The Internal Dimension of Buddhist Meditation Practices: An Experimental Phenomenological Study

Background:

From 2012 to 2017, the number of adults practising meditation increased three-fold in the United States (Clarke et al.). These numbers have steadily increased in recent years, with many institutions integrating meditation into their wellness spaces. Popular meditation techniques—including mindfulness, loving-kindness, and mantra—have deep roots in the Buddhist contemplative tradition. Such practices have become so popular that they now belong to a billion-dollar industry (Wieczner).

A quick survey of introductions to meditation on popular health websites suggests that meditation is primarily a tool for managing stress. Practice is promoted for bringing about peace and relaxation, while reducing the frequency and intensity of negative thoughts. However, for either lack of data or perceived significance, very few authors discuss the phenomenological experience of meditation. What is happening on the first-person side when we meditate? For prospective meditators, lack of phenomenological insight creates a cloud of ambiguity around what they are actually signing up for.

Proponents uphold that meditation practice fundamentally alters how they perceive the conditions and contents of their conscious awareness. Although the goals and styles of practices are diverse, meditation appears to be largely united in cultivating a non-judgmental and concentrated awareness of the chosen object of meditation. By analysing and classifying qualitative assessments of 50 types of meditative activities, Sparby and Sacchet propose that "meditation is at least one of several intentional awareness activities such as [to] observe, focus, release, produce, imagine, and move, underpinned and unified by the activity of awareness of awareness" (Sparby and Sacchet 14). Their definition places added emphasis on stabilising meta-cognitive awareness, which is awareness of awareness.

Buddhist teachers suggest that upon adopting this point of view, meditation opens practitioners up to the non-dual nature of consciousness (Goldstein). While the contents of consciousness may follow the subject-object dichotomy, consciousness itself lacks duality. There is no here and there when describing the condition of consciousness. Zoran Josipovic, founder of the Non-duality Institute, proposes that "consciousness-as-such knows itself to be conscious or aware, directly, unmediated by conceptual or symbolic representations or re-representations, and without needing to structure this knowing as subject-object duality" (Josipovic).

Buddhists take the non-dual nature of consciousness to disprove the existence of an innate and unchanging self, resting within and animating persons. In the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the Buddha explores how the self cannot be reduced to feelings, perceptions, mental conceptualizations, and consciousness—all of which are constantly changing with the exception of the latter in its non-dual state ("The Denial of Self as 'Right View'" 98).
In mainstream society, since meditation practices are primarily embraced for their therapeutic benefits, the altered worldviews underpinning these effects remain empirically understudied

(Frank and Marken). Does theory actually correspond with changes in worldview? What do these altered phenomenological states tangibly imply at the level of experience? What are the macroscopic and microscopic dimensions of these changes in worldview? How do these changes sustain on and off the cushion, across the span of one's practice? How are phenomenological changes giving rise to the psychotherapeutic benefits of meditation? To scratch the surface of answering these questions, we must develop a richer phenomenological account of meditation practices.

Phenomenology, as founded by Edmund Husserl, is the study of subjective experience. Phenomenologists suspend judgements about how the objective world operates, instead focusing on describing experience as it appears to them. Epoché is Husserl's technical term for bracketing judgement and truth claims about the real world. Exercising epoché allows phenomenologists to notice the role that consciousness plays in cognitive processing, as opposed to taking the world and its functioning for granted. Meanwhile, eidetic variation is the intentional variation of the contents of subjective experience (Høffding and Martiny 7). When combined, participants can enhance their understanding of the intersubjective structures that remain constant across all conscious experiences (Gallagher and Zahavi 28).

Some scholars have likened meditation to the Husserlian phenomenological method (Depraz). Perhaps Husserl might have approved of such attempts, given his high praise for Buddhist meditation, calling the German translation of an ancient Pali text "a splendid gem" that he "could not tear [himself] away in spite of otherwise pressing tasks." He added that Buddhism demands "a vigorous and unparalleled, elevated frame of mind" (Hanna 367-368). Yet, while the non-judgmental introspective nature of meditation bears many parallels to Husserlian phenomenological reduction, their fundamental purposes differ. The former primarily serves spiritual, health-related, and soteriological purposes, while the latter is a scientific method of studying conscious experiences (Stone and Zahavi 179).

Since Husserl's conception, phenomenology has evolved into a popular qualitative research method. Herein, researchers ask questions designed to understand the first-person experience of participants. Jack Kornfield conducted a landmark phenomenological study of retreat-goers in 1979 (Kornfield). *The Varieties of Contemplative Experience (VCE)* project is another notable endeavour in detailing the subjective dimension of mediation (Lindahl et al. "The varieties"). Meanwhile, Petitmengin et al. launched a campaign to systematically document the granularities of meditation through micro-phenomenological interviewing techniques (Petitmengin et al.).

Granted, these approaches are more of the exception than the rule. Scientific studies on meditation sway in favour of quantitative rather than qualitative methods, predominantly outlining psycho-social benefits. Quantitative mindfulness research has been critiqued for conflating 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 31-34).

This has created an explicit demand for phenomenological data among the greater meditation research community. Recently, the editors of *Nature Mental Health* published an editorial calling for an intervention in mindfulness research, encouraging researchers to develop more nuanced theories about the meditative experience. ("Mindfulness research needs an intervention"). Davidson and Kaszniak analysed the biggest methodological challenges facing mindfulness and meditation research, reporting that elusive definitions of both concepts would hamper the precision of future research (Davidson and Kaszniak). Sparby and Sacchet explain that understanding the phenomenology of meditation is "not only an important step to improve the overall quality of meditation research but also an essential part of its scientific maturation" (Sparby and Sacchet 2).

Furthermore, subjective reports assist in unpacking the mechanisms by which meditation impacts its participants. As pointed out by Faber et al., "subjective data…could be very useful for comparisons between studies, and for sorting out brain states of different cognitions and of depth or quality of meditation, thereby more exactly identifying the involved brain functions" (Faber et al. 262). Even on its own, phenomenological data can form the basis of theories about the psychological mechanisms involved in meditation. Britton et al. generated a novel concept map of all the self-related processes underpinning Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction interventions. Their hypotheses encompass great depth and variety in how the self enacts among meditators (Britton et al.), suggesting that the mechanisms involved might be far more idiosyncratic than theoretically expected. To add to the ambiguity, Buddhist teachings on consciousness can be difficult to interpret, given that lay readers do not yet have the experiential understandings to confirm or deny them. Even technical writing on a topic can be hard to grasp. As Josipovic notes, language is inherence dualistic, employing a subject-object syntax. Hence, reports of non-duality can seem entirely counterintuitive (Josipovic). Detailed phenomenological descriptions can help lay readers tangibly understand what is meant by elusive concepts.

Phenomenological data also proves useful for meditation teachers. While many meditation instructors have their own strategies and conceptualizations to help their students reach particular subjective mental states, these are often neither formalised nor systematised (Petimengin et al. 57). Perhaps the reason why some people have positive experiences with meditation while others do not is because they have not encountered the same phenomenological changes (Sparby and Sacchet 4).

