MOTIVATIONS FOR MEDITATING

By

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Abstract

Abundant research quantifies the effects of different meditation practices, however little work has been done to investigate the motivations individuals have for starting or continuing their practice. This study investigated individuals’ motivations for starting and continuing meditation practice through an online, open-ended survey. Participants were 401 adult, English-speaking practitioners from 33 states and 27 countries with any kind of meditation practice. Using grounded theory, seven over-arching themes for practicing meditation were identified. The study supported previous work demonstrating that motivations for practicing meditation move along a continuum of self-regulation to self-exploration to self-liberation over time (Shapiro, 1992). The study also revealed increases in altruistic motivations over time, suggesting that over time motivations for meditating become less self-focused. These results have implications for motivational models of how meditation practices are established and maintained.

Keywords: meditation, motivation
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Meditation has a long history stemming from many cultures and religions around the world. Knight (2004) explains that around 1500 BCE, researchers find the first evidence of yoga in Hinduism. Yoga included the physical aspect that the West associates with the word today, however it also had contemplative, devotional and karmic aspects. Later in the 6th century BCE, Daoism developed meditation practice to create a more harmonious relationship between people and the world through contemplation. Some of the most important aspects included energy work and martial arts, potentially modified versions of Hindu yoga. From 535 BCE onwards, evidence of Buddhist meditation is found, with an emphasis on seated meditation and focusing on the breath. This evolved into common forms such as Vipassana and Zen, among others.

Christian meditation developed close to 530 CE in monasteries. The emphasis was on a close, personal relationship with God, and although this was not as popular during the rise of Protestant faiths, this idea remained important in smaller groups, such as the Quakers. During the 9th century CE, Islamic meditation began of Sufism began, with a search to meet the Divine, visualized as an all-consuming fire. The 10th century CE brought about Kabala in Judaism, which involved contemplation of the relationship between words, letters, verses and there numerical equivalents that points to a greater understanding of the Divine (Knight, 2004).

Today, in the West, these traditions continue, as well as their more modern, secular forms. John Kabat-Zinn (1994), considered one of the first to make meditation more mainstream in the Western world, defines meditation today as an effort that helps individuals “wake up from the sleep of automaticity and unconsciousness, thereby making it possible for us to live our lives with access to the full spectrum of possibilities” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.1). There are a number of different types of meditation practices (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015). The most common
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Variation among the different practices is the focus. The focus can be on something that is always readily available, such as the breath or heartbeat. The focus can also be on something that is created for the practice. This may be external, like a particular sound, or internal, like a particular visualization or mantra. Other practices involve more open monitoring: noticing thoughts as they arise, not passing any judgment and letting them pass (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015). The following practices are some common examples. Loving-Kindness Meditation focuses on images of those that one wishes positivity for while Transcendental Meditation focuses on a mantra. Mindfulness meditation often uses open monitoring. However, there can be multiple practices that use the same type of focus, but differ in other ways. This can include posture and duration of practice, among other details. For example, for yoga and martial arts, posture is very important and varies throughout the practice, following varied patterns and guidelines. Vipassana emphasizes duration, with retreats as long as three months being common.

Meditation has become increasingly popular in the West. In a 2012 survey by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 8% of U.S. adults, 18 millions individuals, practiced meditation, and 1.6% of children, 927,000 individuals, did the same. In February 2014, the Association for Psychological Science included mindfulness meditation as one of the topics in its “Teaching Current Directions” section. This trend is noticeable in mainstream press as well. There are copies of magazines like the Yoga Journal and Mindful readily available at many locations. Even publications such as Forbes, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and Bloomberg News have all published multiple articles about meditation.

Part of the increase in popularity is likely due to the growing research showing the benefits of meditation. Typing “Mindfulness” into Google Scholar returns over 63,000 results while “Loving-Kindness Meditation” returns over 16,000 results in the past decade alone.
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Numbers within this range exist for other mediation practices as well. This research has inspired the creation of several empirically-based meditation programs, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR, Kabat-Zinn, 1982), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT, Teasdale et al., 2000) and Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT, Negi et al., 2009). Cullen (2011) explains MBSR has three main components: mindful movement, body scan and sitting meditation. The mindful movement involves basic hatha yoga. The body scan cultivates awareness of the body. Sitting meditation involves awareness of breath and systematic widening of the field of awareness. This leads to awareness of the body, feeling tone, mental states and mental contents. The goal of the practice is to cultivate this awareness in a way that will let meditators incorporate it into everyday life. Barnhofer and Fennel (2008) describe MBCT as a practice based on MBSR and cognitive therapy that is used to treat depression. The intervention aims to increase individuals’ awareness of their thoughts so that when negative thoughts arise, they can notice them and then respond in a way that prevents further negative thinking. The Desbordes et al. paper (2012) explains the aim of CBCT is to create positive change in thoughts, behaviors and emotions that will better help not only the self, but others as well. These practices are just a few of the modern-day Western manifestations of meditation.

