

ABSTRACT

The Impact of a Meditation and Mindfulness Practice: Perspectives across Religious Traditions

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Meditation and mindfulness practices have a longstanding history of use, both across religions and among non-religious individuals. Over the past two decades, substantial peer-reviewed research has been published on the benefits of such practices for health and general well-being. This thesis documents the history of the modern mindfulness movement and its impact on the lives of a sample of people of various religious identities. First, this thesis describes the emergence of mindfulness as a popular topic in the academic world, including a summary of the current research consensus on the benefits of meditation. The diversity of practices across selected religious traditions is also noted, exemplified by discussions of meditation in Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, as well as in non-religious mindfulness practice. Second, the experiences and benefits of meditation are documented through a series of interviews with six individuals, from diverse faith traditions, with decades-long mindfulness practices. These folks describe their experiences from the perspective of their personal religious backgrounds. Third, a discussion is provided of the common features within the respective narratives of the interviewees, comparing and contrasting how different people experience mindfulness and how it benefits their lives. Also discussed are ways that meditation may be relevant and beneficial to people seeking to develop or deepen a mindfulness practice or to understand a subject that is deeply ingrained in human spirituality.

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For Sheri, who inspired my practice

CHAPTER ONE

A History of Meditation and the Mindfulness Movement

In this thesis, I describe the experiences and benefits of a mindfulness and meditation practice. The thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter tells the story of the mindfulness movement, detailing its rich history which is seeded in many religious traditions throughout the world. I also provide an overview of research on the health and well-being benefits of a mindfulness practice. The second chapter reports on interviews with a diverse sample of six people each of whom maintains a robust and longstanding meditation practice. These individuals represent the traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Sufi Islam, and Stregheria. This chapter also compares, and contrasts features of their respective meditation practices, underlying common qualities from across these traditions. These interviews put a personal face to the story of mindfulness, exemplifying how looking inward affects one's relationships with other people and enables one to view others as divine beings. The third chapter draws general conclusions from the interviews, as well as discusses implications of this study for future research on mindfulness.

In the first chapter, I trace various thematic threads in the history of mindfulness. Due to the enormity of the subject—the history of the movement goes back so far and has so many antecedents that it would take a Ph.D. dissertation to do it justice—I emphasize the past fifty years in the U.S., roughly since the rise of the human potential movement.

This constraint inevitably focuses the narrative on how mindfulness and meditation have arisen and evolved within the U.S. within that time frame. After outlining a history of the concepts of meditation and mindfulness, I describe meditative traditions within Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. This is admittedly a selective listing of the world's religions, but the objective here is to give some background on the subject and on how meditation is experienced within mainstream religions, in order to provide some context for the experiences of the individuals whose interviews are discussed in Chapter 2. Also, the first chapter contains a review of research studies on the benefits of a mindfulness practice for physical and mental health.

Definitions

Jon Kabat-Zinn, creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, defines *mindfulness* as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, 4). Mindfulness is a way of looking at the world, a way that is described as living only in the present. It draws on roots in the Buddhist tradition and found its way in the Global North in ways that are often detached from its religious roots. An outlook of mindfulness is elicited, in part, through the practice of meditation and yoga. Meditation is a form of training to produce “connection between the mind, body, and spirit” (Sampaio et al., 2017, 411). Another tool in the journey toward mindfulness is yoga. The term *yoga* is derived from the Sanskrit term *yogi* which can be translated to ‘join’ or ‘yoke’ (Joshi, 1965, 53.). Yoga involves the union of the breath with the body, the body with the mind, and the individual mind with the greater consciousness.

Various forms of meditation or inward-focused contemplation for cultivating mindfulness are prevalent throughout the world, across cultures and religions, both historically and in the contemporary world. Tracing the full history of the origins and antecedents of the mindfulness movement, as alluded to earlier, is a multivalent endeavor and is beyond the scope of this thesis. The most complete effort to tell this story is found in Wakoh Shannon Hickey's *Mind Cure: How Meditation Became Mindfulness* (Hickey, 2019), a very worthwhile read. The most important thematic features of this history are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Historical Overview

The abundant history of meditation can be traced back at least 2,500 years, with origins likely older than that (Wynne, 2007, 98). Meditative practices were most prominently written about in Asian religions, such as in the Hindu tradition of Vedantism. According to Hickey, meditation began to take root in the Global North in the 19th Century, not the 1970s as is commonly believed (Hickey, 2019, 105). The progenitors of what, a century later, became the mindfulness movement, were people from the Global North who learned from Buddhist and Hindu teachings (Qvarnström, 1989, 12). By the time that mindfulness emerged in its present form, it had been molded—distorted, some might say—to fit into a medical or clinical-psychological model. The mindfulness movement that we see today has thus been criticized as being somewhat out of touch with its religious and cultural roots (see Hickey, 2019).

Mind Curists

What was known as the “Mind Cure Movement” emerged in the 1860s and 1870s. It sprang from the convergence of two earlier religious movements, Christian Science and the related New Thought, neither of which were explicitly medically oriented, although each certainly emphasized healing as an idealized outcome of religious practice. What became known as Christian Science developed from ideas put forth by Phineas Quimby in the late nineteenth century (Norton, 1899, 3). While not formally religious, Quimby claimed that mental states influence physical health (Quimby & Dresser, 1921, 9). He ran one of the first “mind-cure” clinics, which was extremely successful and whose results provided support for his ideas. Quimby’s theories and findings were passed down to Mary Baker Eddy, who is credited as founder of the Christian Science movement (Gilian, 1999, 6). Eddy was raised as a Calvinist in 19th Century New England. She broke away from mainstream Christianity after her religious teachers did not satisfy her questions on God’s role in human suffering. She searched for alternative healing methods, finding her way into Phineas Quimby’s mind-cure clinic.

The controversial practices involving spiritual health became a trademark of the Christian Science movement. Christian Scientists believe that the sick are healed by means of the Christian God (Talbot, 1983, 1642). Mary Baker Eddy and her predecessors proclaimed that the divine has the power to forgive sins and heal all physical ailments (Eddy, 1875, 7). Believers used various meditation techniques such as faith healing and mediumship to connect with God in hopes of being cured. Christian Scientists are distinct from other religious groups that use spiritual healing, because they deny any use of medical science or “*materia medica*” (Cunningham, 1975, 308). Therefore, one’s mental

state is inexplicably tied to their physical well-being. The theme of interconnectedness between one's consciousness and physical being will continue in other schools of thought, although not as extreme.

New Thought

The New Thought movement arose around the same time period and was even more eclectic in its antecedents. Hickey describes the movement as “a bricolage, or a confluence of various streams of Protestant, Buddhism, and Hindu modernism“ (Hickey, 2019, 11). The founders of the New Thought movement adapted current religious doctrines to a (then) modern understanding of science. Their basic premise was that if one draws near to the presence of the Divine, then happiness and health will inevitably follow. The sometimes forgotten founder of the New Thought movement is Emma Curtis Hopkins. She made New Thought into a flourishing, nationwide movement by teaching future instructors at the Christian Science Theological Seminary (Harley, 2002, 210). She is reminisced by her followers as a “Teacher of Teachers” (Braden, 1987). Hopkins furthered ideals of mindfulness, instructing folks to “let the gaze be heavenward” (Hopkins, 1920, 2). Her ideas about the soul's interconnectedness with the Divine were adopted by many mainstream Christian traditions. These folks used meditation and breathing practices to approach said divine power by way of altering their state of consciousness. The generality of the term ‘divine’ allowed for the movement to attract people from various spiritual backgrounds. New Thought teachings were widely dispersed, reaching Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, as well as people from non-religious backgrounds.

Many decades later, the influence of New Thought essentially bifurcated, influencing religious communities through its beliefs about healing, spirituality, and human consciousness, and being a notable force engendering contemporary developments such as the Prosperity Gospel Movement. The latter thread runs from figures such as Oral Roberts and Kathryn Kuhlmann up to the present with Joel Osteen (Haller, 2012, 270). The former thread, encompassing the purely ‘individual mind-curists’, were most influential for leaders in medicine and psychology who eventually co-opted their teachings in creating the mindfulness boom. Their development and distortion of the movement is where we pick up in the 1970s with Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Mind-Body medicine.

Transcendental Meditation

Transcendental Meditation was a version of meditative practice brought to the Global North by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 1950s, attaining more popular recognition in the 1960s and 1970s due to the participation of celebrities (such as the Beatles). The technique claims to not require any sort of religious or spiritual belief. Nor, according to their teachings, does TM require concentration, control of the mind, monitoring of thoughts, or “emptying” of the mind. TM is intensely ‘Westernized’ and gained over six million followers in the United States, including many pop culture icons and businesspeople. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi also started his own institution of higher learning, Maharishi International University, located in Fairfield, Iowa (Holden, 1975, 1176).

Under the instruction of a certified TM teacher, the movement guarantees customer satisfaction and promises tangible benefits in only one month. Such benefits include increased oxygen uptake, increased wakefulness, increased electrical resistance of the skin—all which they categorize as increased “quintessence of the sympathetic nervous system” (Trotter, 1973, 378). Critics of TM argue that the movement over-commercialized meditation and stripped it of its spiritual ties. Even if TM does not encompass the depth of the wider mindfulness movement, the improvements seen by its practitioners should not be discounted. There is substantial peer-reviewed evidence that Transcendental Meditation decreases blood pressure, reduces dependence on substances such as alcohol and tobacco, decreases psychosocial stress, and lowers high cholesterol (Walton et al., 2004, 262). It is also interesting to note that the market-based culture of commercialism in the U.S. which helped to disseminate TM also served to define the way that Americans meditate, in ways that differ from traditional spiritual forms of meditative practice and from the early New Thought practitioners. Paradoxically, TM may have put its own limiting stamp on meditation and mindfulness practice, but it also made its benefits accessible to a wider range of people. This especially became the case through its influence on Western biomedicine.

Mind-Body Medicine

A key contemporary figure in the evolution of Mind-Body Medicine in the U.S. was Harvard trained cardiologist, Herbert Benson. Benson’s research indicated that meditation produced measurable effects “through control of an involuntary mechanism in the body” (Wallace and Benson, 1972, 85). He drew on ideas from the Transcendental

Meditation movement and Buddhists he encountered in the United States. His goal for his research was to empirically show the benefits of such practices. Benson was the first American medical professional who received permission to do research on Tibetan Buddhist monks (Benson et al., 1982, 235). He investigated how their minds could be used to harness physical healing.

Benson was one of the earliest researchers to apply careful research methodology to meditation and mindfulness (Tessman & Tessman, 1997, 369). His early research findings were promising, especially his identification of what he termed the relaxation response, which is opposite of the ‘fight-or-flight’ response and is engendered by meditation (Roush, 1997, 357). Benson noted that the relaxation response “has always existed in the context of religious teachings” (Benson, 1975, 19), and is triggered by a quiet environment, a mantra or phrase, a passive attitude, or sitting or lying down in a comfortable position. However, he was also able to train monkeys in TM to reduce their blood pressure (Benson et al., 1970, 404).

Benson’s research in the following years found that patients that could readily access the relaxation response had fewer sick days and required lower dosages of medications when they did become ill (Benson, 1979). Benson theorized that the relaxation response can be utilized to improve health outcomes for medically ill patients. The use of meditation techniques alongside medicine has come to be a cornerstone of Mind-Body Medicine, which suggests that the mind has an effect, or even controls, the success of a treatment. This research was influential in its time and set the tone for much of what followed in fields such as behavioral medicine and integrative medicine.

