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Mindfulness in Everyday Life: An Empirical Study of Mindfulness as it is Experienced in Ordinary Life among Long-Term *Vipassana* Practitioners

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jacqueline Kracker entitled "Mindfulness in Everyday Life: An Empirical Study of Mindfulness as it is Experienced in Ordinary Life among Long-Term *Vipassana* Practitioners." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Psychology.

Howard R. Pollio, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Miriam Levering, Leonard Handler, Sandra Thomas, Jack Barlow

Accepted for the Council:

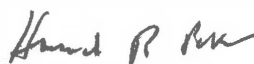
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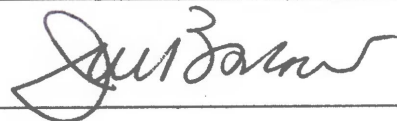
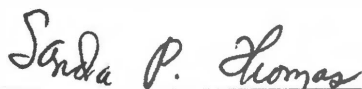
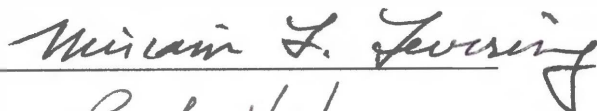
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Howard R. Pollio, Major Professor

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and recommend its acceptance:



Acceptance for the Council:



Vice Chancellor and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Mindfulness in Everyday Life:
An Empirical Study of Mindfulness as it is Experienced in Ordinary Life
among Long-Term *Vipassana* Practitioners

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jacqueline Kracker
August 2007

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those who have gone before and by virtue of their experience, help us understand what is possible and how to proceed.

*May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.
May all beings find perfect peace.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Creating a dissertation is not a solitary enterprise. I wish to thank:

Dr. Howard R. Pollio, dissertation chair and mentor, for helping me learn to see, listen, and experience things in ways that have deepened my clinical work, Dr. Jack Barlow for teaching me so much about object relations and psychoanalytic psychology, Dr. Leonard Handler for encouraging me to try to see the world through the eyes of my clients when working with them, Dr. Miriam Levering for her support and guidance in understanding Buddhist ideas, and Dr. Sandra Thomas for her support, encouragement, and practical approach to things. I am grateful to my committee for supporting my interest in a subject that aroused my passion and trusting that I would make the journey into foreign territory comprehensible and possibly even interesting.

The teachers and authors who have gone before and speak so eloquently about what they found. Those with whom I've practiced meditation and shared experiences.

The members of the phenomenology lab group for their help and support with this research. Friends for their encouragement.

And, in particular, Katie and Rachael for their love and patience.

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological look at the experience of mindfulness in everyday life situations is framed against the background of traditional Theravadin Buddhist descriptions and contemporary Western psychoanalytic ideas of the experience of mindfulness. The research method laid out by Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) and by Thomas and Pollio (2002) was used. In-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with nine participants who were judged to have stable, long-term (four years or longer) *vipassana* meditation practices, as determined by three full-time *vipassana* teachers. The emergent thematic structure includes six major themes and several subthemes: (1) *Present and Aware*, (2) *Spacious and Open*, including subthemes (a) Spacious and (b) Open (Not Judging), (3) *Clear and Knowing*, with subthemes (a) Alive and Embodied, (b) Seeing Clearly, and (c) Knowing Wisdom, (4) *Not Separate (Connected)*, (5) *Not Identified (Self-less)*, and (6) *Free*, including subthemes (a) Freedom and (b) Choice. Additional results include relationships among the themes and three non-thematic aspects that relate to the experience of mindfulness over time: (1) *Mindfulness Comes and Goes*, (2) *Facilitating Factors*, and (3) *Changes Over Time*.

This work empirically validates the experience of mindfulness as described in the Buddhist literature and the psychological literature although interesting differences in emphasis were found among the three perspectives: traditional, psychological, and first-person participant accounts. It is my hope that this study will further understanding of mindfulness from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

If “psychology” is taken as the systematic attempt to understand the working of the human mind, and to develop ways to methodically improve its workings when they go awry, then Buddhism can claim to be one of, if not the, most ancient psychological systems in the world. (Peter Harvey, 1997, p. 341)

The stated aim [of mindfulness] is threefold: to come to know one’s own mental processes; to begin in this way to have the power to shape or control them; and, finally, to gain freedom from the condition in which one’s psychic processes are unknown and uncontrolled (Nyanaponika, 1973, quoted in Engler 1983, p. 32)

Introduction

Mindfulness is a growing topic of discussion and inquiry in psychology. Some of the interest comes from the observation that mindfulness appears to confer some degree of psychological well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003), it may be “a faculty which is latent in all human beings” (Nairn, 1999, p. 22), and it can be increased through training and practice. Clinicians are particularly interested in the potential applications of mindfulness within therapeutic contexts, including the use of mindfulness as the basis for psychological treatment and as adjunct treatment with traditional forms of therapy. One way to increase mindfulness is through practicing mindfulness meditation. There are many opportunities across the country to learn this form of meditation through meditation retreats, meditation groups, or medical clinics that use mindfulness for stress or pain management. Although mindfulness can be learned as a skill, long-term practitioners often report that it grows into way of living in the world.

There are several conceptualizations of mindfulness in current use. They range from the 2500-year-old Theravadin Buddhist perspective of *vipassana*¹ meditation to contemporary views by Langer (1989) and Bishop et al. (2004). In the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is defined as an awareness of the flow of immediate experience “without preference, comment, judgment, reflection or interpretation” (Engler, 1984, p. 28). It is

¹ *Vipassana* is often called “insight meditation.”

described as “knowing what is happening, while it is happening” (Nairn, 1999, p. 29) and living mindfully can be likened to living consciously, aware of both inner experiences (sensations, thoughts, feelings, habits) and outer experiences (being in relation to others and the world). The 20th Century German Buddhist monk Nyanaponika Thera characterized it this way:

Mindfulness . . . is not at all a ‘mystical’ state, beyond the ken and reach of the average person. It is, on the contrary, something quite simple and common, and very familiar to us. In its elementary manifestation, known under the term ‘attention’, it is one of the cardinal functions of consciousness without which there cannot be perception of any object at all. (1988, p. 24)

As such, mindfulness is a way of attending to experience that is independent of religious or spiritual trappings and can be practiced with any spiritual orientation or with none. Langer (1989) defined mindfulness as a quality that includes the creation of new categories, openness, and an awareness of more than one perspective. More recently, Bishop et al. (2004) proposed an operational definition derived from the traditional description as a way to facilitate mindfulness research. This definition describes mindfulness as self-regulated attention to immediate experience that is “characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (p. 232).

The present work joins three perspectives on mindfulness: contemporary Theravadin Buddhist,² a broadly defined psychoanalytic framework, and related phenomenological studies. The Theravadin perspective was chosen from among the various Buddhist perspectives because it is “regarded as the original orthodox Buddhism” (Rahula, 1974, p. xii) and it preserves “the oldest and most faithful tradition of the Buddha’s teachings” (Nyanaponika, 1988, p. 12). It is also relatively free of metapsychology and thus congenial to psychological understanding. Tibetan Mahamudra

² Robert Sharf (1995) provides evidence for the idea that the contemporary view that Buddhism is more of a philosophy and psychology than a religion and is based more on meditative experience than mastery of scholarship or ritual. This is the result of a late 19th to early 20th Century reformation of Buddhism that took place in Japan, Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka due, in part, to the influence of Western culture. These changes served to urbanize, modernize, and move Buddhism from the cloister of monasteries to the laity. The lineages of the writers included in the current paper would be classified by Sharf as members of this reform movement, even though their works suggest that meditation has always been the heart of Theravadin Buddhist practice.

and Japanese Zen include mindfulness practices and some contemplative spiritual traditions have practices that are similar to, but not identical with, mindfulness.

Scholarly discussion of the psychology of mindfulness may be cast in various psychological frameworks ranging from psychoanalytic to cognitive-behavioral. This review is not meant to be comprehensive nor exhaustive, but will focus primarily on key works of several writers who draw from a broadly defined psychoanalytic perspective to describe and explain the *experience* of mindfulness: Mark Epstein and Jack Engler are psychoanalytic and informed by object relations theory; John Welwood is humanistic with psychoanalytic contributions; and Daniel Goleman writes from a variety of perspectives. (See works by Marsha Linehan (2003, 1993), Steven Hayes (Hayes, Follette & Linehan, 2004; Hayes & Shenk, 2004), and John Teasdale (2004) for cognitive and behavioral perspectives.)

Because mindfulness can be learned, practiced, and used in everyday situations, it would be useful to have an empirically derived description of the experience of mindfulness as it occurs in everyday situations. By understanding the experience of ordinary people who have developed a strong mindfulness practice, it will be possible to better understand how mindfulness can manifest in everyday situations. The purpose of this study is to provide *an empirically derived description of how mindfulness is experienced in everyday life among ordinary people who have developed a stable mindfulness meditation practice*. An open-ended phenomenological approach was used.

The sections of this work are presented in standard order with the literature review preceding the results. *In contrast to standard scientific methodology but in alignment with some forms of qualitative research, however, the data were collected and analyzed before the relevant literature was explored in the depth that is presented here*. This was done purposefully to minimize the impact of current theories on the empirical findings and to facilitate a dialogue between the data and the literature. More will be said about this approach in the *Phenomenological Inquiry* section of the literature review.

When it is useful or necessary to use traditional words and phrases they will be expressed in Pali, the canonical language of Theravadin Buddhist scriptures and the language in which Buddhist teachings were first recorded. On occasion, the Sanskrit equivalent will be provided parenthetically since Sanskrit was the standard language of classical Indian texts at the time Buddhist teachings were recorded. To help the reader, a glossary of Pali and Sanskrit terms is appended.

Mindfulness in an Eastern Light - A Theravadin Perspective

Although many types of meditation practice may be found in various spiritual and cultural traditions, it is now generally agreed that each type can be classified as one of two basic forms or a combination of the two: (1) concentrative meditation and (2) mindfulness meditation (Goleman, 1988, p. 105-106). In concentrative meditation attention is focused on a single object. This object may be the breath; a sound, word, or phrase; a physical object such as a candle flame or image of a religious figure; or an image or feeling evoked in the mind. The aim of concentrative meditation is to achieve unwavering, single-minded attention on the chosen object. Concentrative forms of meditation can produce profound states of peace, relaxation, and joy, and, with deepening practice, the meditator can access blissful states of absorption that are known as *jhana* states (*dhyana*, Skt.).

The second form of meditation is mindfulness meditation. *Mindfulness* is a translation of the Pali word *sati* (*smṛti*, Skt.). It is described by the Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and scholar the Venerable Henepola Gunaratana as a present-centered awareness of what is occurring moment by moment that “sees things as they really are,” adding nothing to perception and subtracting nothing (1992, p. 156). *Sati* sometimes translates as “bare attention” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 152), a phrase that conveys the light touch with which attention engages an object. In mindfulness, the focus is open and attention is given to whatever predominates in the perceptual field. For example, a mindfulness meditation practitioner may notice a body sensation, a reaction to this sensation, and the thoughts that arise in response to the sensation or the reaction – each in turn as it occurs.

Although the chosen object of attention is held constant throughout the duration of concentrative meditation, objects shift in mindfulness. It is common to begin mindfulness practice with a brief period of concentration to calm and still the mind before opening the focus of awareness in a mindful way. It is also common to use the breath or some other specific object as an “anchor” – a place to rest one’s attention when nothing predominates in the perceptual field.

Mindfulness of the breath is the most basic of all Buddhist meditation techniques, practiced in all traditions. The unmanipulated movement of the breath comes by itself, a continual and natural expression of the simplicity of here and now. (Bercholz & Kohn, 1993, p. 86)

Mindfulness describes both the form of meditation and the attentional stance that is cultivated when practicing this form. With experience, this stance can be evoked in or out of formal meditation so that mindfulness may occur at any time in the course of everyday life.

Two practices predominate within Theravadin Buddhism. *Samatha* (*samatha* or *shamatha*, Skt.), which is also called *samadhi* (Pali & Skt.), is a concentrative form that is typically translated as “concentration,” or “tranquility” meditation. The other practice is *vipassana* (*vipasyana*, Skt.) (Rahula, 1974, p. 68-69; Gunaratana, 1992, p. 3; Keown, 2003), an integrated form that requires a balance of concentration and mindfulness (Goleman, 1988, p. 106; Gunaratana, 1992, p. 161, 167). *Vipassana* is often translated as “insight meditation” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 3) in reference to insights that may occur with advanced practice. *Vipassana* is more accurately called *Vipassana Bhavana* in Pali. *Passana* means perceiving or seeing, *Vi* refers to a special way of doing something, and *Bhavana* means cultivation of the mind. So, *Vipassana Bhavana* literally means “the cultivation of the mind, aimed at seeing in the special way that leads to insight and full understanding” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 37).

Vipassana requires a balance of mindfulness and concentration. The meditator must be able to hold the mind very still to access deep levels of mindfulness although too much concentration narrows the open-ended focus (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 161, 167). The

aim of *vipassana* meditation³ is to cultivate and intensify a state of “uninterrupted mindfulness” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 149), “not to control the *contents* of awareness” (Claxton, 1990, p. 113). With practice, awareness can become “so intense, concentrated, and finely tuned that you will be able to pierce the inner workings of reality itself” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 20) and experience self and world in a radically different way (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 12). *Vipassana* differs from bare mindful awareness in that it includes an analytical examination of experience that leads to the direct personal apprehension of the nature of existence. “Mindfulness and insight are different, though related. In mindfulness, the meditator notes successive moments of consciousness; with insight, the meditator examines the characteristics of those mind-moments” (Goleman & Epstein, 1983, p. 243-244).

Theravadin Buddhism claims that *vipassana* meditation originated with the historical Buddha, *Siddhattha Gotama* (*Siddhartha Gautama*, Skt.), who lived in what is now Nepal and India about 2500 years ago – between approximately 563 and 483 B.C.E. (Humphreys, 1990, p. 30)⁴. Prior to that time, concentrative meditation was practiced among religious sects in the region and Siddhattha is said to have been accomplished at these (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 13). Siddhattha was called the Buddha after he attained enlightenment – Buddha means “awakened one” (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 320). The Buddha believed that this new form of meditation would allow people to directly perceive the true nature of reality and, in so doing, become liberated from suffering and from the cycle of birth and death. The method is described in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, a teaching attributed to the Buddha (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 35). Walpola Sri Rahula, a Buddhist monk and scholar from Sri Lanka, calls this teaching “the most important discourse ever given by the Buddha on mental development (‘meditation’)” (1974, p. 69).

³ “The aim [of insight meditation] is three-fold: to come to know one’s own mental processes; in this way to begin to have the power to shape or control them; and finally to gain freedom from the condition where one’s psychic processes are unknown and uncontrolled (Nyanaponika, 1973).” (Engler, 1984, p. 28)

⁴ Other scholars give the approximate date of his birth as 566 B.C.E. (Pande, 1995, p. 3), 566 or 448 B.C.E. (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 11), while traditional sources often give a date of around 624 or 623 B.C.E. (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 11; Piyadassi, 1991, p. 12).

As early Buddhism spread across India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, and Japan, it encountered a variety of existing spiritual practices and evolved as it migrated. Buddhism encountered Taoism in China and became Ch'an. The migration of various schools of Buddhism and Confucianism met with Japan's indigenous Shinto religion and Zen took root there (Humphreys, 1990, p. 69-70). Buddhism took on the colorful trappings and ceremonial aspects of the Bon tradition in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism acquired a pantheon of deities.

Buddhism was not recognized in the West as a distinct religious tradition with variant forms in China, Tibet, India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia until 1844, when Eugene Burnouf, a French philologist and translator with a mastery of Sanskrit and Pali, published the first detailed description of Indian Buddhist history, doctrines and texts (Batchelor, 1994, p. 239-241; Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 300). Burnouf's work influenced many 19th Century thinkers, including the philosopher Schopenhauer, whose ideas stirred further interest in Buddhism (Batchelor, 1994, p. 255-261). Edwin Arnold's poetic telling of the life of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia* (1879), was popular at the time and well suited to Victorian romantic ideals (Batchelor, 1994, p. 261).

The late 19th and early 20th Centuries were active times for Buddhist scholarship as numerous works in Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese were translated by a small group of British and French scholars (Batchelor, 1994, p. 246). Meanwhile, expeditions to Asia discovered previously unknown texts and Buddhist artifacts which were then transported to locations in "London, Paris, and St. Petersburg" (p. 246). Eleven such expeditions occurred "between 1900 and 1914" (p. 246).

Another influential period occurred during the 1950s when Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Allen Watts, and others of the beat generation encountered the ideas of D.T. Suzuki and other Zen masters who were living in the United States (Fields, 1992, p. 186-224). The spread of Buddhist practices, however, "began in earnest in the 1960s with the arrival of Theravada *bhikkus*, Japanese *roshis*, and Tibetan *lamas* in the West and the departure of young Europeans and Americans to Asia" (Batchelor, p. 275).

The United States and Europe are now home to many meditation centers and numerous full time teachers of mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation.⁵ Community-based groups also teach mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation and offer the chance for individuals to practice together. Most practitioners learn meditation by attending community group meetings or retreats sponsored by meditation centers and community groups.

Several excellent works in English provide scholarly descriptions of mindfulness and *vipassana* meditation from a contemporary Theravadin perspective. *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Gunaratana, 1992) is a clear, lucid treatment that places mindfulness within its historical context and within contemporary life. Gunaratana's detailed and nuanced description of mindfulness goes beyond the introductory level without diminishing its value as a good beginning book. Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught* (1974) includes a chapter-length treatment of mindfulness and its history. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (1988), by Nyanaponika Thera, however, remains the classic English treatise on *Satipatthana*, the Buddha's original discourse on the foundations of mindfulness. This may be the most detailed description of mindfulness widely available in English. Other excellent, though less readily available, sources include (1) *The Power of Mindfulness* (Nyanaponika, 1997), a commentary on the experience of mindfulness; (2) *Abhidhamma Studies: Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time* (Nyanaponika, 1998), a collection of essays about the *Abhidhamma* (*Abhidharma*, Skt.)⁶; and (3) *The Progress of Insight* (1985) by the Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw. Other books and articles that provide instruction and explanation for practitioners are available from leading Western teachers of *vipassana* and mindfulness meditation, including Joseph Goldstein (1993, 1987), Jack Kornfield (2000, 1993), Sylvia Boorstein (1996), and Sharon Salzberg (1997).

⁵ Sharf (1995, p. 255- 259) views the development of meditation centers for lay practitioners as part of the "Protestant" reformation of Buddhism and traces the origin of widely used contemporary approaches to teaching *vipassana* meditation, in Western countries and in Southeast Asia, to the Burmese master, Mahasi Sayadaw.

⁶ The *Abhidhamma* is a multivolume collection of canonical works and commentaries that delineate Buddhist psychology, including meditation.

Before elaborating on the traditional Buddhist description of mindfulness, it may be helpful to situate it within Theravadin Buddhism. Mindfulness is central to the Buddhist ideal of enlightenment and the end of *dukkha* (suffering, unsatisfactoriness). Theravadin Buddhist doctrine is frequently summarized in lists with four of the most fundamental summaries being the Four Noble Truths⁷, the Eightfold Path⁸, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment⁹, and the Five Spiritual Faculties.¹⁰ Mindfulness is a key factor in each of these, both as a necessary quality in its own right and as the means for achieving proper balance among the other factors. Nyanaponika explains it this way:

‘Right Mindfulness’ (*samma-sati*) is the seventh factor of the ‘Noble Eightfold Path leading to the Extinction of Suffering’ that constitutes the fourth of the Four Noble Truths. . . . Mindfulness is the first of the seven *Factors of Enlightenment* . . . It is the first among them, not only in the order of enumeration, but because it is basic for the full development of the other six qualities . . . Mindfulness is one of the five Faculties (*indriya*) . . . [and] apart from being a basic faculty in its own right, [it] has the important function of watching over the even development and balance of the other four . . . (Nyanaponika, 1988, p. 29)

Among the spiritual faculties and the enlightenment factors, it is mindfulness that not only watches over their equilibrium, but also activates those that are sluggish and restrains those that are too intense. (Nyanaponika, 1997, p. 25)

Mindfulness is considered to be the heart of *vipassana*. “Mindfulness is the center of *Vipassana* meditation and the key to the whole process. It is both the goal of this meditation and the means to that end. You reach mindfulness by being ever more mindful” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 158). *Vipassana* cultivates the mind to see in “the special way that leads to insight and full understanding” (p. 37) and to the freedom that comes with understanding. But *vipassana* is not mindfulness alone.

⁷ The Four Noble Truths are: (1) *Dukkha* (suffering/unsatisfactoriness) exists. (2) *Dukkha* has identifiable causes. (3) These causes can be extinguished and freedom from *dukkha* is possible. (4) There is a path to freedom from *dukkha*. (Rahula, 1974, p. 16; Fischer-Schreiber et al., 1989, p. 109)

⁸ The Noble Eightfold Path includes: (1) Right view, (2) Right resolve, (3), Right speech, (4) Right action, (5) Right livelihood, (6) Right effort, (7) Right mindfulness, and (8) Right concentration (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 32).

⁹ The Seven Factors of Enlightenment (*Satta Bojjhanga*) include: (1) Mindfulness, (2) Investigation, (3) Energy, (4) Rapture or Happiness, (5) Calm, (6) Concentration, and (7) Equanimity (Piyadassi, 1991, p. 260).

¹⁰ The Five Spiritual Faculties (*Indriya*) include: (1) Faith, (2) Energy, (3) Mindfulness, (4) Concentration, and (5) Wisdom (Nyanatiloka, 2004, p. 78)

Vipassana meditation is something of a mental balancing act. You are going to be cultivating two separate qualities of the mind – mindfulness and concentration. Ideally, these two work together as a team. . . . Concentration is often called one-pointedness of mind. It consists of forcing the mind to remain on one static point. Please note the word *force*. Concentration is pretty much a forced type of activity. . . . Mindfulness, on the other hand, is a delicate function leading to refined sensibilities. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 161)

The Buddhist description of mindfulness is phenomenological in nature, emerging from direct experiences and observations involving “a temporary suspension of . . . preconceptions and ideas” rather than from theories^{11,12} (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 46):

Mindfulness stops one from adding anything to perception, or subtracting anything from it. . . . One just observes exactly what is there – without distortion. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 153).

It is also a way of being that engages a level of experience beyond words.

Meditation deals with levels of consciousness which lie deeper than symbolic thought. Therefore, some of the data about meditation just won’t fit into words. That does not mean, however, that it cannot be understood. There are deeper ways to understand things than by the use of words. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 22)

This awareness cannot be described adequately. Words are not enough. It can only be experienced. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 187)

There is no single, comprehensive definition of mindfulness and descriptions that attempt to capture the multi-faceted nature of the experience abound. One that is often quoted in psychology literature was given by Nyanaponika Thera. “Bare Attention is the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens *to* us and *in* us, at the successive moments of perception.” (1988, p. 30). This description captures one of the most important and most often described qualities of mindfulness: present-centered awareness or present-focused attention. Gunaratana describes it as “present-time awareness” (1992, p. 152) and Nyanaponika describes it as “full awareness in the Here

¹¹ Sharf (1995, p. 241) notes Robert Gimello’s (1978) proposition that Buddhist practices may actually shape meditation experience to conform to canonical descriptions rather than the reverse situation, where meditative experience would inform the canonical descriptions.

¹² The claim to be able to observe exactly what is there, without distortion, is of course denied a priori by Western continental philosophy, which argues that the perceiving subject constructs consciousness upon an object, and in the process distorts it because of the necessity of the subject having a point of view (Miriam Levering, personal communication, February 2, 2006).

and Now” (1988, p. 40). Awareness remains focused on whatever is happening as it happens. This is not a thinking, conceptual awareness; simply an awareness without labels, reactions, associations, or comments – awareness that is “stripped of all extraneous detail” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 187). Mindful awareness rests on the present moment – this moment, this moment, this moment – each in turn as it occurs. When awareness remains centered on the moment, it is “marked by a pronounced sense of reality” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 187). For most practitioners, however, mindfulness is not continuous; it slips off and must be reestablished. Mindfulness is sometimes described as both this bare attention to the present and the act of remembering to return to mindfulness when it is lost (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 155).

The description of mindfulness as present-time awareness, however, is not sufficient. The attitude that accompanies mindful awareness is also important. Gunaratana calls mindfulness “non-judgmental observation,” “non-egoistic alertness,” “participatory observation,” “the wakeful experience of life,” and “an alert participation in the ongoing process of living” (p. 151-154). Rahula likens it to a “scientific” attitude that does not judge, criticize, or show preference – one simply observes (1974, p. 73). The investigative quality is one of curiosity, of wanting to see for oneself. “The fundamental attitude of Buddhism is intensely empirical and anti-authoritarian” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 38). Practitioners are encouraged to experience for themselves and not take the descriptions of others’ on faith. The impartial quality is non-judgmental, not attached to a particular outcome, and not reactive.

Mindfulness is non-judgmental observation. It is that ability of the mind to observe without criticism. . . . One simply takes a balanced interest in things exactly as they are in their natural states. . . . You can’t examine something fully if you are busy rejecting its existence. . . . Mindfulness is impartial watchfulness. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 151).

By adopting an impartial attitude that is free of distortion, habitual biases and influences, it is possible to see more of the experience and to see it as if for the first time. This leads to a sense of greater depth and clarity. The non-egotistic quality is one where the present moment is experienced without reference to self. It is an attitude that is not selfconscious, not identified with what is happening, and not defensive. Gunaratana calls

mindfulness “non-egotistic alertness” (1992, p. 152). This quality is not simply an attitude to bring mindfulness about, it is also an outcome of mindfulness practice:

The ego sense itself is essentially a feeling of separation – a perception of distance between that which we call me, and that which we call other. . . . as genuine mindfulness is built up, the walls of the ego itself are broken down, craving diminishes, defensiveness and rigidity lessen, you become more open, accepting, and flexible. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 185-186)

Attitude is a key factor from the very beginning of practice. “It’s not so important what is perceived as the way in which you attend to that perception” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 183). The *vipassana* practitioner attempts to not get lost in the objects of awareness but to notice the process of awareness – where and how it flows.

This investigative, impartial, non-egotistic, “scientific” observing attitude is not a cold, sterile observation that separates one from life. Quite the contrary, mindfulness is “participatory observation” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 153). By suspending bias, judgment, and preference it becomes possible to open more fully to experience and come to know it more intimately. When this happens, experiences feel richer:

Your whole experience of life changes. Your experience of being alive, the very sensation of being conscious, becomes lucid and precise, no longer just an unnoticed background for your preoccupations. It becomes a thing consistently perceived. Each passing moment stands out as itself; the moments no longer blend together in an unnoticed blur. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 186)

Mindfulness is . . . the wakeful experience of life, an alert participation in the ongoing process of living. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 154)

There is a sense of increasing clarity to perception. “Sustained attention leads to a *fuller picture* of the object in all its aspects” (Nyanaponika, 1997, p. 39). Mindfulness makes it possible to notice facets of experience in finer and finer detail, in terms of sensory perceptions as well as in terms of the mind’s reactions to these perceptions. When mindfulness is strong and stable, it can operate “on so fine a level that one can actually directly perceive those realities which are at best theoretical constructs to the thought process” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 157). This fine level of awareness in *vipassana* practice leads to the direct experience of a series of well-established insights about the nature of reality (see Sayadaw 1994 & 1971 for details). It also leads to the direct realization that

there are two kinds of truth: the “conventional truth” of ordinary perception and the “ultimate truth” of mindful perception. The meditator who experiences “this sort of deep observation” of ultimate truth experiences a “total certainty, a complete absence of confusion” and a “pronounced sense of reality” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 160, 187).

Direct observation of experience at this level also leads to the development of intuition. When we disengage from thinking about a problem in the context of mindful awareness, deeper levels of mind can access and process all of the factors available at both conscious and non-conscious levels of awareness. The non-judging, non-grasping attitude also opens us to important information that might otherwise be closed off: “Silently, in the hidden depths of the subliminal mind, the work of collecting and organizing the subconscious material of experience and knowledge goes on until it is ripe to emerge as an *intuition*” (Nyanaponika, 1997, p. 42). Problem solving can become less effortful and more efficient. “A problem arises, and you simply deal with it, quickly, efficiently, and with a minimum of fuss. . . . Your intuition becomes a very practical faculty” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 180).

With increasing clarity comes a sense of wisdom: “Mindfulness leads to wisdom” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 165). We develop wisdom about ourselves, the laws governing cause and effect, and how to live more compassionately.

Through meditative exploration we experience immediately and intimately which qualities of mind are the forerunners of suffering and which ones lead to freedom. Such understanding is no longer secondhand knowledge; we comprehend directly for ourself. This means coming to see both what is happening in the moment and the laws that govern this whole unfolding, living process. (Goldstein, 1993, p. 123)

Meditation . . . works slowly through understanding. The greater your understanding, the more flexible and tolerant you can be. The greater your understanding, the more compassionate you can be. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 16).

A feeling of freedom emerges with clarity and wisdom. Complete liberation from the unsatisfactoriness of ordinary existence is the ultimate goal of all forms of Buddhism.

The purpose of mindfulness practice is freedom. When we purify our minds of the afflictive emotions of greed, hatred, and delusion, we come to the end of suffering. (Goldstein, 1993, p. 40)

Mindfulness leads to insights that make freedom possible. At advanced levels of formal *vipassana* practice, it is possible to watch individual sensations, thoughts, and emotions arise and pass away and to observe directly how we construct reality and our sense of self from “a flowing vortex of thought, feeling and sensation” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 42). This may eventually lead to the direct apprehension of the Three Characteristics or Three Marks of Existence: *anicca* (*anitya*, Skt.) (impermanence), everything that exists is impermanent; *dukkha* (*duhkha*, Skt.) (unsatisfactoriness), everything that exists is subject to suffering/unsatisfactoriness; and *anatta* (*anatman*, Skt.) (no-self or selflessness), the self is transitory and changeable, not something unchanging, eternal or having independent existence.

