

THE ZEN MEDITATOR AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS: A STUDY ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIPS THE MEDITATOR HOLDS WITH THEIR SELF AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS. A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.

EL MEDITADOR ZEN Y SUS RELACIONES: ESTUDIO SOBRE LAS RELACIONES QUE EL MEDITADOR MANTIENE CON SÍ MISMO Y CON OTRAS PERSONAS SIGNIFICATIVAS. UNA INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA.

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ABSTRACT

During the last twenty years, there has been an increasing interest from the scientific community to study the effects that meditative practices could have in human well-being. However, the academic community has not reached a consensus regarding what are the exact myriad of practices that should be considered meditative, and which should not be considered as such. As a means of provisionally solving this problem, it has been suggested that those practices that fall under an ancestral tradition, in specific Zen meditation, have enough references to be considered meditative. There's plenty of information available regarding the benefits meditative practices could be having, however, there has not been enough research that focuses on the impact that meditation has on people's relationship with themselves or significant others. The present study focused on these questions in order to guide future research into the effectiveness of meditative practice on self and relationship development. To do so, a qualitative approach was chosen, particularly guided by the use of Grounded Theory. This was applied by using an in-depth interview methodology to ten participants which have practiced Zen meditation by a period of eight or more years of systematic-weekly-practice. The resulting investigation allowed us to know that meditators report changes in their relationships: 1. In relation to other people, they perceived the emergence of a new positive intentionality directed to those people and that the quality of their relationships with friends and family had improved, however, a consensus was not reached regarding the influence of the practice in the relationships with their couples. 2. In relation to their self, they noticed an increase in the silencing effect of their inner monologues, a positive attitude, a tendency to engage in meaningful activities and feelings of connectedness with themselves. This study is a preliminary attempt to explore how Zen meditative practice influences the relational domain.

Keywords: Zen Meditation, Interpersonal Relationships, Self-Relationship, Social Constructionism.

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RESUMEN

Durante los últimos veinte años ha aumentado el interés de la comunidad científica por estudiar los efectos que las prácticas meditativas podrían tener en el bienestar humano. Sin embargo, la comunidad académica no ha llegado a un consenso sobre cuál es la miríada exacta de prácticas que deben considerarse como meditativas y cuáles no. Como forma de resolver provisionalmente este problema, se ha sugerido que aquellas prácticas que se enmarcan en una tradición ancestral, en concreto, la meditación zen, tienen suficientes antecedentes para ser consideradas meditativas. Hay mucha información disponible sobre los beneficios que podrían tener las prácticas meditativas, sin embargo, no ha habido suficientes investigaciones que se centren en el impacto que tiene la meditación en la relación de las personas consigo mismas y/o con sus seres queridos. El presente estudio se centró en estas cuestiones con el fin de orientar futuras investigaciones sobre la eficacia de la práctica meditativa en el desarrollo del yo y de sus relaciones. Para ello, se eligió un enfoque cualitativo, guiado especialmente por el uso de la teoría fundamentada. Ésta se aplicó utilizando una metodología de entrevista en profundidad a diez participantes que han practicado la meditación zen por un periodo de ocho o más años de práctica sistemática-semanal. La investigación resultante permitió conocer que los meditadores reportan cambios en sus relaciones: 1. En su relación con otras personas, percibieron el surgimiento de una nueva intencionalidad positiva dirigida a esas personas y que la calidad de sus relaciones con amigos y familiares había mejorado. Sin embargo, no se llegó a un consenso sobre la influencia de la práctica en las relaciones con sus parejas. 2. En lo que respecta a su relación consigo mismos, notaron un aumento del efecto de silenciamiento de sus monólogos interiores, una actitud positiva, una tendencia a realizar actividades significativas y sentimientos de conexión consigo mismos. Este estudio es un intento preliminar de explorar cómo la práctica meditativa Zen influye en el ámbito relacional.

Palabras Clave: Meditación Zen, relaciones interpersonales, relación con sí mismo, construccionismo social.

INTRODUCTION

The Zen meditation is a millenary practice permeated by the Buddhist vision and philosophy. As such, it conceives suffering as being linked to the illusory belief that separates the ego with the other, and propose an alternative view of reality, in which one could think that everything is actually connected (Watts, 2003; Yoshida, 2017). The notion of humanity held by contemporary psychology is compatible with the previous statement, due to the fact that it stops viewing humans as isolated, determined or destined beings that pursue their goals selfishly; as it had been previously understood by modern psychology. Instead, it describes beings as being built by the influence others have on them in a cooperative manner. As such, their psyche undergoes a continuous process of construction and deconstruction in which the interactions that have been held with others and that are continued to be had are viewed as fundamental in this process. This form of conceptualization regarding this view of humanity has been named “The Relational Being” (Gergen, 2009; Gergen, 2015) or “Dialogical Being” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Shotter, 2017).

Gergen & Gergen (2012) talk about the importance of accessing the relational well-being that transcend the clinical setting. This affirmation has to do with the idea that people construct

their psychological spaces by immersing themselves in the different relational spaces that are available. The clinical setting offered by psychotherapy, while potentially relevant, is just another space. In this context, Zen meditation may hold special significance considering it is underlined by an understanding of the world that emphasizes the importance of interdependent relationships (Hanh, 2010; Margullies, 2017) also referred to as total relationships (Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, 2009).

The present investigation seeks to explore the domain of relationships that Zen meditators hold with themselves and others. In this process, we seek to contribute with information regarding how a practice could help with developing relational well-being. At the same time, that we are doing so, we will work in tandem with a contemporary understanding of accessing psychological well-being.