Psychophysiology, a related field, is the scientific study of the relationship between physiological and cognitive processes (Schell & Dawson, 2001). It is another field in which researchers investigate the Mind-Body interconnectedness. Psychophysiology looks further into the ‘markers’ of the brain that can key researchers into psychological and physiological events (Coles, 1989, 251). Such measures give evidence to how functions of the mind are carried out in the nervous system. One specific ‘marker’, or neuropeptide, of immune function was discovered by Candice Pert. She is fondly remembered as the “Mother of Psychoimmunology”, a sub-branch of psychophysiology. Pert discovered a vital opiate receptor, but was not credited for her discovery for many years since she was a graduate student at the time (Brady & Herkendam, 2013, 2730). Pert correctly suggested that the receptor would be a target for drugs that treat mental illness and chronic pain (Noda et al., 2018, 196). Today, there are many psychoneuroimmunology-based interventions based on the idea that thought and emotions, the central nervous system, and the immune systems are interconnected and interregulate on another (Moraes et al., 2018, 635). The field is further propelled by students of Pert, including Esther Sternberg who is recognized for her work for the mechanisms for connections between stress, sleep, depression, and autoimmune disease (Eskandari & Sternberg, 2002, 7).

Yoga

As stated in the beginning of this chapter, the term “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit term *yoji* (Joshi, 1965, 53). It can be translated to English as “to join” or “to yoke”. In its various forms, it has been an important feature of religion in India for

thousands of years. Yoga has found its way to the Global North beginning in the 1890s, when celebrated Indian monks began to travel to Europe and the United States for the first time to lecture and teach, bringing their spiritual practice with them (Collier, 2013, 236).

Today, yoga is practiced in public gymnasiums and health spas, on college campuses, and in corporate settings as a method of exercise and stress reduction and even psychological or spiritual growth. According to the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, more than 13 million adults had participated in a form of yoga in the preceding year (Barnett et al., 2014, 87). There are many systems and schools of yoga, mostly derived from the classic system known as *raja yoga* and outlined in the *Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*. In the U.S., the most practiced form is *hatha yoga*, the part of the classic system focused on bodily postures and movement, combined with *pranayama*, or yogic breathing (Funderburk, 1977, 13). In work settings, hatha yoga appears to be effective in the management of stress and burnout in healthcare workers and is suggested to be effective in all fields of work (Cocchiara et al., 2019, 8).

Meditation in the World's Religions

For as long as people have believed in Divine Beings, they have turned inward to connect with or achieve union with the deity. Accordingly, meditation or related practices have been a principal means of this expression of spirituality. The world's faith traditions share a belief in the capability of human beings to connect with the Divine, which, depending upon the particular religion, is indwelling ("inner" or "higher" self) or is

outside of oneself but able to be reconciled to spiritually. The means by which the world's religions practice mindfulness vary considerably, although the aims are similar.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a bountiful tradition that originated in the Indian subcontinent more than 4,000 years ago (Clarke, 2011, 28). Hindu scriptures represent a wide variety of texts and practices. The most agreed upon tenet of the tradition states that every living being has a spark of divine fire within them (Thapar, 2004, 69). This spark originates from the source which is known as *Brahman*. Since all people are spiritual beings, they may attain access to the divine spark, and this can be achieved by means of meditation and yoga. The goal of meditation is to align oneself with one's spirit and to be omnipresent with *Brahman*. Omnipresence is a "metaphysically distinctive feature attributed to religious and theological posits" (Cowling & Cray, 2017, 223). The Hindu theory of omnipresence defines all existence as derived from a universal substance. The *Yoga Sutras of Patañjali* state that meditation is a process of "devolution" (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2019, 27). Meditation begins at the surface of consciousness and brings one's focus inward. Through meditation, one looks for the cause behind each thought, the cause of the cause, and so on. Only in this way can the inner spark be reached. Both meditation and yoga utilize breath as a guide, an important symbol in Hinduism for life and vitality.

As noted earlier, the word yoga is translated to the English word "yoke" or "union". This refers to the union of the body with the breath or the union of the self with

Brahman (Joshi, 1965, 53). The *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* outline eight steps necessary for perfection of meditation or yoga. The eight ‘limbs’ are the following: “the various forms of abstention from evil-doing (*yama*), the various observances (*niyama*), posture (*asana*), control of the prana (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the mind from sense objects (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and absorption in the Atman (*samadhi*)” (Prabhavananda & Isherwood, 2019, 89). This sequence serves to still the mind and clear it of its imperfections. By doing so, one will align oneself with the divine spark.

Buddhism

Buddhist meditation, informed by earlier Hindu traditions, uses mental concentration as a tool to attain spiritual freedom, or enlightenment. The term for enlightenment is *nirvana*. It is liberation from *samsara*, pain and suffering, or, more literally, the cycle of birth and rebirth (Harvey, 1990, 32). It was first attained by Buddhism’s founder, Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha. In a sense, every action in a Buddhist’s life, ideally, is intended to move one toward *nirvana*, and sitting in meditation is central to this path. Meditation is different from other actions in that it trains the mind in discipline and concentration. Meditation is “a state of relaxed alertness that must guard against both excessive hyperarousal (restlessness) and excessive hypoarousal (drowsiness, sleep)” (Britton et al., 2014, 1). Global North application of Buddhist meditation typically focuses primarily on the relaxing effects of the meditation, without a necessarily spiritual context. It has been influential in the development of mindfulness in

clinical settings. Buddhist texts emphasize a need for one's practice to heighten one's compassion, or an ability to detect injustice in the world (Simmer-Brown, 1996, 103).

Buddhist meditation also cultivates a sense of detachment towards the world. During meditation, the person meditating is typically directed to 'watch' their thoughts as they come into consciousness. By merely noticing them and choosing to let them pass, they are exhibiting detachment, which is highly valued (Austin, 1998, 55). Buddhists hope to achieve a high degree of detachment such that the impermanence of the world does not perturb their mental state.

Within Buddhism, the way in which meditation is carried out varies by the individual schools or sects. Many such schools or traditions exist. Among these are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism (Tilakaratne, 2012, 39).

Theravada Buddhism use Shamatha and Vipassana meditative techniques. These techniques "emphasize avoiding discursive thought by letting the practitioner concentrate on an object of meditation (Shamatha) or his/her own mental activity (Vipassana)" (Amihai & Kozhevnikov, 2015, 3). A follower of the Theravada school will learn how to redirect typical thought patterns towards an object of their choosing.

Mahayana Buddhism is the largest contemporary school, and has its own meditative techniques. These include Zen concentration meditation, popular in the Global North, which is a prolonged concentration on the breath to uncover the one-pointedness of mind, or tranquility (da Silva, 1996, 817).

Vajrayana Buddhism, primarily associated with the Tibetan lamas, utilizes practices from Mahayana Buddhism and incorporates Vedic Tantric methods. The latter

are the use of mantras to liberate inner energy and expand the mind, often found in the basics of yoga (Hanneder, 1997, 150). A common Vajrayana practice involves visualizing “oneself as a particular Deity and holding the focus of attention on an internally generated image surrounded by his or her entourage” (Amihai & Kozhevnikov, 2015, 4). In placing oneself in a scene during meditation, practitioners evoke the arousing side of meditation, with the primary goal of breaking the reincarnational cycle of birth and death, referred to as Samsara (Suzuki, 1914, 566).

Islam

The esoteric or mystical tradition within Islam is noted for its characteristic system of meditation and mindfulness. This tradition is known as Sufism. The term ‘Sufi’ comes from the Arabic word *suf*, translated to “wool”. Early Sufis wore woolen robes to show that they rejected a luxurious lifestyle (Shah, 2004, 14), inspired, in part, by Christian monks living in Israel, Syria, and Egypt. Sufis reject their ideas of celibacy but incorporate a life of intentional simplicity and mysticism. They believe that the purpose of life, and therefore one’s faith, is to have individual experiences of connectedness with Allah. Although I refer to this group of people as Sufis, a Sufi never calls themselves by this name.

Sufi practice is likely derived from or influenced by Christian monasticism and Hindu yoga practices. In a formal meditation called *dhikr*, Sufis repeat the ninety-nine names of Allah. Sufi literature, including poetry, has been widely disseminated in the Global North. We cannot talk about the Sufi meditation without mentioning Jalāl al-Dīn

Muhammad Rūmī, more commonly known as Rumi. He is respected as a saint, mystic, and poet. The lyricism of his poetry covers topics such as love, beauty, and silence. His work is fondly read by contemporary Sufis as a course in human expression of mysticism (Mannani, 2010, 162).

Two influential scholars of Sufi studies in the Global North are Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee and Idries Shah. Both authors acknowledge the shortcoming of American and European mindfulness traditions. Vaughan-Lee's books provide a framework for Global North seekers. He states that meditation is a tool to "still the mind and the senses so that we can directly experience the inner reality of the heart" (Vaughan-Lee, 1995, 34). In doing so, one can attain a higher frame of consciousness that enables them to connect with the Beloved. (i.e., God).

Shah writes that general readers of non-religious mindfulness "would have little means of knowing what had been left out" (Shah, 2004, 19). Sufi thinkers are, in general, critical of non-religious mindfulness. Another contemporary Sufi master, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, "used to chuckle at the whole idea, declaring that this was a very superficial approach" (Gowins, 2012, 41).

Judaism

Meditation is valued as a spiritual practice by many contemporary Jews, who are often drawn to other contemplative and mystical traditions. Not widely recognized is its centrality in the lives of Jewish mystics and kabbalists dating back many centuries (Kaplan, 1985). The most prominent contemporary Jewish religious proponent of

meditation was Aryeh Kaplan. He pointed out that Jewish meditative practices and their aims are similar in some respects to meditation as practiced in other religions.

Meditation serves as a tool for psychological awareness, bringing unconscious thoughts to one's conscious mind and enabling focus on the present moment.

Kaplan noted that meditation was central to the prophetic experience, such as visions, through accessing higher states of consciousness. In this respect, Jewish meditation differs somewhat from mindfulness practices in other religions, specifically in terms of its goals and outcomes (Kaplan, 1985). For example, "many elements of the worship service are specifically designed to be used as meditations, to reach higher states of consciousness" (Kaplan, 1985, 50). When one has *kavannah* (spiritual intentionality) during a service, prayers and scripture are used to direct one's consciousness to God. The term *hitbonenut* refers to contemplating or meditating on a specific part of God's creation, such as a leaf or stone. By examining aspects of nature with such concentration, one can find a high level of gratitude for the Creator. *Hitbonenut* can also enable the person to place themselves in the context of nature and appreciate their place in the present moment.

Christianity

With its roots in Judaism, many Christians find meaning through incorporating mindfulness practices, whether termed meditation or contemplative prayer or some other label. Christian denominations and sects come in a wide variety of beliefs and practices, and some value mindfulness more than others. They recognize the meditative qualities in

the life of Jesus, a Messiah who, one might say, traveled inward. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus ventured into the desert for forty days, spending time in prayer and meditation. Additionally, just before being arrested, Jesus took his disciples into a garden to pray in silence. Jesus is angered by the disciples falling asleep during prayer. He seems to highlight the awakening that happens when one turns inward. Two branches of Christianity noted for robust liturgical traditions that sanction meditative states are Roman Catholicism and the Society of Friends (Quakers).

Catholic meditative practices are rooted in contemplative prayer and monasticism. Since its origins, small groups of Christians have closed themselves off from the non-religious world and lived in small communities. Monks and nuns are celebrated for their closeness to God. Father Donald Haggerty states that these individuals “disappear into silence and solitude and give themselves wholly to God” (Haggerty, 2020, i). Monastic life is filled with prayer and meditation, and daily actions which attempt to cultivate a spiritual life, rejecting the outside non-religious world. Those following a monastic path live in the “tension between untrust and trust, sin and grace, is a permanent feature of human life, challenging us again and again to ‘let go and let God’” (Ludwig, 2000, 87).

Contemplative prayer has been described as a silent, individual meditation with the purpose of clearing one’s mind so that it may be more aligned with God. One method of prayer consists of repeating a single word over and over, with breaks of prayerful silence. It is similar to Hindu and Buddhist meditation which uses a *mantra* to focus the mind and align oneself with the divine. These meditations recognize that God is not merely an object “out there,” but rather a divine presence already inside oneself.

