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Meditation has stronger relationships with mindfulness, kundalini, and mystical experiences than yoga or prayer



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ABSTRACT

Contemplative practices can have profound effects on mindfulness and on physical and sensory and mystical experiences. Individuals who self-reported meditation, yoga, contemplative prayer, or a combination of practices and their patterns of practice were compared for mindfulness, kundalini effects, and mystical experiences. The results suggest that the amount of practice but not the pattern and social conditions of practice influences mindfulness and possibly mystical experiences. Meditation, yoga, contemplative prayer, or a combination of practices all were found to be associated with enhancements of mindfulness, kundalini effects, and mystical experiences, but meditation had particularly strong associations and may be the basis of the associations of yoga and prayer with these outcomes. The results further suggest that the primary association of contemplative practices is with the real time awareness and appreciation of sensory and perceptual experiences which may be the intermediary between disparate practices and mindfulness, kundalini effects, and mystical experiences.

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1. Introduction

Mindfulness has recently been recognized to be beneficial for health and well-being. It has been shown to improve mental health (Campanella, Crescentini, Urgesi, & Fabbro, 2014; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011) and relieve stress (Sharma & Rush, 2014) in normal individuals and to be useful in the treatment of mental illnesses (Khouri et al., 2013; Khouri, Lecomte, Gaudiano, & Paquin, 2013; Laxhan & Schofield, 2013). It has also been shown to be beneficial for physical health (Kurdyak, Newman, & Segal, 2014; Obasi et al., 2013) and for the treatment of a multitude of physical ailments (Abbott et al., 2014; Merkes, 2010). Mindfulness has been shown to induce neuroplastic changes altering both the structure and activity of the nervous system (Fox et al., 2014; Hasenkamp, Wilson-Mendenhall, Duncan, Barsalou, 2012; Marchand, 2014). It has even been shown to delay physical and mental decline with aging (Gard, Hölzel, & Lazar, 2014; Schutte & Malouff, 2014). In addition, mindfulness has been employed with great benefit in schools (Zennerv et al., 2014), businesses (Aikens et al., 2014; Wolever et al., 2012), the armed forces (King et al., 2013), with police and firefighters (Smith et al., 2011; Williams, Ciarrochi, & Patrick Deane, 2010), and even in prisons (Himmelstein, 2011; Sumter, Monk-Turner, & Turner, 2009).

The usefulness of mindfulness for the promotion of human flourishing has spawned a tremendous amount of scientific activity that has been accelerating over the last couple of decades (American Mindfulness Research Association & 1980 – 2013., 2015). The work has focused on the effects of mindfulness but there have been relatively few in depth

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investigations into the nature of the contemplative practices and methods that maximally facilitate mindfulness and its benefits. Contemplative practices as used here include a wide variety of practices that have the common thread of emphasizing first person real time awareness. These include meditation, yoga, contemplative prayer, mindful movements, etc.

A variety of contemplative practices have been found to increase mindfulness, including meditation (Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012; Gard et al., 2014; Jacobs et al., 2011; Soler et al., 2014), yoga (Gard, Taquet, et al., 2014; Eastman-Mueller, Wilson, Jung, Kimura, & Tarrant, 2013), and mixed practices such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Dobkin & Zhao, 2011; Sauer-Zavala, Walsh, Eisenlohr-Moul, & Lykins, 2013). The relationship of the amount and pattern of these practices that is optimal for increasing mindfulness is unclear. Carmody and Baer (2008) found that mindfulness increases with increasing amounts of practice while Dobkin and Zhao (2011) found that it was unrelated to amounts of formal practice. Soler et al. (2014) investigated the characteristics of meditative practice that were associated with heightened mindfulness. They found that frequency and life-time practice, but not session length or meditation type predicted higher levels of mindfulness. Clearly, there is a need to investigate the optimal patterns of practice to maximally increase mindfulness.

