

Vipassana meditation retreat

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Motivations, experiences & perceived effects of participants

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## Abstract

This study investigated the motivations, experiences and perceived effects of 10 individuals who participated in a 10 day Vipassana meditation retreat (VMR). A literature review revealed that qualitative data for this type of meditation retreat is scarce. In terms of clinical interventions based on meditation and mindfulness, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, it is expected that participants attending a VMR will show positive effects on mental health. Data gathering was done qualitatively using a previously constructed semi-structured interview, administered to the participants via a digital chat program. The researcher used the 'grounded theory approach' to analyze the data. Results show that motivations of participants revolved around six themes: *seeking, curiosity, prior engagement, recommendation, external reassurance* and *costs*. In terms of experiences during the VMR, data showed that participants experienced having insights and various degrees of adjustments on a physical, cognitive and emotional level. Regarding perceived effects, participants reported various improvements in terms of mental health and cognitive functioning. This study showed that participating in a VMR can be both a very confrontational and beneficial experience on various levels of human functioning. Future studies should focus on dissecting the distinct schedule and unique rules of a VMR to further our understanding of intense meditation retreats.

## Samenvatting

Deze studie onderzocht de motivaties, ervaringen and waargenomen effecten van 10 individuen die in een 10 dagse Vipassana meditatie retreat (VMR) participeerden. Een literatuur studie toonde aan dat er weinig kwalitatieve data voor een VMR is. Met betrekking op klinische interventies baseerend op meditatie en mindfulness, zoals mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, wordt verwacht dat deelnemers van een VMR positieve effecten zullen hebben op hun mentale gezondheid. Data verzameling vindt plaats via een digitale chat programma met behulp van een semi-gestructureerde interview. Bij de analyse maakte de onderzoeker gebruik van de 'grounded theory approach'. De resultaten laten zien dat de motivaties van de deelnemers zes themas bevat: *seeking, curiosity, prior engagement, recommendation, external reassurance* and *costs*. Met betrekking op de ervaringen tijdens de VMR wijst de data erop dat deelnemers fysieke, cognitieve and emotionele adaptaties moesten maken. De deelnemers profiteerden door de VMR met betrekking op mentale gezondheid and cognitief functionering. Deze studie toonde aan dat het deelnemen aan een VMR confronterend kan zijn en dat deelnemers ervan kunnen profiteren op hun gehele manier van functioneren. Toekomstig onderzoek zoude zich moeten richten op de unieke and afzonderlijke onderdelen van een VMR om het inzicht op de manier van werking van een VMR te verbeteren.

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## Introduction

The practice of meditation and *mindfulness* have been of special interest to the field of psychology for quite some time now (Bishop, 2002). Research on the effects of *mindfulness* on both mental illness and mental health found positive results across diverse settings, such as health care, prisons, schools and companies (Creswell, 2017). While research on meditation centers around psychological interventions especially created to increase *mindfulness*, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction training (further referred to as MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) or mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (further referred to as MBCT) (Segal, Williams & Teasdal, 2002), the traditional way to learn *mindfulness* is to take part in a so called Vipassana meditation retreat (further referred to as VMR). Even more so, vipassana meditation has formed the basis of modern mindfulness-based interventions such as MBCT and MBSR (Himmelstein, 2010). Currently, everyone without a psychopathological history can participate in VMRs which are accessible around the world in 276 locations (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). While VMR participants have been studied, there is still little known about their motivations, experience and perceived effects from a first person account. Therefore, this study will try to answer the following questions: Why do people choose to participate in a VMR and what can they report about their experiences during, and the effects after, a VMR?

To develop a comprehensive context for this study, the introduction is structured as follows. Firstly, I discuss the religious context from which Vipassana Meditation arose. Secondly, I will show how meditation is currently defined to facilitate further communication about different aspects of meditation which are relevant to this study. Thirdly, I will discuss the terms, conditions and applied meditation techniques of a VMR and compare it to modern applications of meditation based psychological interventions. Lastly, I will discuss research

regarding motivations to and effects of meditation on psychological functioning.

### *Vipassana: Origins*

Approximately 2500 years ago, a man figured that suffering is inherent to the human condition and proposed a universal way to end said suffering (Bechert, 1982). Needless to say, it's a bold claim, especially interesting to the field of clinical psychology. The man was Siddhartha Gautama, commonly referred to as 'the Buddha', and he inspired one of today's major religions: Buddhism. Despite many different Buddhist branches, all Buddhists believe in the four noble truths and the noble eight-fold path. Broadly speaking, the four noble truths are: 1) Suffering is inherent to life; 2) Suffering is caused by attachment, aversion and ignorance; 3) eliminating the causes of suffering will end the suffering and is achieved by following the eight-fold path and; 4) following the eight-fold path. Thus, the four noble truths of Buddhism are an assumption on the fundamentals of the human condition, its underlying mechanics and ways to overcome said condition. The way to overcome suffering is specified in the eight-fold path. The path can be split into three main groups in accordance to their rules of conduct: 1) Wisdom (right view, right intention); 2) Ethical conduct (right speech, right action, and right livelihood) and; 3) Concentration (right effort, right *mindfulness*, and right concentration). The 3<sup>rd</sup> group concerns a mental activity that has been extensively studied in academic psychology: meditation.

### *Key parameters of meditation*

The Cambridge Dictionaries Online defines meditation as “the act of giving attention to only one thing, either as a religious activity or as a way of becoming calm and relaxed”. Though meditation originally arose from and is used in a religious context in many cases, the context in which meditation takes place doesn't necessarily change the mental activity as such. Therefore, this research does not include an explicit distinction regarding the context in

which meditation takes place (i.e. religious and/or recreational).

Over the course of time, many types of meditations evolved. An interesting attempt to objectify different types of meditations comes from Lutz et al. (2008). Based on activities during meditation, they categorize two activities during meditation: *focused attention* and *open monitoring*. *Focused attention* involves maintaining attention to a single destination over time, including redirecting attention in case of diversion. *Open monitoring* involves non-reactively monitoring present experiences: thoughts, feelings and/or bodily sensations. Note that *focused attention* aims to emphasize the mechanical part of attention regulation in meditation. By contrast, *open monitoring* aims to emphasize the attitude part in meditation. In other words, while focused attention concerns what to do during meditation, open monitoring concerns how to do it. In addition, these two categories of activity during meditation are present in various outlets of meditation (Vedic, Buddhist and Chinese traditions) and do not exclude each other during a single session of meditation (Travis and Shear, 2010).

Next to mechanics and attitude, Shapiro (1992) found evidence that motivations to meditate play a role in meditation and identified three categories of motivation in long-term meditators: *self-regulation*, *self-exploration* and *self-liberation*. *Self-regulation* concerns the individual's ability to regulate attention, emotion and attitude across situations. *Self-exploration* concerns the individual's ability to learn more about who it is and what is inside itself. And *self-liberation* concerns religious and/or spiritual goals that individuals might have fostered before or during meditation to give additional meaning to their lives.

#### *Vipassana retreat and mindfulness-based interventions*

Regarding meditation, a VMR is structured as follows. During all days of meditation, participants are asked to have an open mind, be accepting of themselves and to not judge their experiences. During the first three days, participants engage in *focused attention*. They are

asked to focus attention on their breath as it flows in and out of the nose. In case attention shifts, participants refocus on their breath. Starting from the 4<sup>th</sup> day, participants engage in *open monitoring*. Here, participants are asked to pay attention to various parts of their body for a short amount of time. During that task, all thoughts, feelings and/or bodily sensations that may arise are to be observed. Note that on the 10<sup>th</sup> day, participants also engage in a type of meditation called “loving-kindness meditation” (Lippelt et al., 2014). Here, participants are asked to think of people they know in a compassionate and loving way. This study explicitly centers around *focused attention* and *open monitoring*, given that loving-kindness meditation is only a minor part of the Vipassana retreat.

As mentioned earlier, Vipassana meditation has been the basis of modern mindfulness-based interventions. The most common definition of *mindfulness* comes from Shapiro et al. (2006) and reflects that fact. They describe *mindfulness* as an interplay between *intention*, *attention* and *attitude*. *Intention* describes meditator's reasons and goals for meditation. *Attention* describes meditator's ability to maintain and shift their attention to a chosen object. And *attitude* describes meditator's way of meditating, which should be open, accepting and non-judgmental. Especially, the part of *attitude* closely aligns to the concept of “decentering”, a term used within the context of MBCT (Segal, Williams & Teasdal, 2002). Decentering concerns creating space between one's immediate experiences in the mind and the self, thereby creating the opportunity to see events in one's mind as distinct from the self rather than automatically identifying with the event. Ultimately, decentering can be described as a phenomenon that increases the individual's ability to increase the fundamental condition of perceiving the world as a human being, that is: a subject-object relationship. The more the subject (oneself, the feeling of a personal, independent agent) is strengthened, the less it has to identify with experiences within the mind (objects).



While Vipassana meditation and *mindfulness* have a lot in common, a VMR differs in many ways from mindfulness-based interventions. First of all, the typical duration of a VMR is ten days with an average of approximately ten hours of meditation per day. In contrast, mindfulness-based interventions such MBSR or MBCT are typically demanding 30 to 45 minutes of meditation daily. Furthermore, during a VMR, participants are secluded from the public for the full duration of the retreat, asked to keep their communication to a bare minimum and to obey five rules: abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual activity, lying and all intoxicants. In contrast, MBSR and MBCT, given individually or in a group, leave room for the participants to continue their daily lives as they wish. For a detailed schedule and set of rules during a VMR, see Appendix A. Regardless of the aforementioned differences, since Vipassana meditation and other mindfulness-based interventions can be subsumed as intention, attention and attitude, it is of value to include research on mindfulness-based interventions in discussing psychological effects of VMR.

