

Research Proposal: The Internal Dimension of Buddhist Meditation Practice

Tentative Proposed Start Date: July 3rd

Location of Research: Toronto

Introduction:

From 2012 to 2017, the number of adults practicing meditation increased three-fold in the United States (Clarke et al). These numbers have steadily increased in recent years, with many global universities and workplaces integrating meditation into their wellness facilities.

Popular meditation practices—namely mindfulness, loving-kindness, and Zen—are rooted in Buddhist philosophy. Proponents of such practices uphold that meditation fosters a truer and clearer state of mind—one that alters how one fundamentally perceives the world and their place within it. If meditation alters the character and contents of mental states, it deserves to be called a phenomenological venture.

Formalized by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology is the study of subjective experience. Since Husserl's conception, phenomenology has notably become a popular qualitative research method. Herein, researchers ask questions designed to understand the first-person experience of participants.

Despite the evident theoretical intersection, the phenomenological experience of meditation practice is only beginning to gain traction in the literature. Jared Lindahl and Willoughby Britton's *The Varieties of Contemplative Experience* project is one notable example of an attempt to understand the subjective dimension of mediation (Lindahl and Britton). Granted, their approach is more of the exception than the rule. Scientific studies on meditation sway in favor of quantitative rather than qualitative methods, predominantly outlining its various psycho-social health benefits. Quantitative mindfulness research has been critiqued for substituting somewhat vague traits like heightened awareness and calmness with the meditative state, perhaps for lack of deep qualitative insight into what being meditative entails (Frank and Marken). Therefore, this study aims to address the current gap in the literature, by qualitatively observing how mainstream Buddhist and Buddhist-inspired meditation practices alter the perceived sense of self, objecthood, and emotional regulation of sustained meditators.

New meditators especially stand to gain from understanding the phenomenology of meditation. Referring to their mental states, they often ask their teachers: am I there yet? This study's results may tackle the solipsistic barrier in answering that question. By analyzing testimonies of experienced meditators, one may be able to triangulate the common positive, negative, and neutral facets of the phenomenological meditative experience. Thus far, few have tried to document the perhaps disorienting nature of experiencing phenomenological shifts (Lindahl et al. "I Have This Feeling").

I am invigorated by the prospects of this research because meditation has altered my life for the better. But I, like new meditators, also find myself questioning if I am referring to the same mental state as my teachers. The following research project will help address that quandary. And not only will I be learning more about meditation, but another one of my passions: philosophy. The works of Edmund Husserl may yet enhance our collective appreciation for the phenomenology-meditation nexus.

Finally, I am excited about conducting qualitative research. In my high school IB Global Politics class, I led a focus group discussion on how infrastructural ventures impact community development. Here, I learned how conversation can powerfully bring pre-reflective unformalized thoughts into the light (Høffding and Martiny).

Interdisciplinary and/or International Focus:

This research project embodies both the interdisciplinary and international spirit of the Laidlaws Scholars program. In pairing scientific study methods with religion and philosophy, I intend to challenge the traditional dichotomy between arts and science. Furthermore, the research is internationally-oriented in a few senses. Firstly, it unites Asian and Western philosophical thought. Secondly, meditation constitutes a part of the international zeitgeist, with an ever-increasing number of people who seek to better understand the practice. And lastly, studying altered phenomenological states bears relevance for the *human* experience, which knows of no national borders.

Research Questions:

1. How does Buddhist or Buddhist-inspired meditation practice alter the phenomenological state—specifically concerning the perceived status of self, objecthood, and emotional regulation—of experienced meditators?
2. How do meditators respond to potential meditation-induced changes in phenomenological states?
3. How do mediators' phenomenological states corroborate or contradict ideas voiced by Edmund Husserl?

Methods + Timeline:



Figure 1. Research timeline

My research entails conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals who regularly practice Buddhist or Buddhist-inspired meditation. The process will be broken into 6 stages:

1. Review of literature + personal training = May 15 - July 3

I will scope Buddhist secondary literature, existing phenomenological meditation studies, and the philosophies of Edmund Husserl. This will give me the required background for finalizing my interview questions.

During the preparatory period, I will also complete the following online courses: The University of Amsterdam's [Qualitative Research Methods](#) and MIT's [Qualitative Research Methods: Data Coding and Analysis](#). These courses will help streamline the data collection and analysis periods.

2. Pilot study + refine questionnaire = June 15 - July 3

Next, a series of open-ended questions will be designed to catalog changes in phenomenological perspectives from gaining meditation experience. Sample questions include:

- 1) Do you feel like you have a self? If not, how does it feel like to not have a self?
- 2) Does your consciousness feel intensified or different during practice? (Pekala)
If yes, how long can you sustain that state?
- 3) How do you relate to the objects around you?
- 4) Do you feel like you can control your emotions? Do your emotions feel one with or distinct from you?

Given that phenomenological knowledge can be hard to convey concretely, a pilot study will be conducted with 3-4 meditators within the University of Toronto's Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health unit. The pilot sample's feedback will be incorporated into improving question clarity and directionality, minimizing demand characteristics (Pekala).

3. Recruit participants = July 3 - July 24 (**Official Start of Active Laidlaw 6 Weeks**)

Potential interview candidates will be approached through notable meditation centers in Toronto—including Shambhala Meditation Center, Meditation Toronto, and Hoame. I will solicit the help of the centers' leaders, who can present frequent meditators at the centers with an opportunity to participate in this study. From there, a chain-referral system will be used to recruit further participants until saturation is reached within the data. A sample size of 10-15 individuals will be ideal. Inclusion criteria will parallel those of Lindahl et al's 2014 study:

1. A minimum of 18 years of age
2. "a regular meditation practice in one or more recognized Buddhist traditions"

3. “a meditation-related experience that was significant, unexpected,...or was associated with physiological or psychological change” (Lindahl et al. “A Phenomenology”)

Depending on the availability and willingness of these candidates, public social media calls and online meditation communities may be utilized.