Mindfulness sees the true nature of all phenomena. . . . (a) all conditioned things are inherently transitory; (b) every worldly thing is, in the end, unsatisfying; and (c) there are really no entities that are unchanging or permanent, only processes. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 156)

Impermanence and no-self are particularly interesting features for psychologists. In Theravadin Buddhism, the concept of *anatta* or no-self is “applied to all phenomena with which one may develop a sense of self-identification” (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 320) and applies only to individuals. In later forms of Buddhism that are collectively called Mahayana,¹³ *anatta* applies to all phenomena, including inanimate objects. In this context, it means that nothing – no person or object – possesses an unchanging quality that is eternal. Freedom from self-nature is called *sunnata* (*sunyata* or *shunyata*, Skt.) which translates as emptiness. Buddhism holds that everything is empty of an inherent, eternal, unchanging, and independent existence. *Anatta* (no-self) and *sunnata* (emptiness) are linked with the Buddhist belief of Dependant Origination¹⁴ which states that things that exist do so because the conditions were right for them to come into existence and they will cease to be when conditions no longer support their continuance. Dependent origination applies to sensations, thoughts, emotions, objects, human life, one’s body, and

¹³ Mahayana Buddhism includes many individual schools within Ch’an, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism. The Mahayanists added additional teachings, interpretations, and commentaries to the earlier Theravadin Buddhist teachings.

¹⁴ Dependent origination (*Paticca-samuppada*) is also called dependent co-arising and conditioned genesis (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 323).

one's own sense of self. We feel a sensation when the conditions are right to create the sensation and the sensation ends when the conditions are no longer conducive. The same is true for thoughts, emotions, objects, human life, and one's self.

In the canonical writings of Theravadin Buddhism, *sunyata* (emptiness) has two meanings: "(1) a mode of perception in which nothing is added to or subtracted from the actual data perceived . . . and (2) the lack of self or anything pertaining to a self in the six senses and their objects . . . In other words, sunyata was both a mode of perception and an attribute of the objects perceived." (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 86). In the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism, emptiness came to mean "the direct realization of the non-existence of a perceiving subject and perceived objects, said to be the natural state of mind." (Keown, 2003, p. 283). Although this formulation is not a Theravadin interpretation, it surfaces in some of the psychological literature that follows. For the purpose of this paper, however, the distinction is not significant.

Other characteristics of mindfulness are described in the traditional literature. Mindfulness is said to have a distinct feel to it. "It has a flavor – a light, clear, energetic flavor." (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 155). Bare, mindful attention develops in stages with predictable markers and insights (experiences) that occur at different levels. Moreover, "it is *an increase in the intensity and quality of attention*, or mindfulness, that is mainly instrumental in enabling a transition to the next higher stage [of mental development]" (Nyanaponika, 1988, p. 26-27). As mindfulness increases and stabilizes, the meditator gains access to new levels of experience.

An experience of space or spaciousness is a characteristic of mindfulness that was seldom addressed in the Theravadin sources included in this review. One exception is the following description by Nyanaponika:

By thus stepping back from things and men, one's attitude towards them will even become friendlier, because those tensions will be lacking which so often arise from interfering, desire, aversion, or other forms of self-reference. Life will become a good deal easier, and one's inner and outer world more spacious. (1988, p. 43).

References to greater feelings of space and “big sky mind” typically come from Tibetan Buddhism and sometimes from Western teachers of *vipassana* and Zen. Two Western *vipassana* teachers describe spaciousness this way:

When we meditate, we view whatever arises with acceptance and a spirit of generosity, with a mind that is open and spacious. (Salzberg in Rabinowitz, 1999, p. 83).

In teaching meditation we often advise students to develop a ‘soft and spacious mind.’ . . . We mean by ‘soft and spacious mind’ the quality of acceptance. (Goldstein, 1993, p. 39).

Another Western teacher, Ram Dass linked this sense of spaciousness with the emergence of intuition when he said:

When we function from this place of spacious awareness rather than from our analytic mind, we are often surprised to find solutions to problems without our having ‘figured them out.’ It’s as if out of the reservoir of our minds which contains everything we know and everything we are sensing at the moment, all that could be useful rises to the surface and presents itself for appropriate action. Sudden flashes of memory, past experience, or understanding seem to get expressed: ‘I can’t explain it.’ ‘It just came to me.’ ‘It all suddenly became clear.’ ‘I forgot I even knew that.’ We often call this quality of mind ‘intuition’ (Ram Dass in Rabinowitz, 1999, p. 65).

Another important characteristic of mindfulness is the ability to move it from formal, seated meditation practice to everyday life. In fact, to limit mindfulness to formal practice and not apply it in the world is antithetical to the aim and spirit of meditation.

We must never forget, however, that seated meditation itself is not the game. It’s the practice. The game in which those basic skills are to be applied is the rest of one’s experiential existence. Meditation that is not applied to daily living is sterile and limited. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 171)

You do not have to sit to meditate. . . . the ultimate goal of practice remains: to build one’s concentration and awareness to a level of strength that will remain unwavering even in the midst of the pressures of life in contemporary society. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 173)

There are no activities of mind or body that cannot be done mindfully. When mindfulness is practiced this way, “You continue to live a very normal-looking life, but live from a whole new viewpoint.” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 13). Everything becomes the subject of practice; “the *little things of everyday life* will become teachers of great wisdom,

revealing gradually their own immense dimension of depth” (Nyanaponika, 1988, p. 80).

Nyanaponika went so far as to say,

Bare attention is developed in two ways: (1) as a methodical meditative practice with selected objects; (2) as applied, as far as practicable, to the normal events of the day, together with a general attitude of mindfulness and clear comprehension. (Nyanaponika, 1997, p. 3)

The biggest barrier to a continuous mindful stance is remembering to be mindful and not getting lost in habitual patterns of thought, feelings, biases, and reactions.

In summary, mindfulness is a present-centered awareness that is characterized by an attitude that is investigative, impartial, and non-egotistic. This attentional stance leads to greater clarity and depth of sensory perception, a sense of spaciousness, enhanced intuition and wisdom, insight into the workings of the mind and the nature of self and objects, and to a sense of freedom. This awareness has a “light, clear, energetic” quality. Mindfulness is both mindful awareness *and* remembering to be mindful. It opens a radically different perspective on life that is “marked by a pronounced sense of reality” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 187). Moreover, mindfulness is a mode of awareness that can both be practiced formally and in everyday life.

Mindfulness in a Western Light - A Psychological Perspective

Western psychology’s understanding of mindfulness has been complicated by issues of literal translation (the specific choice of words used in translation) and conceptual interpretation (explaining Eastern perspectives on life and experience to a Western audience). Understanding rapidly deepened during the last few decades through the ideas and writings of Western psychologists and psychiatrists who themselves are advanced mindfulness meditation practitioners. This section will cover (1) a brief history of the task of describing mindfulness and distinguishing it from other meditation practices, particularly concentrative forms and (2) understanding mindfulness experiences within a Western psychological framework. It will not address scientific research into mindfulness experiences. (See Shapiro & Walsh, 2003; Murphy & Donovan, 1999; Walsh, 1979 for a review of scientific studies.)

Distinguishing and Describing Mindfulness

The first step was simply one of identifying and describing mindfulness as something legitimate and worthy of interest. Psychoanalytic psychology encountered Eastern thought while psychoanalysis was a young discipline. Franz Alexander, Joseph Thompson, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung each commented on Eastern ideas and experience¹⁵. From today's vantage point, their remarks largely reflect misunderstanding. Alexander (1931) described meditative experience as an "artificial catatonia" although he suggested that there are some similarities between Buddhist meditation and analysis, such as the ability to overcome affective resistance and narcissism and so gain freedom from repetition (Epstein, 1990a, p. 160-161). Thompson, writing under the pseudonym Joe Tom Sun, introduced aspects of Buddhist psychology to a psychoanalytic audience in 1924. He noted the resemblance of mindfulness practices and free association and wrote favorably about Buddhist psychology, although he did not explicitly distinguish between mindfulness and concentrative experiences (Epstein, 1990a, p. 161).

Freud (1930), however, discounted the feeling of connection that is encountered in meditation as a regression to the experience of symbiotic oneness with the mother. This characterization was based on experiences of Hindu meditation, most typically concentrative forms, which were described to him by his friend Romain Rolland rather than through personal experience (Epstein, 1990a, p. 159; Suler, 1993, p. 19). His ideas paralleled Jones's (1913, 1923) and Schroeder's (1922) earlier characterization of mystical ecstasy as a regression (Epstein, 1990a, p. 160).

Jung was greatly interested in Eastern philosophy. His theories and writings reflect an appreciation of Eastern perspectives although he cautioned Westerners not to attempt Eastern practices. In a comment on yoga, in *Psychology and Religion: West and East* (1958, p. 534) he wrote, "Study yoga – you will learn an infinite amount from it – but do not try to apply it, for we Europeans are not so constituted that we apply these methods correctly, just like that" (from Goleman, 1988, p. 155; Rubin, 1996, p. 37).

¹⁵ See Epstein, 1990a for a comprehensive review of early psychoanalytic views of Buddhist meditation.

Although William James was not psychoanalytic, it is well known that he was strongly interested in religious experience, including “Buddhist mysticism,” and he commented on the value of meditation-type trained attention. In *Principles of Psychology* (1950, p. 424), he wrote, “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.” (from Goleman, 1988, p. 145).

Appreciation of Eastern philosophy, including Buddhist philosophy, and its potential value to psychodynamic psychology grew in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s through the interests of Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, and Harold Kelman in the Zen teachings of D. T. Suzuki (Suler, 1993, p. 20; Rubin, 1996, p. 38-40). Although Freud’s characterization of meditation as regression still held sway for most psychologists, the different modes of perception and consciousness that resulted from meditation were no longer uniformly seen as “strictly pathological.” Their potential for health and creativity was emerging (Suler, 1993, p. 21-22).

A general interest in things Eastern flavored the 1960s and 1970s and psychological understanding of meditation deepened as psychologist-practitioner writers and researchers emerged. Some of the earliest works from the 1970s described and verified the nature of meditative experience in general. Key authors include Daniel Goleman, Jack Kornfield, Daniel Brown, John Welwood, Jack Engler, and Michael Washburn. Research into Transcendental Meditation (TM), a concentrative, mantra recitation practice, also flourished in the 1970s.

Detailed descriptions of concentration and mindfulness meditation were not generally available until the 1970s when Goleman described the broad meditative landscape, first in a series of articles and later in a book (1972a, 1972b, 1977/1988, 1978). In these works, he proposed a classification system of meditation practices from various spiritual traditions based on the Theravadin text, the *Visuddhimagga*¹⁶. Although

¹⁶ The *Visuddhimagga* by Buddhaghosa is an important 5th Century Pali commentary on the *Abhidhamma* that describes and classifies meditative experience, states of consciousness, and the path of meditative attainment. While it appears to be based on meditation experience, Sharf (1995) suggests that the

Goleman was not the first Westerner to offer a typology of meditative experience (see Naranjo & Ornstein, 1971), his system was widely accepted. Prior to the availability of these works, many (if not most) people believed that meditation was more or less a single process with different faces, and that process was assumed to be concentrative.

As noted earlier, Goleman proposed that meditation practices could be categorized as one of two basic forms, concentrative or mindfulness, or as some combination of the two. He identified *vipassana* as an integrated form (1977, p. 110; 1988, p. 106). Goleman also noted that retraining attention is the common feature of all forms (1977, p. 108; 1988, p. 104). His book, *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience* (1977),¹⁷ intended as “a traveler’s guide to [the] topography of the spirit” (1988, p. xxi), includes highly detailed descriptions of the progression of experience along the distinct paths of concentrative and mindfulness as documented in Buddhist literature. In the same year that Goleman’s book first appeared, Brown (1977) published a detailed account of the levels of concentrative meditation based on descriptions from the *Mahamudra* tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. His analysis was related to information processing theory, constructivist theory, consciousness theory, and experimental data. The audience for this literature was predominantly individuals interested in meditation and/or consciousness.

The growing meditation literature remained peripheral at best for the majority of psychoanalytic psychologists and psychiatrists. Freud’s characterization of meditation as nothing other than regression continued to prevail through the 1980s. Epstein addressed this ongoing misunderstanding in 1990 and described the history of psychoanalytic encounters with mindfulness (1990a) that was related earlier in this paper. He emphasized differences between concentrative and mindful meditation experiences and proposed several ways that the experience of mindfulness could be framed in Western psychoanalytic terms. His ideas will be discussed in the next sub-section.

Washburn described both similarities and differences in concentration and mindfulness in his attempt to develop a “Unified Theory of Meditation” (1978). He

Visuddhimagga and similar works from other Buddhist traditions may be based, instead, on a systemization of Buddhist scriptures.

¹⁷ Goleman’s *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience* (1977) was later published as *The Meditative Mind* (1988).

labeled the two forms as concentrative and “receptive” (also called “active” and “passive,” respectively) and included insight meditation among the receptive/passive forms. He viewed “active” and “passive” meditation as “opposing species *of a single genus*, namely sustained attention,” which he characterized as “the defining characteristic of meditation *per se*” (p. 59).

A few years later, Engler summarized the main similarities and differences by saying that concentrative meditation involves *restricting attention* while mindfulness involves *expanding attention*. (1983, p. 31, footnote). He further noted that mindfulness (bare attention, choiceless awareness) “is defined by two technical paradigms: a particular form of deploying attention and a particular management of affect” (1983, p. 32). Attention is given to all perceptions “without preference, comment, judgment, reflection, or interpretation” (p. 32). If emotional reaction, preference, comment, judgment, reflection, or interpretation arises, that becomes the object of attention. This serves to unlink the subsequent reactions from the original stimulus with interesting results: “Unlinking the experience of pleasure or displeasure . . . and the tendency to act on these central state affects [that result from the sensation itself] . . . is a fulcrum point in meditation training. It returns a previously conditioned response to voluntary control and introduces an important principle of delay” (Engler, 1983, p. 59) thereby enabling the meditator to experience life with less bias.

Psychological Perspectives on Mindfulness

As the picture of mindfulness becomes increasingly clear, psychologists and psychiatrists with an interest in mindfulness are trying to explain the mechanisms underlying mindfulness phenomena using Western models. Those with psychoanalytic orientations frame their ideas in psychoanalytic terms; those with cognitive or cognitive-behavioral orientations use cognitive or cognitive-behavioral models, respectively. Some authors discuss meditation while writing on the broader topic of psychology and Buddhism and these works are excluded from this review. (See works by Erich Fromm, Jeffrey Rubin, Jeremy Safran, Seth Robert Segal, John Suler, and Polly Young-

Eisendrath.) The present focus is primarily on the descriptions and explanations of mindfulness provided by three key authors who have addressed mindfulness phenomena: Jack Engler, Mark Epstein, and John Welwood.

I chose to develop this section thematically using three clusters of themes: (1) Space and Spaciousness, (2) Self, No-self and Emptiness, and (3) Awareness, Nonduality and Identification. Each of these individual aspects is both unique and intertwined with the other aspects. This is their nature. They are clustered in this way to facilitate discussion. Much of the discussion of self, no-self, emptiness, and identification is set in a psychoanalytic framework that draws heavily from object relations theories. Object relations is not a single theory, but a collection of theories that have in common the centrality of internal “images” of people and relationships to forming ideas about self and other and informing expectations, reactions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Like Buddhism, there are various “schools” within object relations and various theories within each school. British object relations views emotional feelings as central to the internal images or representations we form of self, other, and relationships between people. American object relations emphasizes the images and our thoughts about these images. Relational theories that began with Sullivan emphasize relational patterns that develop between individuals and groups. Since these authors draw from a variety of psychoanalytic perspectives, no distinction will be made about which psychoanalytic or object relations school is being represented.

1. Space and Spaciousness

An expanded sense of space or spaciousness is often experienced by meditators. Although this aspect of mindfulness is not figural in the Theravadin literature, it is, however, described in the Mahayana Tibetan and Zen traditions and has attracted attention in the psychological literature. Descriptions of space or spaciousness in meditation address psychological experiences related to openness, expansion, and distance. Somewhat paradoxically, as openness and expansion increase, the sense of

distance may simultaneously decrease. The terms space and spacious are used metaphorically and it is important to distinguish among various meanings.

John Welwood is prominent in addressing the experience of space in meditation and in relating it to other experiences of space, using several conceptual frameworks (1976, 1977, 1996, 2000). Space and spaciousness in meditation are forms of what he calls *Lived space*¹⁸ (2000). *Lived space* can be experienced but not measured and manifests in three ways: (1) At an *Outer*¹⁹ level, there is the “space of bodily orientation” (2000, p. 78), the space of right and left, up and down, forward and backward, (2) at an *inner* level, there is *Feeling or Affective space*, the “affective landscape” of our psychological state at any moment (1977, p. 99), and (3) there is *Open space*, which goes beyond the psychological to a fundamental, ontological core of being (1977, p. 103).

The *Outer* level of *Lived space* is the sense of the body navigating through the world and is primarily based on the sense of sight. *Feeling space* and *Open space* have much in common with experiences of space often encountered in meditation. *Feeling space* is in constant flux and includes the way we feel about ourselves, our situation, and our environment. *Feeling space* has three bipolar dimensional qualities: (1) It contracts and expands, sometimes beyond our ordinary sense of boundaries. We can feel vast at times and constricted at others. (2) It can feel shallow and superficial or deep and textured with many levels of meaning and a sense of richness and potential. (3) It can seem frozen and stuck or feel dynamic and flowing (1977, p. 100-101). Psychological spaciousness manifests as expansive, deep, and dynamically flowing. Welwood identifies three additional, non-dimensional characteristics of *Feeling space*. (a) It is centered on self-experience. “I” feel expansive and flowing or an experience feels deep “to me.” (b) I sometimes feel more, sometimes less “distance” between myself and others, myself and the world, and/or myself and my experience. (c) *Feeling space* can

¹⁸ Welwood originally (1977) called this *Psychological space* and contrasted it with two other forms: (1) the three-dimensional *Perceptual space* in which we live and (2) the abstract *Conceptual space* of mathematics and physics which conveys relationships of either real or abstract objects in geometric terms. In a more recent work, he describes *Perceptual* and *Conceptual space* as space that is understood by “objectifying” and “conceptualizing” (2000, p. 78), respectively.

¹⁹ The *Outer* level of *Lived Space* was called *Oriented space* in an earlier publication (1977).

seem like a field of energy that moves and changes (1977, p. 101-103). The state of *Feeling space* at any particular moment can be described along each of these dimensions and characteristics.

In contrast, *Open space* is “centerless.” It is the sense of space that emerges when subject and object distinctions drop away. It is a non-articulate space out of which objects of consciousness, be they thoughts, feelings, or perceptions, emerge and fade (1977, p. 104-105). Welwood characterizes this non-articulate space as “undifferentiated moments” that can be experienced between the “differentiated” thoughts, sensations, and perceptions when the mind quiets in meditation (1976, p. 90).

Open space, according to Welwood, can feel freeing, frightening, or both. It can feel freeing because it is vast and we are free simply to be, without the constraint of thoughts, expectations, or preferences. The very sense of vastness and lack of constraint, however, can feel frightening because there is no confirmation that we exist in the way we ordinarily think we exist when our ordinary sense of self drops away (1977, p. 108; 2000, p. 80). An important aspect of Welwood’s description of these different forms of space is that some sense of self remains in the experience of space until *Open space* is encountered.

In a later work (1996), Welwood examines space in relation to self as one moves from the foggy semi-awareness of ordinary experience to the “awakened” awareness of nondual, *Pure Presence*. In ordinary experience, we tend to be completely immersed in and identified with our experience. Welwood calls this state *Pre-reflective Identification*. In this mode of being, we take ourselves to be our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and labels without realizing that we are doing this and there is no “space” between our self and our experience. If I think greedy thoughts, “I am a greedy person;” if another calls me stupid, I may believe, “I am a stupid person.” Who I am is identical with my thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and labels for all practical purposes.

We gain distance from our experience when we can reflect on it. Reflection involves a division of consciousness into an observing self and a self that is the object of observation. This is the “therapeutic split” in the ego from psychoanalytic psychology. It

creates a space that allows us to observe the process and contents of experience and emotionally contain the resulting affect – space as psychological distance. Epstein likens the inner space of a therapeutic split to Winnicott’s holding environment²⁰ (1990b, p. 21).

Reflection can manifest in different degrees and Welwood identifies four levels or forms that have different qualities. See Figure 1 on page 26. The largest space between self and experience occurs at the level of *Conceptual Reflection* when we apply pre-conceived ideas and models to our experience as a way of understanding what is occurring and why. This form of reflection is experience-distant: we look at our own experience objectively, as though it belongs to someone else. At the level of *Phenomenological Reflection*, the space between self and experience narrows. We observe our own experience but in a way that suspends preconceived concepts and ideas. In doing so, perception is more direct and we “finally start to *have* our experience” (Welwood, 1996, p. 126). We are no longer distant observers, but present and aware participants in our experiences. Phenomenological encounters reveal new meaning in moment-to-moment living.

The gap between self and experience narrows further at the level he calls *Reflective Witnessing*. This mode of being occurs during bare, mindful attention when we are attentive to the *process* of experience without regard to *content*. This is the realm of experiencing without reacting rather than one of seeking for cognitive meaning. In this mode, there is a trace of self watching experience. Welwood calls the last of the reflective modes *Being Present With* and it involves “*giving in* to our experience” (1996, p. 123). At this level, a small amount of effort is necessary to move toward and remain with the experience rather than pull away from it. As such, there is minimal space between self and experience. His final mode of being is *Pure Presence*, and it is here that subject-object duality disappears. *Pure Presence* is “being without being *something*” (1996, p. 117). There is “no longer . . . a hair’s breadth of separation from whatever arises” (p. 118) because there is no longer a self and an object and there is no identification with the contents of awareness or with a self. This is the realm of Buddhist no-self.

²⁰ Winnicott used the phrase *holding environment* to describe good care of the infant’s physical and emotional well being by the mothering figure. Here, it refers to an internal sense of safety or well being.

<i>Prereflective Identification</i>	<i>Conceptual Reflection</i>	<i>Phenomenol. Reflection</i>	<i>Reflective Witnessing</i>	<i>Being Present With</i>	<i>Pure Presence</i>
No Reflection No Space	Reflection Large Space	Reflection Small Space	Reflection Smaller Space	Reflection Least Space	No Reflection No Space

Figure 1. Welwood's Reflection and Space.

Across this spectrum, there is some sense of space between ourselves and our experience when we are in the reflective modes of *Conceptual Reflection*, *Phenomenological Reflection*, *Reflective Witnessing*, and *Being Present With*. There is no space, however, between self and experience in *Pre-reflective Identification* because we are completely immersed in and identified with experience. Likewise, there is no space in *Pure Presence* since self and experience are now coemergent phenomena with no self-object distinction. Additional aspects of Welwood's model will be explored in the third thematic cluster.

Epstein suggests that the sense of *oneself* as expansive and *spacious* that may occur during meditation is a result of increased concentration. In contrast, increased mindfulness illuminates the *temporal nature* of self (1995, p. 142) and deepening insight practice leads to the experience of *anatta* (noself):

The concentration practices expand and contract the spatial view of self, focusing the meditators on feelings of incompleteness, and, simultaneously, opening them up to infinite space. The mindfulness practices cultivate the ability to surrender into the moment, and they elasticize the sense of self by emphasizing its inherent fluidity. The insight practices explode the last illusions of self-sufficiency by zeroing in on a self that breaks up under objective scrutiny. (Epstein, 1995, p. 154-155)

Let us now turn to the next cluster of themes which includes *anatta* and to the ideas of Engler and Epstein.

2. The Self, Noself, and Emptiness – Atta, Anatta, and Sunnata

Anatta and the related terms *atta* and *sunnata* are three Buddhist concepts that go to the heart of psychology. *Atta* is the "personality self" and is usually translated as self, ego, or personality (Nyanatiloka, 2004, p. 30). *Anatta* is the absence of this personality

self and is typically translated as no-self, selflessness, or egolessness. “The *anatta* doctrine teaches that neither within the bodily and mental phenomena of existence, nor outside of them, can be found anything that in the ultimate sense could be regarded as a self-existing real ego-entity, soul or any other abiding substance” (Nyanatiloka, 2004, p. 16). *Sunnata* usually translates as emptiness or voidness. It embodies the idea that nothing possesses *inherent* existence – some quality that is both eternal and unchanging – while confirming the presence of *contingent* existence – ordinary phenomena, including our own existence, are manifest because the conditions are present to support their existence.²¹ In Mahayana²² literature, *sunnata* refers to the absence of inherent existence in *all* things, animate and inanimate. In the Theravadin literature, however, *sunnata* refers strictly to emptiness of self-experience, *anatta*, and it applies only to human existence. In Theravadin Buddhism, *sunnata* and *anatta* are equivalent. The authors included here write from both Theravadin and Mahayana Buddhist perspectives, so the characterization of *sunnata* is not uniformly Theravadin although differences are not significant in this context. As such, this paper will adopt the broader Mahayana position that *anatta* refers to the illusory nature of the self while *sunnata* addresses the illusory nature of all phenomena.

Anatta and *sunnata* are perhaps the most unusual meditation experiences for Western culture to comprehend and possibly the most relevant to psychology. They lead us to question: What is the self or ego? Precisely what self or ego is affected in *anatta*? What happens to the self or ego in *anatta*?

Ego is a theoretical construct that Freud used to refer to both psychological functions and self-concept – the “I” experience – without discrimination (Epstein, 1990b, p. 21). Hartmann later distinguished these two aspects and called the theoretical construct that includes the structural and functional aspects of the psyche *ego* and he labeled the “I” experience *self-representation* – what Rothstein (1981) later named “*self-representation as agent*” (Epstein, 1990b, p. 21; Epstein, 1988, p. 62-63). Today, the ego system

²¹ Contingent Existence is another way to describe Dependent Arising or Dependent Origination (*Paticca-samuppada*).

²² Mahayana includes Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, but not Theravadin Buddhism.

(Epstein, 1988, p. 63) in its broadest sense encompasses the regulatory and integrative functional aspects that are together called *ego* (Engler, 2003, p. 36) and the *representational aspects*. Functional aspects include processes such as defense, mediation, adaptation, and synthesis (Epstein, 1988, p. 63). Representational aspects include the core element of self-representation and our representations of others and objects. As will be seen, both representational and functional aspects are affected by *vipassana* practice.

Self-representation – the self or “I” – is typically experienced as “‘*an entity residing deep inside us*’ that we can reveal or conceal from others as we choose” (Engler, 2003, p. 55-56).²³ It feels inherent, substantial, ongoing, eternal and the locus of self-agency. Additionally, the self is experienced as separate and distinct from others and from the world in its Western formulation, whereas in Eastern and other collectivist cultures, it is invested with more of “we-sense” and is “embedded in a matrix of relations” that includes nature and the cosmos (Engler, 2003, p. 50-51). Epstein is clear that it is not the functional ego, but rather the self-representation that is the “target” of mindfulness and insight practices (1988, p. 62; 1990a, p. 162). Engler describes it this way:

The Buddhist critique [of self] is *not* aimed at the psychologically differentiated ‘self’ of contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice. . . . The Buddhist critique is aimed instead at what Aaronson [1998] calls the *ontological* self: the feeling or belief that there is an inherent, ontological core at the center of our experience that is separate, substantial, enduring, self-identical (Engler, 2003, p. 50-52)

Engler (2003) describes four types of self experience that are helpful in understanding the creation, development, and experience of self and ultimately the experience of no-self. The first two of his forms were proposed by Stephen A. Mitchell (1993) as a way to summarize contemporary psychoanalytic ideas of the self from the perspectives of object relations and self-psychology, respectively. The descriptions given below of self as *Multiple and Discontinuous* and as *Integral and Continuous* go slightly beyond Engler’s description in an attempt to elaborate on these modes of being.

²³ This quotation includes a quotation of Mitchell (1993, p. 111) with italics added by Engler.

(1) *Multiple and Discontinuous* – Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors tend to vary according to context, the people we are with, environmental factors, and internal psychological factors. Most of us have known bright moods and dark, despairing moods; times of open-hearted generosity and of mean-spiritedness. We act in certain ways in business settings and in other ways when we are home relaxing with family and friends. On occasion, we may think or act in an uncharacteristic manner and then think, “I’m just not myself today” or “I don’t know what possessed me.” Each of us seems to have “more than one version of ‘myself’” (Engler, 2003, p. 55).

This sense of having multiple selves is a product of the way our sense of self develops. Blending ideas from diverse perspectives that contribute to object relations theory and the interpersonal theory of Harry Stack Sullivan, Mitchell proposes that, “we learn to become a person through different kinds of interactions with different others and through different kinds of interactions with the same other” (1993, p. 104, in Engler, 2003, p. 54).²⁴

Common to both Sullivan’s interpersonal theory and object relations theories is a view of the self as multiple and discontinuous. . . . The object relations approach focuses on phenomenological units, the kind of person one experiences oneself as being when one does what one does with other people. These phenomenological units are understood to derive either from how one felt with a significant other in a particular context or from one’s sense of how it felt to be that other in relation to oneself. . . . Interpersonal theory might be regarded as a depiction of the transactional manifestations of internal object relations; or conversely, it might be regarded as a depiction of the implicit and largely unconscious senses of self underlying interpersonal transactions. Both types of theorizing presume a multiple, discontinuous, and relational view of self. (Mitchell, 1993, p. 106-107)

In time, each of us develops many relational patterns and self-organizations with many others. The predominant patterns become internalized and throughout life new interactions and new situations evoke one or another of these acquired patterns. In essence, the self is dynamically constructed from the experience of earlier relational interactions that are remembered/ recreated by the body, emotions, and mind. A

²⁴ Fairbairn, an early contributor to the British object relations school, proposed that the infant is born with “a unitary, integral ego” that is whole (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 163). Splitting of the ego occurs in response to emotional reaction caused by impingement from others and the greater environment (Jack Barlow, personal communication, January 31, 2006).

particular self-organization is evoked or assembled at a particular time in relation to circumstances that include environmental factors, prior mood, prior thoughts, habitual biases or tendencies, and intention. When circumstances change, another self-organization may be evoked. This is the experience of self as multiple and discontinuous.