#### *Psychological effects of Vipassana meditation*

The practice of meditation has received significant attention in the scientific community (Bishop, 2002). This increased attention is related to both the findings about psychological effects of *mindfulness* and meditation on mental illness, mental health and the rise of psychological interventions that have *mindfulness* as their key ingredient (Creswell, 2017). For reasons of clarity, the effects of meditation on mental illness and mental health are presented separately. Moreover, due to their relative similarity, the effects of meditation are not differentiated between Vipassana meditation and MBSR or MBCT. Furthermore, the effects of meditation are not differentiated by type of population (e.g. healthy vs ill individuals, delinquents vs non-offenders, etc.).

Meditation can have positive effects on mental illness. For example, the practice of

meditation can reduce symptoms of depression (Hilton et al., 2017; Khoury et al., 2017; Creswell, 2017; Veehof, Oskam, Schreurs & Bohlmeijer, 2011 and Bohlmeijer et al., 2010), anxiety and stress (Cohen, 2017; Khoury et al., 2017; Szekeres and Wertheim, 2015; Chen et al. 2012), alcohol-related and psychiatric symptoms (Bowen, 2007) and addiction in general (Bowen, 2006). Moreover, Teasdale et al. (2000; Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Kuyken et al., 2008) showed that depressed patients chance of relapse into another depressive episode was significantly decreased. Meditation also decreases symptoms of patients with a psychosis (Bradshaw, 2017). While these reviews display promising results for the effectiveness of meditation, caution is warranted due to many studies using experimental designs that lack scientific rigor, randomization and/or control groups) (Khoury et al., 2017; Chiesa & Serretti, 2010).

In terms of mental health, the practice of meditation can be effective at a wide range of mental health indicators. For example, Szekeres and Wertheim (2015), Krygier et al. (2013) and Brown & Ryan (2003) found relationships between *mindfulness* and well-being such as emotional intelligence, emotional subjective well-being, life satisfaction and self-actualization. In the same vein, Carmody & Bear (2008) related *mindfulness* practice to self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. These reviewers, too, point to the fact that meta analyzing the effects of meditation is difficult due to sub-optimal experimental design. For a comprehensive review on most effects of meditation with a broader scope than just mental health and mental illness symptoms, I refer to the review of mindfulness-based interventions by Creswell (2017).

#### *Importance to study 10 day Vipassana silence retreat participants*

By now, it is safe to say that the practice of meditation can have positive effects, among others, on both mental illness and well-being. The positive effects of meditation are mostly

explained by the psychological construct of *mindfulness* as the moderating factor in meditation (Khoury et al., 2017). Interestingly, instead of using traditional forms of meditation practices stemming from a Buddhist context, most of the studies are concerned with the mechanisms and effectiveness of *mindfulness* and have been done using psychological interventions that have been derived from Vipassana meditation (Himmelstein, 2010). Moreover, most of the studies on the effects of meditation have been done using psychopathological or delinquent populations. And finally, the vast majority of research material is focused on quantitative measures when assessing the mechanisms and effectiveness of meditation practice, leaving meditator's motivations and unique experiences in the dark. Since mindfulness-based psychological interventions have their origins in the Vipassana tradition, it might prove useful to investigate VMR participants. While the majority of research on meditation focuses on psychopathological populations, is concerned with efficacy and is quantitative in nature, little is known about the motivations, experiences and perceived effects of healthy individuals who completed a VMR (Himmelstein, Hastings, Shapiro & Heery, 2012). As the practice of meditation grows both in a clinical and non-clinical context, it is of importance to further understand meditative experiences and to investigate the practice of meditation from all perspectives, especially the first-person perspective. Given the scarcity of qualitative data for VMR, the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was chosen, as it is a way to openly probe into people's experiences from their personal point of view. The goal of this study is to give a broad overview of the motivations and possible experiences encountered during a VMR. Therefore, this study's exploration is organized around three areas of investigation:

1. What are participant's motivations to participate in a VMR?
2. What are participant's experiences during the VMR?

3. What effects did participants observe as a result of a VMR, if any?

## 2. Methods

In the following, I will present features of the participants, the interview and the procedure as well as the method of analysis used.

### 2.1 Participants

A total of 10 individuals participated in this study, all of whom followed and completed exactly one VMR. Time passed between the interview and participant's VMR was  $M = 7.2$  ( $SD = 3.91$ , in months). All participants were male, ranging from 23 to 32 years of age ( $M = 26.70$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ). The sample contained seven German and three Dutch participants, nine of whom held a Bachelor of Science and one graduated to the A-level. Half of the participants knew the researcher of this study on a personal level.

### 2.2 Interview

A semi-structured, open question interview (available in German and English) was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, an interview with open questions leaves space for the respondents to talk about their experience exactly the way they see it. Secondly, a semi-structured interview ensures that an equal, basic amount of information is generated from all participants, while leaving space for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions, in case the interviewer feels he has not fully understood what the respondent is trying to say. The interview starts with an introduction (*general introduction, interview conditions, informed consent and closing statement* about the proceedings of the interview) and the gathering of demographic variables. After that, participants are asked about their motivations to participate in, as well as their experiences during and perceived effects after, a VMR. The interview ends with the question to the participants whether they have to add anything that has not been covered by the interview. The full interview script can be found at Appendix B.

### 2.3 Procedure

To recruit participants, the researcher's private social circle is asked, whether people who have followed a VMR were willing to be interviewed. Moreover, these people were asked to recruit additional participants that the researcher did not personally know which ensured a balance between people known and unknown to the researcher. Information on the research and interview scheduling took place via E-mail (The initial informational E-mail can be found at Appendix C). The interviews were held digitally in a private chat room to minimize the interviewer's unwanted interference with the answers of the respondents via body language and tone. A specific interview conduction protocol was used to ensure standardization, reproducibility and increase both reliability and validity of the data gathering process. The protocol encompasses the following steps and rules:

1. Every interviewee is presented with the exact same wording, format and order regarding the introductory and explanatory texts, questions on demographic variables and questions on the three areas of investigation. However, the interviewer keeps the liberty of asking specific, non-standardized, the content of the interviewee's answers matching follow-up questions if necessary.
2. The interview is structured into specific parts. These parts are *general introduction, interview conditions & consent, demographic variables, closing and opening statements* for the three areas of investigation and lastly, a closing statement to officially end the interview. After each of these parts except the closing statement, the interviewee is asked to confirm whether the interviewees understand what is presented to them.
3. The character of the grounded theory process is to present the subject's world of experience from the subject's point of view. Hence, it is strived to ask as much

open questions as possible. However, the interviewer keeps the liberty to ask semi-open and closed questions to investigate the subject's world of experience as specific as possible.

4. The researcher acknowledges that the data gathering process is one that probes into the world of experience of the subjects at a single point in time. Therefore, any additional reflection on the areas of investigations on the part of the participants is not included in this study. The design of the data gathering process does not include the opportunity to ask additional questions to the participants at a point in time other than the interview. Therefore, the point of sufficient information exchange is reached when both the interviewer and interviewee have no further questions during the interview.
5. The researcher would like to disclose that he has followed and finished a VMR during which he made both positive and negative experiences.

## **2.4 Analysis**

Starting point of the analysis process was to prepare the data. Preparing data involved 'copy-pasting' the interviews from the chat room log to a DOC file and converting that file to PDF. PDFs were then loaded in ATLAS ti 7, a program for analyzing, besides others, qualitative data. During the data preparation process data was unchanged, meaning no spell-check took place.

Data was analyzed using the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which includes *open*, *axial* and *selective coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The three types of coding were executed independently on the investigation areas of *motivations*, *experiences* and *perceived effects*. While the codes were held as close as possible to the actual words of the

participants, the formed concepts and categories were chosen to reflect the psychological nature of the study as well as present a coherent range of identified themes in the data. In other words, the resulting tree diagrams, which show the relationship between categories, concepts and codes, show a psychological interpretation of participant's answers.

*Open coding* involved abstracting concrete instances of motivations, experiences or perceived effects into codes. Since the interviews were semi-structured, the venture point for coding was always one of the three research questions. For example, with regards to the first research questions on *motivations*, if a participant answers “I want to be more balanced”, the abstraction code for the entirety of a participant’s answer would be ‘balance’. If one participant gave more than one answer to a given question, it would result in two different codes. After *open coding* for all three areas of investigation took place, *axial coding* was conducted. *Axial coding* involved forming concepts of codes that can be grouped together. For example, codes such as ‘balance’, ‘well-being’ and ‘concentration’ were abstracted into the concept of ‘psychological effects’, as they can all be characterized as psychological effects. The same process applied for concepts that can be grouped together to form categories. For example, the concepts ‘lack of communication’, ‘psychological effects’ and ‘examination of life’ all constitute a motivation of ‘seeking’, hence they were grouped under the category ‘seeking’. And lastly, *selective coding* takes place after a satisfactory, the problem in question sufficiently answering abstraction scheme was established. In this step of the analysis, the data is reviewed to see how the codes fit the concept and category scheme. The goal of the analysis was to produce a broad map of participant’s motivations, experiences and perceived effects of a VMR. Moreover, general trends and unique information were extracted. And lastly, for the results section, quote selection took place on the basis of ‘richness’ and ‘illustrativeness’. For example, if more than one quote was available for a given category,

concept or code, the most illustrative quote was chosen to be presented. To keep the quotes accessible to the readership, all selected German quotes were translated into English.

