

Research Reflections

Awakenings

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Honors Thesis
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During the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters, our team of six research associates gathered once to twice a week and meditated before starting our qualitative duties. Our study, titled Interviewing Zen Buddhists on the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale Validity (Sabellano-Tsutsui et al., 2022), benefited from our practicing conscious awareness of our thought patterns and breathing. Our participants, Zen Buddhists of over 10 years, completed the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale—a scale aimed to measure mindfulness—while voicing aloud their thoughts on each item. Since they spoke about their experiences and awakenings in Zen mindfulness, we found it helpful practicing mindful awareness ourselves under a trained associate Zen teacher who is also a member on this research team. This personal practice allowed us to better understand and represent the nuances of mindful awareness. Our team found that meditating together helped us to better focus, be more productive, connect with participant interviews, build teamwork, enjoy our work, and realize our true selves.

Artist Statement

Our research team is pleased to share our experiences meditating together in a professional environment and its infinite benefits it had on our teamwork, research duties, academic

careers, personal relationships, and functioning in sync with our true natural state of existence (versus who we perceive ourselves to be). True untainted natural state of existence is a term used in the lead researcher, Tiare's Zen practice, and it captures a person's natural intrinsic state of being that is infinite and includes all things, interconnected with the universe. So, being



Tiare is a Psychology major at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa who will graduate in Spring 2022 with Honors. She will attend the Master of Social Work Program at UHM and aims to pursue a PhD in Social Welfare to continue researching and teaching Zen mindfulness. **Aydia** is from the San Jose, California, a Public Health major with a Spanish certificate and Honors student entering her last semester of undergraduate studies. She aims to pursue PA school to work in primary care in low-income communities. **Kyiah** is an international student from British Columbia, Canada. She is a Biochemistry major, Honors student, premedical entering her junior year, and will graduate in Spring 2024. Kyiah hopes to attend medical school to become a neurosurgeon. **Noa** is a Molecular Biosciences and Biotechnology major and Honors student who will graduate in Spring 2023. He is interested in attending medical school to pursue psychiatry or pathology. He was born in Pennsylvania and raised in Kaimukī, Hawai'i. **Shannon** received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (2021). She is interested in attention research and Integrative medicine. She intends to pursue her master's degree in Acupuncture with a concentration in Chinese Herbal Medicine and an MD degree to work in geriatric psychiatry with at-risk populations in Hawai'i.

our true selves might include stress or anxiety that may be arising within us, but we would be aware that we are *not* our limited thoughts and emotions. They are “of us,” but they are not exactly who we are, and we instead can function and live life as that bigger perspective and infinite, untainted awareness. Most of us were new to consistent mindful awareness practice but still experienced the tremendous positives.

Our project involved Zen Buddhists (traditional mindfulness practitioners) who spoke about the nuances of their mindfulness experiences and thoughts on a mindfulness scale’s ability to measure mindfulness. We started each team meeting with either a brief guided meditation or one to three conscious breaths on our own under our team leader and Zen mindfulness associate teacher. Even coming together for a one-breath meditation set the foundation for productive and enjoyable work. This form of opening up a space for ideas to flow for people to function at their best has also been practiced in the team leader’s other projects. Some of these include meditation in her Zen organization’s team meetings and community classes, research team that worked with Native Hawaiian youth with justice system involvement, various community and academic presentations, and Positive Psychology classes for her students housed in Hawai‘i’s correctional facilities. However, of these mentioned groups, our team is the first to utilize mindful awareness practice with the goal to better interpret our mindfulness practice study data and to write specific examples of team meditation benefits.

With “mindfulness” becoming trendy, the buzzword is found in many blogs, YouTube videos, and Instagram posts

describing the benefits of meditation. What our readers can gain from our reflections are the insights of young researchers who sincerely practiced under a long-time Zen practitioner trained to teach from a Zen Buddhist priest. We believe this consistent “formal” (practicing together felt very casual and relaxed, although it had purposeful structure) training had impact on the benefits we experienced. This particular method of meditating as a team under a Zen associate teacher who has consciously awakened to the mind’s subtleties and continues to refine that awakening is vital to mindfulness research. Meditating allowed us to understand the complexities that come with defining, let alone, measuring mindfulness. Further, this form of team mindful awareness practice is extremely beneficial to teams in all fields from academia and business to sports and humanities projects.

We share our reflections of meditation in the workforce—particularly in the mindfulness research field and as undergraduates—with hopes to inspire our readers to try it in your everyday lives.

