

Perspectives on the Impact of Meditative Traits on Relationships
among Advanced Practitioners of Meditation

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(ABSTRACT)

This qualitative study is an exploration of advanced meditators' understandings of how the personal traits developed through meditation have influenced their relationships. The term meditation refers to self-regulation practices that train attention and awareness. A "meditative trait" refers to the lasting effects in sensory, cognitive and self-referential awareness that continue whether or not the practitioner is actively engaged in meditation. These traits may have some influence on meditators' close relationships, but there has been little research of this effect to date. Seven participants were interviewed about their experiences of meditative traits, and how they have seen these traits affect their relationships. The meditative traits that the participants identified were (1) awareness of body sensations and emotions; (2) disidentification from emotions and thoughts; (3) acceptance of situations, oneself, and others; and (4) compassion and loving kindness for oneself and others. The relational effects of these traits were (1) less reactivity in relationships, (2) greater freedom and safety for the participants and the others with whom they are in relationship, (3) a new understanding of the nature of connection between people, which included an awareness of the unity and separation that exists among people, and a deepened experience of intimacy and independence within relationships. Also included are a discussion of the connections between these themes and the existing literature, the strengths and limitations of this study, and the implications for future research and family therapy practice.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Problem and its Setting

This qualitative study is an exploration of advanced meditators' understandings of how the personal traits developed through meditation have influenced their relationships. This section provides an overview of meditation and traits believed to be developed through meditation. The significance of this kind of study is discussed, particularly in regard to the role of meditation in development and the increasing use of meditation in Western psychotherapeutic clinical interventions. Additionally, a rationale is provided for the research topics, namely, personal effects of meditation and meditation's influence on relationships; the qualitative and phenomenological methodology; and the choice of advanced practitioners of meditation as research participants. The phenomenological and systems theory frameworks used for the study are discussed, and the purpose of the study is explained.

Meditation

The term meditation refers to “a family of self-regulation practices that focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control and thereby foster general mental well-being and development and/or specific capacities such as calm, clarity, and concentration” (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 228-229). Forms of meditation can be found in every major religion and in most cultures culture, such as Taoist and Hindu *yogas*, Jewish Hassidic and Kabalistic *dillug* and *tzeruf*, Islamic Sufism's *zikr*, Confucian *quiet-sitting*, Christian Centering Prayer, and Buddhist meditations (Goleman, 1988; Walsh, 1999).

Though various forms of meditation share common features, Walsh and Shapiro (2006) point out that they differ in the following ways:

1. “The type of attention: Concentration meditations aim for continuous focus primarily on one object, such as the breath or an inner sound. Awareness or open meditations aim for fluid attention to multiple or successively chosen objects.
2. “The relationship to the cognitive processes: Some practices simply observe cognitions such as thoughts or images, whereas others deliberately modify them.
3. “The goal: Some practices aim to foster general mental development and well-being, whereas other focus primarily on developing specific mental qualities, such as concentration, love, or wisdom” (p. 229).

For example, in Vipassana or insight meditation practice in the Buddhist tradition, the practitioner begins the meditation with a period of focused awareness, typically using the breath as an anchor. As the meditation continues, awareness is focused on the physical sensations of breathing and the meditator is encouraged to notice when awareness is drawn away from the breath to thoughts or other stimuli and to then gently bring awareness back to the sensations of breathing. As concentration deepens (either within a session or over the course of weeks or months of practice), the practitioner releases awareness from the specific anchor and, instead, attends to whatever internal phenomena arise, simply letting them come and go as they will.

Through this aspect of practice the practitioner attains insight into the impermanent nature of all phenomena (Gunaratana, 2002). By contrast, in Centering Prayer, a Christian form of meditation, attention is initially focused on an inner sound, called the *sacred word*, which serves as a symbol of one’s intention to be attentive to the inner presence of God. When the practitioner’s attention drifts to other thoughts or feelings, he or she gently brings awareness back to the sacred word (Keating, 1992). The goal of Centering Prayer is to “go beyond thought and image, beyond the senses and the rational mind, to that center of our being where God is working a wonderful

work” (Pennington, 1980, p. 18). Centering Prayer’s focus on an inner sound and the overt interest in the inner work of God is different than Vipassana or forms of meditation from the Buddhist tradition. Even though these differences exist between forms of meditation, there is a widespread acceptance among these traditions that meditation can lead to the development of certain traits that are important to explore and understand.

Meditation Traits

Advanced meditators report that meditation practice contributes to the development of personal qualities, referred to as meditation traits. A “trait” refers to the lasting effects in sensory, cognitive and self-referential awareness that continue whether or not the practitioner is actively engaged in meditation (Austin, 1998; D. Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; West, 1987). For most contemplative traditions, the goal of meditative practice is the development of these traits, such as wisdom or compassion, not the momentary achievement of an altered state of consciousness, such as *nirvana* or *samatha*.

Trait changes include “a deepened sense of calmness, increased sense of comfort, heightened awareness of the sensory field, and a shift in the relationship to thoughts, feelings and experience of self” (Cahn & Polich, 2006, p. 181). Negative affective states, such as aggression and craving tend to occur less frequently and are shorter than prior to meditation practice, and when one does experience these negative emotional states, the mind remains calm and dispassionate, and does not succumb to the emotions. Meditators also report experiencing a sense that their mind cannot be harmed by anything, even when they are experiencing negative thoughts or feelings (Wallace, 1999). Over time, ongoing states of awareness, sometimes called “the witness” or “transcendental experience,” emerge, which consist of contentless awareness that is independent of mental activities. These ongoing states can be present both during sleep

and waking, and lead to an experience of altered self-identity marked by the dissipation of the distinction between the observer and the observed (Austin, 2000; Forman, 1990; Travis, Tecce, Arenander, & Wallace, 2002; West, 1987). As this distinction disappears, the sense of self seems to become an impersonal beingness, rather than mental thought centered in the body (Cahn & Polich, 2006). Other unique traits following a meditative state of consciousness have been described in the Buddhist tradition which have not yet undergone empirical evaluation (Wallace, 1999).

Significance

There are an estimated 10 million practitioners of meditation in the United States and hundreds of millions worldwide. The widespread use of meditation in all the major world religions is based on the experience of many that meditation aids in several processes related to personal development. Deurr (2004) points out that meditation is one of the most widely used, lasting and researched psychological disciplines worldwide. In the last twenty years, there has been a dramatic increase in clinical interventions that use meditation skills, especially in the form of mindfulness. Salmon, Santorelli and Kabat-Zinn (1998) have reported that over 240 hospitals and clinics internationally were offering mindfulness based stress reduction trainings as of 1997. Mindfulness is also a key component of several other therapy modalities, such as dialectical behavior therapy (Linehan, 1993a, 1993b).

Meditation and Development

S. Shapiro and Walsh (2003) suggest that the importance of meditation in all major world religions is based on three core assumptions, which have largely been dismissed or ignored by mainstream Western psychology and thoughts. First, “Our usual, psychological state is suboptimal and immature” (p. 87). William James wrote that people generally only engage a

small portion of their potential consciousness, and only imagine a small portion of the possibilities that life offers them (James, 1961). Second, “Higher states and stages are available as developmental potentials” (S. Shapiro & Walsh, 2003, p. 87). The final conventional stages of development are beginning to be seen as an arbitrary, culturally determined arrest of development. A few Western theorists have conceptualized a few post-conventional stages, such as Piaget’s post formal operational cognition, Fowler’s conjunctive and universalizing faith, Maslow’s self-actualization and self-transcendence, and Loevigner’s autonomous and integrated ego (Fowler, 1981; Kohlberg, 1981; Loevinger, 1997; Maslow, 1971; Wilber, 1999, 2000a). Third, “Psychological development to transpersonal states and stages can be catalyzed by a variety of psychological and spiritual practices” (S. Shapiro & Walsh, 2003, p. 87). The contemplative and spiritual practices of all of the major world religions are designed to accomplish this goal of development. A comparison of all of the major traditions found that the seven practices that are generally viewed as central in transpersonal development are “an ethical lifestyle, redirecting motivation, transforming emotions, training attention, refining awareness, fostering wisdom, and practicing service to others” (Walsh, 1999, p. 88). Meditation is thought to facilitate several of these processes.

Clinical Interventions Using Meditation

The substantial increase in the use of meditation and mindfulness in psychotherapeutic treatments has taken several different forms. Some interventions are based on mindfulness training, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Other interventions incorporate mindfulness training as one component of treatment, such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Relapse Prevention (RP).

Interventions based on mindfulness training include Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). MBSR was developed for people suffering from a variety of chronic pain and stress-related disorders in a behavioral medicine setting (Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 1990). The program includes 8-10 weekly sessions for groups of up to 30 individuals for instruction in mindfulness and meditation, as well as discussion of coping, stress, and homework assignments. Additionally, participants attend an all-day intensive mindfulness training around the sixth weekly session. In this program, participants learn various mindfulness meditation skills, such as a body scan, a sitting meditation, movements and stretching using Hatha yoga postures, and mindfulness during ordinary activities. Daily meditation is expected during the program, both with and without meditation tapes. As a result of this practice, many participants realize that most emotions, sensations and thoughts are transient and fluctuate, passing like clouds in the sky or “waves in the sea” (Linehan, 1993b, p. 97).

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) was developed by Teasdale, Segal and Williams (1995), who suggested that the attention control skills taught in mindfulness could help prevent relapse of major depressive episodes. This approach has been manualized in the form of an 8-week group therapy course (Teasdale et al., 1995), based largely on the MBSR program (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). This approach fosters in the participants a detached or decentered view of their thoughts, feelings and body sensations, summed up in statements such as “thoughts are not facts” and “I am not my thoughts.” MBCT prevents depressive relapse by teaching clients to observe their thoughts and feelings nonjudgmentally, without over-identifying with them as accurate reflections of reality or unchanging aspects of themselves. This decentered perspective is thought to prevent the escalation of ruminative patterns of depressive thoughts (Teasdale et al., 1995).

Other interventions that incorporate mindfulness training include Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Relapse Prevention (RP). DBT is a multi-component approach used to treat borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993a, 1993b). In DBT, clients are urged to adopt an accepting attitude of themselves, their histories, and their current situations, while also working to change their actions and environments to improve their lives. The integration of the apparent paradox of acceptance and change is central to DBT. Mindfulness is used as one method to synthesize acceptance and change. In the mindfulness training in DBT, clients are taught three mindfulness “what” skills (observe, describe, participate) and three mindfulness “how” skills (nonjudgmentally, one-mindfully, effectively). These skills, as well as other skills, are taught in a year-long weekly skills group, and are supported by individual therapy. DBT offers clients choices in their mindfulness goals, and also allows them to choose from various mindfulness exercises in order to increase participation (Linehan, 1994).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) is consistent with mindfulness approaches, though it does not explicitly include mindfulness or meditation training. In this therapy method, clients learn to recognize an observing self who can watch his or her own thoughts, emotions and body sensations, and who can view them as separate from him- or herself. An attitude of nonjudgmental observation of thoughts is encouraged, and clients are taught not to try to control thoughts or feelings, but rather to notice them, while changing their behaviors in constructive ways (Hayes, 1994).

Relapse prevention (RP; Marlatt & Gordon, 1985) is a form of cognitive behavioral treatment designed to prevent relapse of substance abuse. Mindfulness skills are included as a technique to ride through urges to use substances. Acceptance of the present moment helps

counteract the addictive tendency to constantly seek the next “high.” Clinicians offer the metaphor of “urge surfing” to help the client conceptualize urges as waves that grow and subside, so that the client can learn to “ride” the wave without acting on the urges. Mindfulness also helps the clients learn to accept urges as a normal response to certain cues, and cope with them in effective ways.

Rationale

This study seeks to explore meditators’ understanding of the impact of meditation traits on relationships using qualitative and phenomenological methodology. Meditation traits, which are the classical goals of meditation practice, and the impact of these traits on relationships have gone largely unexamined in Western research. In this section, I will explain the rationale for studying these variables among advanced practitioners of meditation, using a qualitative and phenomenological methodology.

Meditation Traits

Meditation traits are classic variables in meditative traditions that warrant further investigation in Western research. Walsh and Shapiro (2006) point out that “the classic goals of meditation—such as the cultivation of compassion and wisdom, maturation to postconventional stages, and the attainment of ‘enlightenment’ or ‘liberation’—have gone largely unexamined,” (p. 234) due to a research focus on familiar variables, not on those valued within the meditative traditions. These authors advise that basic research on familiar variables should continue while new research on classic variables in advanced practitioners commences. S. Shapiro and Walsh (2003) also call for an expansion of the paradigm of meditation research to include more than just pathology and symptom reduction. They suggest examining “variables consistent with the classical goals of meditation, such as the development of exceptional maturity, love and

compassion, and lifestyles of service and generosity” (p. 106). Kabat-Zinn (2000) has pointed out that many of the most highly valued outcomes of meditation, such as the cultivation of awareness, insight, wisdom, and compassion, are difficult to evaluate empirically, and have not yet been adequately studied. For this reason, Kabat-Zinn proposes that researchers should consider ways in which to integrate these concepts that are difficult to quantify, in addition to continued research on more familiar variables such as symptom reduction. The variables that Kabat-Zinn mentions, namely, the cultivation of awareness, insight, wisdom, and compassion, especially among advanced meditators, are worthy variables to study. As Baer writes, “Mindfulness-based interventions can be rigorously operationalized, conceptualized, and empirically evaluated. However, to do so risks overlooking important elements of the long tradition from which mindfulness meditation originates” (Baer, 2003, p. 140). For these reasons, this study will investigate traits developed during meditation, and their perceived impact on relationships.

Meditation and Relationships

Though only a few studies have examined the connection of meditation and relational variables (Burpee & Langer, 2005; Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004; Haimmerl & Valentine, 2001; S. Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998; Tloczynski & Tanriella, 1998), there are three main theoretical reasons that demonstrate the importance of this kind of investigation (Carson et al., 2004). First, meditation may provide a mechanism for relaxation that would help meditators approach shared relationship difficulties and challenges more calmly and effectively (Gottman, 1993). Second, the attitude of acceptance which is emphasized in meditative practice may play an important role in the enhancement of healthy relationships (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000). Third, because meditative practice traditionally encourages the incorporation of all experiences

into nonjudging awareness, meditators may be better equipped to handle relationships' natural ups and downs (Carson et al., 2004). These are only a few of the possible effects of meditation practice on relationships. Because so few studies have focused on this issue, a broader investigation is warranted to begin to cultivate understanding in this area.

Advanced practitioners of meditation

This study used advanced practitioners of meditation as the subjects because many of the effects of meditation are more pronounced among advanced practitioners, and because advanced practitioners have certain characteristics, such as increased introspective sensitivity, which make them uniquely valuable subjects in a qualitative study.

Walsh and Shapiro (2003) suggest that inclusion of experienced meditators in meditation research is crucial for the advancement of the field. In later writings, they note that one of the significant limitations of meditation research is that most studies have investigated the effects of small amounts of meditation practice in beginners, even though the traditional reports indicate that the most intriguing effects of meditation occur in advanced practitioners (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006).

Advanced practitioners of meditation are reported to develop several enhanced capacities which may make them particularly unique research subjects. Walsh and Shapiro (2006) suggest that advanced meditators are believed to have highly developed introspective sensitivity to subjective states and mental processes, and note that they are said to have "learned to make a science and art and craft of insight" (Easwaran, 1987, p. 17). Wallace suggests that the collaborative study of consciousness by Western scientists and professional contemplatives could lead to a paradigm shift in psychology much like the shift in the physical sciences precipitated by the development of quantum theory. In this collaboration, professional cognitive scientists would

offer their extraspective skills, while advanced meditators would offer their introspective skills in order to begin to explore the difficult problem of consciousness. One approach to this endeavor may be rigorous longitudinal studies of the development of Samatha, an advanced meditative state, by meditators engaged in this training. Wallace (1999) writes that through the Manhattan Project, “The successful completion of those efforts to tap atomic and nuclear power changed the face of the modern world. The successful completion of a Samatha Project might do so as well, and if such an endeavor were pursued with the altruistic aims promoted by Buddhism and the other great contemplative traditions of the world, the consequences for humanity may be more uniformly beneficial” (p. 187). Though a longitudinal study of the development of Samatha is outside of the scope of this study, qualitative exploration of the experiences of meditators in these advanced meditative traits offers a first step in this direction.

Additional enhanced capacities of meditators include, attention, sense withdrawal, thought and cognition, lucidity, emotional intelligence, equanimity, moral maturity, and other unique capacities (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). These abilities, which will be described in more detail in Chapter 2, are, in themselves, worthy of exploration through research, and may also help advanced practitioners of meditation offer particularly vivid and nuanced qualitative descriptions of their experiences.

Qualitative phenomenological investigation

This study addressed the research question using qualitative phenomenological methods. This framework provided an appropriate structure because it allowed for an in-depth investigation of the question of how a process works, because the practice of meditation has many commonalities with phenomenology, and because there are several inherent difficulties that would interfere with a quantitative approach.

The in-depth analysis possible in a qualitative study provides an opportunity for richness of description of the subjective experience that a quantitative study could not provide. S. Shapiro and Walsh (2006) note that most of the research to date has focused on the question, “Does meditation work?” but has not yet adequately considered the question, “How does meditation work?” They argue that the gathering and analysis of qualitative data are essential for future meditation research. They write, “The subtlety and depth of meditation experiences do not lend themselves to quantification. Further, the interplay between subjective and objective is essential to understanding meditation. Qualitative data provides a means to access the subjective experience of the meditator” (S. Shapiro & Walsh, 2003, p. 106).