With these greater pedagogical implications in mind, this study uniquely targets demographics that have barely been reached in the literature. Existing phenomenological research on meditation has frequently been conducted with contemplative masters, who have accumulated more than 10,000 hours of practice. Yet, when developing teaching mechanisms, one ought to understand how phenomenological changes manifest and evolve alongside one's practice. Likewise, interviewing lay practitioners helps provide a practical reference for what other lay individuals interested in meditation can expect from developing a practice.

Given the evident increasing societal interest in meditation, such information may be critical

in helping individuals make informed decisions about choosing to integrate meditation in their life. Lindahl and Britton (2019) document potential negative consequences arising from the no-self teaching in popular Buddhist meditation practices. Some individuals report losing their entire identity and ability to experience any kind of positive emotion. As the authors flag, “those advocating for no-self are basing their claims on normative conceptions of the Buddhist path, rather than on a body of established empirical research” (Lindahl and Britton 179). Hence, to safely deploy the philosophical lenses offered via meditation, the scientific community must understand the contours of meditative experiences. Which interpretations of teachings are accurate representations of people’s felt experiences and where might they lead people astray?

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 quality of mind and sense of self of Western lay practitioners.

Methods:

Approach:
This study takes on an experimental phenomenological approach. In accordance with Lars-Gunnar Lundh's interpretation, experimental phenomenology is taken to explore "the effects of intentional variations of subjective experience" (Lundh 498). It requires both the independent and dependent variable to be phenomenological in nature (497). Meditation is an optimal target for experimental phenomenological analysis because it is a necessarily subjective practice. The aim of the experimental phenomenological interview is to better understand the characteristics and conditions of phenomenal experience. While this was the primary focus of each interview, descriptive phenomenological dimensions were considered when participants reflected on how they responded to phenomenological changes.

Sampling:
Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 traditional or secularised Buddhist meditators around Toronto. Participants were approached through three leading meditation centres in the city, each representing a different Buddhist tradition. The centres' leaders presented regular meditators with the opportunity to participate in this study. From there, a chain-referral system was used to recruit further participants until saturation was reached within the data.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were inspired by Lindahl et al.'s 2014 study:

Inclusion:
1. A minimum of 18 years of age
2. "a regular meditation practice in one or more recognized Buddhist traditions" (Lindahl et al. "A Phenomenology")

Exclusion:
1. Significant experience from non-Buddhist traditions

On the basis of these criterias, two interviews were excluded for participants being notably influenced by non-Buddhist traditions.

For a study to qualify as taking an experimental phenomenological approach, Lundh necessitates that the study sample have international variation (Lundh 498). Consequently, interview participants were chosen across Buddhist traditions with varying years of practice. Some had as little as 6 years of experience, while others had as many as 52. Since all of the participants were lay practitioners, they had engaged in a diverse range of former and present occupations. Variety in life experience also allows us to understand the sustainability of meditative changes.

Data collection:
Interviews were held over the course of 5 weeks, with each individual interview lasting between 50 - 70 minutes. Interviews were held at the meditation centres, at mutually convenient locations, or over Zoom depending on the participants' availability.

The interview questions were influenced by Lindahl et al. (2017) and Petimengin et al. (2019). See Appendix 1. for a comprehensive list of questions. While the extent of coverage varied, three topics were invariably addressed in each interview: 1. overview of the participants' practice; 2. phenomenological characterization of the meditative state; and 3. impacts on their sense of self. Follow-up questions were posed based on the organic progression and emphases of the conversation. Initial questions tended to be broadly qualitative, providing the opportunity for new lines of inquiry to emerge. Follow-ups tended to be micro-phenomenological, as intended by Petimengin at al., to clarify finer details and inflections in experience.

The interview philosophy was guided by Høffding and Martiny (2015). Rather than asking the practitioners to reenact their experience of meditation, insight was co-generated between interviewer and interviewee (Høffding and Martiny 3). In fact, reenactment of experience was inviable because participants were not able to achieve the meditative state with precision on cue, especially when their minds were immersed in the interview process. Most participants documented their perspectives by analysing specific memories or recurrent characteristics of their meditative experience.

Høffding and Martiny position the interviewer as a midwife in the conversation rather than a neutral diagnostician. Their interview framework encourages the interviewer to adopt a dual perspective: 1. empathetic second-person viewpoint when interpreting the interviewee's words; 2. attentive first-person viewpoint when analysing gestures, styles of speech, and context (Høffding and Martiny 10-22). This is consistent with Varela and Shear (1999)'s foundational philosophy on first-person methodologies: "grounded on a sensitivity to the subtle indices of his interlocutor's phrasing, bodily language and expressiveness, seeking for indices (more or less explicit) which are inroads into the common experiential ground" (Varela and Shear).

Researcher Background and Biases:
All interviews and analysis were conducted by Mridula Sathyanarayanan. The lead researcher has a background in Buddhist meditation, practising mindfulness and loving-kindness for over three years. This pre-existing background proved very useful for framing phenomenological questions. However, in order to account for potential positive biases, coding structures, themes, and sub-themes were consulted with Dr. Shafi Bhuiyan. The latter is affiliated with the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, with extensive experience in qualitative data analysis. His non-expertise in meditation practices enhanced the data-driven nature of the analysis.

The lead researcher identifies as non-religious. However, participants' religious beliefs were respected throughout the study. Their testimonials were analysed from phenomenological and sociological standpoints, rather than theistic or veridical ones. As suggested by Thompson (2006), “intersubjective experience is the common terrain of both science and religion, and it is poorly understood when fractured along the lines of a subject/object (or fact/value) dichotomy” (Thompson, “Neurophenomenology”).

Data Analysis:

Data processing occurred simultaneously with data collection. Each interview was transcribed using an automated transcription service. Transcripts were verified manually and anonymized, inserting a pseudonym for the participant’s name and eliminating all other personally-identifiable information. Three interviews were coded line-by-line using methods prescribed by Susan Silbey in her course on Qualitative Research Methods. Silbey’s approach is rooted in Grounded Theory but allows researchers to include a number of deductive codes from the initial literature review (Silbey).

These intuitive codes used in the initial review were later synthesised into a codebook. Subsequently, all 12 interviewers were coded with the same distinctions in mind. Memos were recorded immediately after the interview, during the coding stage, and when summarising each transcript. Patterns were abstracted from the most dominant codes and memos, which were eventually organised into themes and sub-themes.

Ethics:

The research methodology and appendices were approved by the University of Toronto Human Participant Ethics Board. The safety and comfort of interviewees was prioritised at each stage of the research process. Consent was provided by all interviewees, with most signing a physical form and some virtual participants opting for verbal confirmation. Interviewees had the full freedom to withdraw at any point during data collection. Interview recordings, forms, and questionnaires were stored in a password-protected cloud service. Once they were digitised, all hard copies were deleted or shredded.

