

**MINDFULNESS AND BEYOND: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ADVANCED
MAHASI MEDITATORS' EXPERIENCE**

A dissertation submitted

by

SEAN M. PRITCHARD

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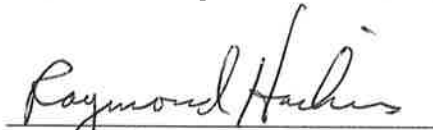
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the faculty of Fielding Graduate University by



Raymond Hawkins, PhD, ABPP
Chair

Committee:

Judith Schoenholtz-Read, EdD, Faculty Reader
Michele Harway, PhD, ABPP, Faculty Research Specialist
Kalina Christoff, PhD, External Examine

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**Mindfulness and Beyond: A Qualitative Study of Advanced
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by

Sean M. Pritchard

Abstract

The recent convergence of Asian and Western culture has generated interest in meditation as a practice and clinical intervention. The Burmese Mahasi style of vipassana meditation in particular has been a wellspring from which mindfulness-based treatment protocols have been derived. These clinical interventions have proven efficacious in treating a wide range of psychological disorders. However, clinically oriented mindfulness training is geared towards beginners, not the higher stages of the contemplative path. Further, current approaches investigating the science of meditation have almost exclusively focused on objective measures to assess the effects of mindfulness on the neurological processes of the brain leading to a rather incomplete perspective concerning the contemplative experience. Using qualitative narrative techniques of enquiry and analysis, this study investigated the lived experiences and ensuing subjective changes in 11 individuals (5 female, 6 male) ranging in age from 41 to 74 years old whose Mahasi meditative experience was deemed to be advanced by qualified teachers. The model that emerged included 7 primary themes that were experienced as processes and insights in the participants' meditative practices: (a) meditative experience, (b) transformation, (c) mental/cognitive processes, (d) disturbing emotions, (e) relationships, (f) morality, and (g) living life. Several important subthemes also became apparent. The study provided important information regarding the qualitative experience of advanced mindfulness meditation as a therapeutic, emotional, contemplative, and cultural enhancement to personal development.

Key Words: meditation, Mahasi, vipassana, mindfulness, advanced meditator, mood management, dark night stages, model of meditative processes and experiences, impermanence, morality, self-management, self-regulation, mastery

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Dedication

To my teacher, the Venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw.

To the welfare of all beings in all realms.

To my deceased parents Mervyn and Jean, wherever they may be.

To my dearest Julia, a deeper love than has ever been known.

To my dear brother Lloyd, who always cheers for me and I for him.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Introduction

As the Asian and Western cultures converge, there is a burgeoning interest in meditation both as a practice and clinical intervention (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Of particular interest to the profession of psychology are practices involving self-awareness, introspection, or self-reflection (e.g., see Bandura, 1986; Rogers, 1961). Arguably some form of introspective self-awareness has been extant in almost every psychotherapeutic tradition dating back to Freud (Feist & Feist, 2006). A number of terms have been suggested in an attempt to define the processes of self-awareness.

The term *metacognition*, a more formalized definition of processes that overview and organize cognition, was introduced into psychological lexicon by Flavell (1979) in the context of developmental psychology. Wells and Purdon (1999) further broadened the definition of metacognition as “the aspect of the information processing system that monitors, interprets, evaluates, and regulates the contents and processes of its own organization” (p. 71).

Mindfulness was first coined by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) in his pioneering work called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). Other clinical applications of mindfulness in the field of psychology followed, such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, 2004) and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan et al., 1999). Since their inception, mindfulness-based therapies have shown promising efficacy, compared to treatment-as-usual (TAU), as evidenced by significant symptom reduction for many clinical conditions such as depression, anxiety, stress, chronic pain, and sleep disturbance (Baer, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 1990, 2003; Roemer & Orsillo, 2003; Shapiro, Bootzin, Figueredo, Lopez, & Schwartz, 2003). MBCT has

demonstrated significant benefits in relapse prevention for those suffering from repeated depressive episodes (Baer, 2003; Teasdale et al., 2000). Additionally, DBT and ACT have shown positive outcomes vs. treatment-as-usual for chronically suicidal borderline patients (Linehan, Tutek, Heard, & Armstrong, 1994), managing psychosis (Bach & Hayes, 2002), and drug dependency (Linehan et al., 1999). While other forms of meditation have enjoyed popular support in the West (e.g., see Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994; Goenka, 2003; Travis, 2011), one particular style of vipassana meditation taught by the monk Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) from Burma (Baer, 2006; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1971, 2002) has provided many of the key components to the clinical applications of mindfulness mentioned above. The central tenet of this meditative practice is to develop a penetrating awareness or mindfulness of all mental and physical phenomena as they occur. This practice is said to lead to 18 progressive stages of insights (see Appendix A) into the true nature of reality and ultimately enlightenment (Nibbana; Bikkhu Nanamoli, 1991; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985, 2002).

While mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) have proven efficacious in the treatment of clinical populations, a number of concerns remain regarding the nature and definition of mindfulness (see Grabovac, Lau, & Willett, 2011; Grossman & Van Dam, 2011; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). As enthusiasm for “mindfulness” has grown in the scientific community, there has been a proliferation of definitions and operationalizations characterizing mindfulness as a trait (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011). This wide range of sometimes vague and poorly operationalized uses for the term mindfulness has created some challenges from both a clinical and research perspective (Davidson, 2010; Wells, 2005). However, a recent paper has presented a Buddhist psychological model (BPM) which suggests the mechanisms of mindfulness used in

an MBI might best be defined as “the moment-by-moment observation of the three characteristics (impermanence, suffering, and not-self) of the meditation object” (Grabovac et al., 2011, p. 157). This definition of mindfulness is a description of vipassana (i.e., insight, mindfulness) meditation and is in accordance with the more traditional one suggested by Mahasi Sayadaw (1985). In spite of challenges in operationalizing a completely uniform definition of mindfulness, a significant body of research has been undertaken within this field.

With regard to research and measurement, the current science of meditation has focused mainly on objective bio-behavioral measures to assess the effects of mindfulness practice on attention and emotion regulation as observed in the brain and behavior. Early neuro-scientific research using meditators in long-term retreat indicated an increase in visual sensitivity as a function of duration (3 month) of intensive vipassana practice (D. P. Brown, Forte, & Dysart, 1984b) and experience (D. P. Brown, Forte, & Dysart, 1984a). Mindfulness training has been shown to improve attentional capability as a function of experience – expert vs. novice meditators (Brefczynski-Lewis, Lutz, Schaefer, Levinson, & Davidson, 2007), while enhancing the brain’s capacity to process information (Slagter et al., 2007). Furthermore, attentional and emotional stability and regulation are positively affected by mindfulness training (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008; Lutz et al., 2009). A recent study has concluded that mindfulness training can improve working memory capacity while reducing mind wandering (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013). Several studies have demonstrated improvements in participants’ cognitive and emotional experiences. Compared to beginners, more advanced meditators reported greater self-awareness, positive mood, and acceptance (Easterlin & Cardena, 1998). Increases in mindfulness over time are associated with declines in mood disturbances and

stress (K. W. Brown & Ryan, 2003), as well as improvements in acceptance, well-being, and resilience (Orzech, Shapiro, Brown, & McKay, 2009). Valid scales of measuring mindfulness have been developed and tested (e.g., see Baer et al., 2008; Lau et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, as suggested above, scientific inquiry often de-emphasizes subjective experience, and therefore little research exists on the fuller range of lived experience arising within contemplative practices. The lack of empirically derived information in this area of contemplative experience can create a skewed and incomplete perspective within the science of meditation. Moreover, clinically oriented mindfulness training (e.g., MBSR) is geared to beginners (Baer & Kreitemeyer, 2006) and not the higher stages of the contemplative Buddhist path from which it was derived.

This dearth of understanding is particularly apparent regarding the more refined and elevated stages of Mahasi style mindfulness practice. Deeper comprehension of these stages as they are subjectively experienced and any enduring changes they might inform, is of vital importance (see Appendix A). Mahasi Sayadaw is widely regarded as “one of the most important founders of the modern *vipassana* movement” (McMahon, 2008, p. 186). Yet first-person information regarding advanced contemplative experience in this tradition is notably sparse in the scientific literature. Along with other modern Tibetan (Chogyam Trungpa) Sri Lankan (Gunaratana), and Japanese (D.T. Suzuki) Buddhist reformers and meditation teachers, Mahasi Sayadaw did much to elevate “the role of meditation over merit making, chanting, ritual, and devotion” (p. 186). Like many modern meditation teachers, Mahasi Sayadaw contributed to transforming Buddhism from its traditional monastic-based history by focusing “almost exclusively on the practice of meditation and the goal of awakening, (thereby) deemphasizing

ritual and monasticism” (p. 186). Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg, and other American teachers who studied with Burmese and other Southeast Asian teachers have made vipassana especially popular in North America. As a result, the Mahasi style of mindfulness practice has become one of the key pillars of “Buddhist modernism”—a form of Buddhism that cuts across cultural and geographical contexts (McMahon, 2008). Buddhist modernism strongly informed the creation of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which makes use of Mahasi techniques (McMahon, 2008). First-person information regarding advanced contemplative experience in this tradition is much needed to help broaden and deepen the present perspective within the science of meditation.

There are several differences between the clinical mindfulness training offered within the context of a Western psychological intervention (e.g., MBSR or MBCT) and the instruction given to a practitioner in a Mahasi vipassana retreat. A typical psychological intervention could involve a weekly group or individual session of 2 to 3 hours for a period of 8 weeks (Hayes, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Linehan et al., 1999; Segal et al., 2002). Each of these modules would involve instruction and practice in various techniques of non-judgmental awareness (mindfulness) of the physical (e.g., breath, eating a raisin, walking movements, pain, tension, et al.), mental (thought), and emotional (mood shifts) processes of the human experience. Each session involves didactic explanation and practice involving walking, sitting, body scanning, thought, and emotional awareness. There is daily home practice assigned each week. By developing a rudimentary non-analytic awareness, the emphasis is for the participants to begin to

realize and experience grounding in the present moment and the transience of thoughts and moods.

By contrast, a Mahasi vipassana retreat typically occurs in a silent intensive residential setting lasting from 3 days to many (maximum 6) months (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010; Mahasi Sayadaw, 2002). A typical day begins between 4:30 to 5:00 a.m. and ends anywhere from 10:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. As well as a breakfast, lunch, and juice break (in the early evening) along with a post-lunch one hour rest period, there is a daily group lecture and personal interview with the teacher. The participants are taught to observe and label throughout the day “each mental state and physical process arising from moment to moment” (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010, p. 5) nonanalytically and without judgment. The format of the practice is to alternate between one hour each of mindful sitting and walking practice throughout the day. In the sitting practice, awareness and labeling of the sensations of the rising and falling of the abdomen as breathing occurs is the primary object of focus. Not to be rigidly attached to, the rising and falling are a sort of default awareness until some other sensation or process becomes dominantly apparent and is, in turn, labeled (e.g., thinking, pain, hearing, etc.). In the walking practice, the lifting, pushing, and dropping processes in taking a slow step are the primary objects, again only until another sense process becomes dominant. During periods when not walking or sitting, the participant is instructed to slow down, observe and label each process of daily activities (eating, toiletry, stretching, bending, etc.), as well as possible. The overarching direction of the practice is to realize the essential impermanence, insubstantiality, and unsatisfactory nature of all phenomena (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1971).

While the basic clinical mindfulness interventions have a demonstrated and proven treatment efficacy, one of the obvious contrasts with the Mahasi method is the uninterrupted continuity and duration of effort provided in a retreat setting. As Chanmyay Sayadaw (2010), one of Mahasi Sayadaw's principal disciples, states, "constant mindfulness gives rise to deep concentration and it is only through deep concentration that one can realize the intrinsic nature of mental and physical phenomena...continuity of noting is needed to carry the awareness forward from one moment to the next" (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010, p. 27). When this deep and pervasive concentration arises from daily continuity of mindfulness, it is possible for meditators to experience the progressive stages of insight mentioned above and discussed later (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985)

Purpose of this Study

More qualitative investigation is needed into any enduring changes that may arise in advanced Mahasi meditators who have experienced the higher stages of insight. How do these changes inform meaning-making in areas of life such as ongoing self-awareness, effectiveness in living, relationship with others, ethical and moral choices, as well as one's overall sense of agency in life? The purpose of this study is to investigate enduring, meaning-making changes that may have arisen in advanced Mahasi meditators during their practice. The data from these lines of inquiry will serve to add a dimension of lived richness to the science of meditation. As well, new directions of research investigation may become apparent from the results of this study. Finally, understanding the lived experiences of advanced meditators might beneficially inform the clinical applications of MBIs.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The convergence of the Asian and Western cultures has brought about a number of new syntheses, a sort of cross pollination of ideas and methods. The adoption of mindfulness meditation techniques as a clinical intervention in the field of psychology is one of the more important cross-cultural adaptations (McMahon, 2008; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). As discussed earlier, MBIs (e.g., MBSR, MBCT) have been informed by the Mahasi style of vipassana (mindfulness) meditation (McMahon, 2008). The clinical applications of these interventions mainly involve patients with little or no experience or training in mindfulness. Therefore instruction focuses on quite rudimentary and basic aspects of mindfulness (Baer & Kreitemeyer, 2006). This review will first discuss the more advanced insights and experiences possible within Mahasi practice as they may affect changing perspective of self and the world. There are a number of Western theorists in psychology who resonate with Asian approaches to self-awareness and spirituality (e.g., see Jung, 1981; Maslow, 1950; May, 1980; Rogers, 1961). However, the work of Bandura provides a perspective and language that is particularly resonant with the underlying principles of Mahasi style Buddhist meditation.

The literature suggests theories describing a productive shift in perspective resulting from mindfulness training. Within the current science of meditation, a major focus of research into these phenomena and others has utilized neuro-imaging and bio-behavioral measures. There is another body of quantitative research that lends strong support to the clinical efficacy of the MBIs discussed earlier. Several of these studies will be discussed. Although most of the

research involved in the science of meditation is quantitative, a small amount of qualitative study on meditation has been undertaken and is outlined.

Mahasi Meditation

Mahasi Sayadaw (1985) has suggested a series of 18 stepwise insights and experiences within the Mahasi style of vipassana (insight) meditation, advanced experiences and insights well beyond basic mindfulness. They arise more or less sequentially as the advanced vipassana practice progresses. These progressive stages of insight are drawn from the earlier scriptural 5th century texts of the *Visuddhimagga*, literally translated as “*the path of purification*” (Bikkhu Nanamoli, 1991). An abbreviated list of advanced meditative insights can also be found in another scriptural text, the *Abhidhamma* (e.g., see Bikkhu Bodhi, 1999). More recent and idiomatically current discussions of these stages of insight have been put forward by Crouch (2011).

Appendix A outlines the 18 progressive steps of meditative insights (*Pali – Nana*; in Arabic numerals) within the context of seven “stages of purification” (*Pali – Visuddhi*; in roman numerals) as discussed in the *Visuddhimagga* (Bikkhu Nanamoli, 1991; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985). The first two stages involve (a) intentionally adopting a set of precepts of wholesome actions such as not killing, stealing, or lying (Purification of Conduct) and (b) focusing and concentrating the mind (Purification of Mind). As the meditation practice proceeds with a focused mind, the third stage of purification (Purification of View) arises as a function of the experience of the first insight (Analytical Knowledge of Body and Mind). At this point the meditator experientially understands the clear distinction between the processes of the mind and those of the body and begins to see the impersonality (non-self) of phenomena. The three

insights that arise next are the essential components of the fourth stage of purification (Purification by Overcoming Doubt). Together they provide an experiential grasp of (a) cause and effect; which leads to the implicit understanding that actions, moral or otherwise, have certain positive or negative effects (Knowledge of Discerning Conditionality); (b) the clear presence of impermanence, dissatisfaction, and impersonality in phenomenal formations as they arise and disappear (Knowledge of Comprehension); and (c) an effortless awareness now possible with the mind firmly rooted in present moment perception of phenomena as they arise and disappear (Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away). This fourth insight is particularly pleasant and is characterized by a sense of rapture, tranquility, and firm conviction in the power of mindfulness practice. Often a meditator may mistake this particular insight as a *Nibbanic* (enlightenment) experience. However, with keen personal awareness and/or guidance from a teacher, the meditator will decide that the true path is to continue practicing. This decision constitutes the fifth stage of purification (Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What is Path and Not-Path) as described in the texts (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985).

Then begins the sixth stage of purification (Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Course of Practice), a middle phase of the practice which involves 10 steps of insight (numbered 5 to 14). The fifth insight (Knowledge of Dissolution) is characterized by an acute awareness of impermanence as the objects of focus are constantly dissolving, changing, or disappearing. The next three insights (Knowledge of Fearfulness, Knowledge of Misery, and Knowledge of Disgust) have been called a “dark night experience” (Britton, 2012) or *dukkha nana* in Pali (insights into suffering). The keen realization of the intrinsic impermanence of all mental and physical things and processes consolidated in the fourth and fifth insight experience fosters a

profound sense of terror, misery, and disgust. With careful guidance and contextualization of the experience, the meditator can move into an insight typified by a deep yearning to be free from reliance on and attachment to impermanent things (Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance). Then follows an insight which involves a sort of reflective review of the causes of fear, misery, and disgust (Knowledge of Re-observation). With patient persistence the meditator can push through the painful restlessness characteristic of this 10th insight into the 11th insight (Knowledge of Equanimity about Formations) which has been called a “meditator’s favorite” (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010).

Here there is an experience of deep and calm contentment wherein a meditator is “neither happy nor unhappy” (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010, p.116), that is, unattached to pleasant things while indifferent to unpleasant objects. Six characteristics of this insight have been identified: (a) neutrality of mind to fear or pleasure related to sense objects, (b) mental equilibrium regarding emotions, (c) balance of mind concerning the mind’s volitional activities (i.e., choice of objects), (d) knowledge gained from previous insight experiences becomes firm and enduring, (e) refinement of mind and character, and (f) the observing mind becomes unwavering in its attention to an object (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1980). The experience of this insight is foundational to progress to the ultimate experience of Nibbana, the cessation of suffering. As the knowledge experienced within this insight matures, the next three insights (Insight Leading to Emergence, Knowledge of Adaptation, and Maturity Knowledge) are often experienced in quite rapid succession. According to the scriptural texts, the attainment of the seventh stage of purification (Purification by Knowledge and Vision) is the final phase of the enlightenment process (Bikkhu

Bodhi, 1999; Bikkhu Nanamoli, 1991; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985) wherein one is “devoid of suffering” (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010, p. 116). This stage is comprised of the final four insights which usually occur in quite rapid succession (Path Knowledge, Fruition Knowledge, Knowledge of Reviewing, and Attainment of Fruition). The Visuddhimagga explains that to attain full enlightenment (*Arahantship*) a meditator must pass through the stages of purification four times; first as a *stream-enterer* (*Sotapanna*), then as a *once-returner* (*Sakadagami*) thirdly as *none-returner* (*Anagami*) and finally as an *Arahant* (Bikkhu Nanamoli, 1991).

An early study using a projective test (the Rorschach) investigated the stages of insights in a small sample of meditators whose experience ranged from beginner to highly advanced. Interpretive differences of experiences were found across the groups whereby the advanced insight and master group were reported to have enduring trait changes in perception and attitude. An important conclusion from this study suggested that the meditative stages of insight are “more than religious belief systems; they are valid accounts of perceptual and affective changes that occur with intensive meditation” (D. P. Brown & Engler, 1986, p. 214).

A Western Perspective

There are numerous theorists in Western psychology that resonate with Asian approaches to self-awareness and spirituality (e.g., see Jung, 1981; Maslow, 1950; May, 1980; Rogers, 1961). However, components of Bandura’s *social cognitive theory* (Bandura, 1986, 1999b, 2001, 2002b) are particularly resonant with the underlying tenets of Buddhism and Mahasi practice. Bandura’s *triadic reciprocal causation*, the interaction of three variables – *environment*, *behavior*, and *person* are important to vipassana practice and application. The agentic perspective of Bandura’s (2003) theory outlines a “set of distinctly human attributes that provide

the capacity for becoming a spiritual being” (p. 167). Bandura (1986, 2001) characterized humankind using such terms as plasticity, flexibility, agency, self regulation, proactivity, self-reflection, and self-organization. These characteristics dovetail with several tenets of Buddhist teaching which are salient to the practice of vipassana and its application to daily life. The most important premise taught by the Buddha in the *Dhammapada* is “the mind is the forerunner of all actions, all deeds are led by mind, created by mind” (Ananda Maitreya, 1995, p. 1). If this is indeed true, a process, such as vipassana (mindfulness), promoting purification of the mind by training present moment focus and awareness is desirable.

Regarding self-awareness, the Buddha stated, “mindfulness is the path to immortality, negligence is the path to death...the wise, having developed a high degree of mindfulness, rejoices in mindfulness” (Ananda Maitreya, 1995, p. 5). Finally a very succinct but profound summary of the Buddha’s lifelong message appears again in the *Dhammapada*: “do no harm, do only good, purify the mind” (p. 52). According to the Buddha these straightforward admonitions contain the keys to a virtuous, balanced, and evolving life facilitated by the practice of vipassana (mindfulness) meditation (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2002). In following these simple guidelines, a meditator can cultivate a respectful and socially responsible attitude toward all beings both in a global and local community context (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1998).

Some interesting parallels exist between these teachings and components of Bandura’s *social cognitive theory* and bear highlighting (Bandura, 1986, 1999b, 2001, 2002b). Bandura (2003) observed that “most people acknowledge a spiritual aspect to their lives, in the sense of seeking meaning and social connectedness to something greater than oneself without being tied

to a formal religion or deity...in such instances they embrace spirituality but not religiosity” (p. 170).

Bandura’s (2001, 2004) views on *human agency* involve several premises that are important to the practice of vipassana: (a) *intentionality* – action incorporating planning, (b) *forethought* - anticipating and understanding the outcomes of actions, (c) *self-reactiveness* – motivation and regulation of actions, and (d) *self-reflection* – examination and evaluation of functioning and motivation. A crucial mechanism of self-reflection is *self-efficacy* which Bandura (2001) defines as “people’s belief in their capability to exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and over environmental events” (p.10). Bandura argues that “efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency” (p.10). A most crucial support for these beliefs arises from successful performance - *mastery experience* (Bandura, 1997).

Another important consideration advanced by Bandura is the concept of *self-regulation*. People with high levels of self-efficacy can develop considerable capacity to regulate their behavior (Bandura, 1994). Both external and internal factors affect self-regulation. Three factors are suggested as requirements for self-regulation: (a) self-observation – monitoring of performance, (b) judgmental process – an evaluation of performance based on personal standards, standards of reference, perceived value of activity, and perceived attribution of performance success or failure, and (c) self-reaction – internal incentive or punishment for actions (Bandura, 1986, 1996). Self-regulation is at the heart of the Buddha’s teaching (i.e., do no harm, do only good, and train the mind): It lays the groundwork for ethical and respectful moral behavior.

According to Bandura (1999a), *moral agency* comprises two aspects of conduct strikingly similar to Buddha's admonitions: (a) do no harm, and (b) help others proactively. However, moral precepts do not operate automatically, but instead operate only if activated, a process called *selective activation* (Bandura, 2002a). Regarding inhumane and abhorrent behavior, Bandura contends "people do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible behavior until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions" (Bandura, 1994, p. 72) via a process he calls *disengagement of internal control*. These disengagement techniques allow people to act in cruel and brutal ways while still retaining their standards of morality. Another salient perspective to this discussion is Kohlberg's levels and stages of moral development. Specifically, Kohlberg posits three levels of moral development each containing two stages of orientation. These include; (a) the pre-conventional level consisting of Stage 1, *the punishment-obedience orientation* and Stage 2, *the instrumental-relativist (hedonistic) orientation*; (b) the conventional level comprising Stage 3, *the interpersonal concordance (good boy/nice girl) orientation*, and Stage 4, *the "law and order" (authority) orientation*; and (c) the post-conventional, autonomous, or principled level which includes Stage 5, *the social-contract, legalistic orientation*, and Stage 6, *the universal-ethical-principal orientation* (Kohlberg, 1977, 2008). Kohlberg even wrestled with the existence of a "Stage 7," a "religious stage going beyond justice principles" (Kohlberg & Power, 1981, p. 233) which would include a fusion of the Greek principle of *agape* (unconditional charity and love for all) and the philosophies of Spinoza and de Chardin.

Bandura's (1986, 1997) viewpoint on pathological depression and fear, dovetails well with some recent findings regarding a darker side of vipassana meditation. Of recent interest is the investigation into a series of insights that have been termed the Buddhist equivalent to Saint

John of the Cross' "Dark Night of the Soul" (Britton, 2012). These insights, formally known as *dukkha nanas* in Pali (insights into suffering), arise midway through an advanced meditator's practice. These insights (see Appendix A; # 6, 7, and 8) are characterized by a profound sense of fear, misery, and disgust as the meditator viscerally experiences the stark truth of phenomenal impermanence. When the meditator comes to realize the falsity of the subtle or gross conviction he or she once cherished and believed concerning the permanence of phenomena, a sense of deep despair and fearful instability can arise. Clinicians and researchers have reported a variety of "anomalous experiences" and "non-ordinary states of consciousness" (NSC) occurring during vipassana and other traditions of meditation (Bronn & McIlwain, 2015; VanderKooi, 1997). Bronn and McIlwain (2015) make the case that there exist validly assessable "spiritual experiences" (SE) and "mystical experiences" (ME), which are different from, although often diagnosed as psychosis (Kuijpers, van der Heijden, Tuinier, & Verhoeven, 2007; Nakaya & Ohmori, 2010), and/or dissociation (Waelde, 2004). However, it should be noted that not all NSCs are necessarily pathological (Lindahl, Kaplan, Winget, & Britton, 2013; Nakaya & Ohmori, 2010). Bandura (1986, 1997) suggests that unwholesome depression can arise in any of the sub-functions of self-regulation, that is, (a) self-observation, (b) judgmental processes, and (c) self-reaction. Concerning phobic fear, Bandura (1986) states that fear arises by direct contact, inaccurate generalization, and observational experience. Without proper contextualization, guidance by a skilled teacher within the practice, screening, or safety procedures these anomalous conditions can last a few days or weeks, months or even years (Britton, 2012; Lustyk, Chawla, Nolan, & Marlatt, 2009). Important questions remain. How are the experiences of these

insights and conditions successfully handled by advanced meditators? How do they impact their daily life?

In summary, components of Bandura's model such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, human and moral agency are resonant with the principles of Buddhism and Mahasi practice. As previously mentioned, other Western theorists resound with Asian spiritual approaches. However, in an important way Bandura serves as a link which illuminates aspects of the Asian cosmology concerned with exploration and mastery of the mind in very real Western terms.

Theory and Research

From a research and theoretical viewpoint, the literature suggests models describing a productive shift in perspective that may arise from even a basic practice of mindfulness – a sense of standing back from one's identity termed *reperceiving* (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006), *disidentification* (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006), *decentering*, (Safran & Segal, 1990), or *cognitive defusion* (Hayes, 2004). Not to be confused with detachment from experience to the point of numbness or apathy, this process engenders a “meta-mechanism” in which “one is able to disidentify from the contents of consciousness (i.e., one's thoughts) and view his or her moment-by-moment experience with greater clarity and objectivity” (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 377). More succinctly, Hayes (2004) suggests that a perceptual shift from “self as content” to “self as context” may be responsible for the positive outcomes of mindfulness practice.

Research into mindfulness, its processes and effects, has followed two paths. The first approach has focused on third person quantitative methods of investigation. This is by far the most prolific and involves two distinct directions: (a) research testing the efficacy of MBI as a clinical intervention for a variety of disorders, and (b) a course of enquiry, known as the science

of meditation, whose area of investigation focuses on the neurology and attentional capacity of the human brain. The second avenue of research, first-person qualitative enquiry into meditative experience, is far less profuse especially with respect to investigation of Mahasi-style meditation.

Quantitative Research

A number of studies lend strong support to the efficacy and effectiveness of mindfulness-based therapy as applied to a variety of clinical conditions. A notable few are presented here.

Ninety patients with chronic pain were trained in MBSR techniques over a 10-week period. Relative to a comparison group, these patients showed a statistically significant reduction in numerous measures of pain perception, mood disturbance, anxiety, and depression. These reductions were evident in a 15-month followup as well (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985). Another study using MBSR with a sample of patients suffering with anxiety disorders found significant reductions post-treatment in panic attacks, anxiety, and depression in 20 of the 22 study participants. These reductions remained constant at a 3-month followup (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992)

The use of mindfulness-based techniques in the treatment and prevention of relapse in depression has been primarily the domain of MBCT. Teasdale and colleagues (2000) randomly assigned 145 patients who had experienced two or more major depressive episodes but were currently in remission to one of two groups: treatment as usual (TAU) and TAU plus participation in MBCT. For those with two previous episodes of depression, MBCT made no difference compared to TAU. However, for patients with three or more previous episodes, 66% of TAU patients relapsed within the following year while only 37% of the MBCT patients experienced a relapse. The results were replicated in a study with 75 formerly depressed patients

yielding a higher TAU group relapse rate within a year compared to the treatment group (TAU 78% relapse vs. MBCT 36% relapse; Ma & Teasdale, 2004).

ACT has had a number of research studies conducted on its effectiveness for a variety of problems (Hayes, Masuda, Bissett, Luoma, & Guerrero, 2004). Rehospitalization of patients with psychosis was significantly reduced in a study involving 80 inpatients randomly assigned to the ACT plus TAU group versus the TAU only group during a 4-month followup. While the period for followup was short, nonetheless, this is an encouraging result demanding further investigation including longer time parameters (Bach & Hayes, 2002). A preliminary study on polysubstance-abusing methadone-maintained opiate addicts ($n = 138$) yielded some interesting results. Participants were randomly assigned to either a treatment group combining methadone maintenance plus a 16-week ACT course or a group-administered methadone maintenance alone. Objective drug use significantly declined in the former treatment group during a 6-month followup. Again, the follow up is short, but the results encouraging (Hayes, Wilson, et al., 2004).

Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) has demonstrated efficacy on a small sample ($n=26$) study of chronically suicidal patients with borderline personality disorder. In a one-year clinical trial 26 female patients were randomly assigned to either a group receiving DBT ($n=13$) or a comparison group receiving TAU ($n=13$). Correcting for dropouts and failures to complete (suicide $n=1$, failure to follow up $n=1$), the treatment group did significantly better on measures of anger, interviewer-rated global social adjustment, and tended to self-report better social adjustment than the TAU group. The researchers conclude that DBT was a promising psycho-

social intervention for improving interpersonal functioning among those severely affected with borderline personality disorder (Linehan et al., 1994).

Orzech's (2008) doctoral thesis studied the psychological effects of an intensive one-month vipassana meditation retreat. He used a partially controlled quasi-experimental pre-post-test design with two groups, each of which eventually participated in a 4-week meditation retreat. Orzech found measures of self-compassion, depression, anxiety, re-perceiving and mindfulness improved after a 4-week retreat for both groups. The improvements remained stable as measured by a one-month follow-up reassessment. Orzech appears to have replicated many of his results in a later similar study (Orzech et al., 2009). Using a quasi-experimental and longitudinal research design, two groups, A ($n=36$) and B ($n=33$) went through a pre and post training assessment followed by another assessment one month after completing a 30-day intensive mindfulness meditation retreat. Group B began training one month after group A and served as a wait-list control. Most participants were female (71%), American citizens, and Caucasian (84%). Findings indicated significant improvements in indicators of anxiety, subjective well-being, and self-compassion (i.e., resilience) from pre-test assessment to post and follow-up assessment. As expected, measures of processes thought to develop during mindfulness practice (i.e., mindfulness, de-centering, and acceptance of unwanted experiences) improved over the study period. This study found that as the training processes increased, measured improvements in psychological symptoms (i.e., depressive symptoms), well-being, and resilience were recorded (Orzech et al., 2009). While the sample may not be representative of a general population and experience levels of the meditators were not accounted for, these two studies provide some very helpful evidence of the psychological benefits of intensive vipassana practice.