Functioning as One

For the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters, our team of six research associates (see Figure 1) gathered one to two times a week and meditated. Our qualitative study titled, *Interviewing Zen Buddhists on the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale Validity* (Sabellano-Tsutsui et al., 2022)—team leader Tiare’s Honors Thesis—benefited from watching our own thought patterns



Figure 1. Our mindfulness research team, left to right: **Geneva Dela Cruz** (graduated Spring 2021, BS in Psychology, BA in Biology), **Noa Brenner** (class of Spring 2023, BS in Molecular Biosciences and Biotechnology) **Tiare Sabellano-Tsutsui** (class of Spring 2022, BA in Psychology), **Ayda Espinoza** (class of Fall 2022, BA in Public Health), **Kylah Slane** (class of Spring 2024, BS in Biochemistry), and **Shannon Sanchez** (graduated Fall 2021, BA in Psychology).

and breathing. We found it extremely helpful in understanding our advanced Zen Buddhist (mindfulness practitioner) participants who shared with us their mindful awareness experiences, life awakenings beyond personal perspectives, and thoughts on a highly cited mindfulness scale's ability to measure mindfulness.

Before joining the project, most of us did not experience a consistent or formal mindful awareness practice. So when Tiare, a Zen practitioner of 15 years under a Zen Buddhist priest sanctioned to teach, introduced guided sitting meditations at the start of team meetings, we began to notice subtle shifts in our thought processes, which resulted in tremendous benefits. It is worth noting that the Zen Buddhist tradition is not only a religious one, but also a practice and way of living based on philosophies of how our minds function; it is up to the teacher and practitioner to decide what they emphasize in practice. Our team's mindful awareness exercises and conversations contained no religious elements. Meditating together opened doors to an endless horizon, not only in our functioning as an efficient team, but in our reactions to thoughts, emotions, people, and situations in our everyday lives. Below we describe our study and nuances of mindfulness that can be tricky to become aware of not only in personal practice but in research as well.

Analyzing a Body of Knowledge

In many publications, authors such as Kabat-Zinn (2003) and Grossman (2011) posit that researchers and teachers must practice mindfulness under a genuine teacher before studying and teaching it since it is extremely easy to misinterpret what mindfulness essentially is. Some of these authors have been long-time practitioners themselves under a teacher who received permission to teach mindful awareness. In our literature review, many of the researchers did not report their mindfulness training, but having a Zen associate teacher on the team helped us in surmising which authors were long-time practitioners by the ways they described mindfulness practice and research. We confirmed each author's mindfulness credentials by searching their biographies for length and type of practice. Some studies that this project was built upon came from authors of over ten years of sincere mindful awareness practice.

In honoring the deep cultural and historical roots of mindfulness practice, we understand meditation to be first recorded in the yoga sutra, Patanjali, *circa* 900 B.C.E., (Taimini, 1999) but said to be practiced thousands of years prior and passed down orally. When practicing Patanjali's yoga sutra, it is stated that yoga is its own teacher and that one must experience Samādhi (awakening) for themselves (Dasgupta, 1920, p. 160), rather than believing or using someone's or something's—such as a mindfulness scale—assessment of which state of mind is more or less consciously aware. Only the in-

dividual experiences their own state of conscious awareness. In other words, according to Patanjali's practice, people cannot experience other people's minds nor levels of awareness; awareness must be experienced and not assessed externally. This is not to say bona fide teachers are not needed (as they are actually essential). Because at best even teachers can only try to help a student experience awakening for themselves by using skillful means, such as limited concepts (i.e., words) to help the student “get into the ballpark” where they have the greatest chance of experiencing awakening and true mindful awareness (M. Shigeoka, personal communication, May 7, 2022). For a teacher or anyone to verbally say the level of mindfulness someone is in already taints the natural experience. Thus, conceptualizing mindfulness for another person (or at all) is not in line with Patanjali's ancient, Indigenous practice.

Despite the ancient practice of mindfulness, it has become popularized exponentially only in the past 30 years in Western fields such as medicine, research, academia, and media (Baer, 2019; Bergomi et al., 2013; Van Dam et al., 2018). The citations in the previous sentence mentioned both pros and cons in mindfulness research. Regardless of the lack of maturity in this empirical field, we recognize the progress science is making in strengthening the validity and value of mindfulness practice's endless benefits. Further, any form and amount of mindfulness practice is infinitely beneficial compared to no practice at all, and it is exciting to see this academic body of knowledge grow to align itself with the experience of mindfulness that has been passed down since ancient times.