While Catholicism has a robust community of individuals who practice meditation, the Quaker Friends incorporate mindfulness directly into their liturgy. Founded in 1647 by George Fox, the Friends emerged from Puritanism, a breakaway from the Protestant Reformation in the Church of England. Fox founded the Quaker tradition on the idea that humans have the capability to speak directly with God. Because of this, Quakers should not separate religious and non-religious life. They also stress that every person has “within them a certain measure of the Light of Christ” (Hamm, 2006, 5). With such trust in the individual to support their spirituality, Quakers have no formal ministerial role nor a formal creed. The Friends assert that “religious creeds are, at best, insufficient metrics of faith” (Kershner, 2019, 1).

Quaker worship services create space for the individual to deepen their relationship with God. Visiting Protestant Christians are often surprised at the volume of silence in a Quaker service. Leaders in the community incorporate group meditation into the liturgy, often offering mantras or prompts. This allows the congregants to “search freely for stillness within and find it individually and in community too, as a connected group” (Wood, 2021, 6). In order to honor the divine spark of every person, Quakers traditionally end each service by shaking hands with one another. This speaks to the overall purpose of meditation—to bring compassion and love to the forefront of one’s mind.

Non-religious Mindfulness

Many people, especially in contemporary American life, find meaning in a mindfulness practice yet do not follow an institutionalized religion. Some of these people grew up around a religion that emphasized meditation, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, and left their faith once they became adults. They tend to hold onto a meditation practice that resembles the practice they learned and experienced while growing up. Other people gain access to meditation through non-religious health-directed mindfulness programs, or through classes in techniques such as TM. Due to the health benefits observed to accrue from a meditation practice (see next section), some physicians recommend regular meditation and yoga to their patients. Furthermore, corporations have adopted mindfulness programs to help reduce stress in the workplace. These methods aim at meditation's focus on short-term stress relief. When meditation is practiced outside of an explicitly religious context, it is believed to be more amenable to a wider audience of practitioners (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, 187). Non-religious mindfulness can therefore be adapted to the values of that individual. Critics of non-religious mindfulness argue that extreme adaptation can skew mindfulness into a version that has no resemblance to its origins (Hickey, 2019, 216).

Review of Medical Studies

At the time of this writing, a PubMed search of “meditation OR mindfulness” and “health OR healing” turned up over 15,000 published studies. Of these, over 2,700 are reviews, systematic reviews, or meta-analyses. Research on this topic has grown

exponentially since 1990 and can no longer be considered a fringe research subject. While the clinical value of meditation is still a contentious topic within medicine and psychology, recent research reviews provide overwhelming evidence of benefit to people's health (Keng et al., 2011, 1049). Moreover, studies on mindfulness-related topics are regularly published in the most prestigious journals, including *New England Journal of Medicine*, *Nature*, and *The Lancet*. This includes research on both physical and mental health.

The benefits of a meditation practice on physical health have been widely studied and recognized. Mindfulness treatments are accessible and inexpensive to patients and researchers (Haynes, 2004, 19). Meditation may be an attractive adjunct to medical treatment, because it is ideally a no-cost “therapy” that can be used with minimal side effects. It has proven to show consistent benefits when associated with conventional medical treatments (Sampaio et al., 2017, 411). A few examples of recent studies follow.

Cardiovascular disease

There is substantial research evidence for the relaxing effects of meditation showing significant improvements in conditions such as hypertension and high cortisol levels. (Ray et al., 2014, 699). In one study, with patients diagnosed with arterial hypertension, mindfulness meditation was identified as an effective intervention with improved anxiety, stress, and depression levels (Ponte Márquez et al. 2018, 237). This eight-week study also found that the mindfulness group had lower systolic blood pressure and diastolic blood pressure values. A literature review of randomized controlled trials

involving adults with cardiovascular disease found meditation to be effective in lowering risk of cardiovascular events without side effects (Manchanda & Madan, 2014, 680). An accumulation of empirical evidence led the American Heart Association to issue a statement recommending meditation as an adjunct intervention to decrease risk of lifetime cardiovascular events (Krittanawong et al., 2020, 23).

Despite such evidence, there is still pushback from medical professionals regarding the efficacy of meditation. Such publications claim that primary prevention studies often enroll healthy individuals who have many factors contributing to their overall health that could influence the outcome of their future diagnosis (Levine et al. 2018). However, when the salutary benefits of mindfulness are compared to a control group with a similar level of baseline health, the evidence gathered demonstrates a significant difference between the two groups time and time again (Loucks et al., 2016, 10). This cannot be a result of chance. Professionals that deny the evidence outlined above may see meditation as a threat to their paradigm of “truth” in biomedical science. As an adjunctive therapy, however, the mindfulness movement in medicine poses no such danger to modern medicine. My hope is that such professionals should be glad to see any indicator that improves patient outcomes, no matter the source.

Diabetes

Similarly to cardiovascular disease, meditation has also been found to be an efficacious intervention method in diabetes patients. The effects of meditation on type 2 (adult-onset) diabetes are more widely studied than on type 1 diabetes. Mind-body

techniques, including yoga, are a common form of adjunct therapy in the management of type 2 diabetes. Most studies find significant decreases in LDL cholesterol levels and increased quality of life after intervention (Lee et al. 2019). Research on the effects of meditation on the management of type 1 diabetes has been published within the last five years. For example, a six-month-long study found a significant reduction in the total diabetes distress score in the intervention group for type 1 diabetes (Shukla et al. 2021). Various Mind-Body therapies that intervene at the physical, mental, and emotional levels improve diabetes distress and overall patient well-being. Diseases such as diabetes that are associated with significant psychosocial distress are usefully managed with holistic adjunct therapy, such as meditation. It may not lead to lower blood sugar (although it may), but it can significantly reduce psychosocial sequelae and stressors that themselves may be pathogenic.

Cancer

Cancer is a disease category containing a vast collection of pathologies involving malignant cell growth at various sites throughout the body. As a category, it is the second leading cause of death in the U.S., behind coronary heart disease. The most common and difficult symptom for physicians and cancer patients to manage is pain. Patients report pain as a result of the cancer tissue itself, as well as due to the effects of treatment.

A study conducted in 2016 showed efficacy of meditation in reducing perceived stress, reductions in depressive symptoms, reduced fatigue, increased sense of purpose, and significantly decreased proinflammatory signaling in young breast cancer survivors

(Bower et al., 2016, 1233). Kabat-Zinn's Mind-Body Stress Relief (MBSR) program was used in a study of women recently diagnosed with breast cancer. Upon completion of the program, there were significantly positive effects on immune function, quality of life, and coping effectiveness (Witek-Janusek et al., 2008, 975). In another study, researchers measured decreased cortisol levels over an eight-week period for breast and prostate cancer outpatients who reported that the MBSR program helped decrease their stress levels (Carlson et al., 2004, 458).

Mental Health

Physiological and neurophysiological studies suggest that meditation has measurable, long-term effects on the brain. A recent study used electroencephalography on Buddhist meditation practitioners and a control group (Lutz et al., 2004). They measured a significantly higher gamma-band oscillatory rhythm to slow oscillatory rhythms on the practitioners, which suggests a change in the self-referential processing and present-moment awareness (Tang et al., 2015, 213). Additionally, the differences between the two groups were even greater when comparing the oscillatory rhythms during a meditation practice. Studies find a higher correlation between meditation and significant changes in the brain when the participants have practiced meditation for a longer period. While some studies measure changes in brain after 1-3 months of meditation, the results are conflicting.

Meditation and mindfulness techniques also show a promising basis for intervention for people with mental health disorders (Wielgosz et al., 2018, 315). A systematic review and meta-analysis concluded that meditation and mindfulness programs in schools decreased symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression in students (Valero et al., 2019, 5). Additionally, this review found that moderate to high benefit was only reached when the program lasted five weeks or more (Valero et al., 2019, 13). Regarding anxiety disorders, meditation serves to reduce the resting arousal state that helps to decrease anxiety symptoms without any harmful effects (Krisanaprakornkit et al., 2006, 7). In a randomized trial looking at adults with treatment-resistant depression, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) significantly decreased therapy and improved the participants response to pharmacotherapy (Eisendrath et al., 2016, 107). These results should encourage contemporary medical practitioners to use mindfulness techniques alongside traditional treatment to improve patient outcomes.

Meditation and Mindfulness Today

Validated research studies have shown that meditation is a powerful technique that benefits physical and mental health. Meditation can be used as an alternative therapy or as a complementary therapy or adjunct to standard medication for conditions from hypertension to depression. As Benson noted, without a synthesis of meditation with medicine, “medicine will become further removed from what you need” (Benson, 1979, 13). Thus, for medicine to fulfill its aim of promoting the health of the whole person, providers ought to be more open to including mindfulness as a component of treatment plans.

While the observed efficacy of meditation in research studies has increased its attractiveness to client populations and to some physicians and psychologists, its increased popularity changed how meditation is experienced. The medicalization of meditation practices—its emergence as a prescribed therapy for medical conditions—has also led to its non-religiousization, to the loss of its original religious or spiritual context. The heightened acceptance of meditation practices has especially led to its popularity among corporate planners and its use in workplace settings. Hickey coined the term “McMindfulness” to describe when a corporate leader encourages employees to meditate to reduce work-related stress. This form of mindfulness may have some transient advantages for practitioners, but it fails to encapsulate a long-term spiritual community, ethical framework, and the encounter with and transcendence of systemic suffering. If corporate mindfulness were to go “deeper,” however, according to Hickey, it might encourage employees to question the corporate values of the company that is causing their overwhelming stress. Thus, it may be in a corporation’s best interest to simplify Buddhist religious practices to a tweak in work schedules instead of a structured response.

This is not meant as an indictment of all non-religious mindfulness programs. Many people who practice meditation outside of a religious context are capable of finding greater sense of peace by sitting in meditation and going inward. The corporate use of mindfulness has, in part, unlocked the possibility for nonreligious people to cultivate such a practice, and thus has been a positive influence on the spread of meditation. Additionally, it has rekindled awareness of meditation among those people who were raised in a faith tradition that encompassed meditative techniques but who left

religion in their adulthood. They may return to practicing mindfulness in some fashion, in a spiritual context or otherwise, and receive the same physical and psychological benefits found in the literature as formally religious people who practice meditation.

Non-religious mindfulness has opened up a valuable health-promoting resource to people who may not have been exposed to religious contemplative practices. In a culture that is constantly buzzing with work stress and stories of corporatization of people's lives, taking time for stillness in any capacity is beneficial. Still, practitioners of Westernized meditative techniques are leaving out a lot when they limit use of mindfulness to just being a tool for deadening stress and pain. Meditation was never meant as a way to sedate feelings, but rather a means to gain awareness of these feelings and their source and then to foster non-attachment and release. If practiced well, mindfulness practice should not just help one "feel good," but should awaken the soul to compassion. It is extremely exciting that more people have access to meditation, because, presumably, some will eventually find a deeper and more authentic way of living. Those that are awakened to compassion will, ideally, be better able to see the suffering and injustice that affects one's neighbors.

Practitioners of contemporary mindfulness are part of a rich history. While increasingly practiced in a non-religious context, it has a place in the world's major religions, including, as we have seen, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism, and Islam. In Chapter 2, I summarize in-depth interviews with six people who practice meditation. These respondents represent diverse faith backgrounds outside of the mainstream, and their experiences shed light on how meditation has benefited their lives and on what is similar and what is distinctive in these practices and benefits across their

respective religions. We will see that normal people find meditation to be beneficial. While you may not meditate yourself, chances are that you know someone who does. Their practice helps them find peace and cope with the challenges of life. That, in turn, helps them to be more present in their relationships. Therefore, I will assert that we all are benefactors of the mindfulness movement.

