

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

Introduction + Aims

- Buddhist meditation practices are becoming increasingly popular, but few research exists on the phenomenology of the meditative experience (Frank and Marken 31-34)
- Existing research suggests that meditation alters practitioners' worldview and phenomenological sense of self
- Aims:
 - Enhance understanding of the phenomenological state achieved with a long-term Buddhist meditation practice
 - Equip meditation students and teachers with useful information for updating pedagogical strategies for achieved the goal states of meditation
 - Provide the meditation research community with increasingly concrete ways of defining the meditative state

Methodology

- Experimental phenomenological approach: exploring "the effects of intentional variations of subjective experience" (Lundh 498)
- Conducted 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews with traditional or secularized Buddhist meditators in Toronto
 - Inclusion criteria: minimum of 18 years of age + "a regular meditation practice in one or more recognized Buddhist traditions" (Lindahl et al. "A Phenomenology")
 - Exclusion criteria: Significant exposure to non-Buddhist traditions
- Interviews lasted 50 - 70 minutes; took place in-person and virtually
- Collaborative interviews, with interviewer and interviewee co-generating insight (Høffding and Martiny 3)
- Coded **n = 12** interview transcripts based on an inductive code-book, generated after line-by-line coding of first three interviews
- Hierarchized most-popular codes under themes and sub-themes

Conclusion + Future Directions

- Buddhist meditative practices are united in inviting participants to become non-judgmentally aware of all the content entering one's consciousness. Two notable phenomenological outcomes of practice are spaciousness and selflessness. Spaciousness coincides with physical relaxation, inner peace, and a slowing down of time. In de-identifying with their phenomenal contents, meditators become less focused and invested in their personal narrative. Selflessness can manifest ethically or phenomenologically. In the ethical off-shoot, meditators become concerned with entities that are not of immediate concern to the self. In the phenomenological off-shoot, moments of "pure awareness" reveal a unity to conscious experience. Phenomenological changes are temporary, but they become a justification for redoubling ethical commitments. Both increase participants sense of agency; but they remain challenging concepts to grapple with and realize

Future Directions:

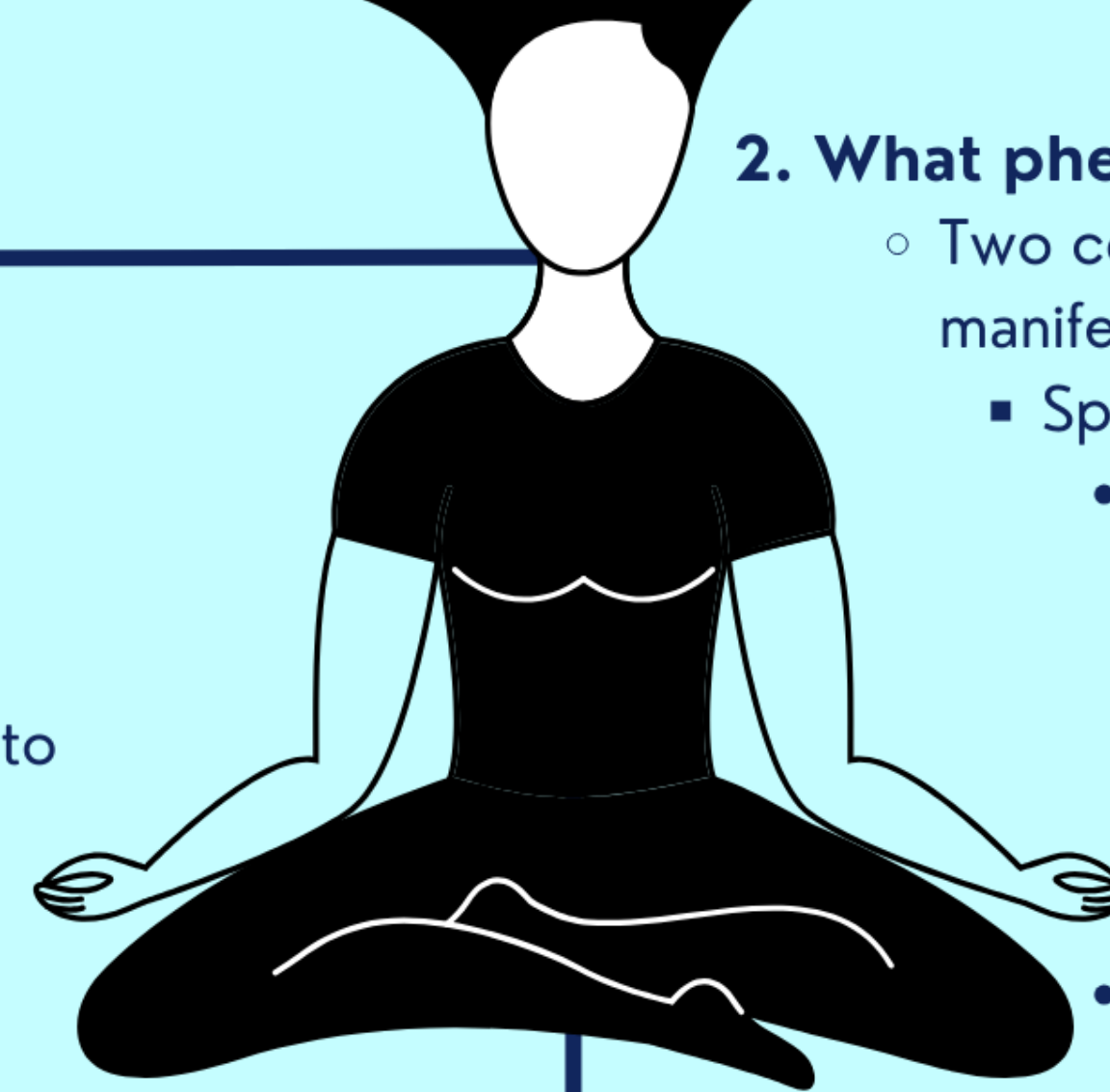
- Working with demographics that have not been reached so far: diverse ages, genders, and cultures
- Comparing phenomenological data with neuroscientific data: What is happening at the level of the brain when meditators claim that their mind feels expanded and subjectless?