### **3. Results**

Results of the qualitative analysis are presented in accordance with the research questions: *motivations for*, *experiences during*, and *perceived effects* after a VMR. Each of the three research questions will be discussed in detail in regards to the results (categories, concepts, codes), accompanied by figures and quotes when suitable.

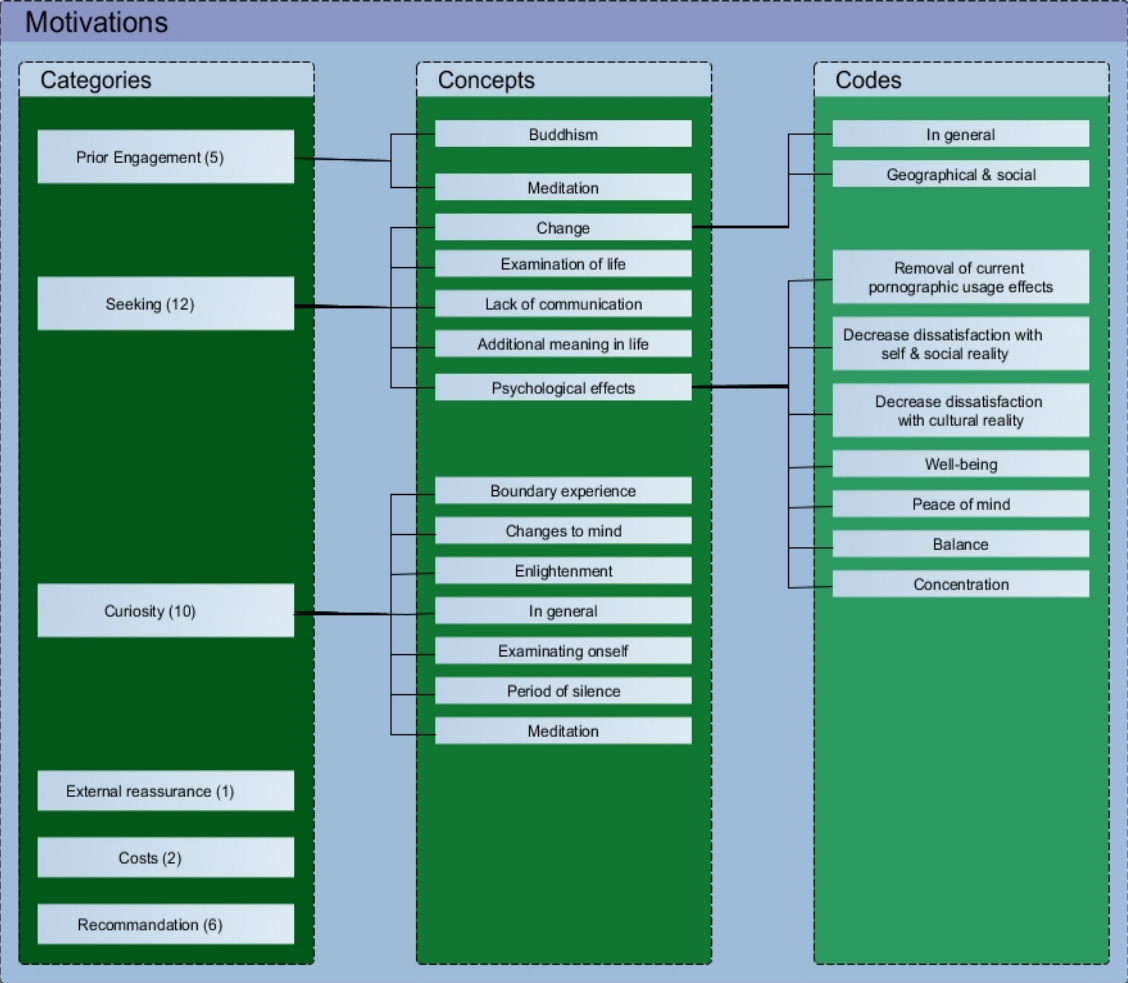
#### **3.1 Motivations**

Investigating participants' motivations to participate in a VMR yielded a total of 36 statements considered for further analysis. Figure 1 provides an overview of the relation between the 6 categories, 14 concepts and 9 codes regarding participants' motivations to follow a VMR. From left to right and from abstract to concrete, the three columns represent the different levels of qualitative analysis (categories, concepts, codes). Digits in the figures refer to the amount of statements identified for given category.



Figure 1:

*Participant's motivations to attend a VMR structured by categories, concepts and codes*



*Tree diagram of participant's motivations to attend a VMR. Digits in brackets indicate the amount of identified statements for a given category.*

As can be seen in figure 1, participants’ motivations to participate in a VMR can be summed up in 6 categories. For reasons of comprehension, the categories are discussed from 'intrinsic' (*Curiosity, Seeking, Prior Engagement*) to more 'extrinsic' motivations (*Recommendation, External reassurance and Costs*). The majority of participant’s statements indicated intrinsic motivations (74.9%) as opposed to extrinsic motivations (25.1%). In other words, the majority of participant’s statements about why they chose to participate in a VMR stems from a personal conviction that doing such a VMR would be beneficial to them. When adding the category *Recommendation* to intrinsic motivations because believing in and acting upon a recommendation can be seen as intrinsic motivation, the percentage of statements by

the participants to indicate intrinsic motivations rises to 91,6%. Please note that each individual category does make sense on it's own but it's important to see the reasoning behind the categories in the context and relationship to the entirety of the categories.

### *Seeking*

The category of *Seeking* was chosen because many respondents stated that their decision to participate in a VMR was informed by them seeking one thing or another. As can be seen in figure 1, respondents specifically sought *change, examination of life, lack of communication, additional meaning in life* and certain *psychological effects*. The seeking of psychological effects was further specified into the following topics: *removal of current pornographic usage effects, decrease dissatisfaction with self and social reality, decrease dissatisfaction with cultural reality, well-being, peace of mind, balance and concentration*. For example, one respondent, who sought after a *psychological effect*, said the following:

*“General dissatisfaction with my life. I was unsatisfied with myself, with my way of dealing with my fellow human beings and how I was being treated. Somehow had the feeling that overall something was wrong and that generally, it could all be handled better.”*

Another respondent who sought after *additional meaning in life* stated the following:

*“explore what's more and the wish to search for the meaning of life”*

### *Curiosity*

The category of *Curiosity* was chosen because many respondents stated that they were curious to experience something new during the retreat. As can be seen in figure 1, respondents were specifically curious about the following concepts: *Boundary experience, Changes to mind, Enlightenment, In general, Examining oneself, Period of silence and Meditation*. Note that a distinction between the categories *Curiosity* and *Seeking* was made because a qualitative difference in respondent's answers was observed. While responses coded as *Seeking* always had a certain feel of 'lack' to them, responses coded as *Curiosity* always had a certain feel of 'adding value' In other words, while seekers operate from a position of deficiency, respondents who were curious always operates from a position of sufficiency. The following two quotes illustrate the position of sufficiency quite well:

*“I was intrigued doing it the right way. Pushing my consciousness to it's limits. To meditate in silence and worldlessness, like the founders of this tradition did for hundreds or thousands of years”*

*„I have always been interested in meditation and Eastern Philosophies about*

*meditation and enlightenment, this also contributed to thinking the course was something for me.”*

#### *Prior engagement*

The category of *prior engagement* was chosen because respondents state that their prior involvement with topics related to Vipassana played a role in their decision to participate in a VMR. As figure 1 shows, the category has two different concepts attached to it, namely: *Buddhism* and *Meditations*. For example, in case of the concept of *Buddhism*, one respondent states:

*„No there was actually no specific point. It was more a gradual development that opened me up for spirituality in general. The starting point was Buddhism in general and that brought me to Vipassana.”*

#### *Recommendation*

The category of *Recommendation* was chosen because six respondents claimed their decision to participate in a VMR was influenced by people recommending the retreat in one way or another. For example, one respondent said:

*“I felt a need for change and then I met three persons in a row who finished a course and who talked really positive about their experience”.*

#### *External reassurance*

The category of *External reassurance* was chosen because one respondent indicates that he wouldn't have participated in a VMR, if it weren't for a friend to reassure him to participate. Here is the quote:

*„Back then I was interested in following a course, yet I also doubted because of the rules and regulations that apply during the course. After speaking with a friend that had done the course, this doubt was removed.”*

#### *Costs*

The category of *Costs* shows that financial considerations play a role in respondents decision to participate in a VMR. An example of this category is the following:

*“After realizing that such a retreat is free of costs, my mind was set that I wanted to try it.”*

## 3.2 Experiences

The interviews yielded a total of 140 statements regarding participants' experience during a VMR. These statements were grouped into 11 areas of experience before the analysis started. For reasons of clarity and practicality, the 11 areas of experience were grouped into five groups, analyzed and presented in the following way:

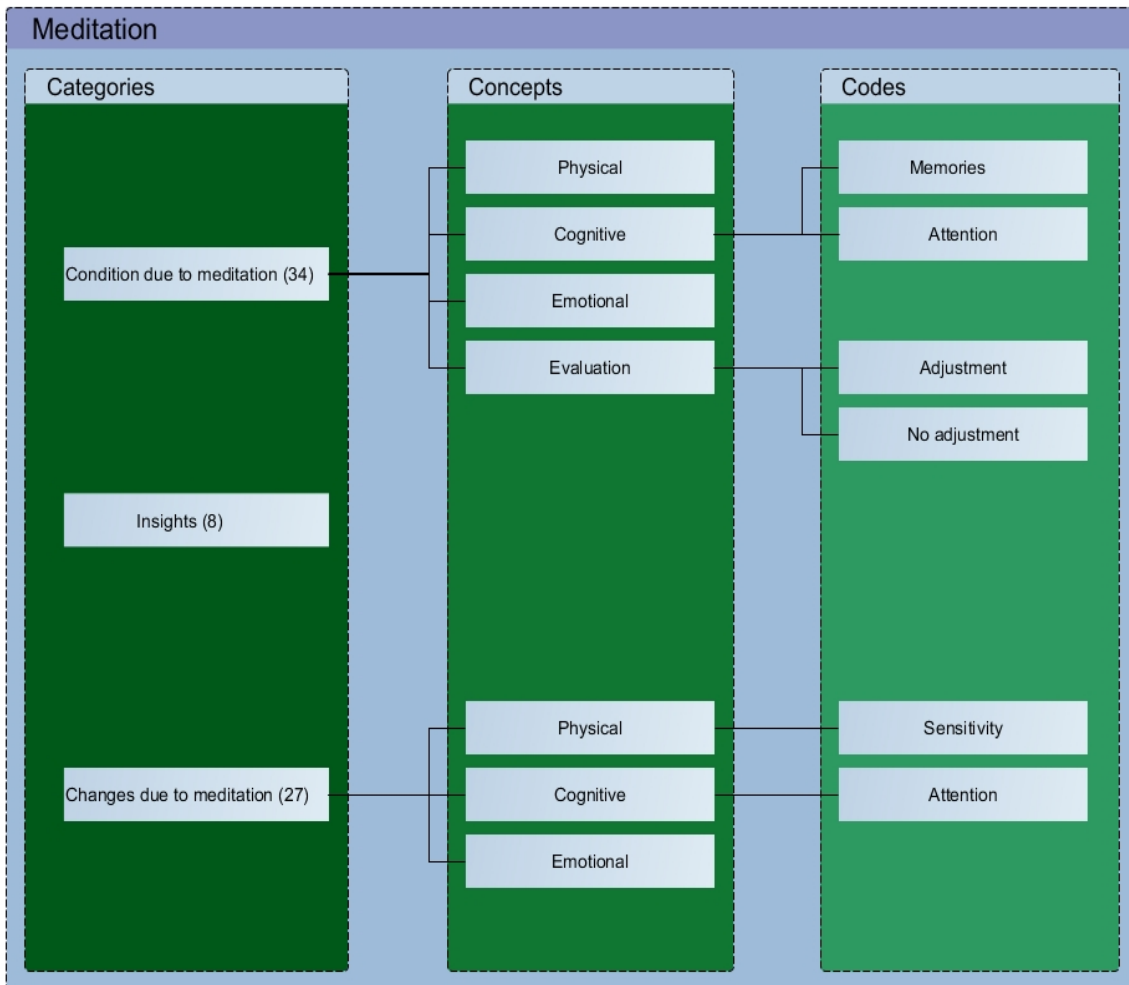
- (1) Meditation
- (2) Five precepts & Lack of communication
- (3) Daily schedule, Waking up early & Eating schedule
- (4) Interviews with the teacher & Evening discourse
- (5) Course atmosphere, Dreaming, Questions

### 3.2.1 Meditation

Investigating participant's experiences regarding meditation during a VMR yielded a total of 69 statements. These 69 statements were classified into three categories, seven concepts and six codes. Figure 2 provides an overview of the relation between categories, concepts and codes. As can be seen in the left column, participant's experience with mediation during a VMR can be summed up to three categories: *Condition due to meditation (49.3%)*, *Insights (11.6%)* and *Changes due to meditation (39.1%)*. Note, that the category *Condition due to meditation* is different from the category of *Changes due to meditation*. While *conditions due to meditation* illustrates the practical implications of excessive meditation (for example sitting 10 hours a day), *Changes due to mediation* is about the perceived benefits of and effects on the respondents due to meditation.

Figure 2:

*Participant's experiences regarding meditation during a VMR structured by categories, concepts and codes*



*Tree diagram of participant's experiences with meditation during a VMR. Digits in brackets indicate the amount of identified statements for a given category.*

#### *Condition due to meditation*

When asked about the practice of meditation during a VMR, respondents answers revolved around being affected physically, cognitively and emotionally. Some respondents also gave evaluations about meditation. In the following, I will give example quotes to illustrate respondent's answers. For example, on a physical level, many respondents had trouble with sitting and not moving for extended periods of time. The following quote illustrates this:

*“I found the first three days to be really exhausting, especially since I am not used to sitting all the time while moving as little as possible.”*

On a cognitive level, many respondents reported that they became aware that simply focusing on an internal object can be very difficult. In this regard, one respondent stated:

*“During those exercises one could see how “wild” the mind actually is. Again and again, I could observe my attention wanting to slip away. I found the first three days really exhausting.”*

In the same way, many respondents had emotional reactions during meditation, mostly negative ones but some respondents also reported positive feelings. With regards to negative feelings, one respondent stated: *“Well, oftentimes frustration, sadness, temper”*. Another respondent stated that his feelings changed between positive and negative feelings all the time: *“My feeling about meditation was changing all the time. I went from liberation in certain moments to total frustration in other moments.”* In terms of evaluating meditation during a VMR, one respondent stated that he enjoyed the meditation because progress of the meditation was quickly noticeable:

*“Good, because one could make nice quick progress. Day 5 was my birthday and the only words at my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday were “very good” to the teacher's question how it went with the meditation. But of course, the progress came with ups and downs.”*

#### *Insights*

When it comes to changes due to meditation, many respondents explained that they gained certain insights that eluded them prior to a VMR. All respondents who gave answers in the form of an insight did so with a certain profoundness and meaning to it, while the insights themselves varied. Here is an example:

*“there was one special part of the course that i cannot really describe in words, it was like being totally present for half a day. For example: when I opened the door, I REALLY opened the door. It felt like I have never really opened a door before. When I took on my shoes, I REALLY took on my shoes this changed feeling was just during one half day of the course It is hard to describe what happened there, it was like getting in contact with the door and everything around me and i never reached this state of mind again until now my mind reacted with judgments and evaluations of this state of mind and that destroyed it you can read a lot of books about being present and mindfulness and then I really experienced it the first time mean REALLY experienced it FULLY for half a day”*

#### *Changes due to meditation*

Data showed that respondents answers about their perceived changes due to meditation covered a broad spectrum from physical, to cognitive, to emotional. In terms of changes on the physical level many respondents reported noticing bodily sensations that they haven't felt before:

*“On the physiological level you experience all kinds of feelings. As you focus on a certain bodypart, you feel all kinds of sensations, such as tingling, pulsating and itching feelings. The Vipassana meditation technique allows you to feel bodily sensations not felt before.”.*

Moreover, many respondents reported changes on a cognitive level, such as increased concentration:

*“During the ten days my concentration increased and I wasn't distracted so easily anymore”*

In the same vein, respondents reported that meditation affected them emotionally. For example, one respondent stated that he gained distance to his emotions, which in turn, gave him the opportunity to not react to his emotions directly hence being more free in his choice of reaction:

*“Another effect was feeling a bit outside of myself, as I was observing my body and thoughts so much. Feeling a bit outside of myself” means that during the course I was mostly in the role of an observant. While in this role, I did not feel like the person that I am in normal life. It felt like I was "leaving behind" a part of my old personality, replacing it with a more observant and conscious part”*

### **3.2.2 Five Precepts & Lack of communication**

Participants made a total of 19 statements about their experiences regarding the five precepts and the lack of communication during the course. Most of participant's statements were classified either as *Adjustment* (43.75%), with a lesser amount of statements classified as *No adjustment* (37.5%) or *Gradual adjustment* (18.75%). One example quote from a respondent that didn't have to adjust to the five precepts and the lack of communication goes is follows:

*“About the 5 precepts: it was not difficult to adhere to the 5 precepts. Some were very hard to break, such as "no stealing" and "don't lie" since you only have your clothes with you and you cannot speak. I rarely consume alcohol so the use of intoxicants was a non-issue for me as well. The only thing that could persuade me to kill a being would be to kill a mosquito during the night, but that was no problem either as those were not around.”*

In terms of lack of communication a respondent who gradually adjusted stated:

*“Not being allowed to speak was a completely new experience. The first two days it felt awkward to remain silent with others around. But from the third day it became a habit. It allowed me to focus completely on my meditation process.”*

When it comes to adjustment, one respondent stated that he had trouble adjusting to the

precept of not acting out sexual desires:

*“Regarding sexual abstinence, I had problems. Oftentimes, I had the need to release my accrued sexual energy. But I fought that need, too. But honestly, I have to admit, it wasn't easy. One is accustomed to do that sort of thing, if one wants to.”*

### **3.2.3 Daily Schedule, food and waking up early**

The interviews yielded a total of 16 statements regarding the *Daily schedule*, *Eating schedule* and *Waking up early*. Individually, *Daily schedule*, *Eating schedule* and *Waking up early* yielded eight, five and three statements considered for further analysis respectively. The majority of participant's statements indicated that some degree of adjustment (43.75%) or gradual adjustment (37.5%) was necessary, while 18.75% of responses indicated no need for adjustment at all. In terms of no adjustment, one respondent stated that he simply accepted the rules from the beginning and wasn't bothered by it henceforth:

*“Right from the beginning, I accepted it and was committed and took it serious, so I followed the daily schedule, which doesn't leave much space anyways.”*

Another respondent stated that he had to adjust to the food itself and being hungry most of the time due to the eating schedule:

*“The food required getting used to, because completely vegetarian. Most of the food I ate, I didn't know before. But yes, if one only gets two meals a day, then the hunger is big during dinner times. Basically, I was hungry all day. One has the feeling, the stomach is digesting itself. And I felt that the constant hunger affected my concentration. But yes, that were the rules, so one adjusted to that.”*

Another respondent stated about waking up early, that is was hard at the beginning but gradually got better and was perceived positive due to being productive early on:

*“after a few days waking up at 4:00 AM was no problem. It actually felt good to wake up that early and to be productive.”*

### **3.2.4 Teacher interview and Evening discourse**

Investigating participant's experiences with the teacher interviews and the evening discourses yielded a total of 22 statements considered for further analysis. Most of participant's statements were positive evaluations about the teacher interviews and the evening discourses (86.4%), while 13.6% of participant's statements were, at least in part, negative evaluations. For example, one respondent enjoyed the opportunity to have an interview with the teacher:



*“The interviews served to answer questions about meditation. I had some questions about the meditation technique and was generally unsure about doing it correctly. The teacher had a wonderful, positive aura and appeared to me as being wise. I liked the interview, especially because I could talk for a bit.”*

In terms of evening discourse, one respondent who enjoyed it stated:

*“The concept of practicing during the day and getting the theory and exercises for the next day made sense to me. It also was a nice way of ending of the day, in a different with a smaller group and goeka talks entertainingly but convincingly.”*

However, not all respondents enjoyed the evening discourse due to perceived indoctrination:

*“I found the evening lectures played by CD, in which they tried to bring me closer to Buddhism annoying because it is said that vipassana is free of confession, or so I thought.”*

### **3.2.5 Course atmosphere, Dreaming and Questions**

The areas of experiences *Course atmosphere*, *Dreaming* and *Questions* didn't lend themselves for further analysis due to low amount of statements. However, since participant's found it relevant to make those statements, example quotes for each area of experience is given.

#### *Course atmosphere*

Two participants made statements about their experience regarding the course atmosphere. While the first quote concerns speechless communication and communion during the course, the second quote concerns the positive attitude of the course managers and course participants.

*“I got to know many people around me better without words or communications, than some I have contact with for years. One gets familiar with the people, they become part of your own environment. A very natural relationship develops. Furthermore, no one is keen to keep a facade. There are no social “games”.”*

*“I particularly liked the atmosphere during the course. During the course there are around 80-90 people on the terrain working very hard on themselves. The volunteers are also working hard in order to provide food and keeping the facilities clean. I felt small in the sense that I was just a starting student in the world of meditation Yet the way things were organized also granted a feeling of being part of something great that not many people get to experience”*

#### *Dreaming*

One participant made a statement about his experience with dreaming during the VMR.

*“It was striking that I had intense dreams, actually every night. Every night, I had dreams that felt very real and were very impressive and emotionally engaging. I can still remember some. I had dreams every night, oftentimes, I dreamed about food.”*

### *Questions*

One participant stated that certain questions arose during the VMR. The questions concerned the meaning of life and his past and future.

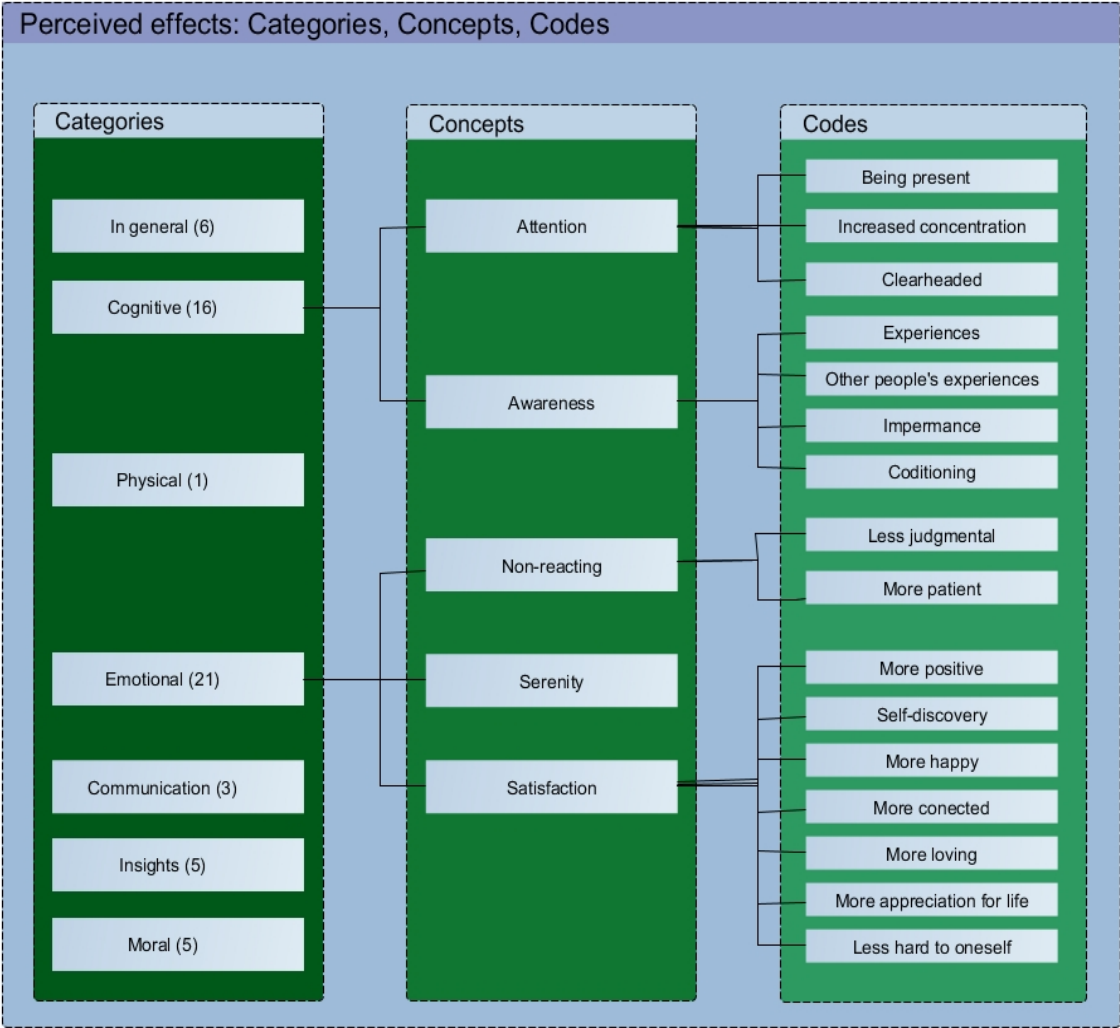
*“From day two or three, many questions arose. First, concrete ones, then more general questions regarding the meaning of my life, my past and my future.”*

### **3.3 Perceived effects**

Participants made a total of 57 statements considered for *perceived changes*. The statements were refined into seven categories, five concepts and 16 codes. Figure 3 provides an overview of the relation between categories, concepts and codes for the area of experience *perceived effects*.

Figure 3:

*Participant's perceived effects after a VMR structured by categories, concepts and codes*



*Tree diagram of participant's perceived effects after a VMR. Digits in brackets indicate the amount of identified statements for a given category.*

Figure 3 shows participant’s answers regarding the effects of a VMR revolved around seven categories. The majority of perceived effects as stated by the participants were either emotional (36.6%) or cognitive (28.1%) in nature. A lesser amount of quotes were retrieved for the categories *In general* (10.5%), *Moral* and *Insights* (8.8% each). The categories *Communication* and *Physical* retrieved a total of 5.3% and 1.8% respectively. Note that none of the respondents stated that they perceived no effects after the VMR.

Many respondents stated that they perceived a change with regards to their emotions.

For example, one respondent stated: *“Felt so happy and full of love towards all beings. Felt so at ease with everything, so relaxed”*. In the same vein, another respondent felt more at ease: *“less stressful, more at ease i got easily stressed but after the 10 days i could take more distance and observe the object of the mind so that leads me to feel more at ease”*

In terms of perceived changes on a cognitive level, many respondents reported changes. For example: *The effects became immediately visible in daily life. I was a lot more focused and felt really happy. I am able to enjoy things more, like being alone or with friends*. Similarly, another respondent stated that he is more in the here and now:

*“Well, with clear and present I mean that I in the here and now and that fully present. That means that my mind is neither thinking about the past nor the future or is busy with judging but really only concentrated on what is happening here and now.”*

Moreover, respondents felt positive changes on a *general level* (*“The first days in the “normal” world were very difficult. I was very withdrawn. The silence actually continued here.”*) but also in specific areas, such as *Communication* (*“things goes easier, communication went smoother for example making yourself clear, communicate clearly about feelings, setting borders”*), *Morals* (*“I felt no need for smoking and a big need to keep to vipassana rules : sila”*) and *physical functioning* (*“somehow on the fysiclal level my joints got more flexiblemy back got straight ...because i let go some muscle tensions”*). Lastly, respondents also reported having gained *Insights* after the retreat. For example, one respondent reported:

*“it feels like that the mental disturbances relates to the fysical level for example, when i feel stressed ....i also feel my shoulder get tensed...what cause my headache imagine how it is to have this tensions in your shoulder for years...and suddenly you understands where the mental stress came from....let this go....as result the tensions in the shoulder is gone too”*

#### **4. Discussion**

The conclusion starts with a short answer to the three research questions. After that, the results are compared and contrasted to existing literature on motivations and effects of meditation.