CHAPTER TWO

Individual Experiences of Meditation across Religious Traditions

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I gave a historical overview of the mindfulness movement. I outlined the roots of mindfulness practices, as well as how meditation is experienced in several of the world's major religious traditions. I also described how meditation gained traction within academia and found its way into the public eye through Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Mind-Body medicine. The broad strokes used in Chapter One provided the context for how meditation is viewed today. The review of medical research studies also provided evidence of the value of meditation in improving physical and psychological health. Meditation can help people face the challenges of living with chronic illnesses including but not limited to depression, anxiety, cancer, diabetes, and many others.

The content in Chapter One described the impact of meditation, but it did not exhaust the topic. Evidence was presented that meditation improves health, but did not address *how*. The precise causal mechanisms underlying the benefits of a mindfulness practice are beyond the scope of this thesis, but the experiences of meditators themselves can help us understand the ways in which people find healing and meaning from these practices.

Accordingly, in this chapter, I will investigate the mindfulness and meditation practices of six individuals. In order to gain a richer insight into how mindfulness is experienced, I have identified people from various religious backgrounds outside of the mainstream of Judeo-Christian religions. Through in-depth interviews, I identify how mindfulness impacts one's relationship with themselves, other people, and a divine being. These folks' spirituality and meditation practice, as we will see, are influenced by their respective location, family background, ethnic and cultural identities, and so on. These interviews bring depth and heart to this conversation about meditation and religious faith.

Methodology

The rest of this chapter will detail personal interviews with six people from various religious backgrounds. Before entering these conversations, I took time to reflect on my own objectives. The nature of meditation is personal and discussing it with others may present vulnerabilities. A person's meditation practice may be extraordinarily sensitive and is unique to their own spiritual state. I had to acknowledge that those I would converse with have experienced their meditative practice differently than mine. Additionally, my preconceived impressions of the meditation practices of a particular religious group, gained through readings, are not necessarily accurate. It was my responsibility as an interviewer to respect the sanctity of each person's unique practice.

In my questions, detailed in the next section, I asked people to describe what they gain from their meditation and/or mindfulness practices. Due to the great complexity of the topic, this may be an unanswerable question. Spirituality and religion try to hint at the

indescribable. I recognize that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to give a verbal explanation of an indescribable experience.

Most of the people I interviewed were a part of a religious minority group. It was vital to my research that I talk to individuals outside of a Judeo-Christian background. Personally, I adhere to a United Methodist background (raised in a church in South Texas and pastored by my mother). This thesis is to be submitted to Baylor University, a Baptist University where most students adhere to some form of Christianity. In my upbringing and education, I have a strong knowledge of Christianity. This allows me to converse well with people in familiar circles, including many colleagues at Baylor. However, it does not enable me to easily communicate with those who see the world through a different religious lens.

As the interviews approached, it became imperative that I better educate myself on the world's religions. During the research portion of this thesis, I took a World Religions course with Dr. Chris van Gorder. This course was significant for my baseline understanding of other faiths. Furthermore, we were introduced to many speakers who were willing to share their beliefs with the class. I learned a great deal from watching my professor and TAs interact with our guests. I saw a level of mutual respect. When engaging in interfaith dialogue, neither individual is required to leave their own faith background. We are simply invited to share our background as openly as possible, all while listening with focused and non-judgmental intention to others. In this spirit, we are more likely to find commonalities and form friendships.

For the reader who does not have the opportunity to take a course on other religious traditions, I can point to additional resources. The *Meditation in the World*

Religions section in Chapter One was an effort to give context to each of the traditions that will be discussed in this section. To supplement this, a great place to start is *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook* (Matlins, 1999). This handbook is perfect to prepare oneself to attend religious services outside of one's own tradition, and may result in your engaging in interesting conversations with new friends. Seeking out information on other religions is a way to demonstrate to people outside of your faith that you care about and respect their beliefs.

Interviews

In this section, I will detail six conversations I had throughout the summer and fall of 2022. I am profoundly grateful to the people who agreed to be interviewed. The interviews could also not have been conducted without the helpful assistance of those who connected me with the participants. Everyone I interviewed gave me verbal consent to either quote or paraphrase for this thesis. To protect the identities of these individuals, I anonymized all of their names, locations, and any other identifying factors. I did this for two reasons. First, I want to protect the individuals who were generous with their time. I do not want these people to be contacted without their consent. Second, the personal details of these interviewees I took out of this paper do not contribute in any way to my goal for this thesis. My hope was to tell their stories and then to relate them to one another, comparing and contrasting aspects of their respective stories.

I asked all the folks I interviewed the same set of questions. These questions served as a tool to guide our conversation. Each interview lasted between an hour and an

hour and a half. For the most part, we talked about meditation practices, but I also learned about the things that made these individuals human—their career, spouse, children, hobbies, etc. To some degree or another, each person was asked the following six questions:

- What inspired you to begin meditating?
- What are the logistics of your daily meditation practice?
- Does your practice bring meaning to your spiritual life and life in general?
How?
- Are you a part of a community of people who practice meditation?
- Why meditate? How does it benefit you mentally, emotionally, or physically?
- Have you ever experienced healing through your practice?

I will now give an overview of each interview. I chose to format this section by narrating each conversation. For the folks I have a history with, I will give context to our relationship and my prior connections with the person. For most of the interviews, I have permission to use direct quotes from an audio recording. I hope that the peace and wisdom of each interviewee will be apparent from their heartfelt words.

A Buddhist Nun

The first person I interviewed is a Buddhist nun. She is a woman who I know dearly. She has many adorations, the first being her Buddhist faith. The second is classical piano, which is how I found my way to her at the age of four. This woman—we

will call her Donna—taught me piano throughout my childhood. I have fond memories of our times together. My sister and I would drive up to her home on Monday afternoons, still in our school clothes, remove our shoes and engage in a bow before starting the lesson. I would always go first, and my lesson was shorter than my sisters since my attention span was also shorter. I remember her being gentle when redirecting the music I had practiced. She was also extremely particular about our work. I thought that was odd, because we never played in any competitions as did my school peers. When one of my pieces reached her standards, she would quietly move to the back of the room and start recording on a fresh CD. I would play as she hummed in the background. When we were both happy with the product, Donna would put the CD in a fresh envelope and send it home with me. I remember playing my CD for my baby brother as he fell asleep at night, astonished at my masterpiece.

However, as I grew up, I noticed she was different than the other adults in my life. Other adults in my life were frazzled by the school pickup line or being late to soccer practice. She was not like that. Her mood was consistent every week, and she mentioned difficulties in her life with a sense of healthy detachment. Donna very rarely mentioned meditation directly. A few times as a young teen, I would attend my lesson in a ball of anxiety. She would instantly notice, which surprised me since I seem able to hide my emotions from many others. Donna would sit me down on her cream-colored carpet, her obedient but stubborn dog in between us. Together, we sat there, facing one another in silence. We probably spent a maximum of twenty minutes at once in a sitting position. Yet I started to notice that I felt lighter after my informal lesson on meditation. I began a

sitting posture on my own at home, a practice that became a lifeline for me in high school and college.

Throughout my teen years, Donna talked more and more about Buddhism. She even voiced a longing to be near to her Roshi, who lived in a medium-sized mountain town a reasonable distance from us. Before my senior year of high school, she announced that after many years of consideration, she would move to said mountain town and become a fully ordained Buddhist nun. Her move was difficult for my family. We shed many tears at the dinner table over the loss of her physical presence. She was a mentor to my siblings and me. My older sister helped Donna pack her things and drove her U-Haul to her new home. It was a large adjustment for us, and we planned to visit her at least once a year. Due to COVID-19, I went three years without seeing her in-person. I interviewed Donna in May of 2022 during my most recent visit. It was also the first time I saw her since I began studies at Baylor. You will see her many wise remarks throughout the interview. However, I mainly recall her laughter throughout the interview. I also remember how tightly she hugged me before and after our conversation. I was happy to sit with her, cross-legged under a photo gallery of her dog, Max, who had recently passed away.

Looking back on her decision to move away from our hometown, Donna recalled to me how she was drawn to her Roshi. She was the woman who brought her into the faith and would ordain her in 2016. I know what it is like to be drawn to someone, for a reason you cannot quite describe. It is exactly how I feel about Donna.

She has had a whole lifetime of spiritual searching and working with people all over the world...her perspective is just huge. Anyways, she was offering this class called 'coming full circle'. It was about life and death. That was in 2002. I was raised to not speak about

things that were not pleasant. And death isn't pleasant. I took her class about five times, and it was different every time because she was so creative. I found that she had a kernel in her, a nugget. It was something I needed to know. There was truth of it that really called me. I don't know why it called me. At some point, I just realized that I had to take the plunge. I became lay ordained in 2015 then fully ordained in 2016.

Not being raised Buddhist, Donna accessed Buddhism first through a class. The teacher of that course would later become her spiritual guide. There was no knowing that would happen, and for Donna it was only a blessing. Like many folks in the Global North, Donna accessed her religion through non-religious means. She found something that called her in that class, a conversation about death. She kept drawing deeper into the faith. She took the course repeatedly, at least five times. Donna recalled that she would go to a bookshop and pick up every book on Buddhism that she could find. The repeated calling, drawing her deeper and deeper into the faith, led her to want to be ordained. That seems like a large step to me. I asked Donna what exactly called her to become ordained.

The truth of it is not something you can speak of. You can feel it. You can taste it almost. So yeah, I don't know what calls me. But it is something.

This awakened me to the charge of this project. I am trying to convey the benefits of mindfulness and meditation broadly, then individually for a small group of people. In the broadest sense, looking at the established data, we can easily state the most up-to-date statistics on the benefits of a practice. However, the more personal we get, the more difficult it is to define. Is it enough to say that just “*something*” calls you? It was enough for Donna to make the dive into her faith. Those of us who meditate know our personal reason(s) why we meditate. It is something, it is a feeling—something we cannot put our finger on, but a subtle change in our lives. That makes it completely worthwhile.

What do the daily logistics of her mindfulness practice look like? Donna told me that it was varied. When she became fully ordained, Donna began a 1,000-day journey of meditation. While not fully isolated, the goal of each day during that nearly three-year period was to dive deeper into Zen Buddhist meditation practices. When I visited her, she had recently completed her 1,000 days, and restarted it again shortly after. In all phases of intensity in her spiritual practice, she told me that it always encompassed some level of sitting posture.

The posture is the basis of being awakened. What is being awakened? You're upright. Your feet are connected to the ground. You're connected with the earth. Your crown is open to the heavens. You are connected horizontally from your heart center. It is not about using this tiny, tiny thing that we call our cognitive center. When you release into it [sitting posture], you find true openness. Your heart is open. Your systems are open. It is such an amazing thing.

One could visualize the beginning of this previous quote as a teaching. As Donna gave directions for the sitting posture, we both adjusted how we were sitting. I straightened the curve in my back. I uncrossed both legs and placed them firmly on the ground. I noticed the fuzzy carpet on my toes. I raised the top of my head towards the ceiling of Donna's living room. I reestablished eye contact with my teacher. I reminded myself of the importance of that moment, and I became closer to fully present. I was guided into a space of mindfulness.

Why meditate at all? At times, it can seem redundant and, frankly, a waste of time. I felt this more than ever during my third year at Baylor. I felt pulled in all directions, encouraged to schedule every minute of my time. I was taking courses that demanded hours of preparation every week and beginning to write a thesis! Why use half an hour of my morning to just sit? Could I not use that time for the 'sacred' act of sleep?

Meditation was not intended for short-term benefit. We cannot enter the practice under the belief that we will reach the perfect mind space in fifteen minutes. The secularization and medicalization of mindfulness instilled the pressure for mindfulness to be a cure for all ailments. It is not that. Mindfulness aims to turn our focus away from what benefits *me*. I was astounded by Donna's response to the question, "What physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits do you gain from your practice?"