Recent scientific research on meditation practices suggests that meditation may offer a range of physical and mental health benefits (e.g. Grossman et al. (2008), Goyal et al. (2014), Lipsey&Wilson (1993)). However, the question as to why individuals in the West begin to meditate is still mostly unexamined. Are they seeking the health and well-being benefits touted by recent research, or do they have other reasons? Although very little research has addressed this question directly, three prior studies offer some clues.
The study conducted by Ganguli (1982) looked at a group of 230 meditation students from the American continent that were on their way to India to see their guru. The name of the practice as well as the guru remained unmentioned in the paper; the authors just referred to them as the “SIP Group”. The students in the SIP Group were all going to see the guru in order to engage in a wide range of activities, including the following: meditating on certain colors, discussing a variety of topics ranging from childrearing to violence, developing faith-healing and mind-reading abilities, among other activities. The study had an open-ended section that asked students their motivations for beginning meditation which were then coded into sub-categories for the following overarching themes: Situational Stress, Social Isolation and Lack of Meaningful Relationships, Drug Abuse, Disturbance of Affect, Disturbed Lifestyle, Problems of Identity and Anomie, Cognitive Needs, Cognitive-Affective Needs, Friends and Relatives as Meditation Motivators and Incidental, Unspecified or Unmentioned. After gathering the data, certain subgroups within the themes emerged as the most common reasons: Need to Understand Occult Phenomena, Depression and then Need to Understand Existential Problems. Although these data provide insight into some motivations for practicing meditation, this study is limited in scope and generalizability. The specificity of the practices involved, the involvement of a guru, and willingness to travel around the world to see the guru shows that these individuals are from a specific subset of American meditators. Although the data is certainly helpful in understanding the particular group in the study, the population used in this study is too specific to be readily generalizable to other groups of meditators in the United States and around the world.

Another study investigated the motivations for meditation for 27 individuals attending a Vipassana retreat (Shapiro, 1992). The researchers hypothesized that over-time, meditators’ motivations for meditation would move along a spectrum from self-regulation to self-exploration
to self-liberation. Self-regulation was described as reasons similar to affect, attention or thought regulation. Self-exploration involved learning more about the self, its roles and relationships. Self-liberation included spirituality, compassion and ideas of going beyond the self. The specific questions asked of participants were: “How long has the person meditated; How frequently per day; what type of meditation; have they changed practices and, if so, why? Have they ever stopped meditating and, if so, for how long? Finally, what reasons, excuses, justifications and/or explanations do they use when they do not meditate?” (Shapiro, 1992, p.26). These questions were asked at the beginning of the retreat when they arrived and then one month and six months after via a printed survey that was mailed to them. If more than one reason was given, the reasons considered the highest on the spectrum (lowest to highest meaning from left to right) was coded. From the 23 respondents whose responses were able to be included, this hypothesis was supported; the most cited reason for beginning meditation, mentioned 37% of the time, was self-regulation. The study also found that motivations did tend to change over time, moving right along the spectrum towards self-exploration and self-liberation. The study provides a useful guide to categorization that could potentially extend to other meditators. However, all of the meditators were Vipassana practitioners that were willing to go on a treat, which means all of them fall into a very specific category of meditation. The sample size of 23 is also quite small. Therefore, the results are not necessarily generalizable.

More recently, Pepping et al. (2016) studied 190 individuals that had practiced mindfulness meditation, 71 of which currently were practicing at the time of the study. The study analyzed individuals’ reasons for beginning meditation, and when it applied, the reasons for continuing. Individuals were first asked open-ended questions regarding their reasons and afterwards asked to rate a series of reasons on a scale of one to seven ranging from “little to no
importance” to “major importance”. The ten categories included: Feel Calmer, Relaxation, Reduce Anxiety, Emotion Regulation, Manage Difficult Thoughts, Concentration, Learning/Curiosity, Interpersonal Relationships, Reduce Physical Pain and Spiritual.

The study found that for the open-ended questions, the reasons given for beginning meditation, from most to least common, were the Reduction of Negative Experiences, Well-being, Introduction by an External Source and Religion/Spirituality. The reasons for continuing meditation were Reduction of Negative Experiences, Well-being, Perception of Effectiveness and Religion/Spirituality. The percentage of individuals mentioning a reason regarding Well-being increased from 31.05% in the first question to 74.65% in the second question. The researchers believed that this was in line with Shapiro’s work, as they viewed Well-being as more related to self-exploration and self-liberation. For the quantitative analysis, the researchers found that for both the questions, “feel calmer” and then “relaxation” were most commonly rated as most important. This study produced data that is somewhat more generalizable than the previous two mentioned, as participants came from different mindfulness meditation practice backgrounds rather than all of them following the same teacher or attending the same retreat, as was the case with prior research. However, the group still was limited to mindfulness meditation, leaving the question as to whether or not these reasons are unique to mindfulness or are perhaps more representative of meditation as a whole. The participants also were all university students, which again, is a limited subset of the overall population of meditators.

The aim of the current study is to build upon existing work examining individuals’ motivations for beginning and continuing meditation, however this time using a more diverse group of meditators. The present study therefore targeted practitioners with various practices
and techniques, lengths of practice, ages and geographic locations. The goal of the present research is to find motivations for meditation practice that are more broadly applicable.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 401 adults that practiced any form of meditation and were recruited via e-mail or flyers to complete the survey. The gender divide was fairly even, with 47% males and 48% females, and then 1% that selected “Other”, and 4% that did not specify gender. The age ranged from 17 to 86-years-old (M=44, SD=16.168). There were 85% of participants that identified as White/Caucasian, 6% as Hispanic, 2% as Black/African American, 1% as Native American and 6% as Pacific Islander. Participants resided in the following 27 countries: Venezuela, Sweden, New Zealand, Brazil, Canada, Finland, Greece, UK (Scotland and Ireland), Germany, Croatia, Netherlands, India, Australia, Poland, Norway, Mexico, Belgium, Slovenia, France, Israel, Switzerland, Spain, Scotland, Hungary, Russia, Chile, Peru and the United States. Within the United States, participants resided in 33 states: Arizona, Georgia, Ohio, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Utah, Nevada, California, Tennessee, Florida, Washington, Colorado, Oregon, Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, Texas, New Mexico, Maryland, Delaware, Connecticut, Oklahoma, Indiana, New York, Iowa, Kentucky, Virginia, Illinois and Maine as well as Washington D.C. Participants varied in highest level of education as follows: 2% with some high school; 4% with a high school diploma or GED; 14% with some college; 4% with an associate’s degree; 26% with a bachelor’s degree; 28% with a master’s degree; and 17% with a JD, MD or PhD or other professional doctoral degree; while 4% did not provide the information. As for current employment, the variation included 36% that are employed for wages, 16% that are self-employed, 16% that are students, 2% that are unemployed and looking for work, 1% that are unemployed and not looking for
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work, 1% that are homemakers or family caretakers, 13% that are in the military, 10% that are retired and 1% that are unable to work, while 3% that did not provide the information.