Results and Discussion:

Only a few representative quotes were chosen to support themes observed in the study for brevity. However, all points mentioned had multiple (typically at least 5 or 6) quotes from different participants to support them. On many occasions, it is explicitly mentioned that nearly all participants were in agreement.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Overview (N =12)	
Participant Age Range	37 - 93
Gender Breakdown	Male: 4 / 12 Female: 7 / 12 Non-Binary: 1 / 12
Years of Practice Range	6 - 52
Highest Level of Education Breakdown	High School: 1 / 12 Undergraduate Education: 5 / 12 Graduate Education: 6 / 12

Describing Meditation:

The Buddhist contemplative tradition encompasses a range of diverse practices. Given that the participants had backgrounds in different Buddhist traditions, their regular practices also varied. They included, but were not limited to: mindfulness, loving-kindness, tonglen, and mantra. The uniting characteristic across these practices is the attempt at holding and sustaining a particular mental posture. This is most evident in mindfulness meditation, where practitioners are instructed to observe a particular mental object in a non-judgemental manner. Typically, this object of mindfulness meditation is the breath. A number practitioners reported using the breath as an object to calm the mind, because of its accessibility in any given moment. Once their concentration has intensified or become fully established, they are comfortable to pivot to other objects: sounds, sights, bodily experience, interoceptive stimuli etc. Participant Gamma states that initially, “it's a narrow point of focus…and then it's more inclusive of your environment, as well as your mind.”

While non-judgmental awareness is the core tenant of mindfulness practice, other meditative practices also prescribe a subtler version of non-judgmental awareness. For instance, practitioners are prompted to monitor what is happening within their mind and body when they attempt to bring the feeling of metta (loving-kindness) into their conscious purview. Participant Echo summarises this mental posture as “being able to cope with whatever comes up by just acknowledging that that's what's happening.” Participant Juliet adds that meditation has helped her “step back and say, just be the observer right now. Don't get churned up, just

step back and watch." Nearly all participants described the importance of non-judgemental awareness in some capacity, when defining the project of meditation.

The purpose of meditation is not to eliminate your problems. Many participants stressed that this was a common misconception among beginners or non-practitioners. Instead, meditation seemingly transforms participants' relationship to their problems. For instance, if they experience bodily pain, the pain doesn't go away when meditating. However, the pain that comes from the narrative they ar telling their physical pain can be minimised. Participant Beta described meditation as an act of "making friends with your mind." He prefers this definition to any kind of mental state, because mental states can hugely vary depending on the thoughts and tasks occupying one's mind. Others used rhetoric like "taming and training" or "controlling" one's mind. Recognizing the primacy of the mind in filtering experience enables meditators to later take charge of the filtration process.

Given its notable cognitive impacts, practitioners do not perceive meditation as a scheduled activity. Overtime, formal meditation bleeds into everyday life, becoming an attitude that impacts all aspects of their mental life. Participant Mika refers to meditation as "a way of living". Romeo details that "my meditation practice is very much like eating, breathing, walking, exercise and work part and parcel of my daily life." However, formal meditation still plays a crucial role in sustaining meditative outcomes. The more formal meditation that one engages in, the more informal insights and transformations that they acquire. Mika recalls having experienced a day when her mental state felt refreshingly diffuse and exceptionally tranquil. She infers that this special day was made possible because of her foregoing commitment and consistency with formal daily practice. Participant Juliet corroborates in stating that "a daily practice…is really important because it kind of awakens more of the intuitive quality."

Both Mika and Juliet's contributions reflect a larger pattern in the effects emerging from meditation. Participants undergo many bottom-up changes as a result of meditation. The term "bottom-up" implies that changes are not consciously-sought after or induced (Guendelman et al. 5). Mika highlights that she is incapable of converting all her days into diffuse and tranquil ones. However, by consciously choosing to practise regularly, she can hope to experience more of those days. Likewise, Juliet can make the conscious decision to practise, and in doing so will integrate a meditative outlook into her unconscious reflexive responses. The majority of participants spoke to the importance of formal meditation in being able to apply meditative insights effectively in everyday contexts.

Participants Zulu concedes that "when you've been at it, as long as I guess I have, you're kind of always there, but you get busy." While confirming proposed ideas about the merging of formal and informal meditative, Zulu affirms that each meditation session varies. Romeo adds that sometimes, "the mind might not settle. That's just the way that mind is." Participant Echo supposes that she's probably "run through pretty much the whole gamut" of how well she can uphold a meditative state. As such, meditation becomes an iterative attempt at trying

to remain non-judgmentally aware of a particular mental object. Failing to do so is very much a part of the process.

Phenomenological Changes:

If meditation is the attempt at holding a mental posture within the mind, what phenomenological experiences accompany this posture? The majority of each interview was dedicated to addressing this line of inquiry. Two broad concepts emerged as the most telling characteristics of the Buddhist meditative state: spaciousness and selflessness. Both characteristics have been touched upon in existing literature and religious commentaries. Yet, this study's results suggest that spaciousness and selflessness exist as rich multi-layered supersets, comprising a range of phenomenological, physical, and cognitive developments. Meditators do not necessarily undergo all these developments during their practice, especially not at once. Hence, these concepts are understood in theoretically convergent but experientially divergent manners.

Describing Spaciousness:

Rather than succumb and mindlessly act upon their impulses, meditators are encouraged to de-identify with their thoughts, non-judgmentally inviting them as objects of contemplation and observation. Many participants described the outcome of this process as spaciousness within the mind. The experience of spaciousness firstly concerns the increased awareness that meditators have of the antecedents and characteristics of their thoughts. Participant Gamma observes that "We're ruled by our heads. We block off so much of what we feel emotionally and physically. So meditating really gets you in touch with that." For Participant Lima, meditation allows her to check in with herself—emotionally and physically.

Meditators described spacious awareness as fixing their point of view in the background rather than foreground of conscious experience.

> Romeo: "And I sometimes think that in the foreground, there are the words I'm speaking and the feelings that come along. I'm content with what I say, or I should say that. So in the foreground that all of these, but in the background there is the mind, which it's not judging it, it's simply being aware. I'm aware of what I'm saying. And in some sense, I know without it being right or wrong."

In the foreground, there are thoughts, perceptions, and sensations. These are constantly under flux. By stabilising their gaze from the background of conscious experience, they witness the foreground, free from judgement. The dynamic of foreground and background parallels the distinction between cognitive awareness and meta-cognitive awareness.

Initially, spacious awareness might be a temporary and fleeting experience, limited to formal meditation sittings. However, many participants describe spaciousness as being permanently accessible within their mind. Participant Echo describes meditation as an outlet that allows

her to return "that space inside of [her]" that can "cope with whatever comes up." Echo's account suggests that meditation allows her mind to reclaim space that it had yielded in moments of rumination of mindless activity. Formal meditation trains the mind to become familiar with mental discursiveness, allowing participants to practise finding space between their thoughts and responses. Overtime, they can slip into this spacious state with greater ease and with faster transitions. Participant Gamma notes how achieving spaciousness is "not an effort thing. No. Even letting go of these thoughts and distractions—it's not an effort." Meditators seemingly achieve spaciousness by ceasing to spend energy on mental fixation or rumination.

