

A R T Y K U Ł Y I R O Z P R A W Y

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CAN YOU STOP YOUR MIND AND YOUR DAILY ACTIVITIES?
AN ANALYSIS OF MEDITATION IN YOGA PRACTICE*

INTRODUCTION

Although it seems to be a passive activity, meditation is an active activity in the mental sense; it requires attention and concentration. The meditator concentrates on “the projects and task plans” (Schütz 1962a: 213).¹

That planned task is meditation. However, it is not a task in everyday life, and the plan is not very clear. The subject decides to start meditation, and entering meditation allows them to enter another reality, the reality of meditation, where there is passivity and focus on the here and now, without carrying out any practical tasks or plans related to everyday life. Concentrating on the “object of meditation” helps focus the mind (Desikachar 1999: 113). The body or breath can also be the object of

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¹ “...within its acts and its attention is exclusively directed to carrying its project into effect, executing its plan” (Schütz 1962a: 213).

meditation (Desikachar 1999: 117). During meditation, the mind merges with the object of meditation, and the meditation process becomes inner and deep (Desikachar 1999: 114; see also Cope 2006, chapter 13). This project is aimed at breaking the mind out of everyday life. However, it is still immersed in it, and it is also a reference point for realizing where the attention is currently located and what consciousness is directing it to. But this immersion is moderated by the meditation “bubble”. Therefore, meditation is a paradoxical project of everyday life that takes place at its very centre, suspending the individual’s involvement in it, thus referring to a temporary rejection of this world (everyday life). Finally, meditation stops the work of the mind and the practical activities of the meditating subject. As such, it is challenging to create and then describe meditative states when the mind is turned off. It is not easy to research these meditative states scientifically (Sparby 2019: 131).²

Sociology has tried to capture meditation from an external perspective (Collins 2004, 2011), and reference has been made to religious practices. Collins treated meditation as an interactional ritual that occurs in the individual’s mind; a person engages in an internal conversation between the social aspect of the self and the individual. There is reference to Mead’s (1934; Blumer 1969; Prus 1996) concept of the self. Interpretations of meditation can also be inspired by the sociology of Durkheim (2008/1912) and his analysis of the elementary forms of religion, and by Giddens (1991; cited in Pagis 2019a) description of the individualization of modern societies. Classic sociology is usually concerned with the motives and explanations for undertaking activities and their social embeddedness, the networks, and the collectives that they promote. In addition, there is a reflection on meditation’s place in contemporary spirituality and how philosophies and elements of Eastern religions are adapted to the Western world (Singleton 2010; Pagis 2019a; Newcombe 2019; Newcombe, O’Brien-Kopp 2020).

From the perspective of critical sociology, meditation and the practice of mindfulness can be viewed as a form that supports the existing power and domination in contemporary corporations. The practice is

² We treat the term meditation broadly. The practice of mindfulness also falls within the scope of our analysis, as it concerns the practice of mindfulness in sitting, observing the breath, and the reaction of impulses that come from the body. We are still dealing with an attempt to disconnect from everyday life and to get to “a point” of concentration. If meditation is used in pain therapy, individuals can distance themselves from the body and lose ownership of sensations, and finally, there is a perceived reduction in pain intensity (Riegner et al. 2022).

mainly meant to increase productivity and the rhetoric of a calm and free mind, and cover up the real goals and effects of meditation practices (Islam, Holm, Karjalainen 2017). It may even justify and stabilize contemporary consumer capitalism (Purser, Loy 2013; Carvalho 2021; Chen 2022; Purser 2019; see also Anālayo's [2020] critique of this thesis) and how "contemporary liberal-capitalism is felt and lived with" (Coleman 2020). Critical and political interpretations tend to be made from *a priori* positions; prior categories of analysis are superimposed on processes that are not familiar to critical analysts from within. A kind of data forcing takes place (Glaser 1992), and different conclusions can be drawn from broad empirical research (Kucinskas, Stewart 2022³; Steensland, King, Duffy 2022). The goal of the research is to look at and describe the meditation practice from the inside without making any assumptions about what can be found in the situation under study; it is a contemplative study of the minding rather than a detailed description of the space where the thinking/not thinking takes place. Contemplative research is inspired by phenomenology, so we are also under its influence (Bentz, Giorgino 2016), and inspirations come from Buddhist Zen (Janesick 2015; Konecki 2018: 43–53). We researched and analysed meditation using contemplative grounded theory methodology. The empirical materials are based mainly on self-observation, self-reports of the research participants, and unstandardized interviews. Empirical materials are analysed according to contemplative coding procedures, with contemplative memos done in the context of coding and analysts' assumptions. The reflective process is opened and objectified by writing and often analysed (Konecki 2022, see chapter 2).

The practice sometimes seems homogenized when we look from an external perspective; however, it is firmly experientially individualized. We do not take a deterministic perspective in which liberal capitalism is supposed to be the structural basis for the experiences and feelings of individual consciousness in the practice of meditation or mindfulness (see Coleman 2020 for a discussion of this issue).

In addition, there is interest in the micro-perspective, where the analysis of the relationship between the self and social situating finds its place in the sociological perspective (Pagis 2010, 2015; 2019a). We, just like Pagis, want to describe meditation from a micro perspective, from the practitioners' point of view, and from the embeddedness in

³ See also: <https://theconversation.com/yoga-versus-democracy-what-survey-data-says-about-spiritual-americans-political-behavior-187960/>.

the situation, including my own occasional first-person accounts. The sociological perspective is used minimally here, although it exists in the background of the analysis, for the practice of meditation does not take place in a social vacuum. It takes place in *the situation*, but, as we shall see, it nevertheless tries to isolate itself in the face of social pressures, including the burdens of working life (Schütz 1962a). As sociologists, we want to cross the borders of the social determination of the process and explicitly show how the mind creates reality, which is supposedly constructed by social factors. Inspired by phenomenology, we want to show how crossing the border of *provinces of meaning* looks, crossing from the reality of everyday life to the realm of meditation (Schütz 1962b: 231). There could be a collision between two visions of reality, two different *finite provinces of meaning* (Schütz 1962b: 229–234). “We speak of provinces of meaning and not of sub-universes because it is a meaning of our experiences and not the ontological structure of the objects which constitutes reality. Hence, we call a certain set of experiences a finite province of meaning if all of them show a specific cognitive style and are — concerning this style — not only consistent in themselves but also compatible with one another” (Schütz 1962b: 230). We do not concentrate *on the essential features of the finite provinces of the meaning of meditation* but want to show how entering it happens. Although we cannot say it is ethnographical research, it is similar to that concerning the detailed description of the situation occurring in the minds and bodies of beginner meditators.



This article follows a qualitative and contemplative analysis style, and describes the components of entering a meditative state in a concrete physical and social situation. How do (primarily) beginners in hatha yoga and meditation deal with this state? What do they feel? The purpose of the analysis is to explore and list the conditions that influence entering into the meditation process and isolate the meditation elements that arise in the *beginner’s mind* (Suzuki 2010). We do not adopt any model to describe meditation experiences (Preston 1981: 48). We try to get as close as possible to these experiences, and reflect their meaning and understanding as they appear in the practitioners themselves (Prus 1996; Giorgino 2014) in crossing the boundaries of the realm of everyday life and meditation.

Certain elements of the external and internal environment distract from meditation. We want to list and interpret them, and see how practitioners deal with these obstacles; what tactics do they employ

to eliminate them, or do redirect attention and include them in the background of the main point, concentration?

Our analysis will mainly focus on self-reports provided to researchers from self-observations made by participants in the research project (see Konecki 2018: 229–231, on self-observation and self-reporting).⁴ Self-reports or journaling can be an effective way of coming out of the meditation or breathing exercises (pranayama) and integrating the stillness of the mind with the lifeworld. Moreover, we still remember what happened during the writing process immediately after meditation, and this also provides material for working with the Self. “The challenge in recording these experiences lies in finding the language to capture their subtlety on the page” (Kempton 2011, chapter 10; compare also Rosen 2011, chapter six).

