



**////Title: Studying Meditation-related Challenges in Western Buddhism**

**////Stand-first:**

Buddhist-derived meditation is becoming increasingly recognised as being able to promote physical, emotional, and mental health in the Western world. Although an extensive literature supports the many benefits of meditation, the adverse effects remain underreported. The Varieties of Contemplative Experience study was initiated by Dr Willoughby B. Britton at Brown University, Rhode Island, to investigate the potentially darker side of meditation.

**////Body text:**

The practice of meditation within Western Buddhism has been used to inform mindfulness-based interventions for a wide range of conditions including depression, anxiety and chronic pain. Once a spiritual and physical practice, mindfulness has been integrated into more modern formats for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, resulting in an alliance between Buddhism and science.

Documented outcomes of mindfulness include improvements to health, happiness, and well-being. While such meditation has become increasingly popular, there is only limited information available on the broader and more diverse range of effects that may arise from practising.

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The teachings of Buddhist meditation explain that practice can be expected to lead to shifts in perception, emotions, knowledge and behaviour – effects that range far beyond the impacts on health and well-being that form the focus in the Western world.

The term ‘nyams’ [NEE-yams] refers to a wide range of experiences ranging from inner calm and out of body ‘visions’, to a multitude of distressing psychological disturbances including elevated fear and paranoia. Meanwhile, Zen Buddhist traditions describe the perceptual side effects that can arise during meditative practice as ‘makyō’ [MAK-yo]. While both nyams and makyō may be interpreted as signs of progress, they are also acknowledged to represent a source of difficulty for the individual, and the effects of these experiences may be long-lasting.

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Dr Willoughby B. Britton at Brown University, Rhode Island, initiated the Varieties of Contemplative Experience study to explore meditation-related effects as described by Buddhist practitioners in the West. He was particularly interested in experiences which were unexpected, challenging, difficult, distressing, or functionally impairing.

Thirty Buddhist meditation practitioners from across the Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan traditions were recruited along with 32 meditation experts who had either taught extensively in a Buddhist tradition or who had applied Buddhist meditation in clinical settings (or both).

Dr Britton and his team conducted semi-structured interviews based around several key topics including personal demographics, trauma and psychiatric history, and early life personal relationships. Practitioners further provided detailed descriptions of their own meditation-related experiences and phenomenology. Meanwhile, expert practitioners discussed the experiences they had have seen in their students or patients and described how they interpreted these experiences.

A qualitative analysis approach was used to achieve systematic organisation and description of the interview data from practitioners. Overall, 29% of practitioners first encountered challenges within



their first year of practice, 45% between 1 and 10 years of practice, and 25% after more than 10 years. Dr Britton and his team categorised these meditation-related experiences across seven domains: cognitive, perceptual, affective, somatic, conative (which refers to motivation), sense of self, and social. Thematic content analysis resulted in 59 categories of experiences across these 7 domains.

Examples of categories include 'change in worldview' in the cognitive domain, 'fear, anxiety, panic or paranoia' in the affective domain, and 'changes in self-other or self-world boundaries' in the sense of sense domain. Each category was reported by an average of 20 practitioners and 5 experts, indicating high consistency in reporting across participants.

Participants reported that the emotional valence and level of impact of these experiences ranged from very positive to very negative. The associated level of distress and functional impairment ranged from minimal and transient to severe and lasting. Notably, very few of the experiences were universally appraised as negative or adverse by participants. Rather, Dr Britton and his team found that the emotional valence and impact of experiences were dependent on complex interactions with other influencing factors.

Twenty-six categories of influencing factors across four domains were identified. These were factors related to the practitioner, the practice, relationships, and health behaviours. Practitioner influencing factors included demographics (such as age, gender and ethnicity), 'worldview or explanatory frameworks', 'intentions, motivations or goals', 'psychiatric history', and 'trauma history'.

Practice related influencing factors included 'amount, intensity, or consistency of practice', 'practice approach' and 'type of practice'. Within relationships, influencing factors included 'relationship to teacher' and 'relationships beyond the practice community' as well 'relationships within the practice community'. Importantly, these were viewed as risk factors for difficult experiences when inadequate, but remedial when perceived to be supportive, helpful and understanding.

Finally, in terms of health behaviours, these generally represented risk factors when inadequate or lacking, such as in the case of sleep, diet and exercise. Conversely, when these inadequacies were remedied, through obtaining more sleep and improving diet, for example, they could serve to remedy the individual's distress. Again, Dr Britton and his colleagues note that influencing factors and remedies discussed by participants were highly variable and specific to each individual. Furthermore, while some remedies were enthusiastically endorsed by participants, many others were described as ineffective or even harmful.

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Through their in-depth analysis, Dr Britton and his colleagues demonstrated the critical impact of cultural contexts and conceptual frameworks on meditation experiences, as well the importance of how such experiences are appraised by the individual.

It emerged that multiple, and sometimes conflicting, interpretative frameworks play a role in the experiences of Western Buddhist meditators. For example, an individual's prior knowledge of Buddhism is likely to influence their appraisal of mediation experiences but even within Buddhism, what is considered to be 'progress' versus 'pathology' may differ between traditions, lineages, and even teachers. A further issue arises in that these traditional frameworks may not suitably explain meditation experiences for Western practitioners who are embedded within a scientifically-orientated culture.



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Dr Britton's examination of Western mediation experiences opens up important avenues for future research in both research and clinical settings.

Follow-up studies include that of practitioners and teachers from Jewish, Christian, and Sufi traditions to better understand the varieties of experiences that are unique and specific to each, and the experiences which are shared among the contemplative traditions.

To better understand the sociocultural context, a study of European Buddhist meditators is underway, examining potential differences between American and European reports of experiences, and a further study is comparing reports between American practitioners and experts with those in India.

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This ongoing program of work led by Dr Britton is underpinning the development of resources and practical methods to help meditation practitioners overcome mediation experiences that may be unexpected or challenging. This work is critical not only for practitioners and meditation instructors within the Buddhist tradition, but to the ever-increasing application of meditation techniques in psychology and medicine aiming to promote health and well-being.

This SciPod is a summary of the paper 'The varieties of contemplative experience: A mixed-methods study of meditation-related challenges in Western Buddhists, from the open access journal PLoS One. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239>

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