MINDFULNESS AND ECOLOGICALLY RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOUR: 
EXPLORING LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MEDITATION PRACTITIONERS 

By 

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Abstract

It’s believed Western worldview assumptions, such as utilitarianism, anthropocentrism, duality, and consumerism, affect perception and behaviour towards the natural world. Mindfulness has been explored for its benefit to wellbeing and its potential to shift perception and behaviour towards the planet. This research is a qualitative exploration, guided by hermeneutic phenomenology and thematic analysis, into lived experiences of five meditation practitioners and the effects mindfulness had on their lifestyle, wellbeing, perception and behaviour. The findings of this study show that while mindfulness may not prescribe lifestyle shifts, it can unveil hidden assumptions and patterns of behaviour that lead to healthful or unhealthful relationships with one’s self and all others. Some key health and environmental benefits the participants experienced included: slowing down, training in attentiveness, reconnecting with their body, becoming aware of interconnection and cause and effect of actions, engaging in simplicity, learning to not react blindly, and taking time to care for them selves.
Dedication

I dedicate this

to you
Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the following people:

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Arriving

Breathe now.
Feel the air sweep through your chest,
and settle in the centre of your being.
Notice the urge to be distracted, to wander away.
Come back to me my friend,
to this moment we share.
Feel your Aliveness here.
Sense the world around and within you,
acknowledge your being, your existence right now.
Tell me, how does it feel to be here,
now in this moment,
and now again.
Notice the urge to leave me,
to run with the elaborate tales,
Stay with me just a little longer friend,
And perceive life here,
in this moment we share,

-Taylor, 2009
Chapter One - Introduction

Introduction to the Topic

Another world is possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing. (Roy, 2003, p. 1)

Breath, that which sustains us, and in the practice of mindfulness, that which we return to as one’s marker of the ‘now.’ *Mindfulness* is the act of bringing a wandering mind back, again and again, from ruminations of the past, or future, or ideas about the present, to the pure and simple experience of the ‘now’ (Das, 1996). Over the centuries, Buddhist, Taoists, and Christians, among many others, have trained in mindfulness through techniques such as meditation, the arts and prayer (Hayward, 1995). The ability of mindfulness to transform one’s way of being, so delicately displayed in the teachings and life of Buddha, has captured the attention of many re-searchers. Quite simply, one practices in mindfulness so as to “be present in our lives as they happen” (Hayward, 1995, p. 69) and to engage in the only moment we truly have to live: the ‘now’ (Hayward, 1995). More intricately, one re-searches mindfulness as a way to understand what benefits it can have on one’s life, and what value it can have on one’s community at large.

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1 Where the etymology of the term search is *to wander or traverse*, and that of research is *to seek out or search closely*; the hyphen in ‘research’ is used to its meaning as both to search closely and also to wander again; thereby honouring the many who have explored these topics before me.
Over the years, re-searchers have questioned some of the embedded assumptions in the Western worldview, such as utilitarianism (Berry, 2006; Eaton, 2007), anthropocentrism (Sewall, 1995), duality (Diehm, 2007; Naess, 1973) and consumerism (Kasser, 2006; O’Brien, 2008) with the intention to understand the affect these beliefs have on one’s behaviour towards the environment and personal wellbeing. Re-searchers have also explored mindfulness in its affects on one’s health (Davidson, et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2005), and behaviour towards the planet and others (Brown & Kasser, 2005).

This thesis is an exploration of the two. It engages the questions: can mindfulness, as it is practiced through meditation, affect one’s life and one’s behaviour towards the environment; and through a practice that unveils reality, what can we learn from mindfulness practitioners about embedded assumptions in the Western worldview?

Paying particular attention to the current rate of environmental damage (Abramovitz, 2003) and the need for education that will help heal the planet (Orr, 1991), this re-search is focused on sharing studies and experiences in mindfulness, wellbeing and ecologically responsible behaviour that may assist environmental educators in program development and personal sustainability.