The research project “Experiencing corporeality and gestures in the social world of hatha yoga. Meanings and knowledge transfer in body practice” in which we tried to describe, among other things, meditative states, concerned analysis of the experience of hatha yoga and the transfer of bodily knowledge. As meditation is one of the elements of yoga practice, we also addressed it in the abovementioned project, but it was not the central theme of the research project. While it is usually not strongly emphasized in commercial hatha yoga practice, it is traditionally an indispensable component of yoga (Eliade 1997: 20–21; Iyengar, undated). The mere physical practice of hatha yoga is a form of meditation in motion. Still, *Dhyana* — concentration on an object — is both a separate and an inner element in the practice of hatha yoga. As yoga masters and teachers claim, you cannot practice yoga without meditation (Iyengar 1990; Desikachar 1999). There are also some proposals or instructions on how to meditate, generalising to some degree or other, from traditions other than yoga:

“The same way works for you yourself as well. If you want to obtain perfect calmness in your zazen, you should not be bothered by the various images you find in your mind. Let them come and let them go” (Suzuki 1995: 32–22).

In our yoga sessions, we tried to introduce meditation practice at the end of the session, after practicing asanas and breathing exercises (Rosen 2011). Or we tried to do separate meditation sessions to study how our mind functions while meditating, and what changes occur in our

⁴ The main self-reports will be cited below; wherever there are quotes from interviews they will be indicated.

perception of the world as a result of meditative concentration in general. We were also interested in connecting the work of the mind (thinking) with the body's sensations. There is no contemplative research on minding without describing the body's feelings (Konecki 2022; Konecki, Płaczek, Tarasiuk 2024). How did the body react to still sitting, and what signals did it send to the mind? What did the mind do with it? What emotions did you feel while sitting? And how were they dealt with? These questions accompanied us when analysing the self-reports that the project participants prepared immediately after practising. Self-observation was conducted under instruction, and the self-reporting was preceded by instructions (descriptions of these research techniques can be found in Konecki 2018: chapter 10).

The study consisted of 17 self-observing participants in hatha yoga, pranayama, and meditation sessions each week (we obtained 532 self-reports). There were 44 meetings, held every week from 21 October 2019 to 1 June 2021. Additionally, we had yoga and meditation sessions with 67 Erasmus students (2020–2022), who also provided self-reports from their self-observations (520 self-reports). Most of the project participants were hatha yoga beginners. Furthermore, we obtained 50 interviews with practitioners and teachers, seven hours of audio-video recordings of hatha yoga practice, and 70 hours of participant observation. Informed consent was obtained from the study participants to use the textual data and video recordings for analysis and publication. This paper mainly concerns the self-reports and interviews conducted during the research.

The University Ethics Commission accepted the research project.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Below we describe experiences from meditation sessions that took place during our project, usually at the end of the hatha yoga practice, after the breathing exercises. The meditation was about sitting, and here we were inspired mainly by the sitting instruction from Zen Buddhism practice (Konecki 2018: 50), although there are stated similarities between yoga and Buddhism, especially in the realm of meditation (Cope 2006). The instruction was to sit still in various positions, with your eyes fixed on one point, and observe your breathing, all the body's reactions, and the work of your mind. The material elements that created the atmosphere, for example mats, blankets, meditation cushions and the bell, were also included in the instructions. Through sound, the bell creates a unique atmosphere and borders with the outside world (Carvalho 2021). We

did not question what might appear while sitting. We were also not concerned with the effects of sitting and yoga practices, such as attaining enlightenment (Preston 1981).

Let us now answer this question from the practitioners' point of view: What is meditation for them?

Practitioners often ask themselves, "What is meditation?" Whether we are in a meditative state or only in mindfulness is an unknown (Nhat Hanh 1976). This meditative state does happen, some yoga practitioners say. Sometimes, while observing the racing of thoughts, we are aware of what is happening inside us and we recall various stories, what we were doing earlier on and what we are doing now, and how our mind works. This is mindfulness. However, yoga is a mindfulness practice with the body as the first mindful object (Vicente, Stuhr 2022). Sometimes, participants of meditation sessions say that there are gaps between thoughts. And then there is an inner "calmness", peace and joy, and inner beauty (Pagis 2015, 2010). There are also doubts about what meditation is. There is often no language to define meditation. Even yoga teachers, who have been practicing for 20 years, mention that you can only sometimes get insight. The following quote from an interview with a yoga teacher shows many of the qualities that practitioners can attribute to meditation:

"I try to sit every day. So, I usually sit in silence, or sometimes I turn on a mantra, choose positions and asanas for sitting, those that are stable for me, sometimes you can sit on a chair. Usually, I sit on the ground. So, what does it give me? Silence inside. Silence is also easier because it is not always possible; what is meditation? This happens to us, right? Usually, there is a storm of thoughts in the head, but these thoughts are also needed because you can see what you have, what you do, what your mind is doing, and where it is going. Sometimes stories come to mind. And sometimes there are gaps between thoughts, and then you are close to that deep, inner peace. And sometimes, after meditation, your eyes shine, and you know it was something. You feel such deep joy and peace. And although I sit every day, I have something to do with myself in the spiritual and internal spheres. Because sometimes... I can say that I don't know if it is meditation. It is a very inward state of profound peace, such inner beauty. But sometimes, it's just a thought, a storm of thoughts, or a storm of emotion. Sometimes the body hurts, and you want to change the position, and sometimes you want to run away from it. It means running away, not doing it, because the body hurts, and this state is shortened when a certain amount of time has been allocated. It also happens that there are ups and downs, right? Along the way of this practice" (interview with a yoga teacher, female).

The difficulty of describing the meditative state is sometimes indicated (see also Shear, Jevning 2002: 191). It is, in a way, a different world, and this other world has no language. Language is from the lifeworld. Meditation is generally a non-linguistic world. We want to disconnect ourselves from thinking, and thoughts are language; they are inner conversations (Mead 1934). And this other world should be deprived of that. So, it isn't easy to describe. This difficulty is related to its essential feature, the fact that it is a beyond-language reality, it is an *extra-language state of being*. Of course, one can conclude from Wittgenstein that we must remain silent about what cannot be said. We do not want to be silent because silence is also significant for our entanglement in the world of life. Its description is a continuation of this paradox of immersing the world of meditation in the world of practical activities through the intention to cut ourselves off from the world of thoughts, names, categories, and actions:

“Meditation takes me into another world, into another dimension. I really like this feeling; it's hard for me to describe” (exerciser, female).⁵

“It clears my mind somehow. I don't know how to explain it, but my body and mind feel lighter” (exerciser, female).

PREPARATION FOR MEDITATION

Well-conducted meditation requires explanation and preparation by practitioners. Therefore, the role of the teacher is essential. They must explain the basic principles of meditation and what may happen during it. However, after a certain amount of practice, explanations are no longer so necessary. Teachers usually leave practitioners a lot of room for discovery, although they sometimes explain the situation if they expect difficulties on the part of the practitioners:

“In my last practice, I had wanted to do a 20-minute meditation. I explained a lot about how to meditate. However, without interpretation of possible feelings. But what is meditation? I thought about it, and said that meditation was an essential part of yoga. Asanas and pranayama and pratyahara are preparation for meditation. I said that practicing asanas today would be easy.

⁵ We use two terms here: exercisers and practitioners. Exercisers are people who have systematically attended hatha yoga for less than one year. On the other hand, practitioners are people who have systematically attended classes for more than one year.

The caption “author” under the quotes refers to the researcher and author of the paper who is both a practitioner and instructor of hatha yoga.

I was doing the meditation, starting with the bell. As it should be, I also gave out instructions on the meditation paper. We were doing the meditation on a chair. We don't have cushions, and it is probably better on a chair because sitting on the floor would be more of a challenge without cushions. Pain in the legs, knees, and spine could occur in inexperienced practitioners.

I explained a lot by talking about meditation because I was afraid of the reaction in the process. I know that the race of thoughts is a pain in our times, and it is difficult to fight it after a hard day's work" (author).