Empirical Background

Research has shown that people who practice Zen meditation show a pattern of reduced anxiety, situation that diminish the affective interference at the moment of using their abilities (Lin, Chang, Zemon & Mildrasky, 2008; Von Visger et al., 2020). It has also been stated that a more frequent meditative practices is associated with a reduced intensity of distressful emotional experiences such as: anxiety, stress and depression

(Lo & Wu, 2007; Winnebeck et al., 2017). In people with generalized anxiety, this is also related with an increased capacity to be connected with the body; and in this particular study, a third of the subjects also report having fewer interfering thoughts which was negatively correlated with a heightened sense of well-being (Chue-Fen, Ming-Kuo, Lorraine, 2018). However, in a meta-analysis conducted by Sedlmeier, LoBe y Quastern (2017), it was found that a positive correlation between the practice of meditation and the presence of anxiety tended to be non-statistically significant (or, in numbers, greater than 0.05). Additionally, another study showed that meditation does not diminish the amounts of anxiety, but actually, increased it (Lin, Chang, Zemon & Mildrasky, 2008).

From a cognitive point of view, it was found that Zen meditation could be mostly related with an improvement towards: object detection, autobiographical memory retrieval, executive and selective attention capacity, and enhanced cognitive flexibility (Chiesa, Calati & Serreti, 2010). While also was associated with a reduction in cognitive interference and attentional blink (Chiesa, Calati & Serreti, 2010). Another study conducted by Strick, Van Noorden, Ritskes & Ruiter (2012) affirmed that meditation was related with an increased capacity for contacting with a pre-reflexive state of consciousness, while research developed by Catdeña, Sjøtedt & Marcusson-Claverts (2015) allow us to know that this practice could improve the capacity for attention span and the feeling of being intrinsically motivated. During Sedlmeier's meta-analysis (2017), it was found that intelligence quotient correlated positively with Zen meditation. Other studies have shown a tendency found in practitioners to follow their own set of values, preferring them over those shared by the collective (Compton & Becker, 1983). Furthermore, during a qualitative research conducted by Silva-Mack, Araya-Véliz, Martínez-Pernía & Aristegui (2018), it was found that practitioners had an improved feeling of mental clarity.

Those investigations that delved into studying the relational dimension showed that the practice was associated with positive effects in their capacity for relating to themselves and others. However, these benefits didn't extend to couple relationships, also, the transit required to

participate in a secluded meditative practice for then to retake an everyday social life was associated with discomfort. In regard to their benefits, it has been stated that it promotes a feeling of sexual satisfaction amongst young couples studying at the university (Khaddouma, Coop-Gordon & Bolden, 2015). For married working women, the practice brought with it an improved relationship with their children, mothers in law and themselves (Kang, 2014) which also correlated with a diminished sense of dissatisfaction when interacting with others (Shaku, Tsutsumi, Goto & Saint Arnould, 2014). Also, recent findings indicate that the practice is associated with an improved capacity for mind openness (Pokorski & Suchorinska, 2018), and that the scores in extroversion was increased by the practice (Hutcherson, Seppala & Gross, 2017). Pokorski & Suchorinska (2018), reported during the same year, that in the meditation research, there exist an under representation of population with extrovertive personality traits. Besides, during Kreplin, Farias & Brazil's meta-analysis (2018), researchers found that meditation impacted two of the socially inclined dispositions: compassion and empathy (these dimensions include compassion, empathy, justice, sense of being connected and diminishment of aggression). Even in these dispositions, the level of influence was comparatively low; however, further research in this subject is required as it was found that none of the consulted bodies of research were, from a methodological standpoint, of investigative quality. When Zen meditation is studied from a first person framework, the research findings proposed by Silva-Mack, Araya-Véliz, Martínez-Pernía & Aristegui (2018) state that the practice helps internal and external content to better communicate with each other.

Furthermore, it has been stated that Zen meditation doesn't help monogamous couples to better communicate with each other (Kang, 2014; Mastrianno, 2012) and the results provided by Lindahl, et al. (2017), indicate that this practice is correlated with an increased difficulty in integrating experiences (cognitive, affective or others) with everyday social interaction, which provokes distress by not being able to feel like actions flow normally.

Considering that none of the previous bodies of research gave conclusive evidence regar-

ding the transformative processes involved in the relationships Zen meditators establish with themselves and others, and contemplating the present importance to continue researching this subject in order to generate a more cohesive and reliable theoretical framework, this investigation's objective is therefore defined by the intention to delve into the narrative experiences and meanings of transformation relational processes attributed to Zen meditation by those who practice it. In line with what has been stated thus far, the following research question is proposed:

What are the emergent narratives and meanings referred by Zen meditators that have been practicing for 8 or more years of systemic practice, that involve the changing relationships established with themselves and other people?

METHODOLOGY

1. Researchers' Profile

All researchers are members of the same institution; Adolfo Ibáñez University. Two of them are clinical psychologists and daily practitioners of zazen, while one of them has focused his research on meditation.

2. Research Design

The research was carried out between August 2015 and December 2016. A qualitative methodology was chosen in order to evaluate the narratives that practitioners used to describe their practice. Data collection comprised of in-depth, personal, presential and individual interviews (Canales, 2006; Cataldi, 2018), this method was used to prompt practitioners to provide more details about their experiences. A semi-structured type of interview (Tarres, 2009; Kallio et al., 2016) was chosen in order to guide the conversation towards topics of interest for this research. The Grounded Theory was chosen to carry out this study, given that the research had a (1) descriptive (i.e., that's looks to identify traces, characteristics, and properties that distinguish to the phenomena), (2) comprehensive (i.e., looking for to identify the contextual and personal circumstances in which arise), and (3) explicative (i.e., that intends to understand under which circumstances the phenomena could be replied in other human beings) scope. Overall, in order to be able to organize the information in base of the emer-

gent meanings from the participants' experiences, Grounded Theory served the baseline for our data analysis because it excels at integrating experiential data that can vary from person to person. It is also well suited to evaluate unusual experiences and for cases when the practitioner is ignorant or unconscious of the effects being measured (as is the case when we are talking about the influence that could have the practice of Zen meditation on the relationships of the practitioner) (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The process was carried out following the three typical steps that characterize the Grounded Theory, say: 1. The open, 2. axial, and 3. selective codification. This kind of open approach to the experience allows commonalities to be highlighted while also registering atypical experiences in order to guide future investigation inquiries. Choosing this particular method is cohesive with an understanding of humans as relational beings in that it comprehends that meaning emerges from the possibility both the interviewed and interviewee have to participate in a reflexive, generative and horizontal type of communication (Wiesenfeld, 2000).