Spacious awareness can also have a physical accompaniment. Participant Alpha described the nature of mind as feeling inherently "expanded," as if her "mind was everywhere." Participant Oscar reported having recurrently felt like his body was "a huge temple…so very spacious, very open". Meanwhile, Mika reported that when meditating, "calm, quiet, and peace that spreads throughout the body, but it also spreads around the space."

The use of physical space to describe a mental state is an intriguing and puzzling choice. Under the materialist paradigm, the mind is entirely the product of physical brain activity. The mind is a process, emerging from successive neuronal signals and firings. In this way, the mind is synonymous with cooking—another process describing the physical interactions of substances. While the foods involved in cooking can have physical attributes, applying those attributes to cooking would amount to a category error (Magidor). Spacious cooking sounds absurd, because spacious is an adjective suited for physical substrates. Likewise, how can a mind phenomenologically feel expanded, if it is merely a process? This remains a mystery worthy of ongoing inquiry.

In a spacious state of awareness, participants' sense of subjective time changes. Their experience of temporal reality slows down, as spacious awareness gives them more sensory and perceptual feedback to process. Oscar paints an analogy that illustrates the relationship between subjective space and time during meditation: "We just have to let the clouds [of thought] dissolve, which means to slow down the thought process enough so that the space shines through between them."

Some might understand the meditative state as being timeless, but this may be misleading. Participants still feel time-bound, as they are aware of the arising and passing of thoughts. Yet, they do not feel bound to complete any time-sensitive thought or task entering their mind. Typically, participants gain the most amount of subjective time between their intentions and actions. Charlie states that normally "things happen so…quickly that you might not have the presence of mind to recognize [your] tightness; you only recognize the barbed words that you shoot back." We act even before we have analysed our intentions. Delta infers that "the practice of monitoring yourself and seeing others..give[s] you more, more options. More alternatives." In finding more room and time in each moment to non-judgmentally observe their phenomenal content, meditators can consider alternative courses of experience.

The participants' reports on the interactions between phenomenological space and time can be described using an analogy. Imagine conscious experience as an axon within the brain. Throughout our lives, we experience reality through myelinated axons, creating gaps in our sense of time. We do not reliably notice what happens between the moment we become angry and begin to yell at someone. Meditation removes the myelin, slowing us down, because we are passing through every stage of a stream of conscious inquiry, from antecedent to action. The de-myelinated axon is an illustration of how increased space interrelates with a deceleration of one's perception of time.

Further Effects of Spaciousness:

Participants report that spaciousness settles their mind, while allowing them to let go of tightness and clenching. They come to accept what appears into their conscious awareness. Participant Beta recounts how "the next moment is very apparent and clear. There's not a question of should I, you know, should I do, you know, like it's either, you know, like should I do this, should this, can I do this? It's more like the next moment just appears in front of you and you step into it." Participant Charlie has an image of a non-meditative mind being a "tight drum," while a meditative counterpart is as pliable and absorbable as a "cotton ball."

The spacious and non-judgemental mind leads to appreciation without expectation. Gamma refers to the space as a "cradle of loving kindness…a place for you to put those things that you don't, you're not happy with." Likewise, Participant Romeo observes how he does not dwell on how he dislikes aspected of reality when meditating, because we have no access to any other reality. The project of forming opinions is almost bizarre and antithetical from a spacious point of view. He uses the weather to illustrate his point: "I look at the leaves and the rain and people say, oh, it's a good day because it's raining or it's not raining. I say, well, doesn't really matter if it rains or if it doesn't rain, rain." His emphasis lies in merely taking in the sensory experience of the rain.

Furthermore, participants reported that a deep sense of peace and clarity emerges from this loosened yet attentive mental state. The peace conflates with the notion of space. Echo describes meditative spaciousness also as being a "place of peace and wholeness." Eight out of twelve participants explicitly mentioned that the meditative states bring about a clarity around their relationship to their phenomenal contents. In fact, a few participants were reluctant to call meditation mentally relaxing because of its active rather than passive character. Gamma explains that mindfulness "meditation is not about going numb or getting sleepy or tuning out. Yeah, it's about tuning in. So it's not a sleepy practice. It's a waking up practice. So some people might not associate that with relaxing." Likewise, Mika comments about how sustainable this peace is: "it's the kind of feeling that you would want to carry into your everyday life because it wasn't like everything is rosy and everything's fine. It was more like I am at peace with myself and I'm at peace with the way my life is." Because she remains viscerally in touch with the problematic features, Gamma referred to meditative peace as being "real". Meanwhile, the caricature of "being Zen" pervading non-practitioners' minds felt fictional to her.

Alpha elaborates how mental relaxation can coincide with waves of physical relaxation: "when you actually focus your mind on one thing, which we never do in our daily life, it automatically starts to bring about a sense of peace and physical relaxation." Despite meditation being a primary tool for managing the mind, nearly all participants also reported greater ease within their body. Physical relaxation is never sought after, yet upon resting the mind in a spacious gaze, the body eases in a bottom-up way. Alpha recalls only realising that her body has relaxed by the end of the session. By contrast, Romeo suggested that physical relaxation is one of the first noticeable effects as he sinks into meditation. While Alpha and Romeo differ in when they notice changes in their bodily condition, they both agree that relaxation is not consciously sought after. This is evident in Alpha's use of the word "automatically" and Romeo's use of the passive voice when stating that meditation "settles me physically".

Among others, Lima points out that "it's really wrong to expect" meditation to yield positive mental or bodily states. While meditation does frequently yield such states, to expect them is to cease holding a non-judgemental relationship with phenomenal contents. As an emerging practitioner, one of Mika's biggest pieces of advice from her teachers was to not fall prey to expectations of altered experience. Oscar made a similar point about the three Tibetan Nyams: bliss, luminosity, and thoughtlessness. While these are positive indications of a meditator's progress, they risk overturning the project when actively chased. Oscar comments that we must entertain "opportunities to experience them without grasping."

When positioning themselves in the background of conscious experience, participants also become aware of the nature of their mind. They first notice the transience of their thoughts. Juliet: "the practice, it really woke me up to our changing states of mind, our changing moods, our changing thoughts." Gamma adds: experience is "never the same two seconds in a row." The constant flux in the contents of conscious awareness later becomes an important gateway into participants' understanding and experiencing of phenomenological selflessness.

In a more straightforward development, non-judgmental awareness allows participants to simply pay attention to objects and surroundings that have nothing to do with the self. Beta summarises that with meditation, "overtime, you literally and figuratively…lift your gaze." When discussing a heightened state of awareness, nearly all the participants described being more in awe of nature. Echo: "sometimes I'll be walking along just going for a walk outside and I'll be thinking ruminating about something, and all of a sudden I remember to look up at the sky and to take a big breath and just be with all this beauty." Tapping into this beauty does not relate back to the participants' life narrative. Rather, they appear to be celebrating their external environment for its mere existence.