Mindfulness research's popularity, however, comes with many validity concerns—particularly in mindfulness measurements, such as the highly-cited Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003). This 15-item survey asks respondents to rate the frequency of attention to and awareness in daily life. One item reads, “I drive places on ‘automatic pilot’ and then wonder why I went there” (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Our Mindfulness Study

Our research asked the question, “Does the MAAS measure mindfulness as the developers intended?” Since we were tasked with extracting main themes—many esoteric—that the Zen experts covered during interviews, we found it appropriate and necessary to experience meditation first-hand under the guidance of a Zen associate teacher in order to have a feel for what our participants were saying. Although exposure to meditation was light compared to what researchers Kabat-Zinn (2003) and Grossman (2011) suggest, we found it extremely helpful in our research.

Our team interviewed Zen Buddhists on their perspectives on the MAAS' validity and personal experiences in their Zen mindfulness practice. During virtual one-to-one inter-

views, we asked Zen practitioners to complete the MAAS while voicing aloud all thoughts that came to mind. We then assigned the organically arising codes (themes) to respective sections in each transcript. Next, we met during consensus meetings to discuss this coding process while identifying overarching themes. We discovered both potential strengths and gaps in the MAAS' ability to measure mindfulness and in mindfulness research as a whole, according to participant responses.

Because of the nuances in the experiences and understanding of mindfulness, we thought practicing mindfulness as a team under a Zen associate teacher would help us interpret data and accurately represent the participants' awakenings and experiences. Our team is proud to share our testimonies with meditation and research in hopes it will open the minds of our readers to mindful awareness practice in everyday life.

Benefits of Team Meditation

As mentioned previously, most of us were new to formal mindful awareness practice prior to joining the project. We all had tried meditation before, but most did not do so on a regular basis. One team member had practiced breathing exercises while drawing Chinese characters, awareness during yoga, and sitting in silence at church. However, delving into consistent practice as a team under a formally trained, long-time associate Zen teacher allowed us to experience the powerful benefits of steady and sincere practice. Team member Shannon, shares, "Having dedicated class time to practice guided mindfulness sparked my passion to devote myself to my [research] duties, making the work feel less like 'work' and more like a means to connect with my true self."

In addition to formal teachings, our team gained insight not only on the practice, but on approaches to our personal lives by being open to, listening to, and engaging with our participants' interviews on Zen awakenings. These newfound appreciations for the practice began to shift our roles as researchers. As our colleague, Kylah, put it, "Practicing mindfulness...sparked curiosity and a drive to learn more. My work...began to shift—I was no longer just transcribing and coding the interviews, but actively engaging... Things became much less surface level within the interpretation phase as I gained a deeper understanding of the participants' backgrounds and mindfulness itself."

Because we experienced mindful awareness first-hand by meditating before each meeting, prior to interpreting data, we were able to give less energy to the parts of ourselves that "clouded" our thoughts, and thus, experienced a "clearer mind." An analogy of this profound experience is allowing muddy waters to sit for weeks. After a period of sitting still, the mud particles settle, and the clear water that has always been there is evident. Our minds function the same way, as "foggy" and stressed-out thought patterns exist within the parts of

ourselves that are at peace and harmony and interconnected at all times. Many instances, we forget or even fail to see that we make the mistake of thinking we are our thoughts (mud particles), when in actuality, we are more like the clear water, always okay and at peace just as we are; even when it feels completely muddy (M. Shigeoka, personal communication, May 7, 2022). These insights made it much easier to dig deeper into each transcript and approach our work with "level heads." We speculate our changed approaches to our research duties is a direct reflection of Zen mindfulness practice.

Further, as our knowledge of mindful awareness practice began to deepen and clarify, we recognized that conceptualizing and defining mindfulness shifts its essential meaning. This realization is consistent with researchers of traditional mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Our lead researcher's extensive background with Zen mindfulness gave us a steady foundation to talk about the participants' experiences as representative as possible. Becoming aware of the nuances of mindfulness that were difficult to conceptualize led to extra care and attention when analyzing participant responses.

As a team we felt that starting each meeting with meditation fostered a connectedness with one another. Fellow associate researcher, Aydya, reflects, "Starting each meeting with a couple minutes of meditation...made our group more appreciative of the time we had together. We were able to refocus our minds before getting to work, which I think made us more productive." Practicing meditation each week together also opened up both virtual and physical spaces where we felt safe and comfortable with ourselves and each other—a perfect place to share ideas. We were quickly able to trust each other with completing tasks on time and providing honest feedback. Further, these meditation sessions helped us to become aware of and release stress from the day, allowing us to be more present during conversations. We focused our minds for better connection with the interview transcripts, each other, and ourselves.