3. Methodological Rigor

The Quality and rigor were procured by employing two main procedures: (1) Maintaining methodological congruence with the research question, which was evaluated mainly in the process of designing the study, but was also reviewed by the research team in every stage of the investigation (above all, in consideration of the iterative nature of qualitative research), (2) Maintaining procedural precision of the study design and data analysis, which was conducted under the supervision of a specialist in methodology (both, quantitative and qualitative) and it was reviewed by another qualitative researcher that belonged to the school of psychology at the Adolfo Ibáñez University.

4. Ethical Considerations

The ethics committee appointed by the Adolfo Ibáñez University approved this research. The approval was conditioned by the fulfilment of four ethical principles: autonomy, non-malevolence, benevolence and equality. Participants were informed about their right to autonomy through the signing of an informed consent docu-

ment, which detailed the freedom involved when it came to willingly participate in this study, and that participants had the option, at all times, to suspend their consent by simply abandoning the study without the need to give any formal explanations. All participants were adults capable of acting in exercise of their free will. Their information was protected by the guarantees provided by anonymity and confidentiality, the data itself was kept under custody. The benevolence principle was upheld as the option to ask for psychological or psychiatric assistance was available; however, no such occasion arose in which this was required. In order to sustain the non-malevolence principle, it was previously stated before the interview took place that in the event that participants felt any discomfort or stress during their participation that the interview would be suspended until the participant managed to gain a feeling of stability. All participants had equal opportunities to offer their testimonies, all of which were taken into account when analysing the results; this is how an equality principle was upheld throughout the study.

5. Data collection

Contact with the participants was possible due to the involvement of a key informant, who participated in the same type of meditation modality (referred to as “sangha” in the Zen tradition) than those interviewed. A formal invitation to participate in this study was sent via email, which stated the objective, the importance of participants involvement and an assurance that no economic requisite was required in order to be involved in this study. Ten people whose age

ranged from 35 to 70 years participated, all of whom had practiced for a period of at least eight years and at a minimum frequency of two times a week (see Table 1). A process of theory saturation was implemented in order to determine a necessary sample size for this investigation.

6. Sample characterization

As a means of homogenizing the sample, a minimum of two hours of weekly practice was required to be carried out by participants (most of which even declared to practice at a higher weekly frequency). Another criterion for inclusion had to do with being employed as a means of guaranteeing that every participant had a regular number of social interactions; an aspect directly relevant to the research question. To minimize cultural differences related to nationality between participants involving relational perceptions with themselves and others, it was required for them to have resided in Chilean territory for a period of at least fifteen years. People who had a pattern of regular consumption of conscious altering substances, alcohol addiction or chronic illnesses were excluded from this study.

7. Analysis procedure

The interview analysis itself was carried out through a data coding process (Hernández, 2014), following the three ways of coding data proposed by Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Milani & Hashemi, 2020) This process entailed: firstly, an open coding procedure of data which identified common experiences referred to by the participants. Then, a relational analysis which observed the interactions between

Nº	Biological Sex	Time Meditating	Occupation	Nationality
1	Female	15 years	Tai-Chi Instructor	Chilean
2	Female	8 years	Univ. Administrative Assistant	Chilean
3	Male	8 years	Engineer	Chilean
4	Male	15 years	Buddhist Monk and Assistant	Chilean
5	Male	8 years	Architect	Chilean
6	Male	9 years	Engineer	Chilean
7	Male	20 years	Artist	Chilean
8	Male	10 years	Environmental Projects	Chilean
9	Male	16 years	Retired	Colombian
10	Male	16 years	Chinese Medic	Chilean

Table 1: Sample Characterization.

the first categories that emerged during the previous level of analysis as an initial attempt at answering the research questions. Finally, a selective coding, which corresponds to a second level of relational analysis, was implemented as a means of proposing a formal answer to the studied phenomenon (that is, the changing narratives and meanings attributed to the subjective experience of the relational process towards themselves and others held by Zen meditators).

RESULTS

1. Descriptive Results

All participants signified the meditative experience as having a positive effect on their lives, specifically, as being able to improve feelings of connectedness with themselves and others. From the interviews, it is possible to identify three ways in which relational changes occur: 1) relationship with themselves, 2) relationship with other people, and 3) involving the relationship with life itself (this last category emerged spontaneously during this investigation).

1.1 Relationship with themselves

Relevant to this dimension is the perceived change involving the relationship participants establish with their own thoughts, in which process those interviewed state that they manage to start feeling de-represented by them, this is achieved by accepting them and just letting this mental rumination pass, which helps participants feel like reiterative thoughts lessen. Furthermore, thoughts are described as being clearer, while inner monologues become more silent and compassionate. There were also descriptions regarding how the practice allowed participants to feel like their consciousness became wider in a sense: *"...if you manage to stay still, more quieter than you usually are for a relatively long span of time, you start picking up on a lot of things you usually don't notice in everyday life as everything becomes slower, which in turn allows you to notice more things"* -RC62.