Lima reflects "I think that connection to nature and the wind in your face and the sky and all of the things that happen in the world that we're so speedy in our minds, we pass them by and they were there." In her discussion of natural beauty, she comments on how fickle the mind's attention can be. Delta describes the mind as having a "remarkable ability to, um, slip away

into fantasy recollection." Meanwhile, Alpha remembers noticing on retreat how the contents of her daily stream of consciousness were "really random, actually. It was things, for example, that came up that I saw on TV or somebody talked about." Yet she contemplates how, oddly enough, most of us trust this "inner chatter…as a guide on what should we think [and] do." We become so captivated by the visualisations, memories and sensory input entering the foregrounds of our conscious awareness that we lose sight of the background. Insights about the nature of mind can only seem to be achieved when activating meta-cogntive awareness, rather than ceasing control to the objects of cognitive awareness. While the discursive nature of the mind has deep roots in Buddhist teachings, participants are empirically confirming these hypotheses through observing them in action during formal meditation.

In addition to analysing the nature of mind from the subjective side, participants garner a greater awareness about their personal tendencies. Gamma mentions that she becomes privy to the "patterns and triggers, pathways" regularly affecting her mind. From a spacious non-judgmental point of view, meditators are able to confront their maladaptive mental habits, as shame or wishful thinking are set aside with all other judgments. Lima: "It's easier to see personally when I'm being selfish or when I'm wrong or when I'm being rigid." Participant Zulu plainly states that meditation helps her "see through the bullshit," making it hard to ignore her personal shortcomings and negligence.

Non-judgmental spacious awareness might give the impression of meditation having a cold and detached quality. However, meditators find a second-order positivity in adopting a stance of neutrality. The positive experience of neutrality is associated with previously discussed experiences of acceptance, mental ease, and physical relaxation. However, the very experience of being neutral seems to also carry a positive valence. Like many other participants, Delta describes meditation as an act of "enjoying your awareness." Beta describes it as "neutrality with heart." Lima spoke to how in her tradition, many senior monks often feel the urge to just cry. The beauty and profundity of everyday awareness moves them to tears. It might seem paradoxical that a neutral stance can feel inherently positive. Yet, at the level of experience, it seems consistent across the board.

In their qualitative study with transcendental meditators, Travis and Pearson documented three phenomenological correlates of pure consciousness: absence of space, time, or body sense; peace; and unboundedness (Travis and Pearson 81). While their study pertains to a different contemplative tradition, the three characteristics have significant overlaps with the theme of spaciousness detailed in this study. Lindahl et al. also documented changes in perception of space and time among Western meditation practitioners and instructors (Lindahl et al. "The varieties" 16). However, few participants in this study brought up negative affects associated with the spacious state, perhaps because they were not explicitly surveyed as was done in *The Varieties of Contemplative Experience* project. This study's findings were more in line with Chen at al (2011), who predominantly observed the positive affective nature of meditative awareness (Zhuo et al. 663).

Describing Selflessness:

> Mika: “But it's a difficult thing to describe because it was like the expansive, spacious awareness stayed with me. And in that spacious awareness, the self is the entirety of the space that the awareness occupies. It's not confined to the body or the mind in that way.”

The phenomenological experience of spaciousness is mutually supported by the experience of selflessness. Mika’s quote illustrates how non-judgemental spacious awareness does not feature a filtration of phenomenal contents through the concept of self. During her day of meditative tranquillity, Mika identified herself with the non-judgemental non-reflexive vantage point of spacious awareness.

The Buddhist concept of Annata proposes that human beings lack any kind of unchanging psychological self. Yet, given people’s strong intuition about the existence of a self or ego, which emerges in early childhood, the concept goes unchallenged in most people’s lives. Even among Buddhist scholars and researchers, the concept of selflessness remains an ongoing puzzle, given its counterintuitive nature.

All participants were familiar with the Buddhist doctrine of Annata and had some allied experiences to share. No practitioner claimed to have reached a point in their practice when they experienced total absence of ego. And a few participants still had not experienced any moments without a phenomenal ego. For the latter, selflessness rests as an ethical concept. For others, selflessness has vivid phenomenological instantiations.

In acknowledging the empirical variation in the experience of selflessness, a more inclusive term for its varied dimensions may be decentering. For those with an ethical understanding of selflessness, decentering implies an interest in other living and non-living beings. For those with a phenomenological understanding of selflessness, decentering refers to the momentary and temporary elimination of a centre of experience. Instead, all that is left is experience as it is. Below, I sketch out the commonly observed progression of ethical and phenomenological selflessness.

Ethical Manifestation of Selflessness:

For the ethical pathway, many of the participants reported an initial redoubling of self when beginning their meditation practice. Participant Beta, who is a longtime meditation instructor, notes that very few people have altruistic reasons for experimenting with meditation. Hence, Beta finds that “when one first starts to practise there is a quality of, um, you know, wondering who that self is and, and to some degree strengthening that self.” Juliet, a meditation instructor from a different tradition, also shares that “it's all about the I, I, I at the beginning.” Participants scrutinise themselves for letting their mind wander or failing to gain any insight from meditation. Participant Gamma, another meditation instructor, suggests that

it is a common experience for students to "feel worse after [they] start to meditate" because they notice all their flawed patterns of thought and behaviour.

Nevertheless, as they learn to apply non-judgemental thinking to even these discomforting reflections of reality, they begin to become aware of phenomenal contents that are largely unrelated to their personal well-being and narrative self. Participant Romeo, as an emerging meditator, once asked his meditation teacher for advice on dealing with a particularly pressing set of circumstances in his life. His teacher's response was "well, you just got to live with it and walk around and look at the beavers." While this answer might appear like a non-sequitur, it accurately captures the ethical decentering emerging from spacious non-judgemental awareness. The teacher encourages Romeo to regain control over his problems by turning his attention away from his problems and noticing the elements of reality that he is momentarily neglecting, like the beavers of the world.

Overtime, this decentering lends itself to identifying with the human condition more broadly. As Participant Beta describes, "once you shift that gaze out and realise that the human condition is…that we have a tendency to complain a lot and not think we're good and not think we're healthy, and that we suffer, then you walk hand in hand with everyone." Instead of perceiving his problems as being a personal burden, Beta recognizes it as a norm of life. He considers how other human beings regularly undergo similar struggles, allowing him to further descenter from his suffering while feeling a solidarity with others. Likewise, Participant Delta mentioned a recent encounter where he helped console an acquaintance who seemed to be enduring some difficulties. When speaking to her, he recalls how there was a meditative opening that ruptured the "formalities that usually keep us at a distance and maybe even a distance from ourselves." Subsequently, a unification with the human condition lends itself to altruistic behaviour, while becoming accepting others' imperfections. Hence, ethical selflessness ultimately manifests as increased altruism.