A recent study using undergraduate participants demonstrated significantly improved working memory capacity (WMC), less mind wandering, and superior reading comprehension on GRE tests in the treatment group, which received 2 weeks of mindfulness training vs. a control group trained in nutrition (Mrazek et al., 2013). The sample of 48 participants was randomly assigned to either the control or treatment group. Baselines were established using pre and post-test scores measuring (a) WMC as assessed by the widely used operation span task (OPSAN), and (b) mind wandering, defined as task unrelated thought (TUTs), measured by self-report and eight quasi-random thought probes during OPSAN and GRE testing. This study used a relatively small sample of young undergraduates. Whether test results would generalize to older and more diverse populations requires more research.

EEG and Imaging Studies

Numerous studies using electroencephalography (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology have been undertaken in an effort to understand the effects of “mental training” (meditation) on the neurology and attentional capacity of the human brain. A broad distinction between types of meditation practice based on the objects of focus has been suggested by Lutz and colleagues (2008). Focused attention (FA) practice involves attending to a single sensation or object during the meditation such as a mantra or breathing at the nostrils. If the mind wanders, attention is drawn back to the object of focus. This practice is characterized as a *samatha* (concentration) meditation (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010). Open monitoring (OM) practice involves a moment-to-moment awareness of the sensations of whatever mental or physical experience may be dominant (e.g., the sensations of the rising and falling as inhalation and exhalation occur). Although FA practices are sometimes used by

teachers in conjunction with or as a precursor to vipassana, OM is the hallmark of vipassana practice (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010).

An early study monitored the alpha brain wave rhythm of the occipital and parietal regions of the brain with an EEG (Varela, Toro, Roy, & Schwartz, 1981). Subjects were asked to determine whether stimuli presented binocularly from two light-emitting diodes appeared (a) simultaneously, (b) sequentially or (c) appeared to move. The inter-stimulus interval (ISI) was adjusted for each subject to near chance levels for determining conditions (a), (b), or (c). Holding the ISI constant, the researchers then presented the two light flashes when the alpha levels were either maximally positive, or negative. They found that the probability of perceived simultaneity was highest when the occipital alpha waves were positive. In a research review article questioning whether perception is discrete or continuous, VanRullen and Koch (2003) admit Varela's findings strongly support "that discrete components of visual perception can be tightly connected to brain oscillations" (p. 209). Whatever the final answers to this question, we can conclude that there are neurological systems that impact attentional processes both negatively or positively.

Can attentional processes be enhanced? Busch and VanRullen (2010) asked subjects to detect luminance targets that were presented either to the left or right of a central fixation cross. Before each presentation, a symbolic cue arrow pointing to the left or the right was displayed instructing the participants to focus on one direction or the other. Targets were then presented at the cued location (attended) or the un-cued location (unattended). As would be expected, the researchers found that simple pre-stimulus attentional cuing improved the detection performance of the targets. However, for the attended stimuli they found fluctuations in performance detection

over time along with spontaneous oscillations in the alpha and theta waves just before stimulus onset as measured by EEG. This fluctuation was missing for unattended stimuli. Busch and VanRullen concluded “that 'sustained' attention in fact exerts its facilitative effect on perception in a periodic fashion” (p. 16048).

Early studies used tachistoscopically generated light flashes of varying durations to investigate detection thresholds and interval discrimination (D. P. Brown et al., 1984a, 1984b). It was concluded that a treatment group of meditators who completed a 3 month vipassana retreat were able to detect light flashes of shorter duration and discriminate more accurately whether two flashes were presented than a control group. Researchers suggested that vipassana meditation enhanced the visual sensitivity as measured by significant differences in detection and discrimination thresholds.

Two more recent studies by Slagter and colleagues (2007; Slagter, Lutz, Greischar, Nieuwenhuis, & Davidson, 2008) investigated the effects of intentional “mental training” in the form of intensive (3 months) vipassana meditation practice on attentional and information processing. The informational processing capacity of the human brain is limited as evidenced by a phenomenon known as the attentional blink deficit. This occurs when two target stimuli (T1 and T2) are presented within a rapid stream of events in close proximity to each other, T2 is often not seen. It is believed the two targets are in competition with each other for limited attentional resources. Slagter et al. (2007) used a sample of 17 practitioners who participated in an intensive 3 month vipassana retreat, all with prior meditative experience, compared to a matched control group of 23 non-meditators who were given some basic instruction in vipassana practice. Trials consisted of a rapidly presented serial stream of 15 to 19 random letters in which

were imbedded two randomly numbered targets (T1 and T2). Occasionally T2 was omitted and replaced by a blank screen. The temporal distance between T1 and T2 (or a blank) was either short (336 ms) or long (672 ms). Participants were asked to identify the two targets and if uncertain guess at T2. An EEG monitored brain wave activity.

Results indicated that participants in the 3 months of intensive meditation retreat had a smaller attentional blink and a reduced brain-resource allocation to T1 as measured by a brain potential index (P3b). This supports the view that the ability to accurately identify T2 relies on an efficient deployment of resources to T1 and indicates that mental training can foster an increase in control over distribution limited brain resources (Slagter et al., 2007). Further analysis of the EEG data (Slagter et al., 2008) indicated that increased neural activity in theta-frequency band “phase-locked” in a robust way with the target stimuli. This phase locking, initially occurring in the right ventrolateral, midline frontal, and then right ventrolateral central scalp sites, was only observed in the practitioner group.

Lutz and associates (2009) exposed a group of seasoned vipassana meditators following a 3 month retreat and a matched control group of novice meditators to a dichotic listening task. Both groups were asked to attend to a tone pips in one ear and press a button whenever they detected a deviant tone in that ear. They were instructed to ignore concurrent pips in the other ear. In another condition participants were asked to indicate when they detected a deviant tone in either ear. The researchers concluded that intensive mental training that is, vipassana meditation, (a) enhances mental stability, (b) reduces task effort (i.e., reduces resource allocation/cortical engagement), and (c) amplifies phase consistency of brain responses to task-related sensory inputs. Based on their findings derived from EEG data, they suggest that these “mental training-

related effects might be produced by a reduction in cortical noise and/or by an enhancement of the rhythmic mode of attention” (p. 13427) – that is, theta-band phase locking to the target stimuli.

A study using fMRI technology examined the neural effects of meditative expertise on attentional experience using a group of highly experienced Tibetan FA meditators (EMs) versus novice meditators (NMs) as a control (Brefczynski-Lewis et al., 2007). Two conditions were presented: (a) participants were instructed to focus on a small fixation dot on the screen for an average of 2.7 minutes (range 146-170 secs.; Med.) and (b) a rest state (Rest) averaging 1.6 minutes (range 84-106 secs.). Distracting external sound stimuli (positive; baby cooing, neutral; restaurant ambience, negative; woman screaming) were presented randomly for 2-sec intervals for last two-thirds of the Med. And Rest blocks. The sounds were contrasted with randomly occurring silent (null) events. General auditory pathways (temporal cortex and insula) were activated in all participants in response to the distracting sounds during both conditions. As predicted, the EMs showed greater activation than the NMs in a number of attentional and other regions including frontal parietal regions, cerebellar, temporal, para-hippocampal, and posterior occipital cortex. NMs also showed greater activation than EMs in regions which negatively correlate with performance in a sustained attention task (i.e., the medial frontal gyrus/anterior cingulate, and the right mid-insula to the posterior insula). During the onset of the distracting sounds, NMs also showed more activation in medial default-mode regions relating to task-irrelevant thoughts and emotions (i.e., the posterior cingulate, the precuneus and medial frontal gyrus/anterior cingulate). The authors rightly caution that in such a cross-sectional study between two disparate groups, definitively attributing the observed differences to meditation is difficult.

However as one of the authors observed in an interview (Davidson, 2007), “we found that regions of the brain intimately involved in the control and regulation of attention, such as the pre-frontal cortex, were more activated in long-term practitioners (EMs)” and when “they hear the (negative) sound, (as detected) in the auditory cortex, they don’t have the (distraction or) emotional reaction” (p. 1).

In an earlier study, Davidson and associates (2003) investigated alterations to the brain and immune system as a function of mindfulness training (in this case 8 weeks of MBSR). Using an EEG, the study measured electrical activity before and immediately after the training period of MBSR. Twenty-five subjects were tested in the meditation group, while a wait list group ($n=16$) were tested at similar periods. After the 8 week training both groups were injected with an influenza vaccine. Their findings indicated significantly more post-training increases in activity in the left-sided anterior region of the brain in the meditation group than wait-list control. This region is associated with a reduction in anxiety and negative affect and an increase in positive affect. Researchers also found that, in response to the vaccine, meditators had a significantly greater rise in antibody titers (units of concentration) than the wait list control. Accordingly MBSR appears to have demonstrably favorable influence on brain and immune function (Davidson et al., 2003). This would indicate that mindfulness training has positive implications in mood management, stress management, and long-term health care.

In a paper reviewing several studies pertaining to attention regulation and monitoring in meditation, Lutz and colleagues (2008) present some important findings concerning vipassana (OM) practice. A number of studies provide preliminary support for the idea that OM practice relies on and activates regions of the brain that are implicated in monitoring, vigilance, and

disengaging from stimuli which are a distraction to the ongoing stream of awareness. OM meditation appears to foster a kind of interoceptive awareness of subjective momentary experience such as emotional tone or internal bodily responses. OM meditative processes appear to exert regulatory influence on emotional responses by regulating the prefrontal limbic systems. Long-term vipassana practice is thought to foster enduring change to brain and mental function, specifically a non-reactive awareness of the stream of experience, thus reducing ruminative thinking (Lutz et al., 2008).

Apropos of ruminative thinking, some interesting work has been done concerning a region of the brain known as the default mode network (DMN) generally and hub components of it, the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC), posterior cingulate cortex/precuneus (PCC/PCu) and the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC). From a neuropsychological (and interestingly from a meditative) perspective, these areas, when activated, have been associated with "mind wandering" (Christoff, Gordon, Smallwood, Smith, & Schooler, 2009; Hasenkamp, Wilson-Mendenhall, Duncan, & Barsalou, 2012; Mason et al., 2007), "self-referential" thinking (Whitfield-Gabrieli et al., 2011), and future thinking (Andrews-Hanna, Reidler, Sepulcre, Poulin, & Buckner, 2010). Brewer and his research colleagues have found that three types of meditative effort (loving kindness, concentration, and "choiceless awareness") will deactivate the PCC (Brewer et al., 2011). Building on this information, his research team has conducted a series of studies using real-time fMRI neurofeedback and grounded theory method (GTM) analysis of participants' self-report (Garrison, Scheinost, et al., 2013). They found that "real-time feedback from the PCC corresponds to the subjective experience of mind wandering (increased PCC activity) and focused attention (decreased PCC activity) in meditators and novices" (p. 4).

Furthermore, they found that meditators are able to intentionally decrease a feedback graph which displays PCC activity. In another study, the team asked meditators to perform a focused attention task (present-centered awareness) on the breath and describe their experience during the meditation after each run. Overall findings indicated that the subjective experience of "undistracted awareness" and "effortless doing" corresponded with the deactivation of the PCC while "distracted awareness" and "controlling" corresponded with PCC activation (Garrison, Santoyo, et al., 2013).

According to Brewer and his associates, the PCC may actually be a processor and support mechanism for the concept of "self" in the human brain and psyche (Brewer & Garrison, 2014; Brewer, Garrison, & Whitfield-Gabrieli, 2013). There is support for the idea that the PCC and mPFC are areas of the brain which can cause one to get "caught up" in "self" supporting mental content and beliefs. Research indicates that there is an activation of PCC with tobacco and drug-related craving and addiction (Tiffany & Wray, 2012), as well as the social cognitive processing of moral dilemma (Cáceda, James, Ely, Snarey, & Kilts, 2011). Relatedly, Morey and colleagues found that PCC activated strongly for actions leading to harm to others relative to self. The researchers further suggest that actions stemming from guilt could lead to a stronger preoccupation with self-actions rather than concern for harming others (Morey et al., 2012). In another vein, functional imaging studies found that the ingestion of psilocybin induced a functional decoupling of the PCC and mPFC leading to a reported "egoless" or "selfless" state wherein the boundary between others and self is blurred (Carhart-Harris et al., 2012). Finally, in a comprehensive meta-analysis Northoff and colleagues concluded that "midline structures"

which included PCC and mPFC comprise a "core", mental, or "minimal" sense of self (Northoff et al., 2006).

Qualitative Research

While the lion's share of research on mindfulness is primarily quantitative in nature, some qualitative study has been undertaken on a wide range of meditative practices. An early phenomenological study of Mahasi vipassana meditation by Kornfield (1979) posed three questions on a questionnaire. These queries were answered every 2 to 3 days by each participant in either a 2 week or a 3 month retreat setting. The survey enquired about (a) sleep duration and food intake, (b) changes in clarity of perception, concentration, and/or frequency of mindfulness, and (c) currently predominant or unusual experiences. The data were categorized under three general headings; (a) somatic experiences, (b) visual experiences, and (c) mental experiences. Each heading had a number of subheadings. The stated purpose of the study was to be a "descriptive exercise aimed at cataloguing and mapping the range and pattern of meditative experiences" (p. 43). To that end, the study shed some important light on the general day-to-day experiences and changes on a typical retreat. On the other hand the subject pool was heterogeneous in its mix of participant experience and no differentiation was made concerning this variable. Further, no differentiation was made regarding the experiences on the 2 week or the 3 month retreat. Finally, no data were gathered regarding any perceived enduring changes in the meditators: However, this was not a part of the research question.

Another phenomenological study purported to study "deep states" of meditation across four different meditation traditions: Siddha Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Buddhist Breathing (?), and Zen Buddhism (Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994). The meditators' length of

experience ranged from 3 to 25 years. The study endeavored to discover “the phenomenology of deep meditation experience (not) the meaning of the experience” (pp. 119-120). The definition of “deep” experience was left for each meditator to decide personally. Three constituents of deep meditation were culled from the data: “ i) transcendence beyond normal physical and mental boundaries of self, ii) different sense of reality, iii) positive emotion” (p. 123). From the study’s stated goals, useful information is presented. However, the homogeneity of meditation traditions, meditative experience, and non-specific definition of deep meditative states prevent a proper investigation of what constitutes an advanced experience.

An unpublished phenomenological study for a doctoral thesis by Healy (2001) investigated vipassana meditation from the perspective of transformational learning theory (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirks, 1998). The study produced useful evidence of vipassana meditation as a transformational learning model. Healy suggests five elements comprise the learning process within insight meditation; (a) readiness, (b) withdrawal, physically and psychologically, (c) formal sitting practice – observing mind and body phenomena, (d) working out insights, and (e) developing an expanded awareness of self. The study also provided some interesting data on how participants perceived their relationship to “self” as a result of their practice over the years; that is (a) knowledge of self, (b) recognition of self and mind, and (c) an awareness of non-self (impersonality of bodily and mental processes, a sense of impermanence of self). However, Healy’s perspective is that of an educator; therefore, his definition of an “experienced” meditator involved a wide range of practice experience (minimum 3 years to 28 years) as well as being a teacher of the practice. The level of meditative attainment was not part of the participants’ inclusion criteria.

Another unpublished doctoral thesis used narrative qualitative measures to examine the influence that "the long-term practice of mindfulness" would have on seniors facing a "major life transition" (Mazur, 2013). His sample size was small comprised of five people, (two women and three men) ranging in age from 58 to 73 years, each of whom was confronted with a challenging life event (four faced life-threatening illness, one experienced the death by cancer of a spouse). Although his inclusion criterion was simply defined as a long-term (15+ years) involvement in the practice of mindfulness, there was no specificity as to tradition, duration, and frequency of each individual's practice, or meditative experience. However, the sample's self-reported duration of involvement with mindfulness ranged from 35 to 53 years with a mean of 43 years. In spite of a small sample size, Mazur collected a rich database which produced 10 overarching themes; (a) impermanence, (b) awareness, (c) nonattachment, (d) suffering, (e) gratitude, (f) self-compassion, (g) present moment, (h) nonjudgment, (i) compassion for others, and (j) connection to the world. He concluded that long-term mindfulness practice was an adaptive and enduring coping mechanism in face of the vicissitudes of life.

Another qualitative study sought to investigate the impact long-term meditation practice would have on intimate relationships (Pruitt & McCollum, 2012). The small sample size of seven included five female and two male participants, four of whom practiced vipassana meditation, two engaged in Christian prayer meditation, and one practiced "mindfulness." Again, there was no specificity as to tradition or content of participants' practice. The sample age ranged from 52 to 70 years with meditative experience ranging from 10 to 30 years. The researchers identified four common "meditative traits" that emerged from their analysis: (a) awareness of body sensations and emotions; (b) dis-identification with emotions and thoughts; (c) acceptance of

situations, self, and others; and (d) compassion and loving-kindness for self and others. There then emerged three common themes that described relational effects that the meditative traits had on relationships; (a) less reactivity, (b) greater freedom and safety, and (c) new experience of connection. Pruitt and McCollum (2012) suggests that their findings are commensurate with emerging Western literature on individual meditative experience. However, they point out that their research would suggest meditation also has significant relational benefits as well.

A qualitative study from the United Kingdom focused on the challenges experienced during meditation practice (Lomas, Cartwright, Edginton, & Ridge, 2015). Their sample included 30 males ranging in age from 20 to 60+ years and was primarily drawn from a local Buddhist Fellowship (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order). Within the sample, 26 were affiliated with the Fellowship and identified their practice as simply mindfulness and/ or loving kindness, three were unaffiliated but familiar with the two practices just mentioned, and one practiced a meditation in the Hindu tradition. The self-reported range of meditation experience extended from under 5 to 20+ years with no specific breakdown as to composition of practice (i.e., retreat setting, daily practice, or duration). Five themes emerged which the researchers characterized as "not so much 'risks of practice' but rather 'potentially beneficial challenges' that meditator's might ideally be helped to engage with and overcome" (p. 852). These included; (a) difficulties learning meditation, (b) a troubled sense of self, (c) exacerbating psychological issues (e.g., self-esteem, anxiety, depression), (d) reality being challenged (e.g., impermanence), and (e) compensatory positive experiences (enhanced coping capability). The study's conclusions include a cautionary note for teachers and practitioners concerning the screening and application of meditation as a protocol especially for patients with psychological challenges. While these

conclusions are supported by other research (e.g., see Bronn & McIlwain, 2015; Lustyk et al., 2009), there was no mention as to how to address and manage these "potentially beneficial challenges."

A recent interview study of expert meditators from Burma sought to examine if meditation induces changes in perception (Full, Walach, & Trautwein, 2013). Findings identified four categories of perceptual alterations across the sample; (a) quality of perception – described as an increased clarity and awareness of perceptions, (b) interdependences in processing of perception – perceptual experience is less dependent on object than on the observer’s mental state, (c) cessation of object/subject based perception – perception of phenomena is less based on a distinction between subject/object but transforms into a non-dualistic, unified observation of occurrences and events, and (e) non-conceptual perception – perception free from conceptualized notions such as self or defined objects. These findings are interesting and provide important insight into some of the changes advanced practice may invoke. Most of the participants were monks and all 18 subjects were defined as expert based on their attainment of “stream-entry” (Sotapanna). However, this attainment was supposedly implied by their status as teachers and it became the proxy defining meditation expertise. My own experience as a Burmese ordained Theravadan monk for a number of years would contradict this assumption; that is, not all teachers in Burma are Sotapanna nor are all Sotapanna teachers. While the idea of testing a sample of Sotapanna is laudable, according to the *vinaya* (rules of monastic conduct) monks are forbidden to disclose to laity any of their own or other monks’ attainments (Nanamoli, 1992). Further, from a more traditional stance, Mahasi Sayadaw (1980) specifically cautions against a facile belief in one’s attainment of Sotapanna. Mahasi suggests

that time for deep self-appraisal involving seven tests or principles (*Mahapaccavekkhana*) indicative of a bona fide attainment should be undertaken. Even after all “tests” are passed a certain quiet circumspection regarding one’s new status and its disclosure is suggested.

Another concern is that participants were selected from monasteries or meditation centers in Myanmar whose practices were assumed to be homogeneous under the label of Burmese Theravada Buddhism. While it is convenient to apply this universal label, there are distinctly different mindfulness (*vipassana*) practices taught and practiced in Burma (e.g., see Mahasi Sayadaw, 2002; Pa-Auk, 2008). A few of the study’s participants even identified with other traditions of Buddhism (Zen, Mahayana).

In short, a more precise definition of which kind of Burmese meditation was practiced is needed and assumptions concerning participant homogeneity and levels of attainment would best be re-examined. Notwithstanding these concerns, which mainly serve to underscore challenges relating to culture and uniform operational definitions, the study’s findings are interesting. This study undoubtedly sampled some advanced practitioners using forms of “Burmese” meditation. The findings provide data concerning meditatively induced changes in perception some of which (i.e., non-conceptual perception) appear similar to what Healy’s (2001) study describes as impermanence of self. Both studies appear to lend support to the perceptual shift to what Hayes (2004) describes as “self as context.”

Summary

The cross-cultural adaptation of *vipassana* (mindfulness) meditation as a clinical intervention into the field of Western mental health has opened up new avenues of application and enquiry. Mindfulness, as well as its intrinsic processes and effects, has become the focus of a

vast body of primarily quantitative research. This review is meant to provide an overview and perspective of some of the current practices and research pertaining to mindfulness. An important supposition of my research is that Mahasi-style practice is a wellspring which has informed the development of a number of MBIs as well as that of Western Buddhism (McMahon, 2008). According to Mahasi (1985, 2002), during an extended retreat in this tradition, vipassana meditators can advance through a series of stepwise insights and experiences. Although there is strong support for the clinical efficacy of MBIs as treatment for a number of disorders, there is little qualitative investigation of the experiences of meditators whose practice has taken them beyond the rudimentary instructions and experience of mindfulness.

Nonetheless in the field of Western psychology, some theorists and researchers such as Bandura provide a perspective and language that resonates with the Buddhist and Mahasi meditation principles. Bandura (2003) observed that “most people acknowledge a spiritual aspect to their lives...seeking meaning and social connectedness (as they) embrace spirituality” (p.170). He recognized a number of human attributes necessary to “provide the capacity for becoming a spiritual being” (p. 167). Such aspects as self-regulation, self-efficacy, human and moral agency not only resonate with Buddhist tenets but serve to illuminate in very real Western terms the Asian path of exploration and mastery of the mind.

Models describing a productive shift in perspective arising from even a basic practice of mindfulness can be found throughout the literature. Some examples are a sense of “standing back” from one’s identity (reperceiving; Shapiro et al., 2006), disidentification (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006), decentering (Safran & Segal, 1990), or cognitive defusion – “self as context” vs.

“self as content” (Hayes, 2004). This shift engenders a meta-awareness in which greater clarity and objectivity of moment-to-moment experience is possible. Research into these phenomena of mindfulness as well as other processes and effects has followed two paths, quantitative and qualitative.

One avenue of quantitative research has shown support for the positive impact of mindfulness on a number of clinical conditions. Some examples include reduction in pain perception, mood disturbance, anxiety, panic attacks, and depression (e.g., see Kabat-Zinn et al., 1985; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992); prevention of relapse in depression (e.g., see Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Teasdale et al., 2000); reduction in psychotic episodes and objective drug use (Bach & Hayes, 2002; Hayes, Wilson, et al., 2004); improved interpersonal function in borderline patients (Linehan et al., 1994). Orzech (2008; Orzech et al., 2009) found significant improvement in measures of self-compassion, depression, anxiety, re-perceiving, and resilience following a one-month vipassana retreat. Finally, Mrazek and colleagues (2013) found 2 weeks of mindfulness training improved working memory in a sample of undergraduate college students.

A second avenue of quantitative research has focused on EEG and fMRI technology to study effects of “mental training” (meditation) on the neurology and attentional capacity of the human brain. An early study by Varela and associates (1981) established that certain neurological systems can impact attentional processes both negatively or positively. Later, Busch and VanRullen (2010) were able to conclude that sustained attention exerts a facilitative effect on perception. Another early study found that vipassana meditation (three month retreat) enhanced the visual sensitivity relative to non-meditating controls (D. P. Brown et al., 1984a, 1984b).

Slagter and colleagues (2007; 2008) found that participants in intentional “mental training” in the form of intensive (3 months) vipassana meditation demonstrated a more efficient deployment of limited brain resources and therefore more effective attentional and information processing capacity. Another study (Lutz et al., 2009) found that intensive mental training, vipassana meditation (3 month), (a) enhances mental/attentional stability, (b) reduces task effort, and (c) enhances focus on task-related inputs. Mindfulness training has been shown to improve attentional capability as a function of experience – expert vs. novice meditators (Brefczynski-Lewis et al., 2007).

Davidson and associates (2003) found that mindfulness training (in this case 8 weeks of MBSR) has positive implications for anxiety management, stress management, and immune system health.

Recent neuroimaging studies concerning the DMN and subcomponents, the PCC and mPFC, using real-time fMRI neurofeedback technology have shed light on the consequences of activating and deactivating these areas in the brain. When activated, these regions have been associated with the wandering mind (Christoff et al., 2009; Hasenkamp et al., 2012; Mason et al., 2007), self-referential and future thinking (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2010; Whitfield-Gabrieli et al., 2011). Brewer and colleagues' research indicated that the deactivation of the PCC is possible through the use of three types of meditative activity and that this deactivation could be intentionally enacted by experienced meditators as measured by real-time neurofeedback mechanisms (Brewer et al., 2011; Garrison, Santoyo, et al., 2013; Garrison, Scheinost, et al., 2013). Further evidence was presented that the PCC might be associated as a support mechanism

for the concept of self and the human mind and psyche (Brewer & Garrison, 2014; Brewer et al., 2013; Northoff et al., 2006)

Taken together, these two bodies of quantitative research in conjunction with the review presented Lutz and colleagues (2008) would support a number of important conclusions. First, there is a productive shift in perception of self even after basic mindfulness training. Second, mindfulness practice has a positive impact on a number of clinical conditions protective factors. Third, mindfulness training (especially intensive or long-term practice) activates areas of the brain that enhance attentional regulation, capability and stability (focus), information processing and efficiency, as well as working memory. Fourth, certain areas of the brain, notably the PCC, when activated can cause distraction, self-referential and future thinking and when deactivated foster a sense of present-centered awareness. Fifth, long-term vipassana practice is thought to foster enduring change to mental and brain function

The second path of research, qualitative, although sparse in quantity, does lend support to the idea of a productive shift in perception of self. Kornfield (1979) began mapping changes in clarity of perception and concentration as well as unusual experiences in vipassana meditators on an extended retreat. Gifford-May and Thompson (1994) describes a sense of transcending normal boundaries of self, while Healy (2001) discusses both recognition of self and mind and a sense of the impermanence of self. Mazur's (2013) research, although comprising a small sample, provides insights into the later life benefits of a continuous meditative practice into senior years when facing major life transitions. Another study containing a small sample examined the impact of long-term meditation on intimate relationships (Pruitt & McCollum, 2012). Lomas and colleagues (2015) provided some insight into some of the challenges

experienced during meditation practice. Full and colleagues (2013) identified four categories of perceptual alterations across their sample involving changes in object/subject-based perception.

Many of these qualitatively based changes could be informed by or associated with the neurological changes discussed earlier. They also may play an important part in clinical transformation and treatment as applied within the MBI framework. However, there remains a dearth of investigation into enduring changes that occur during advanced practice within the Mahasi tradition of vipassana meditation.

CHAPTER THREE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The current science of meditation focuses mainly on objective bio-behavioral measures to assess the effects of mindfulness practice. As a result, scientific inquiry often de-emphasizes subjective experience. The lack of qualitative first-person research in the area of contemplative experience has almost certainly led to a skewed and incomplete perspective within the science of meditation. On the other hand, qualitative data and research can provide a fuller and more expansive understanding of the lived experience arising within contemplative practices.

The lack of research is particularly apparent with regard to the more refined and elevated stages of Mahasi-style mindfulness practice. The Mahasi style of mindfulness practice has had a profound effect on contemporary Western culture and strongly informed the creation of mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (McMahon, 2008). However, first-person qualitative research regarding advanced contemplative experience in the Mahasi tradition is notably sparse in the scientific literature.

Finally, clinically oriented mindfulness training (e.g., MBSR) is generally geared to beginners (Baer & Kreitemeyer, 2006), as well it should be. It is a great testament to Mahasi vipassana in particular that mindfulness-based interventions demonstrate enduring efficacy even with such rudimentary application. What is missing is first-person research on the higher stages of experience and subsequent enduring changes possible within the contemplative Buddhist path from which these interventions were derived.

The Present Study

According to Varela (1996) neuroscience needs to develop alongside a rigorous phenomenology of experience. Childs (2007), who suggests that mindfulness is the psychology of presence, further states, “personal knowledge is the foundation of science...a quantitative psychology will not be genuinely rigorous unless it can show how it includes this grounding” (p. 372). With these admonitions in mind, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively investigate the experiences and enduring changes of a number of advanced Mahasi vipassana practitioners using qualitative narrative techniques of enquiry and analysis.

Research Questions

The following research questions explored enduring changes in everyday life as well as lived-experiences arising during practice:

1. How has vipassana practice influenced/affected awareness, self-management, and relationships?
2. How has vipassana practice influenced moral/ethical actions or behavior?
3. How has vipassana meditation influenced general functioning and perception of environment?

An interview guide (Appendix B) provided a series of open-ended questions to channel the narrative enquiry along research question guidelines.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODS

Qualitative methods of research, specifically collected narrative data (Josselson, 2007; Wertz et al., 2011) and appropriate methods of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005) were used in this study. The processes and phenomena examined within vipassana practice and experience are complex due to their contextual and subtle nature. The challenge in investigating these elements of insight meditation is best answered with a research technique that is inductive and exploratory. Since this study meant to explore phenomena that are less examined, qualitative research methodology is appropriate. Qualitative research “allows researchers to get at the inner experience of participants, to discover how meanings are formed and to discover rather than test variables” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12). Narrative research bases its premise on the contention that peoples’ lives are lived or understood as a story with a beginning, middle, and end. These stories are played out in context to other stories (Josselson, 2011). Common meaning-making themes were mined from the data and analyzed for their capacity to inform change within the context of vipassana meditation.

Participants

An advanced meditator is defined as one who has attained at least the 11th stage of higher equanimity known as *sankharupekkha-nana* in Pali (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985; see Appendix A). Attainment of this criterion was ascertained by qualified teachers within the Mahasi tradition. Preference was given to those participants who met this criterion and had completed multiple month retreats under the guidance of a qualified teacher. The selection of participants was purposeful to optimize the potential for rich data collection based on their advanced experience.

By using a minimum level of attainment as an inclusion criterion, I sought to create a homogenous sample based on (a) commonality of practice among participants, (b) level of accomplishment as defined by the Mahasi stage model, and (c) non-reliance on participants' length of practice as a criterion. The level of *sankharupekkha-nana* was chosen as an inclusion criterion because it qualifies as an advanced level of attainment in this practice and is quite readily identified by an experienced teacher (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985). Determining attainment of higher levels of experience can be contentious (e.g., see previous discussion on pp. 33-34 re Full et al., 2013) and fraught with challenges (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1980)

Recruitment

A number of qualified criterion-level participants were suggested by notable Mahasi teachers such as Venerable U Vivekananda (a 30-year German monk), Ariya Nani (a Swiss nun), Stephen Armstrong, and Joseph Goldstein (Insight Meditation Society). Potential participants were sent a letter of introduction (see Appendix C). A follow-up telephone or Skype contact was arranged to further determine suitability and availability of potential participants using guidelines outlined in Appendix D. Eleven participants were selected, which is within the generally accepted range at which saturation occurs (i.e., no new data are emerging; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix E) and complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F), all of which complied. They were then interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B) meant to target experience during and after the practice.

Procedures and Data Collection

Prior to participation each participant was asked to sign a consent and confidentiality form agreeing to all conditions of the study. A semi-structured 2 hour interview was the main source of data collection. The use of an interview guide was meant to increase thoroughness and consistency. All interviews were conducted and completed in a face-to-face manner at participants' residences or in a hotel environment. The interview was recorded and transcribed for later coding and analysis (see Appendix H). Participants were offered an opportunity to receive a transcribed copy of the interview and comment on the accuracy of content. Seven participants declined this offer, while four participants requested copies but had no further comment. To enhance continuity and accuracy a journal of all activity with appropriate commentary was kept. I journalized my own biases and expectations on an ongoing basis as thoroughly as possible.

