” she studied in Britain. Referring to this experiential form as magical consciousness, “a holistic intuitive perspective,” she argues that it does not simply reside in the brain but in the whole body, feelings, and sensations (Greenwood 2014, 198). Belief, in her view, is secondary; what matters is the experience of this magical consciousness.

“Whilst participating in a magical aspect of consciousness the question of belief is irrelevant, ‘belief’ is not a necessary condition to communicate with an inspired world” (Greenwood 2009, 140).

* In Hinduism *Shakti* is the female principle of divine energy, at times personified as the supreme deity. Camille explained that she was “not conscious” of potentially already knowing this, but having looked it up, she quietly marveled at how the meaning resonated with her experience of the butterfly.

* Danish has an equivalent to this German differentiation, in the words *oplevelse* and *erfaring* – *oplevelse* being the one you had to stay with, according to my interlocutors, while *erfaring*, as necessary and useful as it was, often would also get in the way of such immediate experience.