Crucially, despite experiencing ethical selflessness, participants' phenomenological self can very much still be present. Mika, who associates selflessness mostly with giving, acknowledges that "there is very much a self that experiences and suffers and has limited energy and limited capacity for giving before it falls into negative mind states." Likewise, Juliet submits that despite having moments of ethical unification, "the self is always there. You kind of sit down and I do, I'll speak for myself. I have an idea, oh, I want to achieve something…the whole idea of no abiding self is just really, really, I'd love to say I really have got it, but I feel it's a chipping away."

Phenomenological Manifestation of Selflessness:

While the ethical developments of selflessness were shared by nearly all participants, the phenomenological developments presented as far more elusive and idiosyncratic. For starters, the phenomenological realisation of selflessness takes place over a longer duration of time. The two study participants who have been meditating for less than 10 years reported not having achieved any releases from their phenomenological self. A few experienced

meditators felt similarity. Simultaneously, those who have noticed changes in their phenomenological self openly acknowledge that there are plenty of lapses, in which their constructed sense of self returns.

The following empirical insights from meditation seem to coincide with the progressive attainment of phenomenological selflessness. Firstly, when meditating, participants become familiar with the randomness of their mental chatter from the vantage point of spacious awareness. They observe that loosely connected images, memories, and thoughts are constantly thrust into their conscious awareness. Because the mindful attitude enables participants to observe the contents entering their conscious awareness, they conceptually come to understand that they are not the equivalent of their thoughts. While this is an intellectual development, it is rooted in the empirical observation of thoughts during meditation. For instance, Gamma reflects on how many of her "thoughts were potentially reactive, judgmental, mostly of [herself]." She uses thoughts as the subject of her sentence because they exist independently from her as a subject. Similarly, Delta views meditation as being pivotal in him becoming sensitive to "the inner narrator guy who has [says], okay, let's say this." His phrasing of "the inner narrator guy" indicates how his mental voice can at times feel like a comical stranger.

Furthermore, from the meditative vantage point, participants become familiar with their constantly changing bodily condition. This can be as simple as noticing that they have become relaxed by the end of the session, as was commonly experienced alongside spaciousness. The realisation that their body can relax free from conscious input suggests that they are not the equivalents of their body.

Since the majority of the participants were aged above 60, many are confronting active health issues. People's bodies evolve as part of the ageing process. To treat the body as a synonym for the self would be to reduce their identity to their pains and illness. By contrast, most of the participants described their health issues as simply being a part of their life. Participant Romeo exemplifies this understanding, having combatted multiple episodes of cancer. More vividly, when Romeo was undergoing an emergency surgery after acute damage to one of his organs. He states: "I faced the prospect that the body was really reacting in ways which I might not have chosen, but I accepted." He carries the same impersonal relationship with his body when assimilating all the other health issues that he has endured.

These understandings parallel the Buddha's teachings in the Anatta-lakkhana Sutta, in which he describes what the self cannot be reduced to: body, feeling, perception, and mental formations ("The Denial of Self as 'Right View'" 95). While appreciating the mystery of personal identity does not eliminate participants' sense of self at this stage, it does prompt them to begin scrutinising their everyday intuitions on the topic.

With questions related to the self spewing their mind, some mediators may be lucky enough to experience moments of pure phenomenal experiences—moments where they break free of the phenomenological self and are wholly captivated by the phenomenal content entering

their awareness (Gamma and Metzinger). This captivation is different from rumination, as the phenomenological self plays an active role in the latter. Delta describes pure phenomenal experience as "sudden transcendence in which, uh, the kind of formality of ego disappears…There's some kind of a stunning human, human em, uh, empathy and synchronious nature."

Here are three case studies:

1. Participant Gamma:
    a. "So I had a glass of wine on the counter, and I moved to do something and knocked the wine glass off the counter. I turned to see it, and the wine glass moved. It was like the wine glass moved in slow motion, and when it hit the floor, it shattered. And I could see the shards of glass were struck by the light. It was coming through the window, and they were gorgeous and reflected differently. And it was red wine, and the spill of the red wine on the kitchen floor was beautiful in its color, in its shape, in the pattern of the wine glass. So aware of this, while aware of everything else that's going on. And my ordinary reaction would've been…geez, you're clumsy, or something like that. Yeah, it wasn't, was just, that's beautiful."
2. Participant Delta:
    a. "I started down [this road]. And, uh, of course I was surrounded by strangers…I saw all kinds of people doing all kinds of things. And in a way… I mean, I was, I was there, but I was just the screen or an observer. I was just observing. And it was wonderful."
3. Participant Echo:
    a. "When my older brother was dying…so I went out to see him, and I was holding his hand and just being with him as he was dying. And I really had a sense that there was no separation and that whatever I was feeling and holding his hand, that he was feeling that too, and a sense that my presence and being there, that he had no reason to be afraid. And I mean, it was…very very much a felt sense."

These episodes of pure phenomenal experience are not consciously-induced. They arise in a bottom-up fashion, when participants have been consistent about their formal meditation practice. Each of these examples epitomise the properties of spacious awareness: expansion, backgrounding, first-order neutrality, second-order positivity, and slowing down of subjective time. Furthermore, participants feel so present in their conscious experience that they have lost their self as a referential point. Things no longer appear to their narrative self. They just appear.

Pure phenomenal events are profound because meditators realise the grandeur of the world and all its inhabitants. This feeds into the appreciation without expectation achieved through spacious awareness. In all three of the case studies above, meditators have intensely positive emotions where normally they might have experienced frustration, confusion, or despair.

Here, phenomenological selflessness manifests as a visceral sense of unification, capture, and gratitude. The individual's personal narrative diffuses into the other entities that exist in the world. The momentary breakdown of self-world boundaries becomes an important entrypoint into diminishing the phenomenal self.

The three case studies above suggest that pure awareness may be a more common experience that one may realise. Non-meditators may remember occasions where they forgot about themselves when immersed in an activity or environment. In such moments of flow or oneness, people might assume that they just have forgotten about themselves. They do not posit that such moments might be an indication that there is no self, which is reified in every other waking moment.

Nonetheless, moments of pure awareness are also transient. None of the meditators claim to be able to sustain that state, because they remain individuals with responsibilities in societies that embrace and reinforce dualistic outlooks. Zulu summarises that "I have a sense of self that's constantly evolving and I have a sense of self that helps me get through the day."

Hence, phenomenological changes in self, at this stage, have a half-life. However, when meditators have pure moments of awareness under their belt, they can use their memories of them to try to recreate them in future sittings. Even if it may not work, the meditators are now equipped with the knowledge that it is possible to transcend narratives of the self.