It is vital to prepare the position and place for meditation, for example to avoid falling asleep:

"During meditation, I was half asleep because I was alert, and I knew what was happening around me, even though I fell asleep. That 20 minutes passed by incredibly quickly. I was sleeping, and now and then I would wake up thinking about what I still had to do, especially at work. These thoughts did not last long, and I fell asleep again. I chose the chair on purpose, hoping to avoid such a situation" (exerciser, female).

It is also important to prepare for the lowering of your body temperature:

"I was too cold last week, so I prepared two blankets for meditation. Happily, the guided meditation has focused on the feeling of warmth passing through the body, along with the feeling that it is heavy" (exerciser, female).

MEDITATION AS A CHALLENGE: PAIN, NEGATIVE EMOTIONS, AND SLEEPINESS

Meditators often struggle with the limitations of the body. They fight pain, numbness, body inertia, and recurring pains. There are also particular feelings of the body, such as leaving the body, the body feeling foreign or external, or the practitioner losing control over it:

"I was looking at one point on the mat. This inertia made me feel like I had come out of my body. It felt like it was foreign. I looked at my hands; they looked like they were made of wax and seemed dead. It did not cause any emotions in me. I felt nothing" (exerciser, female, research collaborator).

Some obstacles resulting from the body's physiology, such as a throat irritation, can interfere with meditation:

"In the end, I almost succeeded [at focusing in meditation]. I closed my eyes and listened to my breathing, but my throat bothered me because my

throat was irritated. And in the middle of meditation, I had to stop and drink something so as not to cough up 😞” (exerciser, male).

Sometimes, the pain during meditation is so severe that anxiety and emotions of fear and sadness arise, and the practitioner has to stop meditating. After relaxing your body, you can go back to counting your breath and continue until the end of your meditation. Meditation can be a severe challenge to beginner practitioners:

“When I saw the feet of the other participants and the lack of any movement on their part, I felt even more overwhelmed. It was a strange feeling. I wouldn’t say I liked it. After a while, I felt very scared. I was scared. Anxiety awoke in me, the source of which I did not know. I had no visions, and I felt fear and a little sadness... The pain was over immediately, and I relaxed. I felt that I was back in my body; I was comfortable and well. I was breathing calmly, counting to 10. Suddenly the gong sounded” (exerciser, female, collaborator of principal investigator).

Feelings of uneasiness and dread associated with the feelings of the body may arise during meditation. This is accompanied by bodily sensations (such as tightness in the stomach). The practitioner fights negative thoughts by recalling positive ones:

“After about half of the meditation, which is 10 minutes, I felt a sudden fear and stress. There was a sudden tight knot in my stomach, anxiety, and a loss of sense of security. Thoughts about death began to appear in my head, the image of someone’s funeral, a coffin. I became instantly anxious, and started to fight these thoughts, trying hard to recall positive, kind thoughts. After a while, the negative thoughts disappeared” (exerciser, female, research collaborator).

Pain during meditation (pain between the shoulder blades) is a severe obstacle to concentration and a challenge for the practitioner. The pain is the cause of distraction, but at the same time the focus; the conscious perception of pain is a moment of mindfulness. It is not a “glorious pain” (Lev 2022), but a very useful pain. After the meditation is over, there is a sense of relief, no pain, and a surge of energy. So, the practitioners see the positive effects of meditation:

“During the meditation, an increasing pain between the shoulder blades returned. Whenever my thoughts focused on the pain, I quickly tried to shift them to a single point on the floor. My vision was blurred. I couldn’t hear sounds from other rooms; the only thing that made me distracted from time to time was pain. At the end of the meditation, the pain was so excruciating that I began to ask in my mind for the gong to ring out. When I heard its sound, I smiled gently (or so I thought) and felt relief and

a sudden burst of energy. The pain between the shoulder blades stopped” (exerciser, female, research collaborator).

Meditation, as already mentioned, can be a severe challenge to beginners, as well as those who are advanced in practising it. During meditation, intense thoughts about work may arise that are not easy to break free from when meditating after work. Concentration is difficult, although it may occur at the end of the meditation, as in the following example:

“I had thoughts about work all the time, because I had been working intensively; I had online meetings, phone calls, and much correspondence. Work, work, work... It was challenging to focus on the breathing, the stomach, and the navel. It was easier for me to focus on the breath in my nostrils. I could hear my breath, making it easier to focus. I counted breaths to ten. It was only towards the end that I could fully immerse myself in the meditation. I was in the here and now, almost without thinking. A single chime rang out and ended the meditation. It surprised me, as there were always three rings” (author).

As is evident here, the challenge of meditation for advanced people concerns the strong *tension of consciousness* in the lifeworld (Schütz 1962b; Sebald 2011; Konecki, Płaczek, Tarasiuk 2024: 247–249). It is difficult for them to enter the world of meditation and stop, or they are not careful enough to enter meditation because they are not adequately prepared physically and mentally. It is evident how I want to accommodate the lifeworld in the regime of working life. Changing the reality (cognitive style) is not easy:⁶

“During meditation (on a chair), focus on breathing. Departures from thoughts about work. About today’s scientific degree committee. About the phone talks. And work talks that come along always make me uneasy. But I dissolve it with meditation. Focus. I feel a pain in my back, a ‘pain belt’ on my back; on the right side, I felt pain. I was leaning against the chair. But then I was lethargic, close to falling asleep. Again, I went back to the erect spine, and the pain I had noticed before came back. Concentrating

⁶ Perhaps here I become the self-helper and try to accommodate liberal capitalism, which strongly exploits me within myself (Purser 2019). However, this reflection was only possible after reading the external interpretation of the cultural processes of introducing mindfulness to the capitalist system (see also Coleman 2022). However, after some other readings, we could incorporate another perspective, and see that “mindfulness might turn out to be a crucially important resource in facing the ravages caused by neoliberal capitalism” (Anālayo 2020). Practicing mindfulness can alleviate suffering more effectively at any given moment than merely adopting a critical stance, as seen in critical sociology.

on the breath, on the stomach. Repeating the word ‘focus’ while inhaling; ‘focus’ on the exhale. Without counting” (author).

Thinking about work (working life as *the finite province of meaning*) can also be interspersed with entering a state of falling asleep (the border of another *province of meaning*, sleeping and dreaming); on occasion, there is a disturbance in the perception of time (the essential feature of *province of meaning* — the specific time perspective, Schütz 1962b):

“I was astonished that those 20 minutes had passed; I thought ten max. The strangest thing is that I really don’t know if I fell asleep. On the one hand, I think I didn’t because I heard the leader ending the meditation. On the other hand, I completely lost track of time” (exerciser, female).

Planning is one of the many activities of the mind that is busy working all day, in the province of working life. Meditation is an opportunity to master your racing thoughts:

“During meditation, especially at the beginning, my head talked to me a lot, planned and created potential dialogues and situations. Then, as if I remembered what this part of the practice should be, I started counting inhalations and exhalations to ten. Thoughts tried to penetrate me, but they weren’t as intense as they were at first” (exerciser, female).

Observing others as you meditate and comparing yourself to them can be a hindrance, but it is also a focus on the here and now. Thus, a rule of comparison is taken from everyday life (Brown 2021). But observing others also shows that meditation in a group is a collaborative practice; we try to find ourselves in this group, adapting to others to harmonize our sitting and breathing (another feature of the finite province of meaning is the form of sociality):

“By looking at the same point all the time, I started noticing other participants in the practice. My attention was drawn to the swaying sideways of my friend sitting in front of me, and I began to wonder why she was swinging so much, why I wasn’t doing it, and if it had a calming effect. Later, I saw another friend’s toes move, bend and straighten” (exerciser, female).

Below is the perspective of the person sitting next to the practitioner who wrote the statement above. Similarly, we are dealing with observing others and trying to compare ourselves:

“Often, with my eyes closed, I used to open them to see how the meditation was going on in others, or if they had their eyes closed. And when someone had their head tilted down, I wondered whether that person was meditating

with their eyes closed or half-open or fully open; it was such a mystery for me to decipher. However, I remembered what the professor said so that we would not stay on a given thought for too long, so I stopped trying to solve the answer to the question I had asked” (exerciser, female).

