

Contemplative Science and its Implications for Psychology

An Empirical Study of Zen Buddhist Practices

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Abstract.

This master thesis suggest using their term contemplative science when doing research on different meditation practices. In recent year several papers have been published on mindfulness, that share many factor with the Zen meditation. However when mindfulness is measured it is often done on other contemplative practitioners such as Zen practitioners or Tibetan monks the results reveal a possible gap in how mindfulness is understood.

The thesis starts with a literature review regarding the theoretical background on Zen and Psychology. Zen practice shows positive results, on brain morphology but measurements done with scales intended for mindfulness reveals that there are cultural factors that need to be accounted for when doing research on contemplative practices.

The thesis uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to conduct an empirical study of the experience of five Zen Buddhist practitioners varying in age, gender, years of practice and Zen tradition.

The results are five themes. Duality, Conceptualization and Self were regarded quite differently in the context of Zen practice. Leading to the conclusion that the cultural context of the practice needs to be accounted for when creating tools such as questionnaires in order to measure contemplative practices like mindfulness self report questioners.

The experience of awakening is explained in detail by several of the participants leading to a better understanding of the concept. The concept of awakening is accompanied by a change of perspective that is applicable in therapies. How zen practitioners experience frustration due to their training is also a recurring theme that is explained as serving a purpose.

Key words: Contemplative, Zen, Mindfulness, Qualitative, IPA.

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Introduction

Contemplation is defined as an act of considering with attention or the action of deep reflective thought. This method is synonymous with meditation. Contemplative science then can be considered the scientific study of meditation or its effects thereof. Meditation falls into several broad categories from mindfulness practice, defined as the “awareness that emerges through paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally”(Kabat-Zinn, 2005), to Tibetan ritual and meditation (Elsass, 2011).

In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the third category: the Japanese practice of Zen meditation. Zen is a unique form of Buddhism that includes specific meditation practices that I will argue share many common traits with contemporary psychology. By comparing the two, I hope to make it clear that both traditions can benefit from the other.

Literature review

“The Nature of Contemplative Science and Some Prospects for its Future Development”

This paper was influential for this thesis. In the paper, Terje Sparby argues that scientific studies contribute to the entire field of human knowledge and that contemplative science should concern itself with investigating the effects of meditation practices. The argument is that contemplative practices mainly concern themselves with the actual practice of meditation and not an investigation into the practice. This becomes apparent when meditators are instructed to engage in open monitoring. In open monitoring, a person simply notices the sensations and thoughts that arise and then lets them go (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). The purpose of this is because the thoughts and feelings would otherwise distract from the experience of the practice. In a contemplative practice, using intellect is considered secondary. Whereas the intellectual investigation into the practice is necessary. The paper states that contemplative science should strive to incorporate

what the contemplative practices lack, such as scientific investigation of neurobiological markers for instance. The argument is that the traditional way that data was gathered in contemplative traditions was simply through introspective practices. A parallel to history is drawn by stating that sciences like astronomy gained a lot from the technological advancement of instruments such as the telescope, and sciences such as physics have gained monumental advances through the construction of tools including the large hadron collider for example. In a similar fashion, contemplative science could benefit from the tools and innovations from neighboring disciplines. Terje Sparby argues that the epistemic connections between contemplative practices and science should be the main focus of contemplative science. The aim of contemplative science should also be to connect knowledge gained from other areas of human study while striving towards an understanding of the human being that is as complete as possible, including by relating the views and traditions of other disciplines to contemporary experience and empirical science. The paper itself suggests that contemplative science would benefit from phenomenologically grounded descriptions and documented cases. It also suggests that contemplative science should attempt to seek an explanation of how the contemplative mind functions and that studies should be based on empirical data and comprehensive theory which would help to systematically eliminate errors (Sparby, 2017).

With this in mind, I will attempt to go through the literature that measures or otherwise investigates contemplation from a psychological viewpoint. While meditation practices such as contemporary mindfulness meditation and Tibetan Buddhist meditation may serve as examples and comparisons, I will mainly focus on the contemplative practice of Zen meditation.

Wherever You Go, There You Are

This book was chosen because it functions as a manual for mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is a contemplative practice that owes many factors to Zen practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Kabat-Zinn explains mindfulness in this book. Both mindfulness practice and elements such as present moment awareness, focused attention and sitting postures are discussed.

“Some Reflections on the Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and the Trouble with Maps”

This paper connects Zen and mindfulness and explains how Zen was one of the foundational factors of mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR). Kabat-Zinn recounts his early Zen practice and how a koan prompted him to an experience, and he goes on to discuss how it would be beneficial to create a system containing what he had learned from Zen and Yoga. This system would be aimed at people who would otherwise not come to a Zen center (Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

“Zen and the Brain: Mutually illuminating topics”

The paper states that both neuroscience and Zen practitioners could benefit from learning from each other’s practices. Specifically, the notion of a self becomes of interest because it is one of the main concepts that Zen practice addresses (Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, 1957; S. Suzuki, 1970). The default mode network a narrative generating cluster of areas in the brain that, when linked together, are correlated with the narrative generation of the self. The areas include the medial prefrontal cortex, the medial posterior parietal cortex, and the lateral cortex of the angular gyrus. Parallels between cortical areas are thought to regulate the default mode network, and a state of no-self is drawn from the Zen literature. The paper concludes by saying that there is beginning to be evidence that there are neural correlates being found in many of the elements of Zen practice. (Austin, 2013)

“Activation of the Anterior Prefrontal Cortex and Serotonergic System is Associated with Improvements in Mood and EEG Changes Induced by Zen Meditation Practice in Novices”

This paper shows some of the benefits of Zen practice. The study breaks Zen meditation into two categories. The practice of open monitoring which is the practice of noticing the sensations and thoughts that arise and letting them go (Lutz et al., 2008) and those of focused attention which is the sustained attention on a given

object such as the breath (Lutz et al., 2008). The study was conducted on n=15 novice meditators, who were healthy volunteers.

Electroencephalography (EEG) was used to measure activity in the prefrontal cortex (PFC) while subjects focused on their breathing, and the lower abdomen. The findings were that FA was correlated with activity in the PFC; this correlates with other findings that the PFC is associated with attention (Gurd, Kischka, & Marshall, 2012). Subjective measurements reported overall decrease in negative mood (Yu et al., 2011).

“Thinking about Not-Thinking:’ Neural correlates of conceptual processing during Zen meditation”

This paper is relevant because it presents the default network, and connects it with Zen practice. The default mode network is a set of structures in the brain active during the absence of goal-oriented attention. It includes the regions that are metabolically active when you are awake but doing nothing. These are the neural correlates of mind wandering. The paper uses fMRI to investigate brain activity during conceptual processing in Zen practitioners as compared to a control group. Zen practitioners showed less activity in the default network while conceptual processing than the control group did. The paper concludes that Zen training may enhance control of the automatic mind wandering associated by a triggered stimulus.

“Brain Changes in Long-Term Zen Meditators Using Proton Magnetic Resonance Spectroscopy and Diffusion Tensor Imaging: A controlled study”

This paper shows some of the physiological changes of the brain associated with Zen practice. At the same time it shows how measures of on practice, mindfulness, is used to evaluate practitioners of Zen, as if they were synonymous. Ten Zen meditators aged 18-65 with more than 8 years of training for at least one hour per day were recruited and compared to a control group. The control group (n=10) were hospital staff. The paper discusses the default mode network associated with regions of brain and its activity at rest. The groups were subjected to a set of tests, MAAS the mindfulness attention and awareness scale, that measure two factors attention and awareness, which are believed to comprise mindfulness. The Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) measures orientation to place, orientation to time, attention and concentration, recall, language, and visual construction. It is a test that is often

used in neuropsychology to determine cognitive functioning and progression of dementia (Gurd et al., 2012). Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale (HADS) was used to assess depression and anxiety. The following neuro-imaging scans were done: magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS), and diffusion tensor imaging (DTI)

Findings were that anxiety and depression measures were lower in meditators. Meditators scored higher on the Mindfulness Attention and Awareness Scale. Cognitive functioning measured with the MMSE showed no significant difference between the groups. Structural changes in the brain are correlated with time spent meditating, and increased matter in both myelin and neuronal cells in certain areas of the brain were found. The increase in white matter, or myelination, is thought to enhance communication among cortical areas, which results in a performance increase. Also, an increase in grey matter, or strengthening of neuronal cell matter, in the hippocampus is suggested (Fayed et al., 2013). The hippocampus is associated with memory (Gurd et al., 2012).

“Using Cognitive Interviews to Assess the Cultural Validity”

This paper shows how Zen is considered synonymous with mindfulness, but concludes that the two are different. A group of Zen practitioners are presented with the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), which is a self-reported scale based on a factor analysis of mindfulness. It presents questions and asks takers to rate the five factors believed to constitute mindfulness. Concerns among the Zen practitioners in the study were that meditation can be idealized and the practice misunderstood. It's possible that the level of practice influenced interpretation of items on FFMQ (Christopher, Woodrich, & Tiernan, 2014). The paper concludes that the findings suggest that Zen and Western conceptualizations of mindfulness are different.

The paper becomes of interest because it points to a particular weakness in much of the literature regarding contemplative science: that of culturally situated bias, which if unchecked, may well lead to confounding results. In this case, while the practices of mindfulness and Zen meditation are indeed different from each other, they also share certain factors. Other articles have pointed towards a problem in the construct

of the term mindfulness as well (Kirk Warren Brown & Ryan, 2004; Curtiss & Klemanski, 2014; Tran, Glück, & Nader, 2013).

“Investigating the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ): Construction of a short form and evidence of a two-factor higher order structure of mindfulness”

This paper shows a problem when measuring the contemplative practice of mindfulness. It concludes that the factors of the FFMQ are problematic. Certain factors are weak indicators, including the question related to the “non-reaction” factor. Instead, a shorter questionnaire is suggested (Tran et al., 2013). However, the paper does not consider cultural aspects.

“Examining the Factor Structures of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire and the Self-Compassion Scale”

This paper shows problems in measuring mindfulness on a different scale. The paper investigates the factors used to create the five facet mindfulness questionnaire and the self-compassion scale (scs). Both are regarded as mindfulness practice. The results were that the SCS’ six factors were not robust, and further research is advised in order to develop a better measure for self-compassion.

(Williams, Dalgleish, Karl, & Kuyken, 2014).

“The Zen Notion of ‘Mind’ Or, Is It ‘No- Mind’”

Three major themes stand out in this paper: the notion of duality, the subject object dichotomy, and the notion of the “self,” or One Mind. This is presented as matrix of activity that integrates subjectivity and objectivity by means of a unity of all opposites into the full experience of an all-encompassing reality without divisions.

The concept of mind in Zen attempts this by eliminating the notion of duality, and the line between subject object, internal external, being and nonbeing. The concept of mind tries to avoid a substantialization, or a hypostatization, of a fundamentally insubstantial notion of existence. Huangbo writes, "If you would only rid yourselves of the concepts of ordinary and enlightened, you would find that there is no other Buddha than the Buddha in your mind." In other words, the notion of concepts is a hindrance. Nishida Kitaro, a Japanese philosopher, is quoted in the article as saying

that the category of Mind is crucial for understanding East Asian thought, but he also points out the difficulties in apprehending it. According to Nishida, since mind is internal and subjective, it seems to defy the external and objective modes of analysis typical of Western logic, but he nevertheless stresses the need for developing a new kind of logic based on philosophical reflection. In other works, Nishida consistently refers to this alternative method as a "topological logic" rather than the objective logic of the Western philosophical tradition, which captures the non-duality of subject-as-entity as well as of subject-as-perception and object (Heine, 2004). In the west, focus has been on subjective mental interpretations of reality, but in east Asia, the idea of an "absolute self" is regarded as a process, meaning that the idea of self dissolves and the self becomes the object that it experiences. Nishida quotes Dogen, "To study the self is to forget the self and become immersed in all things." The paper states that there is no distinction and that this realization can be found through contemplation (Heine, 2004).

“Psychology, Ontology, and Zen Soteriology”

This paper shows that there is a cultural component to zen that is often overlooked. HSUEH-LI CHENG writes that, in the west, Zen is the most popular form of Buddhism, but that we tend to search for a silver bullet in the form of pure awareness. Where in fact Zen is a multimodal phenomenon that touches the entire through moral, social, physical, and intellectual aspects of life. The paper's main emphasis is on the use of language and the misinterpretation that this has caused (Cheng, 1986).

“East Meets West: Parallels between Zen Buddhism and social psychology”

The Zen monk Tich Nhat Hanh suggests that contemporary Western science should investigate the conditions of Zen Buddhism and Buddhism in general. While the Dalai Lama has established a gathering of scientific minds in order to do just that, very few of these scientists have been psychologists. McIntosh attempts to draw a parallel between social psychology and Buddhist thought. By comparing the themes of attachment, the concept of self, thought, and awareness, he concludes that there are many parallels between contemporary social psychology and Buddhism and that contemporary psychologists are discovering some of the same elements regarding human behavior that Buddhists have been practicing for millennia. Furthermore,

Macintosh argues for an empirical study where he suggests that Zen Buddhism in particular offers testable postulates. McIntosh says that in Zen Buddhism, and Buddhism in general, the concept of attachment becomes one of the root causes of suffering. If there is a desire to obtain something and this attachment is fulfilled, your desire arises and on and on it goes. McIntosh himself has tested this on people who believe that their happiness is dependent on certain life situations such as being married. McIntosh found that these types of people, who he calls linkers, are significantly less happy than people who do not link their happiness with certain situations such as workstations or marital status. Constantly attempting to fulfill an ever-changing need distracts from being present in the current moment according to Zen Buddhism, says McIntosh, and he compares this to the psychological concept of rumination. According to Zen Buddhism, the concept of self is an illusion created by the individual to have a sense of solidity. Zen suggests that it is beneficial to eliminate the illusion that there is a solid self that is separate from the world and context in which it resides. McIntosh links this with the notion of self-esteem and the mechanisms involved in guarding the sense of self. The final point is that of awareness. According to McIntosh, Zen postulates that attention is the single most prominent attribute to end personal suffering. McIntosh links this with people's general use of heuristics, such as newscasts of a fiery plane crashing inciting people to take the car because of a fear of flying despite statistical data showing that it is safer to fly than to drive a car (McIntosh, 1997).

“Horney, Zen, and the Real Self: Theoretical and historical connections”

Karen strived to integrate Zen into Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization, which ranges from the bottom needs for safety such as food and shelter, to social needs such as love and belonging, and finally self-actualization. Karen Horney believes that there is a core self, or a real self. Karen Horney compares the growth of a person to that of an acorn by saying you cannot teach an acorn to grow into an oak tree, but, given the chance, the acorn will grow accordingly and become an oak tree because that is its real purpose or real self. In the same manner, human beings tend to self-actualize their real selves and grow towards individual self-realization. Karen Horney goes on to talk about how this self-realization is often stunted in youthful anxiety, so it is likely that this anxiety could then somehow stop the process of self-actualization (Morvay, 1999).

Summery

From biological changes, mood improvement, parallels between neuro, social, cognitive and phenomenological psychology, and cultural aspects, Zen meditation is a subject that warrants further study. During the next few years, stress will become a critical medical health problem, and, as some of the literature suggests, Zen may be a more ideal approach to stressful situations than other forms of stress relief.

EEG measures and fMRI scans have charted structural changes in Zen meditators, and new practices such as mindfulness have gained traction both in public media and in scientific publications. However, while the measures of neuroscience are certainly not in question, few of these papers have started out by questioning the operational definition in their field of research. Those who have used the same quantitative methodology to come up with new definitions and scales of measure (Kirk W Brown & Ryan, 2009; Tran et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2014). Jon Kabat Zinn, a main proponent of mindfulness, draws upon his experience with Zen practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2011) when creating his mindfulness based stress reduction program (MBSR). Mindfulness is presented as an attempt to secularize a Buddhist practice and extract factors that seem to benefit various health aspects (Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

A problem has arisen when trying to operationalize the concepts of mindfulness (Bishop et al., 2004). Some debate whether mindfulness is a trait or a state, giving rise to several different scales of measure and investigations of the factors (Baer, 2011; Kirk Warren Brown & Ryan, 2004; Kirk W Brown & Ryan, 2009; Christopher, Neuser, Michael, & Baitmangalkar, 2012; Curtiss & Klemanski, 2014; Tran et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2014). In addition, cultural aspects seem to give rise to confusion regarding measurements of mindfulness. When self-report scales measuring mindfulness are presented to Zen practitioners, they comment that there are several misunderstood elements in the questions presented (Christopher et al., 2014). This is not confined to Zen and Mindfulness. During an interview, professor Peter Elsass of Copenhagen University asked a Tibetan Lama to answer a self-report questionnaire measuring mindfulness (Elsass, 2011). The scale he used was based on a factor analysis (Curtiss & Klemanski, 2014) and has been deemed a valid tool for quantitative measurements of certain factors of mindfulness, and he understood that the factors therein should be present in both Zen and Tibetan traditions. However,

when professor Elsass' interpreter and a Tibetan Buddhist master were given the questionnaire, they broke out in laughter and explained how the questions used missed the main points (Elsass, 2011).

Despite valid methods, the development of the questionnaire had not taken the cultural aspects of Tibetan life into account and lost much of the meaning situated in some of the original practice. This illustrates the problem of researching concepts without taking the specific culture and practice into account. Zen is also a culturally situated paradigm and cannot simply be transferred to other cultures. First, it is important to understand what the object of the investigation is and the context in which it is situated before any other research can be done.

Another common issue that could be cause for some concern is that the results of studying Zen Buddhist, Tibetan Buddhist, or other contemplative practitioners often becomes attributed to very specific practices such as mindfulness (Christopher et al., 2014; Lomas, Ivtzan, & Fu, 2015). What this means is that there is a risk that results from research conducted on Zen suddenly become synonymous with research into mindfulness.

