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Motivational Factors of Young Adults Involved in Meditation Practice

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Abstract

This qualitative research examines the motivational factors of young adults involved in meditation practice. A series of interviews with thirteen young adults around the Bay Area. A grounded theory approach was used when interpreting the data. The factor that was most prevalent in the interviews was community. Within community there were three subtopics – support, collective energy, and common humanity. Support was described as moments when participants felt that they could share intimate thoughts and feelings with their community. Collective energy was described during moments of intense meditation where participants felt everyone was working towards a common goal. Common humanity was described when participants felt similar to their community, or to humanity as a whole.

Motivational Factors of Young Adults Involved in Meditation Practice

The practice of Buddhism in America has grown rapidly over the past century. One of the more popular traditions in America is the Theravada tradition. The Theravada tradition is connected to Vipassana meditation, which is the highest form of Buddhist meditation. Vipassana translates to Insight Meditation and was brought over to America by lay Americans who studied with Theravada teachers in Asia. When they came back, they reformulated the original Insight Meditation by mixing in other schools of Buddhism and adding humanistic psychology. The purpose of this was to have a more accessible Buddhist practice for Americans. Seager writes that this new form of Insight Meditation was not meant to become a religion for people, but rather to be used as a tool of awareness and psychological healing through Buddhist practices. (Seager, 1999). Jack Kornfield, one of the founders of this new type of Insight Meditation practice wrote, “We now begin by awakening the heart of compassion and inspiring a courage to live truth as a deep motivation for practice. This heart-centered motivation draws together lovingkindness, healing, courage, and clarity in an interdependent way” (Kornfield 1993). Almost all of the participants in this study, with the exception of two, had a background in lovingkindness meditation.

Research on meditation has been limited to neuropsychological studies about what goes on in the brain while meditating, and also what benefits meditation has on people. These studies have been done using adults, but there has been very little psychological research on young adults and why they would want to enter into meditation. It was clear from the research that people find great solace in this practice, so

why weren't young adults cognizant of this? My overarching research question was to find out why young adults are motivated to meditate.

One study done by H.C. Ganguli attempted to uncover the motivations behind a group of young men and women involved in a meditation group. He came to a fascinating conclusion that not all young adults sought out meditation for therapeutic reasons, but also as a way of fulfilling their every potential (Ganguli, 1982). He goes on to explain the deficiency and basic needs of these individuals. Ganguli proposed that using a medical-therapeutic model was not enough to understand why young adults would seek meditation. A lot of people sought out meditation to grow and understand. Therefore, he suggested that a therapeutic-cum-growth model would better encompass the reasons for meditation (Ganguli, 1982). The growth model that most accurately follows Ganguli's research is that of Abraham Maslow.

Maslow theorized that people are motivated based on a hierarchy of needs. The bottom four tiers of the hierarchy are what Maslow labels as deficiency needs. The lowest level represents physiological needs such as oxygen, water, food, etc. Next up are safety needs. This refers to the need to live in a fairly safe environment without anxiety or fear. Above safety is the need to belong and be loved. After this is the need to have self-esteem. Above all the deficiency needs is self-actualization, which Maslow terms as a being need (Maslow, 1950). Maslow defines self-actualization as "the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc. Such people seem to be fulfilling themselves and to be doing the best that they are capable of doing. They are people who have developed or are developing to the full stature of which they are capable" (Maslow, 1971). Maslow would describe it as a peak experience. Peak experiences are moments of

self-actualization that cannot be guaranteed. In relation to meditating, no one sits down to meditate knowing that they will have a peak experience, but the possibility is intriguing. Maslow believed that people strive for the next highest need once the need below it is met. Maslow's hierarchy helped to devise the questions that I needed to ask to participants. Questions were asked relating to the safety of the individual, the struggles that he or she went through, the type of support system that they had or didn't have, and what was going on in their lives prior to beginning meditation. The answers to these questions hold the reasons why young adults would begin this practice.