When dealing with their emotions, participants feel that they experienced negative emotions like anger, fear, anxiety and guilt with less intensity and frequency, while peaceful states were experienced more frequently. Also, they

manifested to being better at controlling some emotions by letting them pass, this ability was enhanced as there was a learned understanding that emotions and affect were always temporary states: *"...there was a thought in the back of my mind, something that wanted to get out... had I decided to get rid of it right away, it would have been more intense whilst if I just hold that impulse and deal with it later it becomes much more manageable later"* -J43.

There is also a sensation of experiencing behavioral changes at the same time as impulsiveness decreases; this happens as more thoughts start to be more actively dealt with through actions, which gives participants more time to engage with their own interests: *"I, for example, for me Zen was a starting point to start focusing on other things, because I started to meditate, writing novels and studying for a master's degree, so, for me, a door of opportunity opened up"* -RC5.

Other perceived changes have to deal with a better understanding of the self, as participants expressed to being able to feel like they identify more frequently with their own self, to better know themselves in this process while also being able to know their weaknesses or blind spots. The following testimony summarizes this statement: *"meditation makes me feel more real with myself, so I become aware of what topics interest me while realizing which other topics are not of my interest, this becomes clearer through meditation"* -Mh69. Finally, they describe feelings of increased compassion towards themselves, and that they engage in self-care activities like eating healthy and practicing sports more frequently.

1.2 Relationship with other people

Involving others, this study dealt with subjective perceptions of change involving relationships towards friends, couples and family. In general, there was an increased tendency to help and do good in order to benefit other people. They also manifested to being able to pay closer attention to people around them, while feeling like others can now rely and trust on them more often. The interviewed meditators also attested to their increased capacity for: showing less judgmental attitudes, empathizing, being more compassionate and being trustworthy, all attitudes

that greatly benefit their bonds. The related experience is described as follows: “...I feel like I’m interacting with another person that is feeling the same things I am, perhaps I used to look at others as being inferior or superior when compared to me. That no longer makes any sense to me, that person is a being with similar feelings that those I have” -M66, “I feel like people can surprise me again. It is not like this is particularly time-consuming, however, I do like to help others once in a while, before, I used to be more indifferent or more centered in myself...” -C47.

Changes in different aspects involved in the relationship with others start to take place, amongst these changes, they feel that the way of establishing conversations also experience a

shift, which is facilitated by the increased capacities for listening, being honest and, overall, adopting a less confrontational attitude: “I used to spend a lot of time arguing, that is not something I do anymore. When conversing with someone, I can realize if the conversation is not going anywhere or if the person is not aligned with my thoughts, if that happens, I stop arguing and attempting to convince the other person and just let the conversation come to its conclusion” -F19.

Some participants perceived that after they start their meditation practice, they managed to develop new relationships with a wider variety of people, while others stated that they were able to further develop the bonds they had with people with similar interests. In general, they expressed

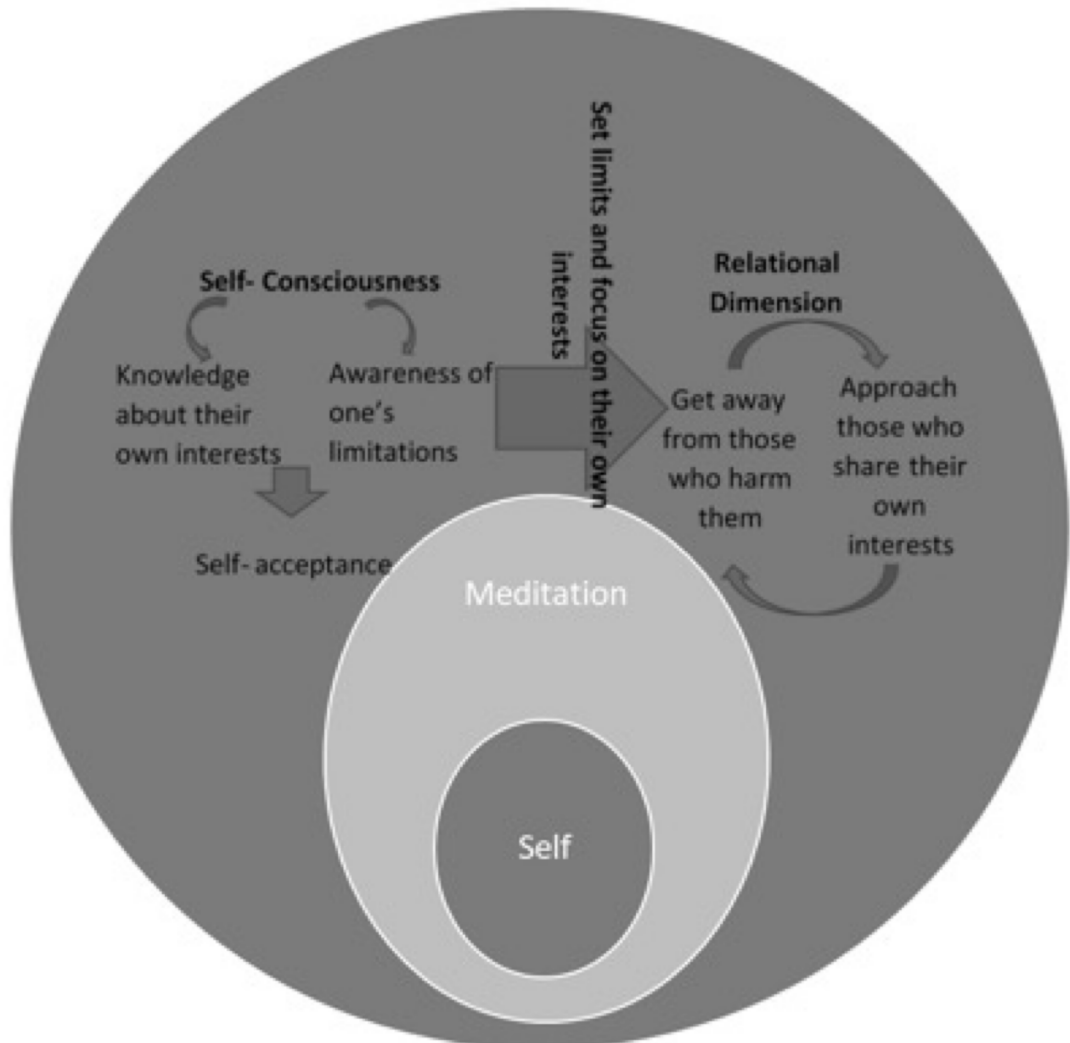


Figure N° 1. Self Awareness and Self Construction

that they were able to abandon some harmful relationships while, at the same time, establishing friendships with fellow meditators.