(2) *Integral and Continuous* - Even though we experience a range of moods, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors across time, we typically experience them as different “versions of a more or less invariant ‘myself’”(Mitchell, 1993, p. 107, in Engler, 2003, p. 55). We can remember good times when we feel sad; times of generosity when we feel mean. This continuity results from the integration and cohesion of the material of self-experience and patterns of interaction into the sense of an entity residing deep inside us that is not contextual, has personal agency, and exists separate and autonomous from others (Engler, 2003, p. 55). This integrated and continuous self contains all self-aspects that are acknowledged and owned. Disowned aspects, however, may be experienced as “not me.”

When psychological development proceeds well and healthy psychological functioning is attained, we can move between multiple and integral configurations with ease (Mitchell, 1993, in Engler, 2003, p. 56). From a Western perspective, this is usually considered the epitome of psychological health. At this level of functioning, the self is constructed moment-by-moment in a way that is fluid and flexible. This is possible, in part because the tasks of psychological development have been successfully navigated and, in part, because large portions of self-experience are not disowned. This is the experience of self as integral and continuous.

(3) *Unselfconscious* - These are times when all sense of self drops away and there is a sense of no one doing anything – just a heightened awareness of doing. This may occur while gazing at a sunset, watching a baby sleep, or when fully focused on an activity with increased awareness. Westerners call such times *peak experiences*, being in *flow*, or *being in the zone*. Engler notes that moments of unselfconsciousness may also occur in a more ordinary way when we act in full awareness without anxiety (2003, p. 59). He calls all such moments of unselfconsciousness *non-dual awareness* (p. 59).

Fingarette (1963) proposed that self-consciousness is consciousness colored by conflict or anxiety (Engler, 2003, p. 62). Suler also links unselfconsciousness to an absence of internal tension and conflict (1993, p. 53-54). Thus “when conflict is resolved or anxiety is absent, there is awareness, purpose, intentionality, but no consciousness of self” (Fingarette, 1963, in Engler, 2003, p. 63). “Thoughts, feelings, actions occur, but they are not experienced as originating in or by ‘me.’ They simply occur as a response to the exigencies of the moment, fluidly, easily, spontaneously, unhampered by extraneous thought . . . without force or conscious intention. And yet even though one acts without thinking or reflecting, “the plan and precision of ‘thoughtfulness’ remains” (Suler, 1993, 54)” (Engler, 2003, p. 61-62). In addition, our responses tend fit the needs of the situation more precisely when we act unselfconsciously.

Engler suggests that the experience of unselfconscious moments shows that:

There is a mode of being, thinking, feeling, and acting that is not organized around a separate sense of self. ‘Thinking’ can happen quite nicely, and does, without a ‘self’ or ‘I’ to think it. In fact, it happens much more efficiently and without anxiety or conflict. The same for feeling, intention, and action. (2003, p. 64).

These are moments in which there is *full awareness without any reflexive consciousness of self.* . . . [The] self is not ‘lost’ here. Experience is simply organized differently – not around a sense of self as separate from its experience. . . . We are unselfconscious but acutely aware, attuned to the realities of the moment. (p. 59-60)

Engler contends that these moments are relatively common, but typically go unnoticed and have attracted little attention in the psychological community. Epstein discusses this mode of being in his book *Thoughts without a Thinker* (1995), the title of which aptly captures the selfless nature of the experience.

The forms of unselfconscious experience that Engler and Epstein describe should not be confused with the unselfconscious experience of the child. Although children often act unselfconsciously, they identify with their experience (Welwood, 1996, p. 112). When a child plays at being a rabbit, she either *is* a rabbit or she is *someone* who is playing at being a rabbit. Engler’s unselfconscious experience involves neither of these forms of identification. Engler’s experience is also different from unconscious

subjectivity that can be accessed in the blissful absorption states of concentrative meditation called the *jhana* states. “They are . . . based on the mind’s becoming ‘one’ with the object of concentration through sustained one-pointed attention. . . . At each progressive level of absorption, mind and body become more silent, more unified in their functioning, more expansive and peaceful . . .” (Engler, 2003, p. 63).

(4) *No-Self (Noself)* – This is the Buddhist experience of *anatta*. Engler characterizes it as:

. . . a profound understanding of the radical impermanence (*anicca*) of all that I have taken to be “me.” Not only do I no longer perceive any enduring ‘objects’ of perception, but I witness the processes of thinking, feeling, sensing, and perceiving as a series of discrete and discontinuous events, each arising and passing away without remainder. . . . The [meditation] practitioner comes to understand the lack of intrinsic existence anywhere; he or she grasps in direct moment-to-moment experience the no-self (*anatta*) or empty (*shunyata*) nature of mind, body, external objects, and internal representations. (Engler, 2003, p. 69)²⁵

There are two distinct pathways to *anatta* in Buddhism. According to one approach, we are already enlightened and it is a matter of discovering our true nature. This path is exemplified by the koans of Rinzai Zen, *shikan taza* (“just sitting”) of Soto Zen, and *dzogchen* practice in Tibetan Buddhism. According to the other approach, enlightenment develops gradually in stages through meditation practice. It is “something we become rather than something we already are” (Engler, 2003, p. 67). This gradual process characterizes Theravadin *vipassana* and Tibetan Mahamudra mindfulness practices.

Engler provides an overview of the progression of insights in *vipassana* meditation that lead to *anatta* and *sunyata*²⁶. The first experience is that “the sense of being an observer disappears” and “the normal sense that one is a fixed, continuous point of observation from which one regards now this object, now that, is dispelled” (1983, p. 54). With further refinement of attention, “all that is actually apparent from moment to

²⁵ *Shunyata* is an alternate spelling of *sunyata*. See the Appendix for additional information.

²⁶ Theravadin sources provide detailed descriptions which include numerous stages. See, for example, Sayadaw (2000) and Sayadaw (1985). Moderately detailed descriptions are also available in Goleman (1988), p. 24 and Epstein (1986), p. 151.

moment is a mental or physical event and an awareness of that event . . . there is simply a process of knowing (*nama*) and its object (*rupa*). . . . No enduring or substantial entity or observer or experiencer or agent – no self – can be found behind or apart from these moment-to-moment events . . . there are just individual moments of observation” (p. 54-55). With additional experience and practice, the meditator sees that momentary self-representation is constructed in relation to an object (only in relation to an object) and the object appears in relation to the observer (1984, p. 45-46). He or she perceives that preceding causes “condition each moment of self- and object representation, and how each moment conditions the next moment” (1983, p. 55). It becomes apparent that “strictly speaking, [there are] no constant end products of representation, but only a continual process of representing” (1983, p. 55). As awareness intensifies and becomes further refined, “the apparent stream of consciousness literally break[s] up into a series of discrete events, which are discontinuous in space and time. Each mental and physical event is seen to have an absolute beginning, a brief duration, and an absolute end” (1983, p. 55-56). As such, even the construction of self and object representations are experienced as discontinuous processes. This brings about a direct understanding of the impermanence (*anicca*) of all things, including one’s self. There are only processes and even processes are not permanent. The self is seen to be empty of any inherent substance (*anatta*).

Along with these insights, the meditator discovers that any emotional reaction of liking or disliking disrupts the natural flow of events and that such disruption causes suffering (*dukkha*). “Moreover, any attempt to constellate enduring self- and object representations, or to preferentially identify with some self-representations as ‘me’ and expel (psychotic, borderline) or repress (neurotic, normal) others as ‘not-me’ is experienced as an equally futile attempt to interrupt, undo, or alter self- and object representations as a flow of moment-to-moment constructions” (Engler, 1983, p. 57). It is said that through the experience of *anatta*, a natural equanimity arises and self-created suffering ceases. Seeing that “self” is utterly contingent and relational gives rise to compassion and generosity, and this directly perceived knowledge changes people even

when they are not “meditating,” in the same way that therapy changes people outside of therapy. In time, there can be “a permanent and irreversible reorganization of self-structure, changing the very experience of self” (Engler, 2003, p. 65) and noself can become a way of being, not just a transitory state.

Mitchell believes that psychological health is reflected in the ability to move easily between multiple and integral self-experience. Engler adds that multiple and integral ways of being are punctuated by moments of unselfconscious experience. Moreover, when the experience of noself is possible, Engler sees self and noself experiences as “interpenetrated” (2003, p. 76). Epstein suggests “somebody [organization around a self] and nobody [organization that is not around a self] are interdependent” (1999, p. 35). The self as it is constellated at any particular moment *exists and is real*, although it does not exist as ordinary perception would suggest – as something with an independent, inherent existence – rather, it exists as interrelated with everything because the conditions that support its presence are in place. “The core of the no-self notion is actually a simple idea: that all things are interdependent, including the self” (Engler, 2003, p. 74). Engler’s 2003 article suggests that optimal functioning involves all four forms of self-experience – multiple and integral; self and noself – informed by the experience of the transitory nature of all phenomena. Epstein describes it this way:

Buddhism sees the ego as a kind of necessary fiction. We need an ego to function in the world, to carry out tasks, to get us to work on time, to do the laundry, and to master new information. But we have a tendency to overvalue its reality, obscuring a more expansive view of the kinds of connection of which we are capable. (1999, p. 87)

It [the ego] comes into being when we have [a task to do] but is otherwise invisible. It has no ongoing, intrinsic reality. Poised between inner and outer, the ego is like a membrane. When it becomes permeable, our boundaries are temporarily lifted. When we prevent this permeability and instead inflate the ego’s ‘reality,’ we are in effect erecting impermeable walls and creating our own isolation. (1999, p. 88)

It is important to note that this framework is not a linear progression that culminates in noself and leaves self behind. Instead, it is a process of opening to more types of self-experience and achieving fluid movement between forms.

This interpenetrating model of Eastern and Western concepts of psychological health contrasts with hierarchical, linear models that were proposed in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a way to integrate Eastern and Western views. (See Engler, 1983 & 1984; Wilbur, 2000, 1993, 1984, 1979; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993.) Engler's early model was a first attempt to explain some of the interesting similarities that he noticed between object relations and Buddhist views of the self. His early work is set in an object relations framework that is based on the ideas of Jacobson, Mahler, Lichtenberg, and Kernberg (1983, p. 33). Although he has since retracted the linear interpretation, his observations still hold and are useful in understanding the self and mindful experience.

1. Buddhist and object relations theories view the experience of self and objects as constructed internal images that are continually and actively created and recreated moment to moment. From both perspectives, what we experience as self and as object are internal images "constructed by a selective and imaginative 'remembering' of past encounters with significant objects in our world (Bruner, 1964)" (Engler, 1984, p. 29).

2. Both theories hold that our ordinary experience of self is not one of construction but of "a feeling of being and ongoingness in existence," (1984, p. 28) that is continuous, consistent, and has agency.

3. Object relations and Buddhist psychologies have similar ideas of how our ordinary sense of self develops. By way of review, object relations theory proposes that the self emerges as "the outcome of a gradual differentiation of internalized images of a 'self,' as distinct from internalized images of objects, and the eventual consolidation of these images into a composite schema or self-representation" (Engler, 1983, p. 33). Buddhist psychology, as conveyed in the *Abhidhamma*, describes the arising of self in a similar way. Various modalities of experience called *khandas*²⁷ arise as we interact with others and the world. The *khandas* (*skandhas*, Skt.) manifest as form (the body), feelings, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 323). The process of identification with and integration of "body," "feelings," "perceptions," "thoughts," and "consciousness" gives rise to a sense of "I" or "me" (Engler, 1983, p.

²⁷ *Khandas/ khandhas* typically translates as "aggregates" indicating that they are pieces or aspects of phenomenal experience which are also empty of inherent existence.

33). Both psychologies thus view the self as arising from consolidating various aspects of experience that emerge from our interactions with others and the world.

4. “The fate of the self is *the* central clinical issue in both psychologies” (Engler, 1983, p. 34). These fates, however, appear contradictory. In psychoanalytic psychology, optimal health is equated with having a healthy, differentiated, cohesive, and integrated sense of self. Different forms of psychological distress occur when the development of the self is disrupted: (a) Functional psychosis occurs when the boundaries between self and other and between conscious and unconscious are lacking, inadequate, or too permeable in the context of inadequate synthetic ego capacities. There is insufficient differentiation and consolidation of “self” and “other” bits of experience. (b) Borderline level functioning occurs when generally consolidated multiple and discontinuous selves are not integrated into a cohesive whole and split along the lines of “all-good” or “all-bad” (Engler, 1984, p. 36). (c) Neurotic functioning reflects conflict between a differentiated, integrated ego and repressed impulses (p. 30). (Thinking of it another way, it is the conflict between a differentiated, cohesive self and incompletely acknowledged self-aspects.) When the tasks of differentiation, consolidation, cohesion, and integration are satisfactorily navigated, the result is healthy functioning by Western standards. In Buddhist psychology, however, optimal health assumes a healthy self but moves beyond this to experiencing and accepting the self as an illusory construction. Clinging to the ordinary belief that some aspect of self or ego is substantial and permanent is seen as the root source of suffering and is viewed as a developmental delay, of sorts.

5. Western psychology uses conventional reality testing as a way to distinguish between neurotic/ healthy and psychotic/ borderline levels of psychological functioning. Buddhist psychology presumes this but describes a different sort of reality testing in addition – the ability to distinguish between ordinary perception, which experiences the self as permanent and substantial, and “wisdom” perception which experiences self and object as processes lacking any substantive, eternal quality (Engler, 1983, p. 59-60). Instead, they are contingent. The result of this “error” is that we perceive things that are impermanent and insubstantial as permanent and substantial. We then believe that we can

have lasting satisfaction only by attaching to pleasure and avoiding pain. When the very things we cling to – self and objects – are changing and impermanent by nature, our efforts fail and suffering ensues. Buddhist psychology holds that experiencing and accepting that self and objects are neither solid nor permanent is the key to ending suffering. These misperceptions are said to become apparent when we directly experience *anicca* (the impermanence of existence), *anatta* (the insubstantiality of existence), and *dukkha* (the unsatisfactoriness of clinging to existence). In Buddhism, these are called the three characteristics or marks of existence (*tilakkhana*).

These similarities originally led Engler to propose a model of psychological health and illness that combined Eastern and Western psychologies along an object relations line of development. He saw noself as the culmination of the development of the self and summarized this idea in the epigram, “*You have to be somebody before you can be nobody*” (Engler, 1983, p. 36). His understanding of psychological health and pathology at that time is summarized in Figure 2 below.

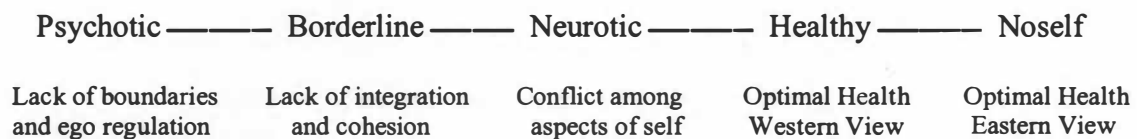


Figure 2. Engler's 1983 Model of Psychological Functioning.

Although his observations remain valid, Engler's interpretation that they reflect a linear development of the self received several criticisms. Kornfield (1993, p. 254-269), for example, referred to incidents of teacher-student ethics misconduct around money, power, and/or sex that surfaced in meditation centers and communities in the 1970s and 1980s among both Eastern and Western teachers. These incidents were thought to demonstrate that less-than-optimal psychological functioning can co-occur with high levels of meditative attainment. This is akin to gaining insight in therapy without the "working through" that brings the insight to a deep level of understanding. For meditators with unresolved psychological issues, traditional psychotherapy can facilitate psychological growth and enhance meditative development as a result.

Suler (1993, p. 62-65) noted that the implied hierarchy of a linear model devalues the benefits of meditation that may be attained before reaching the first stage of enlightenment. In particular, it neglects the potential to develop and strengthen the sense of self in ways that are similar to traditional therapy – through greater acceptance of all aspects of self, increased cohesion of self aspects, and more flexibility. Epstein emphasized the importance of experiencing both self *and* no-self. Our sense of self seems "concrete, independent, self-created, and 'under its own power,' but this is, in fact, an illusion. The true nature of self is something else entirely. Meditation is meant to open a window into this something else; it is not meant to eradicate a previously existent ego. Somebody and nobody are interdependent: They feed off of each other rather than succeeding one another" (1999, p. 34-35). Engler also noticed an important flaw:

A developmental model implies that spirituality has its own developmental line, or is part of a developmental line – that the experience of no-self, for instance, is the culmination of the line of self-development. There is no basis for assuming this. Buddhist teaching views the state of no-self as altogether outside the realm of coming-to-be and passing-away. What is not born and never dies can have no 'developmental line' in a psychological sense. (2003, p. 49)

In effect, the experience of no-self simply *is* and, as such, can have no developmental line. Instead, one opens to an experience that already exists and has always existed. These criticisms apply specifically to the *linearity* of spiritual development and to the *joining* of psychological and spiritual lines. They do not contradict the observation that *vipassana*

insights are said to occur in a documented progression (Epstein, 1981, p. 140; Engler, 2003, 1984, 1983) which lends a developmental *quality* to meditative experience.

The linear models of Engler and others (see Wilbur, 2000, 1993, 1984, & 1979; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993) carried an implication that the self is transcended in some way with meditative attainment. Epstein stresses that even though the sense of “I” is confronted, self-representation is not lost (1990a, p. 163), abandoned (1990b, p. 23), transcended, rejected, destroyed or “merged with the surround” (p. 31). Instead, it “becomes increasingly differentiated, fragmented, elusive and ultimately transparent” (1988, p. 62). The self continues to be useful in attending to some of the tasks of life, but it constellates when needed and is employed with the understanding that it is relative in nature. Furthermore, a true absence of self-representation would concretize the experience of no-self (1990b, p. 30) which would be in stark contrast to the revelation that nothing is concrete.

According to Engler and Epstein, Western psychology would expect that a direct experience of one’s self as a purely representational process would be intolerable and potentially destabilizing (Epstein, 1988, p. 66; Epstein, 1995, p. 133) and they agree that individuals who do not have healthy, stable self-structures can become destabilized (Engler, 1983, 1984; Epstein, 1981). Occasionally, prolonged and intensive meditation practice leads to psychiatric symptoms, including psychotic episodes (Epstein, 1981, p. 138). Epstein believes, however, that individuals with healthier, more stable self-structures can experience this without destabilizing their ego structure because meditation practice strengthens some ego functions and lessens others. He offers the following explanation for some of the possible dynamics of meditation. Meditation practices “require the suspension of many conventional ego functions” (1990b, p. 21), such as censoring, defensiveness, and distinguishing between inner and outer (1988, p. 21-22). At the same time, the synthetic function – the observing ego – strengthens (1989, p. 67; 1988, p. 66). The synthetic function is the aspect of ego that manages, organizes, and integrates “inconsistencies, ambiguities, and uncertainties” (Kellerman & Burry, 1997, p. 54) as well as conflicts. Without a strong synthetic function, there is a risk of self-

fragmentation from “uncovering of defended material, the loosening of ego structure or the inability of the observing ego to ‘sit with’ that which arises” (Epstein, 1990b, p. 21).

At a borderline level of functioning, the synthetic or integrative capacity is weak or lacking and the ability to consolidate conflicting self and object representations is compromised. For those with “healthier” egos, however, synthetic capacity increases as the meditator learns to observe experience without clinging or pushing away, “allowing conflicting images to present themselves just as they are” (Epstein, 1989, p. 67-68). Under this condition, ego boundaries become increasingly more permeable, but not lost, as may occur in concentrative experiences (Epstein, 1990b, p. 26). As practice deepens, there is a “simultaneous dis-identification from and integration of self-images that have often been unquestioned assumptions or split off rejections” (1988, p. 65). Censoring and defensiveness relax, previously defended and conflictual material surfaces, and the experience is tolerable in a way that it was not before. Then as previously defended material surfaces and is not rejected, former splits become incorporated into an “increasingly differentiated psyche” (Epstein, 1988, p. 64) while identification with all self-experience decreases.

A strong synthetic ability ultimately allows the meditator to tolerate the uncertainty of a seeming dissolution of the self as he or she experiences insights leading up to *anatta* and *anatta* itself.

It is the ego, primarily through its synthetic function, that permits integration of the experience of disintegration. In true egolessness, there could be only disintegration, and such a state would manifest as psychosis. The ego system is certainly a target of these meditation practices, but what results is more properly conceived of as an intrasystemic . . . reequilibration rather than a progression beyond an outmoded structure (Epstein, 1988, p. 67).

As practice leads to an apparent dissolution of self and objects as ordinarily known, the synthetic function “binds awareness to the object [of awareness], neither holding on to, nor rejecting, whatever projects itself in the mind” (p. 66). In so doing, it facilitates “integration of the experience of disintegration” (p. 67) and “preserv[es], on a moment-to-moment basis, the integrity of a more highly complex psyche” (p. 67).

These observations are consistent with the characterization of *vipassana* as an uncovering technique similar in some ways to, though not identical with, psychoanalytic free association (Engler, 1983, p. 47). Like psychoanalysis, *vipassana* involves:

1. *Technical neutrality* – The meditative attitude is one in which “mental and physical events . . . are observed without reaction” (1983, p. 47).
2. *Removal of censorship* – “All thoughts, feelings, and sensations are allowed and attended to as they enter awareness, without discrimination or selection” (p. 47).
3. *Abstinence* – “The goal is observation rather than gratification of wishes, impulses, desires, and strivings” (p. 48). Like psychoanalysis, the attitude of *vipassana* discourages discharge or acting out.
4. *A “therapeutic split” in the ego* – The meditator is asked to witness his experience (p. 48).

These processes presuppose ego capacities and ego functioning that correspond to a neurotic or higher level of functioning in either therapy or meditation.

Using Hanly’s (1984) concepts of *ideal ego* and *ego ideal*, Epstein (1986) offers another explanation of the way in which ego structures and functions change through meditation. The ideal ego and ego ideal are residues of the early experience of oneness with the mother.

The ideal ego, according to Hanly (1984), is the source of abstract ideas that the ego has about itself as perfect, complete, immortal and permanent. . . . The ego ideal, on the other hand, embodies an individual’s aspirations. It is derived from the boundless experience of infantile narcissistic omnipotence, in which there is no distinction between self and other and the entire universe is experienced as a part of oneself (Epstein, 1986, p. 146-147)

Epstein proposes that concentration practices strengthen the ego ideal and facilitate merger of the ego and ego ideal in blissful states of absorption. Strengthening the ego ideal in this way produces levels of cohesion, stability, and serenity that can relieve the anxiety and distress of the investigative aspects of insight meditation. However, “if the ego ideal is strengthened without simultaneous insight into the illusory nature of the ideal ego, the experience of the concentration practices may fuel an increasing sense of self-importance or specialness that can paradoxically strengthen the hold of the ideal ego” (1986, p. 154). The mindfulness and insight practices that slowly reveal the nature of the ideal ego bring balance to the overall process, enhancing the ego ideal sufficiently that

the ideal ego and its sense of perfection and immortality can be confronted. Thus, through a balance of concentration and insight meditation, the ego ideal strengthens without narcissistic inflation of the ego ideal and the ideal ego diminishes.

Another psychological change that occurs on the path to *anatta* is a lessening of identification with the image of whom we take ourselves to be. While this facet is intimately tied to the attainment of *anatta* and *sunnata*, further discussion is deferred to the next subsection. In coming to understand *anatta*, however, it is important to distinguish it from other psychological phenomena and ideas that might be mistaken for oneself. Epstein addresses these possibilities in several papers, using concepts drawn from a broad psychoanalytic basis. *Anatta* should not be confused with:

1. Abandonment or paralysis of the ego with a subsequent upsurging of primary process material or uninhibited expression of emotion (1993, p. 121; 1990b, p. 22-23)
2. Self-abnegating disavowal in which attempts are made to abolish, annihilate or extinguish the ego and self-aspects that are judged unwholesome (1990b, p. 28)
3. Loss of the sense of self through subjugation to and merger with an idealized other, resulting in the loss of interpersonal boundaries. (1993, p. 122)
4. Loss of the sense of self and merger with the greater environment or an “ineffable absolute” that can occur during concentrative practices when ego boundaries dissolve (1990b, p. 23-24)
5. A developmental stage beyond cohesive identity and object constancy where ego is transcended or abandoned (1993, p. 122)
6. Pseudonirvana, a state of rapturous bliss, energy, heightened awareness and loss of self-consciousness. (1990b, p. 26)
7. A concrete, substantial state of existence that can be achieved (1993, p. 123) through substitution of a transcendent reality for ordinary reality (1990b, p. 30-31)

Epstein states clearly that *anatta* is not a separate state of existence, but an experience found in relation to belief in concrete existence. It is not eliminating or transcending something that exists, but rather “identify[ing] as non-existent, something that always was non-existent . . . (Gyatso, 1984, p. 40, in Epstein, 1990a, p. 163). Insight practices “seek to dispel the ‘illusory ontology of the self’ (Hanley, 1984) encapsulated within the ideal ego” (Epstein, 1990a, p. 164).

Just as the self can be directly experienced as a moment-by-moment construction, objects of awareness can also be experienced directly as constructions that arise out of preceding conditions. As with *anatta*, there are forms of psychological emptiness and ideas about emptiness that can be confused with *sunnata*. Epstein calls attention to these potential points of confusion as well. *Sunnata* is not a feeling of psychological emptiness that results from:

1. Feelings of incompleteness or deficiency that result when early emotional sustenance was not given, as in the personality disorders (1990b, p. 22; 1989, p. 61)
2. Defects in self and object integration, as in borderline level functioning (1989, p. 63)
3. A sense of “estrangement” when there is conflict between actual and idealized self experience (1989, p. 64)
4. A depersonalized state in which the observing ego becomes hyperaware and some self-aspects are disavowed (1989, p. 61)
5. Identity diffusion (1989, p. 61)
6. Existential meaninglessness (1989, p. 61)
7. The feeling of vast space that may accompany a quiet, peaceful mind that is free of thoughts (1990b, p. 27)
8. The experience of nothingness that results from absorptive merger in the seventh *jhana* (trance state) of concentrative meditation (1990b, p. 24)

Sunnata does not refute that things exist, only that they do not exist as we ordinarily believe they do. Rather, life exists in a way that the everyday mind cannot

grasp. “If things have no intrinsic or absolute reality, then everything must be relational. Emptiness is like a web or matrix that makes one thing dependent on another” (Epstein, 2001, p. 33) Moreover, emptiness is not a transcendent form of reality but an experience that is found in relation to ordinary reality and belief in the inherent existence of self and objects (Epstein, 1989, p. 66). Emptiness and no-self are not experiences of disappearance and they are reported to be far from barren. “The literal translation of *sunyata* is that of a pregnant womb: empty, nourishing, fertile, and containing the entire world” (Epstein, 2001, p. 33). There is a sense of being nothing and everything, “both subject and object, and neither, and beyond” (Nisargadatta, 1982, in Engler, 2003, p. 71).

3. Awareness, Nonduality and Identification

Present-centered awareness is the attribute of mindfulness that is probably most comprehensible to Westerners who are unfamiliar with meditation. Distinctions between past-, present-, and future-centered awareness are clear, all are in the realm of everyday experience, and fine moment-by-moment awareness is easily understood. The changes in perception and experience that accompany increasing awareness on the present, however, may be less familiar. Nonduality and identification are qualities that emerged in the discussions of Space and Spaciousness and of Self, No-self and Emptiness. Both are also closely linked with awareness. Although awareness, nonduality, and identification are distinct, they are grouped here, in part, because of their interrelation and in part because Welwood’s 1996 discussion of reflective and non-reflective awareness addresses them all quite nicely. More should be said about nonduality and identification, however, before proceeding to Welwood’s ideas.

Ordinarily separations cease to appear in nondual experience. It is characterized variously as experience when there is no “I” doing something, no subject-object distinction, and no self-other distinction. Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of nonduality is captured in a line of the Heart *Sutta*,²⁸ “form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form.” The ordinary and the transcendent are not different.

²⁸ The Heart *Sutta* (*Sutra*, Skt.) is a core teaching that is found in both Theravadin and Mahayana forms of Buddhism

With nondual awareness, the objects of ordinary existence are seen to be empty of inherent existence and likewise the transcendent takes form as we know it in ordinary awareness. This captures the interpenetration of ordinary reality and “ultimate” reality,²⁹ where things are not as they ordinarily seem, and it captures the interpenetration of self and no-self.

Nonduality is a quality of Engler’s *Unselfconscious* way of being: “Experience at these times is not structured/constructed in a subject/object mode. Awareness is ‘non-dual’: . . . the knower, the knowing, and the known are experienced as one” (2003, p. 58). Nonduality is also a quality of *Noself* experience (p. 65). It is a characteristic of Welwood’s *Open Space*: “it is not something that can be objectified or explained through concepts” (1977, p. 104) and it is evident in his *Pure Presence*: “awareness and what appears in awareness mutually coemerge as one unified field of presence” (1996, p. 117). In contrast, duality characterizes Engler’s *Multiple* and *Integral* forms of self-experience, Welwood’s other forms of space, his *Pre-reflective Identification*, and his four reflective modes of being.³⁰

Unlike many of the characteristics under discussion, there is only a minimal suggestion of gradual transition between duality and nonduality, although there are hints that this may be so. One hint comes from Welwood’s comment that phenomenology “is one of the most refined, least dualistic Western ways of exploring human experience” (1996, p. 116). Another is Engler’s (2003) description of ordinary moments of unselfconsciousness when we act without anxiety or selfconsciousness. He gives the examples of taking out the garbage and helping a child with homework. While these activities suggest a mode of doing that is not organized around a self, they do not suggest more unusual experiences in which there is no subject-object distinction.