Even Zen, which has several schools, is labeled under the unitary term "Zen" with no distinction as to what constitutes the practice. This has been commented on before in the handbook of *Zen, Mindfulness, and Behavioral Health* (Masuda & O'Donohue, n.d.), where a warning that any scholar researching the topic should at least be aware that there is a difference. Zen is also very different from Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, as both are ingrained in their respective cultures (Masuda & O'Donohue, n.d.). Today, many martial arts practices can trace at least some part of their doctrines or practices to Zen. Karate, for example, actively practices Zazen, or sitting meditation, was developed where Rinzai Zen Buddhism arose in the time of Japanese samurai classes (Masuda & O'Donohue, n.d.) and became integrated and adjusted to that context, whereas the Tibetan form of Buddhism is actively passive (Masuda & O'Donohue, n.d.). Isolating individual factors or components could certainly be highly valuable for research and are often necessary for comparison, but it is always important to not lose sight of the overall context to which these factors belong.

It is true that mindfulness shares factors with Zen or even Tibetan Buddhism, but that does not mean that they are the same. The unclear attention given to this quickly becomes confusing and obscures what actually constitutes the practice.

Factors such as “open monitoring,” which is the activity of consciously noticing the thoughts, emotions, and sensations that arise and then letting them go without holding on to, or being caught by, the sensation (Lutz et al., 2008), has been attributed to several cross-cultural meditation formats and is also part of the mindfulness practice (Lutz et al., 2008). “Open monitoring has been found from valid scientific methodological approaches” (Lutz et al., 2008). There is a clear distinction between practices, so attributing an outcome from one group of practitioners, such as results of Zen meditation, to mindfulness (Christopher et al., 2014) makes it very difficult to gain a clear understanding.

Rather, I suggest using the term *contemplative science* when comparing different traditions and common factors. Contemplative science is guilty of mixing the different traditions together, just like mindfulness, but makes no claims of being a specific practice. This is unlike mindfulness, which was a specific practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) with factors certainly found in others traditions such as Zen (Lutz et al., 2008). Contemplative science is an umbrella term specifically suited to investigating the commonalities between meditation practices and comparing them with contemporary psychological science.

In this thesis, I will draw on phenomenological psychology and add to the empirical body of knowledge. In order to show the intricacies of Zen practice for instance, it is the aim of this study to investigate the actual practice and experience of Zen practitioners, both from the Soto school of Zen and the Rinzai school of Zen.

Research questions

In this thesis, I will try to do as suggested by Terje Sparby paper “The Nature of Contemplative Science.” I have already discussed some of the contributions to contemplative science in the literature review by comparing the recent findings in Zen and the field of psychology. Contemplative science is often synonymous with

contemplative neuro-science. This is largely due to the work of the mind and life institute which is associated with the Dalai Lama and the neuropsychologist Richard J Davidson's work (Dahl, Lutz, & Davidson, 2015; Goldberg et al., 2017; Lutz et al., 2008). However, Sparby suggests a broader perspective on contributions from other scientific methodologies. I believe that a phenomenological approach may add to the field.

I will attempt to compare some of the concepts in the contemplative traditions with concepts found in psychology, which is the science of mind and behavior. Instead of theoretical concepts, I will focus on a narrow field of scientific inquiry to conduct an empirical study of the lived experience of both Soto Zen and Rinzai practitioners. This should lead to a better understanding of how this experience is situated in the Zen culture. Thereby creating a stronger basis for learning, and integrate knowledge from both traditions of contemplative practice and psychology. To that end the following question is asked.

Are there commonalities between Zen and psychology and how are these experienced by Zen practitioners?

Terms used

Zen is form of Buddhism that originated in India and was thereafter transmitted to China by the Indian monk Bodhidharma. From China, Zen was brought to Japan during the Kamakura period (est. 1192). Zen spread to America, and from there to the much of Europe during the 20th century where it was prominently know by the works and lectures of the English speaking Zen master Daitsetsu Suzuki (Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, 1957). Zen attempts to rid the agent of paradigmatic thinking and to make it clear that doing so is a construction and a figment (D.T Suzuki, 1964).

Epoche: Refers to the attempt to bracket off presuppositions about a topic. It means that the interviewer may have preconceived notions about a topic, but that this should not be allowed to influence the questions or conversation if topics that contradict the preconceived notions come up in conversation. It is a reminder to remain curious about the topic (Langdrige, 2007).

Koan: an illogical “question” or “paradox” (Buswell & Lopez, n.d.) that is designed to be a shocking revelation to a student given in a conversation (Heine & Wright, 2000). It takes the form of a story, conversation, question, or statement, and is used as a pedagogical tool to provoke a state of enlightenment (Masuda & O’Donohue, n.d.).

Methodology

The thesis is an empirical, exploratory study of several Zen practitioners’ lived experiences. The thesis is based on qualitative methods and uses interpretative phenomenological investigation in an analysis of semi-structured interviews. Zen masters and students were interviewed in an attempt to understand the dynamic between the two positions and their respective experiences. The theoretical foundation for the empirical study consists of a literature review of relevant literature on psychology and Zen Buddhism.

Research design

A qualitative research design was used. Participants from two separate schools of Zen, Soto and Rinzai, were selected. Participation was on a voluntary basis. After introducing the research and the researcher and participating in daily practice in both schools, students and masters were asked if they would be interested in participating. Potential participants were asked to reply via e-mail. Data was obtained from interviewed recordings of semi-structured interviews of two Rinzai Zen students, one Rinzai Zen master, and two Soto Zen masters. Participants’ ages ranged from 20 to 80 years of age. All of the interviewees actively practiced Zen and Koan study. The Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method was used for analysis.

Gaining Access

To gain an understanding of the context in which Zen practice is done, the researcher went on a nine-day silent retreat with two Soto Zen masters. A retreat is a live-in practice at a selected location where the participants live for the duration of the retreat. A silent retreat means that no conversation was allowed with the exception of

private conversations with the Zen masters. The practice of private conversation is referred to as dokusan. During dokusan, a koan was given to the researcher. This koan was then to be worked on during the retreat and discussed during dokusan. Dokusan was conducted 3-4 times per day. No other conversation was allowed during the nine days. During this retreat, the researcher got to know the two teaching Soto Zen masters. The researcher also attended silent sitting meditation several times at a Rinzai Zen monastery with a group of Rinzai Zen practitioners and attended dokusan, private guidance on meditation, with a Rinzai Zen master. Dokusan was different here in that it did not revolve around a formal koan, but rather, it took the form of a conversation where the Zen master evaluated if the researcher had a clear understanding of the subject.

Preconception

Being completely objective is not possible; therefore an attempt at bracketing off preconceived ideas is done by the use of epoche. Epoche is a way in which we can abstain from preconceived notions of an idea. Husserl claims that much of what we do is based on preconceived notions and indeed this is also the idea behind the cognitive term biases. Unconsciously, we believe we know something, and we act accordingly. Epoche forces us to bring as much of this ingrained knowledge to the surface, reflect on it, and bracket it off. This is important because an attitude of curiosity is important in science. If I am not open to the results of research or if before I start doing research inject my own preconceived notions into it, then the results may very well be confounded.

Having spent nine consecutive days only talking in 5-10 minute intervals a few times per day about Zen and koan practice and having spent time sitting with Zen practitioners at a monastery, it is unlikely that I can maintain an awareness of all the intricacies of the Zen practice I experienced myself. Certain things become habitual and may become so ingrained that I do not notice them. However, I have chosen to partake in the Zen practice and view it as a way to gain a better awareness of the field of study.

Recruitment

A few weeks after the silent retreat, the researcher contacted the Soto Zen Masters and asked if it would be possible to conduct an interview with the aim of doing this thesis. Both agreed but under the condition that the research was modified so it would not include information from dokusan, the private conversations between a student and a teacher (Heine & Wright, 2000). Both Zen masters were adamant that there could be no exceptions to this. The research was changed to only include direct interviews of Zen masters and student but no recordings of student teacher interaction. An email with a request to do research was sent to the abbot of a Rinzai monastery, who invited the researcher to come and join the meditation practice. After the first session, the researcher introduced himself, and asked in plenary if there was anyone willing to participate in the research. Several students and a Zen master were willing to participate.

Recordings

Interviews were conducted on one Rinzai Zen master, two Rinzai Zen students, and two Soto Zen masters. Interviews were recorded on a Tascam Dr-05 v.2. audio recorder. In contrast to mobile phone recorders, this recorder has no internet connection and is a standalone recorder with no third party software that might be able to access the recordings. The digital recordings were transferred to a stationary computer with no internet connection, and the recordings were transcribed under false names. As such, the handling of data was done in accordance with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). No data was transmitted to a third party or transmitted to a location outside of the EU.

The Soto Zen masters were interviewed over an encrypted VoIP teleconference platform. The Soto Zen masters were located outside the EU and are citizens of a country where the GDPR does not apply. However, every effort to comply with GDPR was taken. No data was stored on the computer or accessible to the teleconference provider. The interview was recorded with the same Tascam Dr-05 v.2. as the Rinzai group.

All participants signed a consent agreement that the interview would be recorded and a declaration of privacy that states what the interview is intended for as well that the participants would be anonymized.

Four interviews were conducted in English and one was translated from a different language.

Participant selection

Participants were selected on a voluntary basis by directly asking for volunteers. The Rinzai group was asked in plenum for volunteers. The researcher is aware that there might be a bias present. If one participant volunteered, others might feel pressured to do the same. In order to accommodate this, the researcher made it clear that answers should be given to the Zen master at a later time who could then pass them on to the researcher. However, several participants came up to the researcher outside the meditation hall after the meditation and told the researcher that they found the research interesting and would like to participate. In order to not discourage their enthusiasm to participate, the researcher accepted the comments but made it clear that they should share their thoughts and perspectives with the Zen master who would then contact the researcher. Some participants emailed the researcher directly saying that they had received the email address from the Zen master and that they would like to participate. The inclusion criteria were participants who had a regular practice and were willing to be interviewed about it. The aim was to gather a varied group to see if modalities were constant across gender, age, and Zen schools.

Participants

Peter is a Rinzai Zen master in his 60s with more than 40 years of practice. He holds a university degree but abandoned academic studies in order to travel to Japan and America where he became the abbot of a monastery. He is currently the abbot of his own monastery.

Michael is a Rinzai Zen student of Peter's. Michael is in his 30s and has approximately eight years of practice. He lives outside the monastery but visits regularly.

Wendy is in her 40s and a Rinzai Zen student of Peter's, and she lives in the Rinzai monastery with Peter and has approximately 5 years of training.

Luke is a Soto Zen master in his 60s and abbot of a Soto Zen temple. He holds a university degree and has written a book on Zen. He has practiced for 37 years.

Leia is a Soto Zen master in her 50's and abbot of a Soto Zen temple. She has practiced zen for 37 years. She holds a university degree and has been involved with the development of the mindfulness based stress reduction programs where she was on staff for almost 20 years at the center for mindfulness in USA.

The Soto Zen group are both American.

The Rinzai group are all northern European one is an immigrant from Iran. I have elected to obscure the exact nationality. Because of the few Rinzai Zen groups in the country revealing the nationality would potentially make it possible to locate each individual member.

Interviews

The first interview was done with the Rinzai Zen master who was sitting on a round pillow placed on a square cushion in the meditation room at the Rinzai Zen monastery. This provided a setting that was conducive to the central theme of the paper and provided familiarity and a certain distance by not invading the privacy of the participant's home or the personal spaces of the residents in the monastery. The meditation room was closed off during interviews and the interviewer and the interviewee were the only occupants. The interviewer and interviewee were seated at a slightly offset angle, so they did not face each other directly. The seating corresponded to the microphone direction on the tascam dr 05 recorder, or roughly a 140 degree angle. The following three interviews were done in the same manner, only the seating in the meditation room of the monastery, date, and time of day changed according to the participants wishes.

Ethics

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a non-invasive research methodology. Semistructured interviews are constructed in such a way that the participant of the study receives very little feedback during the interview in an attempt to let them freely explain their experience to the interviewer. This also limits any potential feedback with negative psychological consequences. During the interviews, the researcher learned that one of the participants suffered from schizophrenia.

The choice was made during the interview to continue the interview instead of stopping. It was deemed that stopping the interview would have shown a lack of respect for the time the participant had taken out of their calendar in order to do the interview. The initial thought was that the interview could always be scrapped at a later date. However, the core element of phenomenological research is to be curious and employ epoché of any pre-conceived notions. Therefore, instead of dismissing the interview out of hand, the researcher decided to ask the participant about her experience of schizophrenia and Zen practice. What followed was a rich account of how the participant no longer views herself as suffering from schizophrenia and is now not on any medication due to her training in Zen practice. It was decided that this finding out weighed the inclusion criteria of only including healthy individuals. The participant was clear, lucid, and engaged in rational explanations regarding how and when Zen practice had influenced her view on schizophrenia.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews incorporates the structured form of a structured interview but is still open enough to allow the interviewer to deviate and follow up on what the interviewee finds interesting to talk about. Like the structured interview, it is based on an interview guide, but it is important to treat this as a guide to which rigid adherence is neither required nor recommended (Langdrige, 2007, p. 65). IPA is generally an exploration of a person's lived experiences, and it is therefore important to allow the interviewee to speak about the things that are important to them.

Transcription

All interviews recorded were transcribed according to the document in appendix 1. Real names and places were anonymised from and never written in the transcription.

Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a qualitative data analysis methodology based on hermeneutics and phenomenology. IPA is mainly suited for exploring the experience of individuals. As such, the focus of IPA becomes how these individuals

make sense of their world. IPA attempts to condense the experience from interviews into themes. Themes from the interview can be then be interpreted using topics from previous literature. The themes are found by following a set of stages. (Langdrige, 2007)

Stage 1: Consists of going through the interview and writing initial thoughts regarding possible meanings and similarities with known literature and other elements of interest.

Stage 2: Is noting any emergent themes when going through the interviews.

stage 3: The themes that were found are ordered in the chronological sequense that they appeared in the notes. Themes are then color coded acording to similarities.

Stage 4: The color-coded themes are then connected under superordinate themes.

This was doen for each individual interview. Combining the themes from the individual interviews was done writing them on large piece of paper combining the findings. During this stage, the original themes from stages 2, 3, and 4, as well as the interviews themselves were referenced continously to make sure that the connection between the individual themes and the superordinate themes were still valid.

Empirical Data

Sparby suggested that contemporary science could learn from other fields of study (Sparby, 2017). Add to this the possibility that there is a reciprocal relationship between contemplative science and science and that both fields might benefit by learning from the other. Thus not only would contemporary science gain from theory and methodology used in psychological science or the neurobiological sciences but the other way around as well. Psychology stands to gain from investigating contemplative science.

How the practice of the Soto and Rinzai Zen practitioners is experienced will be the focus of the next part of this thesis. Which is an empirical exploratory study of the lived experience of these practitioners.

Participant 1: Peter

Peter (P) is a Zen Buddhist master and abbot of a Rinzai Zen monastery. When I asked Peter to describe how he became interested in Zen Buddhism, he described an experience relating to the concept of self and said the following.

P: “The reason I became Zen Buddhist is, for instance, when I started studying at the University I started thinking ‘wait a minute, is this really what I wanna study? What I want to be for the rest of my life?’ And then, so to speak, unfortunately another question hit me ‘I can’t know what I want to do with my life if I don’t know what I am’.”

Peter describes an existential crisis of sorts. Studying at university, which presumably requires a great deal of effort, a he began to start questioning his own motivation for being there and doing that work. This question led Peter to question what or who he really is. Peter even uses the term “unfortunately” when he talks about questioning his own identity. The use of the word “unfortunately” could indicate that questioning one’s identity is something difficult or somehow regrettable.

P: “So, I started working on that, and without knowing anything about Zen or meditation or anything, I ended up in this absolute Samadhi. The only thing I know is that I was unconscious for ten days and nights according to my fellow college students.”

Here, Peter describes his experience before he knew anything about Zen or Buddhist practice. Indicating that Peter is recalling his experience and interpreting it from a retrospective point of view with the knowledge that he has gained from Buddhist practice. He describes the experience by using a specific term “Samadhi” from

Buddhist theory. Samadhi is described as deep concentration (H. Pawle, 2003; S. Suzuki, 1970), specifically concentration on the one pointedness of the mind and “meditative absorption” (Buswell & Lopez, n.d.). Indicating Peter had had an experience of full absorption on one point of concentration.

Awakening

Peter goes on to describe the experience by moving onto a different theme: the theme of awakening. He does this by saying the following.

P: “Then the sun rises on the morning of the 10th day, into the 10th day, the sun comes up outside my window and at the same time my awareness comes back and all is clear. I know all about everything.”

Peter uses the word awareness, so we can infer that Peter was un-aware for the ten days before waking up from this state. A waking up experience also indicates a change in perception. The returning of awareness entails the ability to be aware of and thereby process perceptual input. Peter goes on to state that he now “knows all about everything,” meaning he not only returned to awareness but also experienced a change in awareness as well. Peter clearly has had an experience where everything appeared clear to him and an experience of an understanding of some deeper truth.

During the interview Peter describes a worldview that can account for the experience of awakening.

P: “The first thing Buddha said after his awakening or enlightenment eh the first truth is there is dukkha. Dukkha, traditionally, is translated with suffering but this is eh wrong. Eh There, is Dukkha means most people have underlying dissatisfaction with the situation with their life as it is”

The reality of dissatisfaction is regarded as a universal truth in Buddhism. Peter goes so far as to describe clinical diagnoses to this underlying dissatisfaction or Dukkha.

Dukkha is described in the literature as suffering, or dissatisfaction inherent in life (Buswell & Lopez, n.d.)

Indicating an entire worldview:

P: “and in some cases it gets so-called clinical and they get, they go to see a psychiatrist.”

Peter connects dissatisfaction, or dukkha, to clinical disorders that warrant a psychiatrist. Peter then goes on to explain his views that there are several examples in society, one of which is as follows.