4. Data collection = July 3 - July 24

Data collection will happen concurrently with recruitment. Once a participant demonstrates interest, an interview data will be scheduled. Time slots will be organized using [Calendly.com](https://calendly.com).

Before the interviews begin, participants will be given an overview of the aims and procedure of the project. They will be asked to sign a consent form and fill out a demographic questionnaire. Then, the participant and I will engage in a semi-structured interview for 60-90 minutes. The pre-prepared questions (see Appendix 1. for a working list) will be used as a starting point, while raising follow-up questions based on the natural evolution of the conversation. Ideally, interviewer and interviewee will co-generate insight into phenomenology (Høffding and Martiny).

5. Data analysis = July 24 - July 31

A [paid service, Rev.](#) will be used to transcribe the interviews. The participants' names will be replaced for a pseudonym in the transcripts. An initial code will be prepared using the Nvivo software, based on intuitive post-interview reflections. The code will later be refined through line-by-line inspection of transcripts, hierarchizing themes, sub-themes, and context.

Since I have a background in meditation practice, I am aware of my potential confirmation bias in extracting positive themes. This will be accounted for in co-examining results with my supervisor and asking at each stage of analysis whether the data could suggest a converse reality.

6. Report writing = July 31 - August 14 (**End of Active Laidlaw 6 Weeks**)

The final stage entails synthesizing the literature review and experimental thematic analysis.

Supervisor + External Help:

My research advisor is Dr. Shafi Bhuiyan, professor in the Global Health department at the University of Toronto. Dr. Bhuiyan will primarily guide me through the logistics and analysis of qualitative research, as he used similar techniques for his P.h.D thesis.

During the preparatory phase in my methodology—from May 15th to July 3rd—my research adviser had agreed to give me training, over a series of Zoom sessions, on how to conduct qualitative interviews fruitfully, efficiently, and ethically. During the intensive research period, he will check in with me on a weekly basis over Zoom. He will also assist me through the data analysis period.

The only other individual involved in my research will be a hired transcriber from a paid service called [Rev](#). The company has a strict confidentiality policy, so there will be no disclosure of participants' data.

REB Status:

I submitted my REB application, after my supervisor reviewed it. I have officially received REB approval, as of the 8th of June 2023.

Safety and Ethics:

Concurrent with the REB process, the research methodology has been refined to prioritize the safety and comfort interviewees. During the research period, consent will be solicited at each relevant stage, and interviewees will have the full freedom to withdraw at any point.

Interview recordings, forms, and questionnaires will be stored in a password-protected cloud service called [Sync.com](#). Once they have been uploaded to Sync.com, all hard copies will be deleted or shredded.

Outcomes:

1. Enhance understanding of the phenomenological state achieved when cultivating a long-term practice.
2. Assist in unraveling the emotional experience of undergoing phenomenological shifts during meditation.
3. Contextualize results within the works of Edmund Husserl and broader secondary literature.
4. Equip mediation students and teachers with useful information for updating pedagogical strategies aimed at achieving the goal states of meditation.
5. Provide the meditation research community with increasingly concrete ways of defining the meditative state.
6. Exemplify the need for more interdisciplinary approaches in the meditation research space.

Works Cited

- Clarke, Taniya, et al. National Center for Health Statistics, Hyattsville, Maryland, 2018, *Use of Yoga, Meditation, and Chiropractors Among U.S. Adults Aged 18 and Over*, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db325-h.pdf>.
- Frank, Pascal, and Marieke Marken. "Developments in Qualitative Mindfulness Practice Research: A Pilot Scoping Review." *Mindfulness*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2021, pp. 17–36., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-021-01748-9>.
- Høffding, Simon, and Kristian Martiny. "Framing a Phenomenological Interview: What, Why and How." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2015, pp. 539–564., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-015-9433-z>.
- Lindahl, Jared R., and Willoughby B. Britton. "I Have This Feeling of Not Really Being Here." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, 2019, pp. 157–182.
- Lindahl, Jared R., et al. "A Phenomenology of Meditation-Induced Light Experiences: Traditional Buddhist and Neurobiological Perspectives." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 4, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00973>.
- Lindahl, Jared R., et al. "Fear and Terror in Buddhist Meditation." *Journal of Cognitive Historiography*, vol. 7, no. 1-2, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jch.22807>.
- Pekala, Ronald J. "The Phenomenology of Meditation." *The Psychology of Meditation*, edited by Michael A. West, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, pp. 59–80.
- Smith, David Woodruff. "Phenomenology." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edited by Edward N. Zalta, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.

Appendix 1. Model Questions

1. Do you have a self?
2. If you have experienced selflessness, what did that feel like?
3. Where do you physically most feel your self's presence? When do you most feel your self's absence?
4. During practice, does your consciousness ever feel intensified? (Pekala)
5. When practicing, do you feel more awake? How can you tell?
6. How do you relate to the objects around you? Are they one with or distinct from you?
7. Do you feel like you can control your emotions? Do your emotions feel one with or distinct from you?
8. What cues do you use to assess whether you are being meditative or not?
9. If you have experienced phenomenological changes since beginning your practice, how did you come to accept them?
10. Do you feel like you are closer to reality when you are meditating?