Analysis and Data Coding

Analysis

From one perspective, “narrative research is ... a fundamentally hermeneutic enterprise concerned with the science of meanings” (Josselson, 2011, p. 240). To begin to reveal the layered meanings participants assign to their experiences, a thematic analysis was undertaken to become familiar with common themes within the field data. From these themes, meanings were developed as to how people understood their actions, constructed an identity, distinguished themselves from others, and hopefully were able to bring forth some new understanding regarding enduring changes associated with Mahasi practice (Josselson, 2011). In order to facilitate these processes Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest the strategic and purposeful use of

an array of analytic tools. These devices are meant to help analysts to (a) provide a distance from personal experience and be open to new possibilities, (b) question in order to break through conventional thinking, (c) avoid taking anything for granted, (d) listen to and understand what is being said and done, and (e) avoid missing “diamonds in the rough” when examining data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

As suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008), I used the following analytic techniques to familiarize myself with themes and meanings embedded within the data. First, to avoid the peril of superficial or shallow findings, deeper and richer analyses were plumbed by asking questions of the data. Not only enquiry involving the who, what, when, where, how and with what consequences, but questions involving temporal and spatial dimensions were used to provide a particular richness to the process. Several types of questions were posed: (a) *sensitizing questions* – What is going on here? What is the meaning to the actors?, (b) *theoretical questions* – What would happen if....?, (c) *practical questions* – Is my developing theory logical? Have I reached the saturation point?, (e) *guiding questions* - questions that guide the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Another useful tool of analysis was to look at the language participants’ use. Language is often descriptively rich and well worth paying attention to, for it can provide considerable insight into the participants and their experiences. For example, the use of first-person or third-person narrative can provide a sense of distance or proximity to an event or situation. The use of metaphors or similes can be particularly rich in meaning and conceptualization of experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Finally, I used the constant comparison method wherein data were compared (a) from one individual to another, (b) among different points in each individual narrative, (c) from incident to incident and, (d) from category to category (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005). The software ATLAS.ti, offered by the company Scientific Software Development, was used to facilitate data storage, management, and categorization.

Coding

Three levels of coding were used: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding.

Open coding

The first level involved breaking down the transcribed data into units of meaning or concepts, which were categorized and labeled. As additional data were gathered, coded concepts were compared to existing data and re-categorized. The categories were constantly undergoing a process of modification incorporating new information and data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005).

Axial coding

Axial coding, the second level of coding, involved organizing and further explicating the relationships among categories by grouping them into more encompassing or key categories that clearly subsume several sub-categories. Another constant comparison method was utilized with four kinds of comparison; (a) comparing and relating sub-categories to categories, (b) comparing categories to new data, (c) expanding the complexity of the categories by describing the properties and dimension of each category, and (d) exploring variations or apparent anomalies

and reconceptualizing categories and their relationships as needed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005).

Selective coding

The final stage of analysis was to create an integration of categories that is substantive. At this stage of the analysis the process of selective coding involved selecting a central or core category that integrates all other categories into a central story. This core story was a brief narrative of the most important components of the data. It subsumed all other categories and articulated their particular connection to the core story. As in previous stages, the budding themes were continuously compared to the data to ensure it was grounded in the experience of the participant. To aid in this process, Corbin and Strauss suggest using a “conditional/consequential matrix” an analytic device to stimulate thought on the relationships between the range of micro and macro conditions. The ATLAS software helped facilitate this device to further develop the emerging theory’s context. Finally, the refinement of the theoretical construction is accomplished by linking or integrating categories around a core category. Work is nearing completion when all categories are well developed and further data collection or analysis contributes nothing new to the theory termed *theoretical saturation* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Fassinger, 2005).

Validity

To ensure that the researcher’s interpretation of each participant’s “reality” was accurate and true several methods to check internal validity were used. These included: (a) offering to send the participants a transcription of their interview to confirm content served as a useful check and balance, (b) checking with the participants to clarify any points of interpretation and

meaning, (c) information and interpretation sharing with colleagues and committee members, and finally (d) utilizing research assistants will assist to provide another perspective as well as checking my own biases.

Credibility and Trust

Several factors promoted the very necessary interviewer credibility, rapport, and trust. Firstly, participants were initially contacted by the referring teacher requesting permission to refer them on to the author for participation in the study. In the course of this interaction the study was explained briefly and the author's credentials and experience were also summarized. Once permission was granted, participants were contacted directly by phone wherein the study and its rationale was discussed in greater detail. The project was presented as an important collaboration between the author and the participants. Their confidentiality and privacy was assured as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. It was emphasized and recognized that the information they would be sharing was likely to be deeply personal and for that very reason would shed important light on the experiences of an advanced meditator.

Secondly, during the face-to-face data-gathering interview great care was taken to establish rapport in the following ways by; (a) emphasizing the collaborative nature of this process, (b) reassuring participants that their confidentiality would be respected, (c) answering questions about the author's experience and background in an open and transparent way, (d) respectfully and mindfully engaging with the participants throughout the interview process, and lastly (e) gratefully acknowledging and supporting their participation at the end of the interview session.

Finally, any follow-up information that was requested or promised was diligently provided. Participants were encouraged to contact the author with any further thought or clarification that they might wish to convey.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS

Introduction

In this chapter, a narrative analysis of the 11 people who met the criteria of meditative practice and experience in the Mahasi tradition is presented. Each person is also introduced with a detailed biographical description. Following these introductions, a summary of specific demographic information reported by participants prior to the interview process is outlined. Finally, narrative themes are presented that reveal processes and insights experienced by participants throughout their history as meditators in the Mahasi vipassana style of practice. The following paragraphs provide specific information for each of the 11 people that participated in the study.

Description of the Participants

Sarah

Sarah is a 41-year-old, single, White female who lives in the northern part of Canada. She holds a bachelor's degree and enjoys her career as a primary school teacher. When teaching she finds it particularly gratifying to work with "special needs" children who have complex social and family backgrounds. She began her meditation pursuit in the Goenka tradition of practice in 2005. Soon after, she encountered a well-known teacher in the Mahasi tradition and began to practice in that meditative method. She has attended numerous long-term (multiple month) retreats in the Mahasi tradition and states that meditation is a "high priority" in her life at this time. Sarah currently spends one third of her time in meditation practice, one third of her time teaching in the school system, and one third of her time working with a charitable

nongovernmental organization (NGO). She and her mother founded the NGO which raises funds in North America and provides services and assistance in India. She has no plans to marry or have children, and while back in Canada she lives with and is well supported in her pursuits by both her parents. Sarah identifies her religion as a combination of Buddhist and First Nations spiritual practices.

Walter

Walter is a 66-year-old, married, White male, who resides in the northern part of Canada. He has two grown children, one of which is the previously discussed Sarah. He states that, in fact, it was his daughter who inspired him to take up the practice of meditation. He attended community college and received a designation as an engineering technician. Walter is currently retired having enjoyed a long career as a contractor in the construction industry. He began his meditation practices a few years before his retirement at age 65 and has reported participating in numerous multiple month retreats in the Mahasi meditative tradition. He stated that he is quite comfortable in retirement and finds it very fulfilling to both practice with and support his daughter's meditation and charitable work. While his wife does not practice meditation, she has a "charitable heart" supporting both his and Sarah's meditative pursuits, as well as working diligently with the NGO she cofounded. Walter stated that he grew up in a household with a very authoritative, almost bullying, father and spent a lot of his younger days "feeling fearful and wimpy." He reported that he has a somewhat strained relationship with his son, feeling that there is an unnecessary competition between them. He admitted that he was a "tough act to follow" as he had attained a certain level of mastery in martial arts, music, and construction and that his son

might feel a burden to measure up. Concerning his religious identification, Walter indicates that he has none.

Doug

Doug is a 45-year-old, single, White male who resides in an urban center in the northwest region of the USA. He has no plans to ever marry or have children. He has earned a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering and currently works for a company which organizes and provides technical support seminars for industry throughout the United States. Doug facilitates these seminars and in doing so travels a lot. He states that he is well compensated and has a high degree of autonomy and flexibility in his current position. He began his pursuit of meditation in the Goenka tradition but soon switched to the Mahasi style under the guidance of a well-known teacher. He has completed several multiple month retreats under the guidance of this teacher in Nepal and North America. Doug stated that in his early days he used drugs and alcohol excessively as a result of "childhood stuff" with his "family of origin." He stated that he still finds it challenging to deal with his mother's "button pushing" concerning his lifestyle whenever he's around her. Doug self-identifies his religion as Jewish

Jiffy

Jiffy is a 54-year-old, married, White male. He has three children and resides in an urban center in Western Canada. He earned a masters degree in psychology and has studied shiatsu, yoga, and Qi Gong. He is currently the clinical manager of a local addiction center which provides counseling to clients with addictive backgrounds. He finds the work in this profession challenging but extremely gratifying. His work has provided a very comfortable living standard for him and his family. He states that he feels "very grateful and blessed." Jiffy has been

practicing vipassana meditation for several decades beginning with Goenka practice in 1984. Later on he engaged in several multiple month retreats in Burma with two particularly well-renowned teachers in the Mahasi tradition. Jiffy stated that he grew up in an alcoholic family where his father drank excessively. He recalled feeling "a lot of shame" throughout his childhood as a result of this complexity. Jiffy does not identify with any particular or specific religion but states that he is "informed by the richness and transformative practices from around the world."

Tera

Tera is a 72-year-old, divorced, White female who resides in a small town in the West Coast region of the United States. She completed a degree at community college as a registered nurse and with further training at an eastern university pursued a career as a psychiatric nurse. She found this livelihood to be very challenging but gratifying. Tera is currently comfortably retired and spends most of her time practicing meditation and doing small amounts of community service. She began to practice Mahasi style meditation in 1987 at a well-known center for meditation in the Eastern United States. Since that time she has undertaken several short and long-term retreats under the guidance of several well-known meditation teachers in the Mahasi tradition. Tera reported that she grew up in a family in which she described her father as "very anxious" and her mother as "very fearful." She admitted that throughout her life she suffered with fear and anxiety and early on used a number of drugs as well as psychotherapeutic counseling to help her cope with these conditions. She identifies her religion as "Jewish at birth and Buddhist now."

Jacob

Jacob is a 44-year-old, married, White male who lives with his wife in a moderately sized urban center in the Southwest United States. He has no children nor does he plan to have any "in this lifetime." He holds a bachelor of arts and a master's degree in clinical counseling. He earns a comfortable living as a full-time meditation and Dhamma teacher. He began meditating in 1991 in the Goenka tradition. Following that he was an ordained Zen monk from 1995 to 2000. Since 2003, he has studied and practiced primarily in the Mahasi tradition under a number of well-known teachers. He reported that throughout his childhood and adolescence he has always felt very well supported by both his parents to pursue whatever career he desired. Jacob stated that he and his wife are committed to supporting "each other's spiritual growth" in whatever way is necessary. He identifies his religious affiliation as Buddhist.

Calvin

Calvin is a 64-year-old, single, White male who resides in a small town in the southwestern region of the United States. He has never been married nor does he have children. He earned a general bachelor of arts degree and an associate's degree in nursing. He is currently retired from the nursing profession which primarily involved hospice care giving. He admitted that prior to nursing and involvement in meditation practice, he made a living in the "shadow side" of drug dealing and drug use. Calvin stated that he began meditating in the early '70s, involving himself in shorter (10 day) retreats. By the late 1980s he had begun to do "longish," that is, multiple month meditation retreats in the Mahasi tradition. Calvin reported that, due to his parents' emotional immaturity, he never "really engaged" with either of his parents or his other two siblings. He describes himself as having "an aversive personality" early on in his lifetime

and that he was more interested in "doing harm than being kind". Concerning his identified religion he stated that he was "born as secular Jew and practiced and studied Buddhist meditation".

Upo

Upo is a 72-year-old, widowed, White male residing in an urban center in the southwest region of the United States. He earned a bachelor of science in medicine and enjoyed a 30-year career as a physician's assistant working primarily in urgent care and cardiology units. He reported that he has been married twice. He was with his first wife for 26 years before they parted ways and helped raise her daughter until the child committed suicide at age 21. He stated that he had a son with his first wife that died on the second day of his life. More recently, he reported that his second wife passed away in August 2012 and that he is still grieving her passing. Upo indicated that the death of the second wife was particularly difficult as it was a "marriage made in heaven." He stated that he began meditating under the guidance of a Zen master and, following that, spent time studying and practicing in the Goenka tradition. He has also studied and practiced yoga. Upo reported that since 2008 he has been deeply involved with the Mahasi style of practice, encouraged by Calvin, and guided by a well-known teacher. He reported that he grew up in a very abusive family environment. His father, an accomplished but driven artist, was emotionally and physically abusive to Upo ("he was a psychological terrorist"). He also reported using numerous psychedelic and illicit drugs in his younger days. He identifies his religion as Buddhist.

Estes

Estes is a 74-year-old, divorced, White female currently residing in an urban center in the southwest region of the United States. She reported leaving university in her senior year due to the challenges of raising her children. As a result of the divorce she raised her three children (two twin boys and a daughter) as a single parent. She stated that she has worked at numerous occupations throughout her life such as registered massage therapy, alternative school teacher, farm manager, and currently full-time meditation and Dhamma teacher at the local heritage. She began her exploration into meditation in the 1970s with the study of Zen practices followed by an investigation and study of a variety of Tibetan practices. In the mid-1980s she began to practice in the Mahasi tradition under the guidance of numerous well-known practitioners and teachers. She reported that growing up posed challenges due to a complex relationship with her mother. Estes reported that care-giving and assisting her dying mother through her final days provided a "sense of closure" and reconciliation with any existing mother/daughter issues. She identified her religious affiliation as Buddhist.

Sandola

Sandola is a 59-year-old, single, White female who lives in a small town in the western regions of Canada. She has never been married and has no children. She earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in interior design at a local university and currently earns her living as a freelance design consultant. She is also a community leader and teacher in meditation and Buddhist teachings. Previously, she was also a horse riding dressage teacher. Sandola reported that she has been practicing Mahasi-style vipassana meditation for 15 years under the guidance of a well-known teacher. She indicated that she has attended several multiple month retreats in

this tradition. She reported that she grew up in an alcoholic household and that throughout her childhood and adolescence she often felt fear and shame concerning her father's alcoholism. She stated that even in present times certain behaviors in others that resemble her father's actions will trigger these strong emotions. Sandola described how, in spite of her father's alcoholism, there was a strong sense of moral correctness in her family often promoted and modeled by her mother. She self-identified her religious affiliation as Buddhist.

Lynn

Lynn is a 45-year-old, married, White female residing in a highly populated bedroom community in the northeast regions of the United States. She has two young children which she attends to full-time. She graduated from a well-known university with a bachelor of science in electrical engineering. Prior to getting married, she worked for a large engineering firm and lived a lifestyle which she described as "hedonistic" and was primarily interested in "sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll". She stated that she began to practice Mahasi-style meditation in the mid-1990s. Lynn reported that the initial positive effects on her behavior and attitude fostered by her meditation practice were key factors in her "being able to marry and have children." Her husband is very supportive of her spiritual path and earns sufficient income to allow her to be primarily a "stay at home mom." She also has the flexibility to provide guidance in teaching to a number of her meditation students. She reported her early home life to be challenging and stated that for a number of years she harbored a deep resentment and a "grudge" against her parents and the way they raised her. She has sought and found helpful engaging in psychotherapy as an adjunct to her meditative practice. Lynn indicated that her religious affiliation is "atheist, Jewish, Buddhist."

Demographic Summary

All 11 participants in this study identified as Caucasian. Five of the group were female with ages ranging from 41 to 74 years old, while the remaining six men ranged in age from 44 to 72 years old. The nationality of the sample comprised seven Americans and four Canadians. All 11 of the participants had some post secondary education with the distribution as follows: six had bachelor's degrees, two completed community college diplomas, two earned a master's-level degree, and finally one completed 4 years of university but did not obtain a degree. Five of the participants indicated they had children they had raised or were raising, while the remaining six reported having no children. Years of experience in the Mahasi tradition of meditation ranged from 4 to 31 years with the following distribution: one had less than 5 years experience, four participants' experience ranged from 6 to 10 years, two participants had experience ranging from 11 to 20 years, while the remaining four participants indicated experience in excess of 25 years. Four of the sample indicated that they consider themselves retired, while four of the group stated that they were full-time meditation and/or dhamma teachers. Four of the group identified their religious affiliation solely as Buddhist; another claimed to be Buddhist as well as another nontraditional (Native) path; one claimed to be Jewish, while two of the participants claimed to be Jewish and Buddhist; and still another claimed to be Jewish, Buddhist, and atheist; finally the remaining two indicated no affiliation. When asked to comment on their perceived level of insight, nine indicated they had far surpassed the criterion level for participation in the study. while two indicated they had exceeded this criteria but were nonspecific as to how far beyond.

Meditative Processes and Experiences

The analysis revealed seven thematic constructs of insight and experience which contributed to or exemplified enduring and transformative changes in participants' perspectives and life paradigms. While the experiential insights were often life-altering, the thematic constructs are not necessarily universally developmental, sequential, or linear. The constructs include meditative practice, transformation, mental/cognitive processes, disturbing emotions, relationships, morality, and living life.

Meditative practice is characterized by insights and processes that were experienced during or after retreats involving Mahasi-style vipassana practice. These experiences were often the basis for paradigm shifts and transformative insights which would impact various aspects of their lives.

Transformation refers to the processes, agents, and experiences which facilitated changes or shifts in perception before, during, or after meditative retreats.

Mental/cognitive processes represents the "mind" as both a wholesome and unwholesome agent of observation and facilitator of perceptual transition. The mind can be experienced as either a hindrance or a catalyst for progressive change.

Disturbing emotions references the transformative possibilities when such challenging feelings such as anxiety, anger, fear, and shame are addressed through the lens of vipassana meditative practice. These emotions may manifest either as a result of pre-existing conditions or components of the meditation process.

Relationships represents a range of behavioral, attitudinal, and selective changes or shifts that can occur in the context of intentional interactions with others. These shifts or changes can be activated intentionally or by a more gradual process of alteration.

Morality refers to shifts in the processes involved in evaluating the concept of "right or wrong" and the ensuing choices and behavioral responses appropriate to the circumstances.

Living life characterizes the vipassana-induced influences on general functioning, perception of environment, and challenges faced in daily life.

There are subthemes within each of these themes which offer support for the overarching categories. Although not every participant necessarily addressed the subthemes, everyone spoke to the primary themes in thoughtful and meaningful ways.

Meditative Practice

Within the context of Mahasi vipassana meditation practice as a theme, participants' narratives indicate a wide range of experiences and processes. Vipassana meditation is structured and instructed in such a way as to allow meditators "to realize the true nature of mental and physical phenomena (and) aims at the realization of impermanence (*anicca*), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-self or non-ego (*anatta*)" (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010, p. 2). These three qualities are referred to as the three general characteristics of existence and constitute subthemes under this general category. All participants' narratives indicate a direct experience and subsequent perceptual shifts as a result of their encounters during intense meditation practice. Tera perhaps best summarizes this understanding with her comments: "The teachings of the Buddha that *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*, all things are insubstantial. They're not

real. It's just a manifestation of the mind. This is lasting, forever lasting, nirvana, full enlightenment. I know that to be totally true."

Experiencing impermanence (*anicca*)

Although most people may acknowledge generally and superficially the truth contained in such axioms as "all good things must come to an end" or "nothing lasts forever," the participants spoke of the visceral and more enduring understanding of the nature of impermanence as it is experienced in meditative practice. They described how applying this understanding to the more commonly sensed context of life provided them with important and lasting insights.

Impermanence in retreat

Jiffy's narrative outlines the skill set involved with experiencing impermanence within the meditative context, that is, full attention to the changes arising moment to moment:

Allowing it [the moment] to be and then what happens is that if you connect with change, change is happening very, very fast. So if you allow yourself to be fully in one moment, then the next moment is allowed to be fully present and the next moment is allowed to be fully present. Which is a basic sort of skill in terms of vipassana meditation.

Whereas Estes provides a description of the awesome rapidity of change, the common hallmark of impermanence, as experienced in a meditative retreat. In the deepened concentration and focus typical of intense meditation, she describes the "uncontrollable" intensity of this direct experience as follows:

I had an experience it was couched in anicca, a very intense experience of anicca, doing walking meditation by myself. Everything speeded up, very, very, very, very fast.

And I was walking very slow. And there was a sound, like a freight train that went with the speed of what everything was moving so fast...seeing that, in the mind, the heart, the mind, moving faster than seeing the speed of light. I don't know what that means, but so fast of arising, passing, arising passing, arising, passing, just the incessant completely uncontrollable phenomena that that is.

Both Lynn and Sandola describe changes in perception that occur during practice. As Sandola observes, "with the constant seeing of impermanence you go, well, you know, it's not going to stay like this. It's going to--it is continuing to change. It's not stable." For Lynn there was a perceptible change in her sense experiences in that she notes, " just the kind of texture of sensory experience changed, it became much more porous and much lighter and much-- just the ephemerality [sic] of it is always with me, the sense of that." On the other hand, Jacob describes a sense of freedom that comes from experiencing the arising and passing of mind states during meditation:

I guess the big turn for me is to see that, oh, these are just states of mind that arise and pass away. So it's a state of mind that arises and passes away, rather than that's who I am. And that there's been a lot of freedom around that in the sense of just like the weather changes. There could be storms or sunny days. It's just this unfolding like that, rather than, this is who I am.

He is also alluding to the sense of non-self discussed above.

Impermanence commonly sensed

Participants provided descriptions of how insight into impermanence can provide

different textures and perceptions of the passing of daily life. For example, Sarah describes the "focusing" quality that deep understanding of impermanence can foster. As she observes,

"Maybe it's like focusing a camera lens. Maybe it's more like that. So there are times when I'm... I really consciously think oh, this is very precious. This is very precious. Because it can be the last moment. " The preciousness that Sarah speaks of is mirrored by Sandola who states, "there's a greater openness and enjoyment of what happens and an appreciation of the fragility and briefness of everything." Jiffy also echoes this sentiment as he reports that "when I am looking at people, I'm more looking at their beauty, the sense of wonder the sense of, you know, we're sharing this moment here together and who knows if it'll ever happen again."

Impermanence and death

Perhaps the starkest manifestation of impermanence in the human experience is that of death, the truth of our mortality. For Walter the general understanding of death fosters an important understanding concerning the perils of being overly attached to things and events. As he observes:

You see death all around and it helps get rid of attachment if you can think that this is not going to last forever. Whether it's a new car you buy or whatever it is. So you have it and you enjoy it and it's okay to do that, but don't get too hung up on it.

For some the direct experience of death produced profound grief. As Upo's narrative outlines, he is no stranger to the deep sense of loss that arises during the passing of dear ones.

I've had a lot of grief in my life. My daughter committed suicide when she was 21 years old. I was holding my father's hand when he died. I had heart surgery when I was

35 and was told it was not a sure thing that I was going to wake up. So I was not a stranger to a major loss.

The biggest emotional problem I've had for the last 20 months is grief. My wife died in August of 2012. We were closer than either one of us believed two human beings could be. It was a marriage that if I believed in such things I would tell you was made in heaven.

While Upo's story deals with the single dimension of death and the passing of a loved one, Lynn's narrative involves the emotional juxtaposition of the sad death of a beloved mother-in-law against the simultaneously occurring birth of her "beautiful lovely child." She relates how she

just kind of tried to tolerate the huge emotional swings, you know, between my beautiful...this beautiful lovely child that we had, you know, growing before our eyes. And then our beloved mother-- yeah, it was really hard for my husband, that was kind of withering before our eyes. It was really-- it was a year of 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows, really.

Both Lynn and Upo speak about how important the practice was to each of them as they dealt with the grief arising from their loss. For Lynn there was a sense of support arising from the practice of meditation as she trained her focus from moment to moment and day to day which provided her with a feeling of balance and equanimity. As Lynn states,

The practice was really supportive and just being able to go through that kind of one day at a time...and it took a lot of equanimity, you know, to just-- okay, what's the next

moment, what's the next moment, what's the next moment. And I know the practice definitely helped that.

Upo describes his process for managing grief in a little more detailed way. He discusses managing mental tendencies to replay the past or hope for an impossible future. When asked what helped them through these challenging events he replied,

Feeling. Allowing the grief to be whatever it was and in other words, doing the practice. Not talking in my mind about it. Not reliving the past. Not wishing for a future that will never be. Being alert for not replaying the past. By replaying I mean remembering, verbalizing, mentally verbalizing the past. Viewing the past mentally. Being as alert as possible when that phenomenon arises and calling it. Noting it.

I knew it would pass. I mean, I knew the hard part, the deepest pain, the deepest grieving, the deepest sense of loss was going to always be there, but it was going to lessen over time.

Upo recalls beginning his grieving process by spending a number of hours with his wife's dead body which began to create a finality and closure to her death:

I kept her in our bed for about six hours because I wanted her to be cold and stiff before she left the house. I wanted to have the experience of being with her dead body until it had changed.

While Upo's meditation produced confidence that his grief would lessen and pass over time, Estes' experience with her elderly mother's passing was one of closure and mutual reconciliation of past unproductive habitual patterns. As she observes, " but we did both work through our

various habitual ways of being together which was a great thing to do at the end of her life, for both of us."

Like Upo, Estes chose to spend time with the post-mortem body of her mother. For her it was a chance to become "intimate with the process of death" and gain insight into the manifestations of daily stresses and ephemeral nature of life. In a thoughtful passage she describes how:

At the end, right after she died and she stayed here in the house for 3 days. The body was here, and I sat with the body pretty much almost 24/7. I watched very carefully, and I had my hands on the body a lot. I wanted to really be with-- very intimate with that process of death, physically, energetically, and emotionally, so spiritually overall.

It all slipped away and her face became really soft and beautiful, line-free, just at ease, really, really at ease. And I looked at her and thought, "Why wait? What are we waiting for? Should I wait until death for this?" And there was this amazing dissolution of all of that stress and tension and contraction.

On the other hand, Sandola describes a "death experience" that was perhaps more metaphorical yet nonetheless insightful. She describes how she believes she went through an occurrence akin to dying during her meditation process. As she observes,

This death experience, was very powerful, it had confusion in the mind yet it had a very spacious experience-- while going through the dying process, but it was confused. It was clinging to self, and both feeling the spaciousness and mistaking emptiness as fearful.

This was 'cause it had an association with the death of self.

Sandola's reference alluding to the death of self speaks to not only the impermanence of life experience, but also to the transient nature of the concept of self or ego. Further discussion on this subject will follow.

Ignoring impermanence

Both Walter and Estes suggest that the insight into impermanence provides a cautionary note against becoming over involved with things and events. As Walter states, "impermanence made a big impression on me. I've seen impermanence everywhere and sometimes it's just not worth getting excited about things." Estes continues with this line of thought by observing, " So it just made an impression that that's how things are, you know when life is gone, it's ephemeral. It's-- so it's an informative kind of thing, not to take things too seriously. There's nothing to cling to."

Clinging too strongly to beliefs, according to Jiffy, can create a dangerous and false sense of permanency to any mind-created story. As he notes, " Whereas if you're stuck in a belief, I can't handle this, I can't handle this, I can't handle this, you're reinforcing the sense of permanency and permanency to the story." Jacob characterizes attaching permanency to an impermanent world as a poor "investment" for a spiritual path.

What it [meditation] brought me was beginning a different relationship to this impermanent world in the sense of-- it's not like I find it disgusting or frightening right now or even saddening it's not the best investment to make, if you know what I mean. I'm not going to invest in something that's impermanent. Something that simple.

The impermanent world. Not a wise investment scheme.

I'm not doing a spiritual path so I can remain healthy as long as I can 'cause that's a bad investment. I want to invest in something that is not dependent upon if I'm healthy or not.

Suffering and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*)

The Pali term *dukkha* was initially translated by early Buddhist scholars as "suffering," which tended to lend a characterization of Buddhist teaching as somewhat dour and pessimistic and certainly antithetical to the "pleasure principle" pursued by Western culture. A more suitable and accurate translation of *dukkha* would certainly include aspects of suffering, but would be more precisely captured by terms such as stressful, hard to bear, and unsatisfactory. *Dukkha* is typically explained according to three aspects: (a) the obvious mental and physical suffering involved with birth, aging, illness, and death; (b) the stress associated with constantly trying to hold on to ever-changing things and events; (c) the unsatisfactoriness associated with all forms of existence, that is, impermanence, constant change, and a basic lack of enduring substantiality (Anlayo, 2004; Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010). Participants reported experiencing a range of mental and physical states of pain, fear, misery, and disgust during their longer retreats.

Pain

Physical pain associated with meditation practice was often described as "exquisite", "almost unbearable," and "severe" by many participants. Jiffy describes his experiences with physical pain and adds another dimension by discussing the fear that such intense sensations can invoke in many people.

And yet pain arises. You feel this tightness. You feel this contractedness. And if

you allow yourself to feel it, it's intense. The process of meditation is much, like, the pain is exquisite. Like, there can be very, very intense sensations that arise. Phenomenal.

Phenomenal pain. Intense sensations. Most people are very afraid of that.

Whereas if you go into this journey of meditation intense sensations can arise and you can be with them, very, very present to them.

Estes suggests an aspect of understanding concerning a depth of pain that was almost beyond her ability to hold it and withstand it.

The dukkha aspect of understanding that, feeling it was almost unbearable, almost to the point of not being able to stand it. I've never had that much depth of dukkha. And so it was another aspect and totally impersonal, completely and utterly painful. I mean it was almost beyond my capacity to hold it.

A number of the participants acknowledged that while the pain was intense and sometimes challenging, they reported the realization that it was impermanent (i.e., that it would "end," change, or "soften"). Sarah suggests that, in her experience, mental processes such as the mind releasing, can invoke a sense of the dissolution of pain resulting in a calm and balanced composure towards these intense physical sensations.

If some physical pain arises, then you observe it and you know it's going to end. And sometimes the mind grasps more tightly to the physical pain. But eventually as the mind releases, then the pain dissolves. And so now in the practice there's much greater equanimity towards physical-- sort of physical sensations and-- but that's not a huge thing for me, physical pain.

Walter provides a narrative wherein he is able to watch the pain and observe its changes or movement. Consequently, he notes that physical pain doesn't "worry" him much anymore.

Right off the bat there was a lot of pain and I understand that's pretty common. I thought it was quite severe and then it-- at one point it did go away and it didn't last. It doesn't stop me from meditating now. I can just go there and watch it and see if it changes or see if it's going to move or anything like that. And it seems to work out. So that kind of physical pain I don't worry about too much.

Jiffy describes how observing the tightness and contraction of pain throughout the body has provided him with a radically different understanding of "the nature of life."

You're trying to use the pain to spread throughout your body so you can feel your whole body. Other times you're just softening into the pain and it melts and it dissolves. But for me, that's a radically different appreciation of the body, of the nature of life, that it's okay for it to be contracted and tight and painful. And it's okay to just be with it.

Mental and emotional distress

Midway through a typical long-term retreat there can arise a series of insights known as the *dukkha-nanas* (insight into suffering). As impermanence becomes more and more evident during the practice, meditators can experience a profoundly visceral sense of fear, misery, and disgust as the realization of the transient nature of life is seen with deeper clarity. Both Calvin and Doug vividly describe their experiences of the quality of these insights. Calvin presents a sense of misery and unpleasant dissatisfaction as he observes:

This mental state, the continuous state of the suffering that was going on in my

mind, you know, the unpleasantness, the-- this would probably have been in misery rather than disgust. It was horrible. It was just horrible.

Nothing was satisfying. Nothing was satisfying. Everything hurt, you know, emotionally it hurt, you know. Mental thoughts were unpleasant, they were angry thoughts.

While Doug's narrative describes a pervasive feeling of restlessness and an anxious sense of wanting to escape his own "skin."

But it was basically-- every day was fraught with emotions, fear, a lot of anxiety. The feeling I was describing before of wanting to just get out of my skin, like, can't sit still and just wanting things to stop. And everything was miserable from day to day, so there was also fear coming up and anxiety.