Gordon Allport adds another layer to motivation by defining the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Those who are intrinsically motivated may try meditation in order to find meaning in their life. They live a life according to the teachings of meditation. Those who are extrinsically motivated may meditate in order to have security and validation, but they never take the teachings to heart. Allport's theory also shaped some of my questions. Questions such as "What does meditation mean to you?" and "What has meditation taught you?" helped shed light on how intrinsically or extrinsically motivated the participants were. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation weren't the only possible ways of why young adults would be interested in meditation. Questioning motivation was something that needed to be looked at as well.

Another lens that I wanted to look through was meditation as a quest. Baston et al. looked at three ways of motivation. Two of them have been described (intrinsic and extrinsic), but another one is quest motivation. Baston says that questing differs in that it "involves honestly facing existential questions in all their complexity, while at the same time resisting clear-cut, pat answers. An individual who approaches religion in this way

recognizes that he or she does not know, and probably never will know, the final truth about such matters.” Buddha himself displayed this type of motivation (Baston et al., 1993). When Buddha (formerly named Siddhartha) left the life of the ascetics, he was essentially trying to find his own meaning to life and resisting the previously held beliefs of the ascetics. It would seem likely that those people who meditate would have a similar mind frame to that of the Buddha.

Due to the fact that there are many theoretical lenses from which to observe this problem, and the fact that there hasn't been much research done in this area, an exploratory and qualitative approach was taken in this research. I did this through a grounded theory analysis. Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory as a way of utilizing abstract data that was left over from quantitative experiments. Details tend to get neglected when evaluating data quantitatively. In grounded theory the idea is to look at a set of data without any prior theoretical lenses. The theory is grounded in the data and it's the researcher's job to sift through and find it. (Henwood, Pidgeon 2006). Part of the controversy with using this method of research is if there is any possible way for one to be completely theory-free when it comes to conducting research. I addressed this concern by doing semi-structured interviewing. Questions were not set in stone. I framed the questions in relation to the theories described above, but let the data speak from there.

The population used in this research consisted of convert Buddhists. Among those who practice, there is a divide between what Seager calls immigrants and converts. Immigrant Buddhists are those who have immigrated to America from countries where Buddhism is more prevalent. Immigrant Buddhists have brought the religion to America while still keeping with their cultural traditions. Convert Buddhists are those who were

born in America and have adopted the Buddhist religion. Converts have a unique take on the dharma (teachings). Many will use the practices done by devout monks, such as meditation, and weave it into their lay life. Convert Buddhists are said to have “domesticated” Buddhism and are more likely to use it for therapeutic reasons rather than a way of life. In addition, a lot of convert Buddhists are involved in mindfulness meditation. It’s important to make this distinction between the groups, as the research that is discussed regards convert Buddhists, not immigrant Buddhists. (Seager, 1999)

Methods

Participants

Thirteen participants were recruited from around the Bay Area. Recruitment of participants was done through multiple ways. One way was through e-mail contact. Permission was gained from the San Francisco Zen Center, Vajrapani Institute, and Vipassana Santa Cruz to have a flier put up at their centers for people to sign-up to be a participant. The Bay Area Young Adult Sangha e-mail list provided more contacts. Participants were also recruited through a snowball effect. People who had already volunteered to interview were asked if they knew anyone else who would be interested in participating. Lastly, contact was made to the directors of the arts and consciousness and transpersonal psychology programs at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, and John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill. Before any of the interviews began, each participant signed an informed consent form. Seven of the participants were female and six of them were male ranging from 21-30 years of age ($M=25.61$).

Procedure

All the participants who were interested e-mailed me their times of availability and where they would like the interview to take place. During the interview, a battery of questions were asked (Appendix A) related to their meditation practice. From these questions came others that were unique to each individual's situation.