In regards to meditation practice, participants differed considerably as well. The length of practice varied with 2% having practiced for less than one month, 4% for one to three months, 3% for three to six months, 8% for six months to a year, 22% for one to three years, 12% for three to five years, 16% for five to ten years, 9% for 10 to 15 years, 22% for more than 15 years while 1% that did not give this information. Participants had a meditation teacher in 35% of cases, 64% did not, while 1% declined to answer. Participants were part of a meditation group 34% of the time, 65% were not, while 1% again declined to answer. In regards to a meditation retreat, 54% of participants had attended one, 45% had not and 1% did not respond.

Procedure
This study was conducted as an online survey and was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Arizona. Researchers sent-out the link to the survey via e-mail to meditation list-servs in Tucson such as AMRIG, Center for Compassion Studies, Mindful Ambassadors, and various sanghas, as well as to groups outside of Tucson such as CBCT Teachers, Mindfulness Digest, and Shambala Boston. It was also sent to teachers of smaller groups and to individuals that the researchers knew meditated. Recruitment e-mails all requested that meditators share the survey with any other individuals or groups they knew that meditated. Posts on Facebook pages of meditation groups shared the link as well. Flyers were posted at meditation centers with the link to the survey website, which was hosted on Qualtrics. The survey had both a computer and phone setting so that participants could easily complete the survey using any device with Internet.
Measures

Upon following the link to the survey website, the first page gave a brief overview of the survey, the expectation that it should take no more than 15 minutes, informed participants of their anonymity, told them of their right to skip any questions or stop the survey as well as gave contact information for the researchers. The first set of questions was regarding their meditation practice, specifically looking at their length of practice, membership in a meditation group, presence of a meditation teacher and whether or not they had been on a meditation retreat. There were open-ended questions regarding the type of retreat they had been on, if applicable, and then participants were asked for a description of their current meditation practice. The next two pages each contained a more in-depth open-ended question regarding their practice, and participants were asked to provide as much detail as they could. The first question was “Thinking back to when you first started meditating, what was your reason or motivation for beginning your meditation practice? Please write down your thoughts as they come to mind and do not worry about spelling or grammar.” The second question was: “What is your reason or motivation for continuing to practice meditation presently? Please write down your thoughts as they come to mind and do not worry about spelling or grammar.” The next two pages contained open-ended questions regarding the most gratifying aspect of their meditation practice and the greatest challenge, both of which will be used in further studies. The next page asked about demographic information. Last, participants completed a Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) (Gosling et al., 2003) which will also be used in future studies. The final page thanked participants for their time, invited them to share it with others and gave the researchers’ contact information again.

Throughout the survey, there was a bar along the bottom that showed participants their progress. This helped to emphasize that the survey was not lengthy and therefore, ideally,
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encouraged more thoughtful responses. If participants clicked “Next” to move on to the following page but had not answered one or more of the previous questions, a box popped-up giving them the option to either return to the unanswered question(s) or to continue without answering.

Data Analytic Approach

Coding for the open-ended responses was all done using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003) by a single coder, to ensure consistency. The data was processed using IBM SPSS 23.

As mentioned previously, this study focused on the survey’s questions about participants’ motivations for beginning and continuing meditation. These questions were open-ended so that no preconceived notions about motivations for meditation held by the researchers would drive the results. To continue to allow the participants’ responses to speak for themselves, a qualitative approach guided by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003) was used to see what overarching themes the data suggested.

The first step in the process involved researchers reading through the responses for participants’ reasons for starting meditation and paraphrasing each motivation in the responses for its key ideas and themes. From this list of over 150 paraphrased themes, similar themes were grouped together. The process continued through multiple rounds, each one combining similar phrases until 19 distinct categories emerged. The categories were then arranged so that they were part of seven greater overarching themes. The seven overarching themes were Health Improvement, Emotion Regulation, Mind Modulation, Personal Development, Outside Influence, Curiosity and Other. Under the theme Health Improvement the two categories were Physical Health and Mental Health. The theme Emotion Regulation had three categories, which were Critical Life Event, Negative Affect Regulation and Positive Affect Regulation. Mind
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Modulation consisted of Thought/Attention Regulation, Increase Awareness, Skill Training and Alteration of Consciousness. Personal Development included Self-Acceptance, Self-Improvement, Relationship Improvement, Spiritual/Philosophical and Altruistic. Under Outside Influence there was Social/Peer/Media, Gateway Practice and Teachings/Teacher. The final two categories stood alone, not a part of any overarching theme: Curiosity and Other. The details of the specific categories are given below. They are presented from most to least commonly cited. Note that participants were able to have more than one motivation, so the sum of the percentages will equal more than 100%.