Calvin makes a very important point concerning how to manage and alleviate these experiences of "suffering " effectively. He strongly endorses the utilization of training tools "of the mind and heart" as opposed to the cultural alternatives. As he suggests,

Without the tools to understand that suffering can be alleviated through, you know, the training of the mind and the heart, the alternatives are left to the cultural choices which are basically suicide and drugs. [laughs] Or work, whatever, or family, whatever, you know, there are different kinds of opiates.

Several participants shared not only their experiences of the *dukkha-nanas*, but suggested useful guidance and strategies to navigate this challenging part of the practice. According to Estes, an important component of this navigation is the simple acceptance of these challenges as

part and parcel of the learning involved in meditation. She emphasizes that those emotional states to which one is most habituated in daily life are the most potent with which to deal.

I mean we go through lots of emotional states with practice, whichever ones we're most habituated to in our life. So for all of them, I suppose, but the ones we're most habituated to are the most potent to work with.

I always had this feeling, pretty distinct feeling, that it was part of practice. It was an aspect of my practice, and so I welcomed it, and I knew I was okay and that it was just practice. Didn't make it any less intense, but I've been very fortunate that way. I never felt afraid of the emotional states.

Sandola outlines a narrative wherein she recognizes how physical reactions can be caused by mental states of mind.

I had really strong physical reactions to what was releasing from the mind. Terrifically extreme physical reactivity. Steel bands through the gut or through the chest, unable to breathe, unable to breathe, like, no breath, tremendous freezing cold, all the heat dissipating from the body. Tremendous.

When probed as to how she coped with this she replied, " Watched it. I just watched it.

What else can you do? It's there; you can't avoid it." She then continued, "I never believed it was physically caused. I completely believed it was caused, mentally caused, and it was something that was important to experience."

Tera, Jacob, and Lynn found it particularly helpful to be given guidance and contextualization regarding these stages of the practice by their teacher. As Tera relates,

I actually became suicidal and I was afraid to tell V., that he'd never allow me to come back. I was in the *dukkha-nanas*. I was in the misery, and I thought, I never had this.

And then I went and I saw V. when it was time for me to go for the interview. And he said this is common in this particular time and that other yogis had gone through it too.

As Jacob relates his experiences in these stages of the practice, he summarizes it as a sense of "revulsion" about things in general.

Sometimes there would be a feeling of some fear, kind of like this fear about the experience-- it was all around experience of disintegrating or passing away. And so there would be some kind of fear around that. Or there would be sadness, which would have a kind of a heavy kind of low energy quality to it. There could be disgust, which would literally turn my stomach. I had a hard time eating. And so I felt-- and I felt revulsion around things.

He continues to describe how during the interview with his teacher, his experience was effectively contextualized in a humorous and lighthearted way.

Then once I got to V., I think just being with him and him kind of making light of it, it was, like, this is just the practice. He gave me a context of that and, like, this is good. The stronger it is the better. "This is good fear. Go back and practice." For some reason it really worked.

Lynn relates how her particularly aversive personality required a teacher to frame the experiences with very practical and technical instruction. This approach, again, worked very well for her.

Dukkha-nanas, that kind of came at the end of a lot of fast arising-- the fast arising, passing, it was just like so intense and that I was also ill... a lot of disgust in that territory. I've needed quite a bit of help in getting through those stages 'cause I'm kind of an aversive person, so I can get stuck there and kind of wallow in the aversion for a while.

My teacher A. was really skillful in helping me to get through that stuff. Just in giving really practical, technical guidance. Like, exactly how to pay attention and what to pay attention to. He gave me very clear, very specific technical instructions.

Non-Self (*anatta*)

As one progresses through the gradual and experiential stages of understanding the true nature of impermanence (*anicca*) and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) of mental and physical phenomena, there arises a sense of emptiness of self or impersonality. As Doug simply states, "the sense of self seems to disappear or a sense of the observer disappears momentarily." He continues to add there is "a real selfless feeling; selfless meaning there is this spaciousness, openness, a moment of peace." Sandola elaborates on the concepts of emptiness and spaciousness by stating that there is a sense of " many, many, many moments strung together, all continuously. So the perception of emptiness becomes more real and more part of the world. There's less feeling that anything's solid and everything's more spacious." As she discussed earlier (see pp. 66-67), the sense of emptiness and spaciousness manifested as an "association with the death [of the concept of] self."

According to Jacob, the concept of the solid and everlasting self or ego held to be true by

the vast majority of humanity, arises with

A recognition just that this mind has a way of conceptualizing the world. So it might have certain beliefs, views, or concepts of how the mind describes what I'll call the world out there, or how it describes what it sees the subject to be or-- in terms of the concept of the self.

In other words, Jacob finds " relief in just seeing how this mind can have an incessant quality of wanting to become somebody. You could say the hook of becoming, this is what the human mind does." Upo believes that this creates "the masks and the cloaks that are hiding what--hiding the essence."

Both Jacob and Jiffy speak of important and enduring insights into the tendencies to create a "self" that thought, mind states, and emotions produce as the mind seeks to become somebody. Jacob reports that " the big turn for me is to see that, oh, these are just states of mind that arise and pass away. So it's a state of mind that arises and passes away, rather than that's who I am" (see p. 62). Jiffy's narrative would support this observation as he notes, " So I have a, I think, a radically different relationship with thoughts and emotions than I did before. That they're something that arise that I respond to and yet they're not me, they're not who I am." He continues to reflect on his previously held belief that his body (self) was a separate "thing." His meditation experiences have profoundly influenced his way of perceiving life events.

Looking back, I had seen the body as a thing, as a separate thing, this is my body. And I'm going to do "this" with it. I'm going to go "there" with it. Whereas one of the key things about meditation is that-- the sense of body dissolves. The sense of age dissolves.

The sense of sex dissolves. The sense of place dissolves. And the body becomes very, very transparent. And so one starts to experience life through the experience of being a field rather than a separate object.

Tera's description of an occurrence as she worked at her job as a nurse echoes the pervasive sense of non-self that Jiffy and Jacob discussed.

I was just sitting in the nurses' station and I was watching people. And I don't know, something occurred, I was able to see very clearly that I wasn't my mind and I wasn't my body. There was just an awareness of observing. I remember watching and having no opinion, no angst, nothing. That it was just sheer awareness, observing what was going down.

These narratives revealed meditative processes by which participants addressed and came to terms with three general characteristics of existence. For some, the understanding of impermanence added an appreciation, value, and focus to their lives. For others, the transient nature of things and events was a wake-up call to not invest a lot of time and effort in something as unreliable as the passing nature of life. Concerning suffering and unsatisfactoriness, most participants reached a deeper understanding of the causality and impermanence of physical, mental, and emotional pain. Many participants described how effective and skillful guidance and conceptualization by a teacher, allowed them to productively frame the context of these physical, mental, and emotional challenges both within the practice and their daily lives. Perhaps the most difficult of the three characteristics to fathom as a human is the concept of non-self, impersonality of being. Many described their experienced sense of emptiness and insubstantiality

of self or ego as liberating. Others saw this understanding as a herald to live in the moment as authentically as possible. The common thread throughout this theme would appear to be how the meditative processes operate to bring a deeper understanding of the true nature of existence. Another important common thread is the apparent confidence and commitment that the practice and processes of meditation can instill in the participant.

Transformation

Participants' narratives included descriptions of processes that facilitated change, events that precipitated transformation, and insights that profoundly shifted their perceptions of their environment and life meaning. Many participants described lifestyles prior to commencing meditative practice which were vastly altered by these insights, events, or processes.

Before/after

A number of participants provided narratives which outlined a lifestyle before meditative practice came into their lives that seemed to provide "happiness." This was often coupled with a revelation of a new direction and attitude. Sarah relates how sense desire and its fulfillment was at one time a proxy for being happy in her life. She observes, "people are so dependent on such transient things to be happy" and then continues:

Well, the happiness-- before, sometimes I was quite a bit of an expert at sense-desire, quite an expert sometimes actually. I remember one time I drove at midnight to the supermarket to get a mango because I really wanted a mango.

I think I first experienced it in retreat, to be happy and it to be completely unconnected with anything, with any sense-desire. The happiness just coming out from

inside and completely unconnected with anything. So actually it could be a miserable situation and I could still be happy.

She realizes that happiness can be experienced from the inside independent of sense desire. This insight concerning the practice to her is "amazing" and she expresses a deep sense of gratitude at her good fortune.

I think the practice is amazing. It's transformative, and I can't believe how lucky I am. I have so much time. I have such supportive parents who are very happy to help me to be able to do the practice. When I come back I'm so lucky, I get a job even before I get back. I have an amazing teacher, and I still have energy to do it. I can't believe all of those things came together.

Doug describes a previous life driven by a desire for "life experiences and adventures," and an incessant need to be doing something. He relates how this was meant to create a bank of sentimental memories which would be a surrogate for future contentment.

Compared to my life before meditation, which is I think good to compare the two, I used to always feel like I needed to be doing something. And I went out every night, and I'd always want to go out to eat or have friends or always be doing something. And now I'm-- I don't have as much interest in that at all. I'm happy to just be wherever I am.

Before I started practicing I spent a lot of time being sentimental about the past. And I spent a lot of energy having experiences or life experiences and adventures thinking that I would always have memories. And now that's completely not interesting to me at all.

Doug noted a clear difference in the way he related to his external reality vis-à-vis his inner world. As he observes, " my perception of external reality was coloured by my internal reality to a point where I could not always see the difference. Wherever you go, there you are. And there was no out by changing external things." Doug relates how his motivation to transform his life was rooted in his strong wish for a "spiritual life," and that a meditation retreat was a key turning point for him.

I remembered at that point that what I really wanted was a spiritual life and was looking for that in the wrong places I guess. And so I signed up for a ten-day retreat and basically told myself that when I came out I wanted my life to be different.

Calvin story entails a much more shadowy lifestyle enmeshed in drug use, smuggling, and dealing. At some point he has a "catharsis" at a retreat and realizes the unwholesomeness of his life choices.

It's very salient in that from about the age of 18 until the age of about 35, I was a dealer and a smuggler as well as a functional whatever. I put myself through college, you know, selling and using drugs. I had a job, you know, so I was a functional addict and dealer. And smuggler. And as a consequence that was shadow, you know, as a dealer and a smuggler one has to always, if you want to stay safe, you always have to be on guard. So everyone is a potential threat. And you can't be honest with anybody. And I can remember very early on, well, no, towards the middle, I understood what was happening. This was even before I was really into the *dhamma*. I understood that the lifestyle that I was leading was conditioning my mind in ways that were not healthy. And at one point I

had a catharsis on a retreat.

For Calvin, the *dhamma* and its transformative processes are characterized as an almost prosaic, but highly effective conditioning process providing potential for momentary epiphanies and occurrences.

The ongoing training of mindfulness, there are also the potentials of transformative occasions, of transformative moments. Whether or not that's real or not, in the sequence of paying attention and accumulating a certain basis of looking at the world, the way that this mind and body operates in the world has changed. It's just as simple as that. It's a conditioning process. I consider it very much-- in the school of behavioural modification.

Lynn's previous life, around the age of 20, was a lighter version of Calvin's more dangerous hedonism. She notes that " when I first came to practice I was in my 20s. I was, you know, footloose and fancy free and single and quite a hedonist. Definitely. ..[Laughs] just the usual, you know, sex and drugs and rock and roll." She continues to state that as a result of her practice, her perception of life " became much more porous and much lighter and much-- just the ephemerality [sic] of it is always with me."

On the other hand, Sandola describes how she became much more aware of criticisms, expectations, and judgments. She describes the revelation of how previously she had maintained herself as a "very happy person" by unconsciously suppressing the mind and its transient nature.

I'm more aware of my criticisms and judgments and expectations than I once was. I would have described myself many years ago as a very happy person, and I now understand that happiness was the result of a lot of suppression. So now I see that the

mind is continuously changing between happiness and unhappiness about what it wants, what it's trying to get, what it's not getting.

As a result of the meditation induced awareness of the suppression of her mind, Sandola relates how she has more confidence and vitality in her life.

There's just greater confidence and more energy in my life, you know, sleeping fewer hours and having more vitality in the mind and the body and just noticing how much more vitality. And I'm attributing that to when a lot of that energy was used in the past to suppress things, what it's no longer suppressing, well, then there's energy. There's more energy available for living life.

Change facilitators

Many of the participants' narratives reflect processes and experiences that served to facilitate a transformational power and redirection in their lives. These, then, became direct or indirect inspirational factors and/or agents for change.

Counseling

Interestingly, several participants recognized the need for conventional psychotherapy as a useful adjunct preceding or supplementing their meditative practice. Given the nexus of Western psychology with Eastern meditative techniques evidenced by the advent of mindfulness as a treatment protocol, this is an apparently productive choice. Doug, Tera, Calvin, and Lynn each related a story which presented different angles and reasons for addressing psychological components of their makeup. Doug coupled counseling and the retreat setting as a method of dealing with a chronic addiction to alcohol. While he followed a conventional model of

managing his addiction to alcohol, that is, with psychotherapy and AA meetings, it was the final piece of a meditation retreat which at last allowed him to quit drinking for good.

I went to counselling. And-- this is going to turn into a longer story. It's kind of what I told you earlier. So through counselling I started to see my own issues. Did family consolation therapy, so I went back and dealt with a lot of things from my childhood and started to see my patterns. Went through all of my old relationships and started to investigate the patterns and see how I kept dating the same person over and over again and all of this. When that was all finished, I had been drinking a lot and I had never really been in denial that that was a problem. And so the next step was to deal with that. So I went to AA. And after maybe six months, I was having trouble stopping. I was good when I was in AA. I was able to stop, and then I was travelling for work. And when I'd go away for more than a week, I started drinking again.

Six months later I did another ten-day retreat. And just to put in a detail, after that first retreat, I have not had a drink since then. I had my last drink on the way to that retreat in my car. And then after the retreat I didn't drink again. So that was a big turning point.

Tera is somewhat vague on the psychological issues that she felt needed to be addressed. However, in light of her upbringing in a fearful and anxious home, she was aware of the need to take care of her psychological concerns in a timely fashion. These interventions laid the ground for a reportedly more effective meditation practice.

I believe you must take care of your psychological stuff, it has to be taken care of. Or it

comes out sideways. I realized that some stuff was coming up and it was psychological stuff. I don't even remember what it was. But I knew I needed to do some therapy and I knew I didn't have to do for a long time. And I did for a few months. And then I felt complete and I went back and practiced and the practice just moved so fast. It was something that was stuck.

Lynn has an awareness of the deep down "knots" which are triggered by certain scenarios and personality types. Her story involves a recognition of these trigger points and the importance of persevering with her therapeutic and meditative practice.

Like with my psychological programming, you know, like, there's just certain behaviours in people that push my buttons. And, you know, then it's much more likely that I'm going to say or do something unskillful, you know, in those particular areas. Certain types of scenarios, certain types of people, you know, that kind of push my karmic buttons. And-- yeah, so again, I try to do my best. I've got those kind of psychological knots that are kind of really deep down, bottom of the barrel. And I wonder if those are ever really going to budge much. And I have spent time in therapy; I've spent quite a bit of time in therapy.

Calvin, on the other hand, used insights arising during his meditative practice to prompt a decision to seek out psychotherapeutic assistance. As he states, "I saw myself dying. I saw myself dying. Anyway, taking it at the level of my understanding at the time, I took it psychologically and then decided I was going to get therapy."

Drug use

A number of participants spoke of youthful drug use with a range of opinions as to its benefits and efficacy. For Tera it provided early insights into her mother's and father's fear and anxiety as she notes, "this insight wasn't in meditation. It was in psychedelics." She continues to state that "during my period of taking substances, I saw a lot of stuff and I was able to, like, reprogram myself." Speaking to LSD in particular, Doug describes a narrative involving his early and recent experiences with psychedelics.

And in college I did try it and I read a lot of books on it. And the books I read were, you know, the story of the '60s with Ram Dass and Timothy Leary, and so Ram Dass went to India and learned to meditate and said this is just as good... I don't think there's anything wrong with doing psychedelics and I don't think they should be illegal, because I believe that there can be some value in it, and it's not an addictive thing. It's not something I'm going to do every day. I don't crave it.

Doug acknowledges that the effects of psychedelics are time-bounded and for that reason meditation is "better," however he concedes a certain attachment and identification with the drugs as a "spiritual thing."

Part of me knew that, yes, psychedelics don't last very long. You can't live there, and meditation is better. But there's a part of me and my identity that was very attached to the psychedelics as a spiritual thing. I went to a festival every year for 20 years where I'd do it with my friends. We'd take mushrooms or LSD and connect, and that was my spiritual thing.

It was during the long retreats that he attended in Nepal, which occurred at the same time in the summer as the music festivals, that Doug was able to compare psychedelic and meditative experience.

And then the long retreats I've been going to in Nepal have been during the summer, which is when these festivals are. So I have not been going to them. Hence I've not been doing psychedelics. And I have started to question how beneficial they are... [and noticed that] I was twice as high on the retreat as I was at the festival.

From his perspective, Upo is unequivocal in his assessment that meditation had the potential to far exceed any imaginable experience with his previous drug use.

But I knew I had found something that I had never experienced before, and believe me, I had taken every drug available to excess by that point in my life. Not-- I wasn't doing it anymore, but I had in the past. But I knew I had found something tangible, doable and it seemed with the potential for something I had not even imagined even while taking mescaline or LSD or magic mushrooms or psilocybin.

On the other hand, Calvin states, with a conviction matching Upo's, that his lifestyle as a drug user and smuggler was dangerous and likely lethal.

Even before I was really into the *dhamma*, I understood that the lifestyle that I was leading was conditioning my mind in ways that were not healthy. And at one point I had a catharsis on a retreat, there was an epiphany, you know, and a commitment and a visualization that arose as a consequence of this knowing that I was killing myself.

Calvin continues by characterizing how this "shadow" lifestyle "was conditioning me towards

psychological isolation, unskillful and dangerous behaviors." This realization inspired and motivated him to the path of meditation.

Equanimity

For several participants the experience of the stage of insight known as equanimity (*sankharupekkha nana*) was particularly impactful and transformative. From Jacob's point of view, his experience of this insight changed his life in that he now had a direct understanding of the potential of the mind to abide in a profound sense of stability and clarity.

The state of equanimity changed my life in the sense of noticing how refined the mind can be when cultivated. There's just nothing like it in terms of stability and clarity.

Extreme pleasant experiences or extreme joyful experiences, are not as refined as that profound equanimity. So just really seeing the-- one is just seeing the potential of the human mind in that way. It was just unbelievable. It really is a remarkable state of mind.

Lynn's narrative resonates very strongly with the experience of equanimity's profoundly transformative power. She relates how it created "a sense of urgency" which was very motivational for her continuance in the practice.

When I got to the point in my practice when I could get through the *dukkha-nanas* and come out the other end and to equanimity, then it was, like, whoa! And that was-- wow! There's a whole 'nother [sic] possibility. That was really-- transformative. That gave me a lot of-- when I first encountered deep equanimity, that really gave me a lot of sense of urgency. Just once I'd tasted that to realize there was an alternative, that was very motivating.

For Sarah, observing a variety of mental states, both as wholesome and unwholesome, and watching the mind dissolve into equanimity was particularly impactful.

I think what has more of an impact is just over many years observing many different mental states and many wholesome, many unwholesome. I think-- and observing them and if the mind has some pushing away of the unpleasant state, then to observe it and watch it neutralize and then watch the mind become totally equanimous.

Some participants were able to describe the qualitative experience of the newfound state of equanimity. For Doug, "there's an inner feeling of well being and an inner feeling of contentment. And that is very different from how my life used to be." While for Sandola and Lynn there was a sense of lightness in the mind, an openness and spaciousness. As Sandola relates there was "a lightening of the mind, a lightening in the body, you know, this-- that feeling of walking on a cloud, walking in, you know, of insubstantialness [sic], the body's not heavy, it's not weighted, it's, you know, it's spacious." As well, Lynn suggested the attribute of uncomplicated simplicity as a component of equanimity.

Equanimity's very uncomplicated. I guess that's why it's equanimity. That's why it's peaceful. It's very simple. There's-- when a mind state of equanimity really sets in then a lot of the proliferation just drops away. The mind becomes much simpler and much, you know, just more open and more spacious.

Gaining wisdom

A few participants credited newly acquired wisdom as a powerfully motivating agent for transformation. As Upo succinctly stated, "this [the teachings and practice] is something that is

going to change my life because it's going to change my mind." For him the teachings had a convincing authenticity which he described as "a high point. It was because I felt I had a conviction of authenticity. I had a conviction that these people had something I wanted. I had a conviction that they would help me find what I wanted."

For Walter, there was a new and inspiring aid to general growth: "I think the practice has been helpful just in the general growth and generally getting a little more wisdom." When probed as to what he meant by wisdom he replied,

It seems to be using more skillful means or being able to use more skillful means. So you come up with a better way of doing something. You throw away the big hammer and maybe-- try and use your head a little bit.

Calvin framed his experience as obliging a shift in demeanor, speech, and behavior. As he relates, "And so this kindness in this wisdom in this latent stuff that obliges the syntax I use. The tone of voice. The posture and the body style." From a different perspective, Jiffy draws inspiration and wisdom from his daily interactions with the challenging population for whom he provides counseling.

I just love these guys. I love connecting with them, love chatting with them. Like, you know, we have phenomenal dharma discussions, just discussions about life on a weekly basis. Like we start to talk and all of a sudden there's this wisdom that pours into the room and pours through people. And nobody's the owner of it.

These descriptions and narratives provide insight into how a variety of processes, mechanisms, and experiences can fuel and inspire the transformational power possible within a

well guided and concentrated meditation practice. An interesting revelation was provided by participants' descriptions of how the perception of "happiness" had altered over time and with the advent of a focused practice. As well, the narratives provided some rich qualitative descriptions of the experiences involved with transformation. The participants' stories shed light on the inspirational effect that "change facilitators" such as psychotherapeutic counseling, drug use, the experience of equanimity, and the acquisition of wisdom can have. Psychotherapeutic counseling was characterized as a useful adjunct to meditative practice. Concerning the use of drugs, there was a variance in the opinion suggested by participants. Some opined that, while meditation experience was more enduring and preferable, their use of some psychedelic drugs had provided some benefit and encompassed part of their spiritual path. One participant vehemently suggested that his "shadow" life as a drug user, dealer, and smuggler was dangerous and likely lethal. On the other hand, the experience of equanimity was described as "remarkable," impactful while inspiring a "sense of urgency" to practice, and bringing a lightness to the mind and body. Finally, the acquisition of wisdom manifested as a conviction of authentic change, the use of "skillful means," and an openness to sage understanding as it may arise in daily life.

Mental/Cognitive Processes

The management of mental and cognitive processes, more commonly known as the "mind" in Buddhist terminology, is key to progress in a productive meditative practice. In fact, the Buddha's teaching on the path to enlightenment has been succinctly encapsulated by the admonition to "shun all evil, do only good, purify the mind [heart]" (Ananda Maitreya, 1995, p. 52). Taken in conjunction with another tenet of Buddhism that "all deeds are led by mind, created by mind" (p. 1), it is clear that in the Buddhist cosmology awareness and control of

mental and cognitive processes is of paramount importance. As outlined in this analysis, the mind can either hinder or facilitate progressive change depending on whether it is trained or untrained.

Mind as tarnished

A number of participants spoke of insights into the general unwholesomeness of the mind and mental processes. Sarah speaks quite candidly about the clutter of unwholesome thoughts and defilements that can occupy the mind.

Our minds are full of defilements, and they're full of everything. Everything-- every unwholesome thing we can think of, it's in there. It can be anger. It can be jealousy. It can be irritation or sadness, fear, all of those things. Any of those things.

Jiffy suggests the metaphor of an untended garden to characterize the human mind and speaks of the challenge of being able to plant "anything meaningful" or wholesome within it.

Mind is a mess. You have a garden and if it's overgrown with weeds and trees and stuff, it's going to be very difficult to plant anything meaningful in it or grow anything in it. 'Cause the garden's a mess. Similarly there's a chance your mind may be a mess.

Along this line of reasoning, Sandola describes the processes of the mind as constantly chasing after and changing from happiness and unhappiness.

Now I see that the mind is continuously changing between happiness and unhappiness about what it wants, what it's trying to get, what it's not getting, what it would like to get.

She continues to describe the mind as a "circular space, it was bouncing off the walls of this

circular space. It was just spinning in confusion."

Given the untrained mind's tendency towards a state of confusion and unwholesomeness, participants described narratives of unproductive and sometimes dangerous situations and circumstances that can arise as a result. For example, Walter describes an encounter with some unsavory and obnoxious characters and how, if acted upon, the anger in his mind could have caused some serious problems.

A pickup truck pulled in there and there was three or four drunks in there and one of them was just obnoxious...I knew I was experiencing anger that that had risen up in my mind and it was all happening. I just watched and I didn't do anything about it. And it could have really caused some bad problems.

Calvin speaks to a quality of mind that is aversive in its approach to the surrounding environment, " In terms of stereotypes. This mind used to lead very much with the aversive approach to its environment. It would look at things in terms of how it would impact or hurt or not like." While Doug describes a mind, that despite outward appearances, is beset by an insatiable hunger and desire for "more" and the recognition that there was nowhere to go find happiness.

Outwardly a lot of success. But inside there was not. So there was not happiness. It was more like a hunger. Wanting-- always wanting more, and that hunger was never satiated...The low point was when-- realizing that I could go anywhere and do anything, but none of it was going to make me happy. That was the end point.

On another tact, Estes describes the mind's reactive predisposition to immediately move towards

judgment and reproach leading to a tarnishing of the mind.

Somebody says something or does something, and there's some movement of the mind, the heart towards some kind of a judgmental attitude. I mean it might not erupt out of my mouth, but erupts in the mind into some kind of full-blown judgment, noticing the movement towards judgment, towards contraction.

Finally, Jacob and Tera speak to a mental process that can occur both inside or outside of a meditative retreat, that is, the inclination to overstate or "catastrophize" perceived events. Jacob observes, " I have this mind that can take things to be more real than they actually are. Where it's just-- it's a conceptual overlay." While Tera describes the term "yogi mind," commonly experienced during an intense retreat.

Yogi mind is when something occurs and because the yogi is practicing, it could be nothing with nothing. It becomes a hundred thousand times greater and is totally distorted and you're sure this is it. It believes something that's not real.

Mind as observer

Participants report narratives wherein they have cultivated or are cultivating an inquiring and observant mind which now habitually notices physical and mental processes as they occur. Jiffy characterizes his process as an investigation into what is actually happening from moment to moment.

It is a practice of inquiry. So what's actually happening when you lift the arm? What's actually happening when you lower the arm? What's actually happening, you know, why is it that you're intending to turn your head? How does that feel and-- as you're speaking

those words, what is it that you're actually trying to convey?

Upo resonates with this sentiment as he explains how he has conditioned himself to observe and "know" his actions. " When I reach for the doorknob I know I'm reaching for the doorknob. And I know I'm turning the doorknob when I turn it and pulling the door when I pull it. But that's something I've trained myself to do."

Estes and Sandola provide insight into how the mind is now aware of mental and physical activity and details even in such mundane activities as shopping. As Estes observes,

So I'd go walk along the street, and look in the shop windows and watch my mind saying-- first, just appreciating; then liking; then wanting; then needing, in kind of that order, and I got to see it in that order. And then I just keep doing it until it started to change. And I'd recognize it and go, "Okay, there's needing; there's wanting-- or there's first wanting, needing, liking and then-- " until I didn't have it anymore. It didn't keep coming.

Sandola characterizes this quality of mind as a constant moving of awareness to thoughts and sensations.

There's a constant moving of the mind, picking up details. So one moment it might be aware of the position of the posture, the pressure of the feet, the pressure of the seat bones, the temperature of the air, the quality of the light. And other time-- you know, I mean, it's just constantly moving from the thoughts that are arising.

Regarding the onset of this quality of observation and investigation, Calvin characterizes it as being inherent in his early makeup. "As a child I had an observing quality. I was constantly

on radar. There was this kind of radar observing quality, which lent itself very well to mindfulness." Sandola, on the other hand, suggests a more developmental perspective wherein a greater confidence and curiosity arises which supports a sense of enjoyment of the inquiry. " It [the mind] has greater confidence than it used to have around that, and it's more-- there's a greater curiosity and the-- although the unpleasantness is seen, there's also a pleasure in the investigation itself. "

Mind as pure

Participants offer descriptions of an awareness of beauty and wonder as the mind develops a clear and unencumbered focus. For Walter there's a sense of emotion as he observes, "this is the most beautiful your mind's going to be. And it just really hit me and I just-- I started to cry a bit there. 'Cause it was so beautiful, you know." Sarah also expresses the emotion of this beautiful development by contrasting the coarseness of the mind in daily life with its possible purity possible in a retreat setting.

It's so beautiful, I'm almost crying. But it's because if you see the mind becoming tremendously pure and obviously in daily life my mind becomes very coarse, like now. And-- but in retreat it can become very refined and very pure. And out of that purity you see all sorts of wholesome states arise, like *metta* (loving kindness), but even maybe more, like equanimity. If it happens just even one time for a fraction of a moment, then it means these-- a pure state can occur again.

Calvin speaks of how it is possible to experience exalted states of mind known as the *Brahmaviharas*. "There is no question that the developed mind, a truly developed mind, will

experience the *Brahmaviharas*." These exalted states include a calm abiding in loving kindness (*Metta*), compassion (*Karuna*), sympathetic joy (*Mudita*), and equanimity (*Upekkha*).

A quality of clarity of the mind is suggested by Sandola, Jacob, and Tera. Sandola suggests the analogy of a web.

It's like a spider web and finally there's a core or a centre where they all got connected.

And suddenly the mind puts all of these past experiences together and it just goes-- [exhales] I don't have to hang on to that anymore. Then there's this lovely clarity and softness in the mind and-- you know, it's really wonderful and lasts for a while.

Jacob speaks of how in equanimity "the mind is so balanced and clear. It's just--it really is a remarkable state of mind." While Tera suggests a concentrated deepening of the mind is important when she observes, "the mind dropped to a place that was deepest. And I think I just started seeing things much clearer and then the concentration made is even clearer."

The analysis of the theme and subthemes related to mental and cognitive processes (also known as the mind) seems to suggest that, untrained, the mind can hinder the development of insight and wisdom. On the other hand, if the processes of the mind are conditioned to focus on and observe present centered mental and physical processes it is apparently possible for the mind to abide in a state of unfettered purity and clarity.

Disturbing Emotions

Participants' narratives reflect experiencing disturbing emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, and shame, as a byproduct of patterns developed earlier in their life. Engaging the practice allowed participants to distance themselves from the toxicity of anger. As reported

earlier, states of mind such as fear, misery, and disgust were often faced during the *dukkha nana* stages of the practice. Contextualization and application of mindfulness allowed for progress through these challenges.

Anger

Walter outlines a cautionary approach when dealing with anger as the ensuing loss of control can lead to unwanted circumstances.

You can screw up a lot with anger. Like, 40 years of being a perfect husband and father and everything could be [snaps fingers] gone in one shot if I blew it with anger. By manifesting a lot of anger or something like that or getting wrapped up in something to the point where I lose control. Just in that I maybe had a little bit of wisdom happen. And I'm watchful of it. I'm really watchful of it...I think I'm seeing things a little clearer.

However, using the practice of mindfulness to avoid the unwholesome consequences has helped him manage any anger he might have. Calvin describes a direct experience of anger that arose while he was participating in a PBS television documentary, "Making Peace." In this encounter he was confronted by an angry and racist African American man.

There was anger. Whatever it was. There was this anger coming at me. I felt vulnerable. Sad. Frightened. I started to cry. But what was also interesting is that at that time my practice was pretty deep so I was observing the sadness, the fear, and the anger.

While he was able to observe a range of motions arising from this encounter, including anger, fear, and sadness he admits, "my life was on the shadowed side and the internal experience was one of anger and suspicion." He continues to state that "certain characteristics are conditioned as

a byproduct of those patterns... [however] as a result of practice, the mind does not stay angry. The mind is definitely not as aversive as it used to be."