In this research, I transcribed each interview verbatim and applied a process called open-coding. The goal of open-coding is to be able to identify important parts of an interview very quickly (Henwood, Pidgeon 2006). As an example, the quote – “I read a little bit, not just a little bit, I read a lot about philosophy before I came to – came across spirituality – and then um I think I felt kind of a necessity to do it? Like it was kind of painful but I was really convinced that it was a very good thing for me to do, even though it was kind of an unpleasant experience.” – is referring to this person allowing painful experiences into their lives. I coded this as a PAINFUL EXPERIENCE: ALLOWING. After sifting through all the interviews with this general open-coding strategy, the next step is to saturate each code by determining the dimensions of them. The code that was most prevalent in this research was COMMUNITY. Within the community code there were three prominent dimensions, these dimensions being support, sameness, and collective energy. After saturation, it's necessary to ask questions about each quote. Why did this person feel this way? How is this affecting them? When do they feel this way? Who do they feel this way with? These questions function as a way to read between the lines of what is said in the interviews. This is where the real patterns and differences come out. The idea of grounded theory is to flush out every possible variable in the subject. For the sake of brevity, this paper will mainly discuss the community code as it showed up through the interviews.

Results

The codes that came up in the interviews varied. Below is a table with all the codes and short descriptions. In this paper we will be talking about the community code and it's dimensions of collective energy, support, and sameness.

Code	Description
Community	Talk of people in meditation groups. What the community provided for them. Meditating in a group vs. meditating in individually.
Questing	Existential questioning such as what is the meaning of life
Self-Awareness	The ways in which meditation made the more aware of their thoughts, emotions, body, etc.
Introduction	What was the first exposure to meditation?
Alleviating Suffering	When participants sought out meditation as a way to relieve stress, or reduce suffering.
Maximizing Happiness	When participants sought out meditation because they wanted to be happy.
Balance	When participants stated that meditation gave them balance in their lives.
Resistance	Times when the participants were resistant to the teachings of meditation and how that affected them.
Struggles	Moments of suffering.
Frequency	How often people meditated.
Painful Experiences	Painful experiences during meditation both physical and mental. Painful experiences prior to starting meditation.
Difficulties	Things that made it difficult to continue meditation i.e. boredom, wandering mind, confusion, etc.
Social Justice	When people used their meditation practice and teachings to establish social justice
Practical Application	Times when people put the practice and teachings of meditation to use.
Maturity	When participants felt more mature and made more mature decisions as a result of meditating.
Teachers	How meditation teachers had an impact on participants.
Practice	Where and how and with whom people practiced meditation.
Drugs	Moments when people used drugs.

Preconceptions	Ideas that people had of meditation prior to becoming involved in the practice.
Convenient/ Cheap	When participants enjoyed meditation due to its convenience and the fact that it's free.

The initial questions came from the theoretical lenses described above, but the codes emerged straight from the dialogue.

Discussion

My overarching research question was what motivates young adults to meditate and to stick with meditation. In this section I will be focusing on the theme of community because it seemed the most significant and well saturated in the data set. People talked about community when they discussed relationships with people who they meditate with, or share the interest with. One dimension that grew out of community was support. Support was discussed in various ways. Support within a meditation community was displayed when people felt that they had access to others who were farther along in the journey than they were. This kind of support was helpful to people when they felt insecure about the practice. Many of them experienced difficulties within the practices such as physical discomfort, boredom, frustration, sadness, etc. When they talked with people who had been in the practice of meditation for many years, they could see that these people were still continuing with the practice and that there's no need to feel ashamed for having difficulties. Sharing difficulties with others and communicating about them gave some participants the feeling that everyone is in the same boat. Being in the same boat is the notion that everyone is human. Being human means that we aren't perfect. We make mistakes just like everyone else. When participants felt this way in relation to their community, they were more likely to stick with the practice. This feeling of being in the same boat was a common theme throughout the code of community. This is what one woman had to say about her community: "these people have seen me be

super neurotic and make huge mistakes and fail and be mean and they have been willing to go through my growth with me and to...accept that I make mistakes and that things happen and that work through it.” This woman knows that her community supports her because they have seen her darker aspects. More than that, they want to help her through those dark times and not abandon her or make her feel ashamed. She establishes a deeper connection with these people and because of that, is able move forward with her practice.