Results

Starting Motivation

Figure 1. Participant reasons for starting meditation

The most common reason for starting meditation involved Mental Health. Any references to terms defined as psychopathology by DSM-5 were counted in this category. The most frequently cited were anxiety and depression, but Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive
Compulsive Disorder and insomnia were mentioned as well. It is important to note, especially in regards to anxiety and depression, that most participants did not specify that they had received clinical diagnoses or that their mental health concerns were at clinical levels. Some examples included: “had issues with social anxiety” and “I had constant panic attacks and terrible anxiety”.

The Mental Health category was mutually exclusive with three other categories: Negative Affect Regulation, Positive Affect Regulation and Thought/Attention Control. This was because the symptoms of mental illness typically involve these areas, so counting both seemed redundant.

The Mental Health category also included responses that explicitly stated “mental health” or expressed just general mental well-being. Mental Health was a motivation in 24% of responses.

The Negative Affect Regulation category described mentions of goals to regulate negative affect and emotions without the use of terms commonly associated with psychopathology. The most commonly cited was stress management, however, managing anger, grief, fear, suffering and similar expressions were also expressed. Specific examples of responses for this category included: “Overwhelming suffering and a sense of total dysfunction” and “Was under a lot of stress and felt overwhelmed by my emotions”. Negative Affect Regulation was mentioned in 18% of responses.

The third most common reason was Spiritual/Philosophical. Spiritual reasons included anything mentioning any god, higher source, higher power or divinity. It included Enlightenment and terms such as “no-self” that typically mean the equivalent. Examples included “My motivation was (and still is) to feel more connected with my inner being, which I also call God” and “I thought it was a mystical process”. Philosophical reasons included ideas such as wanting to understand one’s place in the universe, finding meaning or fulfillment in life and understanding how everyone is connected. Examples included: “I was interested in deeper
understanding of self and world” and “...a personal inquiry that would hopefully lead me into deeper communion with myself and with others/the world”. These two areas were grouped together because both involve the individual finding a way to understand himself or herself and others in a greater context. For this reason, general sentiments related to this that were not explained, such as seeking understanding or wisdom, were also included in this category. Note that religion was not counted in this category but rather in the Teaching/Teacher category explained below. This motivation was present in 17% of responses.

Positive Affect Regulation was the next most mentioned reason. This category involved increasing positive affect and emotions that were not dealing with mental illness. Words that signaled this were increasing calm, relaxation, positivity, peace, happiness, and equanimity and feeling centered or balanced. Examples included: “The idea of peace and tranquility appealed to me” and “To begin my day in a relaxed way and to support staying centered as my day progressed”. If words or phrases were difficult to categorize as negative or positive affect regulation, the most straightforward connotation of the word was used. For example, to “calm-down” was coded as positive affect regulation because “calm” involves positive feelings. Participants indicated this reason 15% of the time.

Social/Peer/Media Influence meant that participants were strongly influenced by one or more of these. By strongly, this means that they did more than just mention a recommendation or media source in passing, but instead emphasized the role this had in beginning their practice. For social influence, an example was “I started mediation as a child. I was taught by my mother”. Peer influence was along the lines of a friend or partner insisted one try meditation or made it sound particularly appealing. For example, one participant said, “Everyone in yoga was doing it/talking about it. Needed to find out what the fuss was about.” Media, for lack of a better term,
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relates to publications that participants read about meditation, whether that was a book, or an article in a popular science magazine or in an actual academic journal. An example was “I was reading a number of books on brain science by writers like Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson. It was Richard Davidson's book "The Emotional Life of Your Brain" that really got me to start.” The following was not counted: “I was horribly depressed and someone told me that meditation might help.” The emphasis in this statement was on depression. The participant was likely searching for some relief for the depression, making that the true cause. The participant called the person that shared the information “someone” and did not elaborate on the relationship or give any details about the exchange, indicating that it was not the particular individual or their interaction specifically that was a motivating factor, ruling out this category. Participants mentioned a reason in this category 13% of the time.

Thought/Attention Regulation involved two closely related processes. The first aspect typically involved participants trying to eliminate or reduce rumination, worry or similar distressing thought patterns. Typical phrases were along the lines of “Learning how to silence the mind” and “I wanted more control of my inner monologue”. Similarly, the attention aspect referred to improving focus and concentration. In most of these responses, participants explicitly said “focus”. Participants cited this category in 11% of the responses.

Teaching/Teacher was also mentioned several times. This one was only selected if participants elaborated about either a particular teacher(s) or teaching(s) as being part of the reason for starting their practice. For example, one person began his or her response by saying, “I had a gifted spiritual teacher…” and then explained the learning process he or she experienced with the teacher. Teaching included religion or the citation of some particular religious book or specific religious teaching. Books written by meditation teachers or gurus were counted in this
category as well, whereas books that were more science-based were included in the Social/Peer/Media category. Participants mentioned this motivation in 11% of the responses.

The Increase Awareness category referred to both situational and self-awareness. Situational awareness involves being aware of one’s surroundings. Self-awareness is awareness of physical sensations, mental processes, emotional states and personal traits and habits. Common ways of phrasing these ideas were in terms of “mindfulness” or the “present moment”. Some specific examples included “I wanted to gain a greater connection with myself and how I was feeling. I also wanted to learn to be more mindful in my day to day life” and “I felt very disconnected from "myself"”. Participants cited this in 10% of responses.

Responses for the Curiosity category usually explicitly said curiosity and described an interest in the experience of meditation. However, general interest in contemplative practices or meditation was also mentioned. An example was “Want to feel how it feels like.” Participants included this motivation 9% of the time.