Meditation can also be a challenge when we have prepared ourselves inadequately. For example, if we did not follow a diet and ate a meal just before meditating. This, along with a difficult day at work, can be a severe obstacle to achieving focus:

“During meditation, my stomach was full, as I had just had lunch. I felt physical fatigue throughout the body. The whole day of work and online contact with colleagues. Preparation for classes at university” (author).

According to one yoga teacher, the remedy for overcoming the obstacle of the presence of others and other obstacles is accepting what is outside and focusing on what is inside. Focusing on small things can help us transform our view (Cope 2006, chapter 13). An accepting attitude differs from the critical and analytical cognitive attitude in working life. Asana practice can help in achieving acceptance of the outer world and concentrating on the inside world of meditation:

“So, really, again, you can look for a lot of obstacles and say, ‘Oh, I don’t like the colour here.’ And it might happen that someone in the room will say, ‘Well, but this light bothers me.’ And they distract me, as if they are running away from what is going on inside and looking for such obstacles outside. And this change, through the practice of asanas, makes it easier for us to accept what is outside and turn our attention inward” (interview with a hatha yoga teacher, male).

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Meditation is also a way to observe the mind’s work and to distance yourself from your thoughts and the process of thinking itself. It is a process of self-knowledge and recognizing your own mind’s work. Thus, mindfulness is involved here, as we realize what we think and how we think (Nhat Hanh 1976: 7–8). There may also be epiphanies, certain revelations that resolve matters of everyday life. But most of all, we observe our thinking and distance ourselves from it. This self-recognition as a result of meditating can keep you motivated to continue your practice and distance yourself from the current situation and yourself, which in turn can help stop the racing thoughts that you usually experience in working life:

“Well, that’s what it is for me: learning to not pay attention to everything that’s going on in your head. That’s where all the thinking is going on, the pondering, the wondering, the embracing, the planning. And meditation is learning not to pay attention to that, that your brain will do whatever it wants anyway and get you into different scenarios. And such a success in meditation is not to stop thinking at all, because that is very, very, very difficult... as I talk to people who meditate every day, it’s just a super hard thing to do. Rarely does anyone succeed, rarely anyone [can do it] for more than half a minute, but what is a great success is being aware that you are thinking about all the things and learning that, ‘OK, this is how it will always be, I don’t have to’. And in meditation, various interesting visions came to me, created by my brain. And also, thanks to that, I reconciled with my father because, suddenly, I had some kind of epiphany that maybe he didn’t want to hurt me X years ago” (practitioner, female).

During meditation, in this case walking meditation, we also learn about our weaknesses and being mindful of the body:

“When meditating, walking in circles, at first I was focused on my breath, but the longer I kept my feet in the air, the more I had the feeling that with each step, they were getting a little heavier, and I was thinking about getting them on the ground. I felt that I was not very patient if I wanted to quickly put my feet on the ground” (exerciser, female).

Self-recognition can also relate to the mind’s and body’s work of recognizing the amount of time that passes; the realization of a working intuition is startling:

“At the end of the meditation, 20 minutes. We sat with the cameras on, I was also aware of seeing each other, although I was not looking at the practitioners, concentrating on the point in front of me. I was drowsy, but I returned to observing my breaths by straightening up and taking deeper breaths. A stillness came over me in meditation. A little different from that in pranayama, not as joyful but isolating from daily life activities.

I knew exactly when the bell would ring to end the meditation; it’s incredible how the body senses the passage of time during meditation” (author).

Another property of self-cognition may be a greater awareness of specific states of mind, such as the location of pain and the suspension of the mind. Concentration enables one to perceive these phenomena and report on their existence. The body awareness is sharp and vivid in the meditation province of meaning, in opposition to the working life province:

“During meditation, the sun was shining brightly. I could feel it in my eyes and on my face. I liked the sensation. I also felt pain in my stomach and

back. I knew precisely where, behind my shoulder blade, my back hurt. This location was highly accurate. Through meditation, I was able to notice these pains. In everyday life, I would not notice what hurt; I would overlook the sensation.

Despite a moment of actual suspension, I had these perceptions, full awareness in a still body and mind. It lasted for a short time, but I felt it very clearly” (author).

“It cleared my mind (even after that, I looked a bit confused and sleepy). I felt a lot of peace” (exerciser, female).

Concentration also makes it possible to see that certain phenomena are not perceived, for example the *non-perception of sounds*. In the self-reports below, while practitioners heard while sharing self-reports after meditation, the reports of other meditators’ feelings said that they did not notice the sounds some practitioners perceived. People who went deeper into the meditative state were excluded from observing the environment and they went to the state of “deep self” (see Scheff 2014):

“Entering the room, you could hear a chirping sparrow through the open window. While meditating, I didn’t notice it at all. As if it had disappeared and reappeared. I didn’t hear it even though I liked its chirping very much, and it appeased me” (exerciser, female).

There may also be a state between wakefulness and sleep during meditation. It is a state of full consciousness but in a passive form. The phenomenon also happens in the savasana state of mind, the yoga pose preparing for meditation (Konecki, Płaczek, Tarasiuk 2024: 258–260). It is then that the position of the observer appears, who is aware of the existence, although their reflectiveness is blocked. The state of “don’t know” appears in meditation:

“I drifted away several times — I felt as if I was dreaming while awake; I did not know if I was sleeping and I dreamed it, or if it was just thoughts appearing in my head” (exerciser, male).

THE COURSE OF MEDITATION — RACING THOUGHTS, VISIONS, ACHIEVING PEACE

The influx of loosely coupled thoughts that interrupt the focus on *the object or point* of meditation (for example breath, or a point on the floor) has already been explored. These thoughts emerge at specific times, usually after losing touch with your body, followed by particular bodily responses, distractions, and changing points of attention (Petitmengin et al. 2017).

During meditation, various phenomena flow from the mind and are observed by the practitioner. It could be the observation of a sequence of related thoughts, loosely related thoughts, racing thoughts, or multiple visions. A sound and the thoughts floating around it quickly affect the sense of hearing:

“I focused on the sounds outside the window, the noise of cars and trams. There were thoughts, but I very consciously did not go into them. This is probably the first time I’ve experienced thought observation. Although I don’t know if this is observation; it is just letting one thought flow very smoothly and even abstractly into a second thought. It amused me; more loose associations came, but it was a collection of random thoughts. Unfortunately, I don’t remember which ones. With time, more and more, I entered the noise outside the window, which was ‘massaging’ my head; I thought of this noise as something abstract, heavy, as something that had a form. And ... I don’t know what happened next” (exerciser, female).

Chasing thoughts

“For the meditation, I tried to adopt the most comfortable possible position on the chair. I prepared a blanket to be placed in the lumbar region. I put my foot on my ankle, although I admit that I did not count on being able to concentrate, and indeed it did not happen. All the time, I kept getting ‘reminders’ about work, about not thinking, about my health, about past meetings, about how my thoughts were more like a roaring noisy streetcar distracting everyone as it passed by and not like clouds that should flow through my head without occupying my attention” (exerciser, female).

The racing of thoughts during meditation usually concerns everyday matters and working life. In addition, memories and emotions, often negative ones, emerge. The awareness of these emotions is revealed precisely during the practice of meditation. Working life is still in the awareness, and to live it can create difficulties:

“Since the classes were held shortly after I had submitted the correction of my tax report, thoughts came to me about ‘total earnings’, ‘income’ and ‘due taxes’.” (exerciser, female).