P: “Most people live with and by their dissatisfaction this is what drives society so to speak”

Peter takes the individual dissatisfaction and scales it to encompass society.

P: “You need a new economic to eh, em politicians and advertising and everything feeds our dissatisfaction. So this is what keeps our current way of life eh going.”

Peter says that society feeds our dissatisfaction and advertising feeds our dissatisfaction, presumably by presenting something as desirable that we then want. Not getting it would lead to dissatisfaction. This dynamic is something Peter believes to be ingrained in our world to such a degree that it is what keeps our current way of life going.

P: “And and the economy is good when we are dissatisfied eh this is the first law, everything, everyone eh not everyone (!) a few people have looked through (!!)it most people of some sort dissatisfaction. Something that that is in their daily life that they don’t want, or something that is not in their daily life that they insist on having.”

Peter describes how the economy is good as long as we are dissatisfied, and that most people live their lives by their dissatisfaction that a few people have “looked through it.” He seems to suggest that there is something obscured or hidden This becomes more clear when he goes on to talk about the reason that there is suffering or dissatisfaction.

P: “So Dukkha. The next fundamental truth is there is a cause of this. And let me cut through and say that cause is ehm concepts, misconceptions. All concepts are misconceptions because they don’t really have anything to do with reality as it is”.

Here, we see that the view of the Buddhists resembling that of constructionist thinking. The experience of the world is a constructed experience. Something to “look through.” The use of concepts that we employ in everyday thinking is regarded as unreal or at least disconnected from reality.

Concepts.

When talking about his experience with Zen meditation practice, Peter describes an awakening experience, where he goes into detail regarding how the use of conceptualization in everyday life is seen from a different point of view.

P: “At the same time there’s no yesterday and is no future time, The idea, the concept of time is falling away there is only this living moment. So it’s, eh there’s many ways of describing it but this is one”

Peter describes the concept of time as an element that changes during this awakening state. He points towards two scenarios: that of yesterday and that of a future time frame. Peter calls time a concept that falls away. Peter describes that only the present timeframe is left. He then dismisses the rest of his sentence by saying that there are many ways of describing it.

The two time frames Peter speaks of are necessarily conceptualizations because the past is something that we reenact on the basis of our memory and the future timeframe has of course not happened yet but is something that we can only theorize

about. This theorization is, per definition, a conceptualization. If these two categories of conceptualization are stripped away, the only thing left is the current timeframe, only this present moment, which is mirrored in what we find in mindfulness practice and other contemplative traditions (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Peter goes on to further explain the problem of conceptualization by stating the following.

P: “Your mind gets clouded by too much of conceptualization and sooner or later, genuinely lost! In ehm conceptual reality which is of course non-reality. And then we get confused existential questions. You are not confused as a baby (!!)”

Peter states that conceptualizations cloud the mind and that we get confused by it. What he means by this is not immediately clear, however Peter goes on to state that babies are not confused. Peter sums up the entire issue of conceptualization in the following way.

P: “Or let me say this eh the fundamental, the fundamental issue in Buddhist training is to learn to discern between the real and the apparent. What is real and what is apparent. What is real and what is just (+2) our mentalization of everything.”

Peter states that the issue of real and not-real is the fundamental issue in Buddhist training. Of course, Peter stated previously that fake problems were caused by our conceptualization or mentalization of the world. So the contemplative training found in Buddhist practices enable the practitioner to discern what’s real and what is not real or to gain a meta-awareness of the practitioner’s own cognitive faculties which is also found in mindfulness practices. Participants are trained to take a step away from their affective as well as cognitive faculties and try to just notice them coming and then letting them go without actively engaging in these faculties (Hauswald, Übelacker, Leske, & Weisz, 2015).

P: “So eh Dukkha is based on the misunderstanding of the nature of reality”.

Peter describes how a misunderstanding of reality causes dukkha, which he previously described as suffering or dissatisfaction.

So having stated that there is a problem and that there is a reason for this problem, Peter explains what his view on a solution is.

P: “eh the third one is. There is a way out! You don’t have to have this dissatisfaction or eh worst existential crisis or psychological problems emotional problems etcetera there’s a way out and this is eh this way that eh in varieties of schools of Buddhism is taught.”.

Peter briefly touches on the sensation of dukkha as being an existential crisis or an emotional or even psychological problem.

Frustration

P: “eh you are given a koan that doesn’t make any sense. Eh therefore it brings you into eh an existential crisis sooner or eh If you stick around.”

Peter explains that the koan does not make any sense. The use of the word sense could indicate an attempt at rational problem solving or an attempt at logic. When this rational process or logic fails, two choices are presented: either give up and leave, thus not “sticking around,” or an existential crisis. Peter indicates that the purpose of certain Koans is to promote this existential crisis.

P: there is a, the first koans are called initial koans or waking up koans to create existential crisis.

Peter was raised and educated in the west and has taught many years in Scandinavia, so the word existential indicates the conflict between two certainties, either/or and lack of clear choice, or a feeling of anxiety that accompanies the question of identity (Andrews, 2016). Peter explains the koan as follows.

P: “For instance it’s raining and the master asks “now it’s raining how do you make it stop?”

Peter elaborates on what the purpose of the koan is, with an example that makes little logical sense and compares this with a double bind. The purpose is explained:

P: “To test whether you eh actually woke up.”

The koan tests if a person has had an awakening experience, enabling a solution to the non-logical problem of the koan.

Duality

Peter uses the terms of “making sense” and “existential crises,” which he goes on to elaborate on by saying the following.

P: “You use so-called koans, which are meant to show the futility of ordinary dualistic thinking, not the complete futility, but it cannot be used for existential questions.”

Peter talks about the futility of dualistic thinking when it comes to solving koans and existential questions.

When asked about “the way out,” Peter goes on to say the following.

P: “...eh what zen does is go in and attack delusions. And delusions are of course hundred percent dependent on your logical stupid dualistic thinking.”

Peter describes how Zen attacks delusions, which are dependent on logical dualistic thinking. Peter even indicates that this is stupid. What Peter does is weave together delusion, indicating concepts, with the logical and dualistic formal worldview. Peter goes on even further to talk about koans and logical thinking in the following way by giving an account of an experience he had with his first Zen master in Japan.

P: “ My first eh master I met in Japan. This was after the Americans went to the moon and picked some rocks to take home and stuff (!)

He asked How do you bring back a rock from the moon without using a rocket?”

I ask if this was a waking up koan, to which Peter replies as follows.

P: “No this was a koan to test whether you are woke up or not (!)”.

Peter says this was a koan with a direct purpose to test if he had woken up. So the purpose of the koan is different from the waking up koan. Peter elaborates.

P: “Or how clear your awakening is and to clarify it further.”

The koan was meant to show how deep the awakening had been, indicating that there are levels of waking up. This was something I had asked Peter about earlier. Peter then goes on to explain the connection to logic by saying the following.

P: “...to teach you how to function without being bound by your ordinary logic thinking.”

So by awakening, which was the purpose of this koan, Peter says that we are also taught to function without ordinary, logical thinking. Using the ordinary indicates this to be something done often, and that a break with a prevalent way of thinking is taught. Peter explains further.

P: “How can you make your mind, eh, your intellect work in a more free way? It’s not that we shut off our brain.”

Here, Peter asks how the mind can work freely, and then corrects himself by calling it intellect and then saying that we do not shut off our brains. This indicates a dual view. That of the mind and that of the brain. What Peter possibly means is that of logic and concepts and that of a mind free of concepts. Peter adds.

P: “Because we still have our brain, we still have our thinking facility. But use it in a different way. Use it to cut through fake problems”

Peter describes a thinking facility that is not ignored but used differently. Indicating a different way of thinking. Peter then adds that it is used to cut through fake problems. This could indicate an awakened state where concepts are seen as fake and by realizing this, problems are solved differently.

P: “You are eh we can cut the driving force eh for the samsaric world we eh remove the delusions and greed and anger disappears all by itself sooner or later, and you are free.”

Peter uses the term samsaic world, referencing samsara which means rebirth (Buswell & Lopez, n.d.); however, he also notes that it’s done by cutting the delusions whereby greed and other concepts disappear.

Self

Initially, Peter noted that the question that led him to Zen practice was what he was doing at university, when he replied to the follow-up question of who he really was. He even added the ‘unfortunately’ term when talking about how he had questioned his former identity. Peter touches on this subject of self and identity further by saying the following.

P: “Eh the the, I would say the hardest thing for us to accept eh is that we are an illusion in our own mind.”

Peter states, “We are an illusion in our own mind.” The term “we” refers to the notion of self. This identity is constructed, and because it is constructed, it is regarded as unreal or an illusion of the mind. Peter also notes that it is very difficult for anyone to accept that his or her sense of identity is a construct. This fits well with Peter saying that unfortunately he had started to question who he really was. It was not that it was regrettable, but he was communicating a belief that the illusion of self,

or the construction thereof, was one of the hardest things for him to accept. Peter elaborates.

P: “That is so hard to accept that the eh you overlook all kind of help and hints for many many years. I think eh (+3) I did not truly accept that fact eh before ten years after I became a Zen master.”

Peter states that it is so hard to accept that the self is a constructed entity that he ignored or overlooked hints of this. He states that he did not truly accept it until he had been a Zen master for ten years. He explains how by saying the following.

P: I clearly saw that I, I was, I am an illusion of my own mind. My body turns me off at night and turns me on in the morning “Eh it all comes back to eh how, what is it that I call me”...”And eh there is no such thing”.

Peter gives an example of how his body turns him off at night and on in the morning. The notion of the self turning itself on and off here suggests that he views the self as a constructed entity in the mind as it experiences the world. Peter goes on to state that it all depends on how we define the concept of “me.” This comes back to the section regarding concepts that Peter talked about earlier. The “me” is something to define, to conceptualize, and thereby construct, or it is an illusion, as it were, that Peter dismisses as “there is no such thing.”

Waking up

Peter also says that certain koans are meant as waking up koans. These are the first koans that the student is presented with.

P: there is a, the first koans are called initial koans or waking up koans to create existential crisis.

Waking up indicates the presence of sleep or unconsciousness, something to wake up from. This could indicate a view that people sleepwalk throughout life or somehow are unaware. Finally waking up also bears a resemblance to the concept of insight

from psychotherapy (Elliott et al., 1994). Regarding the process of working on koans, Peter says the following.

P: “ You come up with all kinds of good answers to the question and the and you need to bring your answer to the master traditionally once or up to three times a day and the master will get more and more, seemingly more and more angry at you because you come up with some ridiculous logical scientific answers(!). Which is of course no good”.

Here, Peter talks about the experience of how logic fails when working on koans. The process of working on a koan also involves taking the answer to a master for a sort of exam that is repeatedly failed if the student attempts to solve the koan with logic. Peter also notes that the master gives an appearance of anger, but he stresses that the master is only *seemingly* angry. Suggesting that this appearance serves a purpose.

P: “So finally, your thinking breaks down, really. Your thinking breaks down. You sort of give up and sit in a, like a black daze, black hole, you, your sort of spaced or more or less unconscious in your, in your meditation.”

Earlier, Peter had described the koan’s purpose as a way of constructing an existential crisis. Here, Peter describes how the seeming anger and repeated failures at solving the koan results in a breaking down of thinking as Peter describes it. Peter then uses a set of metaphors to describe the feeling. “Black daze” and “black hole,” both statements using black, suggest dark or unclear or obscure. Daze is something that is certainly unclear, and hole is a place that is like a trap or confined. “More or less unconscious” again suggests a lack of clarity or consciousness. Peter then says the following.

P: “And then something, a sound or sight or something wakes you up out of this stupa state. And for some reason all is clear”.

A stupa is a building structure containing relics. A stupa state then could be understood as a stable and unmoving state such as sitting completely still with no natural, spontaneous movement. Peter then describes how something as mundane as a sight or sound can wake someone up out of the stupa state. The waking up metaphor is again used, suggesting a change in awareness. Peter also adds that “all is clear,” supporting the idea that black and dazed were somehow obscuring consciousness or awareness, which are now gone having given way to clarity. Peter further elaborates.

P: “It’s an odd thing you are... Everything is alive. And you communicate with everything. You are actually truly connected with everything so the statement all is one, which would have all heard, is usually uttered for some nonsense reason, but here you really (eh) you are in it. You are- All is one.”

Peter notes that it is an odd thing. Alluding to the change in experience deviating from a perceived normality. Peter is hesitant when saying this, and it is clear that it is difficult to put into words. He says, “Everything is alive.”

Everything is alive could mean several things. It could mean that everything is vibrant or that Peter experiences everything differently than he normally did, which would support the use of the word odd. Or it could mean that Peter experiences everything as having an embodied life. This is further supported when Peter says that he communicates with everything. However, Peter further elaborates that all is one, and this points to an experience where everything is not separately embodied and communicating with Peter, but rather he is in connection to the world and everything around him. This is also supported by Peter’s utterances regarding the illusion of the self that he talked about before. If there is no agent and there is no subject object economy, then everything is one and can be understood. Peter also notes that the term everything is one that has often been uttered for nonsense reason. I believe this is something he says because of the difficulty of putting his experience into words. It is likely that Peter has heard and read the entrance of all is one. I noticed deviations from his own experience and a Zen master trained in judging the enlightened state of

students have deemed these utterances of all is one as misunderstood or as he says nonsense. I believe the intention of saying this is to warn me about how easy it is simply state that all is one without fully understanding the difficulty and complexity of the experience. It certainly stresses the complexity that Peter has felt his experience entails.

Peter talks about waking up in the context of results from continued Zen practice.

P: “They, will end up in a situation, in a very very deep state of eh meditation we called absolute samathi. They will be unconscious or at least un-self-conscious.”

Just as when Peter describes his own personal awakening experience, he uses the word Samadhi, which means deep concentration (H. Pawle, 2003; S. Suzuki, 1970). When asked about the word “unconscious,” he corrects himself and says “self conscious.” The original question that led Peter to an awakening experience was when he questioned who he was. The use of the word unselfconscious in this context adds to his former explanation by removing the concept of an agent or a self from the experience. By deconstructing the concept of self, which Peter has talked about before, the object subject to dichotomy also falls apart. This could very well explain the aliveness Peter talked about earlier. It is not so much that objects are imbued with life around Peter; it is more the other way around. That when the self falls away, everything becomes one because of the elimination of the dichotomy of an agent experiencing the world. Because there is no conceptual “self” to experience, the world is somehow experienced as part of the self. Peter then says the following.

P: “...Eh they are in the state, like frozen, eh it is described in various places in Zen literature as you are you frozen, you are sitting in the middle of a mountain of clear ice or glass. You can see everything you cannot do anything you are frozen.”

Peter describes how the experience is like being frozen, indicating a lack of ability to move. Sitting in a mountain might indicate the scope of the experience. Peter is not just frozen. He is not just sitting; he is sitting in a mountain, one of the largest and

heaviest elements to be trapped by. When he describes the mountain as clear glass, it indicates Peter's awareness is free to see through the clear glass.

P: (!) and then suddenly something, a sound of something triggers the disappearance of the ice or the glass and you are totally free and everything is totally clear.”

Something then frees Peter, an arbitrary element such as a sound, and Peter is now free from the weight of the mountain.

Summary

Peter describes an experience where all is clear and where all is one. He then describes the problem by saying that waking up provides and ends suffering or dissatisfaction. He says that society works because of dissatisfaction. We are constantly seeking satisfaction, but the dissatisfaction that we are trying to end is due to delusion/concepts. Peter describes how this is a misunderstanding of reality and that the mind gets clouded by concepts, and this can lead to an existential crisis because the self is realized as a concept.

The self is a hard thing to accept as a delusion, but Peter says there is no such thing. He further explains that it has to do with what it is that we call “I,” and this is a concept created in our own minds.

When we wake up, the duality of subject/object ceases, and there is no yesterday and there is no future, only now. The concept of time stops, and all is one.

The use of koans, according to Peter, is to create an existential crisis and make you see that the dualistic logic of ordinary thinking is flawed thereby cutting through fake problems, as Peter put it. These fake problems are the conceptualization and intellectualization that we need to use differently in order to make sense of the koan. This will help remove delusion, so we can become free and all becomes clear.

Participant 2: Wendy

Wendy (W) is a resident at the Rinzai Zen monastery where Peter teaches. She describes her first encounter of an awakening experience as follows.

W: “I remember that I I was there in the house and I got out and theres no roads so we had to go out eh down to the shop to buy something, then we have to go from the mountain down so that was, it was very slippery a lot of stones. So when I tried to get down eh down the mountain I remember my my feet just slipped and suddenly my head stopped working all of my attention was like THERE. And that is a very nice experience.”

Wendy describes a trip down a rocky mountainside to a shop. On her way down, she slips on the rocks, and her attention is forced into the present moment. Unlike an experience where a shock brings you attention to the immediate danger of the situation, Wendy is having difficulty putting the experience into words and says that she experienced that her mind stopped working and emphasizes the *vidvi* experience by saying that all of her attention was just there. That her mind stopped working, and “the attention being there” put in the same sentence could indicate the absence of conceptualization. This is supported by Wendy deeming this particular experience important in the context of her Zen training. She goes on to say the following.

W: “so I said to myself, that is a very good thing I have to practice it. I went down and up and down the mountain many many times just to experience this point where there was no thoughts”

Wendy goes on to elaborate on what she meant by calling it a state of no thoughts. She also emphasizes the importance of the experience by a willingness to practice by continuing to go up and down the mountainside many times in an attempt to experience this state of thoughtlessness again.

Concepts

Wendy also talks about how her mind conceptualized the experience.

W: “and at one point I remember after several days then suddenly my brain didn’t shut up and began to talk and talk and talk again although I could see that my my brain just was active. The thought process didn’t stop so I said to myself okay I have to figure out there must be other ways. So ehm I remember I begin to figure out ways where, which I could get out of thoughts”

Wendy uses the words “my brain didn’t shut up” and “began to talk and talk,” indicating that her thoughts are conceptualized through language. She also states how she was able to observe how her thought process was active, this indicates a certain meta awareness, similar to the practice of open monitoring (Lutz et al., 2008). Wendy then gives an example.