The contribution that meditation could have on couple's relationships is not clear, while some participants stated that they feel they had more tools in order to: empathize, tolerating their significant others in conflictive situations and assessing the current state of the relationship, others mentioned the practice didn't have a major influence on the relationship: *"I try for her to calm down, while doing do, I try not to be carried away by emotions or my ego because she is hurting me, she is attacking my pride, so, I keep my composure in those situations otherwise I'm not going to be able to help that person. It's important to note that you do that because you feel like it's the right thing to do, it's what you have to do when someone you love is suffering!"* -Mh58.

All participants experienced transformations regarding how they conduct themselves with family members; being able to further develop those family bonds while tending to avoid conflict.

When speaking about the relation between these changes and the role of meditation, most participants answered by stating that there was a link between them, however, some of the positive effects were also attributed to a heightened sense of wisdom and knowledge achieved as a result of aging and reading about Zen philosophy.

1.3 Relationship with life itself

This category deals with participants' perceptions with their own lives, in this regard, feelings of overall happiness and satisfaction were mentioned. These feelings -as far as the participants could perceive- are closely linked to having positively affected aspects of themselves, treating themselves and others as worthwhile individuals and by allowing themselves to have more intimate experiences with themselves. This is how an interviewed participant mentions this fact: *"our reality is just as valuable as everyone else's and your reality is just as they way it presents itself, there's no need to add anything negative to that; it's like one usually attributes good or bad things to it: "this is good, this other aspect is bad" but when you think about it, what is good and what is bad?"* -Mh48.

2. Relational Results (Axial and Selective Codification)

2.1 Self Awareness and self construction

A comprehensive analysis of participants' experiences practicing Zen meditation tells us that by changing the way they can relate with themselves they, in turn, change the way in which their relationships with others were and vice-versa. This phenomenon can be better understood when dividing it in five stages, as shown in the Figure 1.

According to the narratives held by the practitioners, there's a decreased tendency for impulsive behaviour, which is involved in feeling more emotionally stable, responsible and committed towards problem solving, all of which is capable due to an increased feeling of self awareness, which expands consciousness while allowing for a new form of dealing with thoughts, emotions and the body to emerge. In doing so, participants are more involved when dealing with issues efficiently. This allows them to exercise their will to pick actions that more closely align with their genuine interests, in other words, thoughts are more frequently turned into actions that are experienced as being authentic when compared to what transpired before started meditating. All of this is intrinsically linked to those testimonies that state that actions become truer; more authentic to themselves.

2.2. Self-construction in relation to others

The Figure N°2 accounts for the process of self-construction in relation to others. In this diagram, it is possible to observe the under-lining process from which individuals manage to more closely identify with themselves, which is heavily inspired by the role that relationships offered by others have. A systematic and continuous practice of Zen meditation, would allow for a more readied access to self awareness, which has to do with being more skillful at recognizing interests and limitations, which -as far the participants experienced- become easier to accept. All of this translates into two ways of being that are intensified: an increased ability for establishing boundaries and to focalize energies into actual interests. By acting this way, they can know when a relationship is harmful and when to prioritize those bonds which involve more shared interests; it's no surprise that some of these relationships are established with fellow meditation