Our growth within team meetings is undoubtedly reflected in our individual lives. As students, mindfulness has taught us to reorient when we feel overwhelmed and shift our thoughts from repetitive and critical to attentive and understanding. This shift helped build confidence during times of stress. Further, practicing mindfulness has allowed us to become more attentive in our interactions with others. Being present means taking a step back from those repetitive and anxious thoughts, allowing us to build deeper and more meaningful connections with those around us.

Carrying Meditation into Our Lives Post-Project

We practiced team meditation as a means to connect and properly analyze our data regarding mindfulness experiences and to create a space for ideas to flow freely. However, we also found that it affected us outside of the project in our personal

lives, leading to higher confidence levels, a toolbox of coping mechanisms for distressing times, better relationships with others, a deeper sense of our true selves, and overall life satisfaction and gratitude. Even though our project has come to a close, we consciously carry the teachings of mindful awareness with us and know that the practices and awakenings we experienced will always be part of us. We deem mindfulness practice to be incredibly beneficial for our academic lives and careers as we plan on practicing conscious awareness during our post-graduate studies and beyond. Our practices have facilitated a deeper understanding of every situation we approach.

For our readers interested in meditation, we motivate you to try it out. Team member Geneva, shares, “I think that practicing mindfulness is a great way to acknowledge your thoughts and feelings. I believe it can help you overcome challenges along with accepting that life has many ups and downs.” Even starting small with a couple of deep breaths can be infinitely beneficial. It can seem overwhelming at first, and because some of the most important aspects of practice are very subtle, it is almost essential to work with a long-term bona fide teacher who has awakened to these subtleties about their/him/herself. Good teachers act as mirrors for our blind spots, and they can make the process of developing our practice much easier. Connecting on a deep level during meditation in a professional research setting made this team efficient, productive, trustworthy, and fun to work with (see Figure 2 for fun). Teammate Noa, testifies, “Practicing mindfulness together provided an aura of connectedness and comfort amongst the team, which is something I believe all research teams should strive for.”



Figure 2. Practicing Zen mindfulness as a professional team fostered trust and fun within our group.

We Could Not Have Done This Alone!

We hold the utmost gratitude for and send our warmest mahalo to our mentor, Dr. Jane Onoye, Associate Professor at John A. Burns School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, for guiding us through the research process; to Rev. Dr. Mark Shigeoka, LivAwareness Zen Head Monk and President for being our Zen mindfulness practice expert in this project; to our research colleague, Geneva Dela Cruz (see Figure 1 for credentials) who contributed to the research process and reflections in this article; to our participants who openly shared their personal experiences in Zen practice and contributed to a body of knowledge; and finally, to our readers for having an open mind and connecting with us through our Zen mindfulness reflections.

Mahalo nui loa, and we send our best wishes as you breathe in life's infinite wisdom and experience your own mindfulness awakenings.



Figure 3. Team with research poster at John A. Burns School of Medicine's Annual Biomedical Sciences & Health Disparities Symposium (Dr. Jane Onoye, research mentor, second from right).

Closing Thoughts

Tiare Sabellano-Tsutsui: I look forward to delving further into mindfulness research, as my experiences with this study and amazing team mentioned in this article were the highlights of my Psychology BA program. I'm grateful for the opportunities to have worked in psychiatry, psychology, and public health research along with formal traditional Zen mindfulness under a teacher sanctioned to teach. Through Zen mindfulness research and personal practice, I've learned much about how the world works and believe this will enhance my graduate years and beyond.

Noa Brenner: Although my experience with mindfulness and Zen practice was very limited prior to this research project, I loved being able to learn more from my fellow colleagues about the subject while becoming a more mindful person myself. Researching and practicing mindfulness in a team provided an incredibly fulfilling experience while also highly influencing my career goals. I am extremely thankful for this absolutely wonderful experience and look forward to bringing mindfulness with me into future research experiences!

Ayda Espinoza: Through being a part of this project, I've learned the many benefits of being mindful and meditation. I knew that becoming involved in this project would be helpful to learn how to conduct qualitative research, but it has also helped me to become a more mindful student. It has been such an eye-opening experience that has facilitated my growth as a student and person. I'm grateful for this research team and the experiences we've been able to share through meditation.

Shannon Sanchez: I am eager to go into the next chapter of my academic career promoting mindfulness as an investment in one's mental health and a mechanism for adapting to the world around us.

Kylah Slane: Mindfulness research was a completely new field for me, and seemed somewhat outside the realm of my major. However, as a pre-med student I was able to gain so much knowledge from our lead researcher, Tiare, our mentors, and each team member. Researching mindfulness allowed me to grow not only as a student, but as a person. Learning about the practice and participating in team meditations were huge aspects of this research, and I'm so grateful to have been a part of it. I'm excited to bring this knowledge into future studies!

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