W: “eh one of the ways I practiced was that I took a watch and a look at the watch ticking, and eh I focused on this ticking and all the thoughts that came I just pushed away; I have to focus on this”

Wendy describes how she uses a watch to practice by focusing and returning to the object of focus. This training is similar to the Zen practice of following the breath, which can be regarded as focused attention. Wendy elaborates by saying the following.

W: “focus on ticking, ticking, ticking, ticking, and I did it in maybe 20 minutes or so. And all the thoughts disappeared”

Wendy describes her experience of focusing on the dials of a clock. Instead of just saying, “Focus on the ticking,” she repeats the word ticking four times. This could indicate the high attention given to each movement of the dial. The result of this exercise is that Wendy’s thoughts disappear. This is in line with what open monitoring does (Lutz et al., 2008). Wendy continues.

W: “So eh went time around 45 minutes one hour or so and the thoughts came back RUSHING”

After about 45 minutes, Wendy is no longer able to maintain a state of open monitoring. Whether or not there are several thoughts or if it is Wendy's experience in contrast to having been in a state where she was able to let the thoughts go, is unclear. However, Wendy describes the experience as her thoughts rushing back, giving a sense of both urgency and being overwhelmed. Wendy then states.

W: "You know. Was very very heavy thoughts and I remember I , I suddenly understood I have to make this thought process focus on something"

Wendy also describes the rush of thoughts as heavy, indicating something exhausting to bear or carry. Wendy goes on to describe an insight experience where she is compelled to find a new way to experience the state of no thoughts again. Wendy sums the experience up by saying the following.

W: "So in this way suddenly my focus was altogether in this present moment I couldn't focus on anything else."

Wendy describes how she is no longer using a tool such as a watch but instead uses the present moment. An argument can be made that the watch was situated in the present moment and indeed a symbol of time. Abandoning this in favor of the whole experience can be thought of as merging the object of attention with the entire experience of the present moment. This can be interpreted as a step towards overcoming the subject-object duality. Wendy is merging the element of her attention with the secondary experiences that are happening in the present moment.

Duality

Regarding dualism, Wendy states the following.

W: "The dualistic has to stop otherwise you would always be in suffering and that is what the eh Koan training is doing for me".

Koans give escape from suffering. Wendy notes that dualism needs to stop.

Participant 3: Michael

Michael (M) is a student of Peter's; he does not live in the Rinzai Zen monastery but in a major city some distance away. He comes to the monastery often, and he does work on the buildings. He describes his relationship with Peter as very close.

I ask Michael how he got into Zen practice, and he describes how an experience had led him to a crisis or as he puts it:

M: "Ehm and then at one point I fell madly in love with this girl, who became my girlfriend and that was probably eh she was probably the one person I have ever been most of eh ever. Eh that I also ended up in a relationship with. She chose to, or she found somebody else eh I think she cheated on me, and then left me to for this other guy"

Michael describes how he was madly in love with a woman who then became his girlfriend but who then left him for someone else. Michael describes his affection as "madly;" this indicates a high level of affection that is more than Michael regards as normal. He elaborates:

M: "This was something that I couldn't at this point in my life, I didn't know how to, handle it."

Michael describes being put in an unsolvable situation; he did not know how to handle it. He also points out that it was at that point in his life that he could not handle the situation, indicating that it is something that he would possibly be better able to handle differently now. Michael notes that:

M: "My ego couldn't couldn't come up with any answer to it, that is to say it couldn't be accepted."

Two elements stand out, ego and the inability to come up with answers to a frustrating experience that is further elaborated.

M: “So, I became quite frustrated with this situation ehm and for several days there was this sort of ego-flip in my mind things like ‘She should be ashamed,’ and, ‘who does she think she is?’”

Michael’s frustration is based on what he calls an ego flip, and he states that in his mind, indicating a conceptualized idea, his former girlfriend should be ashamed.

M: and “ ‘How could she do this to me?’ So so the selfish wheel is just rolling along that I get completely caught up.”

Michael reveals how he gets caught up in a narrative of blame. He notes how this is perpetuated:

M: “This self-pity and selfish nonsense, and they keep going for eh (deep in breath) probably ten days eh I managed to keep it going this frustration ego- flip.”

Michael refers to his experience as nonsense and speaks with a certain negative intonation when he talks about it. He also refers to it as a frustration ego flip that is maintained and kept going for ten days. Michael also notes.

M: “Because I, at the time, was working in the same place she was, every time I see her then then it sort of got going again.”

Michael describes how seeing his former girlfriend acts as a trigger, and because she works at the same place he does, he cannot get out of the situation. Michael explains.

M: “and keeps going I I I completely shut myself out of ehm it’s like I I shut myself away from everything in order for me to

immerse myself in nonsense, illusory nonsense that is going on in my head.”

Immersing himself in the experience, Michael stays in the crisis. Being so absorbed in it that he regards the experience as shutting everything out. He also regards it as nonsense, indicating a current changed view. Michael also uses the word “illusory;” from a contextual point of view, concepts were what Peter described as illusions. Indicating what Michael means is that his conceptualization of the experience is nonsense. Michael explains how the situation keeps going.

M: “and eh it keeps going and going and going and then at one point after probably ten days it cant keep going anymore and then it’s like, my head since I can’t keep all this going anymore, this flip so it sort of falls apart. And that’s where I get this what I think is an awakening.”

After having been in this crisis for ten days, Michael’s narrative breaks down, a flip happens, and everything falls apart leading to an experience of awakening. Michael then says the following.

M: “Because I I am completely blinded by these illusions and then suddenly they’re gone and then it dawns on me that it was all just something that I was telling myself”

Michael talks about how he is blinded by illusion and then it is suddenly gone. This makes him realize that it was something he was telling himself. Michael then says something happened.

M: “...and suddenly everything was very clear to me eh sort to say that in that situation I thought everything was clear to me”

Michael finds that everything is suddenly clear. What Michael then does is to say the following.

M: "So I rush out and buy this book and read it and at that point I thought this book was... Now that I've come a bit further in my training I might not be quite as impressed by it, but at that time I thought that he gave a very good theoretical explanation".

Michael is actively searching for an explanation.

M: "And author of the book talks about Christianity Buddhism and Zen. Ehm as as the original purpose of these religions, I'm pretty quick to discard Christianity because I don't think that... It's not my immediate impression that that it is the right thing for me at least not when I think of the Christianity that I knew"

Michael summarizes three leads that could explain his experience, and all are from a religious context. Based on his own experience with Christianity, he dismisses this.

M: "Zen I didn't know what the hell that was, but Buddhism I've heard about."

Buddhism is something recognizable for Michael, and he describes his first encounter.

M: "So, I seek out, eh I google Buddhism near the place I live and the first hit I get must be the official Buddhist group, what else could be".

Michael finds a Buddhist group near where he lives. He says the following about that group.

M: "So it turns out that that is the group of this western lama who taught a Tibetan form of Buddhism. I go to this this meditation group at this time, because I believe that there must be some experienced Buddhists that can teach me something here. Ehm so I get in this room and sit in a circle of chairs and do some meditation

and there's some people who chant mantras, and there are some readings of some texts and that's sort of it and I thought that that was not really what I was looking for or what I was missing. I didn't have the impression that any of them were more enlightened than me, it seemed it seemed more of knitting club, I thought so at the time"

Frustration

Michael then says that his experience with this Tibetan Buddhist group frustrated him.

M: "So didn't return, and I actually got somewhat frustrated, because if that was Buddhism I had I had tried then possibly it wasn't Buddhism that I was seeking and then I didn't know what to do".

Michael says that he did not return to the group, and because he thought he had tried everything he could, Buddhism might not be for him. He explains that he didn't know what to do, indicating how frustrating this experience was. Michael then goes on to say the following:

M: "But then I started looking into this Zen that Eckhart Tolle was also talking about."

Michael is actively attempting to search for an answer still and investigates Zen, which he had found mention of in a book.

M: "Then I find this Zendo in the city where I live. At this time there was something called city zendo where I live which was actually Peters group.

Michael describes a Zendo. Zendo means meditation hall, and Rinzai is a meditation hall that was reserved only for meditation, whereas in Soto, sleeping and other activities could also take place (Buswell & Lopez, n.d.). Michael also mentions this

group was his current teacher's group at that time. He goes on to explain his experience at the zendo.

M: "... and at that time it was more this strict style so it was 2x45 minutes of meditation with walking meditation in between and you aren't allowed to move at all just sitting completely still."

This is a far more vivid description of this experience than the Tibetan group. Michael describes sitting and walking and emphasizes that sitting was done completely still. Michael then explains the sensations in his body.

M: "Your body was completely messed up after that."

Using the words "messed up" after meditation indicates a strong and complex physical sensation beyond a localized pain. Michael elaborates.

M: "I was completely destroyed in my glutes and my shoulders, so I ended up thinking, 'Wow this really seems serious'"

Physical sensation is being described as localized, and Michael attributes a value to the physical sensation by equating it with a serious meditation practice.

Michael gives the impression that koan practice can be frustrating, so I ask about his experience with this and what prompted the feeling of frustration

M: "Yeah well ehm I think I was very uncomprehending regarding what koans even were, right. Because eh it is beyond ehm it is work that is beyond the normal conception, or way of thinking."

Michael mentions that koans are beyond normal conception. This is something Peter had talked about as well, the use of concepts. Michael gives the impression that he did not understand how to approach koans, because it required a new way of thinking. He then mentions the following.

M: “And I think, that was something that really frustrated me in the beginning”

Michael describes how a feeling of frustration was something he felt in the beginning. He further explains.

M: “eh because, I could, I thought I couldn’t see how I should approach such a topic at all”

He explains that his feeling of frustration was based on not understanding how to deal with the topic. He further elaborates.

M: “...and I was very challenged by these koans and and I even think I was close to crying at one point because I was so frustrated by not being able to see how to approach it.

The challenge of the koans was so severe that Michael finds it significant to mention that he was close to crying due to frustration. Michael explains how a solution was found.

M: “But suddenly, after a lot of meditation, then then I suddenly begin to see a different approach so to speak,”

Michael explains that the solution he found was a different approach, indicating a new way of thinking or looking at things, a new perspective as it were. Michael then states the following.

M: “So, so I experienced the first koan I had as very important”

Michael explains how on the basis of what he has said he regards the first koan as very significant to him.

I ask Michael about his experience of frustration and if it had gradually diminished. To which Michael replied the following.

M: “Previously, I could while I could completely panic with regards to certain things in frustration and wouldn’t even know what leg to stand on and things like that”

Michael describes a level of frustration that he had felt previously, with a metaphor of not knowing what leg to stand on. And then he says the following.

M: “And, and I don’t do that anymore so it’s eh it’s become a lot more calm, it’s also quite possible that I’ve been this especially on certain type actually I think that’s the case, it’s possible that it’s been worse for me then it would be for most”

Michael says that he has become calmer and then mentions that he believes that it has been worse for him than he thinks it would have been for most others. He goes on to say the following.

M: “eh but really eh it has significantly diminished and that’s actually only when I think back on it that that sort of dawns on me because not so distant.”

Michael says that, in retrospect, he thinks it has become significantly diminished, and that this is something that just dawned on him because it was not that long ago that he felt this way.

During the interview, I tell Michael that I sometimes run into dilemmas where two outcomes are equally undesirable. I then ask Michael about Zen practice and dilemmas, and if he has encountered something like a dilemma in his training.

M: “(!) YES I think dilemmas like that is something that I encounter quite frequently in this training and it is my experience that it’s supposed to do something, something is supposed to happen inside of us when we are in such an impossible situation.”

Michael explains that his experience is that something is supposed to happen when he encounters a dilemma in the training. He does not go into further detail.

Self/Ego

Michael explains how he met Peter.

M: “And then then I got into this group and met the master and I he seemed like he knew what he was talking about, he knew what it was that I had experienced and knew what it was that I was seeking so it’s somewhat a coincidence that I became a Zen Buddhist”

Peter seemed like he knew what he was talking about, and Michael could recognize his experience in Peter’s teachings. Michael also now identifies himself as a Zen Buddhist.

Concepts

Michael had already mentioned how a break with normal conception was necessary to solve a koan and how frustrating this was. Regarding his first encounter with koans, Michael says the following.

M: “But really ehm (+3) now that I was walking around being so frustrated by it and suddenly find a solution to it, and that frustration is also gone”.

Michael explains that the solution also brought great relief, and he sums up the experience with koan practice by saying the following.

M: “And if you look at it as the entire koan progression, then there has for sure been a marked change in how I view things.”

The solution is a new way of viewing things. Michael further elaborates.

M: “Really, something happens to my perspective you can eh take this with you out into your ordinary daily life I think”.

Michal says that what he takes with him in ordinary daily life is that something has happened to his perspective. He explains further.

M: “eh when you get a koan you can be challenged by some imagined concepts that this koan possibly challenges”.

Michael states that a koan can challenge you, but he also says that it challenges the concepts, indicating that his experience is that his frustration is a conceptualization.

M: “And when we see through it we also see through these imagine concepts ehm and that is something, that is something I have definitely been able to take with me from here”

The new perspective enables Michael to see the concepts and see through them, and this is something he can take with him outside the Zen setting and into his ordinary life.

Summary

Michael fell in love, had a breakup that led to an unresolved crisis which Michael calls a self pity ego trip that eventually gives rise to a waking up experience where this self and ego trip can't keep coexisting. Michael describes it as flip, where everything fell apart, and he realized that the narrative he has been telling himself is an illusion and all these illusions, as he called them, stopped and then everything was clear. Michael says koans have taught him how to realize how his thinking is challenged by conceptualization, and that the koans helped change his perspective on this. After that, Michael actively searched for an explanation and finds a Zen group. He noted particular frustration when working on koans. He noted that they required a different way of thinking beyond concepts and normal thinking. He also said that frustration was significantly less present in his daily life, which he attributed to his practice.

Participant 4: Luke

Luke (L) is a Zen master who originally trained in Rinzai Zen but eventually found a teacher in the Soto Zen tradition. He is now the abbot of a Soto Zen temple.

Luke describes how he read about Zen and was attracted to it but did not begin practicing Zen until he heard a talk by a Zen teacher

L.S: “ehm he spoke of a world of aliveness ehm that that we are not separate from”

Immediately, the theme of duality becomes apparent. The object of “world” and subject of the agent are not separate in Luke’s interpretation of the Zen teacher’s talk. Luke also uses the word aliveness just like Peter did when he said that everything was one.

L.S: “I have had an experience of oneness that sort of happened by itself and ehm very few people I knew could speak of that or knew what that was. And I knew that he had had this experience of oneness.”

Luke describes how he felt that the teacher and he had a similar experience of non-duality. Luke also mentions that his experience had happened on its own and that it had been difficult for Luke to find anyone who could relate to this experience. Luke elaborates on this when I ask about his experience of oneness.

L.S: “Yeah, for me the experience happened in a religious context and I think of eh William James book the varieties of religious experience ehm that it does appear that human beings sometimes have an experience where they are not just their separate isolated self.”

Luke describes his experience of a separate self falling away as happening in a religious context. He exemplifies this with writings in William James’ book *The*

Varieties of Religious Experience and goes on to say that to him it seems other people sometimes have this experience as well.

L.S: “But human beings from all kinds of traditions and no traditions sometimes feel the sense of deep connection beyond words.”

Luke uses the words “all kinds of traditions,” indicating that the experience of non-duality is not unique to Zen. The use of the word “all” indicates a very broad set of traditions meaning a large variance between the contexts of the experiences. Luke then uses the phrase “no traditions,” imbedding the experience across multiple traditions and then decontextualizing the experience by putting it outside any tradition and saying it can be found there too.

L.S: “We might even say before words.”

Previously in the interview with Peter, words and language were linked to concepts. Luke’s use of the sentence before words could indicate an experience beyond conceptualization. By saying before words, Luke also indicates the direct experience before it is put into words. Because words are an after thought, they are a conceptualization that happens after the fact. Luke then says that his experience was mediated by a drug:.

L.S: “So to me the eh and my first experience was the only time I took LSD so I was tripping”

Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) is a serotonin agonist, meaning that it mimics the transmitter serotonin. LSD has been shown to inspire the sense of a separate self, or identity in other studies (Tagliazucchi et al., 2016). Luke states that it was the only time he ever took LSD, and he is unapologetic regarding its effects when he states that he was tripping.

L.S: “But I have been on a religious path for many years my father was minister ehm but on that one trip the only one I ever took I had

a vivid sense of non-separation eh and and for me to use the words
God's love”

Luke mentions that his father was a Christian minister, and that this one LSD trip gave him a sense of non-separation, which he interpreted as god's love at the time. Luke repeats that it was the only time he ever took LSD, indicating the importance that I as an interviewer understand this. Luke then goes on to tell a story of how he felt at the time.

L.S: “I had been suffering a lot with loneliness. I was quite
successful in university. Very successful and very unhappy.”

Luke states that he had been suffering from loneliness while at university and explains that while he had been very successful at university, he had been very unhappy. Luke explains further.

L.S: “I have done what I was supposed to do and it got me nothing!
Apparently. Although you know worldly success.”

While Luke says that although he had gained worldly success, Luke explains that striving for success at university had brought with it nothing. There is an irony in the striving for something that turns out to be nothing in that there is also a valuing process going on when Luke states that he regards the worldly success as nothing. Luke returns to the subject of his LSD induced experience and says:

L.S: “ehm and for me this broke through this. And showed me a
world, tasted, touched a world eh that is totally independent of
achievement and self and other”

Luke's choice of words is “achievement” before he gets into the duality of self and other. In the context of Luke's success and university and his unhappiness, this indicates that he could be talking about the release from achieving what is expected. Luke also talks about self and other, which refers to the theme of duality that has

been talked about earlier. Luke's experience with this breaking down of duality is that of release. He even goes on to state the following.