Meditative disciplines share much in common with phenomenology and qualitative research, in philosophy, methodology and conclusions (Hunt, 1995). Both meditative traditions and phenomenology rely on introspective methods to gather data. The use of these methods has led to descriptions of similar experiences. Much like the peak experiences of meditative traditions, Heidegger described openness to “being” or “isness” as marked by wonder, gratitude, and “releasement” or “letting be” (Hunt, 1995). Heidegger’s later writings display the spiritual element of his phenomenology of experience and are very similar to Mahayana Buddhism. Guenther (1975, as cited in Hunt, 1995) suggests that Buddhist emptiness or *shunya*, during meditation, is similar to Heidegger’s description of Being, which is characterized by a dynamic ebb and flow of objects distinguished from the perceptual field. The metaphors that Heidegger chooses to describe Being are also similar to those of meditative traditions, such as “shining,” “glow,” radiance,” and “welling forth” (Hunt, 1995). These similarities in both methods and conclusions suggest that a phenomenological framework is especially well-suited for the study of meditation.

Additionally, because there are significant differences between the contemplative and Western scientific approaches and methods of inquiry into the natural world, it is important to understand these differences and integrate their methods into continued research. Western science has historically focused on the observer-independent physical world that can be studied objectively, using empirical facts and excluding subjective experience. Meditative traditions, and Buddhism in particular, on the other hand, have focused primarily on the human mind, which they see as the source of human joy and misery, and which has a tremendous impact on the understanding of the rest of the world (Wallace, 1999). In writings attributed to Buddha, he states, “All phenomena are preceded by the mind. When the mind is comprehended, all phenomena are comprehended” (Santideva, 1961, as cited in Wallace, 1999, p. 176). It follows that the mind and consciousness are the primary subjects of Buddhist introspective investigation. Meditation fits well with the qualitative and phenomenological methodology, because of the shared focus on introspection, observation of the mind, and subjective experience.

Finally, a qualitative approach circumvents many of the administrative challenges, difficulties in defining appropriate control groups and conditions, and complications arising from the interconnectedness of meditative states & traits that are typically encountered in quantitative studies of these topics (Cahn & Polich, 2006). For all of these reasons, a qualitative and phenomenological approach will be used in this study.

Theoretical Framework

I chose phenomenology and systems theory as the theoretical frameworks to guide this study. The phenomenological lens used in this study allowed participants to provide an in-depth description of their own experiences. Systems theory provided a framework for understanding the way in which a change in one member of a system could influence the rest of the system.

Phenomenology

One of the main objectives of the phenomenological approach is to describe and understand the experience of the participants through exploration of the meaning behind relationships and everyday life events (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). From a phenomenological perspective, the researcher explores the underlying meaning attached to the decisions or actions of the participants. By using the phenomenological lens, the study sought to begin to fill the gap in the research in understanding how meditation influences interpersonal relationships.

Phenomenology is shaped by several philosophical assumptions. One of the first assumptions of this approach is that the researcher becomes part of the phenomena studied. Phenomenologists suggest that objectivity is unattainable and truth is relative, and thus the beliefs and value system of the researcher will influence the questions the researcher asks. As someone who has some experience with meditation, and who holds the belief that meditation can be a very helpful practice, it has been important for me to keep my own experiences and expectations in check during this study. Boss and colleagues (1996) suggest that it is a necessity for the researcher to be continually reflecting upon and questioning his or her own process when it comes to the queries of the study, and it is preferable to have someone assist the researcher in doing this. I involved my advisor in reviewing and coding the transcribed interviews, in order to balance my perspective.

Another way phenomenology informed this study is through the important concept that participants are the experts of their own experience (Patton, 2001). The questions of the study allowed the participants the freedom to define the phenomena as they experience them without being pathologized by the researcher. Although I began with a theory about the phenomena, I

tried to refrain from placing labels on the participants and acknowledge that it is the participants that have the answers to the research questions, and not me, as the researcher.

Systems Theory

Systems theory is grounded in the concept that in any living system, such as a family or a dyadic relationship, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The features of the whole system develop from the relationships and interactions of the parts of the system. When a researcher only considers individual and isolated parts of the system, important relational data about the system itself is lost (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). This theoretical perspective informed the study's focus on the relational effects of meditation traits, rather than limiting the focus to the personal effects of meditation traits.

One systems theorist, Bertalanffy, developed the metaphor of a family or social group as an organism that is an open system which continuously interacts with the environment. When an environmental factor enters a family, it affects both individuals and the system, and the family learns to respond in a different way (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). In this study, meditation can be viewed as an environmental factor that enters into a family through one or more of its members. Just as other environmental factors would cause a change in the system, it is assumed that meditation would have an effect not only on the individual who practices meditation, but also on others in the family through the network of relationships that exists.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to fill a gap in the current meditation research by collecting and analyzing qualitative data about the relational effects of meditation traits, as experienced by advanced meditators. To this end, I asked two related lines of questions to the participants: first, questions about the personal meditation traits that they believe they have developed; and second,

questions about how these traits have influenced their close, interpersonal relationships. The following are the broad questions that guided the study:

1. How do advanced meditators experience meditative traits?
2. How do advanced meditators' experiences of meditative traits influence their close, interpersonal relationships?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections provide a review of the published literature for key issues related to this study of the experiences of meditative traits among advanced practitioners of meditation, and the way in which these experiences influenced meditators close, interpersonal relationships. The topics included are meditation and Western psychology, the research of meditation traits, and the research of meditation and relational variables.

Meditation and Western Psychology

Significant differences exist between Western psychology and meditative traditions, which must be understood in order to avoid serious mistakes in research. First, Western psychology tends to view the mind from a mechanistic perspective, whereas meditative traditions view the mind as the source of all phenomena (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Second, Western culture tends to be monophasic, centered on one waking state of consciousness, where as meditative traditions are polyphasic, drawing on multiple states of consciousness.

Western psychology tends to view meditation from a mechanistic perspective, in which the guiding, though sometimes unacknowledged, metaphor is that of mind as machine. From this perspective, it has been suggested that meditation works through such psychological mechanisms as relaxation, exposure, desensitization, dehypnosis, deautomatization, catharsis, and decounterconditioning (Murphy & Donovan, 1997). Other suggestions of cognitive mechanisms include insight, self-monitoring, self-acceptance, and self-understanding (Baer, 2003). Potential physiological mechanisms include decreased arousal, change in autonomic nervous system activity, stress immunization, and hemispheric synchronization and laterality shifts (e.g., Cahn & Polich, 2006). Some of these mechanisms have been misinterpreted in a reductionistic way, leading to a limited understanding of the processes of meditation (Wilber, 2000b).

On the other hand, meditative traditions have a very different view of the mind than that of a machine. Buddhist tradition holds that, in the words attributed to the Buddha, “All phenomena are preceded by the mind. When the mind is comprehended, all phenomena are comprehended,” and “By bringing the mind under control, all things are brought under control” (Santideva, 1961, p. 68, as cited in Wallace, 1999). This perspective differs from that of Western modern science, which assumes that the mechanistic control of the environment, particularly the body and the brain, can alter one’s sense of wellbeing, comfort, etc.

Mainstream Western culture tends to be monophasic, meaning that it is drawn from, centered on, and conceptualized within the usual waking state of consciousness, whereas the culture of meditative traditions (both Eastern and Western) is polyphasic and multistage, drawing on multiple states of consciousness and multiple adult developmental stages (Laughlin, McManus, & Shearer, 1992; Wilber, 2000a). As meditative practices are studied using a Western scientific paradigm, there is a danger of “degeneracy,” in which multiple dimensions are simplified into fewer, resulting in a loss of complexity and multidimensionality (Tart, 1992).

Research of Meditation Traits

As previously described, a meditation “trait” refers to the lasting effects in sensory, cognitive and self-referential awareness that continue whether or not the practitioner is actively engaged in meditation (Austin, 1998; D. Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; West, 1987). In the following section, Western research of some enhanced traits of meditators is described. These enhanced capacities include emotional intelligence, equanimity, moral maturity, attention, sense withdrawal, thought and cognition, lucidity, and other unique capacities (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Notably, the research of meditation traits has not explored all experiences reported by

meditators because of the difficulties in quantifying variables such as an expanded sense of self (Cahn & Polich, 2006).

Emotional intelligence. Like Western therapies, meditative traditions attempt to rebalance emotions by reducing destructive emotions. The Dalai Lama writes that “the true mark of a meditator is that he has disciplined his mind by freeing it from negative emotions” (Goleman, 2003, p. 26). Additionally, meditative traditions attempt to cultivate positive emotions such as joy, love and compassion, even to the point of being nonexclusive and unconditional. This kind of all-encompassing love includes yogic *bhakti*, the compassion of Confucian *jen*, Buddhist *metta*, and Christian contemplative *agape* (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Studies have indicated that meditators show emotional shifts, including decreased anxiety, anger and depression, as well as an increase in reported well-being (S. Shapiro et al., 1998). Additionally, EEG profiles of advanced meditators include features associated with positive affect and compassion (Goleman, 2003; Travis et al., 2002).

Equanimity. Equanimity, “the characteristic of the sages” (Aurobindo, 1922, p. 181), is “the ability to experience provocative stimuli nondefensively and with minimal psychological disturbance” (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 237). Examples of this valued trait are yogic *samatva* (Evenness), Sufi’s “contented self,” Hasidic Judaism’s *hishtavut*, Buddhist *upekkha* (equanimity), Christian contemplation’s “divine apatheia,” and Taoism’s “principle of the equality of things” (Bitner, Hillman, Victor, & Walsh, 2003). Studies of emotional stability and startle response have provided preliminary support for this trait of advanced meditators (Goleman, 2003; Travis et al., 2002).

Moral maturity. Moral maturity is highly valued in meditative traditions and is said to be cultivated in meditation through sensitization to the costs of unethical acts, reduction of negative

motives and emotions, strengthening of positive emotions, enhancement of altruism, and increased identification with others through transpersonal experience (Lama, 2001; Walsh, 1999). Studies of TM practitioners indicate that increased scores on scales of moral development correspond with duration of practice and with EEG findings (Nidich, Ryncarz, Abrams, Orme-Johnson, & Wallace, 1983; Travis et al., 2002).

Attention. William James (James, 1910/1950) wrote that character, judgment and will all stem from the ability to control attention, and that to “improve this faculty would be the education par excellence,” but that “it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about” (p. 424). This difficulty in sustaining attention led him to a conclusion that Western psychology has adopted, namely, that the continuous sustaining of attention is not possible. Meditative disciplines agree that sustaining attention is not possible without training, but that attention can be trained and sustained over the course of several hours. Several traditions make this claim, in the form of advanced Christian *contemplatio*, yogic *samadhi*, TM’s “cosmic consciousness,” and Tibetan Buddhism’s “calm abiding” (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Initial support for increased attention has been found in both psychometric and sensory-evoked potential studies, though more research on advanced meditators is necessary (Cahn & Polich, 2006).

Sense withdrawal. Advanced practitioners of meditation are reported to experience a dramatic reduction or cessation of awareness of somatic sensory stimuli when highly developed concentration is focused on the mind itself. This capacity is described in many traditions, such as yogic *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal), Buddhist “absorption,” Jewish *hitbodeduth* (self-isolation), and Sufic *muraqaba* (contemplation) (Feuerstein, 1996; Goleman, 1988). Without external distractions, advanced meditators in this state are said to have significantly enhanced

introspection and cognitive control. There has been some support for sense withdrawal in early EEG studies of sensory-stimulus-induced alpha blocking, but other findings have yielded varied results (Cahn & Polich, 2006).

Thought and cognition. Many meditative traditions use contemplative introspection as a mechanism to develop thought control, such as the Jewish practice of “elevating strange thoughts,” or the Buddhist cultivation of compassion or love through the repetition of thoughts about those emotions. Unlike cognitive therapy, which attempts to change or stop thoughts through suppression, meditative disciplines slow or stop thoughts through the development of a deep calm. Chuang Tzu, a Taoist philosopher, wrote, “If water derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of the mind?” (Giles, 1926/1969, p. 47). Studies of TM practitioners who show distinctive autonomic and EEG correlates during episodes of thought stilling provide initial support of this enhanced capacity (Travis & Pearson, 2000).

Lucidity. Several meditative traditions claim that some advanced meditators are able to maintain clear awareness through dreams (lucid dreaming) and nondream sleep (nondream lucidity). These states have been described in many meditative traditions, but have only been recently acknowledged by Western psychologists. Studies of TM practitioners have shown EEG profiles indicating alert awareness throughout sleep (Mason et al., 1997).

Unique capacities. Other capacities that advanced meditators have demonstrated include (1) voluntary control of the autonomic nervous system; (2) lucid dream sleep; (3) lucid nondream sleep (Mason et al., 1997); (4) a reduction of drive conflicts; (5) a unique integrative cognitive capacity (Jonte-Pace, 1998; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986); (6) control of binocular rivalry; (7) control of motion-induced blindness (Carter et al., 2005); (8) synesthesia, which was previously thought to be an uncultivable capacity (Walsh, 2005); (9) increased cortical thickness (Lazar et

al., 2005); (10) highly developed ability to detect fleeting facial microexpressions of emotion; (11) inhibition of the startle response; (12) ability to respond with subjective compassion and objective relaxation when viewing disturbing videos that typically elicit disgust (Goleman, 2003).

Research of Meditation and Relational Variables

Though most meditation research has focused on clinical variables, such as chronic pain or anxiety, a few studies have begun to examine the effects of meditation on other variables that are closely related to interpersonal functioning. These studies have examined the effect of a mindfulness-based relationship enhancement intervention on relational functioning (Carson et al., 2004); the effect of meditation on reported interpersonal problems (Tloczynski & Tanriella, 1998); the effect of meditation on self concept, including an interpersonal level of self concept (Haimerl & Valentine, 2001); the effect of meditation on empathy levels (S. Shapiro et al., 1998); and the relationship between mindfulness, marital satisfaction and perceived spousal similarity (Burpee & Langer, 2005). The results of these studies indicate that meditation has a positive impact on several relational variables.

The study conducted by Carson and colleagues (2004) evaluated the effects of a novel intervention on relational functioning and individual functioning of nondistressed couples. This intervention, called mindfulness-based relationship enhancement, taught participants mindfulness meditation methods during 8 weekly 150-minute group sessions and a day-long retreat. The participants (44 nondistressed heterosexual couples) were randomly assigned to the treatment group or a waitlist group. The results indicated that the intervention led to (1) increased levels of relationship satisfaction, autonomy, relatedness, closeness, acceptance of one another,

and decreased relationship distress; (2) increased individual optimism, spirituality, relaxation and decreased psychological distress; and (3) continued benefits at 3-month follow-up.

In a study conducted by Tloczynski and Tanriella (1998), the effects of Zen breath meditation were compared to those of relaxation on college adjustment, among undergraduate students. Seventy-five participants were randomly assigned to meditation, relaxation and control groups. One hour of instruction in the assigned technique was provided to the students, who were instructed to practice it 20 minutes per day. After six weeks, there was a significant decrease in both anxiety and depression scores in both the meditation and relaxation groups as compared to the control group. Notably, only the meditation group showed significant decrease in interpersonal problems scores.

Another study by Haimerl and Valentine (2001), examined the effects of Buddhist meditation on three levels of self-concept, including intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal. Participants included 28 prospective meditators, 58 beginning meditators with less than two years experience, and advanced meditators with more than two years experience. The advanced meditators scored higher on all three scales than the other two groups, suggesting that progress in Buddhist meditation can contribute to significant growth in all three of these areas of personality.

S. Shapiro and colleagues (1998) studied the effects of mindfulness meditation on empathy, among other variables, in 78 medical and premedical students. Participants were randomly assigned to a meditation group or a waitlist control group. The meditation group showed significant increases in empathy levels as compared to the waitlist group. When the waitlist group received the mindfulness intervention, the findings of increased empathy were replicated.

Burpee and Langer's study (2005) explored the relationships between mindfulness, marital satisfaction, and perceived spouse similarity. Ninety-five subjects, who were all married, completed self-report questionnaires related to the three research variables. The analysis of the data indicated a strong relationship between mindfulness and marital satisfaction. Mindfulness was found to account for 8% of marital satisfaction, suggesting that mental engagement, openness to new experiences, and awareness of new contexts contribute to fulfilling marital relationships.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Design of the Study

To investigate the perceived impact of meditative traits on relationships, I used qualitative methodology in order to produce a rich and vivid portrait of the participants' experiences and understandings of those experiences. The following sections describe the participants, procedures, and analyses.

Study Participants

The proposal for this project was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, and no recruitment took place until after approval had been granted. Eight participants were recruited for this study using purposive criteria and snowball sampling techniques. The purposive criteria were that participants are long-term practitioners of meditation, having practiced meditation for a minimum of 10 years, and that they identify meditation as an important part of their life. Interviews were conducted with all participants who meet these criteria.

In addition to purposive sampling techniques, I used a snowball sampling method, asking participants to tell friends who fit the criteria to contact me if they were willing to participate in the study. Recruitment strategies included word of mouth, phone calls, emails, and visits to local meditation groups (Appendix A), and informational flyers (Appendix B). Additionally, I contacted teachers and organizers of meditation groups and asked them to pass out flyers to students and group participants. All participation was voluntary and I ensured the privacy of the participants by keeping their identifying information private, locked in a designated cabinet, to which I had the only key.

I conducted interviews with eight participants, but one participant chose to withdraw from the study after the interview, because she did not feel that she had adequately captured her

experiences in the interview. For this reason, only seven interview transcripts were included in the data analysis portion of the study.

Procedures

As participants were recruited, I arranged a pre-interview meeting over the phone or by E-mail. At this meeting, I followed a script (Appendix C) to provide each participant with information about the study as well as my contact information. Each participant was asked to reflect on his or her experience of meditative traits and the impact they have had on relationships. If they wished to participate, we scheduled an interview at a time that was convenient to them. I requested the participant's phone number in order to make a follow-up phone call to confirm the interview. The participants and I agreed on a location for the interview, or agreed to have the interview over the phone. This method was designed to maximize convenience and overcome potential barriers of the participants' limited time, mobility or transportation.