Jiffy agrees with the necessity of observing anger as he states, "if I'm mad at others, then a huge part of me is almost instantaneously going, all, why are you so interested in being mad? What's this about?" Estes described noticing anger coming up through her body as she interacted with her mother during the time she spent care-giving.

It would start to come up through my body, and I'd go, "Oh, there's anger. Oh, wow. Look at that." Now sometimes it would come quickly, and I would respond with maybe a sharp word back to her or react, that's a reaction, not a response. I make a difference between the two... These emotional states, of course, are more seductive and more subtle, and we're so identified and habituated.... [and] Practice was really right there, right there. Very grateful for that.

Upo characterizes his life since engaging in the Mahasi practice as an "empty boat" wherein events that may occur do not have a lasting charge of anger.

I've gotten to a place in my life where most things that happen to me are an empty boat, there's nothing in them to be angry about, and it's real. There is no anger, particularly since Mahasi. And it's a lovely thing. I've never told anybody this, by the way.

Fear and anxiety

Upo, Tera, and Walter suggest family history predisposed them to their sense of fear and

anxiety. Upo characterizes his father as a "psychological terrorist... [who] was really an asshole ...(and admitted) "I never knew how to raise children. I probably shouldn't of had any." Tera confided that "I saw one time that my mother had a lot of anxiety and my father had a lot of fear and I got both of them. I saw that very, very deeply." Walter describes how a military family with a dominating father contributed to his sense of fearfulness.

When I was young, I was fearful, you know, there was a lot of fear. I think a lot of people have that. I was brought up in sort of a military family with a dominating father into corporal punishment and that kind of thing. I was the cowered one. And so fear of speaking up or fear of saying anything or fear of doing something wrong.

On the other hand, Jiffy believes that fear is basic to the human experience.

I think most people have a very basic fear with regards to life. I see fear as part and parcel of the human experience. I am still so restricted, so confined, so afraid. I just see myself trying to zone out or disconnect and I realize that that's my insecurity, that's my fear that's coming up often.

Estes and Sandola suggest that fear and anxiety can arise out of the perceived need to protect the sense of "self-solidity" or ego, "capital ME." As Estes declares, " if capital ME is front and centre, we're defending; we're identifying; we're holding on. There's a lot of worry and fear and anxiety about this capital ME. It just doesn't matter. Mostly, it doesn't matter." While Sandola admits.

I've been working a lot the last couple of years with fear reactions...In psychology they say anger is when you think you're superior and fear is when you think you're inferior to

the person reacting to that. So I grew up in an alcoholic family and so I've got a lot of those issues.

She continues, " I think it's past fear, but it is triggered by the present moment. And that whenever there's some kind of, hmm, self-solidity that arises then there's a fear of wanting to protect that, whatever it is." Sandola concedes that "initially the fear was tremendous, but as soon as that was seen the fear reaction substantially dropped. And now it's much more subtle... It's almost not there." When queried about how this arose, she stated that this occurred by "the watching of fear and watching of all self-judgment and all the criticism that goes on in the mind." Tera concurs that watching and being mindful of fear and anxiety allows one to be "okay" with its impermanence.

I felt the fear and the anxiety and I knew that that's what it was, okay. And I just was with-- I just would be with it, okay. This is fear, this is anxiety. It's impermanent.

It's not going to last forever. I just used the practice of basically watching it, feeling how I was feeling inside and just being mindful.

Finally, Upo and Calvin describe interesting perspectives on fear and anxiety. Upo analogizes fear as a "fall" from which sitting practice provides a safe refuge.

Fear is a thing that happens when you may fall and you know that you may not be able to avoid the fall. But the sitting is a place where there won't be any falling. A place where it's okay if the deepest and strongest pain arises and makes itself known and is embraced and can't hurt you.

Calvin characterizes his fear as arising as a result of " some deep psychological reactivity, you

know, childhood stuff." Echoing Sandola's analogy of a spider's web (see discussion, p. 95) as an avenue towards clarity, Calvin describes combining mindfulness practice with an LSD trip to weaken a mild arachnophobia.

I was much into practice at the time. So I'm really deep into my trip and I see this big spider on a window in a web. I don't like spiders. I'm not phobic, but I don't like spiders. They're creepy. So I remember seeing what fear would feel like as I put my nose closer and closer and closer to the spider. While tripping. I had fear and I watched it.

Shame

Jiffy speaks of shame as an emotion of disconnection and inadequacy. He admits that conditions in his childhood affected him throughout his life.

Shame is one of the key emotions that disconnects you, that makes you feel separate, less than, inadequate than other. I think in terms of my youth, in terms of my teenage years, I was affected by shame. Lots of shame. As an example my father was an alcoholic, but I didn't tell anybody.

The sense of inadequacy arising from this shame he felt in his youth reportedly hampered his development emotionally. As Jiffy notes, "I wasn't aware of the key role that shame plays in the energetic field. So I didn't have that capacity to be with my emotions from moment to moment to moment to moment."

Upo's father, an artist, was also physically and emotionally abusive. The message delivered to the young Upo was one of incompetence and shame.

He hit me a lot, and he hit me in the face a lot. Yeah, and he hit me when the other two

kids did something wrong. He would have us all lined up and he would dress us up and he would lecture to us in the-- in awful critical terms. Until we had soured his stomach to the point that he had to go to his room and be alone.

As Upo observes, " the message he sent me throughout my life was that I couldn't do anything right. I never did anything good, and I would-- I was a failure."Upo describes how he came to understand his father's failing as a parent later in life.

He had a hard life. I've come to understand a lot about him as I've aged. But when he was about 75-- he died of Alzheimer's and from 80 to 84 he wasn't communicating. But when he was about 75 he told me once, "I never knew how to raise children. I probably just shouldn't have had any." That was his concession to everything. And it only occurred to me a few years ago what he's really saying is, "If you guys had never been born, I'd have been better off." [laughs] He wasn't saying, "I'm sorry."

Nonetheless, Upo explains that the practice has become his life now and that it has become an agent of change dealing with everything that life presents.

So the practice is definitely changing this life and affecting this life. But it's simply the next step. It's a process that feeds itself. It's a process that works with everything that's come before it. 'Cause my practice is my life now.

According to the findings of this analysis, participants were quite aware of the etiology and power of emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, and shame. Unchecked without awareness, according to some participants, these emotions can be explosive and ruinous (anger), corrosive and destructive (fear/anxiety), or debilitating and diminishing (shame). The overall consensus

supported the efficacy of mindful awareness as a way to manage and disentangle oneself from disturbing emotions.

Relationships

Many participants remarked on tangible changes they experienced within relationships as a result of their involvement with vipassana meditation. Four subthemes emerged in the context of the primary overarching theme of relationships. They are family, friendships, intimates, and solitude.

Family

Within this subtheme there arises a common thread of increased acceptance and patience with family members. Jacob describes the feeling of acceptance he enjoys by meeting family members where "they're at" and dropping expectations about their behaviors.

And I think in terms of relationship with family, I think the big thing I got out of practice is just, yeah, a deep acceptance of really meeting them where they're at, rather than needing my family to be a certain way or needing a certain family. So again, that's that expectation of really dropping that, has been so wonderful.

Sandola's narrative also speaks to a less judgmental, more accepting attitude of who her family members are, untainted by past experiences and memories. She also reflects a gentler tolerance towards their differing values.

The mental reactions, my mental reactions, are less judgmental, more accepting of their-- of who they are as beings. And less affected by past experiences and memories. More willing to be in the present moment and realize the goodness of who they are and things

that are not the values, maybe, that I value. To accept that their values are different and that's okay. They don't have to be the same as mine.

Tera speaks to the new experience with her family of being able to "allow people to be" without needing to change them.

What I like with my family, I can allow people to be. And I don't have to try to convince them, change them or even say anything. I just kind of like let it be. And that's very new for me.

Lynn reports that as a result of the practice she was able to ease up on "old" grudges and resentment toward her mother and father's parenting style.

Another thing that came kind of early in the practice, maybe a few years into the practice, is that I was just able to really ease up about all the, you know, resentment that I had towards my parents for not really being there when I was young.

Walter expresses a "lottery winning" sense of contentment and happiness with his family circumstances and environment. The practice appears to have fostered a deep sense of gratitude with Walter for his family.

And my wife's across the table and R. is at-- on the side there. And that's really nice to have friends like that to eat with. The dog's nice. We've got birds sitting on the windowsill. Like, I'm not worried about an armored car rolling into the yard. And I'm not worried about trying to get food tomorrow. Like, I really won the lottery here.

Walter is very pleased with the open communication with his daughter with whom he shares meditation practice. As he observes, " I can pretty well say what I want and she understands that

it-- even if it sounds hurtful at the time it's not. And I wouldn't mean it to be but sometimes your tone of voice is off." However, he is aware of a less open, somewhat competitively based relationship with his son. He notes that " with my son we have a touchier relationship. Maybe it's a father-son thing, you know. Dominance-- I think sometimes he's been a little bit intimidated, you know, like, he might think I'm a tough act to follow." He expresses a clear awareness for the need for an element of caution: "I don't want any competition. So I'm trying to be careful. I got to keep this going. I don't want to wreck anything."

Friendships

Sandola describes a sense of the precious nature of relationships with family and friends which bear the fruit of allowing her to develop patience with the shortcomings of herself and others.

With my family and my friends, it's made me-- as I was going on and on about, it's made me really treasure those relationships and feel-- and experience the preciousness of them. And yeah, it's brought everything more into focus. So in that way it's been wonderful. And when you see your own shortcomings very clearly, then it's very easy to be forgiving of other people's. So that makes you more patient. So that's I think a very big benefit of the practice.

Upo's description of how he now reacts to what he previously might have considered a foolish choice by others resonates with Sandola's sentiment.

And in the past what I might say was "Well, you fool. Obviously you've got a nail in your foot if you walked through the yard where they were--" you know. But now my first

reaction is entirely different. It's more compassionate, and it's more understanding that things happen.

Jiffy and Tera suggest that their newfound patience with friends and others reflects a significant diminishment in the compulsion to change people. As Jiffy relates, "so it's kind of a neat experience or a feeling when you're no longer trying to change other people what they're thinking or what they're feeling. But you're willing to interact with them." On the other hand, Tera finds relief in the fact that she is less argumentative with others concerning her spiritual beliefs.

I would get argumentative. I would try to convince people that this is really, you know, the way and this is what the Buddha said and dah, dah, dah. And he was the Buddha, the fully enlightened one and, you know. People don't appreciate that. So I don't anymore.

Many participants tell stories of how older non-*dhamma* friends are falling away to be replaced by like-minded practitioners of the *dhamma*. As Calvin quite succinctly states "the rest of my friends, almost all of the rest of my friends are in the *dhamma*." Lynn agrees:

A lot of my non-*dhamma* friends kind of falling away over the early years of my practice and, you know, just over the years more and more of my really close friends are also *dhamma* people, like-minded people. So there's been that effect.

For Estes, this metamorphosis to *dhamma* friendships is the result of a commonality in understanding of the mind, skillful speech, and loving kindness. "My friends are 99 percent *dhamma* friends, and the friendships are really centered around the *dhamma* and teaching. We all have some degree of understanding of looking at the mind and skillful speech and loving

kindness." While Sarah agrees that this change is likely inevitable, she describes a sense of painful difficulty as old friends drop away. She suggests the analogy of a reformed alcoholic.

That's one of the things that's difficult about the practice, friendships. I guess yeah, things change when you start practicing. And some things become uninteresting. Let's say if you're an alcoholic, for example. Then you-- if you changed your life and became sober, then all your friends would change...So if your addiction is to samsara and to sense-desire and it is decreasing, then you'll have alterations in your friendships, sort of in that kind of a parallel. I've had friends drop away. That was very painful. You feel like you can't really talk to people because they don't understand.

Both Jiffy and Doug describe a newly arisen sense of the need for authenticity and honesty in connecting and interacting with others. Jiffy points to the necessity to cultivate these qualities from moment to moment.

I think a big one is this-- a dance with reality with what is and, you know, the can you attend truthfully, honestly, to the moment-in-moment experience of what is being expressed. So I think honesty and transparency is the foundation of things.

Although Doug essentially agrees with the sentiment expressed by Jiffy, his narrative suggests a sense of paradox. He seeks to be honest and authentic in his connection to people all the while maintaining a quality of detached independence.

I think I am connecting to people more. Being more authentic. Being more honest in wanting to connect to people, but at the same time, not wanting to be attached to them or have them dependent on me or vice versa. So there's in one sense a closeness, in another

sense a detachment or a separation. So that's different.

Intimates

There are differing views as to how intimate relationships (spouses and intimate partners) are impacted within the context of participants' meditative experiences. Lynn attributes her meditative practice as instrumental in her opening up to a deeper and committed relationship.

Well, that was probably instrumental in me settling down with my now-husband, who I've been with for 20 years now, since those early days of practice. As I started to kind of clean up my act then there's the opening there to get into a more committed relationship, you know, deeper relationship. So it's probably responsible for me being married.

[Laughs]

She continues on to portray her husband as an important and supportive benefactor in her life, adding he would probably report favorably on the efficacy of the practice.

My husband has been a great benefactor in my life. He was just very supportive and he could see, you know, if you were to talk to him I think he would tell you that he saw a lot of good effects of the practice.

Jacob describes how the meditative practice supports a key value in his marital relationship. One of the foundational cornerstones of his marriage is a mutually supported journey along a spiritual path.

My relationship with my wife, it's greatly impacted it in the sense it's probably formed a lot of our relationship. We-- our vows were formed around that in the sense of a few different things. Our intention of our marriage is to support each other in our spiritual

path.

While Lynn and Jacob described how the practice of meditation inspired a deeper and foundational intimacy to their relationships, Doug's story outlines how relationship problems with intimacy actually motivated him to practice meditation more seriously.

I didn't actually begin practicing seriously until after having some relationship problems.

So that was something that sort of led me to making a major change in my life. I had been in a lot of short-term relationships, generally had problems when things got too intimate.

I would tend to pull away.

On the other hand, while Sandola and Calvin report evidently deeper understanding of the nature of their intimate relationships throughout life, their narratives indicate challenges still remain in this domain. Sandola describes how certain movements by an intimate can trigger images of her alcoholic father moving in that way. While recently it has become easier to recognize the difference between a memory and a real event, there is still some confusion in her mind.

In a personal relationship, close relationship, when somebody moves a certain way there's a ghost image of my father moving that way. And then that stimulates sometimes aversive reactions. And initially not seen over the years, it's become a little easier but still sometimes there's a lag, you know, a few-second momentary lag time between seeing the image and realizing it was caused from a memory, not actually from the event.

So there's still confusion in the mind as to what's really happening.

Calvin speaks of his earlier blind motivation in the area of male/female intimacy. As he continues to describe how he allowed himself the "cascade" into deeper intimacy, he reports that

he was always aware of what was going on. However, in spite of this attentiveness, the relationship did not work out.

I'd been very motivated in terms of intimacy, male/female intimacy, being motivated by, you know, usual psychological and hormonal impulses. And pretty blind. Pretty blind in that area.

And so I allowed myself to experience this human cascade of falling in love but always I was aware of what was going on. I was always paying attention to what was going on. And we gave it a go or I gave it a go. It was 2 years. I said, this is not working. I've given it every possible approach in order to try to create a communication between us that wouldn't contribute to unwholesome conditioning in this mind and heart. And it wasn't happening, you know, for whatever reasons it wasn't happening.

So the point I'm getting to in this discussion or in this illustration is how little wounding there was, you know, as soon as it was over it was over.

It is difficult to discern whether the small amount of "wounding" when the relationship ended was due to a self-protective guarding or a more spiritually cultivated nonattachment.

Solitude

Several participants reported enjoying spending more time alone and in solitude without a sense of loneliness or withdrawal. Some, such as Tera, report enjoying being with people when she was younger. "I liked living with people and some of them were very good people. But now is the time that I really need solitude." Doug describes how he was, in fact, lonely when socializing with people, but now is very happy to spend time with himself.

I actually spend most of my time by myself, and I'm very happy to spend most of my time by myself. I don't feel lonely. I used to be around people a lot, but I felt lonely. Now I'm not around people very much and I don't feel lonely at all. So that's a big change as well. I'm more interested in really connecting when I am spending time with somebody. So cocktail parties and just kind of talking about nothing, that doesn't really interest me anymore. I'd rather be completely quiet and do my own thing or really talk. Like, the conversation we're having now, for example.

Doug explains that idle chatter is of little interest to him at this time and unless some real and meaningful connection can be forged with others, he would rather be quietly alone. Calvin echoes this sentiment explaining that he finds no reason to socialize and that he regards empty conversation as typically self-serving and aversive.

I don't socialize very much anymore. I don't, you know, in S.C.-- I don't have a lot of friends, you know. Or I don't hang out. There's nothing-- there's no reason to hang out with people. There's no reason. I find that idle conversation is often a conditioning for unwholesomeness to arise because very often idle conversation is almost always rooted in some self-serving attachment or aversion. And I don't really want to go there.

Finally, like some others, Estes states that she enjoys spending a lot of time by herself and when she does "do things" they are involved with her *dhamma* community.

I spend a lot of time by myself, and I'm happy with that. And I do things, but they're usually almost always somehow connected to here in town, to the *dhamma*, to the hermitage, to some discussion that we're gonna have about maybe personal things, but

it's always looked at through the eyes of *dhamma*.

For many participants, the tenor, components, and motivation regarding relationships appear to have changed significantly with the influence of vipassana meditation. For many, relationships within families were characterized as having more acceptance, less resentment, and critical judgment. There is a pervasive sense of gratitude expressed as well. Within the subtheme of friendships, several participants described having more appreciation, patience, and tolerance of differing opinions and values. Another commonality that surfaced was the tendency for non-*dhamma* friends and acquaintances to "fall away" and be replaced by more like-minded meditation practitioners. There was an expressed need to be more honest, transparent, and authentic within friendship. Within the domain of intimacy, some spoke of how important meditation and the *dhamma* are as a foundation of the relationship, while others' awareness focused on challenges yet to be dealt with in this realm. Several participants described finding solace in solitude without a sense of loneliness or isolation. In other words, they conveyed a feeling of contentment with their own company.

Morality

The concept of *Sila* (moral conduct), that is, appropriate thought and behavior, is embedded throughout the Buddha's teaching and in its basic form, is a requisite for a productive meditative practice. Participants reported developing a deeper and more refined grasp of the understanding of this construct, which often differed from a more conventional view of "right or wrong." In this analysis three subthemes emerged in support of the primary theme of morality or appropriate conduct. They include framing, underpinning, and making amends.

Framing

Several participants described narratives defining moral behavior in ways that differed from the more traditional understanding of right or wrong. Estes, Sandola, and Lynn speak of the construct of harming versus nonharming as a workable framework from which to determine the "rightness" of an action. Estes suggests that the terms *right* and *wrong* are too vague and generally overused and therefore should be reframed.

Right and wrong is always in relationship to harming or not harming. So what's harmful and what's not harmful. I mean right and wrong is a term that is used loosely in lots of different ways in our world, so I think of it more as harmful and not harmful. Is it hurtful or is it harmful or is it appropriate and helpful? My understanding and the refinement of what is harmful and what is appropriate or not harmful or helpful has definitely grown.

Sandola describes how within the context and complexity of daily circumstances, the "principle of nonharming" better fosters the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.

There's a softening in the mind towards the judgment of right and wrong in that we all act but there's so many complex circumstances that arise. What's important is to set the principle of nonharming, and then if something happens, then forgiveness and reconciliation is the approach rather than judging.

Lynn describes how, without the early understanding of the Golden Rule, her moral development commenced with her meditative practice.

I wasn't really raised with a moral framework. I wasn't taught the Golden Rule or anything like that. I was just raised kind of, you know, without a moral compass. My

development in that way kind of all started with practice. So in that way it's totally transformed it. Now it's something I think about all the time. Not in terms of right and wrong. But in terms of harming and nonharming, you know, and really being committed to trying to cause the least harm possible.

Now Lynn's life and conduct is a testament to a living manifestation of harm reduction in respect to her interactions with other beings. While Jacob prefers the use of skillful and unskillful as a defining criteria for the morality of an action, he agrees with Lynn and the need for increased sensitivity in view of the intrinsic harm that the very act of living can cause.

I think for me the words that work better are *skillful* and *unskillful* 'cause then it feels like an art rather than something black and white for myself. I feel like there's more sensitivity to how subtle harm can be. And the act of living creates a kind of harm, and that I'm embedded in a situation of harm. And how do I skillfully engage in being-- in embodying an ethical way of being?

He continues by suggesting that " in some ways talking about right and wrong is talking about conditionality. There's not some conceptual framework in that way of right or wrong. But everything has its consequences, or actions or consequences."

On the other hand, Calvin describes a preference for the terms *wholesome* and *unwholesome* as opposed to right or wrong. For him, wholesome actions have the attribute of being devoid of greed, hatred, and delusion and are the directions in which he likes to steer his behavior.

Right or wrong. I prefer wholesome, unwholesome. When I see thoughts or actions that

contribute to the support of wholesome or unwholesomeness, then I assess it from that perspective. My behaviour usually adapts towards wholesomeness. It steers incrementally, not radically, but incrementally towards supporting new supports for wholesomeness to arise...Nongreed, nonhatred, nondelusion.

Finally, Walter frames morality based on the purity of intent: " I think right or wrong is totally dependent on intent. I don't think there's any objective right or wrong." In some ways, Walter is mirroring Jacob's earlier rejoinder about the conditionality of "right or wrong." Walter continues by asserting universality of intent as a key determinant in the morality of choices of action, up to and including perhaps even extreme acts.

I feel that intent is everything. I think you could just about do any action or have any thought as long as the intent was really good. Even killing itself if it came to that. I think it would be very hard to have good intent doing that, but it may be possible.

Underpinning

Several participants spoke of underpinning qualities that were foundational to moral conduct in their lives. From a general perspective, both Jiffy and Calvin speak to the importance of *Sila*, the Pali term in Buddhism defined as right moral conduct. Jiffy describes an aspect of *Sila* that brings an energetic and refreshing buoyancy to one's life.

In Buddhism the idea of *Sila*, it's a root meaning is to do that which refreshes you. What is it that really refreshes you? What is it that makes you feel lighter, more whole, more buoyant, more energetic? And I'm interested in those conversations with people. And I'm interested in those conversations with myself. That's-- shall we say a much deeper level

of morality or ethics that I'm sort of interested in being moved by.

He suggests this may be the foundation of his deeper sense of morality and ethics. Calvin speaks to his own retreat experience as providing a "foundational understanding that in order for me to make progress in terms of my psychological and my spiritual health, I needed to improve my *Sila*."

Subsumed under the broad outline of *Sila* in the Buddhist cosmology, there are a number of guidelines to behavior known as the precepts. These precepts are principles of action and choice meant to support wholesome activity in daily life. A typical lay practitioner might follow five precepts (refrain from killing or harming beings, avoid taking what is not offered, avoid sexual misconduct, avoid lying, and refrain from intoxicants which may cloud the mind). More stringent practitioners might adopt eight precepts which in addition includes remaining celibate, not eating after noon, refraining from unnecessary adornment (i.e., jewelry and perfume), and refraining from the use of luxurious seats and beds. While Upo describes finding "the moment-to-moment unfolding of reality so complex as to best be understood as a result of chaos," he takes solace in the daily observance of these principles of behavior. He analogizes them in Freudian terms.

But once I took those precepts, I realized that these were guidelines for living. And for several years now, I mean, I start every single day by taking refuge and by taking the precepts.

I believe that my conceptualization of right has become much more tangible, largely because I believe it's much more conscious as a guide and way to evaluate my

behaviour, my thoughts... [It is] almost as if they are superegos. Almost as if they are homunculus's, standing there reminding you.

For Tera, "following the precepts will bring happiness, okay. Not following them is going to bring a lot of bad karma and that's why I do it." Echoing a previous discussion on wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, Tera elaborates on her conceptualization of the cause-and-effect relationship between adhering to the precepts and a sense of freedom.

There's just a feeling of freedom. It's just that when I'm following the precepts, my mind is wholesome. When I'm not following the precepts or fudging a bit, it's unwholesome. It's either wholesome [or] unwholesome.

Others describe narratives highlighting the important impact that the meditative practice and the precept of truth telling brings to interpersonal relationships and moral conduct. Jiffy speaks to the uncertainty that arises in relationships that are not based on honesty or truthfulness. As he observes, "the impact that takes place when others don't share openly and honestly or truthfully with me, part of me becomes uncertain. A part of me steps back and is not too sure how to be in relationship with them." From her standpoint, Sarah is also very aware of the importance of honesty. As she states, "I'm really concerned with being honest and truthful, I can't lie. That's the thing. The mind just won't do it. It's too hard. It's too stressful." Like Sarah, Lynn has found the practice of meditation makes dishonesty and lying almost impossible. She outlines a transition for her from telling "lies of convenience" to having a natural mental "recoil" away from being deceptive.

One thing that really surprised me early on in the practice is-- effects on honesty and

lying. And I was never, like, you know, a pathological liar or anything, but I would tell lies of convenience. And that changed very quickly. Very quickly it became very difficult to be deceptive, I was only able to be deceptive like that if I didn't pay too much attention to it. So once I started to really see what was going on in my mind and just to take notice, you know, and I was dishonest or deceptive then-- that's not so pleasant to see, you know. So there just started to be this natural recoil.

Finally, along the lines of the previous discussion concerning Lynn's early lack of a "moral compass," Doug, Sarah, and Walter speak to their sense of the development of an intrinsic, gut-level inner compass of moral conduct. As Doug states; " I take a lot more responsibility for my actions. It's very clear to me what-- I can feel what's right and what's wrong. There's this inner compass." Sarah continues by pointing out that this internal understanding is not subject to rule or law. "If it [some action] seems good and if it seems the right thing, it's intrinsic. It's something inside, it's internal and it's not according to rules or laws." Walter describes a gut-level feeling about the goodness of an intent.

But basically I think good intent would be you'd have a good feeling in your gut about it and you think it might bring a little light into the situation. And the opposite would be for bad intent. But I don't see why a person should have bad intent. That's not very positive. Nothing good can come out of that.

Making amends

Many participants agreed with Jacob's earlier assertion that "everything has its consequences or actions" and as Calvin observes seeing "cause and effect in such a clear and

obviously embracing way" must lead to reparative action when offense has been caused. Many echoed the sentiment that Doug expresses when he states, "so as soon as I noticed I've done something unskillful or said something to hurt somebody or done something to hurt somebody, I try to apologize for it right away." In addition to apologizing and, as appropriate to the AA model of rehabilitation, Doug made a concerted effort to make a list of those he had wronged and, where possible, took expiatory action. " When I did AA and when I first started meditating, I also did inventory and went through and basically thought about anyone I had wronged or done something bad to and I had made amends."

Calvin describes a scenario wherein there was a misunderstanding with a woman he had known who had taken offense with something he had done. He relates the great lengths he took to reconcile with this woman.

I followed her and pursued and, you know, I wasn't threatening her, I wasn't arguing with her, I wasn't challenging her, I wasn't pointing a finger at her. I just simply said, "I just don't understand. There's got to be a misunderstanding here". She was impressed. When I offend people, I tend to apologize.

In line with Calvin's narrative, both Jiffy and Lynn speak about further processes they engage in to accept their responsibility and role in any misunderstanding. Jiffy points out the importance of acknowledging what has happened but also the need for true repentance based on not repeating the offending action.

I do try to, generally speaking, speak with the person and acknowledge what's happened, recognizing what I've done or not done. Trying to not repeat it... and that's the challenge

is that if you repeat it, how much are you really able to repent.

Lynn speaks of developing a meaningful remorse concerning her role and strong resolve regarding future challenges.

I really try to practice wholesome remorse, like, when I mess up I try to be really honest about it and really take it in,... [as well as] cultivate wholesome resolve, you know, to do better next time. I try to feel the pain of recognizing that, you know, I may have caused somebody else some discomfort, you know, due to my own mess up. My bad, due to my bad.

The concept of moral conduct, also known as *Sila* in Buddhist terminology, presented itself as an overarching theme in this qualitative analysis. Many participants reported the development of a more refined understanding of the construct as a result of their meditative practice, outside the more conventional rule-driven view of "right or wrong." Three subthemes emerged in support of the primary theme of morality. They were framing, underpinning, and making amends.

An overwhelming number of participants found the term right and wrong far too vague, inflexible, and insensitive as a descriptor or determinant of moral behavior, especially in the context of their experiences in the meditative practice. Terms such as *harming versus non-harming*, *wholesome versus unwholesome*, *intention*, or *skillful versus unskillful* emerged as much more meaningful ways of framing criteria for the rightness of moral conduct. Qualities that were seen as foundationally important attitudes or actions to maintain moral clarity ranged from the "refreshing" aspect of practicing *Sila*, to the freedom and happiness involved in following

five or eight precepts, to the basic importance of truth-telling. All of these attributes were meant to support and serve the development of an intrinsic inner moral compass.

Lastly, in the event of causing offense to others, the overwhelming majority of participants spoke to the urgent need to take responsibility, apologize, where possible make amends, and ultimately avoid repetition of the offending action.

Living Life

Participants describe narratives involving changes and challenges of living a human life on the planet Earth. It becomes apparent that their quest for insight and wisdom on this meditative path informs and infuses all parts of their lives. Two secondary themes emerge from this analysis in support of the primary theme of "living life." These two themes, general functioning and perceiving environment, are, in turn, informed by other lesser but nonetheless prolific subthemes.

General functioning

Analysis under this theme yielded four important factors or qualities, influenced by meditation, that impacted or continue to impact the participants' life journeys. They are maturation, priority, present-centered awareness, and supportive mind states.

Maturation

Several participants suggested a cautionary note in attributing a beneficial effect to meditation versus the normal process of aging. Walter speaks of how his experience of meditation may have sped up the maturation process while taking on a life of its own.

I wonder how much that's meditation and how much is just aging and maturing a little bit. This definitely speeds it up. Meditation-- once you start doing that, then things that happen seem to take on a life of their own, sort of guided towards moving you along.

Lynn agrees that teasing out the effect of practice and increased maturity is a "bit difficult." However, she points to the immediacy of certain events arising when she took up practice and states that she believes her meditation informed not only her maturation but the direction it took.

It can be a little bit difficult to tease out, like, what's an effect of the practice and what's just increasing maturity, you know, at the time. There's some things I can definitely point to because they happened, like, so immediately when I took up practice. Definitely the practice has informed my growing up. It definitely has informed how I've matured and the directions that I matured in.

Both Estes and Calvin mirror Lynn's sentiments and suggest that the benefits of practice were "phenomenal" and "revolutionary." Estes concedes aging provides important life experiences but states, "A lot of it has to do with practice. I mean I think with maturity, with people growing old and living life and experience, that happens to varying degrees, of course. But just the fruits of practice are phenomenal." Calvin observes, "There's no way to assess how much is practice and how much is aging, you know, there's just no way to really ascertain it... [however] I would say that *dhamma* has had a revolutionary impact on my life."

Priority

A significant number of participants characterized their meditative practice as an important and integrated component of their lives. Upo, Jiffy, and Tera simply state that

meditation practice is an inseparable and constant part of their lives. As Upo observes, " my practice is my life now. It's not something I do. I go to sleep with my practice, and I wake up with my practice a lot." And Jiffy reflects "it's kind of hard to separate meditation from life and that was due to the meditation practice." While Teresa states, "I would have preferred to be practicing all the time, even now. Now I'm doing it."

Jacob and Estes describe narratives of how embedded and central the meditative practice is to their lives and spiritual paths. Jacob describes how formative and central to his path to meditative practice has been.

I think how it's formed my life-- in some ways it's kind of made my life in a sense of it really is something that's central, namely the meditation practice in the broader practice of just the-- of you could say the Buddhist path.

Estes comments on how her behavior and cognitions are informed and structured by the meditative practice and the teachings of the Buddha.

How much my life is ordered by, is structured by, is embedded with *dhamma*? It's just everything, almost. It affects everything I do, really. Everything I think, in some ways. I'm not that conscious of every single thought in relationship to practice and teachings, but it certainly affects what goes on in the mind and the response to it.

Doug describes how metamorphic a 4 month retreat with the well-known Burmese teacher was from the perspective of setting his priorities and goals in life.