Identification, or more precisely a substantial diminishment or absence of identification, is a quality that was important to the discussion of self and no-self and often also emerges in discussions of nonduality. Welwood describes identification as being “like a glue by which consciousness attaches itself to contents of consciousness” (1996,

²⁹ Nondual reality

³⁰ *Conceptual Reflection, Phenomenological Reflection, Reflective Witnessing, and Being Present With*

p. 112). It is the process by which we take ourselves to be identical to the bits and pieces of our experience, in the object relations sense and in the Buddhist sense of *khandas*. Engler's *Unselfconscious* experience is described as "a mode of being, thinking, feeling, and acting that is not organized around a separate sense of self" (Engler, 2003, p. 64) while *No-self* lacks organization around a self and includes the direct perception that the self is insubstantial and impermanent. The experience of No-self is possible only when all identification with aspects of experience temporarily ceases.

Welwood's *Open Space* is said to be "centerless" because "it contains no reference point, no subject or object, no hereness as opposed to thereness" (1977, p. 106). In a similar way, *Pure Presence* is "being without being something" (1996, p. 117). Each of these experiences carries an implicit lack of identification. Unlike duality, however, identification is often described as manifesting to greater and lesser degrees.

In his 1996 article, Welwood examines the ways in which awareness, identification, reflective capacity, and duality/nonduality change as we move from ordinary immersion in experience to what he calls *Presence*. Most of us are often, perhaps usually, immersed in our experience. When we live in this mode, we do not reflect on ourselves or on our situation and, instead, take our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, body, circumstances, and personal history to be who we are (1996, p. 116). That is, we completely identify with the bits and pieces of our experience and are unaware that we are doing this. Welwood calls this mode *Pre-reflective Identification*. See Figure 3 on page 47. This is a realm of dual experience – I am separate from you; and you and I and all of the objects that populate the world seem to have a substantive, ongoing existence. Awareness is blunted or constricted in this unreflective mode. We may be going about life with little awareness or we may be dimly aware of experience, but oblivious to our identifications and motivations. Although Welwood's description ends here, it may also be said that we unwittingly restrict what registers in awareness because of fear of, or attachment to, objects and outcomes (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 151). Awareness is more likely to be focused on the past or the future rather than on each present moment.

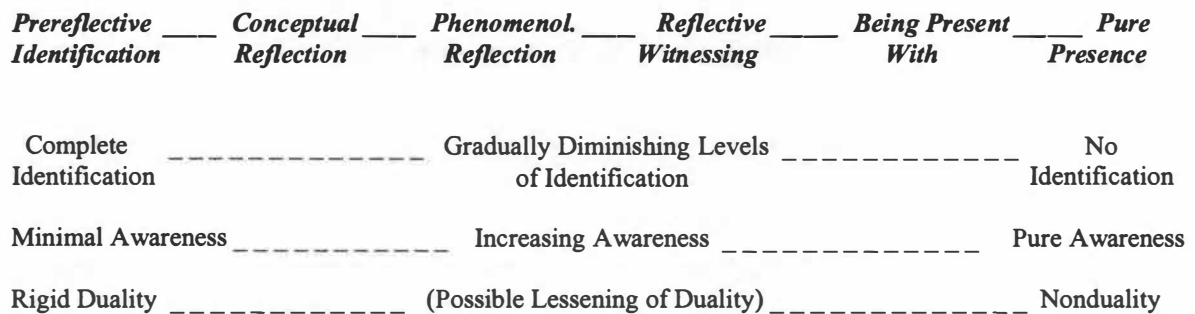


Figure 3. The Relationships of Reflection, Identification, Awareness and Duality in Welwood's Model.

In contrast, *Pure Presence* is characterized by the absence of identification. Awareness is enhanced and there is a sense of being “fully awake” (Welwood, 1996, p. 118) and aware of aspects and nuances of experience that typically go unnoticed. *Pure Presence* is nonreflective, nondual, and requires no effort to maintain. The space between “self” and “object” is gone and there is no self-object distinction: “pure presence is intimate engagement, rather than a stepped-back detachment. . . . it does not involve any ‘doing’ at all” (p. 117). To summarize, *Pre-reflective Identification* is characterized by no reflection, low awareness, high identification and duality whereas *Pure Presence* is characterized by no reflection, high awareness, no identification, and nonduality. I would also add that attentional focus wanders indiscriminately in *Pre-reflective identification* and rests completely on the present moment in *Pure Presence*.

Welwood proposes that a transition from *Pre-reflective Identification* to *Pure Presence* proceeds gradually through several levels of reflection. Reflection involves a division of self and consciousness – I become both “an object of reflection and an observing subject” (1996, p. 110). This is the therapeutic split of psychoanalytic psychology. The first and crudest level of reflection is *Conceptual Reflection*. At this level, we are able to observe and think about our own experience using preconceived concepts and ideas. A lessening of identification must occur if we are to observe and contemplate our own experience. This shift is like taking a large step back from

experience and it highlights the dual nature of experience – “I” am observing “my experience.” Conceptual reflection provides a way to understand, organize, and explain what we experience in terms of theoretical concepts, ideas, and schemas.

Phenomenological Reflection is a closer level of reflective experience. We remain observers of our experience but awareness opens and the space between self and experience narrows. Concepts that may arise in response to experience are less theoretical and more “experience-near” (p. 114); they emerge from the experience itself rather than from preformed ideas applied to experience. A further diminishment of identification is necessary to achieve the close observation of phenomenological awareness. If we are highly identified, we are either too enmeshed with experience to observe it or too afraid to open to the experience in the way that phenomenological reflection requires. A phenomenological stance permits new understandings and new meanings to come into awareness. Duality remains but, according to Welwood, it is lessened.

The next level of reflective awareness is *Reflective Witnessing* and it is characterized by bare, mindful attention. The mind becomes the object of awareness and “one is simply attentive to the ongoing flux of experiencing” (1996, p. 115). In this mode, there is still less identification and the space between self and experience closes further, but some sense of self remains and a light effort is needed to retain this mindful stance. Welwood calls mindfulness “a transitional step between reflection and presence” (p. 115). As described frequently in earlier sections of this review, awareness increases with mindfulness.

The last reflective mode is *Being Present With* and it involves a surrender to and an intimacy with experience. Awareness is open and rests on “*how-we-are-with-our-experience*” (p. 119). The shift from content to process reflects a further lessening of identification and there seems to be virtually no space between self and experience. This is perhaps the beginning of nondual experience, although this conjecture is not clearly substantiated by Welwood’s description. Complete abandonment of the last vestiges of identification and reflection lead to the ability to rest, without effort, in *Pure Presence*.

In summary, Welwood proposes that a transition from low awareness, high identification, and dual perception (*Pre-reflective Identification*) to high awareness, no identification, and nondual perception (*Pure Presence*) occurs through the development of self-reflective capacity and a subsequent refinement of reflective ability until reflection can be completely abandoned while maintaining awareness. A concurrent shift to enhanced focus on the present is implied but not explicitly addressed.

Identification and duality are intimately related. When an “I” is created, an “other” that is “not-I” is simultaneously created along with the self/experience split that is characteristic of dual experience. Epstein and Engler believe that vestiges of narcissistic identification persist until all stages of meditative insight are experienced *and* worked through (Epstein, 1981, p. 144; 1986, p. 154; Engler, 2003, p. 38). In fact, from the traditional perspective, the “final group of fetters” on the way to enlightenment involves the belief that “I am” which is the basis of narcissistic tendencies (Engler, 2003, p. 41). As they are the last to fetters to overcome, they are the most resistant to change.

Awareness and the changes in perception that accompany increasing awareness have been threads running through the entire discussion. Epstein describes meditation as “a process of attentional restructuring” (1981, p. 141) that facilitates fine moment-to-moment awareness of experience and, on this basis, developed mindfulness as “the combination of heightened awareness and loss of self-consciousness” (1990b, p. 26). The latter characterization corresponds to Welwood’s descriptions of *Reflective Witnessing* or *Being Present With*.

It may be helpful, at this point, to review and consolidate what happens to awareness and perception. Epstein (1990b, 1986, 1981) describes the quality and focus of awareness from the beginning through advanced levels of *vipassana* practice, Engler offers details about advanced practices (2003, 1984, 1983) and Welwood (1996, 1977, 1976) addresses the entire spectrum. Preliminary practices enhance concentrative ability as the meditator learns to remain focused on the chosen object of attention moment-by-moment. At this stage, the person’s breath is often the object of awareness and the mind tends to wander and must be repeatedly returned to the object. With practice, the

meditator develops the ability to remain with the object for longer periods of time and eventually achieves access concentration.³¹ With access concentration, the meditator can remain focused on the object without wavering and in this state, he can experience the space that exists between individual objects of mind; the “ground out of which mental events emerge” (Epstein, 1981, p. 143). Although access concentration is common to the paths of concentration and insight, it is here that their paths diverge. Ever deepening concentration without mindfulness will lead a meditator to the single-focused concentration of *samadhi*³² and then to the ever deepening trance-like absorption of the *jhana* states and the characteristic experiences that occur at each of the eight *jhana* levels. Awareness becomes increasingly one-pointed on the path of concentration.

Opening awareness from a single object to whatever predominates in the mind is the alternate path of mindfulness. While mindfulness can be practiced prior to attaining access concentration, it is at this level that the meditator is able to remain attentive to changing mental objects (Epstein, 1981, p. 141). In mindfulness practice, the task is “precise and complete attention to whatever is happening in the present moment within the field of experience” (Epstein, 1990b, p. 25). It may be a succession of sensations, feelings, thoughts, images, and even consciousness itself; whatever it is, awareness is sharp and focused. This requires a balance of concentration to remain focused and mindfulness to stay attentive without becoming absorbed in a single object. Individual objects of consciousness can be seen to arise, exist for a brief duration, and then pass away (Engler, 1983, p. 56; Welwood, 1976, p. 91). Although individual contents of mind may change quickly, each can be known in great detail because of the complete, undistracted quality of attention. The shift, then, from mindfulness to insight practice involves a shift away from awareness of the contents of consciousness and toward the

³¹ As the ability to remain focused on the chosen object improves, the mental image of the object changes in a consistent and predictable manner. The initial perception of the object is called the preliminary sign or beginner’s sign. The first change in perception is called the learning sign and the second change is called the counterpart sign. With each shift, the object’s clarity increases and the emergence of the counterpart sign signals entrance into access concentration (Bodhi, 1994).

³² *Samadhi* literally means “to establish or make firm” and, in *samadhi*, the meditator is merged with the object of meditation in a nondual experience. This state is a precondition for attaining the *jhana* absorption states (Fischer-Schreibner, et. al., p. 296).

nature of one's mental process itself (Epstein, 1990a, p. 162). Insight practice brings an investigative attitude to awareness of experience. For example, rather than attending to the content of a specific thought when it arises, the meditator now attends to the way the thought arises out of the objectless ground, exists, and then dissolves, returning to the ground before another object of consciousness comes into being. This is a natural maturation of mindfulness meditation (Epstein, 1990b, p. 29).

On the path of mindfulness and insight, awareness heightens as it becomes increasingly focused on the present moment, the sense of being an observer disappears as subject and object distinctions dissolve and the meditator experiences the flow of mental activity unselfconsciously (Epstein, 1990b, p. 25-26). Epstein describes "the culmination of the path of mindfulness [as] a charged state in which heightened awareness, sublime happiness, effortless energy, the vision of a brilliant light or luminous form, rapturous and devotional feelings, and profound tranquility and peace of mind all arise together (Goleman & Epstein, 1983)" (Epstein, 1990b, p. 26). This is pseudo-nirvana, not nirvana itself (1986, p. 151), and many experiences are yet to come.

Insight deepens through a series of documented stages that include experiences of delight and terror. Delight reflects the joy of blissful experiences and is believed to result from deepening concentration. Terror results from the insights of investigation as perception changes and one's most fundamental beliefs are confronted and found to be illusory. Delight can be seductive and must be let go of, while the insights of terror must be "continuously integrated" until even terror and delight are transcended and the stages of enlightenment become possible (Epstein, 1986, p. 150-151).

Engler's description of some of the insights and of the changing nature of awareness that accompany deepening mindfulness and insight practice were detailed in the previous section. It may be recalled that first, "the sense of being an observer disappears" (1983, p. 54) and the meditator experiences the simultaneous coming-into-being of awareness and object of awareness and the representational nature of the interaction. The stream of consciousness is experienced as a series of discrete events and later as a series of discontinuous processes. The self and objects of experience are found

to lack anything that is substantial or permanent thereby revealing the cause of suffering (p. 54-56).

As awareness becomes increasingly steady, precise, and complete, the meditator is able to perceive increasingly finer details of experience, even to a previously unperceivable “microscopic” level, and the perceptual process is deconstructed. According to Engler, the “‘stages of insight’ in *vipassana* practice represent progressively earlier stages in the sequence of information processing, pattern recognition, and conceptualization by which we bring a self and a representational world into being each instant” (2003, p. 68). The meditator is left with the crystal clear awareness of pure presence (Welwood, 1996, p. 117-118). This awareness, however, “is not simply an ego function” (Engler, 2003, p. 66), “we *are* that awareness” (p. 66). As advanced meditation practice demonstrates:

Awareness itself can never be objectified, can never be grasped as an object, can never be identified with the contents of consciousness, can never be represented as ‘this’ or ‘that.’ It is of a fundamentally different nature: without qualities, limitless, without boundaries, no more affected by what it observes than a mirror is by what it reflects. In essence, I am not anything that can be named or thought, represented or denied, found or lost. . . . [Awareness] is the *condition* of all experience. Full realization of this is non-dual awareness as one’s natural state. (p. 66)

Relating Thematic Clusters

Welwood’s model addresses themes found in cluster one, Space and Spaciousness, and cluster three, Identification, Awareness, and Nonduality, and describes how they change through varying levels of reflection. All of these aspects are summarized together in Figure 4 on page 53. Although Engler’s and Epstein’s discussions of self, noself, and emptiness do not take place in the context of Welwood’s model, some of their ideas can be viewed against this framework as a way to relate all of the themes. This is summarized in Figure 5 on page 53. Earlier descriptions of the experience of noself and emptiness resonate with Welwood’s *Pure Presence* – all are characterized by nondual perception, no identification, and clear awareness. While the label *Pure Presence* nicely captures the phenomenon from the angle of present-centered, highly focused awareness, it is preferable to use standard terminology when discussing

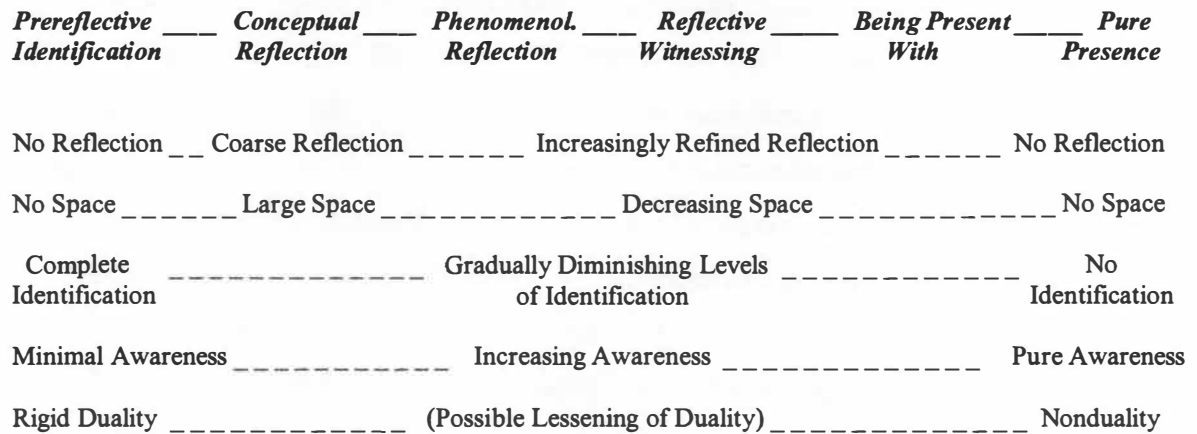


Figure 4. Relationships Among Reflection, Space, Identification, Awareness and Duality in Welwood’s Model.

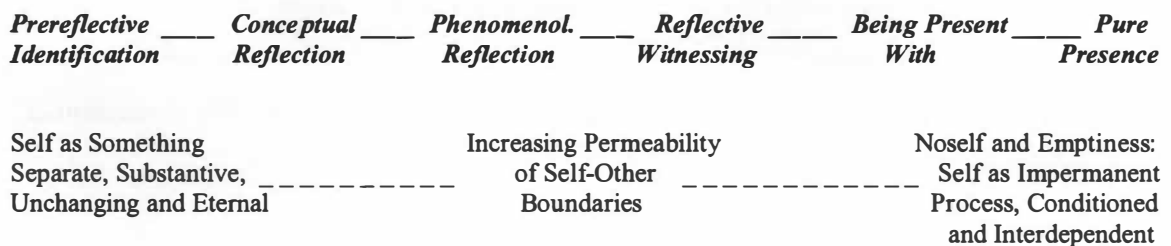


Figure 5. Relating Aspects of Self-Experience to Welwood’s Model.

this state and refer to it as Noself or *Anatta*, rather than introduce another name and risk confusion. *Prereflective Identification*, characterized by complete identification, rigid duality, and minimal awareness, relates to an unquestioned belief that one's self is separate, substantive, unchanging and eternal. This is a familiar state of being for most of us that occurs when we are immersed in our own experience with no self-reflection. Between Welwood's extremes, reflection first becomes possible and then increasingly refined. As this occurs, the coemergent space between self and experience decreases, awareness increases, and identification lessens. It also happens that rigid boundaries between self and other become more permeable and we can begin to sense our interconnectedness with others and the world before opening to noself experience.

This mapping is useful for connecting all of the facets but it does not capture the complexity of the phenomenon. Such a one-dimensional description does not convey the interpenetration of self and noself when the experience of noself is possible. It does not capture the dynamic flow and interdependence of the experience of multiple and discontinuous selves with self as integral and continuous and these, in turn, with unselfconscious experience and noself. It also tends to concretize the experience of noself and emptiness in a way that is clearly refuted. The model is a one-dimensional projection of a multi-dimensional experience. Welwood's model and the other models used in this discussion are aids to conceptual understanding of a phenomenon that is difficult to conceptualize. This reinforces the value of direct experience – as Buddhists are fond of saying, “the finger pointing to the moon is not the moon.” Yet, short of direct experience, it is necessary to break this complex experience down in order to assemble a conceptual understanding of it.

Comparing Eastern and Western Perspectives

The descriptions provided by Buddhist and psychological writers are remarkably similar and highlight similar features of the experience. It seems clear that they are addressing the same phenomenon. The Theravadin Buddhist account of mindfulness is descriptive and prescriptive – it provides a highly detailed account of the range of

meditative phenomena and instructions for how to access these modes of being. It offers little, however, in the way of metapsychological or psychological explanations for them. The psychological account describes and attempts to explain. Easy-to-read, detailed information about mindfulness was not readily available in the 1970s and 1980s and Goleman, Engler, Epstein, and Welwood did much to fill this gap and establish mindfulness as a form of meditation distinct from concentrative forms and a topic worthy of psychological inquiry. More recent works from Buddhist masters, such as Gunaratana's (1992) *Mindfulness in Plain English*, provide further description from the Buddhist perspective.

While all of the qualities of mindfulness discussed in this review are addressed from both psychological and Buddhist perspectives, there are some differences in emphasis. Space and spaciousness receive substantial attention from psychological writers and little from Buddhist, perhaps because these qualities are thought to be products of concentration practice and thus preliminary to mindfulness proper (Epstein, 1995, p. 154). Emptiness, being essentially identical to no-self in Theravadin Buddhism, also receives more emphasis from psychological contributors who draw from both Theravadin and Mahayana perspectives. Emptiness, as distinct from no-self, plays a prominent role in Mahayana thought. The other aspects – self, no-self, identification, awareness, and nondual perception – receive similar levels of attention. In noting the similarity of the traditional and psychological descriptions, it is worth recalling Gimello's proposition that a person's conceptual framework may shape how he conceptualizes his experiences (Sharf, 1995, p. 241). The psychologists cited in this paper have trained in various forms of Buddhist meditation. This does not diminish their contributions, however, because no theory is completely free of personal influences or frameworks. It is also worth remembering that these experiences are well-known and wide-spread in Buddhist meditation communities.

Beyond providing descriptions of mindfulness experience, psychological writers offer psychological explanations for meditative phenomena that improve understanding of meditative phenomena and of psychology in general. Meditation teachers could benefit

from a better understanding of what happens psychologically as people move through the various stages of meditative practice. Psychological explanations may also improve understanding of the psychological reactions that may sometimes occur in people with different psychological make-ups and levels of organization. Epstein and Lieff (1981) and Epstein (1986, 1989, 1990b) detail various psychological hindrances and psychiatric complications that may emerge in meditation practice in the context of a psychoanalytic conception of the mind.

Engler notes interesting similarities in the ideas of how the self develops and is experienced in object relations theory and in Buddhist psychology. His early work (1983, 1984) highlights five parallels: (1) the self is a moment-by-moment construction; (2) despite this, the self is *experienced* as substantial, continuous, consistent, and having agency; (3) one's sense of self develops from identification with various aspects of experience; (4) the fate of the self is central to both psychologies; and (5) some form of "reality testing" is used to assess well-being. The idea that the self emerges as "the outcome of a gradual differentiation of internalized images of a 'self,' as distinct from internalized images of objects, and the eventual consolidation of these images into a composite schema or self-representation" (Engler, 1983, p. 33) grows out of the theories of Jacobson, Mahler, Lichtenberg, and Kernberg (p. 33). This general model proposes that an infant begins psychological life merged with the mother and experiences no distinction between "self" and "other." As the infant's psyche develops, memory traces of experience (bits and pieces) that are invested with emotional energy differentiate into experiences of self (self bits) and other (other bits). As further development takes place, the self bits and other bits coalesce into distinct images or representations of self and other, respectively (St. Clair, 2000, p. 103). This is remarkably similar to the Buddhist view of self as the consolidation of identifications with various aspects of self-experience – body sensations, perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and consciousness. Engler's 2003 formulation of self as *Multiple and Discontinuous* and as *Integral and Continuous*, based on Mitchell's ideas, relies more on Sullivan's ideas about interpersonal transactions that develop from emotionally colored interactions with significant others. In both Western

formulations, our experiences with others, including our emotional reactions, are figural in shaping our identities³³.

The authors reviewed here provide Western psychologists with new ways to think about key concepts such as awareness, perception, self, and consciousness that could alter current psychological theories of mind. Meditation experiences suggest that ordinary awareness is significantly dulled or dampened and reports of meditative awareness and insight indicate that human beings are capable of perceiving at much finer and more precise levels than Western psychological theories suggest and that perception can be enhanced with training. What would it mean if the mind is capable of distinctly apprehending each stage in the process of perception – from sensory awareness through meaning-making? As Engler points out, the primacy of the pleasure principle would be undermined and the impulse to seek pleasure and avoid pain would not ultimately be innate (1983, p. 57). This idea has implications not only for understanding the human experience but also for dealing with adversity.

Meditation experience is ultimately directed at seeing the “true nature” of the self and the world. If the self is indeed the result of a moment-by-moment process of construction, what are the implications for theories of the self and for health and well-being in Western psychology? What would it mean if we are “awareness” and awareness is a process of construction? As with many good descriptions and explanation, these authors raise as many questions as they answer and there is more to learn about psychology through the light of mindfulness.

The articles surveyed in this review indicate possibilities of human functioning that go beyond current, mainstream Western ideas. Theravadin Buddhism has held for 2500 years that mindfulness can be a path to freedom. If health can be characterized as wakeful awareness, flexible psychological functioning, lessened identification, and ease

³³ There is no single object relations theory of development. Fairbairn proposed that infants are born with “a unitary, integral ego” that is whole (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 163) and that splitting of the ego occurs in response to emotional reaction caused by impingements from others and the greater environment. Winnicott believed that “there is no such thing as a baby” independent of maternal care (1952/1958 p. 99 in St. Clair, 2000, p. 69). Instead, “the infant and the maternal care together form a unit” (1960/1965, p. 39, 43 in St. Clair, 2000, p. 70). The infant only becomes a separate, integrated “unit” in the care of a “good-enough mother.”

in living, then mindfulness can become a path to improved psychological health. This quality has been noted since Westerners began trying to understand Eastern meditation experience and it is this quality that stirred interest in therapeutic applications of the mindful attitude. There is growing interest in mindfulness-based therapies such as Dialectic Behavior Therapy (DBT) (see Linehan, 1993), Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (see Segal, Teasdale, and Williams, 2005), and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) (see Hayes, Follette, & Linehan, 2004) and in mindfulness-based adjunctive treatments such as Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (see Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Refined descriptions and psychological explanations of mindfulness phenomena are needed to better understand the possibilities, limits, contraindications, and mechanisms involved. Psychology would benefit from empirically verifying the effects of long-term mindfulness practice as they manifest in daily life.

Traditional accounts are believed to be based on direct observation and, as such, have been experientially validated over approximately 2500 years. Qualitative observation and study comprise an excellent first line of validation for any human phenomenon and Buddhist meditation masters throughout history have raised qualitative observation to a level par excellence through a process very much like a refined and enhanced phenomenological method, to use Welwood's (1996) model. While their observations may represent validation across many "participants" *in effect*, the descriptions were not likely arrived on the basis of systematic analysis of the reports of many individuals as is typically the case in contemporary qualitative inquiry. Moreover, their reports typically focus on experiences that occur during deep states of meditation by accomplished practitioners. A qualitative study of the way mindfulness manifests itself in daily life among long-term, accomplished *vipassana* meditators should provide information about the way that mindfulness manifests in daily life. As will be seen, phenomenological inquiry seems a good choice for this type of study.

Phenomenological Inquiry

Phenomenological research is an empirical method with roots in the philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. Husserl, a German philosopher, proposed a radically new, rigorous, and theoretically unbiased approach to studying things *as they appear* (Valle & Halling, 1989, p. 6). He believed it is essential to step out of cognitive schemas and intellectual theories and return to the phenomena – *to the things themselves* – as a way to better understand human experience and consciousness (p. 9). Phenomenological inquiry is a search for the essential elements of phenomena and their structure.

Heidegger, another German philosopher, added an existential orientation when he turned Husserl's methods to an investigation of human life and the nature of *being* (see, for example, *Being and Time* (1962)). Sartre also sought to combine phenomenological and existential perspectives in his explanations of human action (Kvale, 1996, p. 52). It was the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, however, who developed the most psychological form of phenomenology. He proposed that we examined experience through the lens of perception and use the body as the locus of perception. This approach provides an experience of life from inside the first-person perspective in all of its immediacy and intimacy.

Probably, the major reason for the primacy of perception in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is that it provides a direct experience of the events, objects, and phenomena of the world. Unlike thinking and language, which deal with ideas and representations of the world, perception always concerns an ongoing transaction between person and world. (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 14)

[Merleau-Ponty] advised us to be astonished by the world, to make direct contact with it, and to see it with open eyes filled with awe and wonder. 'In learning how to *see*, we learn how to *be*, how to be something other than what we were when we remained blind to the new way of seeing' (Macann, 1993, p. 170). (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 13)

The second quotation is strikingly similar to Gunaratana's description of *vipassana* – “the cultivation of the mind, aimed at seeing in the special way that leads to insight and full understanding” (1992, p. 37). There are other pronounced similarities between *vipassana* and phenomenological seeing:

For Merleau-Ponty, as for Husserl before him, intentionality³⁴ captures the fundamental structure of human experience and reveals an essential interconnectedness between us and the world. One philosophical consequence to this fundamental fact is that *person and world co-construct one another*. What this means is that the alienation we sometimes feel between ourselves and our world, or between ourselves and other people, or even between ourselves and our body, is not inevitable. If intentionality describes the fundamental configuration of human existence, then connection and relationship – not alienation and distance – describe the most general properties of our being-in-the-world and of our being-with-others (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 14).

This idea of person and world *co-constructing* or *co-constituting* each other resonates with Engler's description of the meditative experience of awareness and the object of awareness arising and passing away in a nondual manner, each coming into existence in relation to the other. Co-construction was also figural for Heidegger. He characterized the co-constitution of person and world this way:

Remove one and the notion of the other has no meaning. . . . It is impossible to conceive of a person without the familiar, surrounding world (house in which that person lives, trees among which that person walks, sky upon which that person gazes, others to whom that person talks, etc.). It is through the world that the very *meaning* of the person's existence emerges both for himself or herself and for others. The converse is equally true. It is each individual's existence that gives his or her world its meaning. Without a person to reveal its sense and meaning, the world would not exist as it does. Each is, therefore, totally dependent on the other for its existence. This is why, in existential-phenomenological thought, existence always implies that being is actually 'being-in-the-world'" (Heidegger, 1962, in Valle & Halling, 1989, p. 7)

While it is unclear whether these philosophers were addressing a direct experience, such as Engler describes, or a conceptualization of experience, the similarities in attitude, observation, and focus of attention are striking and make phenomenology a good choice for studying the experience of mindfulness.

Phenomenological inquiry is not a single research method, but rather "an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture" the goal of which is to "help the phenomenon *reveal itself more completely* than it does in ordinary experience" (Keen, 1975, p. 41). The particulars of technique for a specific investigation are shaped by the

³⁴ Intentionality refers to the directional nature of human experience. When I am aware, I am aware of *something*, and what it is that I am aware of has meaning for me. Another person in the same situation might be aware of another aspect of the experience because of its meaning to him or her.

phenomenon of interest. Phenomenological approaches are unusual in that they reject the strict Cartesian separation of subject and object and embrace the stance that subject and object are intimately interrelated. As Heidegger said, neither an individual nor his world exists separately from the other. This, however, does not mean that we are each limited to individual subjective experiences. It is possible to try to suspend our assumptions and understand the experience of some phenomena from first person descriptions provided by individuals with the relevant experience. The experience can be reported as it occurs or memories or prior experiences can be described.