At the beginning of the interview, I reviewed the informed consent instructions, answered any related questions, and obtained verbal consent from the participant. When consent was obtained, I asked the participant to fill out a brief demographic form. If the interview was conducted over the phone, I asked the participants the questions on the demographic form verbally. The demographic form is included in Appendix D and included questions about such topics as the participant's gender, ethnic background and meditative tradition. The demographic forms were collected and numbered consecutively based on the interview number. The forms remain stored in a secured location until all requirements for the research are complete. The data from the demographic forms was entered into an electronic spreadsheet after the interviews.

After the demographic form was completed, I confirmed that taping the session was acceptable. When the participant agreed to be recorded, I started the recording device. Appendix E describes the interview protocol that I used. First, I restated the main topics of the interview, which are meditative traits and their effect on relationships. I then followed the interview procedure, using a semi-structured interview format. In the interview, I used active listening to elicit a detailed account of the participant's experience and understanding, allowing each participant to "define the phenomenon in question rather than defining it for them" (Boss et al., 1996). I used the sample questions in Appendix E to guide the interview, and also used other related questions and probes as needed to clarify and understand the participants' experiences.

After the interview, I asked the participants if they knew of someone else who met the inclusion criteria and may be interested in participating in this research study. I provided them with copies of the study flyer and my contact information.

I asked the participants if they would like to receive information about the findings of the study. If they did, I will send them an executive summary when the study is complete. In order to maintain confidentiality, the participants' contact information, including phone number and email address were kept with only first name and last initial in a locked cabinet that only I could access. All such contact information will be destroyed when the research is complete.

Analyses

I transcribed all the interviews myself in order to become more familiar with the data, to begin to see the data as a whole, and to increase my theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout the process, I kept a journal about emergent themes that surfaced in the data. The tapes and transcripts were kept in a locked cabinet to which only my advisor and I have access. These will be destroyed when the research is complete.

I used the open-coding method to analyze the interviews and to identify the overarching categories and themes that emerged throughout the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The interviews were transcribed and coded as they took place. Throughout this process, I continued to keep a journal of emerging ideas and themes which informed the coding process. Because patterns and categories surface from within the data, Rafuls and Moon (1996) suggest that they should be “systematically looped back into the collection of data and analyzed further for their interrelationships and meaning” (p. 65). In other words, the patterns and themes that emerged from the first interview informed the direction of the second interview. For example, after the third participant spoke about her experience of awareness of physical sensations, I was more attuned to this theme in the subsequent interviews, and asked participants to elaborate on their experiences in this area. Axial coding was used to organize the open codes into hierarchical clusters or “trees” of open codes that were meaningful in the interpretation of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, the aggregate code “compassion” was composed of smaller codes, such as “kindness,” “love,” and “warmth.” My thesis advisor cross coded some of the transcripts with me to identify themes in the data. I discussed my analysis and code set with my thesis advisor in order to incorporate insights of others’ into the developing analysis.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Demographics

A total of eight participants were interviewed in the period between December 2006, and February 2007. After the interview, one participant requested to be withdrawn from the study, because she felt that she did not adequately express her experiences and beliefs in the interview. The results are based on the seven remaining interviews, which included 79 pages of single-spaced data. Of the seven participants who were included, five were female and two were male. All participants were Caucasian. The participants were between the ages of 52 and 70. Four participants practiced Vipassana or “insight” meditation, which is a technique in Theravada Buddhism; two participants practiced Centering Prayer, a contemplative practice in the Christian tradition; and one participant practiced mindfulness in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. The participants were very well educated, as all of them held Master’s degrees or higher. They were also fairly affluent as a group. Three participants reported annual household incomes of over \$100,000; two reported an annual household income of between \$70,000 and \$100,000; one reported an annual household income of \$40,000 to \$70,000; and one chose not to report income.

The following are brief biographical sketches of the participants:

Participant 1 is a 56 year old Caucasian female, who has been practicing Centering Prayer for ten years. She is recently separated, and is the mother of three adult children, one of whom lives at home.

Participant 2 is a 70 year old Caucasian female, who has been practicing Centering Prayer for 21 years, though this time span has included some breaks from her practice. Before she retired, she was a psychotherapist. She is married, and has adult children and grandchildren who do not live with her.

Participant 3 is a 65 year old Caucasian female, who has been practicing Vipassana Buddhist meditation consistently for 12 years, though she practiced sporadically for 13 years before that. She currently practices psychotherapy. She is in a committed relationship, and has an adult children and grandchildren from a previous relationship.

Participant 4 is a 58 year old Caucasian male, who has been practicing Vipassana Buddhist meditation for 10 years. He is married, and has children from a previous marriage.

Participant 5 is a 64 year old Caucasian female, who has been practicing Vipassana Buddhist meditation for 13 years. She was a psychotherapist before she retired several years ago. She is married and has adult children and grandchildren.

Participant 6 is a 52 year old Caucasian female, who has been practicing various forms of meditation for 33 years, with a focus on Vipassana Buddhist meditation for the last several years. She is in a committed relationship, and has adult children from a previous marriage.

Participant 7 is a 61 year old Caucasian male, who has been practicing mindfulness in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh for 17 years. He is married and has adult children.

Meditation Traits

The participants were asked about the personal traits they believe they developed through their meditation practice. Several meditation traits emerged from the interviews with a high level of consistency between participants. These traits include (1) awareness of body sensations and emotions; (2) disidentification from emotions and thoughts; (3) acceptance of situations, oneself, and others; and (4) compassion and loving kindness for oneself and others. Though these traits are distinct from one another, there are similarities that emerged between them. For example, both awareness and disidentification include a changed relationship with one's emotions, marked by openness and curiosity. Similarly, both acceptance and compassion include a changed

relationship to oneself and to others, and fit closely together. Though these similarities and areas of overlap exist, the distinctions between categories allow for greater clarity and the development of the nuances of the traits described.

Awareness

Awareness was a trait that almost all of the participants identified (six out of seven). For the participants, awareness refers to being open to a wide range of sensory and emotional experience within the present moment. Participants contrasted their experience of awareness with being caught up in thoughts or mindless action, thereby blocking one's experience of the present moment. They described their awareness as extending to their experience of their body and physical sensations, as well as their experience of their emotions and inner life.

In explaining and defining their experience of awareness, participants often made a point to contrast awareness with thinking and other discursive functions.

That, for me, that's an important distinction between thinking and awareness. ...

Awareness has to do with biting into a strawberry and being aware of the taste and the texture, looking at it, being aware of the color. And thinking has to do with, "This is a pretty good strawberry. I wonder where it came from. I wonder if I can get more of them." That's the thinking process. So, partially it's that—living more with awareness, awareness of the power of sensation, or even more with emotions, and just the bare awareness of those, rather than quickly moving toward the discursive perspective. So, that being aware of feelings of sadness or attraction or impulsivity or whatever is not living in ones' head. And living a lot in one's head is thinking about what happened or what I can do, or why is that like that. That's living in one's head.

Participants also distinguished awareness of the present moment from being caught up in mindless action and “doing.”

I quit my job—I’m 64—at 56, really thinking that there’s more just than to do, to do, to do, but to be, and really trying very hard to live in the moment. And I think the meditation practice has, well, that’s the practice, to really bring you into the moment, and I do a lot of it.

One participant explained that, before beginning his meditation practice, he had hope that the “doing” he engaged in would bring him happiness, but that he has learned that it does not.

Whereas before [beginning the meditation practice], I probably never even thought about it. I’d just look and see something in the window of a store and think about buying it, because it looked pleasant. Or, I’d see something on TV, well, let’s just look at that too. All this running around, always doing, doing, doing—that doesn’t promote happiness at all.

The participants suggested that their awareness was cultivated by their meditation practice, in which they learn to become settled and focused on the present moment. Though the focus on the present moment starts with the time in meditation, it is then carried throughout the day.

That’s one of the primary intentions that are set during the morning sit—about scanning the body and what’s going on in the body, but then focus on what is this body trying to do each moment of the day. So, it really relates a lot when I’m encountering you on the telephone, or someone walks into my office or someone is sending me an email or another telephone call. You know, all interactions become focused on, what is it that I’m doing just now? Not trying to plan what’s for dinner tonight when I’m talking to you.

The moment-to-moment awareness cultivated in certain kinds of meditation includes various avenues of sensory and internal experiences.

Well, the meditation that I do now, the Vipassana, is so focused on—or, the goal is really how to live a more equanimous life, and the way we do our practice is—the foundation of it is, body, image, talk—or, body, feel, image talk. So, what are the sensations I'm experiencing in my body? What are the emotional feel experiences? What images? And how aware am I of the messages, the talk going on in my head? And so in meditation, in sitting meditation, just becoming more and more attuned, in a more and more refined way, to the subtle messages that come up, sometimes the gross, but through more time in meditation, the refined and subtle. And, and, so I am just more aware of those things.

Being aware of one's body and physical sensations was a key aspect of awareness that a majority (four out of seven) of the participants identified.

So, I would characterize, prior to discovering Vipassana meditation, that I was totally in my head and never connected to my body, so that the body doesn't exist from the neck below. Now, I can see that a holistic approach to being the most that I can be in this body is to allow all the sensory gateways that fuel my emotions to come into awareness, instead of setting it down, and not even paying attention to it.

This awareness of one's body can begin during a sitting meditation, but is also integrated into one's daily life.

So, the centering aspect of monitoring the body is to stay in tune with it so that the practice for me is not those few minutes on the cushion . . . In all of those awakened moments off the cushion, I'm still reminding myself to scan the body—how am I feeling in the moment with what I'm doing?

Participants reported that body awareness is also cultivated in other forms of meditation, such as walking meditation.

So, I think there's a really important training and practice in working with [inaudible] walking meditation. And a number of years ago, when I was first at retreat center, one of the, the director of practice comes up to me and says, "Do you really want to get something from your time here?" "Sure." And what she said to me was, "Everywhere you go should be walking meditation." And you're to settle into that, so that when you're walking, you're aware of your feet.

The participants reported that their awareness of their physical sensations sometimes provided cues to them about their emotional state.

And here, somebody can come into the room and I can hear a judgmental voice, I become aware of that, or I become aware of a sensation in my body that alerts me that I'm going to be agitated in a while if I don't back off from it a little bit.

This awareness helped one participant respond in an intentional way to a stressful situation, rather than becoming stuck in her habitual patterns.

I remember, when my daughter was visiting at Thanksgiving, and one of the places, for some reason, that I get anxious is when somebody's helping me cook in the kitchen. I don't like it . . . And it always came up, it took me a long time to recognize it. This time when she was here at Thanksgiving, all of a sudden, I felt my body change. And, where I normally would have ended up yelling or acting out, I said to her, "Oh, [daughter's name], I'm starting to feel this anxious feeling, and I'm going to go sit over there for a few minutes." And she was able to then say, "Oh, I'm so glad you told me that, Ma, it makes me understand what's going on with you. Thanks for sharing that."

In other cases, the physical sensations that participants were aware of reflected a positive emotional state that they cultivated, which is related to their acceptance of others and of situations.

So, I had asked [my partner] to put in a couple of loads [of laundry] and bring them up. And this morning, he hadn't brought them up. But I, it's like a physical feeling that I can feel. It's just like, okay, he'll do it. And trust that. And my body feels relaxed about it, so I can feel it physically. Whereas in the past, I would feel a tension and a tightness and get annoyed, and "You didn't do it in a timeframe that I wanted you to do it in." But I can just let all that go.

In addition to an increased awareness of physical sensations and of the body, participants reported that they experienced an increased awareness of their own emotional states. One participant reported developing a greater awareness of her habitual patterns of negative emotional response. This awareness helped her to be more patient with a neighbor who would otherwise have prompted some of these negative reactions.

Keating [who writes about Centering Prayer] really helps you to see the triggers in your own life that are connected when, you know, when something in someone else bugs you. So I think that understanding that that was really triggering something in me helped me then to be more patient with this next door neighbor.

Another participant reported that her emotional awareness allowed her to notice some of her underlying emotional processes.

I think it was only several years—it was probably five years ago that I started recognizing myself as an anxious person. I think everybody else knew it, but I didn't know it. I just thought I was justified.

She continued to explain how these processes were activated in her relationships.

So, at this meditation retreat a couple of years ago, I realized I had this great fear of abandonment, which entered into all my relationships. So, that if [my partner] puts his bags in the middle of my living space, that's abandoning me, because he's not respecting me. I mean, that's quite a generalization.

Overall, participants indicated that their experience of awareness in the present moment was very satisfying to them, and helped them to be open to the intrinsic rewards that pepper the moments of life.

And what I've learned through the practice is about intrinsic rewards—just tasting an orange, just looking at a smile, you know, how does that feel? If there's a sense, if you can be open to it. There's meaning and nourishment in each of those things. That's huge.

Awareness, in the sense of openness to a wide range of sensory and emotional experience within the present moment, was identified as a key theme by many of the participants. This trait, as distinguished from preoccupation with thinking and doing, was cultivated in the practice of sitting or walking meditation, but extended into the rest of the participants' lives. Awareness included an openness to physical sensations and emotional experiences. At times, the physical sensations provided cues to the participants that they were experiencing an emotion that they had not been aware of. The development of emotional awareness helped participants identify triggers and underlying emotions that they had not previously noticed. Increased awareness helped participants respond to certain situations differently than they had previously responded, and allowed them to notice the beautiful and nourishing experiences that often remain hidden within daily life.

Disidentification from Emotions and Thoughts

Every participant described a new relationship with their emotions and thoughts, marked by disidentification and curiosity. One who is disidentified from one's thoughts and emotions has stepped back or disengaged from them, so that one can observe them and see them as fluid and changing. Disidentification does not connote indifference to or denial of emotions and thoughts. Instead, this observational stance is similar to the experience of awareness, and allows one to explore the thoughts and emotions, and to be curious about them, rather than being driven by them. Disidentification, in this context, is contrasted with clinging strongly to one's emotions or thoughts and considering them to be real and permanent.

Participants spoke of disidentification from both thoughts and feelings as involving an observational stance towards oneself, marked by curiosity. One participant likened the experience of observing herself as having the "dual eye" that therapists use when interacting with their clients.

You're studying to be a therapist; I'm one. We have that. So, in our sitting with people, we have the dual eye. If you're good, you're here, and you also have that observing eye. So, I think in a way, that too, it's like, start doing that with yourself, as if you're sitting in the chair.

Another participant spoke of the role of curiosity in his internal experience.

So, my penchant for curiosity has fed this inner exploration as well as exploration of, "How does the universe run?" . . . All of that gets translated into wanting, because of the curiosity, really here looking at being, when I'm sitting in meditation, contemplating what this mind's doing. So, there's a natural, healthy curiosity, to continue to explore even deeper and deeper, the inner cores.

Participants indicated that their observational and curious stance helps them to stay present in difficult situations.

The difference is that rather than letting [negative emotions] start to overwhelm me, getting pulled into it, I can sit back from it and kind of observe it, but stay more in the present, more in the bigger worldview kind of thing, the bigger oneness, and stay connected to that easier.

Participants reported that their disidentification from their emotions was marked by a sense that their identity was not defined by their emotions.

So, something will come up, and I can see myself getting agitated, and become aware of the agitation, and detach from the agitation, so that I'm not the agitation.

Other participants echoed this sentiment.

And you just, you become the investigator. And therefore, there's a curiosity . . . [I can] stand back and look at that fear reaction, rather than being it. You have a lot more leverage out there, just including that with everything.

Participants reported that their ability not to identify with an emotion helps them to respond compassionately, rather than get entangled in the circumstances.

And when somebody's coming at me with—coming to me with an issue, a problem, you know, then I'm able to more frequently, realize, "Okay, this is this person, it's not me," and have some compassion for that person. I think that kind of detachment, that it's not "me," neither my feelings aren't "me" exactly, and other people aren't. So, I tend not to get as entangled, but sometimes I do.

When the participants saw that emotions were impermanent and naturally changing, they were more able to disidentify from the emotions, and allow them to be present without trying to force them to change.

I recognize these feelings and accept it. It's okay, this is how I respond. This is how I react to this. But, I don't have to stay there, in the anger. I don't have to stay in the anxiety, because I know it's going to pass. I recognize it as a chemical reaction, or some other kind of reaction. I don't attach to it, and can continue with my day.

Knowing that emotions are changing helps some participants cope with fluctuations of emotion, without becoming entrenched in them.

I don't tend to have the high-highs and low-lows as much. Especially the lows—I don't go into depression as easily. I can sit with it and it passes.

The participants noted that, paradoxically, when they sit with their emotions without trying to control them or force them to pass, the emotions tend to change or pass naturally.

When you have or are experiencing strong feelings, say, when I'm angry at something that [my husband] has said or not said, or done, and, so, I'll say—I'll name whatever the emotion is that I'm experiencing. "Welcome anger, welcome anger." And just working at receiving it and then asking that I relinquish my desire to control. Relinquish whatever the desire is—frequently it's control. And just, it's a way of dealing with it that is positive. And it's amazing how it helps just, just helps my mood and softens my response.

One participant, who is a psychotherapist, describes how sitting with emotions has also helped her clients.

The other day, [my psychotherapy client] came in and he, I had him just sit with his, whatever he was feeling—oh, he was feeling he had exploded at his wife and when he looked into that and pulled it apart, it was like he felt inadequate. And so I had him sit with the inadequacy, and just feel it, and after a while, he said, “You know what,” he said, “It just went away, and I don’t have to be afraid of it.” And he just came to that.