I went to Burma and I did a 4 month retreat with U. P. And when I came out of that, life was really different. Then the practice became the primary goal... And on that note, it's

also changed my priorities in terms of how I spend time or what I look forward to doing during the day. I'm more apt to want to just go home and sit rather than go to a party or something like that.

Perhaps Sarah best summarizes the reasons underlying the strong prioritization of meditative practice in one's life; the possibility of full awakening.

And so that I think is the greatest benefit to daily life, is that I really realize, wow, I just need to put some effort in and I can become fully-- or this mind or this whatever, this eventually-- full enlightenment can occur. So it's very exciting. And so I guess that means my priority is different.

Present-centered awareness

Numerous participants described how, as a result of meditation, a moment-to-moment awareness, "a quality of presence" has infused their daily lives creating a sense of flow devoid of a toxic automaticity. Jacob and Jiffy generally outline the quality of presence and flow that present-centered awareness can foster. Jacob speaks on the influence of his practice when he observes, " It had an impact in terms of just having the quality of presence throughout my day that would probably be very different if I wasn't meditating." Jiffy discusses how momentary awareness can illuminate life as a continuum rather than a destination.

So if you allow yourself to be fully in one moment, then the next moment is allowed to be fully present and the next moment is allowed to be fully present. The practice sort of points to the flow of life rather than you're using some practice to get somewhere.

Tera and Sandola describe how personal relationships are positively affected with this

sense of presence and lack of judgment. Tera speaks of how pleasant and rewarding it is to talk to her son on the phone while staying in the moment.

We just talk. We're in the present moment. And it's really always nice. And it amazes me that it's always so nice, and we both hang up happy, and then I still never hear from him, and I go, it's just the way it is and it's fine. That would bother me before all this meditation.

Sandola outlines how mental reactions which are less judgmental and unaffected by past memories can truly enhance acceptance of others who may have differing values.

The mental reactions, my mental reactions, are less judgmental, more accepting of their-- of who they are as beings. And less affected by past experiences and memories. More willing to be in the present moment and realize the goodness of who they are and things that are not the values, maybe, that I value. To accept that their values are different and that's okay. They don't have to be the same as mine.

Along these lines, Lynn comments on how mindfulness throughout the day reduces expectations and allows unconditional acceptance of people as they are.

It's just mindfulness in the midst of all that during the day 'cause I don't get a lot of time for formal sitting. I don't have the expectations that I had...just be with these people, how they are and, you know, just accept them for what they are. Just be in the moment with them.

And finally, Sarah, Estes, and Upo provide three slightly different perspectives on the importance of awareness of mental states. Sarah describes "observing in myself, all sorts of

mental toxins. And this relates more to just not grabbing so hard at things. And also nothing's going to last. It just seems like such a waste of energy." She is speaking to the toxicity of the grasping mind which is rarely in the present moment. Estes outlines the importance of noticing thought and even preceding intentions or inclinations, as a means to foster choice and avert the tendency towards habitual and automatic behavior.

And then at some point along the way of this practice, I would notice the thought or even before the form thought, after a while, just the intention or the inclination, and then I could choose, no, no or yes or no. But then the choice was very, very easily available, immediately available. The more refined the mindfulness is, the less we're running on automatic.

Upo makes a humorous case for present-centered focus and awareness versus indulging in the distractibility of a wandering mind.

I come back to what I'm doing. Because I used to think I was denying myself something if I did not indulge my thoughts because my thoughts had to be important. Whereas now it seems that I have less and less attachment to the mind wandering and even laugh out loud sometimes that, well, what could be more important than cutting these carrots?

Supportive mind states

Many participants speak of the arising and blooming of wholesome mental states such as loving-kindness, compassion, patience, kindness, as well as an easing of clinging and grasping. Sarah remarks that an incremental increase in purity of the mind has fostered patience and acceptance of other people's foibles.

Out of the mind becoming slowly a little bit more pure, then the mental states, wholesome mental states naturally blossom. So the *metta* naturally becomes stronger from doing more practice. It seems like those wholesome mental states have put deeper roots into my mind. I feel that I'm more accepting of other people's shortcomings, more patient.

Tera and Jacob state quite simply that they feel a sense of kindness and patience arising in the mind as well as more ease with less wholesome mental states. As Tera says, "I'm much more patient. I'm kinder. I don't hold on to things as I did before. I don't seem to have any grudges." Jacob observes, "more kindness probably arises in the mind, and more willingness to cultivate wholesome states like kindness and compassion. More ease around unwholesome states that may arise." On the other hand, Calvin speaks to the value of kindness but appears to feel that, as a function of his aversive personality, he has difficulty communicating this to others.

I find it very valuable so as to be kind. And yet inside, the experience is this quality of kindness and generosity that for many people is communicated but for many people it's not. It's really interesting to watch how the world responds to an aversive type. It can be very unpleasant. There is a native quality of this mind to be kind. Though my personality doesn't necessarily show it which is interesting. And very frustrating.

Doug describes a newfound ability to non-reactively engage with internal experiences, allowing for a calmness of the mind and a "releasing."

Just sitting with my internal experience, whatever it is, and not reacting to it. So allowing the mind to be balanced and calm, regardless of what's going on. Just bring the mind

back and relaxing again. Letting go again. Releasing, is another word. Letting be. Before I practiced there was never any letting go.

For Lynn this process provides her with "a little bit of buffer space. There's a little bit of decoupling from greed, hatred, and delusion that's coming up." As well, Sandola affirms the importance and lightness of letting go of mental and physical gripping and clinging. For her there's a sense of safety and openness in the process.

The payoff is just being light and open and unburdened. That particular thing that the mind was clinging to, that it thought it had to take responsibility for, it no longer had to worry about it, you know. I've had actual physical reactions like, gripping, a physical gripping, as well as mental gripping. I'd say my mantra of, you know, let go, let go, you can let go, you can let go. It's okay, you know, it's safe to let go. It's safe.

Along this line, one of the Upo's stated goals is to at least manage the tendency to grasp after things by bringing consciousness and awareness to decisions around automatic impulses.

I'm much less driven by unexamined impulses. One of my goals in life is to stop grasping for things, and it's impossible. We live in a realm of desire, but we can certainly limit it to a great deal. It's a good rule of training to make a decision consciously about when grasping comes up.

Perceiving environment

Several participants discussed how their perceptions of their environment and surroundings changed over time as a function of their meditative practice. Some spoke of experiencing the world in terms of an energetic construct of patterns. Others referred to the

emergence of a simplicity of lifestyle both physically and cognitively. Perhaps Sarah's observation summarizes some underlying reasons for these changes. "I'm taking myself and other things in the world less seriously. I guess, yeah, things change when you start practicing. And some things become uninteresting." Two subthemes arose in this analysis; flow and simplicity.

Flow

Jiffy describes a sense of experiencing life as a "field" of awareness or consciousness and how this informs his day to day experience.

And the body becomes very, very transparent. And so one starts to experience life through the experience of being a field rather than a separate object... And so you're within a field of awareness or a field of consciousness or a field of experience. And I think that transformed during meditation practices and I think that's very much how I approach my day-to-day experience.

Sandola describes a sense of enriched intimacy in her existence, a closer alignment with both the natural and human world manifesting as a deeper perception of "energetic patterns."

It's brought a greater intimacy to everything in my life. Everything's more-- is seen on more levels, different levels, and it's enriched my existence. It feels like there's a closer connection with both the natural world and the human world or-- and the unseen world. There's greater perception of energetic patterns and movements.

While Jacob states that he is "not taking the conceptual world so matter-of-factly" and sees the world as more of the fabricated construct. He continues:

[There is] the sense that here I am going through the world is a kind of fabrication... is

just a framework that doesn't hold as much water as it used to. Just a sense that here I am looking out at the world, is in some ways a construct. And to notice that that is a construct that my mind makes is helpful. That's been a big change to notice that.

Simplicity

Several participants described a sort of voluntary renunciation to a simpler and more easily satisfied lifestyle. Sarah elaborates on this process for her; "I've given up many, many things for the practice. I've given up family. I've given up having children, because those are the years I had to make those decisions. Given up family, children, house, big career advances." Sarah continues, "So it means I'm more easily satisfied with food and clothing and where I sleep. And I think that's also a result of the practice."

Calvin echoes Sandola's desire for a simplified lifestyle: "I live very simply. I don't make a lot of money. I don't have a lot. I stay alert. I don't consume as heck of a lot, you know, I live in a 450 square foot house." From a slightly different perspective, Doug speaks to a sense of not needing a permanent residence. "Another change on that note is I have not lived anywhere permanently since I started practicing seriously. And everywhere feels pretty much like home, which is also interesting. I'm more or less comfortable wherever I am." Doug continues on to say that he has a deep feeling of "contentment. I'm happy generally... Life is good. It doesn't matter what happens." He further explains an underlying sense of inner well-being that has pervaded his life since he began meditating.

There's a part of me that knows that everything is okay at a certain level and that it just ultimately doesn't really matter at a certain level. So there's an inner feeling of well being

and an inner feeling of contentment.

In this analysis, the emergence of the primary theme "living life" was indicative of the pervasiveness with which the quest for insight and wisdom along the meditative path could infuse the participants' lives. While two secondary themes, general functioning and perceiving environment, came to light within the framework of this analysis, numerous other important subthemes became apparent as well.

Although several participants provided a caveat suggesting caution when attributing benefits to meditation that might well arise in any event due to normal maturation, they unanimously agreed that their experiences with meditation had a positive developmental impact on their lives. As well, a significant number of participants characterized their meditative practice as an important and integrated priority within their lives. It was suggested that perhaps the opportunity for deeper wisdom, up to and including full enlightenment, was a strong motivator for this prioritization. Similarly, numerous participants revealed that the influence of meditation on their lives had created a sense of moment-to-moment awareness, "a quality of presence" that has become integral in their daily functioning. This momentary awareness has served as an antidote towards acting on habitual and thoughtless impulses. Many participants spoke of the blooming of wholesome mind states such as loving-kindness, patience, and kindness which fostered a pervasive sense of ease in their lives. The ability to nonreactively engage, "release," and let go of mental grasping and clinging was presented as an antidote to and a method of managing unproductive habitual patterns.

Numerous participants were very clear about a changed perspective on how they

perceived their environment and surroundings. Many spoke of a sense of living in a "field" of awareness and consciousness, others spoke of perceiving "energetic patterns" and movements. Several participants described adopting much simpler lifestyles unencumbered by children, spouses, or ambition. Most importantly, all agreed that their fashion and style of "living life" had been indelibly changed as a function influence of their meditative practice.

Summary

Upon completion of the final analysis, there emerged a model which provides a way to conceptualize advanced meditators' experience in the Mahasi style of vipassana meditation. The model includes seven primary components: meditative practice, transformation, mental/cognitive processes, disturbing emotions, relationships, morality, and living life. The insights and processes that participants experienced during and after vipassana meditation retreats provided the basis for shifts in paradigm and transformative experience that impact a number of aspects of their lives. Each of the seven elements presented represents a unique forum or area in which the focused and deeply concentrated mindfulness of a typical long-term meditation retreat can have a productive or facilitating impact. Without exception, each participant's narrative reflects a profoundly beneficial and enduring influence arising within the context of their reported meditative experiences. Each expressed a visceral and experiential understanding of life-changing insights and processes that have become embedded in their daily lives and lifestyles.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative study was to investigate the experiences of advanced practitioners of vipassana meditation techniques within the Mahasi tradition. I believe it is important to examine how vipassana practice at advanced stages can affect life changes with respect to awareness, self-management, relationships, moral and ethical behavior, and finally effectiveness of living and perception of the environment. By listening to these meditators' stories, I hoped to explore the range of experiences, processes, and changes that would impact their lives before, during, and after meditative practice.

In this section, I will present a model of experiential meditative processes that emerged from the data, as well as address the research questions discussed in Chapter 3. I will also integrate the findings from this research with other theoretical and empirical literature that may be relevant and pertain to this topic.

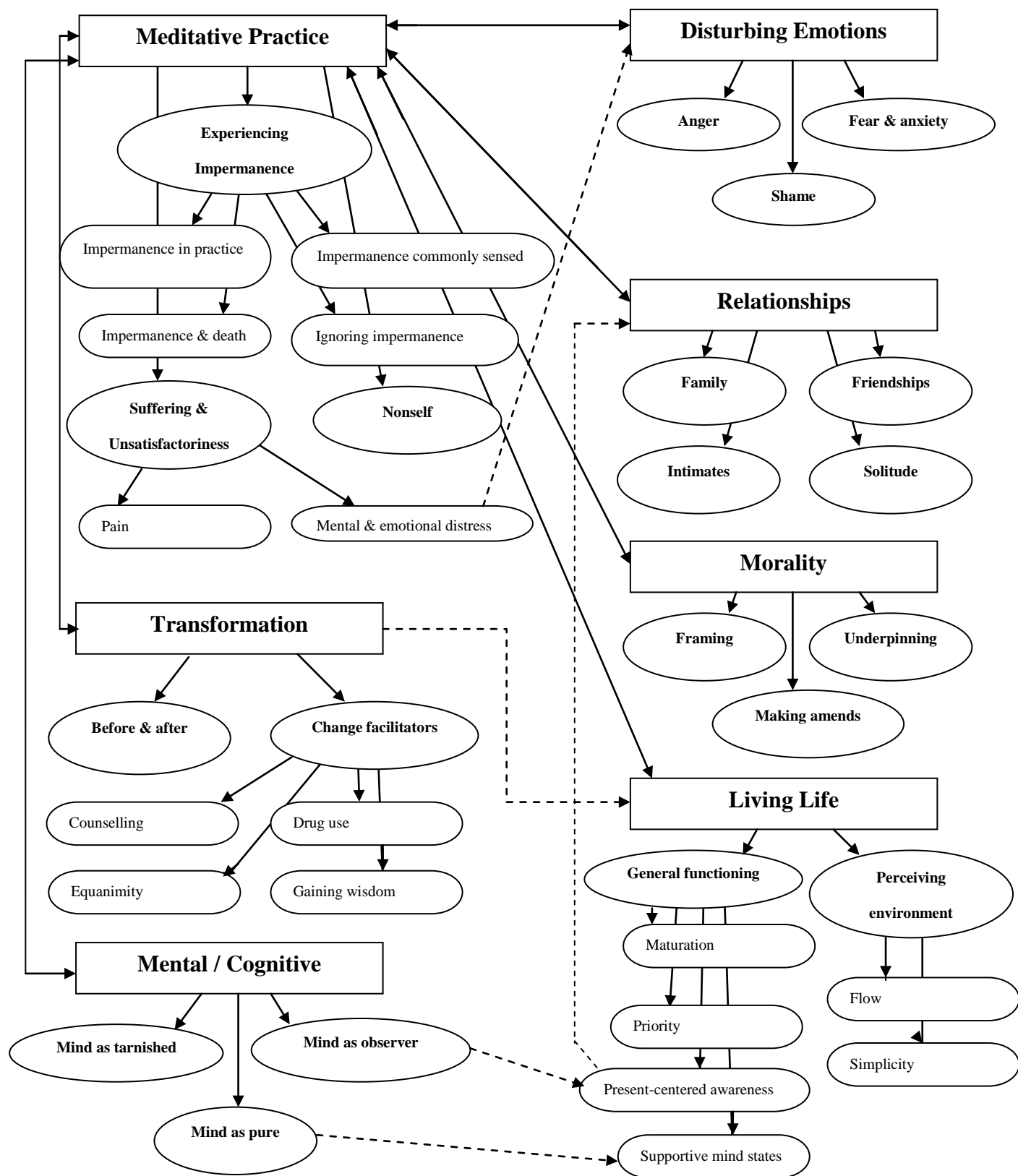
A review of the literature as it stands provides only a limited perspective and understanding of the processes, experiences, and impacts of intensive and advanced vipassana (mindfulness) practice from a qualitative point of view. Much of the research into the science of meditation has focused more on quantitative bio-neurological investigations into the effects of mindfulness. There is a notable dearth of study into the Mahasi tradition practice, which is quite remarkable given the tradition's status as a wellspring from which many mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) arose. The findings of this research study provide a deeper breadth and dimension of understanding into how the experiences of intensive and advanced vipassana

meditation occurs during practice and affects paradigm shifts which ultimately are embedded into daily life.

Model of Meditative Processes and Experiences

After a final analysis of the data, a model of meditative processes and experiences emerged comprising insights and experiences which contributed to enduring and transformative changes in participants' perspectives and life paradigms. The model includes seven primary themes; (a) *meditative practice*, (b) *transformation*, (c) *mental/cognitive processes*, (d) *disturbing emotions*, (e) *relationships*, (f) *morality*, and, (g) *living life*. The chart in Figure 1 graphically depicts the themes and subthemes which comprise the processes and experiences of advanced Mahasi meditators. The seven themes of this model, while transformative, are not necessarily universally developmental, sequential, or linear. However, it should be noted that the interrelatedness of themes and sub themes, as schematically portrayed, include both bidirectional and unidirectional interactions. Notably, the theme *meditative practice* bidirectionally interacts with and informs the other six overarching themes, while some other themes and subthemes unidirectionally impact other themes or subthemes. For example, the *transformation* theme impacts the *living life* theme in a unidirectional fashion, the *mental and emotional distress* subtheme unidirectionally informs the theme *disturbing emotions* and so on.

Figure 1. Model of meditative processes and experiences.



While Figure 1 suggests a nonlinearity within the overarching themes, as previously mentioned, it is important to reiterate that all themes are bidirectionally interactive with *meditative practice*. This particular theme appears to inform or support the other themes in the model in a variety of ways. *Meditative practice* is characterized by insights and processes that are experienced during or after vipassana meditation practice in the Mahasi tradition. Specifically, there can arise an experiential awareness of the three general characteristics of existence; impermanence, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, and nonself. The experience of impermanence as it occurs in retreat can highlight the incredible swiftness of change, the inherent instability of phenomena, as well as the ephemeral nature of mind states arising and passing away. Such insight into the depth of understanding of impermanence, when experienced in daily life, can foster a sense of focused awareness, an opening to the preciousness and fragility of every moment's beauty and "briefness." Even the specter of death, the final affront to human-kind's frail belief in permanence of some kind, can offer comfort; a reduction or riddance of attachment, a grasp of the impermanence of grief, a chance at reconciliation and deeper spiritual understanding, and finally, clarity into the transient nature of self or ego. The perils of ignoring impermanence also become clearer; clinging causes suffering and sadness as does the creation of a dangerous and false sense of permanency in mind-created stories. As well, emotionally overinvesting in an unstable and ultimately ephemeral world of impermanent things can be profoundly disappointing.

Suffering and unsatisfactoriness during meditation arises in the form of physical pain and mental and emotional distress. The physical pain associated with meditative practice is frequently described using the medical term "exquisite," or "almost unbearable," and/or "severe"

by several of the participants. There is an understanding that, although the pain is intense and often challenging, it is also impermanent. On its dissolution there arises a sense of calm and balance; the pain is then perceived as part of the practice and therefore nondisruptive. As the transience of life is seen with deeper clarity during practice, there can arise a feeling of extreme mental and emotional distress in the form of a visceral sense of fear, misery, and disgust. Often described as "horrible", unsatisfying, repulsive, and "fraught with emotion and fear", these stages of experience are quite manageably navigated with (a) acceptance, (b) observation, (c) normalization and contextualization by a qualified teacher, and (d) practical and precise guidance by a teacher.

The sense and concept of self arises as a function of tightly held beliefs, views, thought patterns, mind states, and/or emotions. Upon recognizing the ephemeral and transient nature of these "self" creating functions, there emerges a "real selfless feeling," a sense of spacious openness and peace, a feeling of relief, and an experience of "being a field rather than an object."

Transformation includes processes, agents, and experience which facilitate change or shifts in perception. "Happiness" before meditative practice was often defined by or coupled with the fulfillment of sense desire, an incessant need to be doing something, a shadowy pursuit of hedonistic pleasures, or finally, a suppression of an emotional reality. With these realizations and the ongoing training of mindfulness, a transformative focus and release of energy occurs which allows for epiphanies, greater confidence, and a more vital life.

Certain experiences were identified as catalytic, either as standalone processes or as an adjunct to meditative practice. Processes that can be engaged include psychotherapeutic counseling to deal with "psychological stuff" or triggering "knots," psychedelic drug use as a

precursor to a "spiritual path." As well, the experience of the advanced stage of equanimity can provide a life altering sense of stability and clarity, an urgent inspiration to continue to practice, a peace and quiet characterized by a spacious "lightening" of the mind and body, and finally an unparalleled sense of balance in the face of wholesome or unwholesomeness mental states. The convincing authenticity and wisdom of practice and teachings encourage "skillful means" and actions, even informing vocal intonation and body posture.

Mental/cognitive processes represents the Buddhist conceptualization known as "mind." The mind can be experienced as either a hindrance or a catalyst for progressive change. Observation of the "tarnished mind" can be characterized as the examination of unwholesome mental states such as anger, jealousy, fear and so forth; the tilling of a garden overgrown with weeds; a circular "spinning confusion"; aversion; an insatiable in its hunger "for more"; judgmental and self-reproachful; and finally "catastrophizing." The antidote is the cultivation of an inquiring and observant mind now trained to habitually notice physical and mental processes as they arise. The ensuing confidence invokes a sense of pleasure even in the investigation of the unpleasant. The resultant purity of mind, in contrast to the coarseness of mundane awareness, presents with a sense of beauty, wonder, and refinement. Exalted states of mind such as loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity can be experienced in the clear balance of the purified mind.

Disturbing emotions references the transformative possibilities when challenging and toxic mind states are addressed through the lens of meditative practice. For example, concentrated awareness of anger, as it arises, prevents its corrosive nature from blooming into regrettable mind states or behaviors. Fear and anxiety can arise around issues emanating from a

troubled childhood culminating in a strong and often defended attachment to a "self-solidity" or ego. Again mindfulness of fear and anxiety substantially dispels "the fear reaction" by allowing their impermanence to be viscerally understood and experienced. Shame, described as an emotion of disconnection and inadequacy, likewise is dispelled when exposed to the sharp focus of moment-to-moment awareness.

Relationships represents a range of behavioral, attitudinal, and selective changes or shifts that can occur in the context of intentional interactions with others. Within the family context, there can arise a sense of nonjudgmental acceptance of what may be differing values and beliefs. There can be a dissolution of "old grudges" and/or the need to exert change on other family members. The realm of friendships presents a precious opportunity to develop patience with self and others, the acceptance of others as they are, and, not surprisingly, a "metamorphosis" to like-minded "*dhamma* friendships." Although at least one of the changes may be painful (i.e., the falling away of old non-*dhamma* friends), there arises a compelling need for authenticity and honesty in connecting and interacting with others. Intimate relationships may arise as a result of or in conjunction with the practice of meditation and prove to be enduring and beneficial support systems. On the other hand, the complexities and intricacies of intimacy may remain a perennial challenge and/or may inspire the seclusion of practice. Finding idle chatter and mundane events of little interest, one may take solace and contentment with one's own company without the feeling of loneliness or withdrawal.

Morality refers to the shifts in the processes involved in evaluating the concept of "right or wrong" as well as the ensuing choices and behaviors deemed appropriate to the circumstances. A deeper and more refined understanding of this construct emerges; rather than the vague and

unidimensional terms of right or wrong, morality and resultant behavior is framed as harming versus nonharming, skillful versus unskillful actions, or wholesome versus unwholesome thoughts or behaviors. Purity of intent is also a key determinant as thoughts and behaviors are guided to supporting nonharming, skillful, and/or wholesome outcomes. Several important qualities underpin moral thought and action. Right moral conduct (also known as *Sila*, a Pali Buddhist term) can provide an energetic and refreshing buoyancy to one's life. Subsumed under this construct, there are guidelines of behavior commonly known as precepts; principles meant to support wholesome choice and activity in daily life. These principles of behavior which may number five (restraint from killing or harming, taking only what is offered, no sexual misconduct, truth telling, and restraint from clouding the mind with intoxicants) or eight (now including celibacy, no food after noon, and restraint from unnecessary adornment and luxury) can provide solace as they are normalized into customary yet liberating guidelines for living. Truth telling and honest transparency become so ingrained as to manifest as gut-level inner compasses of moral conduct (i.e., lying becomes impossible). As the visceral understanding that every action has a consequence becomes more and more deeply embedded, so does the realization that reparative action must follow when offense has been caused. This action would include apology, amend making, cultivating wholesome remorse (i.e., honest admission of fault), and wholesome resolve to avoid repetition of the offense.

Living life characterizes the vipassana-induced influences on general functioning, perception of the environment, and the daily trials and tribulations faced in life. Meditative practice is suggested as at least an adjunct to, but more likely, an impactful and "revolutionary" influence on the normal developmental processes of maturation occurring throughout life. The

practice of meditation can be or become an important and integrated component "embedded" within daily life. The entrenchment of meditation as a prioritized part of daily living can be seen as a necessary and purifying aspect of the path to spiritual awakening. As a result of present-centered awareness, there can arise a "quality of presence" which may illuminate life as a moment-to-moment continuum rather than a destination. Personal relationships can be positively affected with a sense of nonjudgmental presence which can foster an unconditional acceptance of others as they are. This moment-to-moment presence can act as a safeguard against the toxicity of unwholesome, habitual, and automatic behavior and their preceding distractive thoughts, intentions, or inclinations. As the mind habituates itself to moment-to-moment awareness, wholesome mental states such as loving-kindness, patience, kindness, compassion, generosity, and non-reactive calmness can naturally blossom. As a result, there may arise a lightness, a buffering, an unburdened sense of space and openness, and a safe haven from the drive of unexamined impulses.

Perceptions of the environment and surroundings can change; the experience of life can present as a field of awareness and consciousness with greater perception of energetic patterns or movements. There can arise a sense of the world as being "a kind of [mental] fabrication." During the course of practice and daily meditation there can develop a voluntary renunciation to a simpler and more easily satisfied lifestyle. This could include giving up; having children, owning a permanent residence, an ambitious pursuit of a career, and/or excessive material consumption. The resulting simplicity can foster an inner sense of contentment and well-being.

The subsequent section will include a discussion of the research questions presented in Chapter 3 as they pertain to the model of meditative processes and experiences. I will also integrate the findings of this research with other relevant theoretical and empirical literature. The research questions address five particular categories contained within their areas of interest and focus including *awareness*, *self-management*, *relationships*, *morality*, and *living life*.

The category of awareness will highlight the processes of insight and understanding arising within meditative practice and the subthemes of experiencing impermanence, suffering and unsatisfactoriness, and nonself. The experience of transformation, the influence and involvement of mental and cognitive processes, and the impact of disturbing emotions will be explored as they pertain to self-management. The experience of relationships will be addressed as they relate to family, friendships, intimates, and solitude. The processes framing and underpinning the determination of right or wrong and any consequential actions will be examined under the category of morality. Finally, the general theme of living life will be addressed from the perspective of general functioning and the perception of environment.

Awareness

The experiences and processes that arise during vipassana meditative practice facilitate the understanding and awareness of the three general characteristics of existence (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness or suffering, and nonself) as outlined in Buddhist literature (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010; Mahasi Sayadaw, 2002). Such awareness and insight are a function of *self-reflection*, *self-reactiveness*, *self-efficacy*, and *mastery*, all important components of the concept of *human agency* (Bandura, 2001, 2004). From this perspective, they are distinct attributes that allow humans to become spiritual beings (Bandura, 2003).

Awareness of the characteristic of impermanence presents in four interesting ways; impermanence in retreats, impermanence commonly sensed, impermanence and death, and, ignoring impermanence. During the actual meditation retreats participants described experiencing an incredible rapidity of change (Estes and Jiffy), a sense of the instability, inconstancy, and ephemeral nature of phenomenon and sensory experience (Sandola, Lynn) as well as the incessant arising and passing away of mental states (Jacob). This supports Full and colleagues' (2013) research that characterizes impermanence as the dissolution of (a) the perception of objects and matter, (b) conceptualizations such as self, and (c) the solidity of objects. Full continues to report that worldly phenomena, as experienced during daily life, are perceived as changing and impermanent. Mazur (2013) reports that impermanence is learned through mindfulness which fosters an awareness of the changes of life, the loss of physical ability and ultimately death. Participants such as Jiffy, Sandola, and Sarah suggest that the understanding of impermanence on a day-to-day basis provides a productive and focused awareness into the "preciousness," "fragility and briefness of everything." Concerning impermanence and death, Halifax (2008) states that "coming to terms with the truth of impermanence is one of the most important ways to transform our relationship to dying and death" (p. 132). Walter would agree and suggests that understanding and acknowledging the certainty of death is a way to rid oneself of attachment to the belief in "the forever." This would support Mazur's (2013) contention that understanding death leads to nonattachment, "a letting go" which can become a "tool of the navigation" through life's challenging transitions. For Lynn and Upo, the sense of support arising from the practice of meditation has allowed them to navigate and manage the profound sense of grief arising from the death of a dear one and

recognize that even grief is impermanent. On the other hand, death can provide a liberating opportunity to become "intimate with the process of death" and reconcile thorny personal issues with the passing of loved ones such as parents (Estes). From another perspective, Sandola describes a more metaphorical "death experience" which occurred during her meditation. She describes a confusing yet spacious mental process with a fearful "emptiness" associated with "the death of self." Kornfield (1979), in his seminal study, found that these experiences, perceived as dying and/or the "death" of the belief in the permanence of self or the body, are common occurrences during long (3 month) meditation retreats. Finally, this research suggests an important and cautionary note against ignoring the ephemeral and impermanent nature of life lest one "take(s) things too seriously" (Estes, Walter). Clinging too strongly to beliefs or attaching permanency to an impermanent world can create a false sense of durability to mind-created stories or narratives or, put more simply, is just a "poor investment" as a spiritual path (Jiffy, Jacob). Other research, which included a sample of inexperienced meditators attempting unguided advanced practices, reported that when some participants were faced with experiences of impermanence, such as "dissolution of identity," severe challenges to their sense of reality occurred (Lomas et al., 2015).

The second characteristic of suffering and unsatisfactoriness manifests as physical pain and mental and emotional distress in meditative practice. The experience of physical and mental pain and discomfort is well documented within the Mahasi tradition of meditative practice (Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2002; Kornfield, 1979; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985). Concerning physical pain, the literature suggests that during meditative practice there is "physical discomfort" (Lomas et al., 2015) as well as a frequency of "body pain" (Kornfield, 1979). Kornfield reports that "as a

result of mindfulness practice...[there is] a greater ability to surrender to and concentrate fully on pain without feeling fear or mental discomfort" (p. 52). The current study would support these assertions, with many participants describing their pain as "exquisite," "almost unbearable," "severe" as well as intense and often challenging. Participants suggested that, while there was "phenomenal pain," with "this journey of meditation, intense sensations can arise and you can be very, very, present with them" (e.g., Jiffy). However, their meditation practice provided them with an additional important insight and realization; the pain is impermanent, that is, it would "end," "dissolve," "soften," or "not last" and that it is nothing to "worry about too much" (Sarah, Walter).

During an extended meditation retreat, there can arise a series of insights which can provoke a sense of mental and emotional distress characterized by fear, misery, and disgust. Formally known as *dukkha nanas* in Pali (insights into suffering), these experiences are also well documented in Buddhist literature (Bikkhu Nanamoli, 1991; Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985). Research indicates that during meditative practice psychological issues, such as depression, anxiety, and even psychosis, can be exacerbated (Lomas et al., 2015). As well, clinicians and researchers have reported a variety of "anomalous experiences" and non-ordinary states of consciousness (NSC) that can occur during vipassana and other forms of meditation (Bronn & McIlwain, 2015; VanderKooi, 1997). Bronn and McIlwain strongly suggest that there exist validly assessable spiritual experiences (SE) and mystical experiences (ME) which are different from, although often diagnosed as, psychosis (Kuijpers et al., 2007) or dissociation (Waelde, 2004). Kornfield's (1979) research would agree with these contentions as he suggests strong fear, insecurity, and altered states are normal during meditative practice. He further

contends that, although often mistakenly viewed as pathological, these states are quite common and can be overcome during practice by "diligent mindfulness and surrendering." However, there is concern that without proper guidance, screening, or safety procedures these anomalous conditions can last a few weeks, months, or even years (Britton, 2012; Bronn & McIlwain, 2015; Lomas et al., 2015; Lustyk et al., 2009). Participants in the current study describe experiencing these stages and insights into suffering as "misery," "just horrible," "emotionally hurtful," "fraught with emotions fear and a lot of anxiety," "revulsion," or like "steel bands through the gut and chest" (Calvin, Doug, Sandola). While this study also supports the need for guidance, screening, safety procedures, the research indicates there are specific conditions that must exist to safely navigate these challenging meditative experiences. Participants suggested the following conditions are very important: (a) understanding and accepting that these challenges are part of the practice, (b) careful observation and application of mindfulness, (c) contextualization and normalization of experiences by the teacher, and (d) very "practical, technical guidance" by the teacher. It is necessary to emphasize the importance of guidance by a well-trained teacher whose own experience is well beyond advanced.