L.S: "...and and it was such a deep relief to me that it changed the course of my life"

In Luke's own words, the experience brought with it a deep relief indicating that he had been under pressure that is now relieved. This pressure had been so great that it even changed the course of his life. Luke then says the following.

L.S: "But that experience also faded away it was great problem I had this great joy for months and slowly faded away and I wanted to get it back."

Luke talks about how this relief was short-lived and that he wanted it back. This, of course, can indicate a frustrating experience of knowing that there's something there but being unable to grasp it. When I ask Luke about chasing this experience, he says the following.

L.S: "There is no way to maintain any one feeling or any one experience and for the first ten years of my Zen practice my goal was to re-create that experience."

Luke describes how it took him ten years of Zen practice to realize that the re-creation of an experience is not possible. Furthermore, he claims that maintaining an experience is not possible either. This could indicate how Zen practice deals with the moment after moment experience of just being in the present moment. When trying to maintain an experience, you lose the experience that is happening, and you attempt to conceptualize something in order to maintain it. Luke further elaborates on the statement.

L.S: "ehm you know some bits I did and and what we teach in Zen is that although there are these experiences of opening that do change us in some fundamental way they cannot be grasped or held".

Luke says that he was able to recapture some parts of the experience. But when he goes on to explain how Zen teaches about “these experiences” in the plural form of experience, it could indicate that the bits he is talking about are more a group of experiences and not necessarily the exact same experience. Luke also says that these groups of experiences fundamentally changed him and that the experience cannot be grasped or held. Not being able to grasp hold the experience could be seen as similar to the pre-vocal experience that Luke talked about earlier.

”L.S: “...and they soon become just another story the ego tells that causes great suffering.”

Luke states that these experiences soon become just another story. By using the word “soon,” Lucas points to a future tense state of mind connected with the experience. This could indicate an attempt at maintaining the experience. Luke then goes on to say that this becomes a story. Of course, stories are fabrications that we tell ourselves; Luke even says that it is the ego telling the story. Earlier, we saw Peter describing the ego as a story that we tell ourselves. Luke ends the sentence by saying that this sort of thinking leads to great suffering. This points towards the Zen idea that illusion leads to suffering, and attempting to maintain an experience becomes a story which is, per definition, an illusion, and this is the cause of great suffering:

“L.S: “...and practice is about integrating those experiences into eh the constant change of life.”

Self/Ego

When I asked Luke about his experience with the concept of self, he says the following.

L.S: “eh so one of the Buddha’s main teachings is that there is not a fixed self.”

The choice of words “fixed self” indicates that the unchanging aspect to the self is what is regarded as an illusion and that there is no core.

L.S: “and one of the great eh in Zen we work with koans. With these inquiries there two essential koans that all the rest come from one is “where is me” this question of identity eh so this is the subject “who was the one who is talking”

Koans were described earlier when Peter described a similar experience where it took him at least ten years after becoming a Zen master to realize that the self was an illusion created by his own mind. In order to do so, it seems that koans are an essential tool to point towards the lack of an unchanging aspect of the self.

Duality

Luke continues the sentence but moves over to the theme of duality by saying that other root of koan practice is regarding the object, while the first one regarding the self is the subject.

L.S: “and the other is ‘what is this.’ That is about the thing that is encountered, so there’s some field of awareness there’s some particular thing that appears in the field so eh and through this social construction we say ‘I hear the bird.’”

Luke uses the description of a field of awareness where something appears in the context of the deconstructed self or core essence of the self that makes sense. Then Peter uses the description of a field of awareness because if there is no self to experience, then the subject object economy would fall apart. Luke also indicates this when he adds the phrase “social construction,” when he says. “I hear the bird.” Luke further explains.

L.S: “and it makes sense the bird appears to be outside and and there is this eh consciousness does eh experience the world in two parts there is me and there is the world eh and that’s quite a useful Eh construction”.

Luke describes how the dichotomy of subject object makes sense but maintains that it is a construction, albeit a useful construction.

Self

Luke moves back to talk about the self and says the following:

L.S: “but when we look more deeply and I think when a scientist a psychologist and other human beings have looked more deeply for the self it becomes quite difficult to find this “I”.

Luke describes the duality of subject/object as a construction and a deconstruction of the fixed self. Now, he has indicated that other traditions, not just Zen but scientists and psychologists who have looked for this fixed self, have found this to be very difficult. Luke goes on to say the following.

L.S: “ehm and end so Zen and awakening often becomes romanticized as some huge eh mystical experience but in fact this loss of self happens all the time”.

Luke talks about awakening and loss of the self in the same sentence, indicating that the two are connected. He also states that the self is not some enduring experience but something that happens continuously all the time. Indicating that the awakening moment is something that comes and goes. Luke further elaborates and gives an example.

“L.S: and so when you are holding your newborn baby and and you know there are moments when there is no awareness of me and the baby there is just the father and this great love, meeting this miraculous human appearing in the universe, right.”

Luke’s example takes the notion of no-self out of the Zen context and applies it to parenthood. Luke says “There are moments when...” emphasizing that an experience of no-self is not a continuous state but one that comes and goes moment to moment. Luke also uses a wording that underlines that the meeting happens outside of the self. He uses the phrase “appearing in the universe,” and this could indicate what Luke mentioned earlier when he talked about, “I hear the bird,” that the experience is in the meeting or field of awareness rather than in the agent. Luke further elaborates.

“L.S: “...and in that moment in the activity of that moment there’s no self standing outside there is just that there’s just washing the dishes athletes just running just bicycling”

Luke describes how in the activity of the moment the activity is all there is; there is no self doing the activity. There is just the activity. Luke also illustrates how some of the diverse scenarios the experience of no-self can occur. The no-self experience is not confined to Zen practice or even religious experience, but it can occur in mundane everyday situations like washing the dishes or athletes engaged in sports activities. Luke further elaborates on this.

L.S: “So, so for me that that self if we look closely enough in their own experience we see, and it is not that there is no self, it is that there are many selves, one appearing after the other.”

Luke says that for him it is not that there is not a self, but that there are many selves, moment after moment appearing after another indicates the fixed stable self is an illusion.

Frustration

When asked about frustration, Luke gives an example from Dogen, a 13th century Japanese Zen teacher (Masuda & O’Donohue, n.d.).

L.S: “eh one great Japanese Zen teacher Dogen talked about the koan of everyday life”

Luke, through Dogen, put this in the context of everyday life, and further explains.

L.S: “So essentially we might say human life is unworkable like it’s just one problem after another.”

Life, like the koan, is unworkable; one problem comes after the other. The context of the koan indicates that life can be managed through a change in perspective. Like the awakening Peter talked about. Luke then says the following.

L.S: “You know and so for me a koan is when we meet the moment in all its fullness.”

The koans are not solved but are met as they are. Luke then says the following.

L.S: “eh and the moment requires something more from us than we have ever given before that if if we were and if so as humans we are prone to rule-based behavior because of our language we want to figure out the rule and then I will just live by the rule and then I will always be happy.”

Luke talks about language, indicating an experience beyond constructed futures. Luke also mentions language and rule based behavior. Indicating how the language we employ creates the categories we live by.

L.S: “It turns out there is an aliveness of the moment that eh requires something of us. That’s and that the human life is essentially a creative experience of using what we have learned and meeting something new and in this meeting life blossoms as it has never appeared before. Moment after moment”

Like Peter, Luke mentions an aliveness moment after moment. This moment requires something of us. Luke mentions that we use what we have learned, indicating a previous experience, and we use it in the present.

L.S: “ehm so koan practice is entering that alive moment.”

Koan practice is entering that alive moment, indicating a shift in perception from any concepts or ideas of the self either remembered or projected. Luke then says the following:

L.S: “So when I meet with people sometimes I will give them specific questions, could be like who.. who is.. who is reading? Right?”

Luke explains how the koan of “who” supports how the self is regarded as a concept, and that the koan helps to change the agent’s perspective. Luke further explains.

L.S: “Or what is the sound of a single hand so many koans ehm and so as a teacher, whether I give a koan or not I’m always meeting this student in the aliveness of their life so I’m not interested in teaching about Zen or something else I’m interested in can we be here in this moment”

Luke ends with the present moment being the focus of attention by saying he is only interested in it if it is possible for him and a student to be present in the moment and that he does not necessarily give a koan in order to do so. This supports how awakening experiences sometimes happen spontaneously and that koans are just one tool for having such an awakening experience. Luke further elaborates on this.

L.S: “Because my experience is that as we enter into this place in some fresh, and you might say, unmediated way that the moment itself reveals itself to us.”

Luke says that his experience with the present moment reveals itself in an unmediated way when we enter into this place. This place could indicate the awakening experience. When Luke says the “unmediated way,” this is beyond concepts or language, which is a mediation of the experience. Luke is therefore talking about the moment just as it is, because the moment is only in the present moment, the past is a memory, the future has not happened, and so then the present moment becomes the focus of attention. Then he goes on more specifically.

L.S: “Not through our effort and our intellect that comes later.”

Luke emphasizes that this unmediated experience comes before intellect or effort, indicating the pre-conceptual experience, and he followed it by saying that the intellect and effort of the experience comes later. He then explains how he puts this into practice as a teacher.

L.S: “So I’m always meeting people and giving people koans and they will sometimes become clear but but often be very puzzled and frustrated.”

Luke then shifts his attention, saying that to enter into this present moment sometimes brings a lot of frustration. Luke quickly follows this up.

L.S: “eh and that’s fine with me if there puzzled and frustrated and angry.”

Luke states that this frustration and being puzzled is fine with him, indicating that the state of being puzzled or frustrated is not something to be overcome in and of itself, rather it is something that fades away when an insight or awakening experience happens. Luke even goes so far as to say that being angry is fine with him.

Awakening

When I ask Luke about his experience with the concept of awakening, he says the following.

L.S: “It is a concept”

Pointing out that awakening is a concept and thereby indicating that the word awakening is a constructed placeholder, we use it to conceptualize the experience. He further goes on to talk about awakening.

L.S: “Yeah, ehm so enlightenment or awakening has been thought of in many different ways in the Zen tradition. And there is certainly some literature that presents it as all you have to do is become enlightened and then everything will be fine”

Luke calls this awakening enlightenment and says it has been thought of in different ways. He also says that it has been thought of as if it is the goal. Indicating that that is not all there is to it. Luke then gives a personal account of what enlightenment means to him.

L.S: “For me enlightenment is much more common and various and and while and and so enlightenment is kind of an opening where we we see beyond our concepts.”

Luke describes his personal view on enlightenment as an opening beyond concepts, which were regarded as illusions by Peter. So, to Luke, this is a world beyond, which is made of illusion.

L.S: “It might be similar to insight that might come sometimes in therapy where someone is so caught up in something and suddenly they see “Ah there’s another way or oh I didn’t or I’m doing this to myself or you know.””

Luke compares the awakening experience to insight, which is a term used in psychotherapy and describes a sense or a sudden realization of a pattern or causal relationship in behavior or thinking. It is also described as an “aha” experience when dealing with difficult problems, when figuring out the solution (Elliott et al., 1994). He then brings this into context.

L.S: “There are these moments that we can’t manufacture but are moments of release and deepening ehm and they come in all shapes and sizes and there are indeed moments when everything drops away. Eh and and these moments, whether big or small, change us. They release some some of the eh wee hold so tightly to who we think we are and we will defend it, we will kill other human beings if they do not believe in who we are and and this process is a little bit of loosening the grip or what the teacher says opening the hand of thoughts. So I do think that every time we ehm feel this

dropping away or feel this intimacy with life that we have a greater capacity to ehm (!!) I might say to shapeshift because in the world and in Zen we are very strong on ehm when it's time to feed the baby we don't sit and meditate on your cushion when it's time to feed the baby you feed the baby and this is the fulfillment of your Dharma and there is nothing more important than that"

Luke explains that the awakening moment cannot be constructed, and that there are moments where everything drops away. This changes us. Luke then states that we hold on to our identity and that we will kill in order to defend our perceived selves. The experience of awakening loosens the grip on concepts such as self, and when that happens, we are able to have a closer experience with life as it is. Luke then says that there is an ability to shape shift involved. This indicates that concepts are not disregarded all together, but an ability to go into the experience and out of it as needed is cultivated. When asked about Dharma, Luke says the following.

L.S: "So Dharma comes from a Sanskrit word meaning something you can hold. But the Dharma also means the teaching or the way things are. Ehm for me ehm we say we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma in Sangha. Buddha being the aliveness of the moment not in some historical figure but taking refuge here and taking refuge in Dharma. One Zen teacher said the trees and the rocks and the walls are all preaching the Dharma. Your new infant is preaching the Dharma. The books on your shelf preach the Dharma so the Dharma is life eh and the law, not in some kind external thing imposed on us but in the reality of life and we say that reality is dependently co-arising eh the self and the world create each other"

Luke explains how everything preaches dharma. It is that everything arises in consciousness and falls away from consciousness. In that sense, everything in life co-arises. Luke uses an example of an infant, when looking at the infant it is possible to have the world of concepts and self drop away and only experience that moment.

Summary

Luke talks about awakening as enlightenment, as the absence of concepts, and as a varied experience that comes and goes with an ability to shape shift according to the circumstance. The experience is beyond concepts, and these drop away. Even the concept of “the self” drops away. Luke notes that koans can be attributed to the main question of “who,” who is thinking.

This promotes an experience of no-self or being one with the experience, which happens all the time when we are absorbed in an activity. This is related to the notion of duality. Luke says the duality of subject/object dichotomy makes sense from a logical point of view, but because logic is a conceptualization or a mediation of the experience, then there is a distinct split between the experience and the conceptual mediation of the experience. Luke notes that life is full of logical binds and calls it the koan of life, which can lead to frustration, along with the challenge of the concept of self.

Participant 5: Leia

Leia (L.O) is a Soto Zen master and abbot of a Soto Zen temple.

Awakening

I asked Leia about what the experience of awakening is like, and what it means to be awakened and she says the following.

L.O: “Right well you know it can mean a lot of different things.”

Leia uses the words “can” and “lot different things,” indicating that awakening is a term used for different things. This also means awakening is a conceptual a term that encompasses several experiences that are separate from each other and from the concept itself.

L.O: “We don’t really emphasize awakening so much in our teaching ehm except that we we actually it’s in the background of everything, because the teaching in Zen is that there’s a way of being present in the world that’s different from what we’re used to.”

Awakening is not a concept talked about so much in Zen teaching, but rather it is something that is always there. This could indicate that awakening is a concept and because of how Zen regards the subject object dichotomy of goal oriented practice, the subject would orient towards a concept or outcome, which might be undesirable. Leia has written an article about awakening and goes on to elaborate on this.

L.O: “So in the in the in the article I wrote it begins with a koan story about a Zen master who shows someone a flower in a garden because people these days see this flower as though they were a dream.”

Leia explains an everyday encounter where teacher shows a student a flower. She then goes on to regard this experience of being shown a flower as if it were in a dream. She further elaborates.

L.O: “So it’s a little bit like the ideas we’re we are dreaming we’re in a dream state we’re asleep we are not really fully perceiving the world around us or world inside of us”

Just like Peter, Leia talks about everyday life as if it were a dream state. This indicates something that is not perceived; something is unconscious or unaware. She then goes on to talk about the awakening from the dream state,

L.O: “And so in an awakening experience there’s a little shift in perspective that reveals a world that’s very different. It’s kind of like an unmediated world.”

A shift from dreaming to being awake entails a shift in perspective. Leia regards this as a little shift, indicating that the change from everyday life to an awakened experience might not necessarily be what would normally be expected when talking about waking up from sleep. This could mean that awakening experiences are sometimes small shifts in perspective. Leia also uses the word “unmediated”, which could indicate the use of concepts, so an awakening experience is when we experience something before it is put into a concept. Which mirrors what Luke said

about awakening when he talked about awakening happening before words. Leia further explains awakening.

L.O: “So usually we look at a flower and we say the word to ourselves “Flower.” Or we would say to “That’s a beautiful flower,” but there’s always a mediation there’s something in between it.”

When we say beautiful, we add a concept. Leia uses this to exemplify how there is always a mediation of the experience, and there is a cognitive conceptual understanding of the experience. She further states the following.

L.O: “So this is so I said in an awakening experience there’s a moment of pure perception where just the thing itself is revealed that could be just a teeny tiny turn (↑) or a really really really big experience so everything in between”

This mirrors what Luke said about awakening being this preconception experience. Leia also states that these moments of perceiving the world can happen in small experiences and it can happen and really really big experiences. And everything in between. What constitutes a big and small experiences unclear but it could indicate that the big experiences are life-changing experiences that entails a changed world View. Leia explains this by saying:

L.O: “And I think that eh my opinion is that most people have these experiences on a regular basis but there’s no context for them. Like when I was a kid, there was no context for that experience so it just drifted away into memory.”

Leia describes how, in her opinion, most people have these experiences of awakening on a regular basis. This could support the idea that awakening experiences are sometimes only small momentary changes in perspective. Leia goes on to say that these experiences become memories, indicating a passing and non-enduring experiences. The outcome is that they become memories could indicate that

the change of perspective is not great enough to warrant a change in worldview. Leia sums up her thoughts.

L.O: “And one of the things in Zen practice is that through studying with a teacher, through koan practice, through meditation, through studying the Sutras, through chanting and bowing and doing all the practices, you kind of, it allows you to integrate that that opening into every aspect of our lives. So instead of forgetting it, you know we keep it as a little memory, but it suffuses everything that happens.”

Leia does not deny that the experience becomes a memory but that the experience must be integrated. Leia describes how the context of practice integrates the awakening experience into everything the practitioner does. She uses the word opening, indicating a possibility or opportunity. This could mean that it is not so much the awakening experience that is the outcome of practice, but rather the integration of the awakening experience into everyday life becomes the field of focus.