Additionally, participants explained that they became aware of some of the sources of their emotions, which also helped them disidentify from them.

But, a lot of anger is really based on, we expected people to behave differently. It’s based on expectations, so that, when you see that, we open up. It’s easier.

Some participants noted a similar disidentification from thoughts that they experienced. Instead of seeing thoughts as true, they began to see thoughts as phenomena of the mind.

Well, meditation has given me a trust that thoughts are not to be trusted to be “all truth.”

And that was really a big thing for a Westerner. I think we really think, and I have always been a thinker, and meditation also opens up the intuitive mind, when you’re there.

One participant spoke about how the experience of thoughts slowing down during meditation has helped her to experience disidentification.

Well, again, when you’re meditating and you’re in that intuitive place, and thoughts aren’t changing in every millisecond, you can really, you are stepping away. It’s really disengaging. And maybe that’s a part of the practice over time. And you do it faster and faster the more years that you’ve meditated.

The disidentification from emotions and thoughts that the participants described was cultivated by a relationship to one’s experience marked by curiosity and observation. Participants implicitly distinguished this attitude of disidentification from the way in which people typically

relate to their inner experiences, wherein they believe that their emotions and thoughts reflect the reality of a situation and of their personal identity. The disidentified stance allowed participants to separate their sense of self from their emotions, which allowed them to respond differently to difficult situations. They also recognized that emotions and thoughts were ever changing and did not always reflect reality. The participants reported that their emotional states seemed to pass or change when they let go of their desire to force them to change, and allowed themselves to be present with them. The participants' insight into the sources of their emotions, and their experience of thoughts slowing down during meditation helped them to disidentify from these internal phenomena.

Acceptance

Acceptance was one of the personal traits that all of the participants identified. In this context, acceptance referred to a willingness to see themselves and life as it is, without trying to change their experience of the present moment. They spoke of a greater acceptance of situations, of themselves and of others with whom they are in relationship.

Some participants reported having acceptance of the situations that they found themselves in, which was manifested by a decreased desire to change their experience in some way.

. . . there's not that “vroomf”—which is the grasping, which is not accepting things as they are, and that's one of the truths of the Buddha. We suffer because we're grasping on to things. I don't grasp anymore.

This acceptance of things as they are also extends to difficult, sad or painful experiences, wherein one gives up the desire to control them.

There's a realization that I can't control that. I don't need to control. I have found that I can just be in whatever the turmoil of the moment is, and live with it. As sad as it might be, as painful as it might be, just being with it and not attach myself to wanting to be—going away or having more of it.

One participant shared how she was able to accept her husband's decision to seek a divorce.

I honestly think [my husband] is making a mistake, but I can't be married to someone who doesn't want to be married to me. It's just incomprehensible. So, I'm letting go . . . I'd never thought I'd have to learn to let go of my husband, of course. That's been hard.

Participants also found that they were able to be more accepting of various aspects of themselves.

I'm less afraid of who I am. I'm more accepting of who I am—my body, my anger, my intelligence, my relationship with my children, myself as a mother—more accepting, less guilt-ridden.

Some participants noted that this acceptance of themselves also includes an acceptance of their shortcomings and mistakes.

I'm just more aware of my own limitations and insufficiencies, and I just let go a lot . . . I'm not so fanatical about things having to be perfect. I know they can't be—I mean, in terms of keeping the home, or, even the relationship with our kids.

Additionally, participants reported a greater acceptance of their physical bodies, which they attributed to their meditation practice.

But I think that I have a better acceptance of just physical limitations in the last ten years than I would if I didn't have this strong element [of meditation] in my life.

This acceptance also extended to the aging process in general.

Just more of an acceptance. More of an acceptance of the aging process, and more acceptance of others.

Several participants spoke of a connection between their acceptance of themselves and their acceptance of others.

When I love myself, then I have space to love my mother, who I resisted. And I have space to love my partner, who I resisted, because I don't have to protect myself all the time because I already love myself.

This acceptance for others that flowed from an acceptance of themselves counteracted the fear that had previously existed in one participant's relationship with her mother.

And then, I think in the past several years—again, as my meditation and therapy became, as I became less—I guess more accepting of myself, and as I gained more compassion for others, I'm less afraid of who [my mother] is. And, that, I'm less afraid of who I am.

Conversely, participants noted that when they were more critical of others, they were also more critical of themselves.

When I was more critical of others, of course I was more critical of myself. And I think this strong element [of meditation] has really helped me be less critical of others, as in, for example, my relationship with [my neighbor].

One participant, who is a psychotherapist by profession, noted a connection between her general acceptance of life situations and her acceptance of others.

People will—my clients of course, but my friends, too—to say, “I just like to talk to you. You're so accepting.” Um, because I don't react in a way that whatever is going on is the end of the world.

Some participants spoke of how their acceptance of others flowed from not being worried about the judgments of others.

I think when [participant's children] were little, when they did something wrong, I was much more aware of or concerned about, "Oh my goodness, how does that look?" I just don't think about at all anymore, and as a result, I think I'm more accepting of them, with all their human frailties.

Participants noted that their acceptance of others helped them accept the differences that existed between themselves and others in their life, without trying to change them.

So, how this translates into being in a relationship, some way or another, is the recognition that even my partner does not have to be just like me.

Other participants echoed this sentiment in statements like, "Okay, so he doesn't have to do it my way, but he does it in his way, and that's accepted." One participant noted that acceptance of others has overshadowed judgment.

Just appreciating people for where they are without trying to change them. And so, there's no judgment associated with being in the company of somebody any longer.

Participants expanded on their ability to accept others by recognizing the factors that contribute to their behavior, and how that acceptance changed the quality of their interactions.

We talked about that the other night, that acceptance, in the sense of seeing things as having qualities and conditions. The Buddha said, "This is because that is." So, rather than getting upset with somebody because they're a jerk, recognizing that they are acting the way they are because of reasons—genetics, how they were raised, and cultures—and getting that. And when you get that, you're less upset with them. You know, you still want to do things to protect yourself, or to make life easier for yourself, but it's without

the anger toward them. So, it removes that venom. And people are responsible for their actions, though, I'm responsible for my actions, but there's a broader sense of acceptance. In an odd sort of way, everybody's doing the best they can, and it doesn't help anybody to get upset with them for not being able to do what they're not able to do.

Participants explained that their ability to accept others as they are allows them to be less frightened, angry and blaming toward others in their life.

Well, it really cuts the edge off the anger toward one's parents, because one sees, you know—and that's what meditation can do about that—see our parents as 5-year old children and their fragility, comforting them. And so, when you see your parents as being formed by natural processes that they didn't have control over—you know, what we were talking about earlier about blame—so, we do the same with ourselves, self-blame. And we do it with our partner, and understand how their part flows from the universe too, and there's less blame there. And with our children.

The acceptance described by the participants extended to various areas of their life. They described a decreased “grasping,” or desire to change situations and experiences, including those that were particularly painful or difficult. They experienced a greater acceptance of themselves, their mistakes, their physical bodies, and the aging process. This acceptance of self mitigated their feelings of guilt for shortcomings. The participants indicated that their acceptance of themselves helped them to accept other people, even those who were quite different than they were. Part of this acceptance of others also seemed to come from an acknowledgment of the many factors that contribute to a person's behavior. In the Buddhist tradition, this understanding is called dependent origination, which means that phenomena arise together in a mutually

interdependent web of cause and effect. Participants reported that the acceptance that they developed helped them to be less frightened, angry and blaming toward themselves and others.

Compassion and Loving Kindness

The majority of the participants (six out of seven) described the development of various forms of compassion, loving kindness, and caring. Compassion, as the participants spoke of it, refers to an acknowledgment of shared humanity and the commonalities in suffering and desires of oneself and others. This compassion can be a motivator to take action to care for and serve others. Loving kindness, in this context, refers to a universal and unselfish love that extends to oneself, to friends and family, and ultimately to all people. The participants spoke of how they offered forms of compassion and loving kindness to themselves and to others in their life, especially people with whom they had difficult relationships.

The participants described concrete ways in which they took care of themselves and attended to their needs.

And I enrich myself, I do. I get up in the morning; I go right into my meditation room. I do 15, 20 minutes of yoga, I do 5 minutes of chi gong, I meditate, you know. By the time I come downstairs, I'm just pretty open, feeling free. Of course, I'm filled [with positive energy].

Several participants noted that their ability to take care of themselves and attend to their own needs allowed them to also care for others.

I try to take care of my body because I understand that it's a processing machine—it's like a, ideally, like an oven, and it's putting off heat that's transferred in to muscular movement and the ability to speak, and therefore I can use the energy that comes from

feeding it, the fuel, to promote growth for myself, actually give it back to the universe for the fact that I'm alive.

One participant described the connection between being gentle to oneself and to others.

Well, because I was so critical of myself in the early days, and we sort of touched on this,

I think just that you can't be gentle with others if you're not gentle with yourself.

Another participant described an important experience she had during a meditation retreat, in which she first extended loving kindness to herself, and was then able to extend loving kindness to her mother, and others in her life. First, she describes the experience of extending loving kindness to a wounded part of herself.

And in this particular Metta [a meditation based on loving kindness], we started out, "May I be filled with loving-kindness," and off that "May you be well, may you be happy," and the next step was, find something in your body that hurts. Or find a space in your body that hurts, and I realized that I could say this, not "May I be," but "May you be," and it was a different part of myself. And so, it was kind of this inner child—notice the finger quotes on the tape—where I could find a wounded part of myself that I could give compassion to as a parent, that I could hold as a part. And it made all the difference in the world, because I realized that I could comfort myself in a deeper way than children comfort themselves, which is sucking their thumb or acting out, but that I could do this for myself, and that it would really work. It wasn't just saying, "Oh, let it go," or, "Don't feel like that, it'll pass." It was visualizing and recognizing that I could really comfort myself, and that's been amazing for me, from meditation. Because that allowed me to then move into accepting myself. I'm a mother, I love my children, and I love them

unconditionally, but I didn't love myself unconditionally. And I think that's what meditation has allowed me to do.

This participant continues to explain how her ability to love herself has opened her up to love others in her life.

When I love myself, then I have space to love my mother, who I resisted. And I have space to love my partner, who I resisted, because I don't have to protect myself all the time because I already love myself. And I—I know that I'm okay. This morning, I was talking to [my partner], and I said, you know, "When you don't share your inner process with me," I said, "then I feel distant from you, I feel separate, because I need communication." And he said something like, "You feel that when I don't share with you, you don't feel worthy of love." And I processed it, and I said, "No, I feel worthy." I just feel like, I just feel distant, you know. It was interesting, you know, because I do feel worthy—that's sort of—again that comes with age and therapy. But, a big part of it comes from this experience of holding myself, that I can take care of myself. Which, instead of making me, "Oh, I can take care of myself," as a distancing mechanism, which is how I grew up, I can take care of myself and now I can take care of you, too. You know, because I know what it feels like.

Several participants indicated that their recognition of the humanity or suffering of others helped them to remain compassionate to people who would otherwise have triggered a negative reaction in them.

Well, it helps me to see what's—see who they are underneath what they're presenting, and remain compassionate . . . to just see the humanness in everybody.

One participant intentionally used meditation to help her focus on the humanity of a difficult relative.

So, I would, every time before he was going to come over, I would just meditate on loving him as a human being, and just getting beyond all that, and just loving him. And I would do that every time before he came.

Another participant spoke of how her acknowledgment of her husband's humanity has helped their relationship.

And that we, we have great differences, and when I really get into that, I get irritated or whatever. But, when I'm able to get into the wholeness of all of our belonging—he's a human being.

The same participant described her realization that her parents were human, while she was visiting the cemetery where they were buried.

And I just got into this—I closed my eyes, I meditated—it was a beautiful day, it was cold. And I suddenly knew, these two people—and my mother died when I was 21—these two people were human beings who came into the world with their own stuff and their own, whatever was on them, which caused them to act in a certain way—they were trying the very best they could for who they were, and I no longer saw this mother who was “rah rah rah rah.” Or this father who was passive. I just completely dropped it. It was like, you know, they were just belonging to this great big thing, and no, they weren't in touch with their inner selves very much, but how could they be.

Some participants explained that part of having compassion for other people involved connecting with their experience of suffering or pain.

Um, [my partner] came home one day and said—he was crying, he was in a traffic jam, and he was looking at people on the road, yelling and honking, and he came back and said, just crying, and said, “People are in such pain.” And if we only really felt it. And I think that’s a big part of what the meditation does, is allow me to not be everybody else’s pain, but to know it, and to, to have compassion for other people in their perverse behaviors.

Many of the participants described a development of compassion, loving kindness, and caring toward themselves and others in their life. They explained their experience of compassion for themselves helped them to extend compassion to others in their life. This process is similar to the process of acceptance that the participants described, wherein they were able to offer acceptance to others when they had first learned to accept themselves. Several participants indicated that their ability to see the humanity and the suffering of others also contributed to their compassion for those people.

In summary, there were four primary meditation traits that the participants reported developing through their practice. First, they reported a heightened awareness of body sensations and emotional processes. Second, they described a disidentification from and observation of their emotions and thoughts. Third, they noticed an increased acceptance of situations, themselves and others. Fourth, they spoke of an increased compassion and loving-kindness for themselves and others. The first two traits, awareness and disidentification, are closely related, as they both reflect a change in the participants’ relationship with their internal and sensory experience. The new relationship with their internal experience was marked by an observational stance, which allowed them to be aware of their emotions and thoughts without becoming entrenched and overly identified with them. Openness to a wide range of emotional experiences was a

component of awareness, disidentification, and acceptance. Within all three of these themes, participants described a willingness to be present in the moment with difficult or painful emotions, allowing them to pass naturally, rather than to try to resist them or to force them to change. Participants reported that their changed relationship with their emotions helped them to respond differently to certain situations. The third and fourth traits, acceptance and compassion, are also share some similarities. Participants described that both of these traits were related to an understanding of the shared humanity of people, and that many factors contribute to a person's behavior. Additionally, within both of these themes, participants indicated that they were able to extend acceptance or compassion to others more easily when they first offered it to themselves.

Meditation Traits' Effects on Relationships

The participants were asked to explain the ways in which the meditative traits they developed, (namely, awareness, disidentification, acceptance, and compassion) affected their close relationships. The common themes that describe the effects of the traits on relationships include (1) less reactivity in relationships, (2) greater freedom and safety for the participants and the others with whom they are in relationship, (3) a new experience of connection with others, which includes a new awareness of the unity and separation that exists among people, and a deepened experience of intimacy and independence within relationships. As in the section about meditative traits, there are some areas of overlap in this section. For example, greater freedom in relationships is similar to a heightened sense of independence. Also connected are the experiences of unity and intimacy, and the experiences of separation and independence. These themes and the connections between them will be explored in this section.

Less Reactivity in Relationships

Several participants (five out of seven) reported that the traits that they developed through their meditation practice have helped them to be less reactive in their close relationships. Participants used the word “reactive” to refer to an intense and overwhelming emotional state, usually marked by anger or fear, which occurs as an automatic response to certain stimuli. The participants’ ability to be less reactive allowed them to remain calm and present in the moment. They reported that they developed this relational skill as a result of a combination of the other traits that they described, including awareness, disidentification, and acceptance.

The participants indicated that a moment-to-moment awareness of their own body, emotions and triggers helped them to slow down and respond more calmly to situations in their relationships.

I think the practice is a way of slowing things down. Getting the skills to remain—be aware of, instead of get up. A wedge in your inward response that so often we act without—there’s a stimulus and there’s a response, but we’re really not there . . . On the cushion and outside because we’re more aware of the stimulation, and, before we respond, take a breath and say, you know, “Okay, I’m feeling a little upset by what’s going on here. What do I want? How do I work with this?”

Participants reported that when they can remain aware of their body and its response, they can then choose to use their body in a greater variety of ways within the situation, rather than reacting in their habitual manner.

I live in a very small space, and [my partner] will come on with his big LL Bean bags, you know, for the weekend, and he puts them right in the middle of my living space, which then takes up about a quarter of my living space, and it flips me out. So, now I can

look at it, recognize that it's an object and what—how it affects me. I feel my body and I can pick it up and move it into—I have a studio in the back room, and stay calm, and not think that I need to end my relationship with [my partner] because he's such a slob and he doesn't care about me and he doesn't respect my space, and all these other things that are problems with [my partner]. So, I can continually recognize it.

Participants also shared that their meditation practice helped them to be more aware of their triggers. This awareness and understanding of their own automatic reactions helped them to be more patient and calm with others who activated these triggers.

But it's really helping me to know myself better and to pray for help in overcoming these knee-jerk reactions—and that's what they are—knee-jerk reactions . . . Keating really helps you to see the triggers in your own life that are connected when, you know, when something in someone else bugs you. So I think that understanding that that was really triggering something in me helped me then to be more patient with this next door neighbor.

The participants indicated that their changed relationship to their emotions, marked by disidentification and observation, also helped them to remain calm and be less reactive in difficult situations.

Right, so as soon as you've made perceptions, you're going to take it personally. We have—we built up some agenda, so we're personalizing it, rather than that standing back and just viewing it for what it is. Once we personalize it, then our reactivity is so much going to be there. And it's a reactivity that causes us so much pain.

Participants contrasted an attitude of judging with an attitude of disidentification from judgment, which allows them to step back and to continue to listen without being reactive.

I'm not attached to my judging, so I'm just able to listen more, and stay calm, instead—. So, when I say that I'm not—that somebody else's reaction, I can see it as a reaction, and not take on that reaction, and then not react myself, so that I can step back and continue to listen, not disappear, not be afraid of it, and be there with it.

One participant spoke of how self-judgment is related to reactivity.