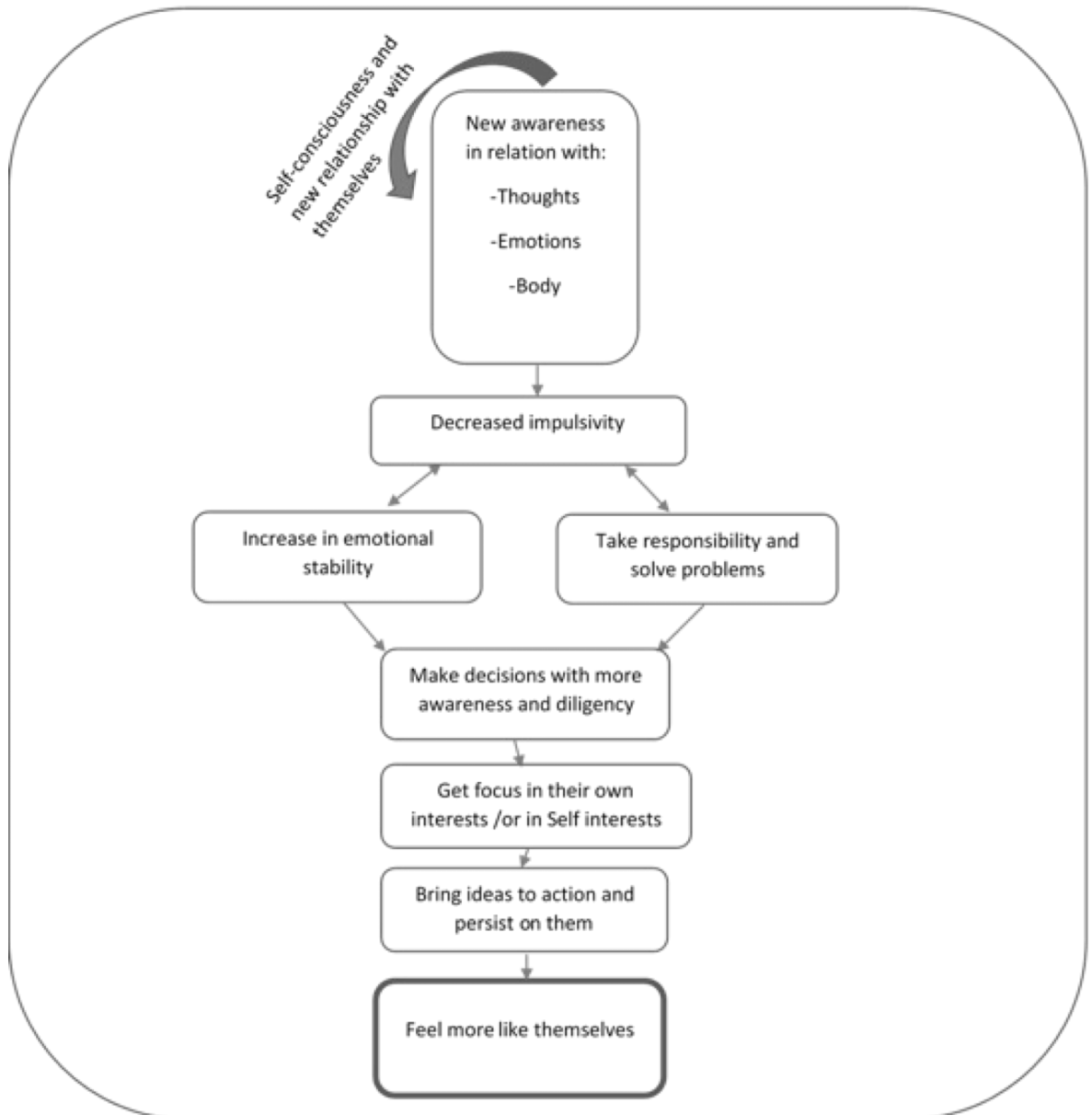


Figure N°2. *Self Construction in relation to others*

practitioners. When talking about effects involving the well-being of participants, an unanimous feeling of being positively influenced by the practice was stated.

2.3. *Well-being Cycle*

The following diagram; Figure N°3, illustrates the different dimensions in which a greater feeling of well-being is perceived. All of these dimensions influence one another, while specifically dealing with: 1. self perceptions regarding

an increase of available inner resources that improve the relationship and joy that individuals experience when dealing with themselves, 2. by being more selective and choosing to abandon some harmful relationships, participants can focus on developing openness with those with shared interests and that are perceived as well meaning people, 3. A more generalized feeling of enjoyment and confidence when it comes to living their lives. As was previously stated, all of these dimensions contribute to each other.