Default Understandings of Selflessness:

A few participants had the goals of advancing beyond these moments to pure awareness, aspiring towards a comprehensive long-lasting elimination of the ego. However, for the large majority, selflessness rests as an ethical concept. Given that all participants were lay practitioners, they have pragmatic roles and commitments to fulfil. Hence, the moments of phenomenological self-transcendence become outlets to strengthen their ethical commitments. When they notice that they are being small-minded, petty, or judgemental, they recall their altered phenomenological experiences to justify changing their behaviour. For Beta, the phenomenological experiences of selflessness and bliss—as rewarding as they can be—can be addictive. They feel magical, but they are not sustainable. Beta states: "your mind isn't always gonna be still, it isn't always gonna, you aren't gonna feel oneness with things all the time…if you think that's some kind of mistake you've made,...then you have really misunderstood the spiritual path."

Selflessness was undoubtedly hailed as the most challenging Buddhist teachings for participants to grapple with. In fact, some were even hesitant to talk about it, because they had been subject to years of misinterpretation and straw-man arguments. Lima reflects that among Buddhist teachings "in the West, I think it's probably the most misunderstood idea." Three notable misconceptions about selflessness seem to include: 1. selflessness is necessarily a metaphysical proposition; 2. selflessness is a denial of existence or one's status as a human being; 3. dualistic language vindicates the self.

Firstly, while Buddhist teachings may be commenting about the metaphysical status of the self, the study's participants were predominantly addressing their phenomenological experiences. Meanwhile, as suggested above, the findings suggest that selflessness rests as an ethical tool rather than an indefinite experiential reality. This may be an important consideration to account for in sociological theories about how meditation is practised.

Secondly, selflessness is not a denial of existence. The participants recognize that they embodied creatures with a subjective conscious experience. Meditation seemingly challenges the existence of an unchanging self that animates and characterises the human being. Participants can cultivate greater awareness about their individual tendencies because human beings can be prone to certain habits. However, to treat those habits as constituting a separate self is claimed to be mistaken. As Evan Thompson writes, "to infer from the absence of a single substantial self to the absence of the person, agent, or subject altogether is to fall prey to the nihilist or annihilationist extreme" (Thompson, "Waking, Dreaming, Being" 322).

Finally, participants' use of pronouns like "I" and "my" can seem to imply that they still retain a sense of self, in some capacity. This is perhaps a question that invites further empirical analysis. However, it remains plausible that "I" refers to human being—the unique union of a body and mind—rather than a self.

Despite pointing out these misconceptions, participants still struggle to get a handle on selflessness. There are paradoxes that obstruct the realisation of selflessness: 1. how can human beings have agency despite not identifying with or producing their thoughts? 2. how can one successfully assess the non-existence of any entity, let alone the self?

Participant Romeo invoked quantum mechanics in responding to these paradoxes. While it seems implausible that an electron could be a wave and a particle at the same time, experience seems to warrant both realities. Both increased agency and lack of an agent seem to be verifiable for him at the level of experience. Other participants are happy to claim their ignorance on these issues and hope that the paradoxes resolve themselves as they progress along the spiritual path.

The ethical and phenomenological experiences of selflessness observed in this study present a unique way of packaging observations in other similar studies. Lindahl et al. documented a breakdown of self-world boundaries (Lindahl and Britton 170). This study's results begin to suggest that these boundaries can break down at an intellectual and viscerally experiential level. The former lends itself to an ethical understanding of selflessness, while the latter lends itself to a phenomenological one. These different understandings of selflessness reinforce one another, but the ethical understanding seems to be the default for lay practitioners, as the phenomenological one is much harder to reconcile with the contemporary norms of civilization and conduct.

Chen et al. dichotomize the breakdown of self-world boundaries as intro- and extro-unity. Intro-unity comprises the self fusing into the external world; extro-unity comprises the external world fusing into the self (Chen et al. 661-662). Perhaps extro-unity can be achieved

through the ethical exposure to selflessness. Juliet, for instance, who has experienced moments of non-duality claims that the "the self is always present." Hence, her moments of non-duality may entail when the concept of self, while remaining intact, grows to encompass her surroundings. Meanwhile, intro-unity may be reserved for those experiencing a release from the phenomenological self.

The spaciousness-selflessness nexus explored within this study mirrors many of the attributes that Gamma and Metzinger associate with pure awareness in their phenomenological prototype. They notably observe a "spacious awareness into which the meditator wants to settle" as opposed to "a mostly noisy foreground of active mental content." This awareness coincides with "peace, bliss, and silence," as mental content is no longer in competition for the mind's awareness. They also document experiences of selfless pure awareness which "simply knows itself, timelessly." Adding onto their findings, this study too provides emerging "empirical evidence for a non-egoic, homunculus-free form of self-awareness" (Gamma and Metzinger 30-34).

Implications of Spaciousness and Selflessness: Agency and Fear

For meditators, the biggest benefit of spacious selfless awareness appears to be gaining greater agency over responding to their thoughts. The spacious analysis of their mental content allows meditators to precisely become aware of the line up of antecedents to a reaction. Hence, they can choose to allow positive responses to instantiate, while nipping negative responses in the bud. Charlie reflects that with meditation, we can "say to [ourselves], don't go down there and…switch gears to think of something else" when detecting the onset of a maladaptive response.

Spacious awareness perhaps reverberates the age-old truth: think before you act. Nonetheless, meditation does not prescribe an effortful attempt at drawing out better thoughts. Rather, meditators are just instructed to notice the thoughts independently entering their mind, waiting until an alternative appears that is conducive to their goals.

Meanwhile, the selflessness piece enables meditators to not feel constricted by any assessment that they have made about who they are and how they ought to respond in a situation. Alpha recounts that "I used to be somebody that, if you say slight things wrong, I can explode…And you live with these things. You think, "Oh, that's part of me. I can't help it." The understanding and realisation of selflessness pushes meditators to allow their personality to change. There is no existential knife at their neck, necessitating them to continue being angry.

On the one hand, it may seem like selflessness might make individuals feel less culpable for their mistakes and errors. Who is to blame if there is no self? The participants recognize that there is still a human being that is responsible for their actions. The weakening of the self merely helps meditators freely consider alternatives, while also refraining from condemning other people with uncharitable assessments of their personalities or selves.

Road rage came up as a common example when exploring these implications. Charlie remembers that one of the earliest impacts of her meditation practice was not getting upset at bad drivers or demanding cyclists. She felt a "a vague…[urge to say]...you go first." Likewise, when getting cut off in traffic, Gamma remembers that "for all I know, that person has a sick child in the car, and they're on the way to the hospital." Charlie and Gamma's testimonials demonstrate how spaciousness and selflessness instantiate together. Both individuals allow for positive thoughts to settle into their mind, which do not presuppose assessments about others' intrinsic selves. Meanwhile, the ethical interpretation of selflessness lurks in the backdrop of the scene, enabling meditators to care about actors unrelated to the individual's personal narrative.

Despite the prospect of increasing one's sense of agency, many participants acknowledge having fear in fully embracing spaciousness and selflessness. Meditation instructors and researchers should be equally aware of these concerns when designing pedagogical programs.