Arrangement

This thesis begins with a reflection on my own journey, how I came to this re-search and where it has led me. It leads into an overview of some of the limitations and motivations of this re-search. Following this is a summary of the works of a few dedicated re-searchers who have come before me and opened the door to understanding mindfulness, wellbeing, and ecologically responsible behaviour. From here, is a description of how I conducted this research, and whom I chose to guide. The five individuals, who have so kindly shared their experiences and insights with me, are then
introduced. Lastly, my offerings of what I have come to know through this re-search on mindfulness and ecologically responsible behaviour and what the benefits might be to environmental actors are presented. In the appendices, there are some tools I used to conduct my interviews and analysis, in addition to a glossary of terms used throughout this thesis.

The Path Home and Here

At some point in time your body might call out to you and demand that you re-consider your behaviour and assumptions that are internally destructive. This was my experience. I had been living a life with the assumption that privilege led to responsibility, and corresponding feelings of guilt\(^2\) and disconnect\(^3\) could be resolved by doing. My doing had been an accumulation of countless environmental and socially responsible activities and this had led me to a place where I could do no more for fear it would capsize my health. When my body called out to me in tension and desperation, I became aware that my behaviour and assumptions may be misguided and a new perspective might help. Unsure of what to do, I did the one thing I had been resisting. That was to stop.

In a moment of rest, I found a gap in my beliefs. It was found without needing to do a thing. I discovered what Capra (1996) and many others noticed: “We belong to the universe, we are at home in it and this experience of belonging can make our lives

\(^{2}\) Feelings of guilt, arising from a) feeling guilty that others suffered from experiences I was not exposed to b) believing there were more things I could do to alleviate suffering but was not doing them c) doing many things and still never feeling like I had done enough d) believing I was responsible to alleviate the world’s pain, because I was of privilege (white, educated, wealthy)

\(^{3}\) Disconnect arising from a) feeling isolated in my feelings of guilt and duty b) feeling a sense of fragmentation from the natural world and others
profoundly meaningful” (p. 69). It is hard to describe the sense of relief that arises from dismantling an assumption and coming to a new one that makes you feel more whole, more sane, and more accepted. Acknowledging the power of simply not doing, I felt called to understand what not doing really meant and how it could shift my view and life.

I can’t tell you how I came across this book, because I don’t remember, but I can tell you it opened the door for a new look at my life. The Tao Te Ching is a book written twenty-five centuries ago, by man who gave hope and direction to leaders in a time of despair and destruction (Wing, 1986). Within the text is a philosophy of non-doing and a belief that we can accomplish all we need to by being mindful of how to act in the present. Empowered by the possibility of a different way of being, and of a life with more harmony in my body, I began exploring ways to practice mindfulness.

The Questions

The questions for my thesis emerged while sitting at a meditation retreat. I arrived there with the intention to begin learning of and through mindfulness. While there, I came across a quote: “When we meditate, we’re training ourselves to see our weak points and strengthen our positive ones. We’re altering our basic perception. We’re beginning to change how we relate to the world – but not forcefully” (Mipham, 2005, p. 30). From this it became clear; I had two things I wanted to know:

1. How do practitioners of meditation understand the influence of mindfulness on their lifestyle and environmental behaviour?

2. What assumptions have meditation practitioners unveiled that might come to affect how one perceives nature and behave towards it?
Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this thesis include time, scope, understanding and motivation.

Time

I recall watching a video on the origin of plastics and distinctly remember the argument that throwaway dishes benefited housewives by allowing them to have more time for relaxing and socializing. Time feels like a constraint, when it is assumed there are other and more enjoyable or more valuable things to do, or when a deadline has been imposed. Writing a thesis on mindfulness has brought new understandings to the word time, because in mindfulness training the time is always ‘now.’ From the perspective of writing a thesis, time however is based on the amount left till due date. In this sense, time became a constraint. It affected the scope and understanding of this thesis.

Scope

In qualitative analysis sampling of participants typically continues until no new themes that depict the experience arise (Morse, 1995). Time, being a constraint, affected the number of participants I was able to include in this re-search. A limited number of participants affect the breadth of this study. Although significant themes emerged from the five interviews, a greater number of participants could have affected the reliability of the emerging themes.