[I gain] the importance of taking responsibility for the whole catastrophe. I was brought up in a patriarchal society. My support was my grandfather. I always felt like I would be married, and my husband would take care of half of me. It never occurred to me that I would have to work on my own. I always assumed that life would follow the course of things. There was always that little girl in me that needed to be taken care of. I had to grow up and, as they say, 'get right-side up'. Taking responsibility for the whole catastrophe is not just growing up, it is taking on every aspect of my life. It is asking: am I in alignment in this moment in my speech, actions, and thoughts? Am I open? Am I here? Am I present? You build a kind of inner strength. They call it "Joriki". The more of that you get, the more of a base you have to settle into.

This statement exhibits one of the attitudinal foundations of many mindfulness practices: taking responsibility for yourself and your personal wellbeing. Donna takes it a step further! She takes responsibility for systemic injustices—namely sexism. Even though she was in the group of the oppressed, she revealed she played a role in perpetuating her own oppression. For her, mindfulness played a role in opening her mind from the narrow view of oppression. She was able to see that the way she was raised to live does not have to be reality.

The phrase, "get right side up" stuck with me long after the interview. In the audio recording, she fumbled around with different phrases. She tries "fix", shakes her head then pauses to think. I remember seeing the epiphany in her eyes, "Oh, yes! As they say, get right side up," as if she was just remembering that teaching again. What makes

that phrase distinct is that everything you need to make a shift is already present. You simply change your orientation. In a meditation practice, there are no gadgets or physical tools required for transformation. All that is needed is your physical and mental presence, open to being turned right side up again and again.

My final question for the interview was about healing. I am interested in the physical manifestations of a mindfulness practice on overall health. As stated earlier, there is immense evidence in the literature for increased well-being after a consistent practice. I have seen Donna live with normal sicknesses, chronic illness, and recently survive breast cancer. I was extremely curious to see how she views her own healing experience.

It can turn around your life so that your mental state is open and positive. To the degree that you have any awakening to wisdom, your compassion and gratitude will increase. When you have these sorts of things, there is something about you that is just healthier. You can still have illness, old age, and death, but they don't have to pull you down.

In this portion of the interview, Donna referred to a story of the Buddha who was prompted to go search for truth after he witnessed illness, old age, and death. He soon found that no one is free from these constraints, even the rich and the religious. The determining factor is your mind's orientation towards those things. After all, your mind is the only thing one really can control. She also stated a trust in medical care, noting the centrality of psychological work for the mind. Medicine and mindfulness, in her perspective, can be great partners towards wellness. The Buddha once used medicine as an analogy for the Noble Truths. He stated, "Know the sickness, Abandon the cause of the sickness, Aspire the cure and rely upon the Medical treatment," (Kalra et al., 2018, 813).

I am thankful to Donna for her guidance in this thesis, but more so throughout my childhood and early adulthood. The greatest shortcoming of this section is that the quotations could not encapsulate her energetic laughter! Donna lives a life of joy. You see it in the way she works and treats others. In the coming sections, I continue to introduce extremely wise and thoughtful folks. I cannot substantiate their impact on their circles as I can with Donna. All my love.

Professor Quaker

I met James through an interfaith group in San Antonio. He is a member of the Friends Meeting of San Antonio, the main Quaker group in the area. James became a Quaker when he married his wife, who was born into the faith. He has now been a member for almost 50 years. He is an educator at heart. James is a retired psychology professor from a liberal arts college in California. Throughout the course of our interview, James threw out a couple cynical remarks about professors. He begrudgingly told me of his distaste for the politics of universities, telling a story or two of passive-aggressive emails that he either received or sent. While I could tell he was glad to leave those dramas behind, he showed a sincere excitement to teach me about his faith background. Throughout the interview, James would beam and make a joke about how it had been a while since he had a 'captive audience'. I was glad to be his student. James had wonderful insight to share.

We had our conversation in a café just outside of San Antonio. When we both arrived, we asked the wait staff for coffee. Each cup was delivered just as quickly as we

could drink it, both of us glad that we shared a similar fondness for caffeine. Our kind waitress eventually left us a pot of hot coffee and left us to our conversation.

We started the interview informally, comparing our religious traditions. James is Quaker and I am Methodist, both denominations of the Christian faith. We both belong to more nontraditional congregations ('heretical' depending on who you ask). James voiced how he had difficulty finding comfortable language for the divine. There is a movement away from he/him pronouns for God in many Christian circles, which brings up a larger conversation of how we tend to box in the divine. Here is what James had to say about labeling a divine presence.

I don't experience the divine as person. But I don't experience it as non-person. I am much more interested in having the experiences than labeling them. Because you can't.

What do we gain from labeling God or the divine as a person? Seemingly, that tool allows us to pull the divine down to our level. We begrudgingly drag the creator of the universe to our level of understanding and connection. Might I add that there is nothing wrong with such a tool. We will meet other wise individuals impose a metaphor on their God figure. In many senses, that enables a relationship with the divine. The divine creator and keeper of all knowledge is way out of humanity's league as a friend. If we think of it as a father-figure, mother-figure, friend, or sibling, we are then able to use our earthy relationships as a model for who the divine is.

James gets at the fact that while labeling the divine may be helpful, it does not completely encapsulate the essence of the Divine. We tend to outgrow the labels we place on the divine and the relationships we base them on transform. We can trade old labels for new ones or ditch them altogether. Either choice is completely fine and each person's

right to make. I would suggest that we investigate why James decided to stop labeling the divine spirit and instead leaned into describing spiritual experiences.

I grew up in the 50's in a non-religious family, so I have real trouble with theistic language. I was raised to not believe in the child's image of a Baptist god. But I've always had a sense that there is something else. I mean, I grew up in the sixties where there was a lot of weird s--t happening. We would read about Buddhist stuff, there weren't a whole lot of them around, but it got to my circles. And then there was the early 70's there was the Hasidic mystical movement with Reb Zalman Schachter and clearly there were manifesting something that was different. So, I did a bunch of dabbling in that stuff when I was in San Francisco doing theater in my twenties. You had everything floating through at that point—when you're working in theater you're working with your body. Naturally, you encounter everything floating through that area.

He brings up a few compelling points, firstly, the act of labeling the divine in material terms may be a learned spiritual practice. As a child of non-religious adults, James never felt a need to pick up this practice. Children in other traditions of Christianity are taught to view God as an older, white elder. This image instills respect, awe, and sometimes the 'fear of God' in children who are raised in the church. James never got this message. Furthermore, he never got a formal religious practice handed down to him by his parents. He says that he still felt *something*. I asked James if the term 'something' was what he used to primarily speak about the divine. He shrugged and took a moment of silence. He remarked that he does not have a formal name for it, but he returns to the term 'something', because it resonated with him as a child and young adult. There is something to be said for the comfort we find in our childhood metaphors for the divine.

In the first chapter, we discussed how and when meditation exploded in popularity in America, in the '60s and '70s. James entered the adult world during this exact point in time. He was entering a notably exploratory period in adulthood. The

country, as a whole, took on this attitude as well, as the public delved into Transcendental Meditation and yoga. James now has over 50 years of expertise in Quaker meditation. However, his first encounter with meditation was entirely non-religious. He happened to be at the right place, San Francisco, at the right time, the early 70's. Here is his account of the origins of his practice.

I soon started working under the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. During that time, I developed a practice of centering. Each type of practice is different, but I was doing the type where you 'sit on the bank and watch the boats go by'. When you discover yourself sitting on one of the boats, you sit back on the bank. That was a really good image for me for a long time.

He went on to tell me that this image, sitting in meditation on a riverbank, was an image he used daily for somewhere between ten and fifteen years. Sure, James started his practice by investigating the offerings of the counterculture of that time period. However, this was not merely a three-month phase of dabbling. He noticed that he was getting at something profound. James was getting closer to whatever divine presence he felt as a child. With much persistence, his practice was changing him, in ways unnamed, but making a difference nevertheless.

Earlier in this thesis, I discussed non-religious mindfulness, identifying two interesting trends in why people practice it. First, they do not see any negative effects, and most notice a positive change in their health and well-being. Second, non-religious mindfulness is often a conduit for folks searching to find a robust tradition of meditation in a particular spiritual tradition. James exemplifies both trends. He saw the benefits of his practice and deepened it as those benefits were realized. Additionally, he joined the religion tradition of the Quaker Friends, gradually brought in by a woman he fell in love

with and eventually married. Here is how his practice has shifted as he used a religious framework for his meditation.

At this point, I use a different image. I look for the point in my sitting when I can see the ripples of the wind on the pond. That's the spot where you are truly still, and in Quaker traditions sometimes hear a message. Sometimes the messages you hear are for you. Sometimes they are leftovers of what your breakfast or what you heard on NPR—and that one you're supposed to not say anything. But SOMETIMES you find yourself on your feet saying something. You all find the stillness, and you can feel it to some extent. And when you are called to speak, you speak in such a way so that the silence is deepened. It isn't the words. It isn't the message. It's the experience of being picked up onto your feet by silence.

Here, we see echoes of the beginning of James' meditation practice. He still utilizes the metaphor of watching boats drive by on a stream. After a couple decades into his practice, he is able to identify the spot where he is truly still. This landmark is not spoken of in the literature, likely because studies usually follow participants for a maximum of just one year. I am unfamiliar with this concept as my own practice is less than a decade old. Finding real, complete stillness is a new concept to me and may take lots of time to attain. For James, getting to that point opened a new layer of possibilities. In complete stillness, one is best situated to hear a voice.

James specifies that what he hears during meditation might not be the voice of the divine. One must have the discernment to determine what thoughts get to pass by and which are shared with the group. Most of the time, this is a conscious discernment made by the individual. James also brought up later in the interview that sometimes there is not a conscious choice to stand. He may find himself on his feet speaking, then sit down not knowing what he said. That point, he clarified, is when he knows he has heard a message

from God. He then has to talk to a friend after the meeting to find out what exactly that message was that was received.

Through his 40-plus years as a Quaker, he recently became a clerk—a leadership position in the Quaker tradition that allows him to lead the meeting. He has now done this for many years, starting in-person and pivoting to Zoom during (and after) the pandemic. James was extremely comfortable in silence, a sign, I would imagine, that makes for a good Quaker and a great clerk. He took frequent pauses to gather his thoughts or offer a space for me to find my words. I am sure this posture of letting silence sit took many years to perfect. James also learned other skills that help to facilitate a successful meeting.

I'll basically use the first half hour settle us in. And then it comes up into more of a waiting spot. There you are open to a message if it comes. It does not? have to be that kind of world-shaking conviction. It can simply be the physical feeling of being in the presence of something...There are cycles in a meeting. There are many shifts of energy within the group. An old saying between clerks is that you end the meeting at the fifth major fidget.

I hear echoes of his own practice when I use this technique. In his personal meditation practice, James learned to find the spot where he in his mind is silent, still, and in tune with the divine. Not only can he do that for himself, but he is able to lead a group of a dozen or so Quakers to this same spot. That is a powerful spiritual tool. James can read a room, take everyone to a similar state of contemplation, then bring everyone back. This is a skill only few have. James, like some of the other individuals in this chapter, finds so much meaning in their non-religious meditation practice, they go deeper. James hopes that other people will also find comfort and peace through meditation, right now, in this life.

Two Sufi Men

I left my interview with two gentlemen profoundly touched. These two men took a moment to ponder before answering each question. They also made soft, attentive eye contact with me. They made jokes and laughed. They were uncomfortable with the interview situation and took frequent breaks to ask me about myself. As I anonymize their names and personal details, I will call these two men Anthony and Jonathan. They are from a large city in Texas and grew up together in the same area of that town. They both had a passion for Pokémon cards, and they still meet up every week with their wives to play Pokémon. Anthony joined a Sufi prayer group first, right out of high school. Jonathan saw how it impacted Anthony and joined a few years later than Anthony. I coordinated the interview through Anthony, who brought Jonathan along so that he could get more comfortable sharing about his practice.