As a research approach in psychology, phenomenological inquiry is the search for the essence and meaning of the first person experience of a phenomenon *as it is lived* (Valle & Halling, 1989, p. 6, 45) or *as it was lived* so that the reader comes away with a sense of the experience, whether he has lived that experience or not. This is often done through an earnest, open-ended dialogue between a researcher and her study participants although it is also possible and sometimes useful to collect and analyze a larger number of brief, written descriptions (Golledge & Pollio, 1995). When working with experience as it unfolds, the richness and complexity is present and available for exploration. When working with memory, specific incidents are solicited and each situation selected by the participant is thought to be a mnemonic nexus connecting a set of memories with a common meaning for the person in that situation. These situations are uniquely revealing in that they are personally significant, contain more meaning, and serve to structure their understanding of later experiences. Whether working in the present or with memories, participants are asked to provide as much detail as possible and one task of the researcher is to elicit further elaboration. This is done not only to obtain a rich, detailed description, but to access aspects of the experience that are either not being reflectively processed or, in the case of memory, were not reflectively processed at the time. When an experience occurs, we are most likely to be aware of and remember those aspects which are meaningful at the time but we also store unreflected details of the experience in memory and when these are retrieved and explored, new meaning is often revealed. This is part of the process of psychotherapy. Soliciting detailed descriptions of specific incidents is also

beneficial because it avoids abstract conceptualizations that may be far removed from direct experience and it simplifies the task of the interviewee because providing a detailed description is typically easier than providing a conceptual analysis. The request that participants choose and describe memories of several incidents related to the phenomenon allows each participant to describe a variety of the ways the phenomenon was experienced.

Phenomenological investigation is “radically empirical” because it is a systematic approach that aims to see and understand a phenomenon or experience with “fresh eyes;” that is, without the potentially distorting lens of pre-existing knowledge, theories, or assumptions so that the phenomenon is revealed more completely than ordinary modes of seeing allow. To do this, the researcher limits the effects of theories and pre-suppositions through a process called *bracketing* in which she attempts to suspend both everyday and theoretical assumptions while collecting and analyzing the data, and focuses instead on the immediate phenomenon and the variety of ways in which it is experienced (Valle & Halling, 1989; Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997). To facilitate the bracketing process and limit the influence of historical and contemporary explanations of the phenomenon, it is common to begin an investigation with a good, but not thorough, review of the literature. This (limited) exposure provides the necessary foundation for conceptualizing the research question and for understanding participant responses while reducing the likelihood of leading the interviewee away from the phenomenon in directions that pre-existing theory would suggest. Bracketing is thus facilitated by limiting the amount of remembered material that must be suspended or put aside.

Thematic structure of the experience emerges through a careful reading of participants’ descriptions of the phenomenon and seeks to capture what is common among their descriptions. The essence is presented as a *thematic structure* that is composed of a cluster of figural themes, their relationships, and often a background or *ground* against which the experience occurs. Phenomenological inquiry is different, in this way, from self-report measures which are based on assumptions about the phenomenon; it is also clearly different from scientific experimentation that attempts to

control and manipulate the phenomenon. The flavor and texture of the themes and of individual experiences are typically conveyed through a selection of participant quotations when reporting research findings (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). After the data are analyzed, an in-depth review of the literature is conducted. Postponing a thorough immersion in the literature until after the data are thematized, aids in bracketing and allows the findings to shape to the literature review.

Phenomenological interviews are typically conducted with 6 to 12 individuals.³⁵ These individual, open-ended interviews can run between one and two hours long and result in transcripts of 20 or more typed pages. Participants are asked to select and describe in detail a few specific incidents that stand out to them when they were aware of the phenomenon of interest (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). For example, participants in this study were asked, *“Please describe a few specific incidents that occurred in everyday life when you were aware of being mindful.”* To request participants choose and describe several incidents allows each participant to describe events that are likely to have personal significance and share a variety of the ways the phenomenon is experienced.

The meaning of the experience of the phenomenon for each participant then emerges through a careful thematic analysis of individual interviews and the overall thematic meaning of the topic emerges by comparing meanings across participants. Typically, interviews are conducted and analyzed until a high level of redundancy is reached in the emergent themes; then two additional interviews are conducted and analyzed. If no new themes surface, additional interviews are deemed unnecessary. Detailed information about the method used in this study and the philosophy behind it can be found in Thomas & Pollio (2002, p. 1-48).

Three phenomenological-style qualitative studies of mindfulness have been conducted during the past 30 years that are related to the current research. In the first investigation of this type, Kornfield (1977, 1979) used qualitative methods to obtain a description of unusual sensory and mental perceptual experiences, sleep and food consumption patterns, and learning that occurred during intensive insight meditation

³⁵ Short, written descriptions may be solicited from 100 or more people.

retreats of two weeks and of three months length. His data came from (1) unstructured self-reports following a long retreat, (2) teacher's notes from periodic student-teacher meetings during retreat, (3) short, open-ended, self-report questionnaires completed periodically during retreat, and (4) a longer, open-ended, self-report questionnaire collected approximately 3.5 months after the retreat (1977, p. 51-52). Kornfield focused on experiences that occurred during extended formal practice as a way to "supplement phenomenological data on the early stages of meditation practice and to familiarize Western psychologists with the range and patterns of experience commonly noted by beginning meditators" (1979, p. 41). While providing a rich description of experiences encountered during intense, formal meditation practice, his work did not focus on the experience of mindfulness as it occurs during everyday life.

Pietromonaco (1986) used phenomenological interviews and data analysis based on the methods of Giorgi, Becker, and Wertz (Pietromonaco, 1986, p. 24) to understand the essential structure and meaning of mindfulness *meditation* (p. 21-22). While his emphasis was on understanding meditation experience, some participants voluntarily included descriptions of mindfulness in daily life. Using an open ended interviewing process, eight *vipassana* practitioners with 3 or more years of experience, individually described their experiences of meditating. Pietromonaco's research topic was much broader than the current study because it included all mindfulness meditation experience and mindfulness in daily life represented only a portion of that experience – as volunteered by some participants. Results included nine structural elements that contain multiple factors. One of the nine major elements, called the Core Experience, includes 12 factors and most of the other elements are similarly broad, leaving the reader far short of understanding the essence of the phenomenon. He also used a population that may have attended only one long (10-day or longer) retreat. If this is the case, it seems that his study did not adequately ensure that the participants had stable, ongoing meditation practices likely to foster mindfulness in daily life.

Morales (1986) brought an educational perspective and a quasi-phenomenological approach to learn how meditators "attempt to apply the meditative attitude" to everyday

situations (p. 68). His participants were nine mindfulness meditators with a minimum of two years experience who had some association with one particular insight meditation retreat center. Many participants, however, had more experience than the required two years. The study included additional participant guidelines designed to insure that all participants were “actively engaged in living their life with a typical social interactive context” rather than immersed for an extended period of time in a meditation retreat environment (p. 79). All lived within a single metropolitan area in New England (p. 80).

Individual interviews were guided by 16 questions organized around four pre-determined lines of inquiry: (1) the nature of mindfulness meditation, (2) the context of meditation practice, (3) the experience of meditation in daily life, and (4) the effects of meditation. The third area, meditation in daily life, looked at how the meditative attitude *could be brought to bear on daily life with particular attention to problematic situations*. Morales’ overall concern was for learning, change, and the nature of change in the context of mindfulness meditation. He summarized the basic theme as “the archetypal search for inner truth, liberation, freedom, and transcendence” (p. 99). His full complement of themes are lengthy and include four themes and 14 subthemes. As with Pietromonaco’s work, the scope of Morales’ project is broader than the current research and does not simply address the experience of mindfulness as it occurs in everyday situations – applied or otherwise. Furthermore, the use of specific questions, while providing structure, can lead the discussion away from important directions that might have emerged if the discussion had been less structured.

Chapter 2

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to become intimate with all things. (A translation of Dogen, in Epstein, 2006, Transcript of a Teleteaching Course by Tricycle)

Mind is the very element in and through which we live, yet it is what is most elusive and mysterious. Bare Attention, however, by first attending patiently to the basic facts of the mental processes, is capable of shedding light on mind's mysterious darkness, and of obtaining a firm hold on its elusive flow. (Nyanaponika, 1988, p. 34)

Method of Data Collection

The methods used in this study follow procedures developed by Pollio and Thomas. (See Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; and Thomas & Pollio, 2002.) Data collection and analysis began with a bracketing interview. Another phenomenological researcher who is trained in this method interviewed me using the research question that I would pose to study participants, *“Please describe a few specific incidents from everyday life in which you were aware of being mindful.”* The interview lasted approximately two hours, was transcribed, and then analyzed by a phenomenological research group to identify the themes present in my experiences of mindfulness in everyday life. I was present during the analysis, but did not participate in the discussion, except to answer questions posed by the group. When the bracketing analysis was complete, the group discussed what they found as a way to make me mindful of the thematic elements of my experiences and alert me to potential biases that might influence the direction of subsequent participant interviews.

My mindful situations ranged from mundane (purchasing an ordinary item) to challenging (facing a potentially difficult loss). Most occurred, however, when emotions were more intense and difficult than usual and the incidents seemed to be memorable because of the resultant quieting of my emotional state. I tended to feel greater presence, heightened awareness, an opening of space (in terms of space-as-distance and spaciousness), less personalization, awareness of more possible interpretations and

outcomes while mindful. Mindfulness came and went and I spent more time being unmindful than mindful.

After the bracketing process, phenomenological interviews were conducted individually with nine “exemplars” – individuals who were deemed by experts to have a strong, stable *vipassana* practice and who had at least four years of regular (daily or several times per week) practice at the time of the interview. Although the basics of mindfulness meditation can be learned in a weekend, it takes regular practice at formal meditation to develop sufficient skill such that mindful moments will occur with relative frequency during daily life. The experts were three full-time meditation teachers who are based in different locations within the United States. Each teacher recommended three meditators who met the qualifications and interviews were conducted at locations mutually convenient to the participant and interviewer. Interviews were captured on microcassette and digital audio recorders. Participants were asked to choose pseudonyms to protect their identities and their pseudonyms were used at all stages of the research.

Each interview began with the request, “*Please describe a few specific incidents from everyday life in which you were aware of being mindful.*” As participants described a particular incident, follow-up questions were geared toward eliciting more detail about the experience, clear understanding of the language used, and the meaning of the experience for the participant. For example, when one participant said, “I think that it gave me space . . .” the interviewer followed up with the request, “Tell me more about that, the space, what that’s like.” In this way, the depth and complexity of the experience of “space,” as this participant perceived it, could be more fully explicated.

When one incident was described to the satisfaction of both participant and interviewer, the participant was asked to describe another incident and the process repeated. At one or more points, I would summarize my understanding or comment on what I perceived to be common threads running through several incidents. The participant was allowed to correct this understanding and elaborate on the common themes, as desired. As each interview approached completion, participants were asked, “*Are there other aspects of the experience of being mindful in everyday situations that we*

haven't talked about?" Interviews continued until the participant felt the experience was explored to his or her satisfaction.

In addition to detailed descriptions about particular incidents, I requested some demographic data as well as some information about the participant's meditation practice as a way to give readers a sense of the person.

Participants

Potential participants were contacted through referral by three full-time meditation teachers who live in different parts of the Eastern and Central United States. Three participants with stable meditation practices of 4 years or more were recruited from each teacher's list of recommendations. Five women and four men between the ages of 33 and 75 (average, 57 years) agreed to participate. They came from a variety of professions and included those of accountant, attorney, carpenter, chef, college professor, company CEO, psychologist, and social worker. Four were retired. At the time of the interview, all had practiced *vipassana* meditation between 4 and 21 years (average, 10.3 years), each attended one to four meditation retreats each year (average, 2 retreats per year), all but one worked in an ongoing way with a meditation teacher, and five had taught meditation for between 2 and 6 years (average, 3.6 years). Each was asked to choose a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview process. A general description of each person is given in Table 1 on page 69 and includes their pseudonym, sex, age, years of *vipassana* practice, years teaching *vipassana* meditation, the number of days they typically spend in *vipassana* retreat each year, and whether the individual works with a *vipassana* teacher on an ongoing basis. Participants were not identified by profession because anonymity might be compromised in one or two instances.

Table 1. List of Participants

Pseudonym (self-selected)	Sex	Age (years)	Experience (years)	Teaching (years)	Retreat (days/ year)	Works w/Teacher
Dharma Jo	M	64	10	-	12	yes
Gigi	F	33	4	-	5-7	yes
Jack Aubrey	M	52	12	-	35	yes
Lucas	F	73	12	-	no response	no response
Metta Blue	F	53	8	4	14	yes
Paul	M	61	21	2	14	yes
Paulette	F	55	4	3	10	yes
Reuben	M	47	17	4	24	yes
Tica	F	75	15+*	6	not specified	yes

*Plus 35 years prior experience with a similar form of meditation in another tradition

Thematic Analysis of the Narratives

Interviews were transcribed and the resulting transcripts were thematically analyzed. Each interview was carefully read and analyzed for a broad set of individual themes by the researcher alone. Additionally, three interviews (of nine) were analyzed by a group of five to eleven people who routinely analyze phenomenological interview transcripts. As a rule, the individual researcher does not participate in the group's analysis, but, rather, listens and makes notes about the findings. This procedure strengthens the bracketing process by lessening the likelihood that the analytic process will be biased by preconceptions the researcher might have. In each case, the group's analysis concurred with the analysis done by the researcher alone. When all interview transcripts were individually analyzed, a comparison was made across individual themes to identify common aspects of experience. Since different people naturally focus on different aspects of experience, the themes that are identified as common need not occur in *every* interview, although they occur in the *majority* of interviews. It is generally the case that the larger set of individual themes coalesce into the smaller set of common themes with ease, once the common structure is identified. This results in a distillation of the thematic structure for the experience of the phenomenon.

Chapter 3

RESULTS

Things are not what they seem. Nor are they otherwise. . . . Deeds exist, but no doer can be found (Attributed to D.T. Suzuki's (1978) translation of the Lankavatara Sutra, in Epstein, 1990a, p. 163).

Thoughts exist without a thinker (Bion, 1967, p. 165)

The results are given in three parts: (1) the types of experiences reported by participants, (2) thematic structure of mindfulness, and (3) non-thematic aspects.

Types of Experiences Reported

Participants reported wide and varied situations when mindfulness occurred. Figure 6 on page 71 lists the incidents grouped into the categories of home, work, traveling, personal relationships, and one's body. This grouping was suggested by the data. Some incidents, such as "being with others at work," pertained to more than one category and when this happened, the best match was selected. The list does not include repetitions. For example, several participants described incidents that occurred while driving in daily life, but driving is only listed once. Incidents ranged from the mundane, such as brushing one's teeth, to extremely good experiences, such as holding a new grandchild, or extremely difficult, such as awaiting the results of medical tests. The largest number of incidents involved other people in the context of home, work, traveling, or being with friends and family and a smaller, but respectable number occurred in relation to the participant alone.

<p>Body</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical illness and body pain Showering with a physical disability Having cancer tests Pre-menstrual period Eating Tooth brushing Depression 	<p>Traveling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Driving Driving home from a retreat Traffic jam Walking down the street Walking on a trail At the airport Encounter with an angry driver
<p>Home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doing dishes Gardening Making a shopping list Daydreaming Waking to the sound of ducks Sabbath day Lying in bed, first thing in the morning Having a pleasant experience interrupted Getting a house ready to sell Relinquishing a cherished activity 	<p>Personal Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holding a grandchild Anniversary trip Being with friends Talking with friends Talking with a neighbor On a trip with friends Eating dinner with friends Watching a grown child make decisions Helping a friend with a difficult decision A heated group discussion Feeling angry with another An awkward group discussion Being with negative people With mother after she had a bad day Visiting a retirement home Making a New Year's resolution Getting the dog to come in the house Catching the puppy chew the carpet Petting the cats
<p>Work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooking at work Using power tools Competing tasks at work Working on September 12th, 2001 Measuring on the roof of a house Working in a crawl space Talking with a difficult client Being with others at work Transitioning into retirement 	

Figure 6. Experiences Described by Participants

Thematic Structure Derived from the Narratives

The thematic structure that emerged from phenomenological analysis of participants' experiences of mindfulness in everyday life situations was interpreted to include six themes, several subthemes, and a ground from which mindful experiences emerged. These are given in Figure 7 on page 73. The names of these themes and subthemes come directly from participants' own words to better convey the first-person sense of the experience. As each theme and subtheme is discussed, quotations from the interview transcripts are provided as a way to bring the themes to life and convey the richness of the participants' experiences. Mindful moments occurred against the ground being "not mindful" and several participants described incidents when they were not mindful as a way to contextualize and contrast their mindful experiences. Illustrative quotations from these stories follow the description of themes to provide a better sense of the ground.

Participants often mentioned two or more themes when describing a specific instance of being mindful. For example, Paulette linked the themes *Spacious and Open* with *Free* when she said:

Incredible spaciousness, openness, flow. You know, . . . if I let life in, I discover it doesn't annihilate me and that's the thing I fear, somehow, that it will be too much, it will be overwhelming, it will annihilate me. (Paulette)

This short passage includes the three subthemes of Spacious, Open and Not Judging, and the flowing aspect of Freedom. No note of overlap will be made in the following passages when this occurs because it is usually apparent.

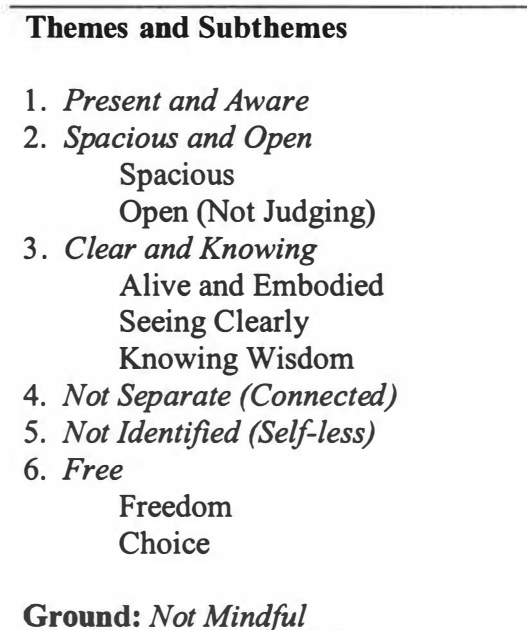


Figure 7. Themes and Subthemes of the Experience of Mindfulness

Theme 1. Present and Aware

All participants described mindfulness as a sense of being aware of what was happening in the present moment. Some spoke in terms of being “awake” or of “waking up” to the present whereas others simply noted its presence.

I feel like I’m really paying attention and when I’m really paying attention, I also feel like I’m really present and when I’m really present, I don’t long for anything. I am at home right . . . in this moment. (Paulette)

Everything just seems very present, very clear. (Paul)

We were just really working on the project at hand and taking the time to breathe and to be present with everything that was going on just at the moment . . . (Reuben)

I feel very present in the moment . . . I feel like I’m very aware (Gigi)

I was sitting on my back deck and it was a beautiful summer day and I was really enjoying this, you know, just hearing the birds and the sky was so blue, there was a little breeze and I was just aware, aware, aware. (Metta Blue)

It becomes very subtle, what you begin to be aware of. . . . You're just more aware, and more aware of everything around you and your responses. (Tica)

The focus of awareness was typically body sensations, thoughts, feelings, habits, and perceptions of what was happening around them. Several participants spoke in terms of “watching,” “observing,” and “noticing” their reactions, sensations, thoughts, and emotions.

. . . thoughts, physical reactions, emotional reactions if they are present. Yeah, it just, it includes everything that I can notice. (Paulette)

It really is just being very present with the physical body and it's contact with whatever I'm in contact with, physical contact with feet on the ground, things like that, belt around my waist, that's what I do to kinda bring myself here. (Reuben)

I experience a lot of mindfulness when I'm gardening. . . . when I even get close to the garden . . . I just feel real present to what's right in front of me and . . . I see the peas growing up the strings and I hear the birds that are in the trees next to me. (Gigi)

Theme 2. Spacious and Open

The theme *Spacious and Open*, includes two subthemes (1) Spacious and (2) Open and Not Judging, representing two related qualities that were often mentioned together.

An awareness of a certain, a certain openness and spaciousness (Lucas)

Incredible spaciousness, openness, flow. (Paulette)

What I felt was just a big sky heart, big, open, spacious heart (Jack Aubrey)

The first subtheme, Spacious, addresses a felt sense of space – a spacious mind, a spacious body, a spacious environment, spacious time. The second subtheme, Open (Not Judging), includes experiences of acceptance, peace, calm, and contentment.

Subtheme A: Spacious

This quality was generally conveyed by the words “space,” “spacious,” and “spaciousness.” Spaciousness was experienced physically and mentally and Jack Aubrey

even characterized time as feeling more spacious and receptive when he is mindful. Some spoke of space around thoughts and experience. Paul spoke of “space-distance” from judgment. Some incidents involved finding “a little space,” some great spaciousness, others involved finding the “space that’s there.”

It feels spacious. . . . there’s a feeling of ease in my chest where there used to be that pushing forward feeling, so it is a . . . spacious place, physically and then mentally it is a spacious place. (Paulette)

It kind of revolves around the breath, I think. . . . and then ... here’s this physical feeling of space, not in terms of distance, but . . . in a way the space is interesting, [it] is space-distance from my own judgments . . . and it gives me a better chance to see it more clearly. (Paul)

When I am aware of the thoughts, I just experience them differently. . . . there’s a little space there where I don’t feel tight and I’m able to kind of see the tightness, . . . And then the tightness, I can see it soften. (Gigi)

Moments seem to expand so that . . . there seems to be time for whatever has to take place, it doesn’t seem like anything’s hurried. And . . . whatever that wants to arise can arise. So, there’s . . . more of a receptivity to the time. (Jack Aubrey)

You know when I’m really spacious, . . . I’m also spacious physically. (Metta Blue)

Paul, Paulette, and Dharma Jo described a sense of “stepping back” or “stepping aside” into a more spacious place. They and others also said that this space offered the chance to see things “more clearly,” to “watch,” and to go more deeply into experience.

There is an awareness then a stepping back (Paul)

It’s . . . similar to physically stepping back from some object so that you can look at it more objectively than you can up close. (Dharma Jo)

It seems as though I step aside. It feels as though I sort of step out of the situation and that’s the place where I watch it from . . . So, of course, I can feel everything and yet it’s just not quite so personal. (Paulette)

Subtheme B. Open (Not Judging)

The second aspect of openness refers to a personal feeling-sense of openness, acceptance, and non-judgment. This subtheme includes qualities of balance,

centeredness, ease, peace, lightness and contentment since they all were typically associated with this quality of openness.

I can feel it in my body that there's this sense of openness and ease and relaxation that comes along with it. (Reuben)

It was a more spacious feeling. More spacious and it was centered, I would say. . . I'm not sure if it's an exact physical thing, but it's a sense of . . . allowing whatever happens is okay. . . . And I clearly didn't like this, but it was okay. So I got to a place where it was okay to have him kind of ranting on with an attitude. (Jack Aubrey)

If I'm mindful, then I feel that . . . I'm balanced. . . . There's a lightness to being aware. . . . I don't feel like there's any resistance when I feel the lightness. . . . there's an openness and a lightness and an acceptance. (Lucas)

What are you letting go of? You're letting go of control. You're letting go of the illusion that . . . this is very difficult to put into words . . . the illusion of existence, the illusion that this is, and it's sort of like just flowing with it, just allowing the illusion to melt, or it has already melted. So I do just sort of let go, I do just sort of let go. I don't go back a lot, to the past. (Tica)

There's a sense of kindness to myself, there's a sense of okayness that whatever I say is okay, so there's a self acceptance and some kindness and . . . there's a sense of self-value. I'm just okay just the way I am right now. (Jack Aubrey)

I feel like I'm really paying attention and when I'm really paying attention, I also feel like I'm really present, and when I'm really present, I don't long for anything. I am at home right in that, in this moment. (Paulette)

Theme 3. Clear and Knowing

The theme *Clear and Knowing* was often linked with the theme *Spacious and Open*, suggesting that these themes are closely related. *Clear and Knowing* has three subthemes: (1) *Alive and Embodied*, (2) *Seeing Clearly* and (3) *Knowing Wisdom* all of which address clarity in relation to the body, perception, and understanding, respectively. These subthemes were often mentioned together.

Subtheme A. Alive and Embodied

Several participants reported that mindfulness is a body-oriented experience. They described using their bodies to access or increase mindfulness and as an important focus of awareness while mindful.

It seems like being mindful and being present to what's going on around me is a very physical thing . . . (Gigi)

The way that I practice mindfulness is just being in my body. For me, it's always the grounding element to be present with whatever's going on with me. I feel myself in my body. That's what brings me here. So with the tools, it's contact with whatever I'm, for example, if I'm cutting wood, with the wood itself and contact with the tool, contact of the sound. . . . Feet on the ground, things like that, belt around my waist, that's what I do to kinda bring myself here. You know, take a breath and just feel myself, feel the blood pulsing, feel the sense contact with whatever with my hands. (Reuben)

What the body feels like when I'm experiencing spaciousness in the thoughts? . . . the body feels more relaxed, it feels more, it's moving in a, more smoothly, my actions feel more smooth . . . I guess they feel deliberate . . . like the thought of what I want to do and what I'm doing is kind of a free flowing thing. . . . my actions feel kind of skilled in a way, like I feel . . . how I'm doing things, I can feel kind of, the knowledge that my body knows how to do a certain thing . . . but it's not really a mental thing, so much as just . . . an experience. (Gigi)

I was aware of a huge energetic turmoil in my body. I just felt like I was quaking inside and like I'd been yanked loose from all of the moorings that generally keep me in a peaceful state. I just couldn't believe the intensity, the energy that was just ricocheting around in my body and in my mind. So when I sat on the couch for those few minutes, I actually was watching that. (Paulette)

This is kind of quiet awareness. . . and I think a lot of the awareness relates to tuning into my body and seeing what's going on with me physically. This feeling that some part of my body is beginning to react in a way like becoming tense, my jaw becoming tense is a real sign for me [of a reaction]. (Paul)

I'm mindful right now of my body. I think that the body has really been the focus of my mindfulness, probably for the last year and a half. And it's very, very effective in pulling me into the moment. If I'm driving, I try to aware of how the body feels, moving with the car, where my legs are. (Lucas)

Subtheme B. Seeing Clearly

Participants spoke of seeing and experiencing things more clearly. They were aware of greater richness, greater depth, more detail, more facets, and more complexity in experiences when mindful. Some spoke of a clarity and quietness of mind and of seeing from the "heart" or soul. Metta Blue spoke of seeing things "as they really are."

There was a richness in everything that we did and . . . to this day . . . the memory [is] very, very strong . . . the air was particularly crisp and it was a lovely day but it was probably not unlike so many others. But . . . the detail of it was just so rich,

the leaves, the color of the leaves, the sound of the birds, the smells, the feel of the air, the contact of our tool belts, of the dust and the smell of the wood that we had been smelling every day and birds were singing every day, but . . . everything was much more focused, much more finely attuned, you know, like sense of smell was better, my vision was better, my hearing was better, I don't know if better was the right word, but it was sharper. It was really so, so sharp. And literally, I think, my vision was that things just seemed so detailed. (Reuben)

I don't feel so much, you know, I don't feel separateness that I can feel sometimes from other people or just some of the world, some of the world around me, but the woods around me, I feel like I just hear things more clearly, colors seem a little brighter. (Gigi)

I have a real actual experience of, a much richer, more complex experience, multifaceted experience, which is ultimately much more satisfying than the, than the half-way attentive experiences that I have otherwise. (Paulette)

Some participants described seeing subtleties and nuances that typically went unnoticed when they were not mindful.

It becomes very subtle, what you begin to be aware of. (Tica)

I just try to, I just sort of watch it happen, watch this little bit. . . . It's more than your eyes involved. I'm noticing the physical feelings. I'm noticing any other nuances that might be popping up, memories or fear. (Paulette)

Like I said, I can almost see the thought, the words and sentences and stuff, but there's . . . fewer of them, they don't seem all tangled up on top of one another . . . I can distinguish the different thoughts more. And . . . there's fewer of them . . . I don't feel my body contract around them so much . . . there's almost more of a completeness to them, too. They're not these kind of jagged kind of jumping from one thought to another and it seems almost like complete sentences, I experience the beginning of the sentence and the end of it and then it goes. (Gigi)

I'm seeing at times some of the more subtle judgments, some of the more subtle ways in which judgments manifest themselves in me. (Paul).

Subtheme C. Knowing Wisdom

Several participants spoke of a felt sense of knowing or wisdom that did not emerge from thinking. One participant called it "an intuitive thing."