Physical Health included mentions of pain relief as well as intentions to manage specific conditions. Such conditions included heart disease and blood pressure. If participants only mentioned “health” or “general health”, then this was assumed to mean physical health. Note that insomnia or problems sleeping were included in “Mental Health” since DSM-5 considers insomnia as part of psychopathology. Participants mentioned this 8% of the time.

Self-Improvement involved participants hoping to actively work to change some aspect of themselves, whether that be in a mental or emotional way. Mental reasons included developing specific qualities such as better decision-making, self-control or creativity. The main emotional reason listed was altering one’s mindset. Note that this is not general emotion regulation, as it does not involve any particular positive or negative emotions, but rather
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cultivating an entire new worldview or outlook. Straightforward responses were similar to: “I have been devoted to personal growth and development” but sometimes were more complex like “wanted to feel more purposeful in daily life”. Participants cited this reason 8% of the time.

The Gateway Practice category meant that participants originally had another type of practice that was in some way similar to meditation or could, in some cases, incorporate meditation. Their interest in the initial practice made them believe that they may enjoy or benefit from meditation as well. Most commonly cited were yoga and then martial arts. An example was “I thought meditation would be like yoga but, instead of concentrating on the body, it would concentrate on the mind.” This reason applied to 6% of participants.

The Critical Life Event category referred to participants’ reference to some life-changing event that inspired them to meditate. Such events included break-ups, a personal disease diagnosis for participants or a family member, abuse, loss of a family member, a work-related event, crisis with a child, a violent act in the community and childhood trauma. A specific example was “I was deeply upset over my younger sister's cancer diagnosis.” Note that the Critical Life Event category was mutually exclusive with both the Negative Affect and Positive Affect categories, as it is usually the case the one must deal with emotion regulation following such an event. However, it was not mutually exclusive with the Mental Illness category, as one does not necessarily involve the other. Participants mentioned an incident qualifying as a critical life event 5% of the time.

The Alteration of Consciousness category indicated participants that wanted to alter their minds or states of consciousness in substantial ways, beyond cultivating a new worldview or outlook. For example, “I thought that it was a way of expanding consciousness and transcending space-time”. Many of them were related to experiences individuals had with drugs such as
marijuana, LCD (acid) and mushrooms; participants were hoping to replicate the experience they had had with drugs without the side effects. Examples of these included “Wanted to achieve [a level] of awareness that I achieved on LSD without the fireworks and neurotic head trips” and “…I could recreate some of the wild imagery I associated with marijuana.” This reason was given in 4% of the responses.

The Altruistic category included reasons that involved helping others. An example was: “I started meditating because I thought it was a practice that could help improve my students' focus and resiliency. I needed to start it first.” The reason had to be about actually helping others for the others’ benefit, not just changing one’s internal thoughts towards them. For example, the following was not considered altruistic: “I wanted to stop my internal critic which was mostly aimed at others.” Although changing this “internal voice” could indeed translate to kinder actions towards others, it does not necessarily mean it did; it could have meant changing one’s state of mind and that is it, and for this reason, it was considered “Self-Improvement” instead. Altruism was mentioned by 4% of the participants.

The Relationship Improvement category involved improving any relationship, whether that be with a partner, family member or friend. Examples included: “I've had problems opening up with people”, “lack of patience with family and friends” and “getting better with girls”. Participants mentioned this reason in 3% of responses.

The Skill Training category most often involved participants developing a skill for their work. For example, two participants were poker players that hoped meditation would help them to perform better in their games. Others used it to improve some skill for positions as therapists. Students wanted to study more effectively. Others just cited the desire to develop certain skills, but did not elaborate on them. Participants mentioned skill-training 2% of the time.
Self-Acceptance included accepting one’s physicality, mentality and/or emotional states. This goes beyond just being aware, but did not extend to self-improvement, as there was no change desired. This category simply marked responses that expressed participants’ desire to be content with their current state, whatever that was. Examples included: “…to accept some of the negative aspects of me as they are…” and “…increase comfort with unpleasant feelings…” This response was given 2% of the time.

The “Other” category was for reasons that did not appear to fit in any of the previous categories. Only 1% of reasons given could not be accounted for in this way.

Continuing Meditation

Figure 2. Motivations for continuing meditation

For the purpose of comparison, the themes and underlying categories that were used to classify the reasons for starting motivation were used to classify reasons for continuing
motivation. The one exception was the Routine category. This was added because some participants expressed that one of the main reasons they continued to meditate was because it had become a normal part of their everyday life, just like eating or sleeping. Of course the idea of a routine could not apply to the reason that they first began, so in order to account for a common reason given for this second question, a new category was added. Note that when giving the relative rank for the frequencies, “Routine” is not counted as a category for the sake of making a comparison to the starting rank.

The following is the list of reasons, from most to least cited: Positive Affect Regulation (34%), Increase Awareness (25%), Spiritual/Philosophical (24%), Mental Health (23%), Altruistic (22%), Thought/Attention Regulation (20%), Self-Improvement (19%), Negative Affect Regulation (18%), Physical Health (12%), Self-Acceptance (7%), Routine (5%), Skill Training (4%), Relationship Improvement (4%), Other (3%), Teachings/Teacher (3%), Critical Life Event (2%), Alteration of Consciousness (2%), Social/Media/Peer Influence (2%), Curiosity (1%) and Gateway Practice (1%). As with the reasons for starting meditation, participants could name more than one, causing the percentages to total to more than 100%.
Differences Between Reasons for Starting Versus Continuing

Figure 3. Percentage Change of Category Frequency Between Reasons for Starting versus Continuing Meditation

The percentage change between the reasons for starting and then continuing meditation are given from greatest positive change to greatest negative change: Altruistic (473%), Other (333%), Self-Acceptance (286%), Self-Improvement (147%), Increase Awareness (139%), Positive Affect Regulation (134%), Thought/Attention Regulation (80%), Physical Health (60%), Spiritual/Philosophical (40%), Skill Training (36%), Relationship Improvement (17%),
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Negative Affect Regulation (4%), Mental Health (-4%), Alteration of Consciousness (-63%), Critical Life Event (-68%), Teachings/Teacher (-77%), Social/Peer/Media Influence (-89%), Curiosity (-89%) and Gateway Practice (-91%).