Frustration

I had meet Leia before during the nine-day silent retreat, and she had given me a koan to work on. I found the process of working on this koan extremely frustrating, and this is something that I found in the literature regarding Zen as well. So, I decided to ask Leia about this frustration, and if it was an intentional part of koan practice. Leia then explains her thoughts about frustration koan practice.

L.O: “I think the frustration is a product of the ordinary logical mind trying to intellectually understand this awakened mind right and and and it would be like using a hammer to put a screw in you need to get the right tool.”

Leia describes how she thinks frustration is a product of ordinary logical thinking, and then she goes on to say that it is in attempt at intellectually trying to understand the experience of an awakened mind. The concept of logical thinking is something

that Peter talked about at length earlier. Peter describes logical thinking as dualistic, and that it would not function as a way of solving existential problems. Leia further goes on to describe how using ordinary logical thinking is like attempting to put in screw using a hammer. In this, she indicates that it is easy if you use the correct tool but difficult when using the wrong one. This could indicate that the intellectual logical mind is the hammer that we are used to using. When we encounter something different, in this case a screw, it does not help to use the tool that we are accustomed to using. We need to understand how the screw works in order to find the correct tool and apply it in order for the screw to get in. Abraham Maslov also famously said, “If all you have is a hammer, then the world becomes a nail.” Leia explains.

L.O: “So actually I believe you can’t work on koans unless you are in regular contact with a teacher because the teacher’s job is to engage with you in that frustration and show you a way out of it, right.”

Leia goes on to explain that she does not believe that it is possible to work on koans, unless there is a regular contact with the teacher. Leia also says that the teacher’s job is to engage in the frustration and show the student way out of it. The choice of the phrase “engage in the frustration” could indicate that the teacher’s job is more than just helping the student to solve the koan or get the frustration out. Engage is a word that means to occupy or to be involved with, this could mean that frustration is not something to be overcome, but rather something to be involved in:

L.O: “So and the frustration is important because something is being disturbed. The ordinary way of thinking is being disturbed and we cling to that because that’s how we explain the world to ourselves.”

Leia adds value to the concept of frustration by saying that it is important. She further goes on to say that the frustration is happening because something is being disturbed. Disturbed is synonymous with an interruption, indicating that the normal pattern of thought is interrupted, so change takes place. The frustration is a result of a fundamental change in how we think it is, or as Leia puts it, the normal way of

thinking is how we explain the world to ourselves. Explanation could indicate both logic and use of concepts that are now being disturbed. Leia further explains.

L.O: “So when that disturbance happens there can be a feeling of frustration, there can be grief (!) there can be fear, people sometimes get very afraid because they’re just on the edge of this little opening, or big opening.”

Leia says that when this disturbance happens, it often entails a feeling of frustration, which she goes on to say can become grief. People sometimes become very afraid because they are on the verge of a little or big opening. The indication of not only frustration but grief and fear indicate that an awakening experience is not necessarily always a positive experience. This means that seeking awakening can quiet the touring. Leia goes on to explain her thoughts on the reason for this.

L.O: “So I think that the usual structure of the self is (+2) being eh it’s being directly challenged and that can create frustration, fear, sadness. Yeah not happy feelings (!!) (+3) And I think that ultimately when the switch happens when the little moment of awakening happens there are many many moments of them in a life.”

Leia couples the reasoning for the negative aspects of the awakening experience to a dropping away of the self. She says that the self is being challenged. This has to do with the view of the constructed self that Luke also talked about. Luke mentions that people will defend their sense of self and even kill people. Leia goes on to say that when the change or switch happens, you interrupt yourself, and she says that there are many of these small moments in life. Leia returns to the concept of koan study as a mechanism for these experiences of awakening.

L.O: “And with koans, you get to have one with every koan or sometimes multiple ones with a koan there’s there’s, the switch is is kind of a relief from the frustration.”

Leia says that koans usually entail a single awakening experience, indicating that that awakening is the actual purpose of the koan. That doesn't mean solving the koan is the objective but having an awakening experience is. Leia also indicates that there are sometimes many awakening experiences with a single koan, and when the switch of perception and subsequent awakening experience has happened, it becomes a great relief. Relief indicates that grief or frustration is something encountered before or during the experience or work on koans. Leia ends by saying the following.

L.O: "So it's not just to frustrate people for the sake of frustrating"

Koans are not just frustrating for the sake of it, indicating that there is a purpose. Leia then goes on to say the following.

L.O: "There's an interesting thing that happens when after you've passed a few koans, that is giving answers that the teacher accepts as valid answers or demonstrations it's it starts to be that the koans start to make sense."

This is that after a few koans have been solved to the teacher's satisfaction, they start to make sense. This indicates that the change in perception has occurred, but it also indicates that koan practice is an ongoing practice that over time changes how the problems of the koans are approached and subsequently solved. Leia further explains.

L.O: "And after you've been through 50 or 100 koans you hear one and "Oh I get it" and then you have to find a way into it that's personal, which, so you still work on it. The same thing when studying Buddhist sutras or texts at first they don't make any sense at all and after a while they start to make sense."

They start out by giving between 50 to 100 koans, which are indicative of having to train for some time, because each koan takes some time to solve unless you are fully awake. Leia sums up by saying, "At first they don't make sense, neither do the Buddhist sutras or any of the texts, but then they start to make sense." She then goes on to talk about some of the mechanisms that aid in this process.

L.O: “And the thing that most aids in this is the sitting present without moving for periods of time it seems to have this effect’s it’s like a big technology for waking up.”

Leia says that it is not only koan study but also just sitting presently without moving for periods of time, and in her experience, this seems to have an effect. She goes so far as to call it a technology for waking up.

Self/Ego

Leia talked briefly about how these awakening experiences challenge the concept of self and how this could lead to frustration. I then asked Leia if she could tell me about her own experience with this dropping away of the self. And Leia says the following.

L.O: “Yeah so for me personally that experience I had when I was a kid I I found myself and this is weird and I don’t really understand why this happened. I was at a summer camp and I woke up really early and left the tent and it was on the shores of the ocean and I sat down on the beach in the meditation posture you know. I was like a nine-year-old kid and watched the sun come up, which I’d never seen before because I’d never been up that early and I’ve never been in the place where I could have seen it. And what happened, the turning point, was that everything started to break apart into its disparate elements”

Leia explains that she does not know the cause of her experience and regards it as weird. Then she tells how she, as a nine year old, experienced how everything came apart into its parts. The use of the word disparate suggests how each part is so separate that they no longer compare or can be considered part of the same. Leia elaborates.

L.O: “So the colors that were starting to appear in the dawn sky were like all these little pieces that I saw were coming together and going apart and and and the feeling that I had was of complete eh

safety and reassurance like that, and and it was kind of interesting because I had no religious context for it”

The parts came together then came apart, indicating a varying experience. Leia also says that this was accompanied by a feeling of safety. She then says there was no religious context to it, indicating that was a comparable experience to a religious experience. Leia explains this further.

L.O: “I think for a Christian kid I might say I thought I have seen God right. And so, but what I thought was “Oh! This is what grown-ups must know ” and I tried to tell my mother about it when she picked me up from camp”

Leia describes how, as a nine-year-old, she went to summer camp and woke up early and saw the sunrise. The sunrise was not something that she had seen before, partly because she had never gotten up early enough or had been in a place where you could see the sunrise. Leia describes how she experienced the entire sensation of the sunrise breaking apart. Leia describes how she experienced everything becoming separated into parts, such as how colors would form and be constructed. This could indicate that the concept of color is experienced as a concept and then as the experience before the concept and back and forth. Leia goes on to explain that if she were a Christian kid, she would have probably said that she had encountered God, indicating the magnitude of the experience. She then goes on to explain how she felt complete safety and reassurance during this experience. Leia then goes on to explain how this seemed to her, as a nine-year-old kid, and she thought that this was how grown-ups knew about the world, indicating a worldview she believes grown-ups had had. Leia explains how she attempted to explain her experience to her mother. She then goes on to elaborate on this.

L.O: “And she clearly had no clue about what I was talking about and she said “Oh yeah sunrises are really beautiful”, you know right. But she didn’t understand that the world had come apart and I could see through, so so that’s why I became curious, like she didn’t know she was the person I would turn to for for help.”

Leia describes her mother's reaction and her own sense that her mother did not understand what she was saying. Her mother had commented that sunrises are beautiful, indicating a valuing conceptualization of aesthetically pleasing nature. But her mother had failed to understand that the world had come apart and that Leia had experienced being able to see through the world. This could indicate that Leia means seeing through the conceptualized world. Leia then goes on to describe an awakening experience where the self dropped away.

L.O: "And so then when it happened again it was during a Zen retreat and it was it was just a few years (+1) into my Zen studies I was somewhere in my 30s actually I remember exactly I was 34 years old when this happened. And and I was actually in some distress I was very upset with my teacher about something and he hadn't come to the retreat and and I was crazed to not see him and so I was just sitting you know and I was looking at a blank screen because in those days we sat facing the wall"

Leia describes being in some distress, because she was upset that the teacher had not shown up to a Zen retreat. She describes her emotions as being crazed not to see him. She then describes how she was just sitting, staring at a blank screen, which was a form of meditation practice at that time. She then goes on to describe how the dropping away of the self happened again.

L.O: "And and suddenly the same thing happened like everything, all my thoughts and concerns, feelings just dropped away and the only thing that was there was the screen in front of me. And I could see it was, as if it popped out of of it was just all these little pieces of phenomena of what I used to call a screen and I just felt this gushing up of happiness and joy."

Leia describes the screen giving way to all the phenomena. A phenomenon is an experience, so Wendy describes herself experiencing the experience, rather than the concept of the screen. This also indicates that there is a temporal component, because

concepts are something maintained in awareness. Leia describes all the phenomena of the screen. Presumably the screen is unchanging, so all the phenomena could indicate the experience changing moment by moment. She also describes how concerns and other concepts dropped away, and there was only the phenomena of the screen in front of her. This mirrors what Luke says about doing the dishes or holding your newborn child, it is the experience of just the experience. Leia then adds that she felt that gushing up of happiness and joy. She further describes the situation in which she experienced this.

L.O: “And when and when the when the sheshin was over for the night and everyone’s supposed to go to bed I I went for a walk in the woods because I was so excited. Everything I saw was like that it was like things were lit from the inside and I remember seeing a tree, it was an oak tree, and it was just so so amazing! I couldn’t get over it just felt like I was the tree and you know so so this had been a very big experience for me.”

Leia describes taking a walk in the woods after the session was over. She also describes how everything was alive or lit from the inside, this mirrors what Peter said earlier, that everything is alive and clear. Leia also adds that she felt excited and amazed by an oak tree, indicating a completely new perspective on an object that she presumably had seen before. She even knows that she couldn’t get over how amazing this oak tree was. She describes how everything she encountered was like this. She goes on to explain how she then met her teacher the next day.

L.O: “And the next morning my Zen teacher showed up and you know so as I went to bed that night you know I was just wow just utterly peaceful and happy. And when I came in to see him in an individual meeting he did this usual asked how I was and and I couldn’t find words to tell them what was happening and he said “you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me?” And I said “well as a matter of fact,” and then I told him more or less what I told you not exactly because this is many years later.”

Leia describes how, when she went to bed, she fell asleep utterly peaceful, and her Zen teacher showed up the following day. When she came in to see him, he asked if there was something she would like to talk to him about, and eventually she told him about her experience. She describes her encounter with her Zen teacher.

L.O: “ehm and eh and he he asked me some koans and I have never worked on koans up until that point. And he asked a bunch of them you know eh and I knew the answers. It it it was like it wasn’t even they weren’t koans to me they weren’t puzzles or questions. They were just obvious.”

Leia describes how she was given Koans by her Zen teacher that she just solved, she then describes how she viewed these koans not so much as problem ors puzzles but obvious. Indicating a change in perception.

L.O: “and and so he would he confirmed that something had happened and and then started and that’s when I started working on koans with him.”

Leia also says that she had never worked on koans until that point and that her Zen teacher confirmed that something, presumably an awakening experience, had happened to her. Leia then goes on to describe what she felt, using a metaphor the following way.

L.O: “And you know as soon as I would get stuck and each one would open up a new eh it was like I, she used to describe it it’s like you’re on a plane and it lands in Copenhagen right, so you’re in Copenhagen but you know nothing about the city and you have to get off the plane to get a taxi to the hotel and in and then it can take the rest of your life to explore everything and he said this this is what happened he said you landed you had an awakening.”

Leia describes how the experience is like getting on a plane and then landing but not knowing where to go from there. The parallels with the metaphor of using a hammer to insert a screw can be made. By looking at the metaphors from a point of view that

says that there is something missing in both cases. The knowledge of inserting a screw but only having a hammer, or the knowledge of getting from the plane to the hotel but never having experienced anything but flying indicates that there is more to Zen training than simply an awakening experience. Something is missing. Leia goes on to explain what this might be.

L.O: “But you don’t know anything of about how to live from that place so his, he he helped me for the next 15 years to integrate what happened in our little moments along the way but yeah.”

So the integration of this waking up experience that Leia started out explaining was helped along by her teacher 15 years after the awakening experience. This indicates that a lot of work has to be done in order to integrate the experience into everyday life.

Concepts

Leia and Luke both mentioned an unmediated experience that exists before the experience is conceptualized. I then ask Leia to elaborate on how this unmediated experience is translated into a mediated experience when putting the experience into words, when talking about it or writing it down. Leia added to her thoughts.

L.O: “Well the thing is everything is temporary that’s one of the other insights that arises. So it falls away completely but then it re-coheres.”

Leia speaks of a temporary experience being one of the insights that arises. This could suggest that the insights that arise are permanent as if something is learned that is then applied. In this case, the insight is that everything is temporary. Leia then goes on to say that everything falls away completely but then re-coheres.

L.O: “Right, and and so the idea is, and the thing is so we we sometimes talk about the world of form in the world and the world of emptiness or thusness is a better word for it.”

Leia has talked about the world as though it deconstructed and recovered several times. She now explains that in Zen, they talk about the world of emptiness and the world of form. Leia then correct herself and says a better word for emptiness would be thusness. Thus-ness indicates the way things are. Leia then elaborates.

L.O: “So we live in the world of form you know I’m sitting on a couch you are there in Denmark there’s definite the separation everything is itself and separate. When this dropping away happens some thing is revealed. It’s not it’s not just the world of form there’s this other thusness.”

Leia explains what she means by saying that there is a separation between her and I and what we are doing, in that there is definitely a physical world that is as it is, but when the dropping away of concepts happens, then there is also a different side of things, a thusness as she calls it. Leia elaborates further.

L.O: “Where everything is connected and there are no barriers for boundaries and nothing is mediated by thoughts or concepts all that happens”.

Leia further explains this by saying that everything is connected to this thusness because nothing is mediated through concepts. Thereby, there are no barriers or boundaries. She also includes thoughts, which are regarded as concepts. Leia then further elaborates.

L.O: “And then the work is to to be able to go back and forth with ease. Back into the world of form but the world of form was never the same again after that experience”

To be able to go back and forth with ease indicates that a balancing act needs to take place between form and emptiness. By going back and forth, the two are not mutually occupying the same timeframe. Leia also adds going back and forth with ease, which could indicate the effects of training or possibly an active choice to go into state of emptiness and back. Furthermore, Leia notes that the world of form is

never quite the same because something has changed. This supports that the experience of awakening changes a point of view, which has been noted earlier. Leia continues.

L.O: “It it’s because something’s been revealed so so at first it’s developing a kind of flexibility to be able to go back and forth between the world of form and the world of thusness, the perception of form and perception of thusness and then at a certain point in the training the two come together.”

Leia further elaborates and says that it is only in the beginning that the training regards going back and forth in developing this flexibility, which eventually leads to the world of form and the world of emptiness coming together. This could indicate a worldview where the two are no longer separate but viewed as one. Leia gives an example.

L.O: “And you know and it really is like you know when I saw that tree it was it was a tree like I knew that it was a tree and yet so much more than a tree. In the same thing with the sun coming up and all those things. They were still, they are forms, but they had this other quality to them that gave them much more openness and depth.”

Leia uses the examples of her own awakening experience both as a child and as a 34-year-old Zen practitioner and illustrates how at that moment in time, the world of form and the world of emptiness came together as one. Leia elaborates.

L.O: “And so so so that coming in and out, I’m describing it using concepts because one of the things a Zen teacher has to do is find ways to talk about this so that other people can hear it and go “oh yeah that matches my experience” or “That doesn’t match my experience at all but it intrigues me, I want I want that” you know.”

Leia explains how she, as a teacher, needs to use the world of form and the tools of concepts in order to establish a recognizable narrative for people, so they can either recognize their own experience in what the Zen teacher is saying or say that they don't understand at all but that they are curious. Leia gives a metaphor that illustrates this.

L.O: "But knowing that there's another phrase we use in Zen you know the finger pointing to the moon so all words or the concepts are the finger, the moon itself, is this is eh it has nothing to do with the finger pointing at it."

Leia gives an example of how the use of concepts is not just something to be avoided but they have a function. By saying that words and concepts are like a finger pointing to the moon, it indicates that words and concepts are tools that you can use in order to discover something more. In this case, the moon itself has nothing to do with the finger, however by using tools such as words or concepts, in this case a finger, you can point towards the moon and thereby guide somebody to have an experience of this moon. In that way, the two worlds of form and emptiness are supplementing each other more than replacing one another.

Duality

Leia has previously talked about the concept of duality. I then asked Leia about what her experience of teaching in different cultures was. She replied.

L.O: "Oh that's an interesting question. You know I find that eh most university educated Westerners whether they're from Denmark or Portugal or North America or the United States doesn't make any difference ehm there are there is a way we bought into the Cartesian version of dualism just you know right it's just how we see the world how we experience the world and interestingly I don't find that so much with Asian people that I run into engines or a station people eh there are little more, the haven't been eh in a way poisoned by Descartes (!!)"