The conclusion ends with a discussion about the limitations of the current study.

## **4.1 Results**

Regarding participant's motivations to take part in a VMR, results revolve around six distinct categories of motivation and show that a majority of participants followed intrinsic motivations (*Curiosity, Seeking, Prior Engagement*), while a lesser amount followed extrinsic motivations (*Recommendation, External reassurance and Costs*).

In terms of experiences during a VMR, results show that participants reported distinct experiences on a physical, cognitive and emotional level. While some participants didn't experience any type of adjustments during the VMR, the majority of participants reported at least some degree of adjustment.

With regards to participant's perceived effects after the VMR, results indicate that all participants reported at least some type of perceived effect, attributed to the VMR. The majority of perceived effects were cognitive or emotional in nature, with a lesser amount concerning general or physical effects, as well as effects on communication, knowledge or morals.

## **4.2 Comparing and contrasting results to the literature**

Results regarding the motivations, experiences and perceived effects are discussed in the context of scientific literature regarding meditation.

### *Motivations*

Few studies have investigated why people meditate, though Shapiro (1992) pointed out that intentions to meditate are important to the practice of meditation. In the same study, Shapiro found that intentions of meditators vary between self-regulation, self-exploration and self-liberation. The results of the current study fit Shapiro's findings. Many of the concepts and codes found in the category *Seeking* are instances of self-regulation, while many concepts and codes found in the category *Curiosity* are instances of self-exploration. There are also instances of self-liberation found in the categories *Seeking* and *Curiosity*. Moreover, results

show that *Prior engagement, External reassurance, Costs and Recommendation* are factors that influence participant's motivations to do a VMR. These findings are explained by the fact that Shapiro's study explicitly asked about *intentions* to meditate, while the current study asked participant's why they chose to do a Vipassana retreat. The broader scope of this study on motivations revealed that *extrinsic* motivations play a role whether individuals actually participate in a VMR or not.

### *Experiences*

Few studies have studied experiences of Vipassana meditation practitioners. In accordance with the current study, Kornfield (1979) found experiences to be common among participants of meditation retreats, spanning across all sense organs, as well as cognitively and emotionally. Among the commonalities between the current study and Kornfield's study are: Free flow experiences, changes in perception of pain, strong emotions and mood swings, rapture and bliss, psychological insights, equanimity, insights into basic mental and physical life processes, dream changes, concentration changes and decrease in sleeping and eating patterns. Interestingly, there are no studies regarding the process of meditation during a VMR, focusing on adjustments during the retreat. The current study clearly indicates that, for many participants, adjustments take place on various levels and to varying degrees, with only few participants not going through any type of adjustment.

### *Perceived effects*

Many studies have investigated the relationship between Vipassana meditation and mental well-being. As the current study's sample population was non-clinical in nature, it does not come as a surprise that most reported effects of meditation practice mostly concerned psychological effects in terms of mental health (36.6%). These findings are in line with

studies that found a link between mindfulness practice and mental well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Carmody & Bear, 2008 and Krygier et al. 2013). Moreover, many participants reported improvement in cognitive abilities, such as sustained concentration and attention regulation in general, which is in line with Chiesa & Serretti's study (2011). Some participants reported increased moral behavior, communication abilities and changed pain perception. In 2003, Brown & Ryan found similar results in their study on the effects of meditation. Interestingly, many participants reported effects in terms of being more aware or having gained more distance to their experiences. Interestingly, these statements can be found across all seven categories. These statements correspond with the goals of MBCT, especially “decentering”(Segal, Williams & Teasdal,2002). It appears that VMR, much like MBCT, has profound effects on the ability to perceive reality within the context of a subject-object relationship and hence gives opportunities to adjust to certain types of negative emotions.

#### **4.3 Strengths and weaknesses**

Strengths and weaknesses are discussed in general, and with regards to the sample at hand, the chat interview and the methods used.

First of all, results show that the topic ‘Vipassana meditation retreat’ is a topic that people can talk about considerably. This is exemplified in the amount of statements considered for further analysis found in ten interviews. A total of 233 statements were found, bringing it to an average of 23.3 analyzable statements per interview.

Secondly, results show that participant’s answers in all three areas of investigation are diverse. That is, though the course is highly standardized, first person accounts regarding motivation, experiences and perceived effects vary considerably. This is exemplified in the amount of categories, concepts and codes formed during analysis for a total of ten interviews.

Thirdly, several participants seem to talk in holistic terms (i.e. truth, what’s more, cake of

all-one-ness). Some experiences during a VMR might, in part, not be suitable for exact language and concrete, measurable concepts. Be that due to the complex nature of the phenomena in question or the inadequate way of wording those phenomena by the participants' remains to be seen.

Moreover, asking participants about their motivations, experiences and perceived effects *after* a VMR has its drawbacks. Participants might forget certain experiences during the VMR or report effects that are not stemming from the VMR itself but from ongoing practice (or the lack thereof) after the retreat. Asking participant's immediately after a VMR might yield more details about their experiences and perceived effects.

### *Sample*

First, though not unusual for qualitative in-depth studies, only ten participants were included in this study. Therefore, data is unlikely to be saturated. While many themes repeated during the analysis, new idiosyncratic motivations, experiences and perceived effects emerged until the end of the analysis, hence interviewing more participants is likely to reveal new data.

Second, the ten participants in this study all successfully completed exactly one VMR, while not leaving the VMR prematurely. Thus, people who participated in more than one VMR as well as those who have stopped the VMR prematurely might give different answers than those found in the current data. It might be interesting to see whether there is a relationship between the frequency of successfully completed Vipassana meditation retreats and the reported motivations, experiences and effects. The same goes for reported motivations, experiences and effects regarding people who prematurely stopped the meditation retreat. Understanding the reasons for prematurely stopping the meditation retreat might yield valuable insights into the working mechanisms of meditation itself. Questions about whether completing the VMR in it's offered length (10 days) is necessary for benefiting



from the VMR remain unanswered.

Third, all participants were male, born and raised in Western society and having a high degree of education. In terms of gender, it is likely to assume that motivations, experiences and perceived effects can vary across gender considerably. Understanding the processes, experiences and effects of a VMR would be aided by data stemming from both males and females.

#### *Chat interview*

Using a chat platform to conduct interviews has both advantages and disadvantages. First of all, given the median age of participants ( $M = 26.70$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ) and their relatively high educational level, it is reasonable to assume that using a digital chat didn't prove difficult for most participants. Moreover, limiting the amount of influence the interviewer has on the interviewee (body language, tone, appearance, etc.) as well as the improbabilities to make mistakes during transcription are surely advantages. Moreover, regarding participant's answers, the level of coherence might have been positively affected due to the fact that interviewees had to think about the answers before writing them down. Lastly, a chat interview ensures a high level of standardization due to priorly worked out interview statements and questions.

A chat interview also has certain disadvantages in comparison to a personally held, verbal interview. An experienced interviewer (using verbal interviews) might have an additional source of information in the interviewee's body language and tone. This would have been helpful especially when it comes to concepts and phenomena that occurred during the VMR that are not easily formulated. Here, a more in-depth approach guided by the body language and tone of the participants could have led to more refined responses. Furthermore, participating in a verbal interview is likely to be less exhausting for the interviewee than a

chat interview. The level of exhaustion might have shaped the answers of the interviewees to be shorter than answers given verbally, which, in turn would have affected the overall quality of the responses. The interview protocol would have benefited from both scheduling breaks and regularly asking participants whether they need a break due to exhaustion.

#### *Grounded theory approach*

Using the grounded theory approach has both advantages and disadvantages. This approach gives voice to the participants in a way that stays true to what the participants actually think and feel. It can lead to profound discoveries in an otherwise theory-laden scientific field. But the grounded theory approach also warrants caution. Data analysis and results are necessarily subject to interpretation. Another researcher using the same data might come to a different conclusion than the current research has. For example, in the current study, the research was carried out in a psychological context. Hence, the interview questions were formed in a psychological context, possibly eliciting explicitly psychologically driven answers. It is possible that an interviewer with a different background would have led to different responses by the participants. Moreover, in this specific case, the researcher has participated in a VMR himself. Therefore, most concepts and experiences made during a VMR were familiar to the researcher. In this sense, lines of questions could have stopped prematurely due to the researchers familiarity with the participants motivations, experiences and perceived effects. A researcher entirely unfamiliar with a VMR could have conducted interviews with more depth and more clarity, especially in terms of uncertain, more holistic phenomena.

#### **4.4 Future directions**

First, as the current study has unveiled, practical considerations (*extrinsic motivations*) can play a role in participant's decision-making when deciding to take part in a VMR. Future research should determine in what ways and to which degree practical considerations play a

role in the decision-making process and whether measures can be taken to facilitate individuals to take part in meditation retreats.