Visions

There are also visions. The mind uses the sense of sight to represent specific thoughts. All of this can lead to reflecting on the creative power of the mind and arouse the need for deeper insight into what is happening

while sitting. There are *visualizations*, and various images, often very clear (cf. Preston 1981: 52). The visions mean that we are entering another realm. In everyday life, they happen rarely. Attempts are made to explain visions, where they come from, and why:

“During the second class, it happened to me that I ‘saw’ the outline of a man’s face appearing for a moment under my eyelids while my eyes were closed. This aroused my interest so much that when, after 20 minutes, the bell signalled the end of the meditation, I wanted to go back for a moment and recognize who it might be. It was a male face that I still can’t recognize, which only appeared on the left side for no more than 2–3 seconds and then disappeared for another 5–10 seconds” (exerciser, female).

“In meditation, I was relatively focused on one point on the floor. I also saw the shape of the face — a pattern of faces formed from dots on the wooden floor. Whether I opened my eyes wider or not, the front remained; I knew that these were only points on the floor and that I was creating (my mind was creating) the shape of the face from these points. So, the mind is a demiurge...” (author).

Visions may repeat in subsequent meditation sessions, and facial images may appear, although sometimes they are shapes that are difficult to identify:

“During meditation, it happened to me once again that an image of a male face appeared to me on the left side while taking a breath. You can’t recognize anyone you know in this face, or any particular symbolism” (exerciser, female).

The facial images can be startling and disturbing. The images change and disappear after a while:

“One of them reminded me so much of someone that I held my breath, and the saliva stuck in my throat; I was a little scared. The look on that face was mocking. The sight of various faces appearing lasted for about 3 minutes; then I saw figures of mediaeval people (a man and a woman) on the wall against the background of a forest with a path, as if the painting stopped them in conversation. Then the patterns on the wall seemed to form a clown” (exerciser, female).

Visions can also appear while meditating in nature. They are associated with shifting the focus to various objects, which may move into the background. This phenomenon can be called “bokeh” in photography, and it is associated with focusing on the main object of the photo while everything around it appears in a blurred background. In the example below, meditation is also associated with feelings of unreal and slower

thoughts. It can be said that after meditating, there is a “bokeh of thoughts”. Concentrating on an object occurs slowly when everything that arises around a thought goes into the background:

“... But in the last few days, I have practiced meditation sitting in the woods several times, so I thought I would write about this meditation instead of the previous yoga practice. I sit in my favourite clearing, on a hill, where I sometimes see wild boar. A small clearing covered with moss, surrounded by pine trees. In keeping with tips on meditation, I choose one point to look at. Usually, it is a leaf on a bush. There are lots of little trees with fresh leaves, and as soon as I start meditating a kaleidoscope turns on. It is exciting what happens with my vision, because one time only the leaves would sharpen, another time it could be branches, and sometimes it's clumps of grass. Even if I shift my gaze to something else for a moment, when I return to my fixed point, the surroundings immediately become a kaleidoscope again. In addition, I feel heavier, and I feel where I'm touching the ground. My breathing slows down a lot. Sometimes after meditating my thoughts are unrealistic; even when X starts talking to me, I have to take longer to digest it as if I were sitting in a bubble and things were reaching me more slowly. [That's] the great thing about this sitting meditation in nature” (practitioner, female).

Peace

Meditation practised correctly gives the feeling of peace and lightness to the body. The following elements are essential: a straight spine, counting breaths, and concentration. The body sometimes loses balance, but a focused mind allows it to return to an upright position. In the following meditation, a safe space can be conducive to well-executed meditation, meaning one that brings calmness and lightness to the body:

“I began as always by concentrating on a straight and stable spine and counting my breaths. I closed my eyes and observed my body and mind. Thoughts kept popping up, but I tried not to focus on them; I let them drift away. After a while, I felt myself relaxing, my arms and head becoming light, and my body gently leaning forward. When I lost the sense of an upright posture, I started again. But I did not feel any anxiety. I straightened my spine again without losing the lightness of my body. I was in a safe space, my own home, which undoubtedly contributed to my feeling of peace throughout the practice, without being distracted” (exerciser, female).

EFFORTLESSNESS

Achieving peace and slowing down the body's work is a kind of introduction to effortless meditation. Effortlessness is an essential feature of meditation (Sparby 2019; Shear, Jevning 2002) as a cognitive style (finite province of meaning Schütz 1962b: 230). Making an effort, overcoming weaknesses, and pushing forward are usually appreciated in working life.

Here is an example from guided meditation. After meditating, the practitioner feels the body slowing down. They also feel calm and fluid in the body's movements:

“But when I heard the leader's voice informing me that we were approaching the end, I suddenly came to my senses. Then I realized that I was not fully aware of what was happening around me. However, I was still awake. It's hard to describe this state. It is a bit like leaving my body and only controlling my mind. It sounds pretty abstract, and maybe I'm exaggerating in describing it this way, but I can't put another word to it. After meditating, I felt my body slow down. My movements were slow, calm, and smooth. I thought that I was prepared for sleep, and if I had wanted to, I could have fallen asleep after a while” (exerciser, female).

Sometimes, a slight change in position allows you to get more comfort from sitting and reduce the tension caused by concentrating. This can make meditation *effortless*. Here is my self-report on the self-observation of meditation that I conducted myself:

“When I had a straight back, I felt a tension in my back, and therefore I still had such tense energy focused on my abdomen/navel. So, attention was focused on a specific point, but it was done with great effort. And at one point, I leaned against the back of the chair, and then I felt tremendous relief, a sudden change, and no effort. This sudden change was striking. Relief! I felt effortless meditation, which gave me great pleasure; I could see that concentration was already going naturally, and I wouldn't get out of it if I sat like this... I was sitting very well.”

In the above description, I used the phrase “I was sitting very well,” but this is not my wording; it is a phrase heard from others. My teachers. When summing up the meditation, some teachers would often ask, “well, how was it with sitting?” The practitioner replies, “It was very comfortable sitting”. And nothing else needs to be explained here. This shows that entering the phase of full meditation, which is already effortless, does not cause pain or difficulties; if difficulties are accepted, they are relegated to

the background (Sparby 2019: 140). We do not drift away from the space of concentration at a given time.

“I liked the guided meditation very much; it seemed to me that I very rarely ‘talk’ to myself so tenderly and wish myself something nice, and it was delightful” (exerciser, female).

According to the yoga teacher quoted below, meditation is an effortless concentration of the mind (see also Sparby 2019: 143; Shear, Jevning 2002: 193). He compares the mind to a crystal that is always transparent, no matter what colour of light passes through it:

“Meditation is a state where the mind’s object of concentration is held effortlessly in your mind. So, it’s as if this mind were suddenly occupied with an object, but it would be effortless. And here, science gets lost because we cannot measure effortlessness. But now, what the good old yoga scriptures say is that your mind is like a crystal. A mountain crystal, and if you illuminate this crystal with coloured light, it emits that coloured light, but this crystal is not coloured. So, your mind is as if it were occupied with this object of concentration, but at the same time it does it effortlessly. Just as you illuminate a crystal, and it may be red, it may be blue in a moment, it doesn’t care.”

SELF-PERCEPTION

Deep meditation is often associated with *distortions* in self-perception. It is not easy to place yourself in the reality of working life only as “I” without the partner of the dialogue, ME (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Prus 1996). Disturbances can also be related to body sensation and awareness of the current reality, whether you are in sleep mode or still awake. However, when awareness of what is happening is maintained, it is possible to return slowly to the fundamental reality, to the lifeworld:

“I heard everything, I knew where I was, who I was with, but I didn’t feel myself. It’s hard to describe this feeling. I was with myself at the same time, not being. My eyes were so tightly closed that I didn’t feel that they were closed. I didn’t know my position or if I was sleeping, but I was aware. After the bell, it was strange for me to come back to myself. I had to slowly gain a connection with my body, legs, and hands” (exerciser, female).

Nature can also be visualized during meditation when we are not in the bosom of nature; at the same time, there is an impression of depersonalization, looking at ourselves from the outside; the self disappears, and the observer appears, which rarely happens in working life:

“By focusing on correct breathing, I first moved my mind to the great mountains as if I were sitting on one of the peaks at sunrise. I felt a chill go through my whole body. I was sitting on one of the peaks, sitting in Turkish style. There was still snow on the peaks, as if the dominant season of the year were not summer but winter. It was supposed to be me, but at times I had the impression that I was in someone else’s body, despite the awareness that I was watching my breath” (exercising, female).