Acknowledgement of feelings was an important kind of support in the interviews, but the acknowledgement was felt in a less direct way than might be assumed. One quality that all the participants shared was the importance of cultivating a meditation practice to better improve their life. When uncomfortable feelings came up in meditation, it was important for others to acknowledge the difficulty without disrupting the journey. Meditating is a unique activity because so many deep-rooted thoughts and feelings come up. Other friendships may talk about more superficial things and not have the space to talk about these sorts of emotions. Through the sharing of emotions, people feel supported in the journey.

“I go on retreat and like, you know, I have a really hard morning or something and, you know, I’m crying and someone comes over and brings me tissues. And, you know, we don’t talk but there’s still support you know? Or, I’m not having a hard morning, but somebody else is. You know, the person three mats over is sobbing through the entire morning sit or something. And it helps me keep myself into perspective...Ok, here’s the thing! I don’t know that every time I sit I would prefer to have company, but being on the journey, and doing this kind of spiritual work, absolutely I want community.”

It’s important to note that the person providing her with tissues doesn’t try to calm her down. The simple gesture of offering tissues has a deeper meaning. The person is acknowledging that she’s having a bad day, but also knows that this is going to help her grow. Stopping the emotions from taking place would disrupt the silence and goal of the retreat. This person is respectful of her feelings, and

respectful of her journey. She realizes that she needs this type of support on the journey with her, and that keeps her coming back.

Another dynamic of support was the environment in which people felt support. The environment of a retreat elicited more conversation of support versus a regular meditation sitting. Not only was there more conversation about support, but also there was a different kind of support that was talked about. I interpret that the reasoning behind this is the silence and intimacy of a retreat. When participants talked about their experiences at retreats, they explained that a lot of emotions came up that they weren't expecting. When these difficulties presented themselves, people were there to acknowledge their feelings most of the time. The quote above demonstrates this perfectly. Many of the participants went to retreats. Some were fortunate enough to go to monthly retreats, and others went to a yearly retreat. These experiences took them to greater places in their journey.

“I did a Vipassana retreat while I was in India as I was traveling through the country, and I think one thing I learned about meditation while I was there was that you sit in quietness and you're aware of any sensations going through your body. So sometimes its very unpleasant like if you're grieving or sad or depressed or anxious about something, you just wanna like shove it away and like not deal with it. But I think in mediation, in true meditation, you're not trying to shove things away and try to be blank, its, you're letting it kind of course through your body and knowing that it'll pass.”

In a retreat setting, there is a greater chance of people having unpleasant emotions due to the intense nature of the environment. This sharing of unpleasantness is a form of mutual support among meditators. The participants had to feel some sort of safety within the community, or else they wouldn't want to return.

The dynamic of feeling supported when people shared difficulties was apparent when one man stated that,

“But then also with my friends we do the same practices and we’re able to talk to each other about our experiences. And um so that, that’s nice because if I go for like, like there’s been periods of time where I’m stuck and I feel like my meditation is just crap, where I’m, where during the silent sitting part I’m just thinking the whole time, you know, planning my day, or going over this...whatever, all kinds of stuff. It’s just so hard for me to focus on my breath and I hear that other people are going through that too, and it’s just like oh okay I don’t have to beat up on myself”.

This particular person had a somewhat deeper support network due to the fact that he actually lived in a house filled with meditators for seven years. When he shares his frustration about not being able to concentrate, that’s when he finds relief. Knowing that people aren’t going to judge him and that the human mind is not perfect helps him to feel more confident in himself and continue pursuing the practice.

Sometimes certain kinds of support from others got in the way of what’s really important to the person. People felt encouraged to be themselves because of the non-judgmental attitude of their meditation community. Social support was felt when the participants identified with others on levels besides meditation. A few participants were a part of an LGBTQ sangha. Those who were a part of this group had an increased sense of comfort due to the fact that these people experienced similar difficulties in terms of not being heterosexual. This relates to what was discussed in the section above on shared difficulties. Social support was apparent when people had similar cultural references to draw from. However, there were instances when social support hindered people from their journey. Social support had a negative impact on a person’s practice when it interfered with concentration. Concentration is an important tool in mindfulness meditation practice or else it becomes difficult to delve deep into one’s mind. One woman expressed that,

“Sometimes it’s hard for me because there’s a lot of socializing and it’s hard for me to drop down into meditation and like really get quiet. And usually at that point I realize I’m exhausted and that, you know, the stress of the emotions of the week are catching up with me. Um...and then we stop meditating and then we have social time. And sometimes that’s really hard for me, to transition like that.”