Reactivity. Really, and just all that self-judgment comes in also with reactivity, and really be able to see what's going on, more than just being it. And it's a whole new perspective with everything in your life. So, I think the reactivity, which is saying the same thing as having much less judgment, accepting things as they are.

Though automatic reactions are sometimes deeply ingrained, participants noted that their disidentified observation of their impulse to react helps them to remain present in the moment of relationships.

And sometimes I just sit there and I can feel myself wanting to, you know, engage in some kind of defensive dissociative behavior, and I'll have to say to myself, "No, this is the moment. I can't wait until I'm on the cushion to start meditating. I have to do it right now. This is where the work is." So, and again, that's how my meditation affects my practice, my daily life, my relationships.

Several participants drew a connection between the attitude of acceptance of others and of situations and their ability to stay calm and to be less reactive.

I think with [my husband], when I was just, when I would get angry at some of the things that really were not intentional on his part, it must have made him feel like he was walking on pins and needles, I mean, I see that in retrospect. So, I think it's definitely

helped. We still have our differences—we'll always view the world differently, but it's—it makes me much more receptive.

The acceptance derived from the concept of dependent origination also softens one's response to people.

We talked about that the other night, that acceptance, in the sense of seeing things as having qualities and conditions. The Buddha said, "This is because that is." So, rather than getting upset with somebody because they're a jerk, recognizing that they are acting the way they are because of reasons—genetics, how they were raised, and cultures—and getting that. And when you get that, you're less upset with them.

Several participants qualified their descriptions of their own behavior by saying that they are not perfect and that they still have moments in which they are angry or reactive. However, these participants noted that their practice helps them to regain calm more quickly than they previously were able to.

And when I don't remember and do get angry, what I'm noticing is I recover more quickly. And that's encouraging to me, you know, as I use this tool more, it will become less a matter of me being reactive.

Notably, several participants reported that their partners and family members have noticed and commented on their ability to remain calm and be less reactive. One participant responded to a question about how others in her life experience her and the changes she's made:

Oh, what would [my partner] say about his relationship with me? I mean, with his experience of me? That I come back much more quickly. I listen better, but most of it, I come back easier. He often says, "I can see you struggling to move beyond that moment of agitation." We're very—the language that we use, you know, reflects our work, our

meditation, and he can see that. He knows that I rebound more quickly. My daughter sees that. She'll make comments about it, that she can see that I can just come back, come back easier. Today, going to my—I still, I will say, “I need ten minutes alone. You have to give me my alone time.” But, I don't storm out. You know, I don't hammer people with it. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I short-circuit. And then I can come back. I can usually come back easier. Because I want to. I want to.

Another participant related a conversation she had had with her children about their experience of the changes in her.

A couple of years ago I asked the children if they could tell any difference in me, and they all said, “Oh yes, you're much more patient. You don't fly off the handle as much.” Well, patience was never my long suit. It's probably still not my long suit, but um, obviously, I wasn't even aware that that had happened.

One participant's partner expressed gratitude for the way the participant remained calm, not only in their relationship, but also in her relationship with his daughter.

Recently, over the holidays, [my partner's] daughter came and stayed with us for a week, and this is maybe a good example, because he was amazed and how I handled it. His daughter is 41 going on 15—very disturbed, very chaotic . . . And I was able to stay loving and patient, and I did say she's never living with us, but, we'll worry about it another day. Yes, and there's limits. But he just kept saying how grateful he was that I stayed loving and didn't react to any of it. I set boundaries, but I didn't react, and he was very grateful for that.

The ability to remain calm and refrain from being reactive was a key way that participant believed that the meditation traits they developed affected their relationships. Awareness of

one's body, emotions and triggers helped participants slow down their automatic and habitual reactions, so that they could choose to act and use their body in a calm and patient way when someone activated a trigger. The development of disidentification and an observational stance towards emotions and thoughts, especially judgment, allowed participants to continue to listen and be present to the other person without being overwhelmed by their own emotional response. This disidentification from judgment is also connected to the participants' attitude of acceptance of others, especially based on an understanding that people have reasons for their behavior, which diffused their anger and allowed them to remain compassionate. This change in the way in which the participants handled reactive emotions was so prominent that several of the partners and family members of the participants remarked on it at various times, expressing their gratitude and appreciation for the participants' efforts in this area.

Freedom and Safety

Most of the participants (six out of seven) said that their acceptance of themselves and others in their life promoted a sense of freedom and safety in their relationships, both for themselves and for their partners and family members. In this context, freedom does not suggest disconnection in the relationship, but rather, the ability of the individual to be him- or herself, without the fear of judgment or rejection from the other. This kind of freedom helps people to lower defense mechanisms and to be true to themselves.

The participants spoke about their acceptance of themselves freed them to remove some of the defense mechanisms or masks that they had previously learned as a way of projecting a certain image, designed to gain acceptance.

And I think there's a being with, you know, your humanness. Not to have—I don't have very many covers. I was taught to have covers. My mother was a bridal consultant, she

would send me out as a 15-year old . . . So, I would go, and she taught me how to stand and what to do to act like I was 25. But, I really feel very comfortable being just without barriers.

Now that they developed a feeling of safety and acceptance that was not dependent on protective covers, they felt freer to be themselves and express themselves more fully.

Another one that comes to mind is an awareness of how, ten or fifteen years ago, something as simple as the clothing that I'm wearing was about trying to protect the self that's inside the clothing. So, you would have found me into my work environment in a pinstriped suit, a white shirt and tie, or something, polished shoes. And you realize, after being exposed to this, that's nothing more than a suit of armor to make people project onto me something that I—I'd keep them away from me, without hurting me, if I could just do that . . . And realizing, that has nothing to do with the person that's inside, in the skin. And letting the freedom of expression come out the way it needs to. So, today, ten years later, you can catch me walking in the door wearing sandals and no socks, sometimes shorts, sometimes khaki hiking pants with pockets all over them and a t-shirt—um, not a white t-shirt, but a colorful expression that seems to strike me today. And, that's just the permission I'm giving myself for creative expression.

Participants described how this “shedding of armor” allowed them to show warmth to others and to be more fully present in relationships.

Well, I mentioned it already, about, you know, looking someone in the eye and being more present with them, have more warmth and you know, people will stop me in the hall and we'll chat for five or ten minutes or however long it needs to be, depending on whatever they want to talk about, and it will often turn into something personal, not

related to work. Whereas before, when somebody came into my office—I would never be talking in the hall—it would be about taking it to the bottom line and being swamped with all these requests and telephone calls and emails and stuff that I need to take care of, and, “You’re just slowing me down, so, get to the bottom line, please. Let’s not have a slow warm-up, here.”

One participant related an experience her brother had shared with her. He is also a meditator and the chief psychiatrist at a large rehabilitation hospital. He described to her the way in which he now interacts with his patients, and the way in which his presence and warmth touch those with whom he comes into contact.

“You know, these days, I go over, I sit on the bed, and I take my patient’s hands in my hands and look at them, and one little old lady said to me, I love you too” . . . That presence, really. And to have people not afraid of being that presence.

An experience of increased freedom for oneself also opens the participants to express love for others in their life, thereby expressing their acceptance, both of themselves and of the other person.

And so, there’s no judgment associated with being the in the company of somebody any longer. And that’s very freeing for myself, and I think it’s very freeing for other people . . . And I certainly don’t hesitate telling them, verbally, that I love them. Whereas when I was growing up as a kid, that’s not something you would ever tell another male, but having male friends, I can say, “I really love that we’re doing this together. I love you for being in my life.” That’s something that I would not have told anyone fifteen years ago.

Several participants described how others in their life experienced greater freedom as an outpouring of the acceptance that the participants offered to them.

And I'm aware of that, that my meditation practice still affects my children, even when I don't live with them. I don't live close to them. But that, who I am and as I develop more spiritually, that it's—I'm still their mother from many, many, many miles away. And they're aware of it. They have more freedom, I think.

One participant explained that his acceptance of the diversity that exists in the universe has helped him appreciate the differences that exist between him and his wife, and how this acknowledgment promotes increased freedom for her in the relationship.

I think the closest person in my life, even more so than my daughters, is my wife. And, it translates into an awareness that came during a retreat years ago, that I don't see the universe that my and your bodies are a part of trying to limit the relationship and making things manipulated . . . So, how this translates into being in a relationship, some way or another, is the recognition that even my partner does not have to be just like me. Being aware of this, hearing experiences in this deep connected, I am bearing witness to my partner's evolution of the day. How is another human being manifesting herself with her energy in the day without my, um, attachment to her in a way that I'm blind to, and I'm considering her my third arm, or my third leg, or part of, you know, of me, my ego, me that's inside here. It's always really just a delusion or something that I'm looking for. If I'm just bearing witness to who she is, then there's a freedom, no trying to make her like me, that allows her to blossom.

The participants juxtaposed freedom with control, or the experience of being controlled within a relationship. Whereas freedom promotes growth and “blossoming,” control awakens resistance and turmoil.

Can't you identify with what it's like to be told that you can't do something and how—even inside yourself? I know inside myself, when somebody tries to put boundaries on me, there's always this revolutionary set of energy that tries to, over time, get around it. I think one of the most stressful tensions is coming from people trying to control others, make them bow to the will of "me". And, by not having that, there's this tolerance for others' diversity that is totally accepted and not trying to be controlled and appreciated and inspired.

Safety in relationships, also established through acceptance, also promotes the experience of freedom, and contributes to the development of greater closeness.

Well, I think [acceptance is] the kind of thing that leads to safety, feeling safe with somebody. And safe to be who you are. Okay, so he doesn't do it my way, but he does it his way, and that's accepted. And so he feels safer, and lets down his defenses and lets down his guard, so that he can really be free to be more himself . . . which is an important vital factor of intimacy.

One participant explained how her acceptance of her partner and her willingness to listen to him have helped deepen their intimacy and promote greater freedom.

And most people have never, never been listened to. I mean, really, not heard, but really listened to. And when they get a sense of that, they can start being more connected to their true self. And that's what has been evolving in my relationship, my primary relationship. So, then they start coming out with things they've never told anybody before. Ways of being that they've never experienced. So they start feeling more connected to themselves, and freedom, and less dependent.

Across the interviews, the development of a sense of freedom and safety for the participants and those people close to them was cultivated by the acceptance offered by the participants to themselves and others. The participants experienced freedom for themselves in their relationships by feeling comfortable enough to lower their defense mechanisms and masks, revealing to others who they really are. This freedom also helped the participants express love and acceptance to others in their life. This acceptance of others, based on an appreciation of the differences between people, was contrasted with a desire to change and manipulate others. Whereas control and manipulation breed resistance and strife, acceptance cultivates freedom and safety to be oneself. This mutual willingness to be vulnerable and true to oneself, sharing experiences and feelings, promotes intimacy in the relationship.

The Nature of Connection

The participants described the nature of their connections with others, which has changed as a result of their meditative traits. This new experience of connection includes a kind of spiritual insight of the unity and separation that exists among people, and a deepened experience of intimacy and independence within relationships. The awareness of unity and separation is closely related to the development of intimacy and independence in relationships.

Unity and Separation. Two interwoven themes that emerged from many of the interviews (six out of seven) are unity and separation in relationships, which were fostered by the meditative traits of awareness and compassion. In this context, unity refers to a perspective that all things are connected to one another and integrated in the universe. Participants also included themselves in the wholeness of the universe, and spoke of experiences of belonging and oneness. Separation refers to the experience of being distinct from others, and not being able to understand them completely. These seemingly opposing concepts of unity and separation were

not experienced by the participants as contradicting one another. Instead, the participants saw these concepts as coexisting, and forming a dialectic of “both/and,” rather than “either/or.”

The participants spoke of their insight into the nature of connection between themselves and others, or other phenomena, as derivative of the awareness, shared humanity, and compassion cultivated by their meditation practice. One participant described how her awareness of physical sensations contributed to her understanding of the unity and connection of the universe.

I’m also aware that, when I walk down, I want to notice the body sensations, because I don’t—because it’s not just cold, it’s how my body experiences it. And what I notice is, I’ll say, “Oh, thigh, knee, shoulder, neck, foot,” and watch it move, so it’s my relationship with it. It’s neither the cold nor me. It’s that place of connection, as the cold affects my body and is not separate from me. I can’t experience the cold as separate from me. It is me, at that moment . . . it’s those meeting places. And they don’t meet like this [placing both palms together], they meet like this [intertwining fingers from both hands].

I’m not separate from it. I can’t experience it as separate.

Another participant reported that her understanding of shared humanity allowed her to acknowledge both the differences and the unity between her and her husband.

And that, [my husband and I], we have great differences, and when I really get into that, I get irritated or whatever. But when I’m able to get into the wholeness of all our belonging—he’s a human being.

Another participant suggested that his experience of unity is related to his compassion and love for his inner self and for others, flowing from an understanding of the shared source of life for all

people. Though his perspective is that there is no difference between people, he speaks of this connection while still acknowledging the distinction between himself and others.

Before, there was no concept the inner-self and what can be in this body. It was always, some primal attachment to something that's out there instead of ever connecting that love pervades the universe and if I can see in the other that they come from the very same center of the universe, source of life, and I'm coming from the same place, and try to love the other person. And the only way I can accomplish loving the other person is if I can love myself, there is no difference between she and I.

Regardless of the meditative trait to which the participants attributed the development of their understanding of the unity and separation of all things, the descriptions of these interlaced themes remained fairly consistent. Unity is described as a realization of the integration of the universe, and that the superficial differences between people are not as important as the common humanity.

I always had this inner core of knowing and recognizing that the world was a much more integrated place than I had been taught. So, that's another big thing about the meditation.

Things are integrated—people and objects and spirit—that things are really just the same. This sense of the unity of the universe contributes to an understanding that very different people are also connected to one another.

I'm looking people in the eyes. I'm looking through their eyes, I'm looking into the essence that they were born into this universe, from the very same place that I was coming from. And then that makes sense—there's no difference between us. I mean, she might be a woman, [inaudible]. She might be Black; I might be considered a Caucasian. But, those are circumstantial. They're not—we don't come from different places. So, that

becomes the first thing that's recognized, and when I see the same sparkle in the eyes or, you know, the light of the soul, or the universal creator's imbuing onto this being that I'm with, then it becomes a precious human being that I'm communicating with . . . Can my inner self feel what they're feeling or they're expressing?

The participants described a new sense of belonging, wherein they felt personally connected to the larger oneness of the universe.

I think at some point being in that really quiet stillness and thoughts quiet down, it becomes pretty obvious that there is, for me, just this energy, this universal energy, that, I definitely am part of that. It's really as the meditation got more comfortable, that, in that space, I really could feel that, it's not an image of anything, but it's much bigger than that.

This understanding of belonging, wherein one is joined with the whole of the universe, is contrasted with the common perspective of Western culture, which emphasizes individualism and the separation of people from one another.

Well, the way I was raised, like a lot of people are raised, is with a firm sense of ego. "Me," "I," as being something different than the rest of the world. And, some of the big questions, like, "How do I fit in?" "Where do I fit in?" "What's the meaning of this life?" . . . Beginning to understand that our skins are a lot more permeable than we believe them to be, and that one sees oneself, you know, as part of the flow of life. That who I am, what I could be, what I believe—my parents' parents asked those—and we all had ancestors a thousand years ago, and they had hopes and fears. And in some way—an energetic way . . . that we're part of a spiritual tradition. The ones we were raised in, the

ones we learned about—we're continuing that tradition and passing it on. We're related to the people around us.

As the participants described their understanding of the unity of the universe, they also noted the diversity and separation that exists within the context of the greater wholeness. This diversity and separation became apparent to one participant through his awareness of nature.

From where I look, I see intensely small differentiations, from something I'm sitting right beside of, whether I'm looking at a tree or a snowflake or human beings or other species—it's all around me. So, what does that tell me? It tells me that the universe isn't trying to make it all the same, like humans try to.

Another participant described the dialectic between unity and separation through the metaphor of a leaf, and applied it to her experience with her partner.

The way I think about it, is I'm one side of a leaf, and other things, phenomena, are the other side of the leaf. But I can't see that. I can't see my other side, but I experience it, and I sense it . . . we're part of the same being. We're part of the same body. But, we're not—we can't always see each other. We don't all have the same experience of the wind at the same moment, even though the wind is blowing, and that's—and so that metaphor has really helped me understand my partner—both the experience of separation and the experience of unity. So, I can be this close, looking right in [my partner's] eyes, and we're so close, and I don't know what he's thinking. I don't know what he's experiencing. But, I do know that I'm in that—I'm in the radiance of that. And I am experiencing what he's experiencing. And experiencing what he's thinking, but I can't mentally construct that.

This participant also expressed her understanding that separation cannot exist outside of integration using a metaphor from her work with art and drawing.

I do a lot of drawing . . . I work in pencil most of the time, and pencil is all about grays and shades. And, in order to—in order to draw the separation of this tape recorder from the table, I have to find the place where they're most connected, and define that most connected space. And by defining that most connected space with that single line, that is—that defines the table and defines the tape recorder at the same exact moment, then I have—I can't create separation if I don't create that integrated line, that integration.

The participants' understanding of the unity and separation of all things was related to their development of the meditative traits of awareness and compassion. Participants described how their awareness of physical sensations, their understanding of shared humanity of all people, and compassion and love for oneself and others contributed to the development of this understanding of the nature of connection. While participants explained their understanding there is no difference between people, they also acknowledged the distinctions between themselves and others. In this way, a dialectic between unity and separation emerged from the interviews. Unity, which refers to the realization of the oneness of the universe, contributes to an understanding that very diverse people are connected to one another, and that the participants themselves are connected to this greater wholeness. This understanding of belonging, in which each person is unified with the universal oneness, is quite different than the individualism and the separation that is usually emphasized in Western culture. Though the participants stressed their understanding of the unity of the universe, they also noted the diversity and separation that exists within the context of the greater wholeness.