We can see a phenomenon close to an “out of body experience”:

“I felt like I was on a beach, totally relaxed. As if my body were the sand, firm, and my feelings — the waves of the sea, up and down, coming and going, and my mind — the sun, from above, observing everything. It was as if I had come out of my own body and was feeling my body, emotions, and mind separately. I loved experiencing this because it had never happened to me before. I had managed to relax, but I had never reached this level of connection between body, soul, and mind” (beginner, female).

We can see the phenomenon as an “out-of-body experience”. Meditation associated with observing the breathing, the body, and thoughts can create a kind of bilocation that is the cognitive consequence of solid attention on self-observation. It is an exciting experience; here (in the quote above), disconnection is called connection. It is an experience of the bilocation of the mind that sees the body from the outside. Emotions and the mind are observed from the outside.

Meditation can be thought-provoking. While meditating, “wrong thoughts” may also appear, and they may remain with the practitioner after meditation. However, there may then be a reflection on whether it is worth focusing on the specific issues that caused negative thoughts and emotions during the meditation:

After the end of such a meditation session, for example when you cried, what did you think when it ended? Were these negative thoughts and emotions interrupted, and were they still with you?

— “They were there, of course they were. It’s not that meditation will cure everything; you have to start talking to yourself and consider whether you need it in your life. Does it make sense to worry so much about certain things because some of them are simply beyond your control? Sometimes during meditation, I find an answer to whether what causes me so much pain in some life situations is worth later crying over, or being in a bad mood, or being upset because of it. And that’s how it is” (interview with a practitioner, female).

PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD:
CHANGES IN PERCEPTION OF BEING IN THE WORLD

During meditation, various thoughts and perceptions about reality arise. There is often a feeling of losing control of time; it can also be a feeling of time passing quickly (specific time perspective — a feature of the finite province of meaning of the meditation realm), but also of losing control of ideas, as well as struggling with sleep:

“While meditating, I quickly lost track of time. I think I managed to stay conscious for quite a long time, but the signal to stop caught me when I was on the verge of waking and dreaming. Torn from this place, I remembered that my thoughts were already spinning out of control. They did it on many different topics and were quite chaotic. The signal instantly brought me out of this state and restored my sense of time and awareness” (exerciser, male).

Disturbances in the perception of time are part of a specific process called “entering an altered state of consciousness”. Despite the most frequently indicated difficulties in describing what happens during meditation, we sometimes find in retrospect a very accurate naming and description of the feelings that arise during that time. Here we are dealing with a form of numbness (see the quote below). And coming out of this state, we also feel that the passage of time changes. The feeling may be that time has passed quickly, but the passage of time is imperceptible during meditation, and there may be a feeling of timelessness (Coleman 2022). There is a feeling of complete detachment from everyday life and a sense of “being”, and thus a feeling of existing in an unavoidable suspension of reality. The sense of being comes from the body. Even from the flesh (numbness), for a moment, we can get to the pre-reflective awareness of being and not being. We can be aware of our awareness (Bauer 2019: 84–85, 92).

In this state, it is possible not to feel the chill that appears immediately after coming out of the meditative state, and thus realize that it was not there while sitting. There is also “non-thinking”, which is the actual meditative state. In this self-reflection about the meditative state that occurs, the thought of doing nothing arises. This is a critical thought because sitting or being in a savasana pose makes it possible to break away from everyday activities and do nothing. The whole experience is, in the summary of the narrator’s statement below, interpreted as attractive, and the description of the perceived reality indicates a kind of unreality:

Mm-hmm. And what did you feel during the meditation?

— “Well, this is where the strangest things happened, because we had our eyes closed and so on, there were some images that we saw or something. It was a bit like psychedelia and stuff like that. Well, I tried not to fall asleep there a couple of times, I didn’t manage, but I don’t know, time sped up. It was a bit like pressing the spacebar in strategy games, you know? I lay down, and now I was controlling my breathing and closed my eyes, and suddenly, after that moment, time simply went by faster. It was like, that’s it! Such a snapping out of a state of numbness, like, I don’t know, like you’re levitating in space, and suddenly someone brings you down to earth. It was like that with me, that it was such a detachment from everyday matters, from what was going on around me, and being somewhere... It was a bit like being, but not being; being in non-being. Well, you were touching the floor, all that, and so on, but on the other hand you didn’t feel it because you sort of didn’t feel the cold. For example, I felt cold just after we had talked about what the professor had prolonged.”

So now answer what you felt there.

— “That’s when I felt cold; I was getting dressed then, and I saw that others were getting dressed too. But, for example, if I had been lying like that, I don’t know, I would have had to lie down for a very long time to feel that I was cold. And also, if you didn’t manage to think about anything, you seemed to be there, but you weren’t because you didn’t know about anything. Because you weren’t thinking about anything. I mean, you were lying there doing exactly nothing. So doing nothing, doing precisely nothing, is hard. Because you’re always doing something, and here you’re doing nothing. That was so interesting too (interview with an exerciser, male).

Disturbances in bodily perception may refer to the phenomenon of the “unreal body.” In the world of meditation, the body is passive and generally does not move; this causes some disturbance in perceiving different parts or even the whole body, which seems to be something external to the conscious mind being here and now:

“Very quickly, I entered a state of relaxation, and after two minutes, my vision changed — I had a narrower field of vision, the shapes on the carpet swirled slightly, my hands lying on my thighs were unreal, as if I did not feel their weight at all, they seemed shorter and as if fused with my thighs. The professor’s voice seemed to be floating somewhere nearby as if I was hearing it from another person, not myself” (practitioner, female).

THE EFFECTS OF MEDITATION — REFLECTIONS AFTERWARD

We have already described the effects of what happens in the course of meditation. But let us summarize and point out how meditators perceive

the effects of meditation after performing it. One effect that is often repeated is inner peace and the removal of tensions, an effect that has been mentioned before. In particular, it was referred to by practitioners (beginners), and although teachers and instructors mention this state, they do so less often; it is an obvious state for them:

“When we started meditating, I started to get rid of thoughts from my head. It was as if I was floating in space. There were no negative emotions. I felt a sense of relief. It was as if I was lying on the water on a summer’s day, with the sun occasionally shining through my eyelashes” (exerciser, female).

A fusion, a merging of body and mind, person and object of concentration (coalescence; Sparby 2019: 140), may also be central and integral to the other meditation effects and yoga practice. When we enter a deeper meditative state, overcoming distracting obstacles, a change in our state of mind may occur. At first, we may feel irritated, but gradually we gain distance from our problems. This happens through concentration when we reach a state of no “mind-movement”, and even the meditator disappears. The merging of body and mind occurs almost spontaneously; the state is achieved step by step; it does not appear immediately, and finally we achieve the state of deep self (Scheff 2014).

Meditation cannot be taught to someone; learning occurs by experiencing and observing the experience. The following quotation summarizes many effects of meditation, the most important of which is the “merging and connecting”, which can even refer to merging with supernatural elements. The distinctive mind disappears and also “the person who focuses disappears” (see quotation below). We can see how the mind can stop; it can stop and become one with the world if there is no distinctive thinking.⁷ It happens thanks to yoga and meditation:

“Initially, my mind was restless, irritated, sometimes also just watching how others were doing it and I wasn’t. This level of annoyance was very, very high; it was very, very high, which caused me to try to meditate basically...

Again, there are 8 degrees in this method. It says here... Again, we may have different ideas about meditation, so first of all, meditation is not some state of flying away and finding in yourself an escape from reality. So, this meditation allows us to free ourselves from a situation and gain some distance, which causes the problem to resolve itself. So, it’s really about

⁷ To stop distinctive discriminative thinking, the so-called koans are used in Zen Buddhism and in Transcendental Meditation (Shear, Jevning 2002: 192).

merging — merging all these bodies that we have. They say it's a combination of body, mind, and soul. So, this work in asanas and balancing this anatomical body, that is, balancing these proportions between too much tension and too little tension, also causes this balance to appear at the physiological level, that is, the functioning of our internal organs.