It's really hard to describe because there's a . . . a knowing. I know I keep using that word. There's a wisdom about the way things really are. . . . It's really hard to put into words. I don't even know how to . . . it's just a sense that is so profound. It's unshakable, there is a *knowing*. You know how you *know*

something? You just *know* it to be true? It's that kind of very solid, no question that this is the way it really is . . . from a place that is devoid of ego. It's a very humbling sense or a sense of humility in just knowing. And it's a really profoundly beautiful place to reside. (Metta Blue)

Knowing is a good word. . . . You just know. (Tica)

I think another way to think about that, for me, is a sense of there's not any self doing anything so that the things that I did were just flowing from somewhere, some inner wisdom, some outer wisdom, something. . . . and by that I don't mean any sense of perfection, either . . . I was doing the best I could in the moment and however it came out was going to be fine. And, so, things falling into place meant that my actions were not motivated by some turmoil . . . falling into place just meant that I was following my inner wisdom. (Jack Aubrey)

It's actually a moment of feeling there's a wisdom, there's a humility, seeing things clearly, knowing who I am in relation to what arises. A deep knowing . . . a deep knowing that all is well. (Metta Blue)

I have a decision to make about what action I'm going to do and accepting the consequences of the action and not deciding whether it's right or wrong, but looking at it and trying to make a clear decision about what to do or what not to do. (Interviewer: And what do you base that decision on?) It's an intuitive thing. It's more intuitive, rather than intellectual. (Tica)

Theme 4. Not Separate (Connected)

Some participants spoke of feeling “no separation” (or less separation) from self, others, world, or experience. Other participants used the word “connection” to describe a similar quality. Each instance suggests an awareness of being part of something larger than oneself but the experiences they described were not ones of merger.

That sense of connection that I talk about is that same . . . connection to source energy. I'm very aware of that. That is in all things – *All things*. And that connectedness is so obvious. You know, I lose connections. It's so *obvious* and . . . I take things so seriously when I'm disconnected and they're catastrophic or some degree of importance, that when I'm connected, I see them so clearly. (Metta Blue)

We were so, both of us were so tuned into it. It was really like a very heart-opening and very heart-breaking, the whole day had the experience of this heart-opening in that we were just, you know, embracing everything. There . . . was really no feeling of separation, of my friend and the work and everything, you know we were all organically flowing with each other. (Reuben)

Everything just seems very present, very clear. . . . maybe a sense of less separation between self and other. (Paul)

The not being separate feels like . . . not so much that I'm me kind of closed off in this body with my thoughts, but I feel like I'm part of this energy that's in the room or in the car. . . . I feel I really listen to what people say . . . and it feels to me that there's this kind of collective energy of the room, it's not just each individual person and what their energy is, there's but this kind of collective . . . energy. I feel very present in the moment. 'Seems like they seem to go together usually. I feel like I'm very aware. (Gigi)

Mindfulness leads to, it's like a doorway to that connection. Without the mindfulness, I don't know how to get through the doorway. (Metta Blue)

When I have that feeling of not being separate from people, I'll usually act more skillfully because it just seems to follow, I guess, that . . . if I'm not feeling separate, I don't want to hurt this person because it would hurt me, too. (Gigi)

Theme 5. Not Identified (Self-less)

Participants spoke about feeling less identified with their thoughts, feelings, emotions, reactions and expectations when they were mindful. Experiences and reactions seemed less personal and there was less sense of a "self." Some likened the arising of reactions, thoughts, and emotions to "conditioned" processes that occur whenever the right factors are present, much as pushing the play button on a loaded tape player would cause the tape play.

I can feel everything and yet it's just not quite so personal. I don't have so much identification with it. I know that I am a conditioned being and I'm watching it more from that perspective, look at what this conditioning is doing. (Paulette)

To wake up, to be attentive to the fact that this is a . . . conditioned response, the conditions are present, it touches whatever object it touches, the response happens . . . I don't identify, I don't have to identify with this as being who I am or what I am 'cause . . . if I did, then I'm an angry, . . . depressed, paranoid, frightened, whatever. Then you can see why people go nuts because they identify with the thought processes. (Reuben)

I could feel myself coming from a place . . . which I guess I would say is somewhat different than ordinary consciousness and I was not identified with the fact that he'd accused us of this stuff and I very calmly explained the way that I saw it and just put it out there. (Jack Aubrey)

You don't take it personally, it's not something your body is doing to you, it's what it [the body] does. And more and more I just see that this is what the mind does. . . . I mean the mind's big wonderful gift is that it can think and it likes to think. It loves it! . . . and given a sliver of a chance, the mind's going to think. That's all, it's just going to think. . . . But it's just what the mind does, presented with any stimulus that's just what it does, so I don't have to take it personally and presented with the stimulus of mindfulness, it also settles down. I can't take any big credit for that, either. It's just another condition. (Paulette)

It's not about me anymore. . . it's not about you anymore, it never has been. (Tica)

But simply by sitting with something that I experienced as being very unpleasant in my body without feeding the story or personalizing it, it eventually subsided. (Lucas)

How did mindfulness come into play there? . . . I guess I would say that I was able to sit in a place . . . where I was not so much of a self. (Jack Aubrey)

If I'm feeling a pleasantness, if I'm feeling an openness or a spaciousness . . . and I just go into that, then it's kind of leaving self-identity behind. (Lucas)

I was aware that she [another driver] had this energy developing towards me. And a few seconds later, the turns had all occurred and all the shifts were made and then there was an opening and she made a quick right hand passing of me and as she went by, she just gave the full hand gesture, the full facial expression and I just looked at it and her expression just went completely through me and didn't stick on anything. And I just realized, . . . my first response to her was, how difficult it must be to be in her body and be pushing herself like that every day, going to work in such a place of anger. (Jack Aubrey)

Theme 6. Free

The theme *Free*, with the subthemes *Freedom* and *Choice*, includes the experiences of having fewer constraints and/or impediments and of having more options. Within the subtheme *Freedom*, there are references to flow, free-flowing, and unfolding which capture a quality of effortlessness and of free movement in time and space. Tica spoke of both freedom and choice when she said:

The choice is always ours, mindfully ours from moment to moment and there's a great deal of freedom in that. There's no one really, basically, telling you what to do, when to do, how to do it. . . . A lot of people don't understand this, but I have an expression for it, I call it "brailing." . . . You're kind of brailing it, you're kind of sensing your way through it, you know, in a very, almost tactile way and you're making choices in relation to this brailing that you're doing to try to

figure out what the next move is. But I think there's a great deal of freedom in that, responsibility, but . . . there's a lot of freedom there.

Subtheme A. Freedom

Several participants used the words “free” and “freedom” in relation to mindful moments. The words “flow” and “unfolding” were sometimes used to describe the experience of body, thoughts, emotions, and activities.

Sometimes it [mindfulness] feels like a grace. Particularly when it seems to arise by itself, it feels like grace. It feels like a door. (Interviewer: To where?) Freedom. But . . . it's the freedom to be in life, to be in existence without so much guarding and . . . self protection. (Paulette)

I don't think I consciously let go. I don't think I go at it that way. . . . I think there's a freedom . . . about the practice that you see the impermanence, you see the transitoriness of everything. And so, in a way, the letting go happens in spite of you. I mean, if you didn't let go, it would be gone anyway. (Tica)

Just with the basic allowing, with the basic intention . . . to be more aware and more awake in the moment, . . . the natural connection and the natural grace of the whole . . . system . . . seems to just unfold itself. It's like getting out of the way. . . if we get out of our own way, . . . if we just be present for it and watch it's unfolding . . . (Reuben)

There's just a sense of flow from my body. There're no hot-spots, so to speak. And there's a sense of freshness that I feel. (Jack Aubrey)

And . . . my body felt very relaxed and my thoughts felt very, just kind of free flowing, . . . and [I'm] listening to what he had to say and it just kind of goes through me almost . . . my mind didn't feel like it was . . . grabbing onto thoughts or opinions or whatever it was, the emotions that were coming through me, the thoughts were just kind of going through me and I felt I was experiencing them very fully, but . . . but at the same time, able to just kind of let go of them and move on to the next, whatever we were talking about. (Gigi)

There was really no feeling of separation, of my friend and the work and everything, you know we were all organically flowing with each other. (Reuben)

Subtheme B. Choice

Some participants spoke of having more choice in their lives which was described as a form and expression of freedom.

Until I got into *vipassana*, I didn't know there was a choice. I didn't know what the concept of mindfulness was, being present in the moment. So I was on automatic pilot, just going, doing, reacting, whatever. But once you know there's a choice, something else you can do, then every moment that's an option – mindful or not. (Metta Blue)

I just feel now that I have a choice. If I bring mindfulness in, I could still feel all of those really unpleasant sensations but I just know that's a physical reaction and a mental reaction and that's really all it is, to a perceived threat, that's really all it is. And I don't have to worry about talking myself out of whether it's a threat or not. And I also don't have to give my mind free reign to go construct a huge edifice of fear out of a little tiny thing. (Paulette)

It's just an arising that can be reacted to or . . . [not], you know. There are choices, I realize, that we do have in how we respond to our responses, how we react to these reactions. (Reuben)

Well, it was just a feeling of, of making the decision that that was the better alternative, I guess. I was mindful that it was better to be safe than to have my bike, if that's the choice. (Dharma Jo)

Ground: Not Mindful

To help convey the differences between mindful moments and unmindful moments, several participants described incidents when they were not mindful. Most called this mode of being “mindless” or “not mindful.” One called it “everyday mind.” Aspects of this experience are listed in Figure 8 on page 84 and select quotations follow. It is interesting and easy to see how the essence of unmindful experiences reflect the opposite of the mindful themes. It is important to note that everyday mind was not described as a fixed mode of being, but, like mindfulness, represents a range of being.

The majority of the time I'm someplace else. . . . most of the time, it's sort of a mindless, hectic, kind of dashing, thinking. (Lucas)

When I get caught up in things, which I do frequently . . . I think my mind gets into the story and gets absorbed into the story whatever that theme is and [I] have really very little awareness of what I'm experiencing physically, very little awareness of what I'm experiencing emotionally or in my thoughts, and just kind of blundering ahead. (Paul)

When I'm not mindful, I'm easily frustrated, I can make myself upset about a situation easily, I can get angry easily. The opposite is true when I am mindful. (Dharma Jo)

Being unaware of what is happening at the moment
Attention is on the future or past, not the present
Not paying attention
Being absorbed in and identified with sensations, emotions, thoughts, and habitual responses
Being centered in the ego
Things seem personal
Being wrapped up in the emotional drama
Wanting things to be different
Wanting to control things
Being attached to outcomes
Things seem too serious or urgent
Emotional torment
Mind darting all over
A storm of thought
Mind chatter
Mind rolling along on its own
Mind spinning out “stories”(imagined scenarios)
Chains of imaginative thought are reacted to as if “real”
Lost or caught up in an experience and reacting with conditioned responses but not aware that
you are
Following habitual tendencies without being aware of reacting habitually
Feeling driven or impelled to behave a certain way
Reacting rather than responding
Acting compulsively
Feeling contracted, heavy, twisted in knots, tight, tense, wound up, disconnected
Feeling **uncentered**, my **energy** is “out there”

Figure 8. Examples of the Experience of Not Being Mindful.

I began to notice how *mindlessly* I eat even if it's something I really like. So, I've been looking forward to having a bowl of ice cream and anticipating enjoying this ice cream and then I'll sit down to eat it and consume half of it before I know it's gone. And that was . . . a really good wake-up call for me because I realized that . . . something in me doesn't even want to be present even during a pleasant situation and Wow! How strange is that? (Paulette)

When I kind of let myself be absorbed in the thoughts . . . I experience the tightness . . . I feel like my whole being is just really tight and . . . I usually stop talking so much . . . sometimes my face will get warm and just, there's a feeling of being very separate from other people around me. (Gigi)

You know, I lose connections. It's so *obvious* and . . . I take things so seriously when I'm disconnected and they're catastrophic or some degree of importance, that when I'm connected, I see them so clearly. But when I'm in it, when I'm in that place of disconnection, it seems just like a dream. It seems so real and I take it seriously. (Metta Blue)

If I don't pay attention and I'm not mindful, I can work myself into an absolute twit and become very . . . compulsive. I can overwork. In fact, I find now . . . that any kind of overindulgence is related to whether I'm mindful or not mindful. (Lucas)

Non-Thematic Aspects of Mindful Experience

The incidents described by participants of mindful and nonmindful moments were rich beyond this thematic structure and included aspects of mindful experience in relation to time. Figure 9 below lists these key features. All participants described mindfulness in daily life as something that comes and goes.

-
1. *Mindfulness Comes and Goes*
 2. *Facilitating Factors*
 - Intention and Choice*
 - Practice*
 - Environment*
 - Triggers and Cues*
 - Body and Perceptual Awareness*
 3. *Changes Over Time*
-

Figure 9. Non-thematic Aspects of the Experience of Mindfulness in Everyday Life

Mindfulness Comes and Goes

I have lots of moments of mindfulness during the day. (Paulette)

For some part of every day I am mindful and some part of every day I am not. (Jack Aubrey)

I will be aware or mindful . . . of maybe my sitting posture and maybe . . . how the shoes feel on my foot, how the clothes feel on my back. . . . But that's not the majority of the time. The majority of the time I'm someplace else. But that mindfulness may recur many, many, many times during the day. (Lucas)

Mindfulness is not easy. . . . most of my time is spent . . . reacting to what's going on around me . . . and sort of on automatic pilot. Going along being swept away by this stream or that stream or you know, mind just being ever so active and clever. (Metta Blue)

I guess you'd say ups and downs or cycles. Everyday I think that I'm not mindful. There are times everyday that I am mindful. (Dharma Jo)

Participants described being aware of the shift into being mindful.

Driving down the expressway, just sort of oblivious to everything and then seeing the exit that you need to take and having that action moment right there, waking up, *Oh!* (Metta Blue)

I was at work and somehow, I was not mindful and then for a moment I was. So sometimes it can just come to you in the moment. (Jack Aubrey)

My first reaction was to yell at them to move, "You're blocking traffic." But then I decided that maybe I would just breathe and let it go. . . . You know, I've been doing this so long, I guess it's kind of automatic. . . . I think that's a function of having meditated for as long as I have. Maybe, I don't know. It's just a good habit. (Dharma Jo)

The trigger is like . . . I've been in this [situation] for several minutes and all of a sudden I realize, "Um, wait a minute. What's happening here?" (Paul)

I feel like what usually kind of brings me back into feeling mindful is, I just will get a sense of my breath all of a sudden, just, I'll just feel myself breathe in and breathe out and almost immediately, it kind of puts me in, and I hear the sounds around me more. I feel my body more. (Gigi)

Sometimes it feels like a grace. Particularly when it seems to arise by itself, it feels like grace. It feels like a door. (Paulette)

In contrast, those who described the shift back to being unmindful rarely noticed the change.

I'll know it's [mindfulness] gone the next time I realize I need it again. But I don't watch it leave. (Paulette)

It was really clear to me about how I can in the blink of an eye be swept away in the moment with all kinds of stories about what's going on in this moment. (Metta Blue)

I was being mindful when I noticed the judgment and the physical urging to move faster. And then that mindfulness continued then until, as I watched the feeling come and go and the physical sensations come and go. And then I probably dropped out of mindfulness then and went back to driving just ordinarily. (Reuben)

The experience of mindfulness ranged from a simple increase in awareness about what was happening, such as when you are driving with your mind elsewhere and suddenly see your exit (Metta Blue), to radical shifts in perspective that resulted in a qualitative shift in experience, such as feeling connected to “the source energy” (Metta Blue). This is represented in Figure 10 on page 88 as levels on a continuum, although this representation is a simplification. Participants' stories did not suggest a linear continuum, but clearly showed variety in the constellation and intensity of figural thematic elements. When asked the follow-up question, “Is the mindfulness always the same?” to clarify understanding of several stories related by Metta Blue, she responded, “I guess there are different levels.” Varying degrees of the experience of the themes *Not Identified (Self-less)*, *Spacious and Open*, and *Not Separate (Connected)* are depicted graphically by the shift from solid to increasingly dotted lines.

God/
The Divine

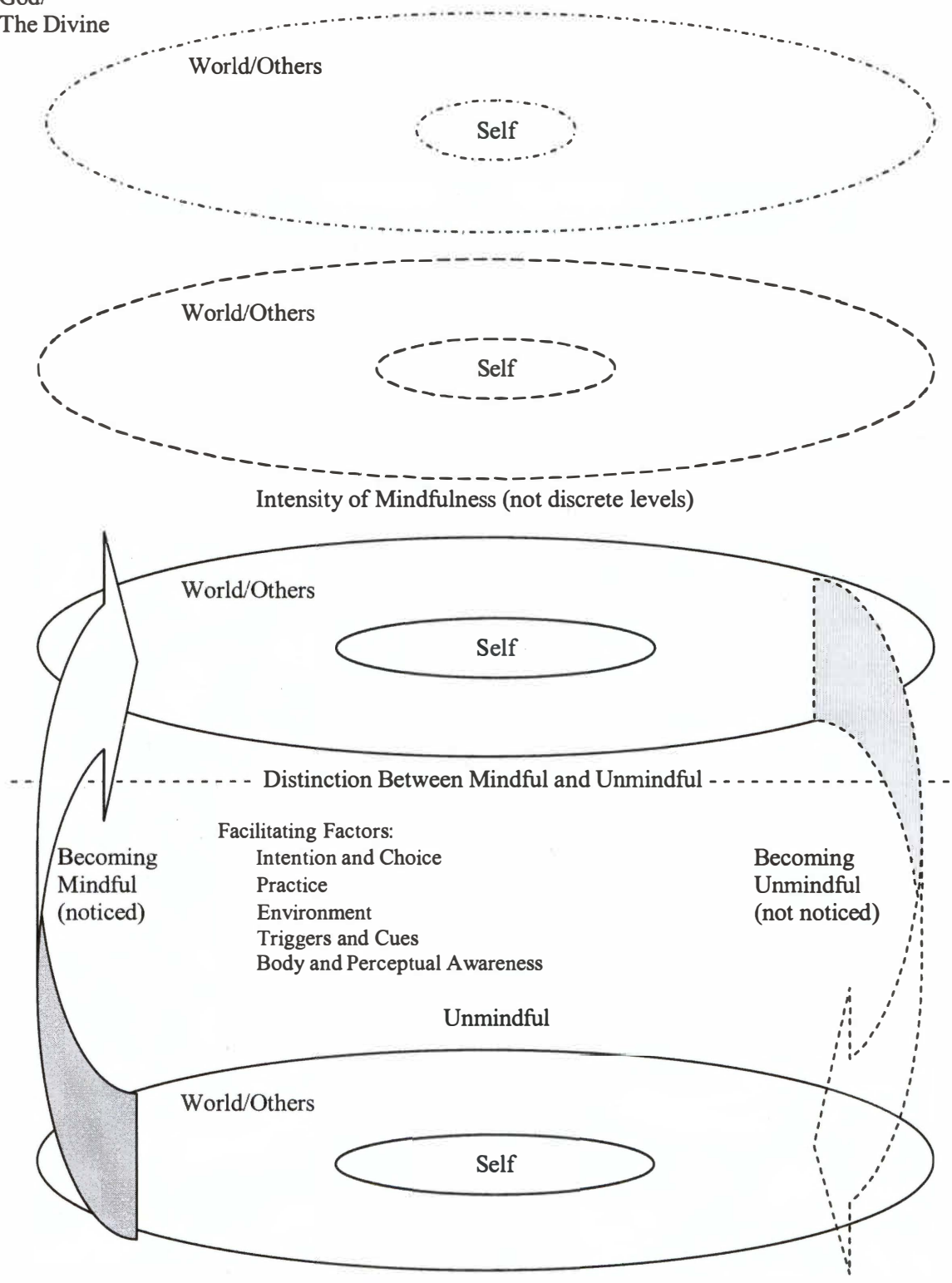


Figure 10. Shifting into Mindfulness and the Experience of Self and World/Others

Facilitating Factors

A list of facilitating factors is included in Figure 10 on page 88 and study participants gave many examples of each.

1. Intention and Choice

Then at some point, I might become aware that, Oh, I'm thinking. I'm not mindful, I'm thinking. And then at that moment, I might go, Okay, feet, feet, keep your mind on your feet. If you're walking, keep your mind on your feet, you know. And then once the mind is on the feet, then maybe you can take in some other sensations, other stimulus. (Lucas)

For example, brushing my teeth, the decision just be here, just be here. That's a decision. And then when I catch myself planning my day, Oop! come back, come back, come back. And when I catch myself doing something else, Oop! come back. So, in that respect, whenever I leave this moment and I catch myself, Oop!, then it's a decision to go back into it. (Metta Blue)

It just does seem to be such a natural process if we allow it. It's like allowing this seed to sprout, that we can really lay good groundwork, and we can really nurture the soil and provide whatever we can do, but then just allowing the process. In my experience that's really . . . how it works for me. . . . We know technique and it's good . . . to get in touch with "Okay, how do we feel our body? How do we feel sensation?" . . . So to be more aware, [it] is necessary, to be in our bodies. . . . If we're always off in chatterland or something then we're not that present unless there's something very strong or striking. But . . . [it is] just with the basic allowing, with the basic intention, rather, to be more aware and more awake in the moment, that the natural connection and the natural grace of the whole, of the whole system seems to, seems to just unfold itself. (Reuben)

I think the choice is to say, "Yes, I have an intention to stay mindful." . . . And maybe grace brings it when it happens. Ah . . . I can't say why today, when I was in the middle of that phone call all of a sudden I said, "Well maybe I just sit here and listen. Maybe that's all he wants." But was it a moment of grace? Was it a choice? . . . Mostly it seemed like it was the result of practice. So I guess I'd say that it's a fruit of practice. (Jack Aubrey)

I try to be mindful and stay in the present moment when I'm in traffic jams. That's an almost daily occurrence. Waiting in a line which happens when you're shopping and so forth. I try to practice mindfulness then and use those moments for mini meditations. (Dharma Jo)

2. Practice

It has to be a choice, it is a choice. It doesn't just befall a person. It doesn't happen that way. It's practice, practice, practice, practice. (Metta Blue)

I think the mindfulness works in spite of me because of the years of practice, it's . . . it's like once you start breathing, you breathe. Well, once you really set this in motion and you really practice it, it works, it works, it works. (Tica)

I was experiencing myself in a place of being mindful where I was and doing the practices that we do which is being present to what's, what one current experience is, so I was practicing all evening. (Jack Aubrey)

So you can have these, you know, moments of mindfulness, you know, deep moments of being present and it can be very quick and then it leads to a little more mindfulness for the next moment and the next moment and the next moment. (Reuben)

Right after I leave a retreat and then come back into my daily life, I'm able to experience that awareness and that not feeling separate more intensely and more sustained. (Gigi)

And the effect of practice after many years.

I've been doing this so long, I guess it's kind of automatic. (Dharma Jo)

It does just come on after a certain number of years, the mindfulness just becomes more natural. But there's also many times that I have to keep queuing myself, this moment, this moment. (Metta Blue)

So I really don't go at it [mindfulness] . . . it's not something I do. It's there for me, but I'm not always 100% awake to it. . . It's something that I started more like 50-some odd years ago in another tradition, and just changed the name of it and the way of doing it. (Tica)

3. Facilitating Environments

It's an organic kind of thing where certain things work in certain situations and then they don't in other situations and . . . certain practices can help facilitate . . . going to retreats or sitting every day. (Gigi)

I would say, a walk in the woods, I experience, for me, around nature and for so many people it seems, . . . in the natural world . . . there's a releasing or a feeling of just being very present and being connected can be strong. (Reuben)

I have to be in a really quiet space, I mean I have to be sitting, maybe sitting, standing . . . with no interruptions, no television, no other noise except maybe nature. (Lucas)

I like to live in the woods and have a place that's quiet and where there's natural things going on around me because that, I know that I have a tendency to be more aware and to act more skillfully when I'm able to, it just helps my mind to

quiet some and for me to be more present when I'm able to be in a surrounding like this. And . . . it's probably why I like being around animals . . . and children too . . . they just have that natural tendency of being present in the moment . . . and certain people are like that, too, and I like spending time with those people because it's easier for me to be that way also. (Gigi)

4. Triggers and Cues

Well, lots of things just shock you into the moment. Just to be able to wake up to any of those little things that shock you into seeing the present. (Reuben)

So being more mindful in contrast to being caught up is really, um . . . some way something triggers me to be a little more aware at that moment than I am when I get caught up. (Paul)

There's so much forgetting that I do, forgetting to be present, that . . . I cue myself, just this moment, this moment, this moment. But then . . . once I've practiced it over and over and over and over and over and the sitting practice just gives way to mindfulness, just here. Both happen. (Metta Blue)

I heard this little tape of Thich Nhat Hanh a little while back and he talked about . . . stopping at stoplights and using it as being grateful for the red light and . . . reminding you to come back to your breath. . . . And so when I'm at stoplights, I tend to remember that and . . . I breathe and so I come back to my awareness . . . but it definitely is a lot about remembering to do it. (Gigi)

My wife is also a *vipassana* meditator and I think we help each other because sometimes she'll say to me, you know, "Breathe." And I do the same for her, because she will let some situation upset her and I'll say, "Breathe." (Dharma Jo)

5. Body and Perceptual Awareness

That is a primary way that I get myself back into the present, by feeling, noticing what my body's feeling. (Paulette)

The way that I practice mindfulness is just being in my body. For me, it's always the grounding element to be present with whatever's going on with me. I feel myself in my body. That's what brings me here. (Reuben).

I go through periods of not being mindful. I feel like what usually kind of brings me back into feeling mindful is, I just will get a sense of my breath all of a sudden . . . I'll just feel myself breathe in and breathe out and almost immediately . . . I hear the sounds around me more, I feel my body more. (Gigi)

Then at some point, I might become aware that, "Oh, I'm thinking. I'm not mindful, I'm thinking." And then at that moment, I might go, "Okay, feet, feet, keep your mind on your feet." If you're walking, keep your mind on your feet,

you know. And then once the mind is on the feet, then maybe you can take in some other sensations, other stimulus. (Lucas)

I come back to brushing my teeth, feeling the toothbrush on my gums, you know, feeling all the coordinated hand and arm movements and neck and back and all of the physical nuances. Like that is a primary way that I get myself back into the present, by feeling, noticing what my body's feeling. (Paulette)

Changes Over Time

Several participants described changes over time that they attributed to their mindfulness practice. Their experience of mindfulness changed: it became more effortless and natural, it came on more frequently, and it could be experienced in more situations. Participants indicated that they changed: their habits and reactions changed, their thinking changed, and they found life's challenges somewhat easier.

I used to think that there was no way to be mindful and make a profit at the work because it had to be at a slow pace. But mindfully racing . . . works for me also. . . . like I said, I can't be quite as attentive to aspects of my body, but that doesn't mean that I can't be mindful, you know, aware of the process of cutting and doing and sawing and . . . rushing and what it feels like to be rushing and things like that. (Reuben)

I'm generally a lot more mindful than I was . . . 10 years ago or 20 years ago. . . . It's a matter of a little bit of growth, a little bit more mindfulness each day, maybe. And I know that I'm in a different place now than I was 10 years ago, but to measure that quantitatively might be pretty hard. I don't know that I could. I just know that I'm in a much better place than I used to be. Now, having said that, I also recognize that I'm not finished with growth, by a long stretch, okay. (Dharma Jo)

Mindfulness will arise and, I think, in my experience, the, I don't know, the tape doesn't run as long or the reaction isn't as deep, as deeply ingrained, so I guess I'm choosing, really, to carve a new channel with some different kind of conditioning that involves a whole lot less suffering. (Paulette)

I practiced mindfulness, but at that point, mindfulness became essential for me and then it carried over more, you know, during the day. (Lucas)

After a certain number of years, the mindfulness just becomes more natural. (Metta Blue)

There's really not any effort, you know, to be present like this, there's not much effort. It's just that you can't get away from it, you can't, and I don't say that in

an unpleasant way, it's just that you're just more aware, and more aware of everything around you and your responses. (Tica)

I know there are many things that I would used to get upset about or judge about that just wash off me now. It's like it's just not an issue anymore. I don't know if that's aging or what it is, but I know mindfulness has played a major role in that. (Paul)

The other thing about the practice is that I lived in my head and the practice has put me in my body more than in my head. (Tica)

The six major themes describe facets of the experience that were figural across the majority of participants. Some themes, such as *Clear and Knowing*, encompassed related, but qualitatively different subthemes, such as clarity experienced in body, perception, and mind. The non-thematic qualities, *Mindfulness Comes and Goes*, *Facilitating Factors*, and *Changes Over Time*, do not describe the mindfulness experience itself, but rather, the experience of mindfulness across time: moment-by-moment and across years. The consistency of the reports of the non-thematic aspects showed them clearly to be important parts of this larger experience of mindfulness.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION

In a very real sense, neither meditation nor non-dualistic experiences can ever be completely understood objectively, with the tools and categories of thinking mind, precisely because their nature is to transcend these categories. Meditation is not so much a particular delimited experience, but is rather a way of seeing through experience, always eluding any attempt to pin it down conceptually. Therefore, no attempt to discuss meditation psychologically could ever be a substitute for the personal understanding of meditation derived from actually experiencing it. (Welwood, 1977, p. 2)

The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence. (William James, 1950, p. 42)

A “typical” mindful moment that occurs during everyday activities could be described as follows: A woman is going about her daily life. She may be working alone or with others, running errands, talking, or relaxing. She experiences a sudden shift in perspective that feels more spacious and open than the perspective she had only moments before. Her attention is focused right in the moment and her awareness is keener. She notices subtleties and nuances that reveal a depth and richness to her experience that was not apparent before the shift. She is more keenly aware of her body; how it feels and how it moves. She is more keenly aware of her feelings, her thoughts, the way she is responding, but there is a spaciousness, too. Her mind is quieter, thoughts are fewer and clearer, emotions arise and pass leaving no residue. She feels interconnected with others, the environment, and/or her experience but is not merged with them. It is the feeling of being a part of something greater than herself. She feels more alive, more intimate with others, herself, her experience, more “real;” at the same time, everything seems less personal. She feels more accepting. She has a sense of the way things “really are” and that at some level everything is just fine even though she may feel discomfort or pain. When faced with a choice, she may know which option is best without thought or deliberation. She simply *knows*. Things seem to flow and unfold in a natural organic way

with little effort on her part. She feels a sense of freedom and lightness that she did not experience before.