Intimacy and Independence. Another pair of interrelated themes that emerged from the participant's experience of unity and separation is the dialectic of intimacy and independence. Intimacy, in this context, refers to a close connection in a relationship, marked by sharing, caring, understanding, and affection. Independence refers to one's ability to stand alone, without feeling overly dependent on others to provide support for various tasks and activities. The participants spoke of these two concepts as being closely related, and experienced both as an outpouring of their understanding of unity and separation.

The unity that the participants described had a substantial effect on the intimacy of the connections to others. One participant remarked, "Perhaps the greatest gift to me from Vipassana meditation is about being in relationship with someone who's really close." Some participants described experiences of increased intimacy with their partners.

Well, like I said earlier, just feeling closer, feeling more deeply understood, feeling that we can present a united, like we can be our individual selves, but yet we can be a couple, and that by being a couple in the world is also a powerful stance. Most people live parallel lives, and to be able to show that—we have a lot of joy, we laugh a lot, things are fun a lot, and people have remarked on that. And that people feel safer in our company. One participant spoke of how his understanding of the unity between himself and his wife has cultivated their love and attraction for one another.

And the only way I can accomplish loving the other person is if I can love myself, there is no difference between she and I. So, that turned out to be a really major awakening. Going inside the body—there's a beautiful human being inside this outer skeleton, that's just enjoying expressing itself while it's alive here, and loving the—my ability to do that

attracts my wife to more loving and wanting—being in her relationship, because I express it in and around her all the time, and she just feeds off of it.

Additionally, participants indicated that their sense of the unity of all things promotes their interest in connecting with others, and the importance that they place on those connections.

I could say it in that, connection is everything . . . When [my husband] and I get disconnected because of whatever—his stuff, my stuff, our stuff—um, and there's a disconnect, we're sort of distant or we're sort of rolling our eyes. Well, the connection's not there. And realizing that connection, which just goes back to all the other stuff, then it's okay. He doesn't have to be—he is who he is, and appreciation for that.

Participants also noted that their understanding of the connections between people allows them to be more open hearted in their day-to-day life.

It, you know, as soon as I see or I'm aware of anything that's alive, that's a part—it's part of who we all are together. It's just so real. So, I could see a child or anyone . . . basically, your heart is open walking around the streets and see the poverty and the people. But, it's like; my heart is open because we share.

Another important aspect of intimacy that is cultivated through connection is deeply sharing with another person.

It's really an interesting process. And there are skills and techniques and a flavor of it that's really interesting, when you experience yourself and somebody else really connecting with, “this is really what's true for me.” I mean, and there's a lot of stuff that comes out.

One participant described a process of group spiritual direction, wherein he and his wife reflect upon and share their spiritual experiences. He reflected that this process of spiritual sharing has a tremendous impact on the intimacy they experience in their relationship.

And it makes it very intimate and holy . . . I've learned how to identify the spiritual energy, that key aspiration—what's moving us? What current are we a part of? And to bring that more into awareness and to share it with other people. And it's awesome [inaudible], and to learn that being able to share that with other people, it's an act of trust and faith. And also, very satisfying. [Inaudible]. And because of the spiritual question and holding, "How is God at work? How is the ultimate being expressed here?"

Another participant described ways in which all of their interactions with others besides their spouse have taken on a warmer tone.

It comes through in the nature of interactions— a warmer conversation, a warmer collaboration. I have a few people here who I'm mentoring and teaching. And I can tell, from looking at their eyes, they really like walking into my office and spending some time with me on whatever the question of the hour happens to be.

Just as the participants' understanding of the unity of the universe promoted intimacy and connection in their relationships, the understanding of separation or of their own distinct place in the universe cultivated a sense of independence for some participants.

It's given me—because I feel with the belonging—I think that I don't—I can stand alone, if that makes any sense. I think needing—thinking that you need someone to hold you up, and realizing that you really belong, you don't need to be held up. Has given me—well, that changes relationships completely, doesn't it?

Some participants reported that they felt more comfortable doing various activities by themselves, because they no longer felt as dependent on their spouse.

You know, what are things that maybe [my husband] doesn't like, and I do? I need to do them. So, he didn't want to go on a safari, and I took my youngest daughter. And, he's not into the sangha meditations. I go, and I get all that wonderful good stuff and I bring it home.

The participants' experience of unity contributed to the development of deeper intimacy in their primary relationships, a greater interest in connecting with others which manifests itself as greater openness and sharing, and warmer interactions with others. The experience of separation and distinction contributed to the development of a sense of independence for some participants, wherein they felt more comfortable doing various activities by themselves.

In summary, the participants in this study identified four primary ways in which their development of meditation traits affected their relationships with others, especially their closest relationships. First, participants reported that they had developed the ability to be less reactive in relationships, based on their increased awareness of internal experiences and habitual reactions; their disidentification from their feelings, thoughts and judgments; and their increased acceptance and compassion for others. Second, participants described an increased sense of safety and freedom to be oneself in relationships, both for the participants and for others. This freedom and safety stemmed from the acceptance the participants offered themselves and others, which promoted trust in the relationship. Third, the participants described an insight into the unity and separation of all things, flowing from their traits of awareness and compassion. Fourth, the participants' understanding of both unity and separation contributed to the strengthening of intimacy and independence in their relationships. The relational effects of meditation traits that

the participants described are closely related to one another in several ways. First, the participants' ability to be less reactive toward their partners and others contributed to the sense of safety and freedom that was cultivated in the relationships. Second, the freedom and safety described by the participants encouraged trust in the relationship, which is a key component of intimacy. Third, the insight into unity and separation led participants to greater intimacy and independence in their relationships.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Many important themes were identified in this study, both in regard to meditation traits and their effects on relationships. These themes are connected in various ways to the existing bodies of traditional, research, and psychotherapy literature. Based on this discussion and on my own reflections, I will include my conclusions and the implications of this study for clinical practice and future research.

Discussion of Themes

The themes that were uncovered in this study include both meditation traits and the relational effects of those traits. Before exploring each of these themes, it is important to make a note of the similarities and differences in the way in which the themes were described by the participants of various traditions. Notably, all of the themes were identified by participants from different meditative traditions. However, the language that the participants used to describe their experiences was informed by their tradition. For example, participants from the Christian and Buddhist traditions described their acceptance of others, but used quite different language to make this point. A Christian practitioner of Centering Prayer said, “God has accepted me where I am, and asked me to do the same of my husband who I dearly love.” In contrast, a practitioner of Buddhist mindfulness in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh said,

Acceptance. We talked about that the other night, that acceptance, in the sense of seeing things as having qualities and conditions. The Buddha said, “This is because that is.” So, rather than getting upset with somebody because they're a jerk, recognizing that they are acting the way they are because of reasons.

These similarities in content marked by differences in form stem from the philosophical and theological contexts of the participants. This pattern exists throughout the data, and contributes

to the nuance and depth of each of the themes, describing both meditation traits and the relational effects of the traits.

Meditation Traits

The meditation traits identified by the participants are (1) awareness, (2) disidentification, (3) acceptance, and (4) compassion. These traits are highly consistent with the existing body of traditional and Western literature about mindfulness and other forms of meditation. Additionally, some schools of psychotherapy have integrated forms of these traits into their theory and praxis.

Awareness. Awareness refers to being open to a wide range of sensory and emotional experience within the present moment. This trait is highly consistent with traditional and current literature about meditation, and relates to several similar concepts within Western psychology and psychotherapy.

Awareness, as defined in this study, is very similar to one of the mechanisms of mindfulness proposed by S. Shapiro and colleagues (2006) in an effort to answer the question, “How does mindfulness work?” They suggest that mindfulness includes three primary axioms, which are (1) intention, (2) attention, and (3) attitude. The second axiom, *attention*, is closely related to awareness in this study. S. Shapiro and colleagues define *attention* as “observing the operations of one’s moment-to-moment, internal and external experience” (p. 376). *Attention* includes a focus on one’s experience in the present moment, without interpretations or judgments.

Awareness is also related to *self-regulation of attention*, a component of the operational definition of mindfulness developed by Bishop and colleagues (2004). The authors define *self-regulation of attention* as “bringing awareness to current experience—observing and attending to the changing field of thoughts, feelings, and sensations from moment to moment” (p. 232).

Bishop and colleagues add that this aspect of mindfulness creates a sense of “being very alert to what is occurring in the here-and-now,” and is characterized as feeling “fully present and alive in the moment” (p. 232). The authors propose that this component of mindfulness is cultivated in meditation by developing skills in “sustaining attention” and “switching.” Sustaining attention refers to maintaining vigilant awareness of current experience over prolonged periods of time (Parasuraman, 1998). Switching refers to the ability to bring attention back to the breath when a feeling, thought or sensation has been noticed. This skill requires flexibility of attention that allows the focus of awareness to shift from one area to another (Posner, 1980). Bishop and colleagues (2004) suggest that the self-regulation of attention promotes “nonelaborative awareness” of thoughts, feelings and sensations. This kind of awareness allows the meditator to have a direct experience of internal events, rather than becoming trapped in a pattern of ruminative thoughts about the internal event. This skill requires inhibition of secondary elaborative processing of thoughts and stimulus selection (Williams, Mathews, & MacLeod, 1996).

Though the definition of *self-regulation of attention* is very similar to the trait of increased awareness described by the participants, Bishop and colleagues (2004) describe mindfulness as a mode of awareness, rather than a state or trait. They argue that mindfulness is a skill that can be developed through practice, and is dependent on the regulation of attention and maintaining an open orientation to experience. They suggest that this mode is not a trait, because mindfulness ceases when attention is no longer regulated. However, they also indicate that this mindful mode of awareness is not limited to time spent in meditation, and that it can be integrated into situations of daily life, especially those that provoke emotional reactions. In this

sense, their concept of “mode of awareness” is closely related to the current study’s definition of “trait,” which is defined as an effect of meditation that lasts beyond the time spent meditating.

Some concepts in Western psychology that are related to awareness are *introspection* (James, 1890), *observing self* (Deikman, 1982), *presence* (Bugenthal, 1987), and *reflective functioning* (Fonagy & Target, 1996, 1997). All of these terms refer to a process of “stepping outside of the automated mode of perceptual processing and attending to the minute details of mental activity that might otherwise escape awareness” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 235). This process is different than some other processes described in the literature, such as *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), or *absorption* (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974), because they refer to one’s experience of primarily external stimuli, rather than internal stimuli. Other constructs, such as *psychological mindedness* (Conte & Ratto, 1997), *insight* (Tolor & Reznikoff, 1960) and *self-awareness* (Fingarette, 1963), are focused on the construction of mental representations of one’s own mind, rather than a non-judgmental awareness of it.

Bishop and colleagues (2004) note that awareness, or, in their formulation, *attention*, has been viewed as an important component of the change process within several schools of psychotherapy. Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy, stated, “attention in and of itself is curative.” Cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) also depends on the capacity to observe and attend to internal events and external behaviors, though, unlike meditation, the goal of CBT is generally to suppress some of these internal events. William James (James, 1910/1950) wrote that the ability to control attention would lead to improved character, judgment and will, and that to “improve this faculty would be the education par excellence,” but that “it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about” (p. 424).

Though initial research support for increased attention has been found in both psychometric and sensory-evoked potential studies of meditators, these studies have measured attention during meditation, rather than awareness at other times, as described by the participants in this study (Cahn & Polich, 2006).

Notably, the participants' emphasis on their increased awareness of physical sensations has not been written about extensively in Western psychological literature, which has tended to focus primarily on the cognitive effects of meditation. An implication of this finding is that exploratory research is required in the area of bodily awareness of physical sensations.

Disidentification. Disidentification is described as a relationship with one's own internal experience marked by curiosity and detachment, which allows a person to observe their emotions and thoughts, rather than be fused with them. This disidentified relationship with one's thoughts and emotions has been described as a key component of meditation practice, and is similar to other constructs of Western psychology. Several schools of psychotherapy include similar concepts, though their understandings and application of the concept differs from the traditional view.

Disidentification is similar to *orientation to experience*, one of the aspects of the operational definition of mindfulness proposed by Bishop and colleagues (2004). The orientation to experience that they describe is characterized by "an attitude of curiosity about where the mind wanders whenever it inevitably drifts away from the breath, as well as curiosity about the different objects within one's experience at any moment" (p. 232). As previously noted, Bishop and colleagues view this concept as an aspect of a "mode of awareness," rather than a trait. Even so, the attitude of curiosity and accepting interest in the present moment is consistent with the

participants' description of disidentification as a trait that they have developed as a result of their meditation practice.

The meditation trait of disidentification can also be likened to the significant shift in perspective described by S. Shapiro and colleagues (2006), which they refer to as *reperceiving*. *Reperceiving* is the process by which “one is able to disidentify from the contents of consciousness (i.e., one’s thoughts) and view his or her moment-by-moment experience with greater clarity and objectivity” (p. 377). S. Shapiro and colleagues suggest that *reperceiving* is a result of mindfulness practice, which is consistent with the experience of the participants of this study. The authors also note that *reperceiving* does not connote distance, numbness or apathy towards one’s experience. On the contrary, reperceiving cultivates “a deep knowing and intimacy with whatever arises moment by moment,” which “allows one to experience greater richness, texture, and depth, moment by moment, what Peters refers to as ‘intimate detachment’ (Peters, 2004)” (p. 379).

S. Shapiro and colleagues (2006) suggest that *reperceiving*, or, in this study, disidentification, is similar the naturally occurring process in human development whereby one is able to view one’s private experience with greater objectivity. This shift in perspective also changes one’s orientation to others, allowing one to view others as separate from oneself, and to have empathy for their needs and desires (Kegan, 1982). The practice of mindfulness is thought to hasten this developmental shift in perspective by strengthening practitioners’ ability to observe their own consciousness and disidentify from it. S. Shapiro and colleagues (2006) write, “For example, if we are able to see *it*, then we are no longer merely *it*; i.e., we must be *more* than *it*. Whether the *it* is pain, depression, or fear, reperceiving allows one to dis-identify from thoughts, emotions and body sensation as they arise, and simply be with them instead of being defined

(i.e., controlled, conditioned, determined) by them” (p. 378). This shift results in “greater clarity, perspective, objectivity, and ultimately, equanimity” (p. 378).

The concept of disidentification is similar to other ideas in Western psychology, including *decentering* (Safran & Segal, 1990), *deautomatization* (Deikman, 1982; Safran & Segal, 1990), and *detachment* (Bohart, 1983, as cited in S. Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). *Decentering* is the ability to “step outside of one’s immediate experience, thereby changing the very nature of that experience” (Safran & Segal, 1990, p. 117). *Deautomatization* is defined as “an undoing of the automatic processes that control perception and cognition” (Deikman, 1982, p. 137). Bohart’s concept of *detachment* includes gaining “distance,” “adoption of a phenomenological attitude,” and increasing “attentional space” (1982, as cited in S. Shapiro et al., 2006).

Disidentification from thoughts and feelings has been integrated into a few treatment approaches for various forms of mental illness. Bishop and colleagues (2004) suggest that disidentifying from one’s goals can help to disengage from ruminative thinking, and decrease one’s vulnerability to certain related forms of psychological distress. Rumination has been shown to be related to anxiety, wherein one attempts to plan for and develop strategies to avoid potential future negative events (Wells, 1999), and depression, wherein one tries to change one’s assumed basic faults (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). The ability to disidentify from one’s thoughts, feelings and goals, and to see them as changing, rather than as true representations of reality, allows one to develop a new orientation to anxious or depressing thoughts, as well. These thoughts are also viewed as “just thoughts,” that do not require rumination to find resolution. For this reason, mindfulness training has been suggested in the prevention of relapse following an

episode of major depression (Teasdale et al., 2000), and generalized anxiety disorder (Roemer & Orsillo, 2002).

Disidentification is similar to the concept of cognitive de-fusion in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) proposed by Hayes and colleagues (1999), which focuses on shifting a person's relationship to a thought instead of trying to change the thought itself. This new relationship with one's thoughts is facilitated by mindful observation, which also leads to a new sense of "self" as a constructed and ever-changing system of beliefs, images, concepts and perceptions. Hayes and colleagues describe one's understanding of identity as shifting from "self as content," wherein self is experienced as that which can be observed or witnessed, to "self as context," wherein self is experienced as the one who is observing and witnessing.

Internal Family Systems (IFS; Schwartz, 1995) also uses a concept similar to disidentification, which is referred to as *differentiating the Self*. IFS is the theoretical model that describes the internal system of each person as including a "Self," and "parts." According to IFS, parts of a person develop their distinct traits from life experiences, and can be influenced by such factors as the quality of peer relationships, adequate or inadequate parenting, and the nature of relationships with teachers and other adults (Wark, Thomas, & Peterson, 2001). In addition to the parts, each person is understood to possess a "self," which is the leader of the parts, and has the qualities of compassion, confidence and perspective taking (Breunlin, Schwartz, & Kune-Karrer, 1997). The goal of therapy in IFS, is "to help people reorganize their internal systems, so that the Self is generally in the lead and the parts are there to advise, lend feelings or talents, or otherwise assist" (Breunlin et al., 1997, p. 68). Sometimes, the client experiences a particular part so strongly that it becomes "fused" with the Self, limiting the Self's ability to relate to that part with its characteristic compassion and curiosity. In this case, IFS focuses on *differentiating the Self*, so

that the client can relate to the part of themselves as a distinct entity within the internal system, rather than as a fused attribute of the Self. This process is similar to disidentification, in that the client develops a new relationship with their “parts,” which is marked by curiosity, and based on the understanding that the “part” is not an inexorable aspect of their identity. Though the concepts of disidentification and *differentiation of the Self* are similar, the IFS model holds that the parts are relatively stable features of one’s overall internal system, whereas the experience of the participants was that thoughts and feelings are fundamentally changing and unstable.