I drove to the city where Anthony and Jonathan live one evening for the interview. We stood in line at a local coffee shop, unaware of what each other looked like. Anthony turned around to face me and told me he had a feeling I was Alice, the person who would be interviewing him. His intuition was correct, and we ordered our drinks together. I showed Anthony the delicacy of an Italian soda, flavored soda loaded with sweet cream. We enjoyed them over our conversation, while a familiar stomachache settled in towards the end of the interview from the cream. The men asked that I didn't record our conversation. For that reason, I will discuss ideas they brought without direct quotations and will paraphrase their ideas in my own words.

The most frequent topic Jonathan and Anthony brought up was their spiritual guide. In Sufism, a Sufi who is authorized to teach and guide a group of students is referred to as an imam (Rauf, 2008, 591). The men brought up the following thoughts about their imam or sheikh.

He is an incredible man. He is delightful in casual conversation. Our sheikh is a great listener and cares deeply about our lives. He will ask good questions and only offer advice when we ask for it. When he does impart his wisdom, you always pay attention. We have learned the greatest of lessons from him. You can't help but follow him.

Anthony and Jonathan's imam is a person I would like to know. They spoke with the same level of admiration as one may talk about their hero or spouse. They trust him to a level I had only seen before in Donna when she spoke about the woman who introduced her into Zen Buddhism. Their imam gained Anthony and Jonathan's trust by showing up, time and time again, and offering steady, wise advice. They also credit him for their faith. Their imam drew them into mysticism, which gave them both a more fulfilling spiritual life.

They voiced that there was *something* about this man that made him different from others. He had been a Sufi for decades longer than them, which could be what sets him apart. He also is a great listener and naturally adept at meditation, a quality they think he has always had. Moreso, their imam is consistent in his practice and in being a mentor to both of them. That is a quality he worked on over the years, showing a level of consistency to Allah that they strive to have. It was their imam who encouraged Anthony to reframe his language for the divine. Below is a paraphrasing of Anthony's journey with the divine.

The best way I have learned to describe Allah is friend. I tried to call him father, but that failed because I could not really be myself with him. Friend is a good analogy for me right now. If you want to develop a friendship in this life, you must spend time with that person. You must share what you are going through each day. You also listen to them for advice and accept help when life gets challenging. I deepen my friendship with Allah through meditation. It is how I spend quality time with my best friend, well besides Jonathan.

I find it so incredibly wholesome that Anthony's best analogy for his relationship with Allah is his friendship with Jonathan. From the couple of hours I spent with Anthony and Jonathan, I could see just how much the two cared for one another. I could see how happy they were to drive over half an hour to meet with me. They told me that it was a blessing to them, because it gave them an opportunity to have conversations in the car. Anthony also told me that the following night they would gather with their wives for a dinner party. I could see the deep fulfillment that their friendship brings into their lives.

It is quite fitting that they use their friendship as a mechanism to understand what it is like to know the divine. Anthony took up this narrative in his early adulthood. He said that when he was a child, he was secure in a parent-child relationship with Allah. But when he grew older, the intrinsic power dynamic of calling Allah 'Father' made him uncomfortable. Anthony outgrew a spiritual tool that was previously impactful for him. I will suggest that at his current pace of spiritual growth, Anthony will find many fitting metaphors for Allah. Each will be a true, but different view of the divine, each perspective creating a more complete picture.

I left my conversation by thanking them for their time and wisdom. Jonathan offered me a blessing, which filled me with a warm, sparkling energy. I drove back to my apartment in silence, their words echoing in my mind. When I made it back, I found a

kind email in my inbox from Anthony. These were not his exact words, but they communicate the same ideas. I hope one can see how action-based their faith is, and just how much Anthony and Jonathan enjoy sharing about Sufism.

I am regretful that we were only able to treat you to soda tonight, not a meal. Perhaps we can set that up next time you are in town. Please join us for a meditation group in the winter. We would be so happy to host you and teach you more about our practice. It is a joy for us to share it with others.

Man from local Paramahansa Meditation Circle

The first thing to establish about the local Paramahansa Yogananda group is that they are eager to share about meditation. I got in contact with their leader initially, who forwarded my message to their group of about 20 folks. My inbox filled to the brim with kind messages asking if I still needed interviewees for this project. I quickly got the material I needed through talking to one of their members, Bill. I still, however, heard from over a dozen members of the meditation circle. You probably cannot find that level of engagement at any church in Texas. I am almost certain that I will continue to hear from them, either from more folks reaching out or Bill checking on me.

The local group is the kind of tight knit group that all religious and social circles strive for. They speak incredibly highly of one another, and some raised their families together. Some of this must have to do with their weekly meditation circles, where they trade off leading one another in various sittings and exercises. They are one of the only alternative spiritual communities in our mid-size town in the heart of the bible belt. People outside of mindfulness circle often berate them, calling them all sorts of names (such as “cultists”) that allude to their belief that they think all non-evangelical Christians

will be sent straight to hell. The meditation group gives them spiritual growth and a supportive community, both of which are imperative to general well-being.

I spoke formally with three people in the Paramahansa Meditation Circle and informally, over email, with many others. Their group follows the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda, a 20th century Hindu swami of the 20th Century. He is referred to as “Father of Yoga in the West”. Paramahansa Yogananda brought Kriya Yoga to the United States when he moved to Los Angeles for the last three decades of his life (Yogananda, 1946, 263). His effect was so large that there is a Paramahansa group in every large city in America. While these groups are often founded on his teachings, they seem to attract meditators of all types. The man whom I will quote in this section (we will call him Bill) does not identify as Hindu. However, he admires the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda and has found a supportive community in the meditation circle. I first asked him about what religious tradition he claims, if any.

I've had good friends call me a Zen Buddhist Quaker. I am not particularly Zen. I am not a Quaker, but the denomination that I most admire and applaud are the Quakers, for the way they respect silence. People can evolve and become enlightened within any religious tradition. Some of the most Christ-like people I've met in my life call themselves atheist. The more organized and rigid a religion has become, the less likely it is for anyone within it to be humble enough, open enough, and nonjudgmental enough to have a mystical experience...All mystics from any time and place go essentially from the same source. Most Christians don't recognize their roots of deep and profound mysticism. The 'sine qua non' of mystical experience is humility which begets openness and receptivity. The opposite is pride, which is ingrained in America. A proud mind is not open to mystical experience. I am here to teach people to be the change they want to see in the world. If this is a loving, kind, and peaceful world, we ought to behave that way.

Bill wanted to avoid labeling his spiritual doctrine. His hesitancy is understandable. While he easily named qualities he admired from each religious tradition, I know that each also has a dark side. Bill is hesitant to abide by a doctrine and be caught

up in their rigidity, a quality he thinks would stifle his meditation practice. His friends call him a “Zen Buddhist Quaker”, as noted above, but I would probably call him a Universalist. Bill seemed to find a lot of meaning in the teachings of Jesus, but he also believed that anyone could access that truth, Christian or not. Bill’s thoughts throughout our conversation echoed the ideals of a Universalist, but I will refrain from imposing a religious label that he does not claim.

Bill takes much inspiration from Christian mystics, many of whom were talked about in Chapter One. He tries to emulate their practices and teach about the mystics to his meditation circle. He sees his teaching as filling in a gap in Christian theology. Some Christians often brush off Christianity’s deep mystical roots, instead adopting a theology that seems to primarily embrace capitalism, perhaps on keeping with the prevailing Calvinist tendencies (Weber, 1905). Yet, Christians worship a messiah who himself practiced mindfulness and meditation. This is a point that Quakers recognize, and Bill took a moment to offer admiration for their tradition. I think that Bill and James, my Quaker Friend previously cited, could be great friends. Both men were raised in a nonreligious home and found their spirituality through sifting through TM and various mindfulness threads in the ‘70s. Both settled on a form of mindfulness, which they practice within an alternative spiritual community. Below is more information about how Bill came to recognize mindfulness as a genuine power.

When I was about thirteen years old, like all twelve- to thirteen-year-old kids, I was asking lots of questions: What does this all mean? Why am I here? What is the meaning of all this? I had been to church enough to know the verse ‘seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you’. So, I started doing that. I talked to people, some I really admired, some who called themselves Christians, but I saw a little hypocrisy there. I came from a relatively poor family who lived in a reasonably wealthy part of Chicago. Long story short, I had a semester-long science project to do in school. I didn’t ask my

parents for the money to do the project. At the end of the semester, it [the project] was all due so I pretended to be sick for the first time in my life. I knew I was pretending, and after two or three days I really started to feel sick. My parents called a doctor, and I got a test that said I had a blood disease. I was out for two weeks. What I knew to be pretend, became a measurable symptom by science! Then I embarked a more formal source for the truth that included lots of Asian philosophy and thought and Christian mysticism.

Bill draws an important connection here between the personal and empirical effects of mindfulness. Sometimes, the benefits are ones only the individual can determine. We see a subtle change in our stress levels, pain responses, energy levels, and sleep patterns. All these are real to the individual, but difficult to validate since the benefits may vary for each research subject. Yet, there are also times when the impact of a mindfulness-like state of consciousness gives overwhelming, significant evidence for physical effects. This, of course, can work for both healing and sick-making, evidenced by the negative impact of his thoughts on young Bill's part. His pretended insistence on being sick negatively impacted his immune and respiratory systems. This demonstrates the sort of Mind-Body connection noted in Chapter One, in a way that even a thirteen-year-old could notice. This experience told him he was onto something, and he formally got into meditation at age 14, but this time the kind that brought him stillness and healing. Bill's mindfulness practice has undoubtably non-religious roots. However, he still deepened his practice and found meaning in various religious traditions. This dichotomy gets at the heart of this thesis. Some folks use meditation primarily as a stress relief technique. That does not exclude them from the spiritual and other benefits, healing in particular. There is something about mindfulness and meditation that some individuals cannot resist. It calls us to a continual, deepening, deepening, deepening.

I do believe in healing, particularly the preemptive kind that meditation brings us. I've had some experiences of instantaneous healing. All my life I've never been sick, except

for two times. Stress is the precursor to virtually every disease...I use meditation as a source of relief, strength, and destressing. Along the way, I had my own way of meditating and yoga. I had some influences in my life that guided me into the spiritual aspect of meditation. Over time, I saw meditation as more than just physical relaxation and emotional stability. I saw that quieting my mind, which for me is my small self and ego, allowed for higher insights, visions, and possibilities. I moved from the linear thinking of our culture to lateral thinking. That helps me see reality in its many forms whereas if we don't, we are going to miss out on what may be the essence of it.

It took time, Bill says, but he eventually found that meditation is more than just “physical relaxation and emotional stability”. It may not be our role to call out people who are new to meditation for not going deep enough. They will get there with time and patience. If they never deepen their practice, that too may be acceptable. Stress relief without side effects is a great gift. It is not our place to cast judgement or establish unneeded, judgmental rigidity.

Bill has seen genuine physical healing in his practice. He views his own illnesses to be a side-effect of stress, a cause that is treatable with meditation. This allows him to approach his illnesses with prayer, meditation, diet, and herbal medicine. Bill has also shifted from linear thinking to what he calls lateral thinking, which is a form of consciousness that uses intuition to see multiple realities simultaneously. He places many medical practitioners in the linear thinking category, as they typically approach patients from a paternalistic, one-sided perspective. This, of course, creates a great deal of distrust in the medical institution.

Towards the end of our conversation, Bill shared that he was recently diagnosed with metastatic cancer. He will be avoiding treatments such as chemotherapy, instead using mindfulness and various alternative therapies for healing and comfort. Whichever direction his health takes, Bill insisted that he is ready to continue his life or peacefully

die. Throughout this section, as seen in the quoted materials, it is apparent that Bill has a gentle and kind spirit. This was especially brought home to me in the way he blessed me during our conversation.