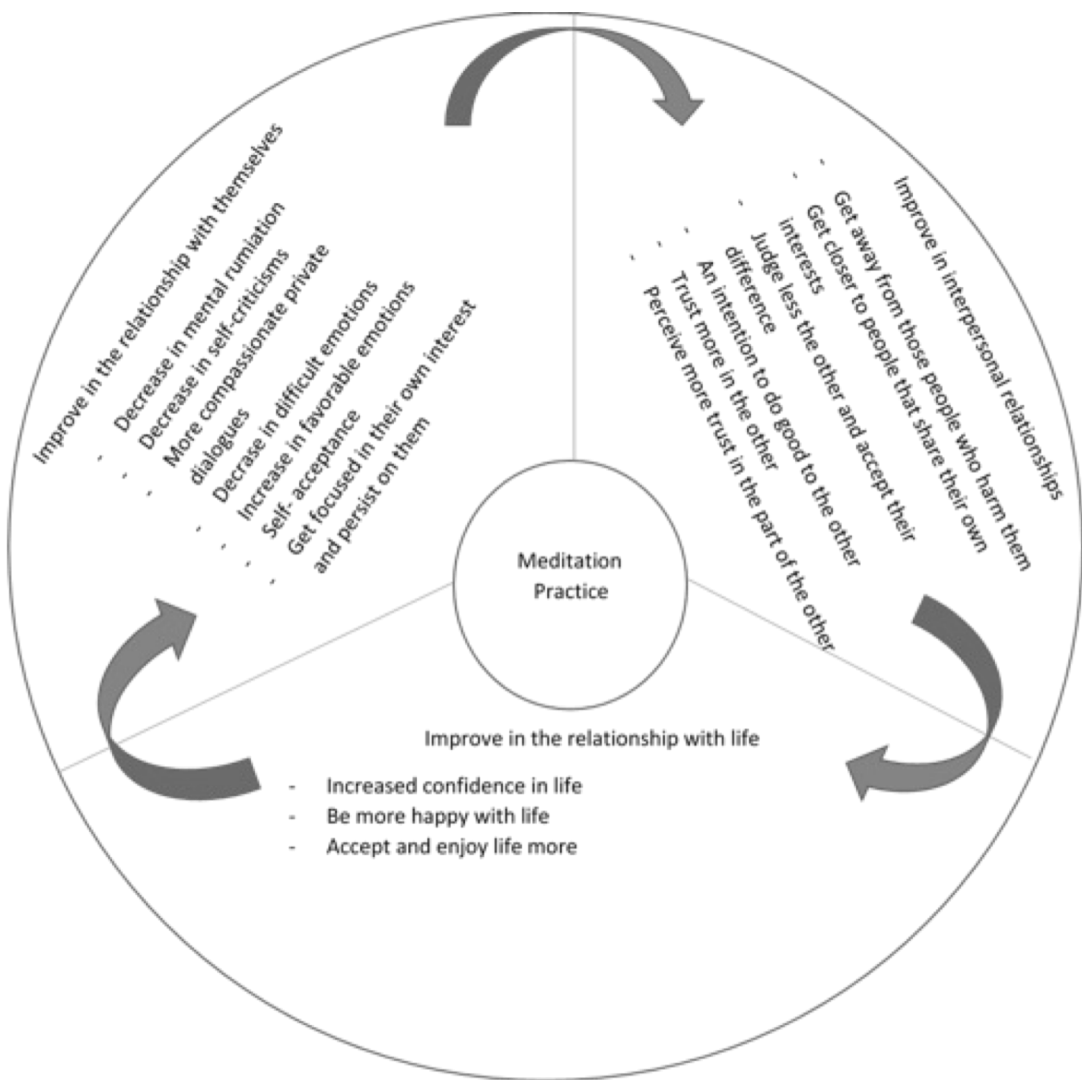


Figure N°3: Well-being Cycle.

2.4. Experiencing otherness as a meditator

Last but not least, as part of the process of selective coding, a diagram which explains how Zen meditators experiment their relationships with themselves and others is presented in Figure N°4.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

As part of the results of this investigation, it is safe to state that Zen meditators generally feel and talk about their relationships as being positively impacted due to practicing meditation. Part of this is characterized by an acceptance of the experience; regardless if those experiences

are pleasant or unpleasant in practice (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Teasdale, et al. 2000; Arlt Mutch et al., 2020). This study confirms the previous findings proposed by Silva-Mack, Araya-Véliz, Martínez-Pernía & Aristegui (2017) regarding the widening of consciousness and self awareness, while also attesting to the under-lining mechanisms involved in these processes that result in the prevalence of states of well-being. These findings proposed that the phenomenological experience of meditation carries with it increased feelings of mental clarity and comprehending that the existing differences that had practitioners feeling like they were different from other people start to dissipate.

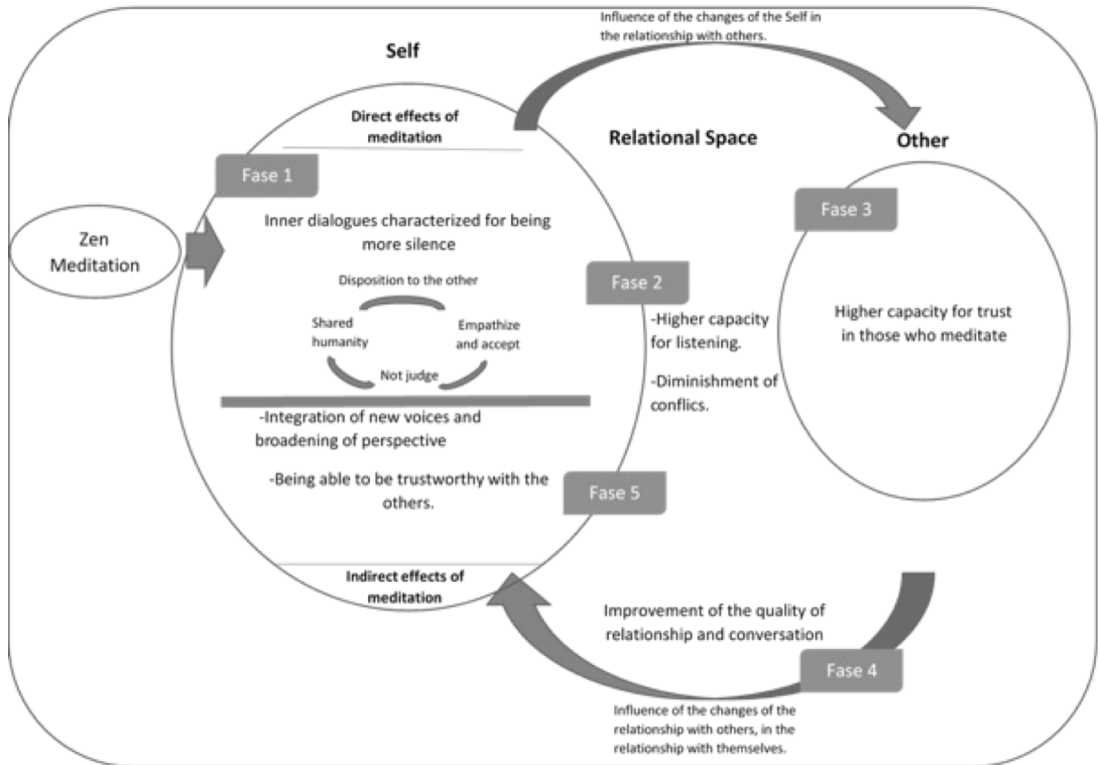


Figure N°4: Experiencing otherness as a meditator.

1. The first section of this diagram deals with the experience of perceiving thoughts beginning to settle as they are experienced with more ease, while also experiencing a better disposition towards others. This could be explained by the notion of shared humanity, which attempts to explain how many of our experiences are not isolated, instead, they include shared feelings and sentiment that are characteristic of every human being. This attitude generates a more compassionate, empathic, and accepting stance towards themselves and others. There's also an increased tendency to avoid being judgemental.

2. During a second phase, relational changes start to take place. According to what was said by meditation practitioners, these increased capacities leave individuals feeling more motivated and energized when it comes to being able to listen, avoiding conflicts and being more readily available to bond with others; all of which is explained by a freedom of psychological resources that were previously being used by reiterative thoughts.

3. As a third phase transpires, we start witnessing how others start trusting the meditators, probably in response to their changes in attitudes and behaviours.

4. During phase four, it is safe to state the fact that the overall quality of the relationship is improved, all of which is brought forth by the changes in attitudes Zen meditators establish with others.