Perhaps one of the most challenging characteristics to grasp theoretically is the concept of non-self (*anatta* in Pali). There is widespread evidence in the literature supporting the manifestation of this conceptualization. Kornfield (1979) reports that a common experience during long-term meditation retreats is that of "the death of illusions of self-images" (p. 54). Other qualitative research speaks to the "non-conceptual perception of self" (Full et al., 2013), a "transcendence beyond self" (Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994), a progression of understanding including "self, self and mind, and non-self" (Healy, 2001) and finally, a "dis-identification with

emotions and thoughts" (Pruitt & McCollum, 2012). Of recent and particular interest, is the neuroimaging research work examining the neurological concomitants and possible brain loci associated with the concept of a "self." In 2006, Northoff and colleagues published a "meta-analysis of imaging studies on the 'self' " that concluded the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC) and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) are associated with a "core," "mental," or "minimal sense" of self. Along these lines, Brewer and his associates suggest that the PCC and mPFC may actually be processors and support mechanisms for the concept of "self" in the human brain and psyche (Brewer & Garrison, 2014; Brewer et al., 2013). He suggests that these areas of the brain can get "caught up" in "self" supporting mental content and beliefs. Research indicates that the PCC is activated with tobacco and drug-related craving and addiction (Tiffany & Wray, 2012), as well as social cognitive processing of moral dilemmas (Cáceda et al., 2011) and preoccupation with self-actions arising from other-centered guilt (Morey et al., 2012). Interestingly, other functional imaging studies found that during the ingestion of psilocybin the PCC and mPFC underwent a decoupling process leading to a reported "egoless" or "selfless" state which blurred the boundary between others and self (Carhart-Harris et al., 2012). The current research study certainly supports the arising of a perception of nonself; as one participant describes, "the sense of self seems to disappear or a sense of the observer disappears momentarily" (Doug). What is valuable and important are participants' descriptions of their qualitative experiences of this phenomenon. These first-person narratives provide a more visceral understanding of the experiential components of non-self. For Doug there was also a "real selfless feeling; selfless meaning there is this spaciousness, openness, a moment of peace." Others describe a sense of "many, many, many moments strung together, all continuously" wherein "the perception of emptiness becomes

more real... [and] there's less feeling that anything's solid and everything's more spacious" (Sandola). From a qualitative point of view, the process of creating the idea of a "solid self" is rooted in the way the mind has of conceptualizing the world. The "world out there" is constructed around certain mind-created beliefs, views, or concepts, while, internally, the mind has "an incessant quality of wanting to become somebody...the hook of becoming is what the human mind does." There emerges the realization that the "self" creating mind states such as "thoughts and emotions", which are continuously arising and passing away, are not who we really are, only creators of "the masks and the cloaks that are hiding...the essence"(Jacob, Upo). This insight creates a "radically different relationship with thoughts and emotions" wherein "the sense of body...age...sex... [and] place dissolves" and life is experienced as "being a field rather than a separate object" with "just an awareness of observing... sheer awareness" (Jiffy, Tera; e.g., see also Hayes, 2004; "self as context [versus] self as content").

The awareness and insights arising during vipassana meditative practice facilitate an important visceral understanding of the three general characteristics of existence, that is, impermanence, unsatisfactoriness or suffering, and non-self. Bandura's work on human agency and humanities quest for "spiritual" understanding lay the groundwork necessary to grasp these three general characteristics (Bandura, 2001, 2003, 2004). The experience of impermanence presents in four informative ways; in retreat, as commonly sensed, as experienced with death, and the consequences of ignoring impermanence provides an important reminder of the ephemeral, transient and ultimately disappointing nature of worldly phenomena. The experiential understanding of physical and mental distress and pain provides important insight into the interface of the mind and body. When embraced and diligently observed these processes can

yield an important and crucial understanding; all suffering is ultimately mind driven and is itself transient and impermanent. The advanced awareness concerning the concept of non-self that can arise during intensive meditative practice is grounded in the realization that the mind is incessantly clinging to views, beliefs, and "self" creating thoughts and emotions. Mental and physical processes are perceived as separate and essentially insubstantial, cloying together in a way that creates a seemingly enduring "relative" self. Vipassana meditative practice fosters a less entangled, lightened, and spacious attitude and experience of the flow of life.

Self-Management

The experience of transformation, the influence and involvement of mental and cognitive processes, and the impact of disturbing emotions will be explored as they pertain to self-management. This area of the research resonates with components of two important concepts advanced by Bandura, each integral to activating change or transformation, understanding and guiding mental and cognitive processes, and managing emotion and mood fluctuations. The first, *human agency*, involves *intentionality* -- planned action; *forethought* -- understanding the outcomes of actions; *self-reactiveness* -- motivation and regulation of actions; and *self-reflection* -- evaluation of functioning and motivation (Bandura, 2001, 2004). *Self-efficacy* is a vital component of self-reflection and foundational to human agency. It is defined as a person's belief in their ability to exercise a degree of "control over their own functioning and over environmental events" (Bandura, 2001, p. 10). Successful performance (i.e., *mastery experience*) is crucial to foster and support ever strengthening self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Another important concept salient to this study is that of *self-regulation* (Bandura 1986, 1996). According to Bandura (1994), a person with high levels of self-efficacy can develop a considerable capacity

to regulate his or her behavior. Three factors are suggested requirements for self-regulation; self-observation -- monitoring of performance, judgmental process -- an evaluation of performance, and self-reaction -- internal incentive for actions. Evidently, self-regulation, in conjunction with the principles of human agency, is at the heart of the Buddha's teaching and vipassana meditation practice and can provide an important foundation for progress down life's path. In summary Bandura (1986, 2001) characterized the qualities of humankind using such terms as plasticity, flexibility, agency, self-regulation, self-reflection and self-organization.

A number of narratives from this research speak to a pre-meditation lifestyle, before any transformation, which defined happiness and fulfillment in terms of indulgence in sense desire, pursuit of "life experience and adventure" for future "memories," or a shadowy hedonism ("sex drugs and rock 'n roll"). Finding these proxies for "happiness" unsatisfactory, participants described the occurrence of a "catharsis" of the mind, a realization of the desire for a "spiritual life," a re-examination of the role of "suppression" of mental and emotional processes, or a yearning for an internal contentment (Calvin, Doug, Sandola, Sarah). These experiences motivated participants to examine and re-evaluate their priorities in life and redirect their actions and energies towards gaining a level of control and mastery over their lives via the practice of vipassana meditation. Participants describe the "training of mindfulness" as a "conditioning process" which facilitated "greater confidence," "more energy" in life, and "more vitality in the mind and body" (Calvin, Sandola). This research dovetails well with Bandura's models of self-regulation and human agency. For example, within the context of self-regulation, participants reported engaging in self-observation, a judgment process, self-reaction, that is, examining internal incentives for actions (Bandura 1986, 1996). Within the framework of human agency,

participants engaged in intentionality -- taking planned corrective action, forethought -- anticipating and understanding possible dire consequences relating to their premeditative lifestyles, self-reactiveness/self--reflection-- activating a motivated regulation of actions while examining and evaluating these actions and motivations (Bandura, 2001, 2004). As their proficiency in meditative practice improved, participants began to experience a sense of mastery (Bandura, 1997) which reportedly increased their sense of confidence in their capabilities to manage and self-regulate their lives (self-efficacy; Bandura, 2001).

A number of "change facilitators" emerged from this research which can inspire life-changing transformations. Conventional psychotherapy and counseling was recognized as a useful adjunct to supplement their meditative practice. The literature provides clear support for the efficacy of meditative practice as a beneficial process to alleviate psychological issues. Kornfield (1979) found that "unresolved internal conflicts often arise in practice, and that when these and their associated feelings are noticed and experienced, they are frequently resolved spontaneously" (p. 53). Other research indicates an improvement in measured psychological symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, in the treatment group following a one-month vipassana meditation retreat compared to controls (Orzech, 2008; Orzech et al., 2009). Lomas and colleagues (2015) in their qualitative study found that, although some participants reported psychological symptoms such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression were exacerbated during meditative practice, on balance, they reported that "they also gradually acquired emotional management strategies and 'tools' to help them deal with these concerns" (p. 856). Participants in this study utilized different blends of conventional group and individual psychotherapies and meditation practice to address psychological concerns in their makeup.

Many participants recognized the need for counseling during meditative practice ("I saw myself dying," "I've got deep down psychological knots," "take care of your psychological stuff"). And they either (a) continued doing their therapeutic and meditative practices together, (e.g., Calvin, Lynn), (b) continued practicing meditation and therapy jointly until certain psychological issues were resolved and then maintained meditation as a standalone practice (e.g., Doug), or (c) temporarily halted meditation and focused exclusively on therapeutic counseling for several months until becoming "unstuck" and then returned exclusively to vipassana practice, (e.g., Tera).

The study suggests that drug use, specifically psychedelics (LSD, psilocybin), can provide insights into the onset of childhood psychological issues while fostering an ability to "reprogram", or support an early framework for a "spiritual path" (Tera, Doug). However, there was an acknowledgment (Upo, Doug) that meditation experiences presented "something that I'd never experienced before [on drugs]," or a beginning to "question how beneficial they [drugs] are... [noticing] I was twice as high on the retreat as I was [on drugs]." However one participant cautions that drug use "was conditioning me towards psychological isolation unskillful and dangerous behaviors"(Calvin). Notably, research by Carhart-Harris and colleagues (2012) reported that the ingestion of psilocybin induced a decoupling process in areas of the brain (e.g. PCC, mPFC) "permitting an unconstrained style of cognition" (p. 2142) in the treatment versus control group. Subjectively this was reported as an "egoless" or "selfless" state wherein there was a sense of blurred boundaries between self and others. This study may lend support to the recently reemerging idea that "psychedelics may be useful in the treatment of certain psychiatric disorders" (p. 2142). Further qualitative and quantitative study into agents (e.g., psilocybin,

psychedelics, meditation) that might deactivate the default mode network (DMN) generally, or the PCC/mPFC specifically is clearly important and necessary (see later discussion on p.175).

Certain experiences in the meditative practice, such as advanced equanimity, can inspire and inform transformational processes. The concomitant sense of "bliss and rapture" is reported to be quite common in the literature (Kornfield, 1979). The resolution of "the strong fear and insecurity, rage...the death-like experiences" of the *dukkha nanas* "leading to the development of equanimity...seems central to the growth of insight" (p. 54). Reported experiences in the current research support the sense of bliss and rapture while suggesting other qualitative dimensions to equanimity such as an "inner feeling of contentment," "a lightening of the mind and body...a feeling of walking on a cloud...spacious," "peaceful,... more open" (Doug, Sandola, Lynn). From a transformational perspective, the research indicates "just seeing the unbelievable potential of the mind in that way" was "impactful" providing a "motivating urgency" for the continuance of the meditative practice (Jacob, Sarah, Lynn).

Newly acquired wisdom was found to be a strong motivating agent for transformation and change. Wisdom was defined as the ability to "use more skillful means...come up with a better way of doing something" (Walter). The "convincing authenticity" of the teachings and practice was a "high point" which could change a life "because it's going to change [the] mind" (Upo). For others, the practice provided a predisposition to appreciate and understand "wisdom" as it may arise and present itself during day-to-day life (Jiffy). This research supports the perspective presented by Bandura's views on human agency and self-regulation. In the context of human agency, there was a motivation to regulate actions (self-reactiveness) as well as an examination and evaluation of actions and motivations (Bandura, 2001, 2004). Components of

self-regulation, such as self observation -- the observation of performance, and judgmental processes -- performance evaluation based on personal standards and standards of reference as well as a perception of the value of activity, can also be seen to be engaged (Bandura, 1986, 1996). It is suggested that the gaining of wisdom was clearly a component of the mastery experience (Bandura, 1997) and strongly enhanced self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001).

Numerous studies utilizing EEG and fMRI technology have been undertaken to explore the effects of "mental training" (meditation) on mental and cognitive processes including the neurology and attentional capacity of the human brain. Busch and VanRullen (2010) established that "sustained attention" is enhanced by pre-stimulus attentional cuing and had a "facilitative effect" on perception. A phenomenon known as the "attentional blink deficit," in which two target stimuli (T1 and T2) are presented in close proximity within a rapid stream of events, was investigated using a sample of subjects, with prior meditative experience, who had participated in an intensive 3 month vipassana retreat and a control group of nonmeditators. T2 is often not seen; however, the experienced meditators more accurately and more frequently identified the second target stimuli. This suggests that mental training can foster an increased control over distribution of limited brain resources needed to reduce the attentional blink (Slagter et al., 2007; Slagter et al., 2008). Another study exposed a group of seasoned vipassana meditators, following a 3 month retreat, and a matched control group of novice meditators to a dichotic listening task. The results indicated that intensive mental training, that is vipassana meditation, enhances mental stability while reducing the "task effort"-- cortical resource allocation needed for focused attention (Lutz et al., 2009). Utilizing f MRI technology, other researchers examined the neural effects of meditative expertise on attentional experience by exposing a group of highly

experienced Tibetan meditators (EM) and a control group of novice meditators (NM) to distracting external sound stimuli while they focused on a small fixation dot on the screen. EMs showed a greater activation of areas of the brain involved in attentional focus, while NMs showed greater activation areas of the brain associated with distractibility, that is, the PCC (Brefczynski-Lewis et al., 2007). This body of research would suggest that, at a neurophysiological level, advanced meditation practice can enhance and stabilize the overall attentional capacity of brain functioning providing an augmented capability to self-regulate and self-manage.

This current qualitative study supports the contention that meditatively trained or untrained mental/cognitive processes (also known as the mind in the Buddhist cosmology) can hinder or facilitate progressive change. Concerning the mind as tarnished, this research suggests that the untrained mind can be "full of defilements" such as anger, jealousy, or fear not unlike a garden "overgrown with weeds" while "spinning in confusion" between "happiness and unhappiness" (Sarah, Jiffy, Sandola). Other perspectives suggest a mind that is dangerously "angry" or "aversive [in its] approach to its environment" and/or caught up in an insatiable hunger and desire for "more" (Walter, Calvin, Doug). Still another viewpoint would suggest that the mind's reactive and contractive predisposition to judgment and reproach could foster a tendency towards overstating or catastrophizing perceived events in a "totally distorted" manner (Estes, Jacob, Tera). Neuroimaging research provides what might be described as neurological correlates to the so-called tarnished mind relating to the activation of the DMN generally and its hub components (i.e., the PCC, PCC/PCu, and the mPFC). When activated these areas have been associated with distractive "mind wandering" (Christoff et al., 2009; Hasenkamp et al., 2012;

Mason et al., 2007), "self-referential" thinking (Whitfield-Gabrieli et al., 2011), "future thinking" (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2010), and tobacco and drug-related craving and addiction (Tiffany & Wray, 2012).

Functioning as an apparent antidote to these "unwholesome mind states," Brewer and colleagues (2011) have found that three types of meditative effort or observing mind (loving-kindness, concentration, and "choiceless awareness") will deactivate the PCC. Their later research, using real-time fMRI neurofeedback and grounded theory method (GTM) analysis of participants' self-report, found that self-reported subjective experience of mind wandering is associated with increased PCC activity, while non-distracted focused attention results in decreased PCC activity. Furthermore, they found that experienced meditators were able to intentionally decrease a feedback graph displaying PCC activity (Garrison, Scheinost, et al., 2013). In another study, these researchers found that the subjective experience of "undistracted awareness" and "effortless doing" corresponds to the deactivation of the PCC while "distracted awareness" and "controlling" is associated with PCC activation (Garrison, Santoyo, et al., 2013).

The current study provides a qualitative perspective on the actual mechanisms and processes used when the mind becomes the observer. The meditative "practice of inquiry" involves intentional and experiential observation of physical and mental phenomena such as "lifting" or "turning the doorknob," postural or pressure changes, "wanting or needing," and finally the "constant moving of the mind" even during mundane activities such as shopping, walking, or sitting. A "greater confidence and curiosity" gives rise to "a pleasure in the investigation itself" even when "unpleasantness" is experienced (Jiffy, Upo, Estes, Sandola). In his study, Mazur (2013) suggests that the observing mind can provide an "intensive applied

mindfulness" fostering a "surrender and acceptance of change through awareness" and ultimately a "path to awakening" (p. 112). On the other hand, Full et al. (2013) suggest that the "present mental condition of the observer" (p. 59) determines the actual perception of an object. These contexts would agree with the experience of the current study's participants.

According to the literature, as the concentration and observational power of the mind becomes more focused and intense there can arise a sense of "bliss or rapture." In the sample observed by Kornfield (1979), a much higher percentage of 3 month retreatants reported experiencing these bliss/rapture states compared with those on 2 week courses. He suggests that the deeper concentration developed over a longer term meditation practice facilitates these states arising. Other research, based on a compilation of reported "meditation-induced light experiences," suggests that certain meditative practices especially those that intentionally reduce social, kinesthetic, and sensory stimulation while emphasizing focused attention may have cognitive and perceptual outcomes akin to sensory deprivation thereby increasing neuroplasticity (Lindahl et al., 2013). This is clearly an interesting path needing further exploration to determine qualitatively and quantitatively the neurobiological components involved in this process. The current study provides some insight into the qualitative experiences that manifest as the observing mind begets the mind as pure. Descriptions of the mind such as "beautiful," "very refined and very pure," lovely and soft, "balanced and clear," were suggested (Walter, Sarah, Sandola, Jacob). This state of mental purity arising from the "truly developed mind" fosters "all sorts of wholesome states" to arise: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (Sarah, Calvin). These states of mind indicate an advanced level of practice

(Chanmyay Sayadaw, 2010) and can be a strong motivational factor building confidence and inspiring greater growth and mastery (Bandura, 1997, 2001).

Managing disturbing emotions, such as anger, fear, anxiety, and shame, is an important component of self-management and self-regulation. During formal retreat practice intense changes in moods and emotions are quite common (Healy, 2001; Kornfield, 1979). As Kornfield observes, "intense emotions and mood swings are a universal part of the practice reported in mindfulness retreat's close" (p. 52). The actual practice of longer (one month +) formal vipassana meditation has been shown to improve scores on measures of anxiety, depression, and resilience (Orzech, 2008; Orzech et al., 2009). From a clinical perspective, mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) have been shown to be effective treatments for mood disturbance, panic attacks, and anxiety (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1985; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992), as well as depression and its relapse (Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Teasdale et al., 2000).

This research indicates the importance of managing anger as the ensuing loss of control can lead to serious and unwanted consequences ("everything could be gone in one shot if I blew it with anger"; Walter). Anger can provoke other emotions such as sadness or fear and can be noticed "through the body." It can arise as a result of some previously "habituated" "anger and suspicion" (Estes, Calvin). There is universal agreement that intensive meditative practice fosters a predisposition to "instantaneously" be "watchful" and that "as a result of practice the mind does not stay angry...or as aversive as it used to be" (Jiffy, Walter, Calvin). This creates what has been described metaphorically as an "empty boat" wherein events that may occur do not have the lasting charge of anger (Upo).

While such emotions as fear, anxiety, and insecurity have been previously discussed in the context of intensive meditation practice (Britton, 2012; Bronn & McIlwain, 2015; Kornfield, 1979; Mahasi Sayadaw, 1985), the current research sheds light on processes involved in managing fear and anxiety during daily life. Several participants in this research study suggest that fear and anxiety are predisposed by family history wherein parents can be experienced as a "psychological terrorist," a "dominating father into corporal punishment," simply fearful and anxious by nature, or the cause of "some deep psychological reactivity, childhood stuff" (Upo, Walter, Tera, Calvin). This creates a situation where "most people have a very basic fear with regards to life... [which is seen] as part and parcel of the human experience" (Jiffy). Others suggest that the mechanism by which fear and anxiety can arise is the perceived need to protect and nurture a sense of "self-solidity", ego, or "capital Me." A sense of "defending, identifying, holding on" creates "a lot of worry and fear and anxiety about this capital Me" (Estes). A slightly different perspective suggests that "past fear...is triggered by the present moment... [and] self-solidity arises, then there's a fear of wanting to protect that" (Sandola). Mindful observation provides an antidotal tool to manage fear and anxiety such that when "seen the fear reaction substantially drops...it's almost not there" and that "this fear, this anxiety... It's impermanent. It's not going to last forever" (Sandola, Tera).

Shame is characterized as an emotion of disconnection and inadequacy "that makes you feel separate less than others." Circumstances such as the presence of alcoholism in the early childhood family unit can foster "lots of shame" and hamper emotional development. As a result, shame can have an adverse impact on the emotional and "energetic field" stunting the capacity to be with emotions from moment to moment (Jiffy). Physical and emotional abuse at an early age

can send a message that a child cannot "do anything right or good" which, of course, can dramatically and adversely impact the formation of lifelong core beliefs. As meditative practice evolves to be more deeply and intrinsically embedded into daily life it becomes " a process that feeds itself, a process that works with everything that's come before it" (Upo).

In the context of this study self-management involves three components. Firstly, there must be a self-reflective understanding of and motivation to change pre-meditative lifestyles grounded in meditative practice and other change facilitators. Secondly, there is a needed recognition that trained or untrained mental and cognitive processes, also known as the mind, can facilitate or hinder progress in the meditative practice and impact positively or negatively the quality of one's life. Finally, there is a necessary understanding of the importance of managing distressing emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, and shame in the context of daily life. Findings in this study are supportive of key components of Bandura's theories of human agency and self-regulation including concepts of mastery and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, 1989, 1997, 2001).

Relationships

Research indicates that tangible changes are experienced within relationships in association with vipassana meditation practice. The literature speaks to the impact of meditative practice on relationships from two different perspectives. Pruitt and McCollum's (2012) qualitative study focused on how various meditative traits impacted on intimate relationships. Participants identified an increased acceptance of situations, themselves, and others as well as greater compassion, loving-kindness, and caring for themselves and others. "By not trying to change the experience of the present moment" participants were able to "accept the differences that existed between themselves and others in life" (p. 140). Others "described the development

of various forms of compassion, loving-kindness, and caring over the course of their meditation practice" (p. 141). There was also a feeling of "nonreactivity" and a seemingly paradoxical sense of intimacy supported by a grounded independence and separation from others. In other words, there was a diminished sense of "neediness" with intimates. From another point of view, Mazur's (2013) research on the impact of mindfulness practice on seniors facing a major life transition (e.g., death of a spouse, life-threatening diagnosis) suggests that the application of "nonjudgment" provided an important insight into living with acceptance of others and self-compassion. Others spoke of the development of compassion as a means to live in community and with unity to others.

Within the current research four subthemes; family, friendships, intimates, and solitude, emerged as areas of focus. Concerning family relationships, there is a common thread of increased acceptance of, patience with, and tolerance of differing values with family members that arises as a function of meditative practices. These qualities are characterized by descriptions such as "meeting them where they're at," being "less judgmental, more accepting of who they are as beings," "allowing people to be... [and not] convince them or change them," and an "ease about all the resentment" built up from the past (Jacob, Sandola, Tera, Lynn). These findings support those of Mazur (2013) as well as Pruitt and McCollum's (2012) research.

Concerning friendships, one of the suggested benefits of the practice of meditation is a greater self-acceptance which fosters patience and forgiveness of others' shortcomings. This opens the possibility to "really treasure those relationships and experience the preciousness of them" (Sandola). Rather than judge people harshly for their thoughtless actions there is a "more compassionate...more understanding" perspective around people's foibles (Upo). Interactions

with friends are more accepting, "no longer trying to change other people," much less prone argumentatively sway people to one's own views (Jiffy, Tera). Less "reactivity," as Pruitt and McCollum (2012) might suggest. There was an overwhelming trend towards the falling away of older "non-*dhamma* friends" in favor of those who share "an understanding of looking at the mind, skillful speech, and loving-kindness" (Calvin, Lynn, Estes). While this phenomenon is seen as somewhat inevitable, there is a sense of "painful" difficulty as those friends who are still quite attached to "samsara and to sense desire" are metaphorically dropped in a way that a reformed alcoholic might change his or her close associations (Sarah). There is a compelling need for a "foundation" of authenticity, honesty, and transparency friendships and relationships (Jiffy). On the other hand, in line with findings by Pruitt and McCollum (2012), there is a paradoxical need to be "more authentic...in one sense a closeness, in another sense a detachment or a separation" (Doug).

In the domain of intimate relationships (i.e., spouses and intimate partners), there are different perspectives as to how these connections are influenced within the context of the meditative experience. For some, meditative practice is seen as instrumental leading to a deeper and more committed relationship, a foundational cornerstone supporting the journey along a mutual "spiritual path" (Lynn, Jacob). Others view "relationship problems" as a catalyst inspiring the initiation of a meditative practice (Doug), while others, although understanding the deeper nature of intimate relationship, still find challenges remaining in this domain (Sandola, Calvin).

Spending time alone and in solitude is not presented as a lonely escapism or withdrawal. Moreover, it suggests a contentment with one's own company, an avoidance of "cocktail parties, talking about nothing" and "idle conversation that is almost rooted in self-serving attachment"

wherein real loneliness and separation can occur (Doug, Calvin). Some suggest that previous associations were with "good people" but now there is a need for a solace dedicated to the cultivation of self-awareness and associations that do exist are engaged in and "looked at through the eyes of *dhamma*" (Tera, Estes).

Under the influence of vipassana meditation the tenor, aspects, and motivation concerning relationships can undergo significant alteration. Relationships within families are characterized as having more acceptance, less resentment, and critical judgment. Friendships are seen and engaged in with more appreciation, patience, and tolerance towards differing opinions and values. Old acquaintances and non-*dhamma* friends are gradually replaced with more like-minded practitioners of meditation. The need to be more honest, transparent, and genuine within friendships becomes important. Within the bounds of intimate relationship, there was an expressed importance of the foundational quality of meditation and the *dhamma* is a cornerstone, while others still find this realm challenging. There is a heartfelt sense of comfort and contentment with one's own company, a solitude without a sense of loneliness or isolation.

Morality

The construct of morality as exemplified by man's quest to understand "right from wrong" is a topic as broad and deep as any ocean. For the purposes of this paper, we will confine ourselves to a brief discussion on Bandura's (1999a) concept of moral agency and Kohlberg's (1977, 2008) three stages of moral development in the context of the Buddha's teaching concerning moral conduct (*Sila*). The construct of moral agency comprises two components, that is, do no harm and help others proactively. These admonitions are remarkably similar to those embedded in the teachings of the Buddha: "do no harm, do only good, purify the mind"(Ananda

Maitreya, 1995), which are the requisites for and results of a productive meditative practice. According to Bandura (2002 a) moral precepts do not operate automatically but must be triggered by a process called selective activation. During this process, "individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that serve as guides and deterrents for conduct...and regulate their reactions by the consequences they apply to themselves" (p. 102). Bandura (1994) further contends that "reprehensible behavior" is not an ordinary or common choice made by people unless there is a justification of the morality of their actions via a process known as disengagement of internal control. Under the spell of this process unusually cruel and brutal activity can be carried out while moral standards are apparently retained. Interestingly, the processes of self activation and disengagement of internal control allow for different types of conduct by people with the same or similar moral standards (Bandura, 2002a). Kohlberg (1977, 2008) suggests a developmental model of moral behavior which includes three progressive levels; (a) the pre-conventional level, (b) the conventional level, and (c) the post-conventional, autonomous or principled level. Each of these levels contain two stages of orientation the last of which (contained in the post-conventional level) are the social-contract, legalistic orientation, and the universal-ethical-principled orientation. The social contract orientation involves a socially and communally based agreement on a set of rights and dynamic rules of conduct and behavior. The universal-ethical-principled orientation relies on a set of self-chosen ethical principles of justice, reciprocity, and equality appealing to a logical and comprehensive universality. Kohlberg even struggled with the possible existence of a stage 7 which he defined as a "religious stage" well beyond the justice principles. He suggested that it comprises a fusion of the Greek principle

of agape, unconditional love and charity for all, and the philosophies of Spinoza and de Chardin (Kohlberg & Power, 1981).

The current research suggests three components of moral thought and conduct: framing, underpinning, and making amends. The traditional understanding of right or wrong is considered to be too vague, too judgmental, and generally overused. There is strong support in determining appropriate conduct in the context of harming versus nonharming: Is the action "hurtful or is it harmful or is it appropriate and helpful?" (Estes). In the face of the "many complex circumstances that can arise" the principle of nonharming provides a "moral compass" by which a commitment "to trying to cause the least harm possible" can be applied (Sandola, Lynn). Three other frameworks are suggested as guidelines for moral conduct. As the very "act of living creates a kind of harm," the concept of skillful and unskillful engagement provides an "art" and "sensitivity as to how subtle harm can be." This way of focusing allows for the embodiment of an ethical way of being based on an understanding of actions begetting consequences (Jacob). Another viewpoint is the assessment and regulation of behavior based on "wholesome or unwholesomeness" steering "incrementally" towards "supports for wholesomeness to arise... nongreed, nonhatred, nondelusion" (Calvin). Finally, morality can be framed on the basis of purity of intent and is the key determinant in the choices of actions, up to and including perhaps even extreme acts (Walter).

Several underpinning qualities foundational to moral conduct are suggested. The term *Sila*, the overarching concept of moral conduct in the Buddhist cosmology, is suggested to be refreshing allowing one to "feel lighter, more whole, more buoyant, more energetic" and an important component to improving psychological and "spiritual health" (Jiffy, Calvin).

Subsumed under the broad outline of Sila, there are a number of guiding principles of behavior known as precepts. Typically lay practitioners might follow a grouping of five (i.e., refrain from killing or harming beings, avoid taking what is not offered, avoid sexual misconduct, avoid lying, and refrain from intoxicants which may cloud the mind) or eight precepts, which additionally includes remaining celibate, not eating after noon, refraining from unnecessary adornment (i.e., jewelry and perfume). There is a sense of wholesome comfort in that the precepts provide a "conscious guide and a way to evaluate behaviors and thoughts" (Upo) or a "feeling of freedom... when following the precepts, mind is wholesome" (Tera). The combination of meditative practice and the precept of truth-telling brings an important impact to interpersonal relationships and moral conduct, the lack of which creates an uncertainty of "how to be in relationship" (Jiffy). In fact, as a result of the practice, lying becomes almost impossible -- "The mind just won't do it. It's too hard. It's too stressful" (Sarah), "being dishonest or deceptive, that's not so pleasant to see. So there just started to be this natural recoil" (Lynn). Over time there is the development of an intrinsic, gut-level inner compass of moral conduct; there arises a feeling of "what's right and what's wrong" (Doug), "its something inside, its internal and it's not according to rules or laws" (Sarah).

A deep understanding of the law of cause and effect (every act has consequences or reactions) suggests reparative action must follow when an offense has been caused. There is a universal accord that "wholesome remorse" in the form of acknowledgment, apology, and amending as well as the cultivation of "wholesome resolve" not to repeat offending conduct is the proper course to take.