Contemplative practices can have other effects on the individual including the induction of physical symptoms and changes, often termed kundalini effects (Sanches & Daniels, 2008). These appear to be a consequence of contemplative practice involving changes in the energetics of the individual and the production of physical and sensory alterations (Thalbourne & Fox, 1999). These physical changes can be misinterpreted and diagnosed as anxiety or panic disorder (Thalbourne & Fox, 1999). Kundalini effects were first described in the yogic traditions going as far back as the Upanishads, commentaries on the Hindu scriptures, the Vedas (Krishna, 1993) but have also been recognized in the meditation (Wilber, 1996) and prayer communities (Underhill, 1995). Sanches and Daniels (2008) developed a Kundalini Awakening Scale in order to begin systematic investigations of the kundalini effects. They demonstrated heightened kundalini effects in yoga practitioners and a mixed group of contemplative practices. Unfortunately, with the exception of Sanches and Daniels (2008) and Thalbourne and Fox (1999) there has been relatively little systematic research into kundalini effect. Clearly there is a need for empirical research into the kinds of practices and the pattern of practice that have the greatest impact on these effects.

Contemplative practices also can induce mystical, spiritual experiences that can have powerful effects on the individual (Büssing, Hedtstück, Khalsa, Ostermann, & Heusser, 2012; Hood, 2006; Prakash & Caponigro, 2009; Travis, 2014). These types of effects are reported in many different traditions employing a variety of practices including a variety of yoga, meditation, and prayer techniques (James, 1916; Stace, 1960). In comparison to kundalini effects there's been a considerable amount of empirical research on these mystical experiences. Hood (1975) developed a Mysticism Scale to measure the characteristics of these experiences. Applying factor analytic techniques he detected two major factors, a general mystical experiences factor and an interpretative factor. Further analysis employing larger and more diverse samples produced a three-factor structure of Introvertive Mysticism, Extrovertive Mysticism, and Interpretation. Subsequent research generally replicated the basic three-factor structure (Chen, Qi, Hood, & Watson, 2011; Chen, Zhang, Hood, & Watson, 2012; Hood, 2006). In the extrovertive mystical experiences all perceptual phenomena are viewed as coming through the senses as one while the introvertive type is devoid of all sensory imagery viewing instead everything as pure consciousness. "The essential difference between them is that the extrovertive experience looks outward through the senses, while the introvertive looks inward into the mind" (Stace, 1960, p. 61). Unfortunately, again there has been little or no systematic research into the kinds and pattern of practices that produce and have the greatest impact on mystical, spiritual experiences.

The present study attempts to develop and expand upon the prior research by comparing the relative associations of meditation, yoga, contemplative prayer, and a combination of practices with mindfulness, kundalini effects, and mystical experiences. These three were chosen to represent the variety and breadth of changes that have been associated with contemplative practices. Additionally, the patterns of practice that are most highly related to these outcomes were also investigated. Mindfulness practitioners who self-reported their current contemplative practices and their patterns of practice were compared on their levels of five different aspects of mindfulness, observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging, non-reacting, as measured by the Five of Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ, Baer et al., 2008). They were also assessed with the Kundalini Awakening Scale (KAS, Sanches & Daniels, 2008) for physical changes and the Mysticism Scale (MYST, Hood, 1975) for awakening experiences.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from students at Sam Houston State University for the Contemplative Practices and Mindfulness Development Study to investigate the relationship between contemplative practices and the development of mindfulness, gratefulness, satisfaction with life, and awakening. They participated to partially fulfill a course requirement. Participants were also recruited from the general population who volunteered in response to advertisements in mindfulness oriented magazines, through word of mouth, snowball sampling, and social media. Outside participants were recruited to help with scientific research for developing understanding about mindfulness and awakening by participating in the Mindfulness and Awakening Research Registry (MARR, <http://www.contemplative-studies.org/views/MARRegistry.php>). Their participation was entirely voluntary and they did not receive rewards or inducements for participation. The study protocol was approved by the Sam Houston State University Institutional Review Board.

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