Discussion

The most common reason for starting meditation was Mental Illness. By contrast, the most common reason for continuing meditation was for Positive Affect Regulation. Whereas the reason for starting meditation was to reduce something negative, the reason for continuing was to cultivate something positive. This extends to the second most common reason for each as well. For starting meditation, the second most common reason was Negative Affect Regulation which again reflects the reduction of something negative. For continuing meditation, the second most common reason is Increase Awareness and is again the cultivation of something positive. However, to look at these results in a more structured manner, it is helpful to review them using the framework previously mentioned.

Relation to the Self-Regulation, Self-Exploration and Self-Liberation Continuum (Shapiro, 1992)

It is interesting to see that the data does somewhat move along the self-regulation, self-exploration and self-liberation scale that Shapiro described. This means that participants reasons for continuing meditation are more complex and more often towards the self-exploration or self-liberation end of the scale later on as compared to when they started and were closer to the self-regulation phase. For these data, the themes of Health Improvement and Emotion Regulation were categorized as self-regulation. Mind Modulation, Outside Influence and Curiosity were categorized as self-exploration. Personal Development was categorized as self-liberation. Each one of these levels increases in complexity. Self-regulation means gaining control of the most basic things that one needs every day: one’s physicality, mentality and emotional states (Shapiro,
1992). It is hard to accomplish anything more complex without having these issues addressed first. The Health Improvement theme dealt with the first two aspects while the Emotion Regulation theme deals with last. Self-exploration involves finding out one’s capabilities (Shapiro, 1992). Mind Modulation meant participants adjusted different cognitive processes in order to see how they could function differently. Outside Influence and Curiosity meant participants explored their capabilities, to find aspects that they could begin to develop that they may not have realized were there. Self-liberation involves one freeing oneself from limitations as well as freeing oneself from centering just on the self (Shapiro, 1992). This could have meant actually cultivating a skill that helps one rise above limitations, but just as importantly, it can also mean that one cultivates a mindset that makes limitations be viewed in a more positive light. “Personal Development” was about self-liberation because it encompasses categories that involve developing skills for the purpose of self-betterment. It was also about looking outward as well by caring for the well-being of others.

Self-regulatory reasons occupied the following relative positions, with the starting and then continuing motivations listed: Mental Health (1\textsuperscript{st}/4\textsuperscript{th}), Negative Affect Regulation (2\textsuperscript{nd}/8\textsuperscript{th}), Positive Affect Regulation (4\textsuperscript{th}/1\textsuperscript{st}), Physical Health (10\textsuperscript{th}/9\textsuperscript{th}) and Critical Life Event (13\textsuperscript{th}/15\textsuperscript{th}). This continuum framework predicts that all of these would go down in relative rank over time, which Mental Health, Negative Affect Regulation and Critical Life Event do. Physical Health has only a modest change up in ranking though, moving up one position. One possible explanation for this could be that certain aspects of physical health are outside of self-regulation, as some conditions are outside of a person’s control. Positive Affect Regulation does see a relative step-up in ranking. However, it could be that participants that are focusing on increasing positive affect instead of just decreasing negative affect are potentially closer to developing a
new mindset, which is part of Personal Development and therefore closer to a higher level on the continuum. If this speculation is correct, then this increase in rank for Positive Affect Regulation may still follow the framework. In terms of percentage change, most in line with this interpretation are Mental Health which decreased by 4% and Critical Life Event which decreased by 68%. Positive Affect Regulation, however, showed a substantial increase of 134%. If the reasoning behind its increase in relative rank is correct, then it could be applied to this increase in percentage as well. Mention of Physical Health increased in mention by 60%, however this also could be potentially explained by the previously stated reasoning. Negative Affect Regulation increased by 4%, deviating from the framework.

The relative rankings for self-exploratory categories, with the original ranking first and the continuation ranking second, are as follows: Social/Peer/Media (5th/17th), Thought/Attention Regulation (6th/6th), Teachings/Teacher (7th/14th), Increase Awareness (8th/2nd), Curiosity (9th/18th), Gateway Practice (12th/19th), Alteration of Consciousness (14th/16th) and Skill Training (17th/11th). Looking at relative importance, two out of the four Mind Modulation categories increased in importance over time, supporting the framework, while one stayed the same and one, Alteration of Consciousness, went against this idea and decreased in relative importance. However, Alteration of Consciousness is slightly different from the others under the same theme in that it is not essential to improve this area before moving on to something that falls under Personal Development. These other categories, by contrast, are an important preliminary step, as it would be hard to advance in personal development if one did not have good focus, awareness, etc. For example, an individual would need to develop focus in order to work on self-development. If someone could not focus on the quality at hand, how could they improve it? In a similar way, how could one be able to accept his or her own emotions if there was not an
awareness of those emotions first. Those categories in the Outside Influence theme and Curiosity all decreased in relative importance. However, an argument can be made that these themes are different from Health Improvement, Emotion Regulation, Mind Modulation and Personal Development. While these themes all had implicit goals that meditators hope to achieve, Outside Influence and Curiosity do not seem to have any specified goals. If this is the case, then it seems more understandable that over time their importance would fade. So although these two themes are self-exploratory in nature, the lack of explicit goals may mean they fall outside of the continuum framework. Looking at percentage changes, three of the Mind Modulation categories, Increase Awareness, Thought/Attention Regulation and Skills Training, all increased 139%, 80% and 36%, respectively. Mention of Alteration of Consciousness decreased by 63%, for the potential reason explained earlier. Teachings/Teacher, Social/Peer/Media Influence, Curiosity and Gateway Practice all decreased by 77%, 89%, 89% and 91%, respectively, also potentially because of the reason explained previously.