It is reasonable to state that the experiences and insights involved in advanced meditative practice support the selective activation process suggested in Bandura's concept of moral agency. This is a self-regulatory process in which individuals monitor their conduct and the conditions surrounding its occurrence, judge it according to their moral standards and regulate their behavior with respect to consequences they may perceive as likely (Bandura, 2002a). The universal scope of the principles of nonharming, wholesomeness, and skillful means coupled with the broader grasp of action and consequence that meditative practice supports, provides a logical and reasonable understanding as to why the processes of disengagement of internal control (i.e., redefinition of behavior, distortion of consequences, dehumanization or blaming of the victim or displacement diffusion of responsibility) are readily eschewed. With respect to Kohlberg's (1977, 2008) model, there is strong support that advanced meditative practice can foster a moral stance congruent with at least the universal-ethical-principial orientation (stage 6). In this stage,

right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency... At heart, these are universal principles of justice, of the reciprocity and the quality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons. (Kohlberg, 1977, p. 190)

A compelling argument could well be made that moral conduct "going beyond justice principles" (i.e., stage 7) is possible based on the narratives presented in this current study. Kohlberg and Power's (1981) suggestion that the basis of this theoretical stage could include a fusion of the agape principle of unconditional charity and love for all beings and the universality

of the philosophies of Spinoza and de Chardin is supported, at least in part, by qualitative experience reported in this paper (see discussion; Mind as pure, pp.94-95; Supportive mind states, pp.125 - 127).

Living Life

Two secondary themes, general functioning and perceiving environment inform changes and challenges of living a human life. Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation theory comprising three interactive variables -- external environment, behavior, and person (which includes gender, social position, size, attractiveness, as well as cognitive factors such as thought, memory, judgment, etc.), provides a salient theoretical underpinning to this section of the study (Bandura, 1986, 1999b, 2001, 2002b). This theory seeks to provide an explanation of psychological functioning in terms of the triadic interaction of the person, his or her behavior, and the external environment. This perspective assumes that human action is the result of the bidirectional interaction of these three variables influencing and/or conditioning each other. The relative influence of any of these three triadic factors depends on which is strongest at any particular moment (Bandura, 1997). In line with Bandura's agentic view of personality, humans have the capacity to exercise control over their lives thus enhancing their sense of mastery and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2001, 2002b). Concerning the environment, Bandura (1982, 1998) alone gave serious consideration to the possible importance of *chance encounters* (an unintended meeting with unfamiliar persons) and *fortuitous events* (an unexpected environmental experience). Many of the participants in the current study would consider their encounter with meditation practice and its teachers to be fortunate indeed.

The experience of general life functioning yields four subthemes; maturation, priority, present-centered awareness, and supportive mind states. A cautionary note is suggested concerning attributing a beneficial effect to meditation as opposed to the normal process of maturation. However, on balance, there was an overwhelming accord that the meditative practice had a constructive influence on the practitioners' lives informing maturity and its directions (e.g., "the fruits of practice are phenomenal," "*dhamma* has had a revolutionary impact on life"--Lynn, Estes, Calvin). From another perspective, there was an equally overwhelming agreement that meditative practice became a priority forming an important and integrated component of life -- "the practice became the primary goal" (Doug). Meditative practice is described as an inseparable and constant part of living ("my practice is my life now" -- Upo, "it's kind of hard to separate meditation from life" -- Jiffy). Meditation practice is a formative and central aspect of life (Jacob) -- "how much of life is ordered by, is structured by, is embedded with *dhamma*?...everything almost" (Estes). The reward: "the greatest benefit to daily life...full enlightenment can occur" (Sarah). From a Banduran perspective, the chance encounter and fortuitous event(s) surrounding their engagement with teachers and meditation retreats have apparently impacted and conditioned the behavioral and personal aspects of the participants' triadic interactions.

Present-centered awareness (mindfulness) has been described by Goldstein and Kornfield (2001) as "seeing how things are, directly and immediately seeing for oneself that which is present and true. It has a quality of fullness and impeccability to it, a bringing of our whole heart and mind, our full attention, to each moment" (p. 62). The current research suggests that, with the influence of meditation, a moment-to-moment awareness, "a quality of presence" infuses

daily life with a sense of flow (Jacob, Jiffy). Personal relationships are enhanced and positively affected by this sense of presence, unconditional acceptance, and lack of judgment ("We're in the present moment. And it's really always nice" -- Tera; "My mental reactions are more accepting of who they are as beings...that their values are different" -- Sandola; "I don't have the expectations that I had...just accept, just be in the moment." -- Lynn). There arises a grasp of the need to be aware of mental states, the recognition of the toxic automaticity of the grasping mind which stems from the closely held belief that wandering thoughts are important. ("I notice the thought ... Just the intention or the inclination... The more refined the mindfulness is the less we're running on automatic" -- Estes; "Observing in myself all sorts of mental toxins...such a waste of energy" -- Sarah; "I come back to what I'm doing...what could be more important than cutting carrots?" -- Upo).

Other research supports the importance of being in the present moment as a means of "living a full and meaningful life". This attitude and approach provides an antidote to fear allowing the richness of life to be experienced one moment, one step, one day at a time even in the face of one's own death or that of a dear one (Mazur, 2013).

As a function of the practice of meditation, supportive mind states, such as loving-kindness, compassion, patience, kindness, and an easing of the tightness of mental clinging and grasping, arise and bloom quite spontaneously during daily life -- "wholesome mental states have put deeper roots into my mind" (Sarah), "there is more willingness to cultivate wholesome states like kindness and compassion. More ease around unwholesome states that may arise." (Jacob), "Allowing the mind to be balanced and calm... Letting go. Letting be" (Doug) "I'm much less driven by unexamined impulses" (Upo), "The payoff is just being light and open and

unburdened" (Lynn). Other research into the influence of meditation on relationships suggests that compassion and loving-kindness for self and others as well as a lessening in reactivity to others emerges (Pruitt & McCollum, 2012). Along these lines, Mazur (2013) reports that compassion for self and others commonly occurred in his research.

Perceptions of environment alter over time as a function of meditative practice wherein the world is experienced in terms of energetic patterns and constructs. There is an emergent simplicity of lifestyle both physically and cognitively, as well as a sense of taking self and "the world less seriously." Two sub-themes emerged: flow and simplicity.

On a day-to-day basis the flow of life is experienced as a "transparent...field of consciousness or a field of experience" (Jiffy). An emergent sense of a "greater perception of energetic patterns and movements...a closer connection with both the natural and human world" (Sandola) arises. There is a tendency towards "not taking the conceptual world so matter-of-factly" as it is seen as "a kind of fabrication...a mental construct...a framework that doesn't hold as much water as it used to" (Jacob). This research resonates with other earlier work; Gifford-May and Thompson (1994) found that there emerges a "field of awareness that is cosmic...endless, boundless, oceanic" or a sense of a "very very powerful energy" (pp. 126-127). Other research (Full et al., 2013) describes experiences such as an increased clarity of awareness -- "almost like transparent and very vivid and very clear" (p. 59), subject and object are perceived as a unification of phenomena, "perception of compactness and solidity dissolves and materiality is perceived as components in permanent flux" (p. 61). The process of "choiceless awareness" and its function in the deactivation of the DMN, as described earlier, could be a

neurological mechanism associated with and/or impacting the quality of perception (Brewer et al., 2011).

One of the impacts of meditative practice is a strong tendency to engage in a voluntary renunciation which creates a sense of simplicity and a less demanding lifestyle. Such things as having children, raising a family, owning a permanent residence, and "big career advances" are eschewed in order to "live very simply" (Sarah, Calvin). This fosters "an inner feeling of well being and an inner feeling of contentment" and ability to be "more or less comfortable wherever" (Doug). By managing, simplifying, and restructuring such components of the environment, cognition (person) can have a strong causal effect on both environment and behavior which reciprocally influences the quality of a person's life (Bandura 1986).

In summary, the narrative data provided by this study highlight experiential and transformational changes rooted in and informed by meditative practice. Within the meditative practice the experience of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and nonself provided the foundation for shifts in the paradigms and perspectives of life. All participants reported that within the domains of mental, cognitive, and emotional processes, there was the development of adaptive and productive insights. This new understanding fostered a progressive and beneficial improvement in attitude and conduct with respect to relationships (family, friendships, intimates, self), moral choice (behaviorally and attitudinally), as well as living life in the context of general functioning and the perception of one's environment. There was an overwhelming consensus of humbling gratitude, amazement, enduring confidence, and universal compassion which arose in the context of the meditative practice. As these participants continue to meet with and engage in the joys, trials, and tribulations so embedded in the human life, it is anticipated that the skills of

self-regulation, the sense of self-efficacy and mastery, as well as the blooming sense of wisdom and insight into the conditions of existence will continue to mature.

The Challenge of Being a Meditatively Advanced Observer

The process of immersing myself into research concerning the impact and influence of advanced vipassana meditation practice was personally more challenging than expected. As a former Buddhist monk and meditation teacher, I was deeply entrenched and experienced in the meditative practice that was being investigated. The somewhat daunting challenge was to remain at a distance throughout the study so as not to impose my own assumptions, experiences, and biases on the research process.

This was particularly exigent during the interview process. There was a great sense of commonality and community with the participants who had "walked the same path" that I had. They initially viewed me variously as a "fellow traveler," teacher, confidant, and perhaps, lastly, as a researcher. I was very careful to clearly outline what our roles would be at the early outset, that is, a collaborative effort allowing them to safely and thoroughly provide a narrative involving their first-person experience of meditative practice. There was a concern that during the interview I was either not capturing in complete enough detail the richness of their experience or that I might be somehow subconsciously guiding or influencing their responses. Before each interview I would cue myself as to the possible areas where my experiential bias might seep through. However in the end, I allowed that there would be an aspect of the collaboration that would naturally be drawn from my experience but that I would trust myself to allow the participants to guide the direction and flavor of the interview.

To optimize the objectivity of the coding and analysis process, I engaged two research assistants. One assistant had experience in qualitative research (i.e., his master's thesis was qualitative), counseling practice, and limited meditative practice. The second assistant had a PhD and was well versed in qualitative research and the ATLAS.ti software applications therein. Both of their work and suggestions provided invaluable assistance, guidance, and perspective from the early coding up to the final defining of the emergent primary themes of the study.

Limitations

There are numerous limitations evidenced in this research study. Firstly, this is a qualitative narrative study of the vipassana meditation experience (specifically the Mahasi tradition) of 11 North American people. Given the small sample size, caution is advised in assuming that these findings might be generalized to all meditators. While the gender mix is approximately equal and the distribution of age for both sexes ranges from middle-aged to early 70s, all participants identified as White and North American (four Canadian and seven American). As such, there is limited diversity in terms of younger ages, racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. As well, all participants had completed at least 2 years of post secondary education and might be generally better educated than a general population of meditators. Therefore, the results may not be representative of all meditators' practice and experience.

Life experiences varied among participants which may have influenced each individual's perception and experience of the practice. Family upbringing and structure, socioeconomic status and standards, religion, and community setting differed for each participant and may have impacted their understanding and expectations of the practice. Additionally, while the criterion for participant inclusion was defined as the 11th stage of higher equanimity (see Appendix A),

all participants reported exceeding that level of attainment. This could add a variance to the level and depth of each participant's subjective meditative experience.

Finally, analysis of this study was achieved utilizing qualitative methodology, which relies on induction and deduction by the researcher. These processes may be influenced by the researcher's history and experiences. In an attempt to control for this researcher bias, I chose research assistants, one of whom had some meditative experience, while the other had none, but both of whom were well-versed in qualitative research methods. Despite the attempt to control for this bias, my experience as a meditator, meditation teacher, and Buddhist monk almost certainly impacted the analysis and interpretations to some extent.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. The focus of this research was on the experiences of advanced meditators and how the practice of vipassana might have impacted or influenced their lives. While many of the participants spoke to the processes and experiences they encountered during and after the practice, they also offered details concerning transformational shifts they had undergone while meditating. An area of interest might be a more in-depth exploration of factors that provided motivation to undertake and engage in (a) early meditative practices, and then (b) more intense practice leading to deeper and advanced insight.
2. This research provides a seven-factor model outlining the transformational impact advanced meditative practice can have on various aspects of life. The insights, experiences, and processes within the general context of this model were well presented and articulated. Further investigation focusing more specifically on individual

components of the model (e.g., morality) might provide greater detail and understanding regarding the processes and mechanisms intrinsic to each of these emergent factors.

3. The inclusion criterion for this study was set at the advanced level of high equanimity as per the Mahasi method of practice. There are many higher stages of attainment and insight in this model of practice, some of which current participants reportedly have experienced. Although contentious, further research using practitioners designated by well qualified and experienced meditation teachers to have attained even higher levels of progress than this study, could provide more refined information on subtle nuances that may arise during these extraordinarily advanced practices of meditation.

4. There is a remarkable onset of mixed method research utilizing quantitative neurophysiological imaging measurement techniques and qualitative first-person reports. The current study provides some interesting parallels between reported qualitative experience of advanced vipassana meditators and neurobiological research findings on the activation and deactivation of various loci of the brain when various agents (i.e., psilocybin, psychedelics, meditation) are utilized. Further research on meditators deemed to be advanced based on meditative progress rather than length of practice using mixed methodology might provide clearer mapping possibilities of the neurological loci of interest.

Summary and Clinical Implications

Interesting things can happen when cultures come together and meet. The recent convergence of Asian and Western culture has generated interest in meditation as a practice and clinical intervention. The Burmese Mahasi style of vipassana meditation has had an important

influence in the West with respect to its impact both on modern Buddhist thought and practice and the development of mindfulness-based treatment protocols. These clinical interventions, even when applied at the most rudimentary levels, have proved remarkably efficacious in treating a wide range of psychological disorders. As well, bio-behavioral research has demonstrated positive outcomes regarding attention, cognitive, and emotional regulation using sophisticated brain-scanning techniques. However, clinically and research-oriented mindfulness training is geared towards beginners, not the higher stages of the contemplative Buddhist path. Furthermore, current approaches investigating the science of meditation have generally avoided investigating subjective experience and almost exclusively focused on objective measures to assess the effects of mindfulness on the neurological processes of the brain. This approach has led to an incomplete perspective concerning the fuller range of contemplative experience. The scarcity of qualitative first-person research within the literature on higher stages of contemplative experience as well as the dearth of research into the wellspring tradition of the Mahasi-style of vipassana meditation further confounds this issue.

For the participants there was an overwhelming consensus, within and across the narratives, that the practice of advanced intensive vipassana meditation was a transformational and seminal experience in their lives. Many spoke of lifestyle changes that occurred after their initial experiences with the intensive vipassana practice. They outlined a number of change facilitators such as psychotherapeutic counseling, psychedelic drug use, advanced meditative experience (i.e., equanimity) and perceived acquisition of wisdom, which worked as an adjunct with or led to meditative practice. While many of their experiences in younger life may have been marred by challenges with their early family environment, all of them generally embraced

conventional North American cultural and social values. Their choice to engage in such a redefining and culturally diverse process as intensive vipassana meditation practice speaks to its apparently universal transformative power as indeed they reported.

North American culture, and humankind in general, does not resonate well with the three general characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and nonself which are commonly experienced during an intensive meditation practice. There may be a passing analytic nod to the characteristics' plausibility. Nonetheless, there is strong cultural support to cling to impermanent things as if they were permanent, to staunchly avoid any investigation into "unpleasantness," and finally, to adamantly embrace an egoic selfhood. In spite of this strong social pressure, analysis of the narratives suggests a powerful and profound potential for experiential wisdom which supports the veracity of these general characteristics.

Viscerally understanding the ephemeral nature of life can foster a sense of focused awareness and appreciation of the preciousness of each moment. Comfort can be found even when realistically addressing the specter of death: riddance of unnecessary and cumbersome attachments, a grasp of the impermanence of grief itself, and an opportunity to reconcile "loose ends" with others before or during the death process. On the other hand, ignoring the truth of impermanence can set up a perilous sense of sadness, suffering, and profound disappointment as one clings to the "straws" of an ever-changing cycle of events and circumstances throughout life. The application of these practices in circumstances requiring palliative care or grief counseling could bring a great deal of comfort and a sense of closure to those in need.

During intense practice there can frequently be an experience of deep physical and emotional suffering. Often described as "horrible," "unbearable," or repulsive, these experiences

can provide a safe framework from which to understand, at a deep level, that unpleasantness and suffering are themselves impermanent and not everlasting. Other research has indicated that, unguided, meditators might become rooted in states of fear, anxiety, terror, depression or even psychosis for extended periods of time (days, weeks, months, and even years) at certain stages of meditative practice. To prevent these extreme states from becoming an enduring phenomenon, it is most important that these states are properly contextualized as normal within the practice by a qualified teacher, accepted as such, continually observed, and finally, navigated with practical and precise guidance by the teacher. The lessons from intense meditative experiences are easily transferable and applicable to daily living as tools of self-awareness, mood management, and self-regulation. When disturbing emotions, such as anger, fear, anxiety, or shame, are addressed through the lens of mindful awareness their potentially corrosive and toxic natures are dispelled.

Participants' narratives indicated that, upon recognizing the makeup and etiology of the self (i.e., tightly held beliefs and views, thought patterns, and mind states/emotions), there can arise a sense of spacious openness and peace as well as a feeling of relief. The perspective that this recognition and understanding provided fostered an experience of distance from the storms of life, a more resolute ability to cope, and finally a greater self-efficacy.

As a function of the insights and tools garnered from the practice of meditation, many areas and aspects of the participants' lives were reportedly more manageable, less stressful, and more productively engaged. While these outcomes were generally positive there were also challenges. On the one hand, participants were able to subjectively grasp with greater clarity the machinations and processes of their mental and cognitive functions (i.e., their minds). However in doing so, there was an imperative to face and examine the unwholesome "weed-like" aspects

of the mind such as anger, jealousy, fear, self-reproach and judgment, aversion, incessant desire and the tendency towards catastrophic thinking. Nonetheless, with reasonable diligence, the mind can be trained to be a skilled and much less stressed observer. This observant and nonreactive quality of the trained mind can be a very adaptive life skill in almost every profession, social circumstance, and personal relationship.

The participants in this study experienced a notable change in the dynamic across a range of relationships attributable to their strengthened ability to maintain present-centered awareness during encounters and interactions. Within the context of the family, there arose a nonjudgmental acceptance of differing values and beliefs, a dissolution of old resentments, as well as a diminishment in the need to exert change or press family members into agreement. The dynamic of friendships also underwent some notable changes. There was a patient acceptance of others and self as well as a noticeable migration to more like-minded friends. While these new friendships fulfilled a compelling need for authenticity and honesty there were a few somewhat painful repercussions over time. Some longtime friendships which could not endure or understand the paradigm shifts experienced during meditation simply fell away. Concerning intimate relationships, there was a paradox presented. On the one hand, it was suggested that unions formed in conjunction with meditation could prove extremely enduring, supportive, and beneficial. While on the other hand, for some, the complexities of intimacy might just remain a perennial challenge. Numerous participants indicated finding an ease and contentment in solitude with their own company. Previous feelings of loneliness or withdrawal when alone had completely disappeared. Many family and marital problems can be attributed to either a lack of awareness of one's own emotional processes and/or a misinterpretation of others' behaviors and

attitudes. Developing or being trained to develop the habit of moment to moment awareness could prove very effective in areas where personal conflict or disagreement arises (e.g., marital counseling, family counseling, workplace interactions).

The narratives suggested in reference to the concept of moral conduct are particularly interesting. There emerged a deeper and more refined understanding of the construct far beyond the vague and unidimensional terms of "right or wrong." Morality and its resulting behavior was framed using such terms as harming versus non-harming, skillful versus skillful actions, and wholesome versus unwholesome action. Purity of intent was also a key determinant in guiding thoughts and behaviors to non-harming, and skillful, and/or wholesome outcomes. There was a universally clear understanding of the importance surrounding choice and its resulting consequences. In other words, participants demonstrated a seemingly instinctive grasp that all thoughts and actions are causes leading to certain results or effects. Accordingly, discernment regarding the choice to engage in or avoid certain thoughts or behaviors, depending on their resultant effects (e.g., wholesome or unwholesome) to self and/or others, is evidently a crucial aspect in determining the participants' matrix of moral conduct. The suggestion that right moral conduct can provide an energetic and refreshing buoyancy to life inspired the adoption of guidelines or principles of behavior known as precepts. Self-awareness and adherence to these guidelines renders a wide range of unwholesome behaviors unacceptable (e.g., lying becomes impossible). However, "to err is human," so when an offense has occurred, reparative action must follow including; apology, amend making, wholesome remorse, and wholesome resolve to avoid repetition. In a values-based (e.g., ACT) or positive-psychology counseling paradigm, these approaches and constructs might prove quite helpful to a certain type or segment of clients.

Finally, many of the participants spoke of the vipassana-induced influences on their general life functioning and perception of the environment. The practice of meditation was characterized as an impactful and revolutionary adjunct and influence to the process of maturation throughout their lives. For all the participants, meditation and the ongoing sense of present-centered awareness became an embedded and prioritized part of daily living. Life became illuminated with a quality of presence and is experienced as a moment-to-moment continuum. This ongoing present-centered awareness became a shield and safeguard against distractive thoughts, inclinations, and the ensuing unwholesome, habitual, or automatic behaviors. As a result, wholesome mental states and a non-reactive calmness naturally blossomed fostering a lightness, spacious openness, and a feeling of being in a safe haven. Perceptions of the environment and its surroundings underwent alteration. Life was then experienced as a field of awareness or a consciousness with greater sensitivity to patterns of energy or movement. The world then was perceived as a kind of transient mental fabrication, not in a disingenuous way, but more along the lines of the inspirational understanding of impermanence. An easy and voluntary tendency towards a simpler and more readily satisfied lifestyle arose, the simplicity of which fostered an inner sense of contentment and well-being, an adaptive and productive bidirectional interaction between person and environment.

In summary, any life journey involving the experiences and processes of an advanced vipassana meditation practice is a journey into profound self-awareness and radical transformation. Through a range of processes and insights, these individuals faced and discarded or became disenchanted with old ways of being and living, while adapting to and adopting new paradigms of existence and perception. To a person, with the benefit of retrospection, they speak

with a humbling gratitude and profound amazement at the richness of the insights and rewards their efforts have bequeathed to them. They continue on their quest for further wisdom well armed with the quiet yet enduring confidence of a masterful and dedicated peaceful warrior.

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APPENDIX A: PROGRESS OF INSIGHT

- I) **Purification of Conduct** – (*Sila Visuddhi*)
- II) **Purification of Mind** - (*Citta Visuddhi*)
- III) **Purification of View** - (*Ditthi Visuddhi*)
 - 1) Analytical Knowledge of Body and Mind - (*Nama-Rupa Pariccheda Nana*)
- IV) **Purification by Overcoming Doubt** - (*Kankha-Vitarana Visuddhi*)
 - 2) Knowledge of Discerning Conditionality - (*Paccaya-Parriggaha Nana*)
 - 3) Knowledge of Comprehension - (*Sammasana Nana*)
 - 4) Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away - (*Udayabbaya Nana*)
- V) **Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What is Path and Not-Path** - (*Maggamagga-Nanadassana Visuddhi*)
- VI) **Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Course of Practice** - (*Patipada-Nanadassana Visuddhi*)
 - 5) Knowledge of Dissolution - (*Bhanga Nana*)
 - 6) Knowledge of Fearfulness - (*Bhayatupatthana Nana*)
 - 7) Knowledge of Misery - (*Adinava Nana*)
 - 8) Knowledge of Disgust - (*Nibbida Nana*)
 - 9) Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance - (*Muncitu-Kamyata Nana*)
 - 10) Knowledge of Re-observation - (*Patisankha-Nupassana Nana*)
 - 11) Knowledge of Equanimity about Formations - (*Sankharupekkha-Nana*)
 - 12) Insight Leading to Emergence - (*Vutthanagamini Vipassana Nana*)
 - 13) Knowledge of Adaptation - (*Anuloma Nana*)
 - 14) Maturity Knowledge - (*Gotrabhu Nana*)
- VII) **Purification by Knowledge and Vision** - (*Nanadassana Visuddhi*)
 - 15) Path Knowledge - (*Magga-Nana*)
 - 16) Fruition Knowledge - (*Phala-Nana*)
 - 17) Knowledge of Reviewing - (*Paccavekkhana Nana*)
 - 18) Attainment of Fruition - (*Phala Samapati*)

Progress of Insight (Mahasi, 1985)

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

I am interested in studying the experiences of advanced Mahasi vipassana meditators and how this meditation has impacted their lives. Your personal experience and practice has given you a unique perspective. Thanks for offering to share it with me.

- 1) How do you think meditation has impacted your daily life and life in general?
- 2) Please tell me about some of your successes or high points?..Your regrets or low points?
- 3) Describe a situation(s) in which you noticed you were able to stand back and observe your reactions to the actions of others
- 4) Tell me how your practice may have impacted your personal relationships (e.g. intimate, friendships, family or professional)?
- 5) Tell me about times when you may have encountered emotional or physical difficulties during your practice? (Probe: Please help me understand the nature and experience of these challenges. How long did they last? Tell me about things that helped you get through these experiences?)
- 6) Tell me about how these experiences affected you practice? Your life?
- 7) Some say that meditation changes people in certain ways. As you think of yourself since you began meditating what changes have you experienced?
- 8) Tell me a story about a time when you felt you had been wronged or offended?
- 9) Tell me about a time when you felt that you have wronged someone?
- 10) On reflection over time, tell me how your conceptualization of right and wrong may have changed? (Probe; what do you think contributed to this change?)

Closing

- 11) What advice would you give anyone beginning this practice?

Thank you for sharing your time and experiences with me

APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear.....

Thank you for expressing interest in this study. You have been recommended to us by_____ as having the advanced level of practice and experience suitable for this investigation.

I have been an ordained monk in the Burmese tradition under the guidance of Chanmyay Sayadaw and a teacher of the Mahasi style vipassana practice for a number of years. Currently, I am a doctoral student in clinical psychology interested in the confluence of Asian and Western approaches to mental health.

Initially we will be engaging in approximately a 2 hour interview to explore your experiences as a vipassana meditator within the practice as well as your daily life. There will be a follow-up discussion to confirm and/or adjust your responses

To begin with I would like to talk with you via phone or Skype to discuss details of the study and answer any questions you might have.

Please let me know some good times to talk as well as your preferred method, telephone or Skype.

Yours truly

Sean Pritchard

APPENDIX D: PRE-INTERVIEW GUIDE

- 1) What is your educational and professional background?
- 2) How many years have you been practicing vipassana (insight) meditation?
- 3) Have you been on any long retreats (1month ++)? How many?
- 4) Briefly describe any interesting experiences you had before during or after practicing vipassana.
- 5) Describe your career path since you began meditating?
- 6) What draws you to participate in this study?

APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in a research study conducted by Sean M. Pritchard M.A. (researcher) a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology at Fielding Graduate University. This study concerns the experience of advanced practitioners in the Mahasi tradition of vipassana meditation. I understand I will not be paid for participation in this study

I agree to participate in an interview in which I will be asked about my meditative experience and its effects on my daily life. Prior to the interview, I will complete a background information questionnaire. I understand the interview may take between 1-1/2 to 2 hours and that it will take place either via Skype or in a local that is convenient and comfortable for me. I will receive a transcribed copy of the interview and I agree to review it. A follow-up telephone or Skype conference of approximately 30 minutes will take place some time later during which time I may add to, change, or delete any of the interview information; ask any unanswered questions about the study; discuss preliminary findings; and answer additional questions from the researcher if necessary

I understand the information I provide will be kept strictly confidential. My interview will be recorded by audiotape and then transcribed. My name and other information that may identify me will not be included in the tape. The recorded interview will be labeled with a unique code; only the researcher, his research assistant(s) and a trained transcriber will listen to my interview. All references to my name will be removed from the transcript and replaced with a pseudonym to further ensure confidentiality. Transcribed interviews, disguised by code, will only be read by the researcher, his supervisors, and members of his research team. I understand that the Research Ethics Committee of Fielding Graduate University retains access to all Informed Consent Forms. Data from this research will be kept in a secure location, possibly used in future research, and the results of the interviews will be described the researcher's doctoral dissertation. Any documents connecting participants to their data will be destroyed as soon as the dissertation receives final Committee approval; interview audiotapes and all other research materials will be destroyed three (3) years from the dissertation publication date.

I understand that I may be asked to provide a pseudonym to be use with any quotations that might be included in the final research report. I understand that by signing this consent form. I am also granting permission to used my disguised interview information in the dissertation report and any parts of the study that, in the future, may be published in a professional journal, book, or at a professional conference

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time (during or after the interview) without negative consequences. Should I choose to withdraw, I understand that I may request that my data be eliminated form this study

I understand that participating in this study may give me an opportunity to learn more about myself. I also understand that the risks to me of participating in this study are considered minimal. However, in the unlikely event that I experience emotional distress as a result of my participation in this study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor, or someone else for a therapeutic referral.

I understand that a signed statement of informed consent is required for all people interviewed for this project. My signature on this informed consent statement indicates that I have read, understand, and voluntarily agree to participate in this study according to the conditions described above, and that I have received a copy of this form

Date

Signature of Participant

Printed Name of Participant

_____ Yes I would like a summary of the result so this study sent to me

Mailing address for summary results

Researcher;

Sean M. Pritchard M.A.

Vancouver BC

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. Judith Schoenholtz-Read

APPENDIX F: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 1 Age _____

1. Gender
 - Male ₁

 - Female ₂

2. Marital Status
 - Married ₁
 - Single ₂
 - Divorced ₃
 - Common Law ₄
 - Widow/Widower ₅
 - Civil Union ₆

3. Number of Children _____

4. Occupation
 - Professional ₁
 - Medical ₂
 - Teacher ₃
 - Trade ₄
 - Clerical ₅
 - Military ₆
 - Other ₇ _____

5. Education (completed)
 - High School or GED₁
 - Community College ₂
 - Trade School ₃
 - Undergraduate Degree ₄
 - Graduate Degree ₅
 - Doctoral Non Medical Degree ₆
 - Medical Doctor ₇

6. Income

- \$20,000 or less ₁
- \$20,001 – 40,000 ₂
- \$40,001 – 60,000 ₃
- \$60,001 – 80,000 ₄
- \$80,001 – 100,000 ₅
- >\$100,000 ₆

7. Years of Vipassana Practice _____

8. Perceived Level of Attainment _____

9. Determined by

- Self ₁
- Teacher ₂
- Other ₃ _____

10. Main Vipassana Teacher

- Sayadaw U Pandita ₁
- Chanmyay Sayadaw ₂
- Joseph Goldstein ₃
- Steven Smith ₄
- U Vivekananda ₅
- Other ₆ _____

11. Religion

- Christian ₁
- Jewish ₂
- Islamic ₃
- Buddhist ₄
- Hindu ₅
- Other ₆ _____

APPENDIX G: RESEARCH ASSISTANT CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Title of Research Project: Mindfulness and Beyond - A Qualitative Study of Advanced Mahasi Meditators' Experience

Principal Researcher and Affiliation: Sean Pritchard, M.A.
 Doctoral Student
 School of Psychology, Clinical Psychology
 Fielding Graduate University

I have agreed to assist Sean Pritchard, M.A. in his doctoral research study, in the role of research assistant.

I understand that all participants in the study have been assured that their responses will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to preserve anonymity of the interview transcripts. I agree to maintain that confidentiality and anonymity. I agree that no materials will remain in my possession beyond the conclusion of this research study. I further agree that I will make no independent use of any of the research materials from this project.

I further understand that if I am found acting indiscreet with confidential materials or not protecting the privacy of the research participants through my actions, I will be dismissed from my job as research assistant immediately. I understand this action to be necessary in order to maintain high professional standards of the research project and researchers involved.

Research Assistant:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Principal Researcher:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

APPENDIX H: TRANSCRIPTIONIST CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Title of Research Project: Mindfulness and Beyond - A Qualitative Study of Advanced Mahasi Meditators' Experience

Principal Researcher and Affiliation: Sean Pritchard, M.A.
 Doctoral Student
 School of Psychology, Clinical Psychology
 Fielding Graduate University

I have agreed to assist Sean Pritchard, M.A. in his doctoral research study, in the role of transcriptionist.

I understand that all participants in the study have been assured that their responses will be kept confidential, as the interviewees will use pseudonyms and all other identifiers will be removed from the interview transcripts. I agree to maintain this confidentiality. I agree that no materials will remain in my possession beyond the conclusion of this research study. I further agree that I will make no independent use of any of the research materials from this project.

I further understand that if I am found acting indiscreet with confidential materials or not protecting the privacy of the research participants through my actions, I will be dismissed from my job as research assistant immediately. I understand this action to be necessary in order to maintain high professional standards of the research project and researchers involved.

Transcriptionist:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____

Principal Researcher:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____