This communication between the brain and the rest of the body is then undisturbed, which causes our emotions to calm down. Then we have this body that is already so spiritual that suddenly we see that we are not just a collection of muscles, bones, or internal organs, that we are not also our intellect. Because it is known that all the contents of our head are also things that have been accepted, and now when we calm down, we have a chance to experience this connection, and this is the connection with Atman, that is, with a kind of cosmic soul, where there is no division, and everything is unified. And that's also what this meditation is, that there is no such thinking at some point, so you could say that the gap between the thoughts that appear is lengthened... Iyengar said you couldn't teach meditation because it is a kind of state of experience, and you can't tell someone about the taste of an apple, right? We can describe it, but it still won't have the right image. And it's the same with concentration. In this method, long-lasting concentration, that is, the lack of these movements of the mind, causes us to enter the state of meditation. So, by concentrating on a point, and here it can be our body, this body merges with the mind. The person who focuses disappears. The concentration itself, and the object of attention, it all merges" (interview with a hatha yoga teacher, male).

The effects of meditation also relate to strictly social aspects. Thus, there is the possibility of improving one's relationships with others. However, it is recommended that meditation be effortless and purposeless; it should not be associated with any additional emotional benefits, such as pride in having performed the meditation well. Such additions are sometimes mentioned by meditation Zen masters:

"Once you understand our innate power to purify ourselves and our surroundings, you can act properly, and you will learn from those around you, and you will become friendly with others. This is the merit of Zen practice" (Suzuki 1995: 37).

Although the benefits of meditation should be revealed, meditation is an autotelic activity, sufficient for itself. Its effects can at most be perceived by the mind outside the practice of meditation.

Some of the project participants also drew close to this attitude. It is the feeling itself that becomes essential rather than the linguistic interpretation of the practice:

“For a while, I accused myself of lacking focus or effort, but I felt this was an incorrect diagnosis. I began to question whether I was doing the practice well, why I was doing all this, and what tangible benefits were coming. The answer was short. The important thing was that I felt that it served me to practice, so why put it into words and argue logically” (exerciser, female)

LEARNING TO BE IN MEDITATION

Our research was about entering the meditative state of mind. We described the problems encountered by beginners switching from the realm of working life to a meditative finite province of meaning. Although one of our research participants stated that meditation could not be taught, instructions for meditation have long existed. Some guidelines on how to meditate are usually given in the practice of hatha yoga or meditation practice itself. In these descriptions and meditation instructions, you can also find common features, contemplative maps, and signs that indicate where you currently are in the meditation process (contemplative landmarks, Sparby 2019: 138). They can be very brief, or can be more elaborate.

Learning meditation is processual (Preston 1981), and we gradually reach the practice of free meditation (effortless meditation). After mastering one of the meditation techniques (such as counting breaths or repeating mantras), we gradually reach insights, noticing something that appears in our mind. We no longer perceive distracting elements, or we do not assess what emerges as problematic. It is challenging in our culture to switch to the do-nothing mode and accept this situation. It also has to be learned so that we can grasp techniques and the interpretation of certain states, for example the state of inactivity.

When this happens, the judgmental mind disappears. But it has to be perceived that we are just fully here and now. There is peace, and we notice things we have not seen before, and do not judge them. This learning process is individual, and detailed instructions are rarely given on what to do in a thought-racing situation. Going back to breathing observation or breath counting is generally suggested. The teacher gives instructions on meditating and teaches meditation techniques, but rarely includes interpretations of feelings. We therefore learn a technique that can help control the racing of thoughts, whatever those thoughts are (usually from our culture, and distracting). Ultimately, however, it is the meditator who has to deal with this problem:

“... there is zazen meditation, in which breath is something that allows you to enter the state of meditation, and count the breaths from 1 to 10, saying

in your mind ‘inhale’, ‘exhale’ and so on, and start from the beginning. And how to be a person will get lost, because it is known that the mind starts to pull somewhere, so it starts all over again. This is the kind of meditation I started. And I will do it until, at some point, I don’t need these breaths anymore. You enter this meditative state, at least that’s how I feel, such a state of total emptiness. As if there were simply nothing in my head. Of course, at some point, emotion arises, there is some emotion, and often when this mind is so evident and calm as if there is such a void, such insights appear, but these insights are just like noticing something. This is also so amazing” (interview with a yoga instructor).

Meditation can also be viewed in a scientific convention, when the medical perspective is invoked (Shear, Jevning 2002). The flow of electromagnetic waves in the brain can be checked with encephalography (Aftanas, Golosheykin 2005; Jensen, Kaiser, Lachaux 2007; Moore et al. 2012) or respiration rate, and oxygen consumption, blood flow to the brain, or blood cortisol could be measured (Shear, Jevning 2002: 206–207). One yoga teacher, a scientist, takes this approach by presenting what meditation practice is:

“Well, now. How can I feel my departure if, for half a minute, I don’t know what happened to me? Maybe I was in a meditative state, but I don’t know if I was meditative; perhaps I took a nap? However, while concentrating on the mind, we can measure it again, and the frequency of the brain waves decreases” (interview with a yoga teacher, male).

The teacher plays a vital role in learning to enter the meditative province of meaning. He is also meditating, but his role is clearly defined; it is that of a teacher. It is often difficult for a teacher to fully enter a meditative state in this role. However, the suspension of the world does occur even though they are focused on preparation and conduct, the time control of the meditation, and the participants of the practice. The teacher is balancing on the border of two worlds: the world of meditation and the world of practical activities. They are alternating between these two worlds. Meditation for a teacher is an excellent activity to achieve a specific goal, in this case putting practitioners into a meditative state.

The teacher watches throughout the meditation. Although the practice is highly individual, the teacher’s presence motivates and gives a sense of security, provides instructions, and determines the length of the meditation. The teacher, although also meditating, is focused on what is happening in their surroundings:

“Generally, I am focused on the practice of yoga and the participants in the classroom. It was the same in meditation and when I was sitting. I was

paying attention to what was happening in the hall. At one point, one of the meditation participants fainted and fell off his chair. I am afraid of this happening again. Everything is going well today” (author).

CONCLUSIONS

Our analyses are based on the first-person reports of meditation participants, including the researchers themselves. We did not adopt a critical perspective on meditation practices in the modern world (Purser, Loy 2013; Purser 2019) or other assumptions or models regarding entering meditation or the course of the meditation (Preston 1981). As the subjects observe their body sensations, thoughts, and emotions, we watch how meditation develops mainly among beginners. We are closer to Carvalho’s (2021) ontological approach, which observes what meditation does to an individual’s subjectivity and self in a particular setting. It is a micro-research approach (Pagis 2010, 2015, 2019a), a kind of contemplative sociology (Giorgino 2014; Bentz, Giorgino 2016; Konecki 2018: 59–64), when the cognitive aspect of meditation is strongly emphasized along with the bodily aspect and the emotions associated with it (Konecki 2018, chapter 2; Konecki 2022, chapter 2; Janesick 2015). We also believe, like Berlant (2011), that the “here and now” is considered in the context of the real situation of “here and now.” We look at what appears in here-and-now meditation; even if it is difficult to express in language as in deep meditation, we want to see how this difficulty can be expressed (Shear, Jewning 2002: 195). If one has not had such an experience (being in the meditation realm), one can easily say it; if one has had such an experience, one can testify to it (Shear, Jewning 2002: 195).