The relative categories give the original ranking first and the continuation ranking second for categories that fall under self-liberation: Spiritual/Philosophical (3rd/3rd), Self-Improvement (11th/7th), Altruistic (15th/5th), Relationship Improvement (16th/12th) and Self-Acceptance (18th/10th). All of the relative ranks increased, with the exception of Spiritual/Philosophical staying the same, supporting the continuum idea that self-liberation becomes more important over time. In percentage terms, Altruistic, Self-Acceptance, Self-Improvement, Spiritual/Philosophical and Relationship Improvement all increased by 473%, 286%, 147%, 40% and 17%, respectively, echoing the results of relative ranking.
Relation to Recent Research about Motivations for Mindfulness Meditation (Pepping et al., 2016)

Besides comparing it to a theoretical framework, it is also interesting to compare the results to other available data. Most relevant is the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) about mindfulness meditation mentioned earlier. First using the qualitative results, their rankings for starting motivations are from most to least common are: Reduction of Negative Experiences, Well-being, Introduction by an External Source and Religion/Spirituality. Reduction of Negative Experiences aligns with the two categories with the greatest frequency in this study: Mental Health and Negative Affect Regulation. Since Mental Health and Negative Affect Regulation are mutually exclusive, the two percentages can be added, meaning 42% of individuals in this study had the equivalent motivation. In the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016), the percentage was 94.74%. So although in terms of relative importance both studies found this reason to be most common, the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) found it to be much more prevalent.

The second category from the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016), Well-being, cannot be compared with this study, as according to their definition, it includes ideas that for this study have been separated among different categories. The description included “increased happiness” which for this study falls under Positive Affect Regulation, “greater self-awareness” and “greater alertness” which falls under Increase Awareness, “improved performance” which falls under Self-Improvement and “greater concentration” which falls under Thought/Attention Regulation. This involves multiple categories and even multiple overarching themes, and as they were not mutually exclusive, the percentages cannot be combined. For this study, researchers broke down well-being into its components in order to create a more detailed analysis. Also,
these categories included other ideas that may not be considered Well-being according to their definition.

The third reason from the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016), Introduction by an External Source, was mentioned in the study by 28.4% of participants. In this study, the percentage of responses in the Outside Influence category were 13%, 11% and 6% for Social/Peer/Media Influence, Teachings/Teacher and Gateway Practice, respectively. Although these percentages are not mutually exclusive and therefore cannot be added together, if this were adjusted for, the numbers could probably be fairly similar. However, it is important to note the difference in definition between the two studies. The study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) defined an external source specifically as a person, whereas for this study, an outside influence could be not only a person but also a book, article or practice.

The study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) greatly differs from this study in the fourth reason it found, Religion/Spirituality, as only 6.32% of subjects mentioned this reason. In this study, Spiritual/Philosophical reasons were given by 17% of participants. Again, the definitions differed here, as with this study, the explicit mention of religion was included in the Teachings/Teacher category, which was mentioned 11% of the time. No matter which category is used, this study received significantly more participants giving spiritual reasons. This could suggest that perhaps those that partake in mindfulness meditation are less interested in the spiritual aspect compared to those practicing other forms of meditation. However, this could just be another important difference in definition. One would need to know how the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) coded for words that may or may not be viewed as philosophical or spiritual, such as just general mentions of understanding or wisdom; the paper did not specify.
The reasons for continuing had both differences and similarities as well. The study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) has Reduction of Negative Experiences as the most common reason for continuing meditation, just as it did for the initial reason. This study, on the other hand, found the top three reasons for continuing meditation to be based all on positive ideas: Positive Affect Regulation, Increase Awareness and Spiritual/Philosophical. The study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) actually saw the percentage of Reduction of Negative Experience mentions increase to 95.77%. Although this study saw the mention of Negative Affect Regulation increase by 4%, it decreased in relative importance from second to eighth rank while mentions of Mental Health decreased 4% and from first to fourth in rank. This could suggest a fundamental difference between those who practice mindfulness meditation and other forms of meditation or, maybe more likely, significant differences in the demographics of the groups. The study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) includes mostly younger meditators that had not been meditating for relatively long while this study has a more diverse group of participants.

Well-being was again the second most common reason for the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016). In this case, they described well-being in positive terms: “greater happiness and improved psychological health and life satisfaction”. This study saw increases in the number of participants that mentioned Positive Affect Regulation and Self-Acceptance and a decrease of participants mention Mental Health, all of which are similar to those ideas.

The third reason for the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) was Perception of Effectiveness, which was mentioned by 18.31% of participants. The closest equivalent in this study would be Routine, which was mentioned 5%. The study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) found Religion/Spirituality to be the least common reason again, this time with even less
frequency, being mentioned only in 4.23% of cases. In this study, Spirituality/Philosophical actually increased in times mentioned by 40%, although the Teachings/Teacher category did decrease by 77%. Again, the definitions seem to be different, so it is not possible to make a true comparison. It could again be that those that practice mindfulness meditation are fundamentally different or related to differences in demographics, both of which were also mentioned earlier.