Second, it might prove useful to investigate people's experiences, improvements and adjustments on a daily basis during a VMR. This line of research could detail stages of progress during the process of intense meditation and identify what's necessary to maximize the benefits of meditation retreats.

Third, it might prove useful to investigate people who have attended but prematurely stopped the VMR to better understand the process of meditation during a retreat. Knowing the factors that contribute to prematurely stop with a VMR might yield valuable insights as to what factors lead to successfully completing a VMR.

Fourth, there are several distinct features at play in a VMR (rules, schedules, food itself, evening discourse) that differ from most individual's normal life routines. It might prove useful to investigate whether certain features of a VMR are necessary to achieve certain effects and whether certain features stimulate certain effects better than others. After all, taken together, the environment during a Vipassana retreat is hardly comparable to daily life or mindfulness based interventions environments. Therefore, it might also prove useful to investigate what role the unique features present at a VMR play in benefit retention after individuals enter their normal environments again.

And lastly, when looking back at participant's motivations (most participants were seeking psychological and/or cognitive effects), it seems that overall, reported perceived effects of the VMR seem to match participant's expectations about the course. Again, if one expects something, it is more like that one seeks out that expectation, which could explain the degree of match between participant's course expectations and perceived effects.

### *Take home message*

During the interviews and the analysis of the data, it became obvious that meditation and Vipassana meditation retreats mean more to the individual than just a process of compartmentalized actions and parts. While research oftentimes focuses on dissecting processes into smaller and smaller parts, it is easy to forget that those who wish to learn to meditate come with their own life stories, shortcomings and talents. Aside from a set of behaviors and attitudes, meditation is also an activity which forces most individuals to adjust to a entirely new way of coping with their physical and mental experiences. Meditation is a set of actions designed to benefit mental functioning but it is also a way of life and for some, the latter is more important.

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## Appendix

### A: Detailed schedule and set of rules during a VMR

#### Meditation and Self-discipline

The process of self-purification by introspection is certainly never easy--students have to work very hard at it. By their own efforts students arrive at their own realizations; no one else can do this for them. Therefore, the meditation will suit only those willing to work seriously and observe the discipline, which is there for the benefit and protection of the meditators and is an integral part of the meditation practice.

Ten days is certainly a very short time in which to penetrate the deepest levels of the unconscious mind and learn how to eradicate the complexes lying there. Continuity of the practice in seclusion is the secret of this technique's success. Rules and regulations have been developed keeping this practical aspect in mind. They are not primarily for the benefit of the teacher or the course management, nor are they negative expressions of tradition, orthodoxy or blind faith in some organized religion. Rather, they are based on the practical experience of thousands of meditators over the years and are both scientific and rational. Abiding by the rules creates a very conducive atmosphere for meditation; breaking them pollutes it.

**A student will have to stay for the entire period of the course. The other rules should also be carefully read and considered. Only those who feel that they can honestly and scrupulously follow the discipline should apply for admission.** Those not prepared to make a determined effort will waste their time and, moreover, will disturb others who wish to work seriously. A prospective student should also understand that it would be both disadvantageous and inadvisable to leave without finishing the course upon finding the discipline too difficult. Likewise, it would be most unfortunate if, in spite of repeated reminders, a student does not follow the rules and has to be asked to leave.

#### Persons With Serious Mental Disorders

People with serious mental disorders have occasionally come to Vipassana courses with the unrealistic expectation that the technique will cure or alleviate their mental problems. Unstable interpersonal relationships and a history of various treatments can be additional factors which make it difficult for such people to benefit from, or even complete, a ten-day course. Our capacity as a nonprofessional volunteer organization makes it impossible for us to properly care for people with these backgrounds. Although Vipassana meditation is beneficial for most people, it is not a substitute for medical or psychiatric treatment and we do not recommend it for people with serious psychiatric disorders.

#### The Code of Discipline

The foundation of the practice is **sīla** — moral conduct. **Sīla** provides a basis for the

development of **samādhi** — concentration of mind; and purification of the mind is achieved through **paññā** — the wisdom of insight.

### ***The Precepts***

All who attend a Vipassana course must conscientiously undertake the following five precepts for the duration of the course:

1. to abstain from killing any being;
2. to abstain from stealing;
3. to abstain from all sexual activity;
4. to abstain from telling lies;
5. to abstain from all intoxicants.

There are three additional precepts which old students (that is, those who have completed a course with S.N. Goenka or one of his assistant teachers) are expected to follow during the course:

6. to abstain from eating after midday;
7. to abstain from sensual entertainment and bodily decorations;
8. to abstain from using high or luxurious beds.

Old students will observe the sixth precept by having tea without milk or fruit juice at the 5 p.m. break, whereas new student may have tea with milk and some fruit. The teacher may excuse an old student from observing this precept for health reasons. The seventh and eighth precept will be observed by all.

### ***Acceptance of the Teacher and the Technique***

Students must declare themselves willing to comply fully and for the duration of the course



with the teacher's guidance and instructions; that is, to observe the discipline and to meditate exactly as the teacher asks, without ignoring any part of the instructions, nor adding anything to them. This acceptance should be one of discrimination and understanding, not blind submission. Only with an attitude of trust can a student work diligently and thoroughly. Such confidence in the teacher and the technique is essential for success in meditation.

### ***Other Techniques, Rites, and Forms of Worship***

During the course it is absolutely essential that all forms of prayer, worship, or religious ceremony — fasting, burning incense, counting beads, reciting mantras, singing and dancing, etc. — be discontinued. All other meditation techniques and healing or spiritual practices should also be suspended. This is not to condemn any other technique or practice, but to give a fair trial to the technique of Vipassana in its purity.

Students are strongly advised that deliberately mixing other techniques of meditation with Vipassana will impede and even reverse their progress. Despite repeated warnings by the teacher, there have been cases in the past where students have intentionally mixed this technique with a ritual or another practice, and have done themselves a great disservice. Any doubts or confusion which may arise should always be clarified by meeting with the teacher.

### ***Interviews With the Teacher***

The teacher is available to meet students privately between 12 Noon and 1:00 p.m. Questions may also be asked in public between 9:00 and 9:30 p.m. in the meditation hall. The interview and question times are for clarifying the technique and for questions arising from the evening discourses.

### ***Noble Silence***

All students must observe Noble Silence from the beginning of the course until the morning of the last full day. Noble Silence means silence of body, speech, and mind. Any form of communication with fellow student, whether by gestures, sign language, written notes, etc., is prohibited.

Students may, however, speak with the teacher whenever necessary and they may approach the management with any problems related to food, accommodation, health, etc. But even these contacts should be kept to a minimum. Students should cultivate the feeling that they are working in isolation.

### ***Separation of Men and Women***

Complete segregation of men and women is to be maintained. Couples, married or otherwise, should not contact each other in any way during the course. The same applies to friends, members of the same family, etc.

### ***Physical Contact***

It is important that throughout the course there be no physical contact whatsoever between persons of the same or opposite sex.

### ***Yoga and Physical Exercise***

Although physical yoga and other exercises are compatible with Vipassana, they should be suspended during the course because proper secluded facilities are not available at the course site. Jogging is also not permitted. Students may exercise during rest periods by walking in the designated areas.

### ***Religious Objects, Rosaries, Crystals, Talismans, etc.***

No such items should be brought to the course site. If brought inadvertently they should be deposited with the management for the duration of the course.

### ***Intoxicants and Drugs***

No drugs, alcohol, or other intoxicants should be brought to the site; this also applies to tranquilizers, sleeping pills, and all other sedatives. Those taking medicines or drugs on a doctor's prescription should notify the teacher.

### ***Tobacco***

For the health and comfort of all students, smoking, chewing tobacco, and taking snuff are not permitted at the course.

### ***Food***

It is not possible to satisfy the special food preferences and requirements of all the meditators. Students are therefore kindly requested to make do with the simple vegetarian meals provided. The course management endeavors to prepare a balanced, wholesome menu suitable for meditation. If any students have been prescribed a special diet because of ill-health, they should inform the management at the time of application. Fasting is not permitted.

### ***Clothing***

Dress should be simple, modest, and comfortable. Tight, transparent, revealing, or otherwise striking clothing (such as shorts, short skirts, tights and leggings, sleeveless or skimpy tops) should not be worn. Sunbathing and partial nudity are not permitted. This is important in order to minimize distraction to others.

### ***Laundry and Bathing***

No washing machines or dryers are available, so students should bring sufficient clothing. Small items can be hand-washed. Bathing and laundry may be done only in the break periods and not during meditation hours.

### ***Outside Contacts***

Students must remain within the course boundaries throughout the course. They may leave only with the specific consent of the teacher. No outside communications is allowed before the course ends. This includes letters, phone calls and visitors. Cell phones, pagers, and other electronic devices must be deposited with the management until the course ends. In case of an emergency, a friend or relative may contact the management.

### ***Music, Reading and Writing***

The playing of musical instruments, radios, etc. is not permitted. No reading or writing materials should be brought to the course. Students should not distract themselves by taking notes. The restriction on reading and writing is to emphasize the strictly practical nature of this meditation.

### ***Recording Devices and Cameras***

These may not be used except with the express permission of the teacher.

### **Course Finances**

According to the tradition of pure Vipassana, courses are run solely on a donation basis. Donations are accepted only from those who have completed at least one ten-day course with S.N. Goenka or one of his assisting teachers. Someone taking the course for the first time may give a donation on the last day of the course or any time thereafter.