Works Cited

- 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., 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>.
- Lundh, Lars-Gunnar. "Experimental phenomenology in mindfulness research." *Mindfulness*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2019, pp. 493–506, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-019-01274-9>.

Investigator:
Mridula Sathyanarayanan

Supervisor:
Dr. Shafi Bhuiyan
MBBS, MPH, MBA, PhD



Results and Discussion

1. What defines Buddhist meditation practices?

- Buddhist meditation practices are united in prescribing observing or maintaining focus on a particular mental object. Practitioners do not perceive meditation as a scheduled activity, because the non-judgmental mental posture bleeds into their everyday life. However, formal practice remains essential for sustaining bottom-up meditative outcomes.
 - Charlie: "Our mind is usually like "a tight drum;" with meditation, it is like "a cotton ball"
 - Romeo: "my meditation practice is very much like eating, breathing, walking, exercise and work part and parcel of my daily life."
 - Juliet: "a daily practice...is really important because it kind of awakens more of the intuitive quality."

2. What phenomenological experiences accompany non-judgemental awareness?

- Two concepts emerged as the most telling characteristics of the Buddhist meditative state: **spaciousness** and **selflessness**. They both empirically manifest as rich multi-layered supersets, comprising a range of phenomenological, physical, and intellectual developments
 - Spaciousness:
 - The experience of spaciousness emerges when practitioners distance themselves from the phenomenal content entering their mind
 - Oscar: "my body feels like "a huge temple...so very spacious, very open"
 - Romeo: "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"
 - Alpha: "my "mind was everywhere"
 - The effects of spaciousness include increased awareness of mental and bodily condition; peace, relaxation and clarity; a second-order positive affect to neutrality
 - Mike: "a "calm, quiet, and peace that spreads throughout the body, but it also spreads around the space."
 - Delta: "when meditating, I realize that my mind has a "remarkable ability to slip away into fantasy recollection."
 - Beta: "meditation is "neutrality with heart"
 - Selflessness
 - Non-judgemental spacious awareness does not accommodate a filtration of phenomenal contents through the concept of self. All participants were familiar with the Buddhist doctrine of Annata and had some experiences to share about a decentered ethical or phenomenological view.
 - Ethical view: phenomenological self remains intact, but participants begin to notice and care about entities unrelated to the self
 - Beta: "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."
 - Phenomenological view: fusion of self and world, often arising from moments of pure awareness
 - Gamma: "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 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."
 - For most participants, phenomenological moments of selflessness are elusive and transient. Their default is the ethical view; when they notice that they are being small-minded or judgemental, they recall their altered phenomenological experiences to justify changing their behaviour
 - Juliet: "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."
 - Zulu: "I have a sense of self that's constantly evolving and I have a sense of self that helps me get through the day."
 - Gamma: "my understanding of selflessness is "just a feeling, feeling of interconnectedness and a feeling, a realization that life is so kind of impermanent and petty, and we worry about things we don't need to worry about and what is really important"

3. What are the implications of spacious and selfless awareness?

- All participants reported feeling greater agency in responding to thoughts
 - Charlie: "meditation allows us to ""say to [ourselves], don't go down there and...switch gears to think of something else."
- Yet, participants also fear that embracing selflessness might lead them to neglect their relative well-being as a human. Other fear getting lost in new and unfamiliar realms of conscious experience.
 - Juliet: "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."