Leia explains that in her experience, university educated people in the West tend to have been taught a worldview that is different from people in Asia. This worldview is influenced by Descartes, who, in Leia's experience, has not affected Asian thinking as much. She even goes so far as to say poisoned when speaking about Descartes' philosophy. Presumably, Leia is referring to Cartesian dualism, in which Descartes proposes that the mind and body are dual phenomena. The mind is regarded as non-physical and thereby removed from the body. Leia then goes on to further elaborate on how she deals with this situation in teaching.

L.O: "So so there's less of that but I don't actually try to ehm point that out to people so much I just take it as a given that most people live in the dualistic world I have never met anybody who doesn't"

Leia does not explicitly point out the difference out in her teaching, but continues.

L.O: "Until they have the awakening experience and then they see that there's more than the dual eh they have an experience of the non-dual, that's another way of talking about thusness."

Leia talks about non-dualality as an experience that comes after awakening. In this way, non-dual is regarded as another way of saying thusness. Leia continues.

L.O: "It is you know it's just this oneness and and it can be quite attractive to live in the world of thusness and then we have to go back to the dualistic world you know to survive."

Leia talks about how the non-dual world can be attractive, and she hints at survival being dependent on the world of form by saying that in order to survive, we need to return to the dualistic world. Leia notes the following.

L.O: "It is funny that after an awakening experience especially if it's been a big one sometimes people can't do anything they can feed themselves or go to the bathroom in open have to kind of eh

comeon! Get through that, come back! Because there will be this tendency to float away”

Leia describes how encountering people who are having this awakening experience and have trouble returning to the world of form. She thinks that people sometimes have difficulty doing simple things, such as going to the bathroom, and they sometimes need to be pushed out of this state in order for them to come back, otherwise there will be a tendency to float away as she calls it.

L.O: “But, you know there’s another metaphor that I like its actually a joke that to Fisher swimming in the ocean and and one old fish swims by them and says something like how are you enjoying the water and then he floats off and one fish says eh to the other whats this thing he’s talking about water? Because the idea is that fish don’t know the water the are swimming in. This is the world is just the way it is so to call it something it doesn’t make sense to people.”

Leia compares living in the dualistic world to being a fish and not knowing the water fish is swimming in. She illustrates this by using a joke where a fish says to another fish, ‘How do like the water?’ The fish doesn’t know that they are swimming in water. This unknown factor that surrounds people, and is taken for granted, is what the world is like, according to Leia. She mentioned twice that it does not make sense to talk about duality for most people, because it is like explaining the water to fish, and they don’t know that they swim in water. This indicates that the fish would need to experience the water in order to realize it, just as people would need to experience the world of thusness or non-duality in order to realize it.

Summary

There is less emphasis on awakening in Soto Zen practice, but it’s in the background of everything. Awakening is a way of being present in the world in a different way, where a shift in perspective reveals a unmediated world of pure perception. It is not telling ourselves what we see but experiencing it directly. Many people have these

experiences regularly, and with koans, you can have many experiences of awakening. After an awakening, koans will make sense.

The frustration people feel is regarded as important because the ordinary way of thinking is disturbed, so there is an opening for change. The frustration is a byproduct of the ordinary logical way of thinking. It is trying to intellectually understand what the awakened mind means using concepts to understand non-conceptual thinking. It also relates to the structure of self being challenged. Leia felt her self-concept drop away, along with feelings, concerns, and other concepts.

Concepts are a mediation of an experience, Leia talks about the world of form and the world of emptiness, where nothing is mediated and everything is as it is. Emptiness in its Japanese form is called mu, and there is a concept called mu-Shin that is connected to Zen Buddhism, which is regarded as the empty mind. The empty mind is a state free of form, or empty of concept (Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, 1960). Leia notes that everything is temporary, and the world is not either/or nor separate.

The dualism in the world of form and of thiness, which Leia also calls emptiness, requires balance and flexibility to engage in conceptual thinking when needed. Leia describes how people who get caught up in the experienced world so completely without the ability to engage in the conceptual again, need help with simple things like going to the bathroom. Leia gives an example of the duality: Fish not knowing the water they are swimming in is just like the world around us. The experience of the water and calling it water makes no sense, because that there is something there would be foreign to the fish.

Three rogue findings

Three lines of questions were not related to the interview guide but came up spontaneously during the interview sessions. The first was a question asked of Peter, due to a thesis the researcher had read.

The Trolley Problem

The Gordon W. Allport Prize was given to a master's thesis in psychology with the title "Would the Buddha Push the Man of the Footbridge? Systematic Variations in the Moral Judgment and Punishment Tendencies of the Han Chinese, Tibetans and Americans," written by Xin Xiang at Harvard University (Xiang, 2014). The findings were that Buddhist monks were more likely to push the man off the footbridge, whereas non Buddhists have a tendency to not push the man of the footbridge. On the basis of these findings I thought it would be interesting to see if a Zen Buddhist master would respond in the same fashion. Here is Peter's response, after I explained the trolley problem and asked him what he would do.

P: (gets up and walks around) "so you have a trolley and there's like a fork in in trails the and you can change the.."

P: (suddenly tackles the interviewer to the floor).

L:(!!)

P:(!!)

Like Peter said earlier Zen helps him look through fake problems, in this regard pushing over the interviewer stops the made up problem.

Hallucinations

During the interview, Wendy told the researcher that she used to suffer from schizophrenia. Initially, the criteria for participating was that participant was a healthy individual. However, during the interview, Wendy claimed that she no longer suffers from schizophrenia, and that this was something her Zen training had helped her with. A decision was made to ask her more about this and include it in the study.

Wendy draws a parallel between hearing voices and that of ordinary thoughts. In both cases, content is something projected from the individual. In the case of schizophrenia, the voices simply take on another form than the thoughts of other people, according to Wendy . By discerning that the voices are not external entities attempting to manipulate Wendy but simply her own thoughts projected onto a different modality, Wendy is able to ignore the thoughts, which have since disappeared.

The implication that Zen training has an effect on psychiatric disorders was not something that was expected in this study. However, when the explanation of how this has worked for Wendy, it was shown to correlate quite well with the idea that Zen is something that tends to rid the individual of any constructions that the mind would otherwise inject into the context of things. A diagnosis can be very helpful, but it can also be an identifier. The social expectations of how someone with a diagnosis behaves can be a construct that shapes the very behavior of the agent.

When the interview was initially over and I was packing my recorder and getting my shoes, I was talking with Wendy at the same time. I asked if the interview had been unpleasant or if she had any questions. Eventually, I told her that I got the impression from what she had told me that it seemed like she had realized that the voices and hallucinations were a manifestation of her own thoughts. Wendy immediately exclaimed, “Yes! Exactly!” I did not get this on the interview recording, but I will present the part of the interview that led me to that conclusion. Wendy is explaining a breakdown she has had while trying to isolate herself.

W: “So I got to the house of bed and breakfast I took eh what you say in europe somewhere. There was not that many people so I began to get out of the pills and at one point I just got all the pills and hallucinations came“.

Wendy describes how she had isolated her self and began to stop her medication. After that the hallucinations came. She explains this further:

W: “...the demons were there and I remember that eh /It’s not that long time ago was about 2014 or 15 so I eh I was fleeing away from them . I was trying to figure out what is this but I couldn’t because I was so afraid I was so afraid but eh at at one time I was just talking to myself all the time and and the demons were just terrible I just didn’t understood what it was but it was terrifying “

Wendy explains how she was terrified of her hallucinations and that this stoped her from understanding what was happening.

W: "...my sisters she's a doctor and she said you are not okay you have to go to the psychiatric unit so the doctor came and when I was talking to them so I realized I need some comfort I need some safe place so I went with them to the psychiatric unit. And ehm there I was sitting in the ambulance and it suddenly hit me that I have to I cannot flee eh eh away from this demons and the devil I have to! Understand what they were trying to tell me".

Discursive psychology says that when we tell a story, we can portray an event as a trigger. By linking an event to a state, or sense of a problem, we integrate this event into the narrative of that sense or state (Capps & Orchs, 1995). When Wendy says she needed some comfort and therefore accepts going with to the psychiatric unit, it indicates that the psychiatric unit is something she also associates with comfort and something her sister associates with safety.

W: "So, there were people around me so I was safe so I said to the devil okay I'm afraid but you can just show me what you want to say(!) And I remember my hallucinations and the devil took me in my hand and I went into the eh she was actually very nice she actually took something around my eyes I couldn't see what was going on and was talking to me about why people were there and why what is this hell and what is this devil thing. And and I understood there that the devil is actually the part of us that doesn't want to see who we are in reality the part that went away"

Wendy explains how she has realized that her hallucinations were a part of her. Indicating that they were constructions of her own mind.

W: and when I understood what they were suddenly the pills were not necessary anymore because the hallucinations were not there and I was clear in my head there was nothing haunting me.

Wendy explains that she has understood what her hallucinations were and that therefore her pills were not necessary. She also remarks that she was clear and there was nothing haunting her.

W: “So, I don’t have schizophrenia paranoia, I don’t have hallucinations”.

Wendy does not regard herself as suffering from schizophrenia paranoia anymore.

W: “ehm and what Zen is doing for me is like it’s giving me a clear-cut. When people meditate a lot they will get hallucinations that is what happens because their subconscious level just opens up. That was actually what happened to me when I got the hallucinations schizophrenia paranoia”.

Here it becomes clear that Wendy is starting to regard her hallucinations as manifestations of her subconscious. Meaning that the hallucinations are stripped of agency, and Wendy was in the process of realizing that these hallucinations are a manifestation of her own thoughts and feelings.

Cultural context

During the interviews with Peter and Leia, they both independently commented on cultural differences. While discussing the theme of conceptualization, these cultural differences do indicate a problem in ignoring cultural context when doing research on contemplative practices.

Peter is talking about koan practice, and I ask him to give me an example of a waking up koan. He hesitates for four seconds but then states the following.

P: “The traditional one was: Zen master Joshu, a monk asked Zen master Joshu “does a dog have Buddha nature or not? Joshu said mu”.

Peter gives a koan and, having knowing the word Mu translates from japanese to a rough equivalent of the english word empty I ask if this is what he means.

P: ”no no no no no (closes eyes shakes head)”

Peter is clearly in disagreement so I ask him Mu does not mean empty.

P: “eh the reason the word mu is not translated here in the West, of course a Chinese or Japanese monk know what Mu eh means, that would make it harder for him (the Westerner) to awaken. That wouldn’t take it /That would mean she takes longer to end up in an existential crisis”.

Peter explains that the reason the word mu is not translated is that, despite a Chinese or Japanese monk knowing what this term means, the Westerner would find it harder to awaken if the word was translated. This indicates that the mental process used to understand a culturally ingrained word, such as mu, would likely lead the Westerner to analyze the meaning of the word and thereby conceptualize it. This supports the difficulty in translating a culturally situated word and placing it in a different cultural context.

When I interviewed Leia, I also asked her about conceptualizing elements from contemplative practices such as mindfulness into self-report questionnaires. I explained that when certain self-report questionnaires were presented to Zen Buddhists and Tibetan Buddhists, the results were that the participants pointed out some of the misunderstandings in the questions in the questionnaire itself. I asked if Leia has any thoughts on this and she states the following.

L.O: “That’s the thing too its, yeah the different concepts of the self in different cultures of I would say Western cultures and Asian cultures are where the, that’s the dividing line. But anyone who had studied Asian religion like Zen is, would understand why the Tibetan guy laughed, right”.

Leia says that anybody who had studied an Asian religion, such as Zen would understand why the Tibetan would laugh at the mindfulness self-report questionnaire presented to him. This has to do with how the self is conceptualized differently in Asian countries and Western countries, which, according to Leia, is where she would draw the cultural divide. She goes on to say the following.

L.O: “Because it is it is because even talking about measuring mindfulness it’s hilarious! And we are very serious about it because

it comes from scientific tradition of measuring, there have to be results and there have to be outcomes and in Zen we don't emphasize results, we emphasize intention, but not outcomes that clashes with the with a lot of modern mindfulness research".

She says that talking about measuring mindfulness is hilarious, indicating that it is misunderstood or misguided to the point where it becomes funny. Leia also comments that research into mindfulness is very serious, but it comes from the tradition of measuring and there has to be an outcome. But she says that this way of thinking is in contrast to what is taught in Zen practice. Zen practice emphasizes intention and not results so much. I ask if I have understood her correctly by saying that my understanding is that dualism can refer to the notion that there is some me here and now that the needs to work towards some future projected result, to which Leia replies.

L: "Right (!!)right which is which is just such a weird limited view eh".

Confirming that the idea of working towards a goal or somehow conceptualizing a future self becomes a dualistic way of thinking

Results

Discussion of the themes

Several psychological therapies have emerged on the basis of contemplative practices. MBSR, MBCT, and ACT all employ factors in common with Zen.

So what can psychology learn from contemplative science? Based on the themes from the empirical findings, I will compare this with contemporary psychological science and make the argument that there is still a lot to be learned.

Awakening

Peter started questioning who he was, leading to an awakening experience. That experience caused him to take up a Zen practice. Wendy experienced how she was able to free herself from conceptual thinking at a very early age. She eventually found her way to Zen practice and has understood her experience as an awakening experience. Michael had a crisis that led him to an awakening experience. Luke experienced his concept of self drop away and, through that, had an awakening experience. Leia experienced how the world came apart, also at an early age; this awakening experience repeated itself during a Zen retreat. The notion of awakening is something very central to all of the participants in this study. The individual experiences all point to a changed worldview with a increased awareness of how concepts create much of the mental activity that is regarded as everyday life.

Concepts

The awakening experiences center around the deconstruction of the conceptual world. Peter explains how the mind gets clouded and lost by conceptualizations and that the conceptualization of the world is not the same thing as the world itself with regard to the conceptual experience as non-reality. Leia explains how the world came apart; presumably what she means is that the conceptualization of the world came apart.

Cognition is the activity of knowing (Neisser, 1976), yet we only have access to limited parts of mental activity. Only the results of mental functioning, not the underlying process, are available to the conscious mind (Wilson & Nisbett, 1977). This means that there is a functioning aspect to thinking that is sub-vocalized and pre-conceptual (Wilson & Nisbett, 1977). This process of the preconception of knowledge can be regarded as the unmediated experience and that was a repeated topic in the interviews. It also points to the constructionist nature of any concept that arises in our cognition. This constructionist nature is found in the themes of the interviews.

At the very core of phenomena lies an interpretation, a conceptualization of the phenomena in the mind of whoever experiences it. Cognitive scholars have hinted at

similar reasoning that we do not have direct access to the mechanism underlying thought, we only have access to the partial conclusions or interpretations of phenomena (Wilson & Nisbett, 1977). Discursive scholars say that we often create the problem through discourse. An agent may experience this as a problem because of how this is associated with a their world view (Capps & Orchs, 1995). Wendy does this this when she tells the story of how she was isolated and then got help from the psychiatric unit. It stands to reason then that retelling and reimagining a story can also be problematic. Rinzai Zen attempts to call attention to this conceptualizing, calling it an illusion.

By realizing that the phenomena is a concept that is constructed in our mind, the meaning and value of the concept becomes less important, and then so does the consequences of the phenomena.

In psychology, Frederic Bartlett supports this constructed conceptualization of the world with his experiments on memory. Frederic Bartlett shows that remembering is something that is reconstructed over time. Bartlett showed this by asking people to recall a story and after letting time pass, recall it again, and he then charted how the story changed (Bartlett, 1920). The stories Bartlett investigated had a tendency to change towards an accepted cultural norm. What this shows is that memory is a very fluid concept that does not accurately describe the world as it is seen or even how we initially experienced it. It is rather how we experience the memory in the current timeframe. Loftus and Palmer point out that memory is not fixed, and they conducted experiments with videos of two cars crashing into each other. When participants were asked to recall what they had seen, they were given the opportunity to replace crash with birds, resulting in a more aggressive bird being used. Then the participant would estimate that the car had traveled faster than it had actually done (Loftus & Palmer, 1974). This means that the concept we hold mind, that is memory, is subject to change and influence and thus also subject to construction.

Self

During the interviews for this thesis, a recurrent theme of the self as a construction came up. Peter said it is hard to accept the self as a construction of the mind. In

psychology, memory is regarded as central to the concept of the self.

Autobiographical memory is thought to give a sense of continuity of a perceived self construct (Markowitsch & Staniloiu, 2011), yet memory is ever-changing. Memories can be manipulated by how questions are asked (Loftus & Palmer, 1974). How something is remembered also changes over time to conform with the social norms of a given culture that the agent is part of (Bartlett, 1920). The question remains whether memory is essential to the sense of self, and if memory is ever-changing, the self might also be ever-changing or reinvented. Luke says that it is not that there is no self but that there are many selves, one appearing after the other. This bears a resemblance to narrative coherence, where the self is regarded as a story about one's life. Coherence refers to the necessity for the story to provide causal explanations and advance socially valuable actions (McAdams, 2001). These socially valuable actions change according to situation and context. And so the story of the self is mediated by the context. Some parts of the story that are omitted in one context may be emphasized in another.

However, the self is still treated as if it were a tangible entity. We may say that it is ever changing, but that just tells us something of the properties of the concept. The realization that there is no self or that there are many selves, as Luke puts it, is a fundamentally new perspective. A new perspective that requires not only training but a radical new worldview. During the interviews, the Zen Masters were quite explicit in how this awakening experience had changed their view of self. This is often connected to an awakening experience indicating just how difficult it is to realize the self as a construct, because, intellectually, you could always just add who is constructing or in whose mind is the self constructed. In essence, there is no thinker of thoughts in addition to the thoughts, which is the opposite of Descartes, whose philosophy is so prevalent in the West, or has poisoned our thinking, as Leia says. But Zen meditation seems to take a holistic approach, in fact, or attempt to eradicate the cause of suffering, which Zen views as this delusional mind, or illusion that everything we construct is regarded as no-self (H. Pawle, 2003).