Despite the amount of evidence of people finding support within a community, not everyone in my sample experienced it. Those people who found support within a community had been participating in meditation for many years. More inexperienced and infrequent meditators had not found such support. People who found support to be important also mentioned more trauma experiences than those who did not.

There was one person who believed that mediation was an individual journey. He didn’t give much explanation as to why he believed that, but he did discuss his earlier experience with meditation and how it impacted him greatly. As a young child he and his parents attended ashrams around California. He remembered feeling perceptive of the energy of the group and having it overwhelm him. It could be that the energy of the group (something I label as collective energy) was too overwhelming too him. It may have had so much of an impact on him that it discouraged him from meditating in a group altogether. When asked if he prefers to meditate in a group or by himself he answered, “Nah, I’d rather do it by myself because I feel alone. Whereas if I’m in a group everyone’s kind of like...even though everyone has their eyes closed and everyone is meditating, I feel like it’s...I feel like it’s a spiritual, inner time by yourself, you know?” The collective energy of a group was a discouraging factor for this person, but for many people, collective energy was a powerful motivator.

Collective energy was a feeling experienced by some of the participants. Their encounters with this energy was a unique characteristic of meditation, and one that was so compelling, it motivated them to have more of it. When people said they felt energy within a group, they couldn’t explain the feeling in all that much detail. They did describe

in which instances they could feel this energy. When the participants experienced physical difficulties, such as in the practice of yoga or a long meditation sit, they said the energy of the room helped them to continue and come out in greater places. People could achieve harder yoga postures and delve deeper into their minds. Collective energy was also apparent when everyone in the group was attuned to a common goal. Once again, the feeling of everyone being in the same boat is present. Collective energy wasn't a daily occurrence in these people's practice, but when it did come up they said it was in a very intense environment. The common goal between these individuals was one of deep significance, something that everyone could attest to. Being that the majority of the participants were a part of the Theravada tradition, it would be appropriate to say that these people wanted cessation of suffering. One woman described what the energy of a group does for her while in yoga. "I would do my best stands when I work together with the other people's energy around me. Literally. We would go up at the same time and hold it and if one of us fell out the other one would too. But you're not paying attention to them, it's just like their connected energy that's like so radiant in this intense environment." It's important to note that this woman's interpretation of meditation was different from that of others. For her, meditation was an activity that wasn't limited to being in a meditation hall. This woman meditated during yoga, walking on the street, and lounging in her apartment, among other places. One participant described how collective energy effected him, "And there's also a really energy in a group meditation that helps me to be a little bit more focused like not in myself but with other people's energy and it's more potent it feels like." The collective energy supported his concentration during meditation, making for less disruption, and more growth. Everyone appeared to view the collective energy as a positive experience with the exception of the man who had viewed meditation as an individual journey.

The last dynamic of community that was discussed among the participants was the idea of common humanity. The participants of this study talked a lot about the

similarities they had with their fellow meditators. The most important similarities they had with others had to do with their goals in meditation and their experiences in life. Many of the people I spoke with suffered trauma in their lives. I spoke with people who had been victims of rape, heartbreak, job loss, parental suicide, and depression. When the participants were able to share these moments of trauma with others, they felt a sense of common humanity; a sense that everyone is human and that life has suffering. This is true in the Buddhist religion. The first noble truth of Buddhism is that life is suffering. From the feeling of a common humanity, there came a safety surrounding the relationship. As mentioned earlier, a few participants were a part of a LBGTQ meditation sangha. The participants felt a sameness and safety with the group, safety to be themselves, to make jokes, to talk about personal feelings, etc. Being around people similar to them motivated them to come back. Prior to being involved in meditation, many participants expected meditators to be almost perfect people. The longer the participants were around their community, the more similarities were found and the more they felt on an equal plane to the rest. One woman's original goal of meditation was to be around spiritual people. This is what she had to say about her experience:

“I spoke to you in the beginning about how I wanted to be around spiritual people, and I think the thing that stuck out to most, being in the house, was that there's really no such thing as spiritual people – I mean, everyone is dealing with what they are dealing with and they're dealing with it in their own ways – so people still like to watch Glee or go to the movies or do other things, will enjoy beer and, you know, everyone has their different things, and everyone's human and there's not like this superhuman spiritual thing.”