Most of the meditation practices during our research were preliminary. Gradually, however, more and more awareness was acquired. In fact, for most practitioners, mindful sitting was precisely the practice of mindfulness, not deep meditation with objectless consciousness (see Nhat Hanh 1976; Desikachar 1999). First of all, many mental states, thoughts, emotions, and “obstacles” in entering the meditation realm were noticed. However, they were not obstacles at all, in fact, but an aid to realizing their state of mind, presence, or absence in a given situation here and now. The observation of the racing of thoughts, constant planning of the future, disturbances in the perception of time, pain, physical discomfort, negative emotions, sleepiness, and various reactions of the body that were unnoticeable in everyday situations were all helpful in the practice of mindfulness, because they allowed the meditators to gain

awareness of the existence and course of multiple processes here and now, without the need for intellectual reflection. Noticing obstacles is a state of the “beginner’s mind” (Suzuki 2010), which often sees more than the mind of an experienced meditation practitioner. It was one of the goals of our research to reconstruct the obstacles that become the aids of entering the realm of meditation. The beginner’s mind is often indicated as one that needs to be maintained over a more extended period to see things that are usually invisible to us. An experienced practitioner may, through the acquisition of experience, lose the sensitivity that the beginner’s mind possesses.

We tried to reconstruct the minding process mainly from the perspective of the beginner. It shows how we look for the obstacles to stop our activity in some working life. However, noticing obstacles is a prelude to stopping the work of the mind and exiting activities in everyday life.

Crossing the lifeworld consists of an effort to overcome certain obstacles. This does not mean overcoming by rejecting the elements that hinder the crossing of the world, but by accepting them as elements that support this transition. This conclusion resonates with Alfred Schütz’s theory of cognitive styles, especially concerning the delineations between finite provinces of meaning, which inherently possess cognitive aspects. The borders of worlds are traversed through the concerted effort of intellect and emotion, intertwined with an awareness of how one’s body reacts to shifts in perception of the world.

It is possible to stop the work of the mind and everyday activity, but it takes time and training, that is, learning meditation techniques, perceiving the effects, and interpreting them. Sometimes, the “access meditation” state of mind is obtained in practice. This mind is associated with intensely concentrating on the object of meditation (the breath, the body, a point on the floor, and so on), overcoming obstacles, and ultimately accepting them. Finally, there is also effortlessness and focus on what is happening inside our minds (cf. Sparby 2019: 146). Most practitioners in our hatha yoga project were unable to achieve a meditative state when effortlessness and concentration accompanied us throughout the day, apart from when sitting on a meditation cushion (it is so called “absorption state,” cf. Sparby 2019: 140). However, the struggle to achieve a state of concentration on one object and push obstacles into the background was a vital lesson for many practitioners and exercisers.⁸ They gained temporal

⁸ The issue of concentration in meditation is highly complicated; you need to concentrate on losing your points of concentration and the awareness of concentration itself:

meditation insights and recognized the effects of meditation (for example disturbances in the perception of time, limitations of their bodies, the emotions of anxiety or sadness, pain, thoughts about work, comparison with others, and racing thoughts). All this meant that perceptions of reality could change due to being distanced from it and seeing how much of this perception comes from state of mind.

Observing the reactions of beginners, we could also reconstruct some of the features of the finite province of the meaning of meditation. The feature is visible when the practitioner breaks the border of the lifeworld and meditation realm. This is the theoretical benefit of the research (see also the analysis of Savasana's state of mind in Konecki, Płaczek, Tarasiuk 2024: 258–277).

Becoming the observer is a feature of the meditative province of meaning. If we observe breathing or body reflexes, we see them from the outside. Similarly, we can see ourselves from the outside and think; we become the observer of somebody who is the self but not the self. It is momentarily consciousness of the body or mind that can be reached when we enter the state of meditation. We can achieve a distance from ourselves.

The time perspective changes during meditation. We can lose control of the time. Time can speed up or slow down. It can be evaluated later on from the cognitive perspective of working life.

Another feature of the meditative realm is *effortlessness*, usually connected with peace of mind. Peace appears when the body is accustomed to the position of meditation and does not disturb the practitioner. This is possible for beginners, but it is still not easy.

Another feature of the finite province of the meaning of meditation is a merging of body and mind, of the person and object of concentration. This does not happen in the practising of meditation by beginners. Although there were signs of reaching this state of being, the main point of concentration proved to be the obstacle. This is the most challenging state of being for beginners. Therefore, entering another finite province of meaning is processual and also needs some education and instruction, so it has some social background.

“Concentration is not to try hard to watch something. In zazen if you try to look at one spot you will be tired in about five minutes. This is not concentration. Concentration means freedom. So your effort should be directed at nothing. You should be concentrated on nothing. In zazen practice we say your mind should be concentrated on your breathing, but the way to keep your mind on your breathing is to forget all about yourself and just to sit and feel your breathing” (Suzuki 1995: 113; see also Shear, Jewning 2002: 195, 203).

Educational effects on self-awareness were noticeable in the participants' self-reports. Even if it takes some effort to do the meditation practice and overcome your weaknesses, it ultimately benefits the practitioner and the practitioner: "So you have to encourage yourselves and make an effort up to the last moment, when all effort disappears. You should keep your mind on your breathing until you are not aware of your breathing" (Suzuki 1995: 37). So the beginning, which involves effort to face the challenge of meditation, is a normal state of mind in meditation. And it is, in a way, a condition for stopping the mind from working while meditating.

Practitioners often ask if they meditate correctly. It is difficult for a teacher to answer this question using the semantics available in language. Sometimes it is done in a roundabout way, using metaphors or examples, or by building specific associations. For instance, Buddhist master Seung Sahn said (1999: 12):

"If you do correct meditation, being sick sometimes is OK; suffering sometimes is OK; dying someday is OK. The Buddha said, 'If you keep a clear mind moment to moment, then you will get happiness everywhere.'"

Not asking myself whether I am meditating well is also a tactic to stop the mind from working. Answering such questions leads to an increase in the work of the mind during meditation. Realizing this is meta-awareness about stopping the activities of daily living. Learning this technique of meta-attention proves that people are advancing in meditation practice, for example in the cognitive plane, which is extremely important for generating the appropriate motivation for meditation. It varies from person to person, occurring at different times in the practice. Each meditator deals with these interpretations individually. Some may withdraw from meditation because of discomfort, or ignore it while practicing yoga. The practice of meditation is intensely personalized in terms of experience. Some self-reports may show similar experiences; however, everyone experiences things differently and how they describe these experiences takes into account their life so far, their situation, memory, and their physical and mental state in each situation and time. We stop the work of the mind individually, using proposed and widely available techniques.

Research has also shown that the practice of hatha yoga is not often associated with meditation, although *dhyana* (meditation in yoga practice) is a crucial element of yoga philosophy (Iyengar 1990; Desikachar

1999). Perhaps this rejection of meditation in our Western culture was related to its association with religion or spirituality, which practitioners do not always accept in the Western world. If you stop reflecting on whether meditation or hatha yoga is compatible with your value system or religion, you can enter the meditative state and limit the work of the mind while meditating.

For some philosophical and religious traditions, physical practice alone is not meditation, for example for Zen Buddhism (Seung Sahn 1999: 12). However, one has to admit that traditional and contemporary texts on yoga philosophy do emphasize the role of *dhyana* (Iyengar 1990; Newcombe, O'Brien-Kop 2020; Desikachar 1999), which is increasingly being embraced by practitioners of hatha yoga.

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Abstract

The paper investigates meditation as a state of consciousness that isolates an individual from the attitude of everyday life and the perspective of practical actions. It is an "ethnography of the mind" instead of the place. The paper analyses self-reports from meditators' self-observations as part of hatha yoga practice and data from semi-structured interviews with hatha yoga teachers. Elements that distract or help people meditate were analysed and interpreted. The features of the meditative state during the practice of sitting meditation are also reconstructed. Attention is paid to three essential aspects that are related to each other when entering the meditative state: emerging thoughts, body sensations, and emotions. The analysis focuses on how practitioners deal with these obstacles; what tactics do they employ to eliminate barriers or redirect attention and include them in the background of the concentration point? What is the role of teaching meditation? What are the effects of meditation from a practitioner's point of view? Empirical materials obtained from the first-person perspective of the researcher, the author of this article, and his collaborators in the study were also analysed.

key words: contemplative studies, self-observation, first-person perspective, meditation, hatha-yoga