Some aspects of narrative therapy are similar to the concept of disidentification (White & Epston, 1990). For example, in narrative therapy, clients are encouraged to “re-story” or “externalize” problems and acknowledge their source in the dominant social discourse, rather than in internal flaws. However, externalization in narrative therapy is based on a negative view both of problems and of the dominant culture, which is significantly different than disidentification, which is based on a curious and non-judgmental perspective of internal experience. As Gehart and McCollum (2007) note, “a mindful approach focuses on reducing the strength of an individual’s investment in the dominant discourse without encouraging a confrontational stance with the discourse itself” (p. 217).

Acceptance. The participants spoke of acceptance as a willingness to see themselves and life as it is, without trying to change their experience of the present moment. Acceptance is consistent with the literature about meditation, and has been applied on a limited basis to some forms of psychotherapy.

Acceptance is an aspect of the *orientation to experience* included in the operational definition of mindfulness proposed by Bishop and colleagues (2004). From the *orientation to experience* described by the authors, all thoughts, feelings, and sensations are observed and

noticed, without an effort to change them. In this way, this orientation to experience is characterized by acceptance, which they define as “being experientially open to the reality of the present moment” (p. 233), and “allowing” internal stimuli to be present. The authors suggest that this accepting and curious orientation to present experience may lead to a decrease in the use of cognitive and behavioral coping measures that avoid aspects of experience. Additionally, the accepting stance could lead to a change in the psychological context in which thoughts, feelings and sensations are experienced, so that negative affective states would seem less unpleasant (see Hayes et al., 1999). The accepting orientation toward experience cultivates investigative awareness and self-observation of the ebb and flow of feelings, thoughts and sensations, which can lead to a greater cognitive complexity and nuanced understanding of these phenomena. This kind of observation helps practitioners understand thoughts and feelings as transient phenomena of the mind, instead of as intrinsic dimensions of their identity or valid representations of reality (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002; Teasdale et al. 1995).

Certain aspects of acceptance have been used in several forms of therapy, though the theoretical understanding of its utility is often different than the understanding that emerges from meditation and meditative traditions. Hayes and colleagues (1996) argue that most kinds of psychological distress and psychopathology involve the inability to tolerate negative features of experience. This intolerance for certain aspects of private experience leads to the development of behavioral and cognitive patterns that are designed to escape these undesired events. The authors note that most effective psychological treatments counteract avoidant patterns and expose the clients to the negative aspects of their experience that they had been trying to escape. Examples of this kind of exposure in therapy include desensitization for phobias and anxiety disorders, and encouraging clients to stay aware of frightening or painful feelings during psychotherapy.

Increased awareness and disidentified acceptance of one's thoughts and feelings can help clients adopt adaptive strategies of behavior, rather than the dysfunctional change agendas they had previously been using. Additionally, through exposure, one learns that emotions, thoughts, and feeling are changing and will eventually pass naturally. This awareness "enables a person to experience even very strong emotions with greater objectivity and less reactivity" (S. Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 381).

As the name implies, acceptance is a key concept in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), developed by Hayes and colleagues (1999). The goal of ACT is, "to help a client live a rich and meaningful life, while accepting the suffering that surely comes to all of us" (Wilson & Murrell, 2004, p. 126). As Hayes (2002) writes, the interventions in ACT are designed "to teach acceptance and willingness as an alternative coping response, and to practice deliberate defused exposure to troublesome thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the like" (p. 60). The concept of acceptance in this model is relatively close to the acceptance described by the participants.

Acceptance is also a feature of some family therapy approaches, though to a lesser degree. For example, Integrative Couples Therapy (ICT, Jacobson & Christensen, 1996) seeks to balance change and acceptance within relationships. This approach employs behavioral techniques to address some issues and to enhance marital satisfaction, and suggests acceptance as a way of dealing with other situations that are more inflexible. Therapists using this model help couples to see that acceptance is not synonymous with resignation because it can lead to greater intimacy and help a person to stop trying to change their partner. However, the concept of acceptance in ICT differs from the way it is used in this study, because the underlying hope in using acceptance techniques in ICT is actually to engender change.

The work of Gottman (1999) also acknowledges the role of acceptance, especially in relation to the 69% of problems experienced by couples that are never resolved, usually because they are caused by differences in personality, and not behavior. Gottman's intervention for these "perpetual problems" is "the dream within the conflict," in which both partners are asked to share the basic hopes and needs that underlie the argument, and why these are important to them. According to Gottman's research, this technique helps couples move from gridlock to a conversation that promotes increased intimacy 86% of the time. Like ICT, Gottman's approach uses the concept of acceptance, but focuses on its utility to promote external relational change.

The concept of acceptance is also used in Internal Family Systems (IFS), in their strategy of befriending "exiles," which are parts of oneself that had previously been rejected or marginalized (Breunlin, et al., 1997). Schwartz criticizes traditional systems theory developed by Bateson, because the approach "orders people not to experience things that they cannot help experiencing, and this puts them at odds with the parts of themselves that do experience those things" (p. 60). He suggests an alternate relationship with these aspects of one's experience, wherein they are welcomed, befriended and integrated into the internal system which is led by the Self. The role of acceptance in this model is similar to the acceptance described in this study, because it involves curious observation and a reluctance to judge, though clients are taught how to actively manage their parts, rather than just "letting go."

Compassion. Compassion refers to an acknowledgment of shared humanity and the commonalities in suffering and desires of oneself and others. Compassion is related to loving kindness, which is defined as a universal and unselfish love that extends to oneself, to friends and family, and ultimately to all people. These concepts have broad support in various meditation traditions, and are related to concepts in a few schools of Western psychology.

Compassion is similar to *attitude*, the third axiom of mindfulness proposed by S. Shapiro and colleagues (2006) which describes the quality of mindful attention, or *how* one practices. Kabat-Zinn (2003) proposes that attention can have “an affectionate, compassionate quality . . . a sense of openhearted, friendly presence and interest” (p. 145). S. Shapiro and colleagues emphasize the importance of the heart in this kind of attention, and allude to Japanese word for mindfulness, which is comprised of one character for “heart” and another for “mind.” More specifically, the authors suggest that the attitude of mindfulness includes “patience, compassion and non-striving” (p. 377), and is contrasted with a judgmental attitude.

Some schools of Western psychology promote compassion for oneself and others, though many of them focus instead on the comparison of self and others through concepts like “self-esteem.” Neff (2003) has suggested *self-compassion* as an alternate conceptualization of a healthy attitude towards oneself. Neff describes three aspects of self-compassion as “(a) self-kindness—extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh judgment and self-criticism, (b) common humanity—seeing one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating, and (c) mindfulness—holding one’s painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them” (p. 89). The author describes the ways in which self-compassion is cultivated by mindfulness, which is supported by the experiences of the participants in this study. She also notes, like the participants in this study, that compassion for self promotes compassion for others and solidifies the sense of shared humanity.

Self-compassion is similar to *self-empathy*, a component of the self-in-relation model of women’s psychological development, developed by Jordan (1997). Jordan (1989) describes *self-empathy* as a nonjudgmental and open attitude toward oneself, which is closely related to

empathy and connection to others. This perspective toward oneself is described as a “corrective relational experience,” in which parts of oneself that had been marginalized or rejected are “accepted and responded to in a caring, affectively present and re-connected manner” (Jordan, 1991, p. 287). Jordan suggests that *self-empathy* is developed through the mutually empathic connection in a psychotherapy experience, and involves a realization of one’s basic similarity with others, and the inevitability of loss and pain for all humans. In this way, Jordan’s *self-empathy* is similar to compassion, in that it involves an acknowledgment of shared humanity and a sense of connection with others.

Humanistic psychology has developed various concepts that are similar to self-compassion, though they lack the focus on relationships and shared humanity. Some of these formulations are Maslow’s *Being*, which is a nonjudgmental, forgiving and loving attitude toward oneself (1968); Roger’s *unconditional positive regard*, an unconditionally caring emotional stance toward oneself (1961); Snyder’s *internal empathizer*, an ability to respond to one’s experience with an attitude of curiosity and compassion (1994); and Ellis’ *unconditional self-acceptance*, in which self-worth is presumed as a basic quality of existence (1973). Though these concepts are somewhat related to compassion, they do not explicitly support one of the primary components of compassion in this study, which is a strong sense of one’s common humanity and connection to others.

In summary, the meditation traits are part of a broader framework of a changed relationship with internal and external experience, cultivated through meditation practice. As previously described, this new perspective is characterized by increased awareness of the present moment, disidentification from internal experience, acceptance, and compassion. The development of this reorientation dramatically changes one’s relationship to internal experiences,

such as thoughts and feelings, and external experiences, such as difficult situations or relationships. The meditation traits that were identified in this study are consistent with the traditional literature about meditation, and more recent conceptualizations of the mechanisms and operational dimensions of meditation (Bishop et al., 2004; S. Shapiro et al., 2006). The operational definition of mindfulness proposed by Bishop and colleagues (2004), has significant overlap with the traits defined in this study. Their conception of *self-regulation of attention* is very similar to this study's trait of awareness, and their *orientation to experience* is closely related to this study's traits of disidentification and acceptance. Two of the three mechanisms of mindfulness described by S. Shapiro and colleagues (2006), namely, *attention* and *attitude*, are also echoed by the traits of awareness and compassion, respectively. The meditation traits defined in this study also related to concepts in Western psychology, though their application in this area is often different than the traditional understandings. In general, Western psychology has attempted to integrate isolated concepts similar to meditation traits without adopting the larger framework of reorientation to experience in which these concepts have been developed in the meditative traditions. For example, ICT may borrow the concept of acceptance, but does not abdicate the Western preoccupation with change. Or, humanistic approaches may use a concept similar to self-compassion, but maintain the largely individualistic Western perspective that does not include an emphasis on shared humanity.

Relational Effects of Meditation

The relational effects of meditation traits in this study were (1) less reactivity, (2) freedom and safety, (3) the nature of connection, which included the insight of unity and separation, and the experience of intimacy and independence. There are some commonalities between these relational effects and the meditation traits, because these effects described the

ways in which the meditation traits were manifested and experienced in relationships. Because traditional literature and research about meditation has had a largely individual focus, these relational effects of meditation traits have had less consideration in the field. Even so, there are some areas of consistency with traditional literature. Notably, these relational effects are similar to concepts within various approaches to psychotherapy, many of which do not use mindfulness or meditation.

Less Reactivity. The participants in this study reported that they were less reactive in their relationships, meaning that they were able to remain calm and present in the moment, even when they experienced an intense and overwhelming emotional state, usually marked by anger or fear, which occurs as an automatic response to certain stimuli. This relational effect of the meditation traits has been acknowledged in some of the literature about meditation. In the field of family therapy, the ability to be less reactive is encouraged and cultivated in several schools of therapy, most notably, Emotionally Focused Therapy and Bowen's intergenerational approach to family therapy.

Bishop and colleagues (2004) describe how improved awareness and disidentification from emotions can contribute to less reactivity. They propose that, in a mindful state, internal phenomena such as feelings or thoughts are observed, "without over-identifying with them and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual pattern of reactivity. This dispassionate state of self-observation is thought to introduce a 'space' between one's perception and response. Thus mindfulness is thought to enable one to respond to situations more reflectively (as opposed to reflexively)" (p. 232). This relationship between meditative traits and the ability to be less reactive echoes the observations of the participants in this study.

The theme of less reactivity is similar to *self-regulation* and the effects of *exposure*, two of the positive outcomes of meditation that S. Shapiro and colleagues identify (2006). *Self-regulation* is the process by which *reperceiving*, or disidentification, disrupts automatic maladaptive responses, so that “we become less controlled by particular emotions and thoughts that arise, and in turn are less likely to automatically follow them with habitual reactive patterns” (p. 380). The ability to tolerate and witness emotional states increases freedom to choose behavior, rather than succumb to mindless reactivity. The hypothesis that mindfulness leads to greater self-regulation is supported by a study conducted by Brown and Ryan (2003), which found that people who scored higher on a measure of mindfulness reported significantly higher levels of self-regulated behavior and emotion. *Exposure* refers to the direct observation of one’s experience, which is similar to awareness. S. Shapiro and colleagues suggest that, through exposure, one learns that emotions, thoughts, and feelings are changing and will eventually pass naturally. This awareness “enables a person to experience even very strong emotions with greater objectivity and less reactivity” (p. 381). The participants in this study shared similar understandings of the development of their ability to be less reactive in their relationships.

Though Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and Bowen Family Systems Therapy are not related to meditative traditions, they focus on developing the ability to be less reactive in relationships. Both of these therapy approaches help clients to take an observational stance toward relational patterns, though they do not emphasize observation of internal processes. EFT focuses on changing the negative interactional cycles that distressed couples develop (Johnson, 1996). In therapy, one of the first steps in changing these patterns is cycle de-escalation, which includes helping angry and reactive partners to become less reactive to one another. This first-order change helps couples develop a trust in the relationship, so they feel more comfortable

making other changes which feel more risky or vulnerable. Unlike the experience of the participants in this study, EFT promotes less reactivity through the safety of the therapy session and the empathic understanding that partners offer one another when vulnerable emotions are expressed (Johnson, 1996).

In Bowen's intergenerational approach to family therapy, reactivity is related to a low level of differentiation, which is the ability to think and to reflect, so as not to react automatically to emotional pressures (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The goal of this model of therapy is to increase differentiation, thereby decreasing emotional reactivity in relationships. The differentiated person is able to balance thinking and feeling, and exhibit self-restraint when they experience emotional impulses. This model of therapy seeks to increase differentiation by guiding clients in learning about themselves and their family's patterns of behavior, so they can take responsibility for their own problems. Unlike meditation, this approach favors the discursive functions, rather than moment-to-moment awareness.

Freedom and Safety. In the context of this study, freedom refers to the ability of a person to be him- or herself, without the fear of judgment or rejection from their partner, or someone else in their life. This kind of freedom promotes a feeling of safety in the relationship, and helps people to lower defense mechanisms and to be true to themselves. Notably, this formulation of freedom within the context of a relationship is largely missing from the traditional literature about meditation. Though freedom and liberation exist as concepts in both the Buddhist and Christian traditions, they refer to a kind of spiritual freedom from attachments to experience or from the "false self system" (Hahn, 1998; Keating, 1992). The freedom that was described in the interviews was a markedly different concept than this spiritual freedom, and was cultivated by a level of trust in the relationship. In this context, freedom and safety in a relationship is related to

the concept of a “secure base” from attachment theory, which is used as a basis for EFT (Johnson, 1996), and an aspect of intimacy (Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1995).

The concept of adult love described in attachment theory and EFT is related to the concept of safety in relationships. In these models, adult love is viewed as “a bond, an emotional tie with an irreplaceable other who provides a *secure base* from which to confront the world and a *safe haven*—a source of comfort, care and protection” (Johnson, 1996, p. 18). This safe haven is created through a pattern of attachment behaviors and emotional responses in a relationship that show a person that their partner is accessible and responsive to their needs. When an attachment figure, either a partner or a parent, is responsive and accessible, the person develops a secure attachment style, in which the self is seen as basically lovable and accepted. This correlation between the feeling of being loved and accepted, and feeling free and safe in the relationship, is similar to what the participants in the study described when they spoke about the increased freedom and safety in their relationships.

In their description of intimacy, Masters and colleagues (1995) note the importance of both trust and authenticity in the relationship. They describe the development of trust as contributing to the freedom to share for both partners, so that, as trust grows, “two people are able to share even more information about their thoughts and feelings without fear that this will be used against them in some way” (p. 313). Masters and colleagues also emphasize the importance of discarding one’s usual defenses, suggesting that “people who are able to relinquish such defenses in favor of being themselves, authentically and spontaneously, are apt to find intimacy more rewarding” (p. 314-315). This ability not to depend on protective covers or defenses is closely related to the theme of freedom and safety, and was highlighted by the participants as an effect of their development of acceptance of themselves and others.

The Nature of Connection. The nature of connection refers to a new experience of relating to others, marked by an awareness of the unity and separation that exists among people, and a deepened experience of intimacy and independence within relationships. In this study, unity and separation form a dialectic that qualifies the experience of connection for many of the participants. Unity refers to a perspective that all things are connected to one another and integrated in the universe, whereas separation is the experience of being distinct from others, and not being able to understand them completely. The experience of unity is described in some form both in Buddhist and Christian meditative traditions. In Buddhism, unity is often referred to as “oneness,” and is developed as one transcends one’s identification with the concept of being a separate self (Hahn, 1998). In the Christian Centering Prayer tradition, practitioners are encouraged to “dismantle the false self system” and develop the true self, which is intimately connected to God and to others, thereby facilitating what has been called “mystical union” (Keating, 1992). Additionally, the concept of unity is somewhat related to an aspect of compassion that has been proposed in Western psychology. However, the dialectic between unity and separation has not been well developed in Western psychology, perhaps due to the highly individualistic cultural understanding of identity that emphasizes separation and largely ignores unity.

One of the key components of compassion that Neff (2003) describes is “common humanity—seeing one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating” (p. 89). She notes that compassion toward oneself softens the harsh sense of separation from others, and facilitates feelings of interconnection. This understanding of shared humanity is related to the experience of unity, though it does include a concept of transcending one’s personal identity. However, it does emphasize connection, with

the implicit understanding of the experience of separation. In this sense, it is related to the dialectic expressed by the participants of unity and separation.