Sally Wiggins states that discursive psychology has been used to investigate the concept of identity and that identity is thought of as an emergent property of context and social actions. She says there is no core or natural or true identity beneath the discourse. In general, discursive psychology treats identity as a social construct that is negotiated between agents (Wiggins, 2017). In this regard, there are many

parallels with Zen. Zen claims that there is no core identity carried over moment to moment, this is just a construct, and clinging to constructs such as this is the root of suffering, or dukkha.

Bartlett conducted experiments that show how memory changes over time (Bartlett, 1920). Loftus and palmer shows that what we remember can be influenced by how a question is worded (Loftus & Palmer, 1974) and Brockmeier states that the activity of remembering and imagining are indistinguishable from each other from a neurological perspective (Brockmeier, 2015). Brockmeier states that what sets the two apart is that meaning is attributed to the event after it has occurred. In this manner, there is support for the constructed worldview that the interviewees of this thesis talk about.

Duality

The theme of duality came up in the interviews, describing how the subject of a self orients towards the object of the world. This is regarded as a delusion. Luke describes this as a construction that makes sense and gives the example of an agent hearing the sound of a bird. What is regarded as constructed is the notion of the self, which was discussed earlier. There is no self and there is no subject object dichotomy, because there is no subject. There is no thinker in addition to the thoughts. Peter notes that the relaxation of the self as a constructed entity is one of the hardest things for anyone to realize. This resembles the existential crisis that revolves around the crisis and angst associated with the ontological question of identity (Andrews, 2016).

Frustration

Frustration is something that enables a change in perspective, much like the existentialist's frustration is related to the duality of life. Zen treats frustration not as something to be overcome but rather as a tool to promote this existential crisis that forces a new perspective. Koan practice is essentially deeply frustrating, for this change of perspective has to take place and an awakening experience has to happen.

Culture

As has been pointed out several times in the literature, Eastern and Western ways of thinking about logic may very well be different, where in the West people tend to think about things as either/or and Eastern philosophy has stressed the both/and way of thinking. The problem with either or thinking is that it tends to box experiences into concepts. When you have a concept, something is either that concept and falls under the rules of that particular box according to Western logic. However, the experience of human life is not always manageable in concepts, categories, and boxes. A very famous thought experiment is that of “What Mary didn’t know,” where a girl, Mary, is put into a black and white room to study the color red. Mary is raised with the one goal of learning everything there is to know about the color red without ever having seen it. So, the question is, when Mary is let out of this black and white room and sees the color red for the first time, does she learn something new? The thought experiment very much exemplifies the fact that there is sometimes more than can be put into categories. Not so much in the metaphysical sense of the word, but it points towards the imprecision of the language that we use.

You could argue that if Mary did indeed learn everything there was to learn about the color red, she would also learn the experience of the color red. However, having learned something about an experience and having experienced it in its own right are two different things.

Discussion

McAdams and others have stated that life is a story we tell and retell (McAdams, 2001) with continued modification to suit the current predicament. This also means that everyday problems arise in this narrative context. While language is the primary method of storytelling, it makes sense to look at how this is employed. Zen offers an antidote to the problems of discourse in a rather radical way. Zen - be it Soto or Rinzai - uses tool such as koans to practice looking beyond the narrative. Zen becomes radical in its search to eliminate everything that is regarded as illusionary. I do not suggest such a radical step, but rather that at times when experiencing a contradicting experience, the lessons from the koan be remembered. The koan tells

us to look beyond the concepts we use to label experiences and simply return attention to the experience itself. We define our experience with the help of concepts. We label experiences by constructing narratives and define ourselves by these stories (McAdams, 2001), and the social scenarios we encounter shape our memory (Bartlett, 1920) and thereby our life stories. If we learn to realize how and when these constructions take place, we may be able to let them go and return to experiencing the present moment. In so doing, we can learn to accept where we are. Just like Wendy who stopped trying to overcome her schizophrenia when she realized that her thoughts manifested themselves differently than others.

Alternatives

The gap in the literature that was addressed was that of context, culture and subjective interpretation. In what context is the self regarded as a concept, what cultural considerations are necessary, and how is this interpreted by practitioners of a contemplative tradition. IPA was chosen to address this. But other methodologies exist. Template Analysis could have been used in a similar way as IPA to generate themes (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015). Grounded theory could have been employed in order to clarify the patterns in the interviews, and develop a theory based on this data (Glaser, 2013). Discourse analysis would be useful to investigate the interaction between student and teacher, and has the social context as its main focus (Wiggins, 2017). Discourse analysis could reveal how different categories are valued and also how national identity is formed. Specifically Discourse analysis has been used to investigate nationality and ethnicity it could have been useful to have looked at how Peter as a European was treated when he studied in Japan and America. Discursive analysis has a potential for unearthing culturally situated issues in social context.

Application

How a constructed worldview is experienced by Zen practitioners has been a finding of this thesis. It was indicated that people often confuse the conceptualization of the experience with the experience itself (Capps & Orchs, 1995). As this paper has shown, there are many parallels between Zen and the field of psychology, including

biological psychology, cognitive psychology, discursive psychology, or even evolutionary psychology. Therefore it stands to reason that the field of psychology has something to gain from looking into the practices of Zen Buddhists. Mindfulness has been a secularized attempt at integrating thoughts from Buddhist thinking, and in particular Zen, into a modern clinical practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2011) with distinct practices such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy dominating the peer reviewed articles. A search on mindfulness based stress reduction turned out 530 articles published in 2018 alone. At the same time, the instruments used to measure mindfulness have come under some scrutiny because, when they are aimed at Zen meditators or Tibetan monks, the factors derived from these practices fail to register, suggesting a missing component of some sort (Christopher et al., 2014; Elsass, 2009). It could be that by secularizing mindfulness meditation from the monastic traditions of Zen monks or Tibetan clergy (Kabat-Zinn, 2011), the aspects that separate clergy from laymen would lead to these apparent failures. There seems to be a problem when we think or talk about the same concepts, when in fact there are cultural underpinnings that give everyday notions, such as identity and self or ego, very different meanings in different contexts. By not taking this into account, the otherwise valid methodologies used to assess the intervention forms such as MBSR and MBCT, when measured on the FFMQ and MAAS scales, fall apart.

Preliminary Conclusion.

There is a gap in the literature. When Peter Elsass and others have given valid questionnaires to Buddhist monks, and they start laughing, (Elsass, 2009). This thesis has shown that several concepts such as self, and duality are regarded differently in Zen and across cultures.

Zen states that the self is an illusion constructed by our own minds. Narrative scholars point to the self as ever-changing with no fixed core, but still treat it as a singular object simply exchanging fixed parameters for dynamic properties of an ever-changing “self.” A story of the self is proposed with dynamics defined as a need for coherence and meaning making, but at the core of the problem remains “who” tells this coherent changing story of the self.

Zen proposes that there is no agent to orient towards the problem. There is no thinker of thoughts in addition to the thoughts. The very wording we use creates artificial problems. We use labels such as “mental illness” as an identifier with which meaning is created; a behavior becomes problems to be solved. Zen offers a different point of view. Zen has incorporated the notion of constructed problems and a constructed self into a practice. The outcome is an awakened state with a clarity that lifts the practitioner up from the construction in question by an increased meta-awareness of when these constructions take hold. A stark example of this was seen in the interview with Wendy. By realizing that the voices she heard were only a projection of her own mind and not someone else talking, these voices lost their hold. This was a novel change in perception and indeed a rational one with very strong implications. Schizophrenia is one of the most costly and debilitating mental illnesses in the world. If it is possible to learn from Zen training and integrate this into therapy, there is a possibility that this could help reduce the effects of the diagnosis.

Zen teaches that the self can drop away and become one with the experience. Applying this to stress leaves just the experience of stress, not somebody being caught by stress or being stressed, but just stress. Leia talks about this awakening moment also giving some form of release. Applying this to a self that is stressed and then releasing the self means that the self is no longer ruminating and being caught in this stressful situation, but when the self is released from the experience and there is just the experience, then this form of release can mediate a change of perspective. This mediated change might be what is needed to overcome or change the experience. In Wendy’s case, where she has a significant mental illness, she says that Zen has taught her how to change her perspective from hearing voices. The self or the agent who receives information from an outside source is changed. Wendy is realizing that the outside source is part of herself, and this oneness has enabled her to view the hallucinations as projections of her own thoughts, much in the same way many people hear a narrative being told when they read a book. So instead of quieting these thoughts with medication, Wendy has simply achieved a oneness with the experience that has led her to a different perspective and regards this as a cure. Rather, she regards herself as not being schizophrenic anymore.

When we look at contemplative science in general, a parallel to mindfulness investigation needs to be made. Mindfulness has shown promise in many areas of psychology, however presenting some of the methods to Zen practitioners and Tibetan Buddhists results in the participants pointing out that there is a misunderstanding. Zen in particular emphasizes concepts as an illusion and very much a root of suffering. Leia said that there is a cultural divide between Zen philosophy and Western science, and she believes the concept of a self to be an illustrative concept that is understood differently between cultures. Having valid methodologies for investigating an object of interest is valuable, but unless the object of investigation is understood, then biases, misconceptions, misunderstandings, and misconceptualizations are bound to confound the resulting data. In short, we need to know what it is we are investigating. By investigating Zen practice, it is not necessarily enough to simply look at what constitutes Zen practice, we also need to look at what cultures the practitioner is situated in. Leia says that anyone who has studied Eastern philosophy would understand why the Tibetan guy would laugh at the question on the self report mindfulness scale. This also means that the research into contemplative science needs to look to other disciplines, like the Sparby paper suggested (Sparby, 2017). In the case of the mindfulness questionnaire, it would have been beneficial for the researchers to research into Asian philosophy before generating the questions that supposedly rate the accepted factors of mindfulness.

Intention is important. What is the motivation behind the contemplative practice? Is there a culture that favors any new employee who has done contemplative practice? Is contemplative practice done because there is a culture that regards the practice as a positive trait? These are not just arbitrary variables, and they are difficult to measure. However, Zen is measured on rating scales and with brain scans, and conclusions made on this basis. However, as Leia said, the intention of practice is important. It matters if Zen practice is done in order to gain something. The timeframe of what comes after practice is a conceptualization and just an added obstacle considered an illusion as Peter explained.

These variables need to be accounted for. This is where psychology, specifically cultural psychology, can add to contemplative science. By qualitative investigation, this thesis has explored the experience of five Zen practitioners and found that themes of self, duality, and enlightenment are all concepts that are regarded quite

differently in the context of Zen practice. It was also found that if these concepts were accounted for, it could add to the scientific literature and help weed out misconceptions.

This study has contributed by looking at two different groups of Zen practitioners. One of the findings was when Luke, who is both a Soto Zen practitioner and a former Rinzai Zen practitioner, said that the difference between Rinzai and Soto is mostly in ritual. This means that when looking to Zen as a contemplative science, it is necessary to evaluate whether or not the object of investigation could be connected to any of these rituals. This thesis also contributed by making it clear how subject/object dichotomy is conceptualized and how this influences the way of thinking. Particularly western ways of thinking needs to consider this. When science is applied to contemplative practices, anyone wishing to investigate such a practice needs to be aware that there is a distinctly different way of thinking about the self and about awakening and about conceptualization and Cartesian dualism. These are variables that should be kept in mind and accounted for.

Anyone wishing to investigate contemplative practices will also encounter a dilemma because, on the one hand, the quantitative science of measuring is regarded as particularly valuable in Western culture, but at the same time, the object that is investigated is likely to be regarded as a construction at least from the point of view of a Zen practitioner. As Leia put it,: “that’s the thing too its, yeah the different concepts of the self in different cultures of I would say Western cultures and Asian cultures are where the, that’s the dividing line. But anyone who had studied Asian religion like Zen is, would understand why the Tibetan guy laughed, right. Because it is it is because even talking about measuring mindfulness it’s hilarious!”

When comparing psychology and contemplative science, it becomes apparent that many of the issues such as identity, self, existential crises, frustration, and even dualism have been investigated before. What the Zen practitioners did that was radically different from that of psychology was to merge all these themes into a worldview that essentially boils everything down to how these concepts that we use in everyday life are created and in what context this happens. The most extreme example of this is the very rational statement from Wendy which, put simply, says

that she has realized that the hallucinations or voices that she heard due to her schizophrenia were simply projections of her own mind. This is of course absolutely true. There are no external entities speaking to the schizophrenic. Realizing this may indeed be part of the therapeutic regime in the psychiatric care of the schizophrenic patients. However, Wendy has managed this by simply looking at everything that goes on in her mind, as a construction this enables her to recognize that her own hallucinations are just projections of her own thoughts. In essence, Wendy has realized that her own thoughts simply take on a different manifestation, and this has led to her being able to regard herself as not a schizophrenic.

One of the themes that repeatedly came up was the use of concepts to define our experience. On one hand, there is the experience, and on the other hand, there is the conceptualization in order for communication of the experience. There is a dualistic thinking implied in this. Leia says that it's not that Zen ignores duality, because there is a use for that concept. Luke explains it by saying it is like a finger pointing to the moon; the moon and the finger have nothing in common, but the finger pointing leads to the experience of the moon. In the same manner, it is important to discuss the use of concepts and the experiences these concepts point towards. The irony is that speaking about themes, such as waking up, is a conceptualization of an experience, and through the conceptualization, it is never possible to actually experience the experience. Neuroscientist Thomas Nagel once wrote a book regarding consciousness, *What is it Like to be a bat*, where he concludes that, despite knowing every single state of every single neuron in the brain of the bat, the experiential part of being a bat remains hidden (Nagel, 1974). Knowing this does not mean that we should not investigate the neural correlates of experience. Just like using EEG to measure the default mode network in meditators should not be abandoned just because it does not render the experience itself. The results point towards an experience, like the finger pointing to the moon.

We also need to discuss how we discuss. It is possible to practice Zen, mindfulness, yoga, or any number of contemplative practices. But if you practice Zen in order to be enlightened, you miss the point, because there is no agent orienting toward the object. When the practice is treated like this, it becomes a tool for self-enhancement, but when there is no self to begin with, the practice also loses meaning. It is possible

to go through the moves without actually practicing. The intention is important in Zen, as Leia said. What this refers to is that if you enter into Zen practice in order for you to be better, less stressed, more productive, or get a thicker cortex, then the practice is not done correctly, and the results will likely be missed. Examining the role of intention on outcome could be of interest for further study.

Leia says that it is like putting in a screw with a hammer, and this is a quote that bears quite some resemblance to Maslow's law of the instrument that says: "It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." Of course, this is referring to the tendency to use the same way of thinking or usage of tools to view everything. The use of antipsychotic drugs for every psychiatric ailment for instance. This is something that needs to be discussed, in part, because contemplative practices seem to have a positive effect on the broad-spectrum of traits and states that we wish to enhance, such as thickening of the cortex and a relief of stress and frustration. However, approaching the subject as if it were a tool in order for it to enhance your or effect some aspect of our life, there is a risk that contemplative practice would fall under the category of self-help, which has already been discussed as a misunderstanding of at least Zen practice. However, the research into contemplative science also risks categorizing the practice as if it were a tool for the enhancement of the individual. While this can certainly be a valid approach, studying the effects of the practice on the thickening of the brain's cortex, for instance, it is necessary to discuss the paradigms, cultures, and context to which these practices actually belong. If not, then contemplative practices such as Zen and mindfulness, might have a tendency to become a "fix all" tool. It works with stress, depression, attention, and even pain (Cardena, Sjöstedt, & Marcusson-Clavertz, 2015; Davis & Hayes, 2011; Grant, Courtemanche, Duerden, Duncan, & Rainville, 2010; Marchand, 2012). Understanding the mechanism's neural correlates of these practices are a high priority, but unless we know what we are researching, we cannot start to uncover the mechanisms that underlie the practices. Psychology is particularly at risk of using contemplative practices as a tool for the betterment of clients.

Practices such as mindfulness are used frequently in treatments of stressed clients or even clients with depression. However, after going through the literature, it becomes

apparent that both stress and depression are dependent on a specific program, MBSR and MBCT. Simply applying the concept of mindfulness as if it were a thoroughly researched methodology can have negative effects. These effects can be that the psychologist believes that they are doing the right thing, but when the specific practice of MBSR or MBCT programs are colloquially referred to as mindfulness, the concept is thereby confused with a practice. When there is no stringent border between how we talk about the different practices, we open the way for confounding factors. Culturally contextual elements such as India's chakra system is introduced into a well-defined practice, without taking into account that there is a specific way of thinking about a person when introducing something such as chakras and a specific way of thinking about a person when doing Zen meditation or even mindfulness meditation. Another example is the practice of self-compassion, which is regarded as a mindfulness practice. While factors from Zen are certainly present in mindfulness, the entire view of a person becomes muddled. Because who is compassionate towards who?

Conclusion

The interviews showed several themes that share commonalities with psychology, the main difference is how these are experienced and viewed by the zen practitioners. Factors, such as the view of the self and the cause of suffering, must be taken into account and made clear both in work with clients and in the construction of new practices. The themes were constant across both Soto and Rinzai groups and across both European and American groups.

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Appendix 1.

Transcription format

(↑) pick up

(↓) pick down

(!!) laugh

(LARGE CHARACTERS) emphasis

/ Corrects sentence

(...?) Inaudible

(+x) Pause x denotes time in seconds

(WHISP) Whisper

(INT) interrupts

(HESI) Hesitate

() Situation or action relevant for the interview is describes inside the parenthesis

Appendix 2

Interview guide:

Exploratory

Semi structured. IPA

Research question

1. Commonalities between Zen and psychology experienced by Zen practitioners

Guiding questions:

- How did your interested in Zen practice begin.
- What is the practice like
 - if an concrete experience comes up, ask how the practice relates to this.
- What is you experience with koans
- Can you tell me anything about how the practice has influenced you in daily life.
- Allow for anything the interviewee says to overrule all of the above and follow the conversation!