This woman discovered that the people who she meditates with are exactly the same as her. Another woman took it a step further and expanded the idea of common humanity to people who don't meditate.

“To be honest, I think it’s only different in the sense that we can talk about meditating and we have that sort of framework to look at things, which I appreciate. Fundamentally, there’s still the same issues that there are in my other relationships too, and that’s another thing that I’ve realized, just because somebody meditates does not mean that they’re perfect, you know? Really, all of us are just normal people that are trying or aspiring to be whatever we want to be. Fundamentally it’s like...the relationships aren’t any more perfect than the other close relationships in my life right now.”

Expanding common humanity to people outside of meditation provided this woman with more insight about the journey of life. Suffering was a commonality amongst participants. One woman had this to say about her community: “It’s nice because the people who I’ve met have often been through all kinds of bizarre, like weird experiences, such as I have been, or who are just really interested in being grounded and what it means to be sane, as an intention, whatever sanity means.” The second noble truth of Buddhism is that suffering is caused by attachment. Attachment to one’s suffering will only bring more suffering. When participants were able to detach and forget about their own suffering and realize that everyone suffers, they were able to bond with their community and focus on ways to eliminate suffering.

This study revealed that the role of community in motivating young adults in meditation practice is significant. Community was a strong motivating factor because participants found support, collective energy, and common humanity. One of the three jewels of Buddhism is community, and this study showcased its importance in the lives of young adults. The importance of community relates to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. One of the deficiency needs of Maslow was the need to belong. When participants were a part of a community, they were able to have a more enriching experience, similar to the sort of peak experiences that Maslow was referring to. Peak experiences are moments of self-actualization, according to Maslow. In this study, participants had more peak experiences when they had a solid community around them. This research also supports Allport’s idea of intrinsically versus extrinsically motivated religion. The participants in

this research can be said to have been intrinsically motivated in their meditation practices because they internalize what they experience in order to enhance their life.

Other interesting codes that deserve further analysis were self-awareness, and drugs. These categories were not as saturated as the community code. More data would need to be elicited to follow up on these leads. Self-awareness was something that participants experienced during meditation. Awareness of one's feelings and emotions had a great impact on participants and motivated them to strive for more self-awareness. A further analysis of this code is important and could lead to more people turning to meditation to become more self-confident and satisfied. Self-esteem is part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The drug code was something I didn't expect to come up in discussion. While discussing past difficulties, participants also discussed ways in which they used to cope with their problems. The vast majority of participants said that they used drugs to cope with problems and/or have a spiritual experience. Then they admitted that they didn't need drugs anymore because it wasn't conducive to the lifestyle of meditation. The idea of meditation encouraging people to get off drugs would be an interesting topic to research.

Something that might be seen as a limitation in this study is the representativeness of the sample. However, this type of research is meant to not be representative. Instead it is designed to explore the contours of a research question and sets the stage for later research. Further research should be done on this topic to explore just how motivational factors such as community and self-awareness are.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

How old are you?

How did you first hear about meditation?

Describe your first meditation experience?

What made you come back a second time?

What was going on in your life at the time you chose to participate in meditation?

Is meditation what you expected it to be like?

How often do you meditate? In what setting?

Have you developed a lot of social connections through meditation? Can you describe them?

How important is meditation to you?

How has meditation helped you to deal with trouble or sorrow?

What do you gain most from meditation?

Has meditation given you what you've been looking for?

Are there things you hope to get from meditation that you are not getting?

Were there benefits that you weren't expecting?