Intimacy and independence formed another dialectic that described the nature of the participants' interpersonal experience. Intimacy refers to a close connection in a relationship, marked by sharing, caring, understanding, and affection. Independence refers to one's ability to stand alone, without feeling overly dependent on others to provide support for various tasks and activities. These concepts are not widely discussed in traditional meditation literature or in Western research of meditation, which tend to have an individual and cognitive focus. However, these concepts are at the heart of many family therapy approaches, including the work of Masters and colleagues surrounding intimacy (1995), and Bowen Family Systems Therapy (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Masters and colleagues (1995) note that the word *intimacy* is derived from the Latin word *intimus*, which means "deepest" or "innermost." They describe interpersonal intimacy as a connection that develops over time, which is characterized by caring, sharing, trust, commitment, honesty, empathy, tenderness, and authenticity on the part of both partners. The authors note that one's ability to develop intimacy in relationships depends on realistic self-knowledge and self-acceptance, which are somewhat related to the concept of independence. Self-awareness allows one to acknowledge one's own needs and feelings, so as to be able to communicate them to someone else. Self-acceptance is also emphasized, as "it allows a person to be themselves without pretending to be something other than who and what they are" (p. 310). The description of intimacy that Masters and colleagues provide, which is based on self-acceptance and self-awareness, is very similar to the descriptions offered by the participants in this study.

In Bowen Family Systems Therapy (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), individuality and togetherness are seen as two counterbalancing forces in human experience which need to be reconciled. However, the human tendency is to overemphasize one or the other of these forces, leading to interpersonal imbalances such as relational cut-offs or enmeshments. For Bowen, differentiation of the self is the process by which individuality and togetherness can be balanced. This dialectic proposed by Bowen is similar to the dialectic described by the participants in this study, between intimacy and independence.

In summary, the relational effects of meditation varied in their consistency with the traditional literature and the Western research on meditation. The experience of being less reactive in relationships, and the concepts of unity and separation are consistent with traditional literature. The more overtly interpersonal themes of freedom and safety, and intimacy and independence, are largely missing from the traditional literature, which tends to have a more individual focus. However, though meditative traditions have not focused on these relational concepts, they are closely related to some approaches to marriage and family therapy. In this discussion, EFT and Bowen's intergenerational approach have been highlighted, but many other schools of family therapy also echo some of these themes. Though these therapy approaches share the same concepts as were identified by the participants in this study, they do not acknowledge mindfulness or meditation as a potential mechanism for achieving these ends, such as intimacy or less reactivity.

Strengths of the Study

A key strength of this study that enhanced it in several ways is the qualitative methodology, which drew upon the increased awareness of the advanced meditators who participated in this study and allowed for an exploration of a relatively un-researched area with a

high level of depth and richness. The in-depth interviews and qualitative methods of this study gave the participants great freedom to describe their experiences and understandings in a variety of ways, using metaphors, memories, and stories to describe and elaborate on complex concepts and experiences. As a group, the participants were able to clearly articulate inner and relational experiences which are sometimes difficult to capture in words, perhaps because of the close awareness and observation of these internal events and their relational effects, cultivated by their meditation practice. The qualitative methodology provided an open and receptive way of gathering their rich narratives and descriptions. This openness is especially crucial in the early investigation of the relational effects of meditation, which have not been explored in great depth or breadth to this point. Because there is little precedent for this investigation, the use of quantitative methodology could have been overly restrictive and limiting, especially in the variables selected by the researcher for investigation. The qualitative methodology circumvented this potential limitation of research, allowing important themes to emerge from the experiences of the participants, rather than the presumptions of the researcher.

Limitations of the Study

The three primary limitations of the study are the relative lack of diversity within the sample, the lack of involvement of the partners of the practitioners of meditation, and confounding factors, such as aging and therapy.

The participants in this study were predominantly Caucasian, middle-age, well-educated, affluent, female, and practitioners of Vipassana meditation in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. This relative lack of diversity in the sample may have skewed the themes that the participants identified, due to the similarity of their experience and philosophical perspective.

Another limitation of this study is that the long-term meditators were the only ones interviewed about their experience of the relational effects of meditation, as opposed to interviewing both the meditators and their partners. Several participants suggested that I speak to their partner about his or her perspective on the traits that the participants developed, suggesting an openness to this kind of inquiry. A research study which would include both meditators and their partners would be consistent with systems theory, which suggests that the whole system should be considered, so that important relational data is lost (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998).

The participants identified several factors besides meditation that may have contributed to development of certain traits and relational changes. These other factors included aging, natural growth and development, individual and couples therapy, marital enrichment activities, and other practices, such as yoga. The participants described meditation and the other processes as mutually supportive, and reported that it was difficult to separate their effects. Though qualitative research does not focus on the elimination of confounding variables, as does quantitative research, it is important to recognize the complexity of life, and to acknowledge that other factors may have also contributed to the development of the traits and relational effects described in this study. Future quantitative research of the development of meditation traits and the relational effects of meditation will be better suited to address the confounding variables identified by the participants.

Future Research

The themes identified in this study suggest several implications for future research in the field. First, the relational effects of meditation, which are not widely acknowledged or understood in the traditional or research literature, require significant attention in future research.

Second, the physical awareness of the body within the participants' descriptions of awareness should also be explored further in research.

Though Western research of meditation has increased significantly over the last thirty years, the focus has been almost exclusively individual, and not relational. This study suggests that meditation may have significant relational benefits, which should be explored using both qualitative and quantitative methodology, and grounded in systems theory. Continued qualitative inquiries are necessary in order to gather the rich experiences of meditators, so as to develop a more complete theory of how meditation affects relationships. Partners and family members of meditators should also be included in this research, as they may have important insights and observations about the effect of meditation in the relationships of their partner or relative. Quantitative studies that focus on the relational effects of meditation are also needed, so as to confirm and generalize the relational effects of meditation, and differentiate them from impact of other factors. These quantitative inquiries should include as variables the themes identified by the participants of this study, such as reactivity, freedom in relationships, the nature of connection, and the dialectic of intimacy and independence. Because the development of meditation traits and their relational effects occurs over a period of time, some studies should adopt a longitudinal format, so as to track the personal and relational changes that occur; and long-term practitioners of meditations should be included as participants in future studies.

Western research on meditation has emphasized awareness or attention, but has largely focused on the cognitive dimension of this capacity. The participants in this study emphasized the role of physical and bodily sensations within their awareness, not only during meditation, but also in the rest of their life. This physical awareness helped some participants be less reactive

and calmer in relationships. The physical awareness that develops through meditation should be explored further in Western research.

Clinical Implications

There are several important insights that this study provides for clinicians, especially family therapists. First, the overview of the relational effects of meditation traits can provide a preliminary framework that can help them understand their clients who are practitioners of meditation. Second, the results of this study suggest that the relational effects of meditation share many commonalities with concepts in various approaches to family therapy, so that meditation can be seen as a parallel process that can enhance and support therapy. Third, the positive personal and relational effects of meditation described in this study suggest that the underlying philosophical understandings of meditative traditions have much to offer to Western psychology, and to family therapy in particular. For this reason, a family therapy approach based on the principles and integrating the techniques of meditation should be developed, providing clinicians and families an alternate paradigm through which to understand themselves and their problems.

With a growing Western interest in meditation, there has been a significant increase in the number of practitioners of meditation. It is estimated that there are 10 million practitioners of meditation in the United States. For this reason, it is important that clinicians are aware of the mechanisms of meditation, and its personal and relational effects. The findings of this study can increase the theoretical sensitivity of family therapists, so that they have a framework from which to better understand the experiences of their clients who practice meditation. It is important to note that some writers have identified ways in which meditation can be used as a kind of escape from conflict, or as a protective shield from intimacy or vulnerability (Goleman, 1988). Though this process was not described by the participants in this study, it is important for

clinicians to be aware of these potential negative effects of meditation on the relational functioning of their clients.

As previously noted, some of the relational effects of meditation traits are very similar to the classic relational goals of certain approaches to family therapy. For this reason, it would be appropriate for clinicians to view meditation as a parallel process to family therapy, and to teach clients to meditate. Just as some individual treatment modalities use meditation as a part of the treatment for anxiety and depression (i.e., Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction), this study suggests that meditation may be an appropriate intervention in the treatment of relational distress. Some therapists, especially those who are unsure of the usefulness of meditation, express concern that their clients will not be receptive to learning meditation. Though some clients may be more eager to learn meditation than others, the therapist can encourage clients to meditate in several ways. First, the therapist can present the method in a matter-of-fact way, as he or she would present any other therapeutic intervention, without communicating either verbally or in their tone or body language that this intervention is odd or unhelpful. Second, the therapist can summarize the many positive effects of meditation that have been found in the growing body of research. Third, the therapist can be sensitive to the client's religious or spiritual background, and explain meditation in a way that is congruent with the client's beliefs and tradition. For example, when working with an atheist client for whom "meditation" seems too spiritual, the therapist could use the word "mindfulness," and focus on awareness meditations. On the other hand, with a client who practices a certain religion, the therapist could encourage the use of a meditation word that is consistent with the client's beliefs.

The significant positive effects of meditation for practitioners suggest that the underlying philosophy of meditative traditions may be helpful in providing an understanding of people,

relationships and the process of change. In fact, the basic principles of Buddhist psychology and of other meditative traditions are radically different than those of Western family therapy. To fully integrate these principles into family therapy practice would constitute a paradigm shift, and would result in the development of an entirely new approach to family therapy. Gehart and McCollum (2007) describe this kind of alternate approach to family therapy based on mindfulness and Buddhist psychology. This alternate approach is based on a profound shift in the experience of suffering, wherein one stops trying to avoid suffering, allows oneself to just “be with” suffering. Instead of viewing mental health as the result of making changes and solving problems, this new approach would see mental health as the ability to “embrace life ‘as it is’ even if it is not what one desires at the moment” (p. 219), to maintain emotional openness and availability, and to be less reactive when confronted with life’s difficulties. Whereas most family therapists are strongly invested in therapeutic change, a mindful approach would encourage therapists to maintain a compassionate presence with clients, being open to whatever the clients present without trying to change their experience. This new stance towards problems and suffering would allow both clients and therapists to befriend problems, with the understanding that problems often provide great opportunities to learn about life and about oneself. Though this approach to therapy appears counter intuitive, its benefits are clear when one is able to fully embrace the shift in their relationship to suffering. As the participants in this study described, this kind of paradigm shift allowed them to embrace the present moment, rather than try to push it away, and helped them to develop a number of positive personal and relational traits.

Personal Reflections

The experience of conducting this study was meaningful and enlightening to me, both on a clinical and a personal level. Clinically, this study has helped me to understand more fully the

way that acceptance of suffering and a changed relationship with one's experience can promote personal and relational satisfaction. As a Westerner, this perspective goes counter to much of what I have learned from studying marriage and family therapy and from being immersed in the culture, in general. Having heard the narratives of the participants and having developed a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of acceptance, I feel more comfortable offering this new paradigm to my clients. For some clients, this paradigm shift is made overt, by reframing their experience through the lens of acceptance. For other clients, I do not directly speak about acceptance, but I model it in the therapeutic relationship. This modeling comes naturally from my own beliefs and perspective, marked by acceptance and compassion for my clients, and awareness of our common humanity, as many of the participants of this study described. For this reason, whether or not I speak of acceptance or teach meditation to a client, I believe that my experience as a therapist and their experiences as clients are changed.

On a personal level, as a relative novice in Centering Prayer, it was a great privilege for me to speak to so many advanced meditators about their experiences. Many times, I felt like a student at the feet of a respected teacher, rather than a researcher conducting an interview with a study participant. As I spoke with the participants, their sincerity in speaking about their spiritual experiences and their sense of presence in the moment created a kind of sacred space, which I was honored to participate in. In the interviews themselves, and in the process of coding and analyzing the data, I found myself stirred by the participants' compassion, generosity and insight, and will continue to try to apply their understandings to my own life and work.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Scripts

Phone and E-mail:

Hello, my name is Irene Pruitt. I understand that you organize a meditation group in the area. I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I'm conducting a study about how meditation influences people's close relationships. I'm looking for study participants who have been meditating at least ten years, who would be willing to be interviewed for one hour to one and a half hours. I would greatly appreciate it if you would distribute the attached flyer to your group, and to anyone else you know who may be willing to participate. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. Thank you in advance for your help.

Announcement:

Hello, my name is Irene Pruitt. I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I'm conducting a study about how meditation influences people's close relationships. I'm looking for people who have been meditating at least ten years, who would be willing to be interviewed for about an hour to one and a half hours. If you would be willing to participate, please talk to me after this group, or call me at the number listed on the flyer. Also, if you know anyone else who may be willing to participate, please take a flyer and share it with them. Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix B

Flyer

Is meditation an important part of your life?

Have you been meditating for at least 10 years?

Would you like to participate in a study about meditation?

This study is of people who have been meditating at least 10 years,
who believe meditation is an important part of their life.

If you participate, you'll be asked to fill out a short survey and be interviewed about your experiences, especially regarding the personal traits you developed during meditation and how they have influenced your close, interpersonal relationships.

This is the first study of its kind to talk to advanced meditators about their experiences!

If you would like to participate, we will meet together in person or on the phone and I will ask you about your experiences and understandings. The information you provide will be kept confidential. The interview will take about an hour to one and a half hours.

To learn more about this research and set up an interview time, please contact:

Irene at 703-538-8393
(feel free to leave a message)

I work at the Center for Family Services in Falls Church and we can meet there or at another location more convenient to you for the interview.

Please tell other practitioners of meditation you know and ask them to call me, too.

Appendix C

Pre-Interview Script

I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I'm conducting a study about how meditation affects people's close relationships. In particular, I'm focusing on how meditative traits affect meditators' relationships. A meditative trait is a lasting effect of meditation that continues whether or not you are meditating at a given moment. If you agree to participate, I would interview you for about an hour to one and a half hours about your experiences. During the interview, I'd like to ask you some questions about your experiences of meditative traits, and how they have affected your close relationships. Are you still interested in participating? When would you be available for an interview? Where would you like to meet, or would you prefer a phone interview? If you have any questions, feel free to call me at 703-538-8393. Thank you for participating in this study!

Appendix D

Demographic Questionnaire

What is your age? _____

What is your gender? _____

What is your ethnic background? _____

What is your meditative tradition? _____

Who else lives in your household? _____

What is your highest level of education? (Please check one)

High school or less

Some college

College degree

Some graduate work

Graduate degree or higher

What is your annual household income? (Please check one)

Less than \$20,000

Between \$20,000 and \$40,000

Between \$40,000 and \$70,000

Between \$70,000 and \$100,000

Over \$100,000

Appendix E

Research Protocol

Background questions:

- How long have you been practicing meditation?
- Are you a part of a particular meditative tradition? If so, which one?
- Please describe your practice.
- How does the structure (timing, location, etc.) of the practice affect your relationship?

Questions related to meditative traits and relationships:

A meditative trait is a lasting effect of meditation that continues whether or not you are meditating at a given moment. I'd like to ask you some questions about your experiences of meditative traits, and how they have affected your close relationships.

- What are some of the traits that you believe you have developed because of your meditation practice?
- What do you mean by [trait]?
- Could you give me an example of a time when you demonstrated [trait]?
- What do you believe caused you to be more [trait]?
- What do you believe is the result of being more [trait]?
- How does [trait] change the way you relate to yourself?
- How has [trait] impacted your close relationships?
- Could you share an example of a time that [trait] influenced a close relationship?
- How did the other person respond to your [trait]?
- If the other person were here, how do you think they would describe this experience?

- How are your close relationships different now than they were before you developed [trait]?
- As you know, I'm a student in a family therapy graduate program, and we work with families and couples struggling with many issues in their lives. I wonder what kind of thoughts you have for me or my clients about how you think the use of meditation could benefit them?

Closing:

Looking back on our conversation, is there anything we haven't talked about regarding your experiences of meditative traits or relationships that you'd like to tell me about?

Appendix F

IRB Approval Letter



DATE: December 6, 2006

MEMORANDUM

TO: Eric E. McCollum
Teresa Irene Pruitt

FROM: David M. Moore 

Approval date: 12/5/2006
Continuing Review Due Date: 11/20/2007
Expiration Date: 12/4/2007

SUBJECT: **IRB Expedited Approval:** "Perspectives on the Impact of Meditative Traits on Relationships of Advanced Practitioners of Meditation", IRB # 06-718

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective December 5, 2006.

As an investigator of human subjects, your responsibilities include the following:

1. Report promptly proposed changes in previously approved human subject research activities to the IRB, including changes to your study forms, procedures and investigators, regardless of how minor. The proposed changes must not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.
2. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.
3. Report promptly to the IRB of the study's closing (i.e., data collecting and data analysis complete at Virginia Tech). If the study is to continue past the expiration date (listed above), investigators must submit a request for continuing review prior to the continuing review due date (listed above). It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain re-approval from the IRB before the study's expiration date.
4. If re-approval is not obtained (unless the study has been reported to the IRB as closed) prior to the expiration date, all activities involving human subjects and data analysis must cease immediately, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

Important:

If you are conducting **federally funded non-exempt research**, this approval letter must state that the IRB has compared the OSP grant application and IRB application and found the documents to be consistent. Otherwise, this approval letter is invalid for OSP to release funds. Visit our website at <http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/newstudy.htm#OSP> for further information.

cc: File
Department Reviewer: Angela J. Huebner

Curriculum Vita

Irene T. Paz Pruitt has a bachelor's degree in Culture and Politics from Georgetown University and a master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Virginia Tech. She was a Graduate Assistant in the Virginia Tech MFT program from 2005 to 2007. She was a Therapist Intern at the Virginia Tech Center for Family Services from 2005 to 2007, and at the Church of the Epiphany from 2006 to 2007. Prior to her enrollment in the MFT program, Irene was the Director of Youth Ministry at the Catholic Parish of St. Andrew, St. Paul and St. Francis in Clemson, South Carolina.