5. Lastly, during the fifth phase, we can appreciate how these changes in the nature of the relationship and interactions can help Zen meditators to more easily trust others, which in turn allows for the integration of new points of views and learning about new perspectives. This process allows meditators to engage in a continuous process of actualization and widening of their consciousness'.

Structure amidst a liquified society

It's of interest to note that these previous descriptions can be understood by what Bauman (2000) called a "*solid person capable of establishing mutual commitments*". This theoretical individual described as such is capable of having and maintaining guidelines that orient the relationships they can establish with others, which in turn allows them to feel more confident in this process. Some characteristics of this way of being are: a disposition for manifesting openness towards others and the ability to discern what are the others' intentions.

Participants expressed to being able to feel more genuine with themselves, at the same time they become more skillful at assessing that self-awareness by being able to recognize themselves in a particular scenario. This is carried out by evaluating if the presence of certain personal traits are being manifested or if they are being untruthful to themselves. This tendency for spontaneously assessing their self-awareness while being more acceptive of themselves has been referred to as self-compassion by Neff (2012) and Neff & Davidson (2016).

Following the diagram proposed by Neff (2003b, 2012), Neff & Davidson (2016). and McGehee, Germer, & Neff (2017), more frequent feelings of self-awareness and self-compassion occur when three factors are present: 1. Mindfulness, understood as the ability to realize and take a stance against challenging situations, 2. Giving one-self the benefit of the doubt in contrast to adopting a more critical stance and 3. a feeling of living a shared humanity experience appears in opposition to feelings of isolation. All testimonies included in this investigation are coherent with these affirmations, in other words, these aspects combined with an increased tendency for kindness increases the chances of feeling connected with others.

Also included in the testimonies were increased feelings of satisfaction and ease involved in the relationships they established with themselves, with others and life itself; which could be involved in the developing of solid guidelines in a liquified society. Not only to this increases well-being, more interestly, these feelings of stability and structure brought by the practice are wanted and desired, which could be greatly beneficial in an ever-changing context.

Transformation of a myriad of voices

Another perspective that calls for further analysis is that developed by Gergen (2009), who proposes that human-beings are relational by nature and so is inevitably socially constructed as a result of a process of interaction with the environment and others and where the psyche is greatly influenced by the ways in which that particular environment has allowed the individual to view or signify their experience. Hermans & Hermans-Konopka (2010) also attest to the importance of culture and those we engage with. This is explained as every encounter carries with it a different form of understanding or a "myriad of voices" (perspectives of understanding), Furthermore, each encounter not only supposes that we as individuals have dialogues with ourselves, but there's also the possibility that one of these voices could speak with one of the voices the other participant employs.

In that sense, Zen meditation could have a place, when it comes to being a therapeutic alternative for those that struggle with their internal dialogues or in their relationship with other people. More precisely, the results of this research shows to be helpful with: (a) frequent self-criticisms, (b) harmful thoughts, (c) untrustworthy attitudes towards others, (d) effectively managing their myriad of voices, etc. In our opinion, the results achieved with this study, shows a clear bridge between the Zen meditation and the theoretical framework -about the dialogical-self- developed by Hermans & Dimagio (2004). If we further attempt to analyze the results of this investigation by using the framework of the dialogical-self, it is possible to understand that meditation allows for inner-dialogues to decrease in their intensity and/ or frequency, while facilitating trust to emerge, all of which allow the meditators to feel like they can be more readily available and present for others.

Limitations and further lines of research

The present study contains a number of limitations involving the necessity to consider that all participants belonged to the same practice group of meditation, which could have influenced their narratives when considering they could have been elaborating the meditative experience together; this could also explain some of the si-

militudes found in their descriptions.

Other remarkable limitation that this article presents, is that it used the semi structured interview as the only information gathering instrument, generating a self-report of the practitioners. In addition to the known limitations of self-reports, the complexity of the subject under study is added. Since meditation is a non-discursive practice, which could generate changes not perceived by the practitioners, nor by the couples of these. Due to this methodological limitation, it is impossible to know if these changes occurred or is rather corresponding to a perception influenced by the practitioners' own perspective or narrative. Therefore, it is necessary to include in future studies other qualitative and quantitative instruments that verify or deny the information reported here.

A longitudinal study could bring further knowledge regarding how these narratives are transformed or changed due to the passage of time and the years practitioners continue to use meditation.

An understanding of these findings from a postmodern lens would require studying these subjects by immersing in different contexts; especially those that more closely resemble what Bauman (2000) characterized as liquified societies.

Also pending in this research is acquiring further insights into the therapeutic benefits Zen meditation could have in a context of dysfunctional voices (Hermans & Dimagio, 2004) and also regarding why some of the positive effects involved don't seem to be present in a couple's relationships.

Besides all the stated above, further approaches to different types of meditation, other

than the Zen modality of meditation, and with other kinds of interpersonal relationships (as could be long distance relationships, LGBTIQ+ community, etc), could also contribute with new perspectives to understand how Zen meditation could impact the relationships of the meditator with themselves and with other people.

CONCLUSION

Those who participated in this study attested to the ways in which their relationships have changed across the years of practice, which is directly attributed to the consistent attitude involved in the practice itself. These changes were symbolized as positive and desirable.

In conclusion, this study observed how some of these transformations linked to the relationships established with themselves, others and life itself were possible as a more positive attitude started to take hold in their lives. Further expanding this notion would mean attesting to the increased perceptions participants had towards the following aspects: feeling more compassionate towards themselves and others, being less judgemental, critical and giving the benefit of the doubt more often than not. Being more aware of their own limitations in this regard also helped with developing feelings of self-awareness, which also had to do with being better at identifying their interests and those relationships they wanted to pursue. Finally, they described the practice as having a direct positive impact in their purposefulness when it came to carrying out their ideas and feeling more confident with themselves. All of these factors ended up benefiting the ways in which they related to themselves, others and life itself.

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