She feels the shift to a more mindful perspective once again. It's been hours since she last felt this way. Mindfulness seems to slip off without awareness of its passing. This is the way it happens. It comes and goes. It is so easy to get caught up in things and lose that spacious perspective. She recalls that by practicing being mindful and setting her intention to be mindful, it occurs more frequently. Sometimes the shift in perspective is small, sometimes large, sometimes profound. Sometimes she is more aware of a sense of spaciousness, sometimes a sense of clarity, sometimes a lack of separateness, sometimes a lack of identification, and sometimes a sense of freedom. Sometimes she is aware that she feels pain, that she want things to be different, but when experienced mindfully, she feels freer in some way.

As can be seen in Figure 6 on page 71, mindfulness may occur during the most mundane of circumstances, such as eating, driving, or talking with friends. Most of the incidents related in the interviews were quite ordinary. Mindfulness can also come on during exceptional circumstances, such as when holding a new grandchild or awaiting the results of a cancer test. This finding aligns with Gunaratana's characterization that formal mindfulness practice is simply that – practice – and the real aim is to become mindful in all aspects of one's life (1992, p. 171). Similarly, Piyadassi tells us that mindfulness becomes “part and parcel of our life” (1991, p. 196). This view is repeated throughout the literature (Rahula, 1974, p. 72; Gunaratana, 1992, p. 171-183; Kornfield, 1993; Kabat-Zinn, 1994;) and the participants' stories indicate that after 4 to 50 years of practice, mindfulness does manifest across their lives.

The experience of mindfulness in everyday life may be characterized by six essential themes plus three additional non-thematic aspects as listed in Figure 7 on page 73 and Figure 9 on page 85, respectively. It is important to note that the names of the themes should not imply that mindful experiences are necessarily “pleasant.” One participant talked of being mindful with depression, another was mindful for several days with worry about her son, still another said that chronic body pain had shifted her

mindfulness practice to a more body-oriented practice, and a fourth was mindful while awaiting the outcome of cancer tests. These are only four examples of many incidents that involved “difficult” situations and emotions. The directive given by traditional sources to adopt a non-judgmental attitude (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 53-57; Goldstein, 1993, p. 39-41; Gunaratana, 1992, p. 46) acknowledges that many experiences are quite pleasant or quite unpleasant and lead us to want to cling to or reject them, respectively. Epstein noted that documented stages of advanced *vipassana* meditation are characterized either by “terror” or “delight” (1986, p. 150-152).

In conducting phenomenological research, the aim is to share the first-person *lived experience* with a greater audience and, to this end, it becomes important to identify themes using the participants’ choice of words whenever possible. The names of the six themes and related subthemes were drawn from the interview transcripts. While the choice of language varied among individuals and some participants spoke more of some themes than of others, the names that emerged seemed to best capture each thematic element. It is reasonable to ask to what extent the language of the tradition influenced participant descriptions and a definitive answer would be elusive. All participants have attended retreats where mindfulness meditation is taught and practiced and all have read some of the mindfulness literature, so there would be a tendency to adopt the language of the tradition. Descriptions in the literature and on retreat, however, tend to be first-person, experience-near, and often metaphoric when expressed in English rather than Pali or Sanskrit and so people are not typically drawn away from immediate experience in their use of language. Moreover, the method of asking participants to elaborate on various aspects of experience during interviews, particularly when they use words that might be construed as “lingo,” encourages further description using ordinary language. For example, some participants spoke of the mind creating “stories.” With further inquiry, it became apparent that they were describing the tendency of the mind to project imagined scenarios into the future based on habitual ways of thinking and feeling. In light of these factors, it is reasonable to assume that the names of the themes are experience-near and come from the common language.

A comparison of the participants' themes with traditional and psychological descriptions suggests that mindfulness as revealed in this research is the same phenomenon as mindfulness described in the literature. The themes are essentially the same as the qualities of mindfulness discussed in the literature, although the characterization sometimes differs. For example, space and spaciousness were mentioned often by participants, but seldom by traditional writers. As another example, traditional literature speaks more of non-attachment while participants and the psychological literature speak more of identification and not being identified with one thing or another.

At the level of everyday experience, particular themes were more figural for some participants while other themes were more figural for others. Gigi, for example, spoke much about connection, no separation, and body awareness; Paul talked of judgment and non-judgment; Reuben spoke of body awareness and richness of perception. These differences reflect individual sensitivities and preferences in relating to self, others, and the world. The interviews also suggest that there are individual differences in frequency and intensity of experience. Tica, with approximately 50 years experience in a combination of *vipassana* and other *vipassana*-like practices, seemed to live in a mindful state most among all of the participants, "I think the mindfulness works in spite of me because of the years of practice." Tica's description of "brailing" – her word for a moment-to-moment intuitive sensing of choice in actions – suggests a deep, ongoing, open awareness.

Some thematic elements were important in accessing and cultivating mindfulness. Participants often mentioned that they choose to return awareness to the present moment, let go of judgments, and, to a lesser extent, let go of identifications. This parallels Engler's description of mindfulness as awareness "without preference, comment, judgment, reflection or interpretation" (1984, p. 28). When learning mindfulness meditation, students are typically instructed to pay attention to what arises in the present moment without judging the objects of awareness as good or bad. Thus, their appearance in the data as a cultivating factor is not surprising. Awareness and non-judgment or letting go are focal throughout the participant interviews, both as part of the mindful

experience and as a means of accessing mindfulness. The other thematic factors of spaciousness, openness, clarity, knowing, non-separation, freedom, and choice appear to occur as a result of mindfulness and are less likely to be cultivating influences.

It is clear from the participants' descriptions and the discussion of mindfulness in the traditional and psychological literatures that all themes are highly related. Individual incidents often involved two or more themes and each theme captured a different facet of the experience. It is also the case that when one theme was intense, related themes were likely to be intense as well. When Reuben was highly mindful on the day after the September 11th incident, he saw things more clearly, felt more connected with his work and his fellow workers, and everything seemed to flow organically. There are two more interesting relationships among the themes. Mindfulness often begins with heightened awareness of the present moment and as mindfulness deepens or increases, the individual opens to other thematic elements, such as spaciousness and clarity, and the combination of heightened awareness, spaciousness, and clarity results in a greater sense of freedom and choice. So, as mindfulness deepens, one opens to more facets of the mindfulness and the experience becomes richer. The second interesting relationship is that as mindfulness deepens and becomes increasingly nondual and the intensity of the thematic elements increases, distinctions among them diminish. For example, *Not Separate (Connected)* and *Not Identified (Self-less)* become the same experience when experienced nondually – to identify to any degree with any aspect of experience is to create separation. Furthermore, at the level of nonduality, these two facets become identical with *Clear-Knowing-Spacious-Open-Free-Present-Awareness*. All distinctions cease.

Variation in intensity of mindfulness and mindful experience is conveyed graphically in Figure 10 on page 88 along with some of the changes that accompany changes in intensity. The figure does not mean to suggest that there are discrete levels of mindfulness, only that there are many different intensities. It also attempts to portray, graphically, the increasing permeability of boundaries between self and other, self and world, and perhaps self and the divine that can be part of a mindful experience. There was no suggestion in the data of some absolute threshold between being unmindful and

mindful – although there was consistently a noticeable difference. For this reason, Figure 10 has no absolute boundary between mindful and unmindful states. The quality of opening to more thematic elements and of their eventual merger in nondual awareness resists graphical depiction and is not included in diagrammatic form. Each of the themes, subthemes, and non-thematic aspects will be discussed in turn before a more general discussion is undertaken.

Theme 1: Present and Aware captures an invariant feature of all of the mindful incidents related by participants and of all of the traditional and psychological literature on mindfulness: present-centered awareness. Gigi mentioned both aspects when she said, “I feel very present in the moment . . . I feel like I’m very aware.” Like Gigi, Nyanaponika’s oft-used description of bare attention as “clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens *to* us and *in* us, at the successive moments of perception” (1988, p. 30) highlights both heightened awareness and a present-centered focus. Participants described being more consciously aware during mindful moments than during typical wakefulness. They used the words “very attentive,” “awake,” and “living in the now” to convey this quality and the difference between being simply awake in the ordinary sense and being mindful was sometimes likened to the difference between being asleep and being awake in the ordinary sense. Metta Blue described the intensity of her experience on one occasion when she said, “I was just aware, aware, aware.”

The psychological literature identifies awareness of the present as a key feature of mindfulness. Washburn named sustained attention as the definitive quality of meditation (1978, p. 59) and Epstein likened meditation to “a process of attentional restructuring” (1981, p. 141) that facilitates fine moment-to-moment awareness. Participants reported being aware of body sensations, thoughts, emotions, reactions, others, and their environment. Awareness is also the factor that allows people to notice more fully other aspects of experience, such as connection and spaciousness. This facilitating aspect is highlighted by the presence of mindfulness among many of the core doctrinal “lists” (See page 9.)

Participants described a range of intensity of awareness, from the common experience of waking up to the fact that your highway exit is upon you, to the experience of sensing a profound wisdom in life as it is. Gunaratana's description of awareness "so intense, concentrated, and finely tuned that you will be able to pierce the inner workings of reality itself" (1992, p. 20) conveys the intensity and outcomes that are possible. Variations in intensity of awareness are also apparent in Welwood's (1996) model as one moves from the minimal awareness of *Pre-reflective Identification* to the clear and detailed awareness of *Pure Presence*. Participants' lack of awareness when not mindful and the varying levels of awareness they experienced when mindful fit the description in Welwood's model. Present-centered awareness also a feature of Engler's (2003) *Unselfconscious* and *Noself* modes of being.

Awareness in both obvious and more subtle forms was figural in the literature and for participants. Some participants used words like "very subtle" and "more aware of everything." A different form of subtlety of awareness that can be involved is described by Gunaratana (1992) when he characterizes mindfulness as both awareness and *the act of remembering* to be mindful (italics added, p. 155). Participants similarly described mindfulness as both awareness and the intention to remain aware. In so doing, they rendered present-centered awareness both an end in itself and the means to that end. Training in formal mindfulness meditation includes instruction to bring attention to what is happening in the moment (Rahula, 1984; Gunaratana, 1992; Goldstein, 1993; Kabat-Zinn, 1994), whether the focus is on the breath or whatever predominates in the current perceptual field, and to return awareness to the present when attention wanders off. Given the central nature of this factor, its prevalence in the data is no surprise.

It is important to distinguish between mindful awareness and the hypervigilance of paranoia. Hypervigilance and paranoia are characterized by scanning the environment for "particular" clues. This form of awareness is accompanied by selective attention to some elements and complete lack of awareness of others. Mindful awareness, in contrast, is non-preferential. In the literature, mindfulness is characterized as awareness that does not attempt to control the *contents* of awareness (Claxton, 1990, p. 113). Hypervigilance

is also characterized by fear – fear of something that might occur or, as some psychoanalysts suggest, fear of something overwhelming that has already occurred but which remains emotionally unprocessed and unintegrated (Winnicott, 1959-1964/2004; 1974). Using either of these formulations, the focus of hypervigilance is as much or more on the past/future as on the present moment. Although mindful awareness does not preclude fear – one can be mindful of fear – fear is not characteristic of mindfulness and when fear is perceived mindfully, it may be with an attitude of openness to the experience. Participants spoke of openness, ease, and less resistance when mindful, and of contraction and resistance when not mindful.

Theme 2: Spacious and Open is composed of two subthemes, *Spacious* and *Open*. This theme includes the similar but distinct qualities of space, openness and non-judgment – three qualities that participants often mentioned together. Two senses of space are conveyed by participants in the subtheme *Spacious*: One is the sense of space between self and one’s experience. The other is a psychologically spacious quality such as one might feel while standing in a spacious environment. The second subtheme of *Open and Not Judging*, includes these two closely related aspects.

Subtheme A: Spacious. The first sense of space in the subtheme *Spacious*, space-as-distance, is prominent in Welwood’s 1996 model and 1977 characterizations of space. Paul spoke of feeling a “space-distance” from judgment and Dharma Jo described it as “similar to physically stepping back from some object so that you can look at it more objectively.” This is a non-dimensional quality of Welwood’s *Feeling Space* that occurs when I feel more or less “distance” between myself and others, myself and the world, and/or myself and my experience (1977, p. 101-103). For Welwood, this form of space is created by reflection and it gradually diminishes when moving from *Conceptual* to *Phenomenological* to *Mindful* awareness, as diagrammed in Figure 1 on page 26. Furthermore, as the sense of space decreases, a greater sense of intimacy with experience arises. He suggests that these changes occur as identification lessens. At the level of *Pure Presence*, experience becomes nondual and this space disappears.

The second sense of “space” in this subtheme is a psychological feeling that echoes Welwood’s description of the expanding/contracting dimension of *Feeling Space* (1977, p. 100-101) and Epstein’s description of the *self* as spacious. Participants’ sense of having more space when they were mindful and less when they unmindful illustrates such expansion and contraction. The feeling of feeling more (or less) space applied variously to psyche, body, and mind. Several participants spoke of feeling physically spacious. Gigi talked of sensing space between thoughts, which conveys this sense of spaciousness and is also reminiscent of Welwood’s “non-articulate space” between thoughts (1976).

Epstein offers an explanation for psychological spaciousness. The self-observing ego split that is invoked when we are aware of our experience moment-to-moment creates an inner space in which the objects of experience can be held and observed (1990b, p. 21) and in which various aspects of self can flourish (1995, p. 138). It is a space that resembles Winnicott’s holding environment. Thus, reflection may create both space-as-distance which then diminishes with increasing mindfulness, per Welwood, and a psychological “inner space” which expands with practice, per Epstein. Several participants combined these themes when they spoke of stepping back or stepping aside into a more spacious place. Nyanaponika also links space-distance and spaciousness when he speaks of increased ease and a more spacious inner and outer world that can be found by “stepping back” (1988, p. 43) and Zen frequently refers to “big sky mind.”

Welwood’s 1996 description of *Pure Presence*, where space-distance between self and experience disappears with the attainment of nonduality, compares with his 1977 characterization of *Open Space*, the space of no subject-object distinction where one’s sense of self disappears. He suggests that this type of space is not merely psychological, but ontological (p. 103) and is a “non-articulated open dimension that underlies all the articulated objects of consciousness” (1977, p. 105). No participant story captured this nondual sense of space in everyday experience. Two exceptions to the paucity of discussion of spaciousness in the Theravadin literature lead to the second subtheme. The American-born teacher Goldstein says, “In teaching meditation we often advise students to develop a ‘soft and spacious mind.’ . . . We mean by ‘soft and spacious mind’ the

quality of acceptance” (1993, p. 39). Salzberg also suggests that an attitude lacking preference relates to spaciousness (1999, p. 83)

Subtheme B: Open and Not Judging. Although we often link the words spacious and open in the physical sense of Welwood’s *Perceptual Space* (2000), participants often linked open and not judging. Lucas said, “there’s an openness and a lightness and an acceptance.” Participants described openness in terms of “allowing,” being “receptive,” “let life in,” and “open heart.” This quality reflected an accepting, non-judging attitude that they also described as “not resisting,” “not controlling,” and as “letting go” of judgments, expectations, and attachments. It appears that *open* is a way to describe this quality in the *positive* while *not judging* is a way to describe it in the *negative*. Participants spoke of becoming aware of judgment as they became mindful and of a softening or releasing of judgment as a result, including the ability to watch a reaction run its course without the need to act on it. Participants’ openness was a form of psychological space that Welwood calls *Feeling Space* (1977).

Engler proposes that mindfulness has two basic qualities, “a particular form of deploying attention and a particular management of affect” (1983, p. 32). The form of management includes no preference, comment, judgment, or interpretation (p. 32). Mindfulness and bare attention are often described as non-judgmental observation (Gunaratana, 1992; Rahula, 1974). Gunaratana links this quality to openness and to a lessening of space-distance when he explains that by suspending bias, judgment, and preference it becomes possible to open more fully to experience and come to know it more intimately (1992, p. 186), defensiveness decreases, and we become more flexible and accepting (p. 185).

Training in formal mindfulness meditation includes instructions to not expect anything, not reject or cling to what is, and let go (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 46); to not judge and let go (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 53-57); or to accept what is (Goldstein, 1993, p. 39-41). Given the prominence of not judging and not resisting in traditional literature, psychological literature, and mindfulness instruction, it is not surprising to find it

prominent in the thematic structure. What is different, however, is its characterization as open and spacious.

Theme 3: Clear and Knowing includes three subthemes which address an experience of clarity in body (*Alive and Embodied*), perception (*Seeing Clearly*), and understanding (*Knowing Wisdom*). Gunaratana addresses this theme in relation to body and mind when he says:

As meditative mindfulness develops, your whole experience of life changes. Your experience of being alive, the very sensation of being conscious, becomes lucid and precise, no longer just an unnoticed background for your preoccupations. (1992, p. 186).

Subtheme A: Alive and Embodied addresses participants' enhanced awareness of their body and breath, connection with the external world that occurs through the body, and the role of the body and breath in cultivating mindfulness. Gigi described body movement when mindful as more "deliberate" and "skilled." Seven of the nine participants spoke specifically of being aware of their breath when mindful or of using the breath to become more mindful. This is not surprising as one basic form of mindfulness meditation is awareness of breath (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 51). The breath is typically the first subject of meditation for beginning meditators and it is often the first focus of awareness for experienced meditators during any particular period of sitting practice. Initial attention to the breath during formal practice can quiet the mind. Then as the meditator shifts into mindfulness and allows her attention to rest on whatever predominates in the perceptual field, the breath becomes an "anchor point" to which she returns her attention when nothing predominates. Thus, experienced meditators usually have extensive practice watching their breath, both as a way to access mindfulness and as an object of mindful attention.

Enhanced aliveness and embodiment receives little mention in the traditional or psychological literature. Gunaratana speaks of increased aliveness (see previous quotation) and Salzberg describes mindful moments as times "when we are fully alive" (in Rabinowitz, 1999, p. 54). This feeling of intensified aliveness comes, in part, from a sense of heightened perception that is addressed in the next subtheme.

Subtheme B: Seeing Clearly includes participant descriptions of enhanced perception of sensations, thoughts, and emotions. Mindful experiences held greater richness, depth, subtlety, and nuance than ordinary experience. Participants spoke of seeing more clearly, hearing more clearly, smelling more clearly and of having a richer, more complex, multifaceted experience. This resonates with Welwood's Surface and Depth dimension of *Feeling Space* which can be rich with many levels of meaning. In Buddhism, the mind (consciousness) is considered the sixth sense organ and it apprehends objects of mind (Nyanatiloka, 2004, p. 34). Participants described a sense of clarity of mind and the contents of mind. Gigi could distinguish different thoughts more easily, thoughts and speech seemed deliberate and skilled. Others participants described "very little mind chatter" and the mind as "clean" and "unmuddied." Nyanaponika's (1988) description of "clear and single-minded awareness" and Gunaratana's characterization of enhanced clarity and depth (1992, p. 185) address the same phenomenon.

Clarity in the context of everyday mindful moments appears to result from greater awareness. Welwood attributes enhanced clarity to lessened identification, "when there is no identification either with the observer or what is observed, awareness remains undisturbed by any divisions, and a new freedom, freshness, clarity, and compassion become available" (1996, p. 108). Thus, when we are not distracted by our biases, expectations, and judgments, our mind is free to notice more fully what is there and awareness is enhanced. As a result, we apprehend more of the breadth, depth, and nuance in experience. The ultimate aim of *vipassana* practice is to see the true nature of reality through direct perception and it culminates in direct realization of *anatta* (lack of an intrinsic self), *anicca* (transitoriness of all things), and *dukkha* (the unsatisfactoriness of relative reality). The experience of clarity of perception, thought, and emotions is a step along the way.

Subtheme C: Knowing Wisdom. Three participants described a sense of knowing and wisdom that they said was not a result of thinking. It was sometimes characterized as "intuitive" knowing. They described it as "a deep knowing," "unshakable," "very solid,"

and “wisdom.” *Knowing wisdom* becomes possible when we experience life without distorting influences. The traditional literature describes the experience this way:

It [mindfulness] . . . is marked by a pronounced sense of reality. You know absolutely that this is real, more real than anything you have ever experienced. . . . From this vantage point, all is seen with clarity. (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 187)

Insight is the most profound level of learning. It is learning through direct perception which naturally gives rise to understanding. (Nairn, 1999, p. 13)

This knowing and wisdom can be described as intuition. Tica characterized decision making as, “an intuitive thing. It’s more intuitive, rather than intellectual.” Gunaratana writes about intuition becoming “very practical” (1992, p. 180) and Nyanaponika (1997) provides a psychological explanation:

The influence of sustained attention on the subconscious and on memory brings a deepening and strengthening of the faculty of intuition, particularly the intuitive insight . . . Intuition is not a gift from the unknown. Like any other mental faculty, it arises out of specific conditions. In this case the primary conditions are latent memories of perceptions and thoughts stored in the subconscious. . . . These more articulate memory images will be a strong stimulation and aid for the intuitive faculty. Silently, in the hidden depths of the subliminal mind, the work of collecting and organizing the subconscious material of experience and knowledge goes on until it is ripe to emerge as an *intuition*. (p. 42)

The experience of clarity of perception and mind receives more attention than embodiment in traditional literature. Emptiness is said to be ‘clear, open, and unimpeded’ (Kalu, 1986, p. 33, in Epstein, 1989, p. 62)). Buddhism speaks of “clear comprehension” (Thera, 1988, p. 46; 1997, p. 2-3) and the development of wisdom³⁶ (Rahula, 1974, p. 68). The role of mindfulness and *vipassana* in developing these qualities is attributed to diminishment of “impurities and disturbances” of mind (Rahula, 1974, p. 68) and the direct comprehension and knowledge (Goldstein, 1993, p. 123) that flows from this state. *Knowing wisdom* is the culmination of ever deepening meditation practice; the ultimate fruit of practice.

³⁶ Buddhism groups the eight qualities of the Eight-fold Path into three categories: virtue, concentration and wisdom.

Participants related everyday incidents rather than experiences during intense meditation practice. The sights, sounds, and demands of daily life result in more mental and physical activity than is typically experienced in seated, deep meditation, so it makes sense that their incidents include more descriptions of clarity in the body and perception. If clarity manifests in all of these dimensions, then it would likely be pronounced in the body and perception as well as in the domain of knowing and intuition during daily life.

Clarity is often linked with awareness, spaciousness, and openness. Epstein likens *knowing* to the *positive* aspect of emptiness and *spaciousness* to the *negative* aspect and further indicates that they are “inextricably linked” (Epstein, 1999, p. 168-169). Clarity is a quality of Welwood’s *Pure Presence* which is described as, “the clarity of wide open, wakeful awareness, without any attempt to alter or fabricate one’s experience” (1996, p. 117); it is also described as “being fully awake within thought, feeling, perception when they arise, no longer maintaining a hair’s breadth of separation from whatever arises” (1996, p. 118). Perception becomes radically enhanced and clear in deep meditation as we see the arising and passing away of individual objects of consciousness and ever more precise aspects of the process are revealed. Engler (2003 p. 91-92; 1984, p. 51), suggests that the sequence of meditation insights represent increasingly earlier stages of the perceptive process, a level of clarity and refinement of perception that was heretofore unimaginable.

Clarity of knowing also emerged in Engler’s description of *Unselfconscious* being where “thoughts, feelings, actions . . . simply occur as a response to the exigencies of the moment, fluidly, easily, spontaneously, unhampered by extraneous thought . . . without force or conscious intention” (Engler, 2003, p. 61). Clarity is implied in Epstein’s description of realizing “egolessness.” Specifically, one is able to experience that the true nature of self is transient. This feature of experience, however, was not directly addressed by study participants.

Theme 4: Not Separate (Connected) was a theme specifically discussed by five participants and it encompasses feelings of greater “connection,” “deep connectedness,” being part of the “collective energy of the room,” and being “not separate.” It is

interesting to note that this experience was expressed verbally in the positive – as a sense of connection – and in the negative – as no separation. *Not Separate* experiences appeared to be more intense than those described as *Connected*. This greater sense of closeness applied to self and experience, self and others, self and world, and, for two participants, self and God or the divine.

Participant descriptions did not suggest a loss of identity through merger or loss of self, as deep levels of concentration are likely to evoke. While the experience was pleasant, it was not associated with the bliss that often accompanies concentrative merger. Instead, there was a sense of greater intimacy with whatever was in awareness and of being part of something greater than our everyday, separate, and isolated self. It was distinct from participants' reports of feeling things less personally – diminished ego identification – that is addressed in the next theme, *Not Identified (Self-less)*. Descriptions of both greater connection and less separation suggest that access to nondual perception is not an all-or-none phenomenon. Rather, it is something that gradually increases as Welwood implied when he characterized phenomenological perception one of the “least dualistic” Western ways of seeing (1996, p. 116). It is not clear if the emphasis on *not separate (connected)* is a product of our Western, individualistic perspective. It would be interesting to learn how people from more collective cultures would describe the same experience.

Interconnection and non-separation are basic to Buddhist thought. They characterize nonduality and are the essence of dependent origination. It may be recalled that the doctrine of dependent origination states that everything is interrelated, temporal, and comes into being as the result of prior causes. Gunaratana identifies our sense of self as the source of the separateness we ordinarily feel. “The ego sense itself is essentially a feeling of separation – a perception of distance between that which we call me, and that which we call other” (1992, p. 185). Epstein likens the ego to a membrane between inner and outer that can become permeable, resulting in a temporary lessening of boundedness (1999, p. 88). He suggests that the loss of subject-object distinction resulting from this “increased permeability of ego boundaries” is distinct from the complete loss of ego

boundaries and subsequent merger that characterizes concentration practices (1990b, p. 26). Epstein attributes the undoing of separation to enhanced mindfulness and likens the result to “states of erotic union in which experiences of ‘distinctness and union are reconciled’ through the combination of heightened awareness and loss of self-consciousness” (p. 26, with a quotation from Benjamin, 1988, p. 29). This relaxation of ego boundaries is not the result of weak ego functioning. Rather, it is the result of the suspension of select conventional ego functions, such as judging and censoring, and the strengthening of others, such as the synthetic function (Epstein, 1988). And yet Epstein does not view separation and connection as an either-or phenomenon but as co-emergent phenomena – each makes the other possible (Epstein, 1999, p. 84). What is preferable is not one or the other, but the ability to move freely between them at need (p. 90).

Western psychological literature contains many descriptions of self experience that fit the characterization of the self as solid and continuous or as a constantly changing dance of stable, discrete relational patterns (Engler, 2003; Mitchell, 1993, 1992; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975; Jacobson, 1975). One consistent attitude in the literature, however, is that the experience of self as separate and distinct is necessary for health; anything else is considered pathological. The meditation literature and the study data suggest that this may not be uniformly true. Engler’s *Unselfconscious* and *Noself* experiences are modes of being that are organized without a self and without separation (2003, p. 60). Welwood’s 1996 model also highlights the changes in separation between self and experience across six modes of being, as previously discussed and as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4 on pages 47 and 53, respectively.

In the realm of nonduality, non-identification is identical to non-separation, but the two experiences are apprehended as different qualities prior to full nondual perception. The constellation of self through identification may be the process by which duality comes into being. Creation of a “self” implies creation of an “other” and the creation of “me” includes the creation of “mine” and “yours” or “not-mine.”

Theme 5: Not Identified (Self-less) is the only theme that was expressed just in the negative. Identification and organizing experience around a sense of self is so ubiquitous in ordinary experience that it is difficult to describe its opposite in the positive. This theme was mentioned by all participants in relation to their experiences. Some described it as “not quite so personal,” “[not] so much identification,” and “don’t have to identify.” Other phrases such as “devoid of ego,” “leaving self-identity behind,” “not so much of a self,” “not being as caught up in,” and “not get lost in” were also used.

This aspect of mindfulness is prominent in the traditional literature and central to Buddhist ideas. Gunaratana calls mindfulness “non-egoistic alertness” (1992, p. 152). Clinging to the idea of self as separate, substantial, and eternally existing is seen as the root cause of suffering in Buddhism and the “final fetters” on the path to liberation from suffering are precisely those related to identification – the notion that “I am” (Engler, 2003, p. 41). Identification is so persistent that Epstein and Engler suggest that traces of narcissistic identification exist until all stages of meditative insight are experienced and worked through (Epstein, 1981, p. 144; 1986, p. 154; Engler, 2003, p. 38). *Anatta*, the experiential revelation that there is no inherent, permanent self, is the ultimate experience of non-identification.

The traditional literature speaks also of the related concepts of non-judgment and non-attachment. Judgments result from identification. Things are good or bad in relation to me, to someone I care about, or to some standard that I hold. Attachment is a term often used to describe identification with ideas about oneself and investment in cherished ideas, belongings, and outcomes. Judgments can lead to attachment – wanting to attain what is better and wanting to avoid what is worse. In a complementary way, identification is a form of attachment – attachment to thoughts, feelings, labels, and to one’s identity and sense of worth. Discussions of non-judgment in the traditional literature may occur for pragmatic reasons, because identification can be lessened by evoking a non-judgmental attitude. When we sense judgment or attachment, we can make an effort to let it go. “Perhaps things are not as I judge them.” “Perhaps I will be fine without this particular outcome.” It is less easy, however, to let go of personal

identification as it is about a core sense of “self,” of “who I am,” and usually out of immediate awareness. Epstein describes the process well when he says:

The key to the transformational potential of bare attention lies in the deceptively simple injunction to separate out one’s reactions from the core events themselves. . . . There is enormous freedom to be gained from such a shift. Instead of running from difficult emotions (or hanging on to enticing ones), the practitioner of bare attention becomes able to *contain* any reaction: making space for it, but not completely identifying with it because of the concomitant presence of nonjudgmental awareness. (1995, p. 111)

Identification and the lack of identification are understandably prominent in the psychological treatment of mindfulness as identification is a key concept in psychology. Welwood’s 1977 description of *Feeling Space* includes a non-dimensional characteristic that is indicative of identification. He describes the quality of *centeredness* where the space is “structured around a central point, a sense of ‘me-here-ness’” (p. 102) and he later calls unconscious identification the basic problem in both the psychological and spiritual domains (1996, p. 112). He likens identification to “a glue by which consciousness attaches itself to contents of consciousness . . . and assumes with each of them, ‘That’s me,’ or ‘That represents me.’ Identity is a way . . . in which we see ourselves as *something*.” (italics in the original, 1996, p. 112). In contrast, the state of non-identification is described as free, fresh, clear, and compassionate (1996, p. 108). Engler characterizes non-identification as having “a natural equanimity, contentment, joy, and compassion” (2003, p. 71).