I ask my small group of readers this: please send blessings of peace and healing to Bill. Blessings from any religious or spiritual tradition are fine; Bill will embrace them all.

Strega

I now detail my conversation with Andrea Dreamwalker, who prefers to be called Skye. Skye is the only person for whom I am using her real name. She requested that I *not* anonymize any of her personal details. With a name like Skye Dreamwalker, I would make the same request! Skye owns a ranch an hour outside of Waco, Texas, where she raises and trains horses. She claims to be “Italian witch born, hillbilly raised”, which was the first time I have ever head those two qualities in the same sentence.

The tradition of Stregheria was new to me. It is the root form of witchcraft originating in Italy, also termed ‘Paleo-paganism’ as it is one of the original pagan faith systems. This contrasts to the branch of paganism that is most familiar to Americans, Wicca. Wiccans are classified as neopagan, since their founders revived qualities of Paleo-pagan traditions to make a new tradition.

It is important to Skye that we get one part of her faith cleared up: magic. I have held preconceived notions of what magic and witchcraft look like. It probably has something to do with a black cauldron and pointy hat, both of which are part of the

mainstream culture surrounding a holiday at the end of October. To the best of our ability, Skye urged, it is important to start building a new notion of what witchcraft looks like. First, Skye looks just like you or me. She is not a character, but a human being with a family, occupation, and hobbies. She does cast spells and call upon the forces of magic, but it is more of an everyday calling of the divine forces. These are similar callings of the divine in most other religion traditions, notably prayer in Judeo-Christian faiths. Popular culture tries to impose distinct lines of black and white magic upon her witchcraft. Skye clarified that it is not that simple. As stated in her sacred text, the Book of Ways, there is a ‘gray’ area between black and white magic. Skye put it this way:

I have to be careful where I put that energy. If I am angry, listening to war drum music, I will cause bad things to happen. Effect is greater than intent...The best you can do it go out and do good. Everything you put into the world comes back to you. When you don't have a religious scapegoat in your tradition, there's no mitigating the bad you put out into the world. That makes you need mindfulness.

Skye places the utmost importance on the energy she is putting into the world. She believes that mindfulness is critical to guiding her energy. Spells, in her belief system, can be cast subconsciously. If she is angry and hateful in her daily life, she will be casting negative spells on others. That can cause bad things to happen to those folks without their agreement. Skye made it clear that if someone casts a love spell on a person without their consent, that is a form of abusive behavior. Later, we will hear about the immense benefits Skye sees personally from her practice. However, the benefits to other people came off as more relevant. Her mindfulness is for other people's safety, well-being, and happiness.

She stated that her magic is powerful, in part, because of her heritage. Stregheria is distinct from Wicca in that their people are culturally Stregan. These folks can trace their lineage back to a group in Italy who founded the tradition. Most Stregans are culturally and religiously Stregan. Thus, they believe that they have been Stregan all their life but did not necessarily realize it from the start. Skye has a similar story. She was raised around horses, who she says helped her to first get in touch with mindfulness (more on that later). Skye felt connected to animals and nature in a different way than her adopted parents. In the quote below, she describes her childhood and how she encountered other members of Stregheria.

Horses taught me the power of mindfulness and meditation long before that, but I didn't know what it was teaching me. Being Present and being Conscious. I came into those things through music and through horses before I even knew what I was doing. The minute I could hold my head up, I was sitting at the piano. I knew I was weird, yes. Mom was constantly running me past priests and doctors trying to figure out why I was strange. It was when I started studying the Book of Shadows at UT that I figured out who I was...The old language of the Strega is that you are born of the blood as a witch. There is a list of things that you must do before puberty to prove that you are a witch. You are born into the craft in Italy. There is a set of religious practices, deities, and tenets which makes up the structure of it. But there also are other components— their heritage, their religious beliefs, or their cultural background.

Every person's own experiences in childhood and beyond influence how they encounter mindfulness. Skye found mindfulness through the peace of living creatures, which is unique compared to the other people I spoke with. Moreover, many of the people I spoke with mentioned an underlying connection to the divine as a child. Their connection was then deepened when they joined a religious tradition or were led to find meditation.

Skye's version of this narrative has another layer since she is culturally Stregan, but adopted into a Southern family in Texas. Her being a witch was in her blood, she said, but unrecognized by her adopted parents. It took discovering her ancestry and developing her spirituality to prove herself as a witch. Skye went through a huge spiritual transformation in her adult life, but her love of horses remained constant. She owns a ranch where she is the primary caretaker of the horses, as well as cats, dogs, and a parrot who joined our Zoom call. Skye found the roots of her mindfulness practice in her love for horses as a girl. Now, she sees her practice as vital for being a caregiver to them.

It is absolutely necessary for dealing with horses. They are constantly in a state recognizable as meditation. If you are going to be safe with them, you have to join them in that space. If you are not mindful in handling a horse, you are hurt or you are dead...With a mind that works like mine, it's a survival skill. I have to learn to ramp my mind down...Meditation is part of my life every single day. I am quick, clean, and consistent. It is not the quantity of time I meditate; it is the quality. It goes a lot further than setting aside 20-30 minutes a day. I am in the space of meditation and mindfulness or I am in crisis. I will take five minutes to sit and listen to my breath every time I get the chance to do it...It's good for my blood pressure, it is good for stress. It helps me control the triggers for migraines as much as possible. Instead of eliminating my migraine triggers, I can change how I respond to them. I was able to rewire my neural pathway for fear and pain.

Skye's mindfulness is vital to her spirituality, safety, health, and sense of well-being. She sees the benefits of her practice as necessary to carry out her daily life. Skye is distinct in her practice in that she intersperses her sittings throughout the day, instead of sitting for an hour in the morning or evening. That makes her practice fit her busy lifestyle. This works for her, because she sees mindfulness more as a state of being than a hobby. In changing her neural pathways through meditation, she says, she can change how she reacts to daily stresses. Doing so makes her job more fulfilling and decreases her migraine headaches.

Discussion

In the last section, I detailed my conversations with six people from different faith backgrounds who each has a long-standing meditation practice. I encountered Donna the Buddhist nun, James the Quaker and retired professor, Anthony and Jonathan the Sufi friends, Bill from the Paramahansa Yogananda group, and Skye the Stregan witch. Each person associates with a large religious group, yet they have a nontraditional way of connecting with the divine. They all expressed profound benefits of their practice on their lives. Everyone expressed that mindfulness helped them deepen their spirituality. In three of the interviews, people shared that they had direct experiences with spiritual healing. Four of the participants credited their happiness and fulfillment to their mindfulness practice.

After completing all the interviews, I could not help but think about how these people would interact with one another. I would love to see them all in a room together. I imagine that they would be kind to one another and show interest in each other's lives. I assume their conversations would have a real substance to them, yet not lack laughter. Their time together would end in various blessings and prayers, as each sent me off with a unique blessing. In the next section, I will put our new friends in an imaginary, literary room together. I will identify and explain any themes that emerged from my conversations in hopes of finding common ground. It seems as if the more each faith practice draws inward, the more alike they become.

Hesitancy naming the divine

All the participants identified a belief in some form of a higher power. They identified meditation as an important tool not just to understand but to connect with that power. I heard many different names to identify this: God, the divine, ‘something’, Allah, Creator, ‘up there’, Love, the Great Friend, amongst other names. Moreover, no person I interviewed was completely happy with the name they chose from the divine. The Sufis used both ‘Allah’ and ‘the Great Friend’, alternating between the two. James, the Quaker, could not choose. He instead used the term ‘something’, motioning upward to the space between us. Donna started with the term God, I assume to appease my Christian upbringing, but shifted to ‘Love’ halfway through our conversation. I will frequently use the term ‘divine’ in this section, because it is not affiliated with a specific religion. Each of the people I interviewed also used that term to some extent, even though they recognized it does not fully encapsulate their own experience of the divine.

Those I interviewed also used metaphors to characterize their relationship with the divine. As mentioned earlier, the Sufi individuals told me how their metaphor for Allah changed from “Father” to “Friend”. Others saw nature as the best example of the essence of God. Skye and Bill most easily saw the divine in their animals, horses and dogs, respectively. Whatever metaphor they chose, they recognized the limitations of their literary device. I loved to see them pause when they searched for a word for the divine, as if silence itself would be a better term.

The terms and metaphors we use to describe this power are just those, words. We use them to communicate our spiritual experiences to one another. In naming God, Allah, Love, etc., we unlock the possibility of sharing a religious experience with another

person. However, the divine best reveals itself when we live in its presence. A paper on the divine gives only a glimpse into its breathtaking awe. Therefore, I and my new mindfulness accomplices charge you to find a meaningful spiritual experience. I will suggest, later, that meditation is an extremely beneficial technique but one should pick what suits them best and fits best with their belief system. In experiencing the divine, we can gravitate to our own techniques and our own terms and metaphors for encountering 'the ineffable'.

Consistency

For one, the individuals I interviewed were all overwhelmingly on time or early for our interviews. I became accustomed to showing up to our agreed upon coffee shop a few minutes early to find them already sitting there, enjoying their second cup of coffee and chatting with the wait staff. If they are a member of a spiritual group, they are consistent in their attendance. These folks have attended or led Quaker meetings, meditation circles, or Buddhist chant service weekly for decades. As a result of their steadiness, they have built strong friendships with people in their religious groups. They give of their presence to their communities, partner, family, and friends. Four of the people I talked to were dedicated to a romantic partner, married or not. Each person spoke about their relationship fondly, often bringing up how much they admired a certain trait about their partner. The only person who was not in a long-term committed relationship lost their partner in a tragic accident. She swore she would never love anyone else in the same way. This is a group of dependable people who make good friends and excellent partners.

There was a bit of a selection-bias here! When I set up each interview, I requested to speak to someone who has practiced meditation for a substantial period. Therefore, I got a group of individuals known for their consistency. Each person was identified as (or identified themselves as) a 'long-term meditator'. I expected to find this commonality, but I did not expect to see such a high degree of it. I also witnessed how this quality benefits every aspect of their lives. The most important benefit may be to themselves, by showing up to their practice and sitting even when it is not convenient or enjoyable. 'Long-term meditators' see past the benefits outlined by mindfulness studies, which only survey results after an average of six-weeks. Sure, they see short-term benefits such as stress relief, a decrease in blood pressure, and reduction of chronic pain. However, these individuals want more from their practice. They want to grow and be transformed by mindfulness. That includes sitting without direct, short-term benefit. This develops resilience and consistency that impacts their practice and the folks they interact with on a daily basis.

Silence

I sat in a lot of comfortable silence. Most interviews went like this: I would ask a question and the person would sit in silence for a few moments. Then they would start to answer the question, typically with a story, then take another pause before making their main point. I originally thought that each person used that time to gather their thoughts. That is perhaps still true, but only part of the truth. First, these individuals do not want to 'speak off the cuff' and state their first thought. They seemed to comb through different ideas before conveying one to me. A few of the people I interviewed stated that they were

being extra careful with their word selection, because their respective faith traditions experienced negative pre-conceived notions on the part of others outside their community. It was necessary to take extra silence to make sure they did not give any ‘bad press’ to their tradition.

Regarding their silence, I do not think that is the whole story. These individuals go about life at a different pace than I am used to. I operate in mostly academic, young circles of students buzzing around trying to prove themselves with words. These people lack any sort of need to prove themselves to me. Thus, they would only state phrases that they wholeheartedly meant. I am also used to being around folks who never take time to sit in silence, often in fear of where their *mind* will go when it is not preoccupied. The people I interviewed take time daily to be alone and silent. Their going inward perhaps changed the way they interact with silence in conversation. It is not a sign of an awkward conversation or lack of connection. In fact, I was most connected to each person in the moments we sat in silence together, often accompanied by eye contact and a smile.