Another possibility could be that in the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016), the way participants viewed spirituality over time was changed by meditation, and therefore the wording to describe it changed overtime as well. For example, in this study, one participant gave as the starting motivation “I needed more depth in my spiritual and personal life.” However, when describing the motivation for continuing, he or she said “The continued deepening of the practice and discoveries of more depth as the practice continues and deepens.” For both of these instances, this study considered both of these reasons spiritual, even though the first reason explicitly mentions spirituality and the second does not. If the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) had a more strict definition that did not account for these changes, then this could explain the decrease in mention over time.

For the quantitative results of the mindfulness study, ten categories were measured: Feel Calmer, Relaxation, Reduce Anxiety, Emotion Regulation, Manage Difficult Thoughts, Concentration, Learning/Curiosity, Interpersonal Relationships, Reduce Physical Pain and Spiritual. The only two areas that are similar for comparison purposes are curiosity and relationships. In the graphs, it appears that curiosity increases in importance over time, while for this study shows an 89% decrease. Both studies show that improving relationships increases in importance over time.
In summary, the most notable similarity between the studies shows a negative affect reduction as a strong reason for starting meditation. However, the most significant difference is the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) shows spirituality as a relatively unimportant reason overall, while this study shows it is an important motivation for both starting and continuing. This could in part be due to the greater number of categories in this study compared to the study conducted by Pepping et al. (2016) which allowed for more detailed analysis. The other differences may relate to differences in demographics or category definitions, as mentioned above.

Significance of Altruism

There is another noteworthy point regarding the change over time. The greatest percentage increase from initial reason to the continuation reason occurs for altruism. The Altruistic category saw a 473% increase. Besides being important just because it is a large number, it is also significant because it brings attention to the idea that meditation is not always about the self. This could happen through numerous potential paths from a self-regulatory category to a self-exploratory category to finally altruism in self-liberation. Perhaps the techniques used to solve a particular health issue carry over and the principles are applied to attention regulation in general. Then when someone thinks of another person, because of the increased ability to hold attention, when he or she witnesses this person suffering, he or she will be able to more understand the person’s pain, and therefore be more moved to help the person. Any number of combinations like these can be constructed.

Limitations

One of the strengths of the study was its qualitative nature that allowed the data to speak for itself without researchers putting too many preconceived notions in participants’ heads or
creating conditions for demand characteristics. However, this strength can also be viewed as a weakness when considering the extremely subjective nature of coding the responses. In order to minimize this effect, the same coder was used throughout, however if another coder went through all of the data also, he or she might return with different results based on his or her own relative biases.

There were some issues with the categories used. There was an interesting change in the Other category in regards to continuing motivations; there was 333% increase in use. Although this sounds trivial, it suggests that perhaps the categories created based on solely the responses of why participants began motivation did not accurately account for all for all of the reasons participants continued to meditate. Although using the same categories made comparison easier, perhaps if a system had been created from only the continuation motivations, the categories would be quite different.

Some of the differentiation between categories was not obvious. The Negative Affect Regulation and Positive Affect Regulation in some cases may be saying the same thing, just using different words. For example, “calm-down” was coded as “Positive Affect Regulation” because calm has a positive meaning. However, to “calm-down” implies that one must be upset, and therefore the argument can be made that it is Negative Affect Regulation.

The Increase Awareness category was a bit broad because it covered both situational and personal awareness. Situational awareness can easily be considered a low level of awareness, as it is something that many animals have, whereas personal awareness, on a level where someone is aware of complex emotions and output from higher-level thinking is much more specialized. Because oftentimes just “awareness” or “mindfulness” was given as a reason there was no way to differentiate between the two, however realistically, they are probably very different.
Self-Acceptance may also be considered a troublesome category, depending on a person’s definition of self. In this study, accepting the self meant accepting one’s physicality, mentality, emotional states and personal characteristics. However, some might argue that emotions, for example, are not part of the self, but rather part just part of general human experience that everyone experiences and not unique to the individual.

The Spiritual/Philosophical category can also be confusing, as spirituality and philosophy can be quite personal and mean very different things to different people. For example, a person searching for “no-self” may be different from a person looking for a “Catholic spirituality”.

Further Study

Further study could involve a second coder going through the data to find inter-coder reliability. Researchers could also investigate not just the general changes in motivation over time but also changes at an individual level. This could clarify whether on average all participants tend to change motivations moderately, or if some change a lot and others barely at all. This would help determine if meditators overall show typical trends, or if trends occur within specific groups. Potential groups can also be measured by comparing demographic information and information about the type of meditation practiced compared with the motivations. The survey also collected other data regarding meditation rewards and challenges, as well as personality questions. Although they were not utilized in this study, the motivations can be compared to this data in the future. Future studies can build off of this data, as well as potential data that was just mentioned, by using the results to administer quantitative studies that can confirm these results in a more concrete way.
Implications and Conclusion

This study provides insight into why people start and then continue meditation and therefore may help to create a general understanding of the type of person that is drawn to meditation. Understanding this can help meditation teachers better relate to their students and understand how to keep them engaged in the practice. It can also help lower attrition rates, as this is a prevalent problem faced by many meditation groups and therefore faced by those conducting studies about meditation. Keeping meditators engaged and continuing the practice will be able to help focus those that want to continue for personal reasons, but it will also create a better environment for carrying out studies on meditation, and therefore increase what can be learned about it.
References