In this way courses are supported by those who have realized for themselves the benefits of the practice. Wishing to share these benefits with others, one gives a donation according to one's means and volition. Such donations are the only source of funding for course in this tradition around the world. There is no wealthy foundation or individual sponsoring them.

Neither the teachers nor the organizers receive any kind of payment for their service. Thus, the spread of Vipassana is carried out with purity of purpose, free from any commercialism.

Whether a donation is large or small, it should be given with the wish to help others: 'The course I have taken has been paid for through the generosity of past students; now let me give something towards the cost of a future course, so that others may also benefit by this technique.'

## Summary

To clarify the spirit behind the discipline and rules, they may be summarized as follows:

**Take great care that your actions do not disturb anyone. Take no notice of distractions caused by others.**

It may be that a student cannot understand the practical reasons for one or several of the above rules. Rather than allow negativity and doubt to develop, immediate clarification should be sought from the teacher.

It is only by taking a disciplined approach and by making maximum effort that a student can fully grasp the practice and benefit from it. The emphasis during the course is on work. A golden rule is to meditate as if one were alone, with one's mind turned inward, ignoring any inconveniences and distractions that one may encounter.

Finally, students should note that their progress in Vipassana depends solely on their own good qualities and personal development and on five factors: earnest efforts, confidence, sincerity, health and wisdom.

May the above information help you to obtain maximum benefit from your meditation course. We are happy to have the opportunity to serve, and wish you peace and harmony from your experience of Vipassana.

## THE COURSE TIMETABLE

The following timetable for the course has been designed to maintain the continuity of practice. For best results students are advised to follow it as closely as possible.

4:00 am	Morning wake-up bell
4:30-6:30 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room
6:30-8:00 am	Breakfast break

8:00-9:00 am	Group meditation in the hall
9:00-11:00 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room according to the teacher's instructions
11:00-12:00 noon	Lunch break
12noon-1:00 pm	Rest and interviews with the teacher
1:00-2:30 pm	Meditate in the hall or in your room
2:30-3:30 pm	Group meditation in the hall
3:30-5:00 pm	Meditate in the hall or in your own room according to the teacher's instructions
5:00-6:00 pm	Tea break
6:00-7:00 pm	Group meditation in the hall
7:00-8:15 pm	Teacher's Discourse in the hall
8:15-9:00 pm	Group meditation in the hall
9:00-9:30 pm	Question time in the hall
9:30 pm	Retire to your own room--Lights out

## **B: Full interview script**

### **General introduction, interview conditions & consent and closing statement**

#### *General introduction*

Hello. I would like to extend thanks to you in advance for your decision to let me conduct an interview with you. In the following, I will provide information about the proceedings of the interview. Are you ready to start?

#### *Interview conditions & consent*

Good. First of all, I would like you to know that this interview takes approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Moreover, you are free to stop the interview at any given point in time and finish it at a later date. In that case, I will send you an email at a later date to schedule an additional appointment to finish the interview. In case you want to make use of this opportunity, then just say so during the interview.

Furthermore, several safety arrangements have been taken to ensure your privacy. First, I would like to inform you that your interview will be read by my two attending tutors and me. Additionally, my master thesis (thus including your interview) will be published internally at the University Twente, thus anyone related to the University of Twente can read your interview. It says in the email I sent you that, for reasons of anonymity, you are to choose a nick name. If you use a nick name neither my two attending tutors nor any third party related to the University of Twente can draw conclusions about your identity. Furthermore, if you give information during the interview that makes it possible to draw conclusions about your identity, I will adjust that information to ensure your privacy. Moreover, the email I sent you had a document attached which you were supposed to read prior to the interview. Since the interview is held in a chat room provided by the chat room provider 'Chatzy', the document contains both the terms of use and the privacy policy of the chat room provider 'Chatzy'. And lastly, I would like you to refrain from communicating with smileys, emoticons and

language that can be misleading in terms of interpretation (for example sarcasm or irony). Do you, without limitation, agree to the above stated terms, which are to be applied during the chat interview?

Good. The interview can commence now. First, I would like to know some general information about you.

*Closing statement*

Good. The interview is finished. Do you have any questions regarding the interview?

Good. In case you want to be informed about the results of this study, I will send you an email with a short overview of the study's results. Would you like to receive the short overview via email?

Good. I would like to extend thanks once again for your time and effort and wish you a nice day.

## **Demographic variables**

*Opening statement*

Good. The interview can commence now. First, I would like to gather some general information about you.

*Questions*

How old are you?

What is your gender?

What is your nationality?

What is your highest educational degree?

How much time passed between your last Vipassana course and now? (please give your answer in months)

How many 10 day Vipassana courses did you do?

*Closing statement*

Good. Thanks for answering the general questions. Now, we move on to the next part of the study. In the following, I am going to successively ask you questions about four areas of investigation. After each area, I will inform you that we are going to move on to the next area. Are you ready for the first area of investigation?

## **Four areas of investigation**

In the following, each of the four areas of investigation is presented. Each description includes a general question, an opening statement, the questions asked during the interview and a closing statement.

### **1. Why do people choose to follow a 10 day Vipassana silence retreat?**

*Opening statement*

Now, we move on to the next part of the study. In the following, I am going to successively ask you questions about four areas of investigation. After each area of investigation, I will

inform you that we are going to move on to the next area of investigation.  
Are you ready for the first area of investigation?

*Questions*

Why did you choose to do a 10 day Vipassana course?

Was there a specific point in time after which you were certain that you are going to do a 10 days Vipassana course? If so, can you elaborate on that moment?

Is there anything else to know about why you chose to do a 10 day Vipassana course?

*Closing statement*

Good. The first area of investigation is finished. Let us commence with the next area of investigation.

## **2. What do people experience during a 10 day Vipassana silence retreat?**

*Opening statement*

Let us commence with the next area of investigation. Are you ready?

*Questions*

Can you give me a general description of a regular day during the 10 days Vipassana course?

For example, what did you do during a regular day and how did that go (good, bad)

What else can you tell me about your experiences during the 10 day Vipassana meditation?

Note to the interviewer: What were your thoughts/feelings/evaluation on topic x (relevant topics: food and eating schedule, daily schedule as such, meditation, interviews with the teacher and evening discourses, five precepts, noble silence)?

Gedankenstütze für den Interviewer: [Welche Gedanken/Gefühle/Bewertung hatten Sie zum Thema x (Relevante Themen: Essen und Essenszeiten, täglicher Ablauf als solches, Meditation, Interviews mit dem Lehrer, abendliche Vorlesungen, fünf Regeln, edle Stille)?]

Did you encounter any other experiences that have not yet been covered?

*Closing statement*

Good. The second area of investigation is finished. Let us commence to the third area of investigation.

## **3. Developments and processes during the 10 day Vipassana meditation**

*Opening statement*

Let us commence with the third area of investigation. Are you ready?

*Questions*

What can you tell me about personal developments and/or processes that you might have encountered during the 10 day Vipassana meditation?

Did you encounter any other personal developments and/or processes that have not yet been covered?

*Closing statement*

Good. The third area of investigation is finished. Let us commence to the fourth area of investigation.

## **4. How does the experience of a 10 day Vipassana silence retreat affect people's daily lives?**

*Opening statement*

Let us commence to the fourth and last area of investigation. Are you ready?

### *Questions*

What can you tell me about effects of the 10 days Vipassana course during the course?

What can you tell me about effects of the 10 days Vipassana course after the course was finished?

Did the experiences you made during the 10 days Vipassana course affect your daily life? If so, can you give me an example of such a situation?

Did you encounter any other changes after you have finished the 10 day Vipassana meditation that have not yet been covered?

### *Closing statement*

Good. The fourth area of investigation is finished.

## **C: Initial informational E-mail**

Dear reader,

You receive this email because you either have been contacted by me personally or, in my name, by one of my acquaintances. I would like to extend thanks to you in advance for your decision to be interviewed. In the following, I will provide information about the proceedings of the interview and the conditions of the interview.

First of all, you are asked to give me date at which you have time for the interview. You can do that by simply replying to this email and suggesting a date. I then will reply to your email and either confirm or disconfirm the date you are suggested and ask you to suggest another date. This back and forth will go on until we agree on a date.

Secondly, I would like you to know that the interview takes approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Moreover, you are free to stop the interview at any given point in time and finish it at a later date. In that case, I will send you an email at a later date to schedule an additional appointment to finish the interview. In case you want to make use of this opportunity, then just say so during the interview.

Thirdly, several safety arrangements have been taken to ensure your privacy. First, I would like to inform you that your interview will be read by my two attending tutors and me. To stay anonymous for my attending tutors, you are asked to choose a Nick Name. On the day of the interview, I will send you an email containing a link to the chat room. You are asked to click the link at the time we agreed upon. After clicking the link, you are asked to choose a Nick Name. At this point, you can type in the Nick Name of your Choice and the interview starts. Moreover, this email has an attached document. This document contains both the terms of use and the privacy policy of the chat room provider 'Chatzy'. Please read the document prior to the interview and make a decision whether you agree to Chatzy's terms of use and privacy policy.

And lastly, I would like you to refrain from communicating with smileys, emoticons and language that can be misleading in terms of interpretation (for example sarcasm or irony). This is a lot of information but don't worry. On the day of the interview, you will be provided with basically the same information and you will be asked to either agree or disagree to Chatzy's terms of use and privacy policy as well as the condition of the research as such. I am looking forward to receive an email from you containing a date suggestion,

Kind regards,

Tim Wösten (Bachelor of Science Psychology, University of Twente)