Hospitality

All of the individuals I spoke with held the intention of living in harmony with their community. Luckily for me, I was included in that community as I interacted with them. These people were more than eager to meet with me and showed interest in my education and well-being. I am incredibly grateful for the ‘excuse’ of being a student, which enabled me to have these conversations. I was treated to many coffees and invited to upcoming spiritual gatherings and meditation circles. These people could not help but

pull me into their inviting circle. They reject all forms of the ‘us and them’ mentality, an attitude often used against them by their Evangelical counterparts. By breaking this cycle of hatred and isolation, they open themselves up to a new way of relating to others.

When I spoke with one of the members of our local Paramahansa Yogananda Group (we will call her Lisa) she wanted to share a message with everyone who reads this thesis. Lisa is a lifelong practitioner of meditation and practices as a medium. She faces major isolation, so she typically practices from home, sharing her practice via Zoom and Facebook. It is important to her that I communicate that she feels isolated in her spirituality.

All I am doing is connecting people with unconditional love. This is an opportunity for me to speak [about my spirituality] and how they are not antithetical to any religion. We are trying to express the same God as clearly as possible.

We are all seeking to love, be loved, and to draw nearer to the source of love. May we use this desire as a force to unite us. May we approach the boundaries we have created to block out those who are different from us. May we take a step over that boundary each day, forming friendships with those we used to label as ‘other’.

CHAPTER THREE

Conclusions and Implications

Introduction

In Chapter One, I detailed a brief history of how the mindfulness movement emerged in the Global North, specifically the United States. I also outlined the literature on the measurable health benefits of a mindfulness practice. Chapter Two put us face-to-face with individuals who experience and benefit from meditation and mindfulness. I elaborated on conversations with six people from five different faith traditions: Buddhism, Quaker Friends, Sufi Islam, Stregheria, and Paramahansa Yogananda's Kriya Yoga. The people I spoke with affirmed the short-term physical and mental health benefits I spoke about in Chapter One. Yet, they also pointed towards larger, more subtle benefits, traits transformed by a decades-long meditation practice. I noticed that all the people I met shared four common characteristics: a hesitancy in naming the divine, consistency, comfortability with silence, and hospitality.

In this chapter, I speak to the limitations of this study and delve into the appropriate parameters for studying meditation and mindfulness. I also speak about the implications of meditation in clinical practice. My research and conversations transformed the way in which I personally study and practice meditation, which I will also discuss in the conclusion.

Limitations of this study

A few limitations of this study are obvious. First, this project was confined to the last two years of college. I consider this thesis to be a culmination of my education and life experience. I am also proud to have a project that spans multiple years. A project of this magnitude is a new challenge to my skillset, and I realize that it does not do the topic justice. I could easily spend the rest of my career writing about meditation and still have more to explore. This thesis is a mere whisper in a booming, ongoing discussion of this topic. I look forward to reading about, and practicing, meditation and mindfulness over the next decades.

Second, I was confined, to some degree, spatially. My goal for Chapter Two was to speak with individuals who practice meditation near me. I study in Waco and have family in San Antonio. That meant that my interviews were limited to folks who live near the major highway that connects the two cities. I did concede and speak to two people on Zoom, due to their preference. Both people lived near me but wished to speak online for convenience or health reasons. I was happy to abide by their request, yet I will also give a nod to the limitations of online conversations.

Third, since I only spoke with Texas residents (or a former Texas resident in the case of the Buddhist nun), I was limited to a small group of people who are outside the religious and spiritual norm. According to Pew Research Center, 77% of adults living in Texas identify as Christian. That leaves a small fraction, 18% of whom are not religious and 4% who adhere to a non-Christian Faith. That four percent of folks are primarily

Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu. This paper focuses on the four percent. Yes, I did speak with a Christian, but even then, our Christian representative was from the Quaker tradition, who represent less than 1% of Christians in Texas. I spoke with people on the religious fringes, which meant there were few of them. In a couple of instances, my conversations were limited to the one person from a religious group who agreed to meet with me. Understandably, people from non-Christian traditions may be hesitant to share their beliefs with a student of a Baptist University.

Fourth, due to spatial and temporal limitations on this study, I only spoke with one to two people from each religious tradition. That, inevitably, leads to a degree of tokenism in research, what researchers refer to as selection bias. Our resident Buddhist, Sufis, Stregan, and Quaker were the sole voice to represent their entire religion. That is a demanding task, and may have put unnecessary pressure on them. Undoubtedly, each of those faith perspectives is much more complex than the perspective of their one representative. Also, only two of the five folks were ordained or a leader in their congregation. The rest were a lay member. So, of course, we got a glimpse into each tradition through the eyes of one person. Yes, that person was selected by their group to represent them, revealing how highly regarded they are in their community. That is not the whole story and it is beneficial to note that qualitative studies often have an innate sense of tokenism (Morse, 2002, 729)

On the other hand, my overarching goal was not to give a full view of the relationship between meditation and religion. That would be a challenge even for a Ph.D. dissertation, much less an undergraduate thesis.. I hope that the wisdom perspectives revealed through my conversations provokes readers to speak with individuals outside

their spiritual circles. It is when we speak with the groups labeled ‘other’ that we can dissolve those arbitrary boundaries.

Parameters in the Study of Meditation and Mindfulness

The goal of this paper was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of a meditation or mindfulness practice. In Chapter One, a reading of the literature on the topic gave us a ‘bird’s eye view’ of said benefits. In Chapter Two, I described the personal impact of meditation in the lives of those I interviewed. Their experiences were perhaps less measurable than the sorts of data summarized in the literature review, but pointed to something perhaps deeper and even more meaningful. It took both reviewing the research and engaging in the conversations for me to grasp the many facets of life that mindfulness touches.

Most current studies on meditation and mindfulness follow participants who are new to the world of meditation and mindfulness, perhaps through a program or course. Researchers then watch for markers such as blood pressure, stress levels, and pain resilience as participants complete a short-term meditation practice. Researchers place a greater value on stress reduction and symptomatic relief than on deeper and more lasting psychological or spiritual benefits in a participant’s life. Sure, reducing stress can help an individual go about their professional and personal life healthier and happier. Yet we learned from our conversations that the sorts of programs that focus on short-term stress relief boil mindfulness down to a simplistic and sometimes numbing mental strategy. At

present, there is less research funding or mainstream academic interest in exploring the course and outcomes of a years- or decades-long meditative practice.

Accordingly, I would recommend two improvements in future research. First, it would benefit the alternative medicine community to introduce participants to meditation and follow them for over lengthier periods, as much as 20 years (Gamaiunova et al., 2019 148) . This is not impossible; sociologists and epidemiologists, for example, conduct such long-term studies. Researchers could obtain empirical data that might reveal longer-term psychological and spiritual transformations. There may also be much to learn from folks who found meditation on their own and continued it throughout their lives. It would be interesting, as well, to follow two family members, or even twins, one who has a decades-long practice, and one who does not. There is a long-standing tradition of twins studies in psychology which could be extended to the study of human consciousness.

Second, I would recommend that researchers not shy away from qualitative studies, like this one, and not focus solely on effects of meditation on biomedical markers. This small-scale qualitative study clued me into four subject markers of long-term meditation practitioners, as detailed at the end of Chapter Two. These were hesitancy in naming the divine, consistency, comfort in silence, and hospitality. These markers are just as substantive as data about cardiac health, pain reduction, or even social factors, yet would not have been able to be identified through a pre-set survey questionnaire or a laboratory experiment. Ideally, medical and psychological studies, on the one hand, and studies like this thesis, on the other, complement each other nicely.

Improvements to meditation and mindfulness research, such as those proposed, might be more likely to be implemented if the lead researchers practiced meditation

themselves. They might then understand the subtle, yet profound, impact meditation can have on so many aspects of one's life. This field of study needs open-hearted folks with meditative practices who are willing to document the practice of meditation and its benefits among people from diverse faiths and cultures and nationalities, not just the affluent Americans who are typically subjects of current research.

Implications in Clinical Practice

There is overwhelming evidence that a daily meditation practice is a positive contributor to health and well-being. Healthcare providers overlook a large literature of research evidence when they neglect these benefits. Over the course of the past two decades meditation and mindfulness have worked their way from the fringes of alternative medicine to adoption as a mainstream medical therapy or workplace intervention. Meditation belongs in the toolkit of preventive healthcare providers as an adjunct therapy to treat chronic illness. This should not be seen as advocating for something radical. The systematic evidence reviewed reveals benefits for work-related stress and for mental health, physical health, and general well-being.

A vital step would be to introduced programs on mindfulness for healthcare providers. Recent evidence shows that a mindfulness program for healthcare workers had a beneficial impact on compassion, positive well-being (Lomas et al., 2018, 1202). Findings such as these are encouraging, as people who work in medicine are typically convinced by empirical evidence, so they may be inclined to consider meditation if studies continue to show a significant difference in well-being. Especially following the

unprecedented stress on the healthcare system due to COVID-19, this would be a worthy cause.

Healthcare providers who themselves are coming from a place of mindfulness may be better equipped to offer a genuine recommendation to their patients. Daily mindfulness techniques should be just as highly “prescribed” to patients as a nutritious diet, exercise, and plenty of sleep. With patient consent, a mindfulness practice can be beneficial alongside conventional medical therapies and as a primary-preventive measure. Additionally, it is a low-cost treatment which makes it extremely accessible. Patients who are hesitant about mindfulness, perhaps due to spiritual concerns, can at least benefit from associated techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing. This technique has evidence to suggest that it may decrease stress measured by physiological biomarkers and self-report tools (Hopper et al., 2019, 1864). Meditation and breathing techniques are flexible in that they show similar benefit across the age and economic status (Behan, 2020, 2). Medical providers can better put the health and well-being of their patients first by recommending meditation.

Moving Forward

I hope that my readers experience encouragement and other positive benefits from reading this thesis, much as the interviewees have from their meditation practices. I know I was just from my conversations with these individuals and from reading the literature and writing the thesis. I found resilience in completing a years-long project, pushing forward with seemingly no end in sight (and continuing to write when the end was in

sight, yet I seemed to be out of words to say). I found resilience in hearing stories from those who show up to their meditative practice without any short-term incentive. They show up, simply, motivated by the potential for connecting with the divine.

I also got new lessons in openness. When I interviewed with folks outside of the Christian tradition, I found that *they* tended to put their religious practices in Christian terms. I understand why they do so. It makes me, a person from a Christian background, more comfortable with their tradition. However, I can also see how it can be exhausting for a person to feel a need to continuously frame their background through a Christian lens. So, I challenged myself to go into my interviews with Skye and Lisa with a strong enough background of *their tradition*. That way, I could try to meet them where they are, instead of the other way around. Learning the basics of Stregheria and the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda removed, I hope, some of the educational burden from those I interviewed. Our conversations could then go deeper into their individual experience of how mindfulness uniquely intersects with their spiritual background.

I consider this paper to be more of a personal project than a requirement for my degree. My conversations and new friendships are a culmination of my lifetime's work on openness. I met six folks who became role models for me. I hope that I extend the same love and peace that I received from Donna, James, Anthony, Jonathan, Bill, Lisa, and Skye. Compared to them, my meditation practice is at a beginning stage, just a few years strong. I gained a newfound determination to keep up with mindfulness, for it will mold me into the person I wish to be in the future.

I walk away from this project with a similar feeling of when I left each interview. I left each coffee shop, restaurant, or public park usually noticing the cool breeze or

beautiful sky. Short, wise remarks from the person I just spoke with raced through my head. That person's joyful smile, calm voice, or peaceful disposition stuck with me. I always returned home making a new friend and role model. Throughout that evening, I would continue to think about my conversation and send blessings to that person. In my next meditation, I could feel those blessings coming my way as well. I feel like it is right to end this paper in a place of mutual blessing. May you find openness and peace wherever you go. Blessings.

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