Some participants worry that they might neglect their relative well-being as a human, when decentering from their sense of self. Mika admits that selflessness has become "a dialogue between how much is reasonable to give in terms of energy and time…generously, and which juncture does that become giving too much and not giving myself enough consideration." Romeo is also prudent to open up "in a wholesome way or skillful way" without hurting himself, as an individual. Navigating this balance may require once again learning to dichotomize between the narrative self and the human being.

Additionally, some participants harbour a fear of entering new realms of consciousness that they cannot understand or return from. Delta acknowledges that while it may sound dramatic, "there's something…fearless" about letting spaciousness consume one's mind. Because it is a mental posture so radically opposed to everyday modes of thought, participants' fear of the unknown can fester. Juliet reflects that "I've had a lot of fear in my practice, especially when I would get deeper and calmer and doing the Jhanas or any meditation practice where I really, really drop down and it's very still and quiet, and the fear is like falling off a cliff." Her vivid imagery illustrates how meditation teachers and researchers must clarify their teachings with empirical reports, so that participants can become more confident in opening up to potentially beneficial mental states, while avoiding harmful ones.

Conclusion:

To summarise, Buddhist meditative practices are united in inviting participants to adopt a particular mental posture, while retaining a non-judgmental awareness of all the content entering one's consciousness.

The two notable phenomenological outcomes of practice are spaciousness and selflessness. Upon closely and non-judgmentally observing the phenomenal content entering their minds, meditators begin to locate a position within their mind, distanced from their phenomenal contents. This dynamic carries the phenomenological appearance of space pervading the mind. Physical relaxation, inner peace, and a slowing down of time coincide with the spacious gaze.

In de-identifying with their phenomenal contents, meditators become less focused and invested in their personal narrative. Decentering further branches into ethical and phenomenological experiences of selflessness. In the ethical off-shoot, meditators become concerned with entities that are not of immediate concern to the self: external objects, nature, mental images, and nature of mind. However, the phenomenological self remains intact as the agent behind this broadening of interests.

In the phenomenological off-shoot, meditators begin questioning the nature of self. Some experience moments of "pure awareness" wherein the boundaries between the self and the world disintegrate. These moments are so immersive that meditators no longer feel a phenomenological sense of subjecthood. There is reason to suspect that the frequency and familiarity of moments of pure awareness increase with the amount of formal meditation practised.

Granted, for the majority of participants, such phenomenological changes are temporary. They are instead used to reinforce their ethical stance of selflessness and increase altruistic behaviour. Selflessness continues to be a challenging concept for lay meditators to grasp. It requires unpacking some solvable and other unsolvable paradoxes, overcoming fear of unfamiliar conscious states, and unlearning mistaken habits of thought.

Limitations:

This study is one among the emerging efforts to empirically document the phenomenological experience of Buddhist meditation practices. Because this area of scholarship is nascent, there is a limited opportunity to corroborate findings with other comprehensive studies or meta-analyses. Hence, while saturation was reached within the data, indicating internal validity, external validity can only be assessed as new studies materialise.

The chosen methodology also restricts the extent to which these results can be held as a true reflection of the meditative experience. Chain-referrals increase the chances of encountering consistent reflections, because the participants may have grasped them from common teachers, sources, or directly exchanged them with one another.

Likewise, we cannot confirm if the participants' words accurately describe their experiences, or if they were inadvertently repeating phrases that they had consumed in group meditation sessions or texts. There also remains the possibility that "some responses were driven largely by a desire to report particularly impressive or personally meaningful experiences rather than to adhere as closely as possible to the instructions" (Gamma and Metzinger 34). Given how infrequently negative meditative experiences were reported, participants may have felt incentivized to linger on the positives.

Some experiences may also be too difficult to put into words. The ineffability of certain phenomenological experience invites another solipsistic critique: what one person experiences may not be what another experienced, despite a use of the same words. Nevertheless, there were also moments of lucid communication achieved during each interview. Some participants were able to verbalise what others seemed to struggle with and vice versa. Hence, with future research, researchers may encounter clearer ways of communicating ineffable experiences.

Other study limitations involve how phenomenological analyses can run counter to the immediate goals of meditation practice. In monastic context, meditators are not urged to discuss their phenomenological states, for risk of becoming prideful. A few of this study's participants may have been reticent to offer certain first-person experiences for similar reasons. In addition, a number of participants did not delve into granular phenomenological detail because doing so would lead them to lose the object of their meditation. Therefore, many participants had little to share on the micro-phenomenological changes occuring during practice.

Future Directions:

Future directions for research include working with demographics that have not been reached so far: diverse ages, genders, and cultures. Varying the years of experience may also be crucial when better understanding the mechanisms and stages by which new mediators can achieve the mental states of experts. Existing phenomenological studies exclusively work with expert meditators. However, this does not shed light on the intermediary steps involved in the realisation of phenomenological changes. This study's exploration of alternate pathways of selflessness is an elementary attempt at doing so. When equipped with more qualitative data, quantitative studies can help assess the prevalence of qualitatively-assessed meditative changes.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative data can help meditation teachers and instructors revitalise their teaching mechanisms, designing methods that are empirically-rooted and tested. This study already gives future researchers some new dimensions to consider: physical vs mental; space vs self; ethical vs phenomenological.

Spaciousness and selflessness are intriguing principles to analyse from a neuroscientific point of view. What is happening at the level of the brain when meditators claim that their mind feels expanded and subjectless? Does spacious awareness gradually expand or does it entail a threshold-based system with distinct stages of expansion? How can a non-physical process like the mind harbour these seemingly tangible attributes? What activity in the brain is enabling meditators to experience non-physical processes like the mind on physical terms?

Such questions mark the interdisciplinary beginnings of mapping out the fascinating and cavernous landscape of conscious experiences accessible to human minds.

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Appendix 1. Interview Questions

Meditation History:

- How did you get into meditation?
- Why did you get into meditation?
- How often do you meditate?
- What kind of meditation practices do you engage with?
- What are some common misconceptions about meditation?

Meditative Experience:

- What kinds of experiences do you associate with your meditation practice?
- How much control do you have in bringing about these experiences?
- In your experience, what characterises a meditative state? How does it differ from a regular state?
    - What cues do you use to assess whether you are meditating or not?
    - Which feels more real: the meditative or the regular state? Why?
- Walk me through the stages, including minute details, as you collapse into a state of meditation.
- Has your subjective experience when meditating ever deviated from expectations or instructions given to you, by your teacher?

Self:

- How has meditation impacted your sense of self?
- For you, is selflessness a true reflection ro reality or a lens you apply to reality?
- When you use the world “I”, what are you referring to? Do you retain your sense of agency?
- When you were initially introduced to the idea of selflessness, how did you make sense of it? What was the experience like coming to terms with an altered sense of self? How did meditation facilitate this?

Objecthood:

- When meditating, how do you relate to the objects around you?
    - Are they one with you? Are they distinct from you?
- Describe to me how, when meditating, you imagine the world. What is creating the world around you? Is it just your mind? Or, are there actual objects out there?

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