Participants’ and classic descriptions of mindful non-identification do not fit descriptions of dissociation and depersonalization, nor do they match descriptions of the pathological forms of emptiness that characterize the psychotic, borderline, or ailing neurotic (Epstein, 1989). (See Figure 2 on page 37.) Epstein emphasizes that changes in ego functioning, such as diminishment of identification, occurs within the ego and that certain aspects of the ego are strengthened through mindfulness practice (1988, p. 61-62). He further suggests that the non-judgmental quality of mindfulness “permits simultaneous dis-identification from and integration of self-images that have been unquestioned assumptions or split-off rejections” (p. 65). With deepening practice and movement toward Welwood’s *Pure Presence*, the literature suggests that one can

experience directly this lack of a solid, unchanging self. Using a quotation from the Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, Epstein describes it as follows:

The self is not eliminated, it is revealed to be what it has always been.
 ‘Selflessness is not a case of something that existed in the past becoming non-existent; rather, this sort of ‘self’ is something that never did exist. What is needed is to identify as non-existent something that always was non-existent. . .’
 (Gyatso, 1984, p. 40 in Epstein, 1988, p. 65-66)

Theme 6: The theme *Free* includes two subthemes, *Freedom* and *Choice*. Tica referred to both aspects when she said, “The choice is always ours, mindfully ours from moment to moment and there’s a great deal of freedom in that.” The theme *Free* was explicitly mentioned by eight of the nine participants using words and phrases such as “free,” “freedom,” “remarkably freeing,” “choice,” “conscious choice,” “free flowing,” and “unfolding” to describe the feeling of being free from constraints and impediments and free to choose from more options. The ninth participant described several instances of moving from a place of distress to a place greater of ease and calm implying some freedom from the suffering he experienced. Participants also felt free from expectations, attachment, illusions, and a sense of isolation.

Subtheme A: Freedom addresses a sense of psychological freedom and includes experiences of “free flowing” and “unfolding” – manifestations of freedom in time and space. The sense of flowing and unfolding was applied to the body, to thoughts, and to experience as a whole, and carried a sense of effortlessness and of neither holding back nor holding on. While mindfulness meditation instruction often encourages the meditator to watch what arises and neither grasp onto nor reject what comes into awareness, flow is not figural in this instruction although its potential can be imagined. Flow is a dimension of Welwood’s *Feeling Space* that he calls Frozen and Dynamic (1977).

Freedom is central to Buddhist philosophy and mindfulness meditation, and discussions of freedom abound in traditional literature. Goldstein writes, “the purpose of mindfulness practice is freedom” (1993, p. 40). It is freedom from “the mind” (Rahula, 1974, p. 24) and from the “obsessive, compulsive drivenness of your own desires”

(Gunaratana, 1992, p. 13). The Four Noble Truths³⁷ which lay at the heart of Buddhist teachings address the nature of suffering/unsatisfactoriness and explicitly state there *is* a path to freedom. Buddhism lays out this Noble Eightfold Path³⁸ in great detail and mindfulness is a key factor.

Freedom is present in the psychological literature on mindfulness as an end-product, but has not been a main focus of investigation. Welwood proposes reflection as a means to achieve freedom from the problematic state of unconscious identification (1996, p. 112-13). Epstein speaks of the freedom that can be gained through the practice of bare attention (1995, p. 111) and writes that meditation can provide “liberation from the vestiges of . . . [primary] narcissism” (1990a, p. 164). It also frees us to experience the representational nature of the self without “the distortions of idealization” and without disintegrating into psychosis (1988).

Psychology’s characterization of consciousness as a flow or stream dates back to William James (1892) but little has been written about flow as an aspect of mindfulness in the psychological literature, perhaps because this experience is not characteristic of all levels of practice. At the advanced meditation stage of “coming to be and passing away,” the stream of consciousness is experienced as breaking up into discrete objects of awareness that have clear beginnings, existence, and ends and are “discontinuous in space and time.” Equally important to psychology, is the report that self-representation itself is experienced as coming into being when an object is perceived and as passing away when the object passes. Self and object, in this mode, are experienced as discontinuous processes. (Engler, 1984, p. 45). This perception of disruption of flow and ongoingness of self is generally achieved only in deep states of meditation and it was not reported by participants in everyday life situations. This experience is very different from ordinary experience and it runs contrary to current psychological thinking. Further investigation

³⁷ The Four Noble Truths are: (1) *Dukkha* (suffering/unsatisfactoriness) exists. (2) *Dukkha* has identifiable causes. (3) These causes can be extinguished and freedom from *dukkha* is possible. (4) There is a path to freedom from *dukkha*. (Rahula, 1974; Kornfield, 1999)

³⁸ The Noble Eightfold Path includes: (1) Right view, (2) Right resolve, (3), Right speech, (4) Right action, (5) Right livelihood, (6) Right effort, (7) *Right mindfulness*, and (8) Right concentration (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 32).

from qualitative and quantitative perspectives is warranted to validate these reports and explain the phenomenon.

Subtheme B: Choice. Participants credited mindfulness with providing more choices in how to think, react, and behave. Reuben summed it up nicely when he said, “It’s just an arising that can be reacted to or . . . [not], you know. There are choices, I realize, that we do have in how we respond to our responses, how we react to these reactions.” Talk of choice and choosing is prevalent in the traditional literature. The experience of sensing more options likely arises from a non-judgmental attitude that allows us to see more, with less attachment to a particular outcome or means to an outcome. Gunaratana says that, “you can’t examine something fully if you are busy rejecting its existence” (1992, p. 151). It is significant to note that “choiceless awareness” leads first to a greater sense of choice, and then with deepening practice, to knowing the “skillful” choice, as participants described it.

According to results of the present study, mindfulness was described as freeing participants to experience life more fully, whether in terms of richness and depth or options otherwise out of awareness. Each thematic element can be viewed as particular manifestations of freedom. *Present and Awake, Spacious and Open, Clear and Knowing* all suggest fewer restrictions and more freedom from the differing perspectives of awareness, body, perception, and mind. *Not Separate (Connected)* describes freedom from an isolated, bounded sense of self and *Not Identified (Self-less)* speaks of freedom from identification. This overarching sense of freedom may be why the various themes were often linked in participants’ experience and in the mindfulness literature.

Thematic Ground: Not Mindful. Several participants described what it was like when they were not mindful as a way to put mindful moments in context. *Not Mindful* is the *ground* against which mindful moments occur. Figure 8 on page 84 lists various descriptions of what it is like to not be mindful. These descriptions reflect the opposite of what is experienced during mindfulness. “Ordinary mind” is the state from which mindfulness moments arise and the state to which experience returns. It is characterized by low awareness, a past or future focus, feeling contracted and tight, judgment, feeling

less alive, less clarity, less knowing, more separate, more identified, and less free. The ground *Not Mindful* is included in Figure 10 on page 88. Note that it is not an absolute and fixed mode of being and the diagram does not mean to suggest that it is.

Non-Thematic Aspects

Three additional descriptors emerged from the data in addition to the six major themes of mindful experience. They are not qualities of mindful experience itself, but are related to the experience of mindfulness over time. See Figure 9 on page 85. All participants described mindfulness as a way of being that *Comes and Goes*. They also described *Facilitating Factors* that help to bring on and prolong mindfulness and *Changes Over Time* that they attributed to the practice of mindfulness. These “factors” were sufficiently frequent and important to warrant inclusion in the results.

Aspect A: Mindfulness Comes and Goes. All participants described mindful moments as coming and going. They also reported being aware of the shift into mindfulness and, for most, this shift began without volition – they were suddenly more aware or became aware that they could be more mindful. All who described the move from mindfulness into unmindfulness did not notice when mindfulness slipped away or even that it had slipped away. (See Figure 10 on page 88.) Of those who commented on the relative amounts of time spent mindfully versus not mindfully, most said that the larger part of their life was spent not being mindful. Tica, who had the most experience, indicated that mindfulness had largely become a way of life with her. This finding is in accord with Gunaratana’s remark that mindfulness is both the act of being mindful and remembering to be so. All beginning meditators – both concentrative and mindfulness – are keenly aware of the natural tendency of the mind to wander off into thoughts, emotions, plans, “stories,” and other mental enticements. Even William James (1950) saw value in training attention and, as Epstein notes, mindfulness is a form of attentional restructuring. Gunaratana says that “the ultimate goal of practice . . . [is] to build one’s concentration and awareness to a level of strength that will remain unwavering even in

the midst of the pressures of life in contemporary society” (1992, p. 173). Tica’s stories indicate that this may be an attainable goal.

Aspect B: Facilitating Factors. Some participants spoke of factors that facilitate shifts into mindfulness. These included practicing formal mindfulness meditation, attending retreats, setting an intention to be mindful, developing reminders (triggers and cues), making the effort to be more mindful when remembering one has the choice, focusing attention on the body and perceptions, and spending time in particular environments. (See Figures 9 and 10 on pages 85 and 88, respectively.) It is clear that most participants set an intention and then make an effort to be mindful in daily life, so the facilitating factors become a way to manifest their intention. When learning mindfulness, students are often taught ways to cultivate mindfulness. One participant recalled the Vietnamese meditation master Thich Nhat Hahn’s suggestions to take a breath and return to mindfulness at the sound of any bell or to choose a daily activity, such as tooth brushing, and be very mindful when doing it. Daily practice is encouraged to promote and stabilize mindfulness and to facilitate greater awareness out of formal meditation, resulting in changes over time.

Aspect C: Changes Over Time. Many participants described changes that they believe are the fruits of mindfulness practice. These include becoming increasingly more mindful throughout the day, finding mindfulness to be more natural and requiring less effort, and feeling more at ease. This observation is supported in the traditional literature. Goldstein (1999) puts it this way, “it becomes effortless, it starts to work by itself” and he likens it to learning how to play a musical instrument. In time, you simply do it (in Rabinowitz, p. 51).

The findings of the present study confirm experiences described in the traditional and psychological literature. It seems clear that the phenomenon is the same. All perspectives speak at length about awareness of the present moment, clarity that comes with mindfulness, feeling less identified, feeling less separate (more connected), and experiencing more freedom. There is an interesting shift in language, however, when non-judgment is described from a first-person perspective: The open and spacious feeling

that accompanies non-judgment is more figural than the absence of judgment itself. Interview stories also conveyed the sense that participants felt lighter and freer and they attributed this to their practice, despite the fact that the objects of mindful awareness are not always pleasant.

This research has empirically described many of the ideas proposed in the psychological literature. There is strong evidence for Welwood's 1996 model. Participants' descriptions of unmindful moments coincide with his *Prereflective Identification* and their descriptions of mindful moments show a range of reflective experience that run from *Conceptual Reflection* through *Being Present With*. It is not clear from the data that anyone achieved *Pure Presence* during the course of daily activity. Participant descriptions of awareness, space, identification, and duality follow Welwood's progression. When not mindful, they were unaware, there was little or no space between themselves and their experiences, they were identified with their bodies, thoughts, and emotions, and they were attached to outcomes. In *Reflective Witnessing* and *Being Present With*, awareness was intense, participants reported feeling spacious and yet intimate with their experiences, and identification was low. Additionally, the sense of being interconnected (not separate) and feeling freer were prominent. Participants also clearly demonstrated that they move among Welwood's modes of being throughout the day.

There is also validation of many of Welwood's forms of *Lived Space*. Participant awareness of the position of their bodies, of contact with tools and wood, and of brushing teeth reflected his *Outer*³⁹ level, the space of body orientation. There were numerous references to the three dimensions of *Feeling Space*: expansion and contraction, shallowness and depth, and frozen and dynamic. Participants also described Welwood's three non-dimensional qualities of *Feeling Space*: that it is centered on self-experience, that there is distance between self and experience, and that it can feel like the movement of energy. Many experiences, unmindful and some mindful, included awareness of self and identification with aspects of self-experience. Likewise the experience of more or

³⁹ The *Outer* level of *Lived Space* was called *Oriented space* in an earlier publication (1977).

less distance between self and experience was broadly discussed. Only a few participants spoke of Welwood's *Open Space* that manifests itself as the space between thoughts, sensations, and other objects of consciousness.

Engler's (2003) *Unselfconscious* mode of being and its interpenetration with more ordinary modes of being are empirically supported by the data. Participants described incidents when they were not organized around a sense of self. While participants did not specifically describe experiences of self as either *Multiple and Discontinuous* or *Integral and Continuous*, they described being unmindful in ways that indicated organization around a self – judging, preferring, and reacting. It is not clear whether any participant experienced *Noself* during ordinary mindful moments. Much of Engler's work from the 1980s addresses experiences that typically occur in deep, prolonged meditation practice and while meditation masters may be able to access *Noself* at any time, in any situation, participants' stories did not evidence this experience.

Engler's ideas across the years have been based on the ideas of Jacobson (1964), Mahler et al. (1975), Kernberg (1977), Lichtenberg (1975) and Mitchell (1993, 1992, 1988); authors who largely adopt an American Object Relations point of view that sees self and other representations as experience-distant, cognitive constructs. British Object Relations, in contrast, views self and other representations as experience-near internalizations that are laden with the emotional experience of encounters with significant others. With the prominent role of emotions as motivating factors for our thoughts, behaviors, and habitual reactions, there is room in the psychological discussion of mindfulness phenomena, particularly in the realm of reactions and judgment, for more inclusion of this perspective and its role in creating identification and separation. Mindfulness, likewise, gives psychology a tool for working with emotions as basic as clinging and rejecting or as broad as the entire range of emotional experience.

The data support Epstein's idea that meditation fosters change "within the ego, rather than beyond it" (1988, p. 62). Participants reported a greater ability to sit with difficult and ambiguous life experiences than in times past and they offered evidence of lessening judgment and censorship. This type of response suggests strengthening of the

synthetic function of the ego and lessening of judgment, defensiveness, and censorship (p. 64-65). It also demonstrates the presence of a healthy observing ego and the development of a good Winnicottian holding environment which together allow the individual to better adapt to the “flow of inner experience” (Epstein, 1990b, p. 21). An increasing ability to watch the *process* of mind, rather than focus exclusively on the *content* of mind, is also evident in these stories (Epstein, 1990a, p. 162).

Participants were better able to recognize and acknowledge habitual thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that were previously out of awareness, suggesting the integration of formerly spilt-off self-aspects of self (Epstein, 1988, p. 65) and producing greater wholeness and a more complex psyche (p. 67). They also reported greater ability to release engagement with strong emotional states by not feeding into them. This non-defensive attitude in the face of difficulty is consistent with good synthetic ego functioning (Epstein, 1990a, p. 163), more fluid ego functioning, and relief of narcissistic anxieties due to better cohesion and stability that may accompany mindful investigation (1986).

The diminishment of ego during mindful moments as reported by participants did not appear to be pathological adaptation such as repression, merger, or self-annihilation that Epstein warns should not be confused with egolessness (1990b). The greater and lesser degrees of connection/ non-separation also support his idea that the ego boundaries become increasingly permeable rather than abandoned (1990b, p. 26) and permeable to greater and lesser degrees. There was no clear support for or disconfirmation of changes in the theoretical ideal ego and ego ideal that Epstein discussed in his 1986 paper.

This study was designed to provide an empirically-based description of the nature of mindfulness as it manifests itself in ordinary life situations among ordinary people who have developed a stable, long-standing, *vipassana* practice. It has successfully linked traditional treatments, psychological treatments, and memories of first-person experiences of mindfulness as they occur in daily life. This work is an empirically-based qualitative study that employed a careful methodology, including the use of an interpretive group, to ensure reliable results. There are, however, some limitations that

proceed from the design. A single mindfulness meditation tradition was chosen for investigation as a way to understand the phenomenon in a relatively pure form. The participant sample, however, was not purely from the *vipassana* tradition. It is relatively common for *vipassana* practitioners to take part in other spiritual practices, either concurrently or in sequence, and some of the participants are known to have trained and practiced in other traditions that make use of mindfulness techniques. Of the known instances, one began meditating using S. N. Goenka's *vipassana* technique of body scanning (2006, 2002), another began with a mindfulness-like practice in a different spiritual tradition, and a third has trained in A. H. Almaas' Diamond Approach (2006, 1986). Thus, while participants knew they were contacted because of their extended experience in *vipassana* meditation, some caution should be exercised in taking the findings to be representative of mindfulness in the *vipassana* tradition. Caution should also be used in generalizing the findings to other mindfulness traditions without confirmation through investigation.

The results of this research have implications for psychology in general and for clinical and counseling psychology in particular. For psychology at large, current results provide further evidence of a range of human experience and a way of being that fall outside of standard Western models and the data suggest that these ways of being may be accessible to ordinary individuals who make an effort to cultivate them. Moreover, participants attributed more comfort and satisfaction with life to their mindfulness practices. A comprehensive psychology of human existence must include a better understanding of these forms of functioning. With recent advances in brain imaging and related investigative techniques, work is progressing on the scientific front through initiatives such as those fostered by the Mind and Life Institute⁴⁰ (2006). It is also important to extend our understanding of these experiences through qualitative research as a way to extend the foundation for scientific inquiry and to investigate aspects of experience that resist scientific methods – such as understanding the human meaning of these phenomena. Study results also have implications for refining current descriptions,

⁴⁰ The Mind and Life Institute is an organization whose goal is to promote rigorous scientific and experiential inquiry into contemporary, contemplative experiences, such as meditation.

definitions, and measures of mindfulness as experienced in everyday life. For example, present awareness is the sole factor in Brown and Ryan's (2003) Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). They included two factors when first developing the measure, present awareness and acceptance, but found that responses for acceptance did not improve the instrument beyond what they obtained using presence alone, and so acceptance was eliminated (Brown & Ryan, 2004, p. 245). Using the thematic structure derived through this research, it might be possible to incorporate other aspects of mindful experience into a measure as a way to improve the validity and reliability of such an instrument and capture a fuller picture of the experience. For example, items related to openness and identification might serve to distinguish the heightened awareness of mindfulness from that of paranoia.

There are implications specifically for clinical and counseling psychology. The picture created by traditional and psychological literature, and framed by the current study results, show mindfulness to be a useful way of working with emotions. Psychological distress often involves difficult emotions coupled with inadequate coping mechanisms. The principles of mindfulness are proving effective in helping clients to work with and manage difficult emotions. For example, Linehan's (1993) Dialectic Behavioral Therapy (DBT), which targets borderline symptoms, grew from mindfulness principles. Study results confirm that mindfulness fosters a greater sense of well-being through the experience of greater awareness, less identification, more ease and openness, more freedom, and more choice. Participants described many difficult situations that seemed more acceptable when attended to in a mindful way and these were experiences of ordinary people who have simply chosen to practice mindfulness. Suler (1993, p. 62-65) noted benefits of meditation that may develop and strengthen the sense of self in ways that are similar to traditional therapy. As professions that promote and foster well-being among patients and clients, current interest within clinical and counseling psychology for the usefulness and applicability of mindfulness as an approach to therapy or as adjunctive treatment makes good sense. The results of this study demonstrate what may be possible when someone learns and practices mindfulness for an extended period

of time. As with any therapeutic intervention, care must be taken to match individuals with specific techniques or approaches that are suitable and not contraindicated. Those who are interested in utilizing mindfulness as a therapeutic approach might benefit from awareness of the themes of mindfulness and the relationships among the themes that emerged through this study.

The intention of this research was not only to provide an empirical description of the experience of mindfulness in everyday life, but also to lay a foundation from which further investigation could proceed. It would be useful to qualitatively analyze mindful experience among individuals who trained in other mindfulness meditation practices to determine the extent to which one's training tradition shapes the perception and understanding of mindful experience. It would also be interesting to determine how connection/ no separation during mindfulness is experienced in cultures that place more emphasis on interdependence and less on individualism.

Each participant in this study was selected on the basis of being an advanced practitioner with a stable, long-term *vipassana* practice. It would be informative to analyze the experience of beginning and moderately practiced mindfulness meditators as a way to understand the trajectory of experience as practice develops. This data would be particularly beneficial for people who wish to use mindfulness as a therapeutic technique or as an adjunct to therapy. All participants in this study began mindfulness for reasons other than therapy, although some faced challenges such as depression, physical illness, or physical disability during their practice. With the growing interest in mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention, it would be useful to analyze the experience of individuals who learned mindfulness as a therapeutic technique and who have become accomplished at the level of the current study participants to determine if the experiences of mindfulness differ in any way between these two populations.

According to traditional accounts, mindfulness has been around for at least 2500 years although it was little known and little understood in the West until recently. Traditional accounts of mindfulness and insight meditation experiences challenge the limits of human potential as understood by contemporary Western psychology and

provide a way to broaden Western understanding of what it is to be human. Further investigation may change current understanding of the nature and experience of perception and of the self. Reports of enhanced ease and well-being even under adverse circumstances, greater acceptance of things that resist change, increased freedom, and improved intuition and clearer understanding as a result of mindfulness practice hold promise for applications in clinical and counseling psychology. It is my hope that this study will further this understanding for both theoretical and practical considerations.

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APPENDIX

Pali-English Glossary and Select Buddhist Concepts⁴¹

Abhidhamma (Abhidharma, Skt.) – A multivolume collection of canonical works and commentaries that delineate Buddhist psychology, including meditation.

Access Concentration - The ability to remain focused on the chosen object of meditation.

Anatta (Anatman, Skt.) - Translates as no-self, selflessness, or egolessness. The personality self is transitory and changeable, not something unchanging, eternal or having independent existence. In Theravadin Buddhism, the concept of *anatta* or no-self is “applied to all phenomena with which one may develop a sense of self-identification” (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 320) and applies only to individuals. In later forms of Buddhism that are collectively called Mahayana, *anatta* applies to all phenomenon, including inanimate objects.

Anicca (anitya, Skt.) – Translates as impermanence. Everything that exists is impermanent and contains no enduring substance or aspect.

Atta (Atman, Skt.) – Translates as elf, ego, or personality. It is the “personality self.” (Nyanatiloka, 2004, p. 30).

Bhikku or *bhikkhu (Bhikshu or bhiksu, Skt.)* – An ordained Buddhist monk. A nuns is called a *bhiksuni*.

Ch’an Buddhism – A form of Mahayana Buddhism that developed and flourished in China. It literal means “meditation school” (Keown, 2003, p. 52).

Dependant Origination (*Paticca-samuppada*) is also called Dependent Co-arising, Conditioned Genesis (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 323), and Contingent Existence. The belief that things exist because conditions are right for them to come into existence and they cease to be when conditions no longer support their continuance. Dependent origination applies to sensations, thoughts, emotions, objects, human life, one’s body, and one’s own sense of self.

Dukkha (Duhkha, Skt.) – Translates as suffering or unsatisfactoriness. *Dukkha* is the first of the Four Noble Truths (life is characterized by unsatisfactoriness) and it is one of the Three Marks of Existence (*anicca, dukkha, and anatta*).

Dzogchen – Literally means “the Great Perfection.” A central teaching and practice of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism that aims at seeing clearly.

⁴¹ Except where specifically noted, information is derived in a general way from the four sources listed at the end of the Glossary.

Eightfold Path or Noble Eightfold Path – The last of the Four Noble Truths and the path that leads to the end of *dukkha*. It includes (1) Right view, (2) Right resolve, (3), Right speech, (4) Right action, (5) Right livelihood, (6) Right effort, (7) Right mindfulness, and (8) Right concentration (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 32).

Five Spiritual Faculties– A subset of the 22 *indriya* (faculties of the human individual). The five spiritual faculties include: (1) Faith, (2) Energy, (3) Mindfulness, (4) Concentration, and (5) Wisdom (Nyanatiloka, 2004, p. 78).

Four Noble Truths – Four propositions described by the Buddha in his first teaching that are the foundation of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths include: (1) Existence is marked by *dukkha* (suffering/unsatisfactoriness) (2) *Dukkha* has identifiable causes. (3) These causes can be extinguished and so freedom from *dukkha* is possible. (4) There is a path to freedom from *dukkha*. (Rahula, 1974, p. 16; Fischer-Schreiber et al., 1989, p. 109)

Heart Sutta (Sutra, Skt.) - A highly influential Mahayana scripture that is particularly popular in China, Japan, and Tibet. It is part of a larger teaching called the *Prajnaparamita-sutra*. The Heart addresses the nondual nature of existence and is summarized in the most famous line, “Form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form.” (Keown, 2003, p. 106; Fischer-Schreiber et al., 1989, p. 128).

Jhana (Dhyana, Skt.) – “A state of deep meditative absorption characterized by lucid awareness that is achieved by focusing the mind on a single object.” (Keown, 2003, p. 76). There are eight *jhanic* levels that may be attained in a well-documented sequence.

Khandas (Skandhas, Skt.) - Typically translates as “aggregates” indicating that they are pieces or aspects of phenomenal experience which arise as we interact with others and the world. The *khandas* manifest as form (the body), feelings, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness and like everything, are empty of inherent existence. (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 323).

Lama – A title of respect in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. It originally translated as guru or teacher, but is now used to refer to any monk. (Keown, 2003, p. 153).

Mahamudra – A form of practice that aims to realize *sunyata* (emptiness). It is a core element of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. (Keown, 2003, p. 164).

Mahayana Buddhism – A major movement in Buddhism that began “between 100 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 322) that reinterpreted and added additional teachings and commentaries to the corpus of early Buddhism.

Mahayana includes many individual schools within Ch'an, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism.

Nama – Nondual knowing of an object of sense awareness. It is one aspect of *nama-rupa*, knowing and the object of knowing.

Rinzai – A school of Zen Buddhism. It is one tradition that uses *koans* – “Zen riddles” that become the focus of meditation and a means to open to nondual, clear awareness.

Roshi – A “venerable master” in Zen Buddhism. (Keown, 2003, p. 240).

Rupa – The object of sense awareness in nondual awareness. It is one aspect of *nama-rupa*, knowing and the object of knowing

Samatha (*samatha* or *shamatha*, Skt.) – Translates as calm or calming. It is one of the two main forms of meditation in Buddhism. The other form is *vipassana*, insight meditation.

Samadhi (Pali & Skt.) - Literally translates as “to establish or make firm.” A form of meditation in which the meditator merges with the object of meditation in a nondual experience. This state is a precondition for attaining the *jhana* absorption states (Fischer-Schreibner, et. al., p. 296).

Sati (*Smrti*, Skt.) – Translates as mindfulness or awareness.

Satipatthana Sutta – One of the most important teachings in the Pali cannon about meditation and how to meditate.

Seven Factors of Enlightenment (*Satta Bojjhanga*) – Seven qualities of experience that are cultivated in Buddhism with the aim of achieving enlightenment. The factors include: (1) Mindfulness, (2) Investigation, (3) Energy, (4) Rapture or Happiness, (5) Calm, (6) Concentration, and (7) Equanimity (Piyadassi, 1991, p. 260).

Shikan taza – Often translates as “just sitting.” It is a practice of meditation that is used in the Soto school of Japanese Zen.

Siddhattha Gotama (*Siddhartha Gautama*, Skt.) – The personal name of the historical Buddha who lived in what is now Nepal and India about 2500 years ago, between approximately 563 and 483 B.C.E. (Humphreys, 1990, p. 30). Other scholars give the approximate date of his birth as 566 B.C.E. (Pande, 1995, p. 3), 566 or 448 B.C.E (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 11), while traditional

sources often give a date of around 624 or 623 B.C.E. (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 11; Piyadassi, 1991, p. 12).

Sunnata (*sunyata* or *shunyata*, Skt.) – Typically translates as emptiness or nothingness. It is the idea that nothing has intrinsic or absolute reality. Rather, everything is relational and dependent on other factors for existence. Buddhism holds that this is the true nature of existence.

Sutta (*Sutra*, Skt.) – A discourse attributed to the Buddha in the Pali canon. The Mahayana canon contains *suttas* that did not originate with the Buddha, but are considered to be important discourses.

Theravadin (*Theravada*) *Buddhism* – Literally translates as “The Teaching of the Elders.” It is an early Buddhist school that became established in Southeast Asia. (Robinson & Johnson, 1997, p. 325).

Three Characteristics or Three Marks of Existence (*Tilakkhana* (*Trilaksana*, Skt.)) – The Buddhist idea that all conditioned phenomena have three characteristics: (1) *anicca* (*anitya*, Skt.) everything that exists is impermanent; (2) *dukkha* (*duhkha*, Skt.) everything that exists is subject to suffering/ unsatisfactoriness; and (3) *anatta* (*anatman*, Skt.) the self is transitory and changeable, not something unchanging, eternal or having independent existence.

Tibetan Buddhism – A form of Mahayana Buddhism that developed in Tibet and the surrounding areas of Ladakh, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Nepal. It contains four major schools or forms: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk.

Vipassana (*vipasyana*, Skt.) – Often translates as “insight meditation.” This is one of two predominant forms of meditation in Buddhism. The other form is *samatha*, a concentrative form.

Vipassana Bhavana – The more accurate name for *vipassana*. It literally means “the cultivation of the mind, aimed at seeing in the special way that leads to insight and full understanding” (Gunaratana, 1992, p. 37).

Visuddhimagga – An important 5th Century Pali commentary on the *Abhidhamma* that describes and classifies meditative experience, states of consciousness, and the path of meditative attainment.

Zen Buddhism – The Japanese translation of the Chinese word *Ch’an*, which means “meditation.” It is a form of Buddhism that developed and became popular in Japan and contains many schools.

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