The participants’ background also limits the scope of this thesis. They were selected from a mindfulness practice rooted in Buddhism and meditation. As a result, it is possible they have a unique perspective of mindfulness. This limits the ability to extend their experiences to others who practice mindfulness through a different medium and from a lens other than Buddhism. In addition, the participants selected were a majority of males. While I did not notice significant difference in perspective between
male and female, this re-search is limited in its ability to draw conclusions on if, or how gender could affect the experiences of mindfulness practitioners.

**Understanding**

Time affects the extent of understanding I come to this re-search with. I am relatively young in my experience and understanding of meditation, mindfulness and re-searching. I have limited prior knowledge of how to conduct this re-search and in this field. While I engaged in mindfulness practice and studied literature to enhance my understanding and experience, time limited the amount of knowledge and experience I am able to draw from and offer.

My inexperience conducting interviews through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology affects the findings I obtained. While I learned-as-I-went, greater prior knowledge and practice in phenomenological interviews may have enabled a more in-depth and rich understanding of the participants’ experiences.

**Motivation and Bias**

In hermeneutic phenomenology, it is assumed the re-searcher is not isolated from the interpretations (Austin & Hein, 2001). My motivations and biases may then affect the findings I came to and shared. I was motivated to explore a practice that could increase wellbeing, assist environmental educators, shift behaviour and assumptions. This may have affected which aspects of the participants’ experiences I chose to focus on and the conclusions I drew.

My experience of mindfulness also has an influence on where I believed the findings would tend. Being aware of this bias, I chose to let the experiences of the participants speak for themselves as often as possible and to be clear when I was
speaking from my perspective. I also asked the participants to verify that my findings were an accurate interpretation of their experiences.

*A Need For Re-searching*

As intensely aware as environmentalists may be of the complexity of the natural habitat, when it came to human behaviour their guiding image was simplistic in the extreme. They worked from a narrow range of strategies and motivations: the statistics of impending disaster, the coercive emotional force of fear and guilt. (Roszak, 1995, p. 2)

As Roszak (1995) states, this historical mode of educating about the environment has led to dis-empowering feelings of guilt and fear. Acknowledging this stimulates a need to understand how environmental educators can teach in a manner that develops knowledge and behaviour reflective of the needs of the planet and is empowering and healing. Orr (1991) suggested, “it is not education that will save us, but education of a certain kind” (p. 52). And this education needs to provide its students with the “skills, aptitudes and attitudes necessary…to heal the earth” (Orr, 1992, p. 1). Healing the earth, for ecopsychologists (Roszak, 1992) becomes in part about healing one’s self and the apparent disconnect from nature. This is based on the assumption that ecologically irresponsible behaviour can stem from a damaged person-nature relationship (Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2008). The re-search of skills, aptitudes and attitudes that will help heal one’s connection to one’s self and nature and will empower students is essential as environmental education approaches and motivations are re-evaluated. Re-search, which demonstrates the positive influence mindfulness has on wellbeing and wellbeing has on ecologically responsible behaviour (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Kottler, 1999; Siegel, 2007), leads me to wonder if mindfulness is a skill, an attitude or an aptitude that Orr (1992) speaks of.
While reflecting on some ways we in the West have been educating, one also comes to see how the Western educational system and culture at large, has tended towards developing rational, calculative thinking (Drengson, 1995). This type of thinking has been criticized as being a leading cause of social and environmental damage (Drengson, 1995). Alternatively, meditative thinking - that which “[draws] on intuitive capabilities and seeing things as a whole,” (Drengson, 1995, p. 108) – has largely been suppressed in Western educational institutions and is now being reconsidered as a valuable tool in these times of environmental and social destruction (Drengson, 1995).

Understanding how practices rooted in meditative thinking, such as mindfulness and meditation can affect environmentally responsible behaviour becomes important as we re-consider the value and construct of current educational systems.

Moving beyond the realm of needing to re-search how to effectively teach and what tools to draw on in environmental education, is the need to re-search how to sustain teachers and students so they can continue as environmental actors. Burnout, that is the “syndrome of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of low personal accomplishment” (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005, p. 165), is not uncommon amongst environmental actors (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). Recognizing the prevalence of burnout prompts a need to find mechanisms that promote wellbeing and sources of sustainable motivation for those in the environmental education sector. Minimal qualitative research on the relationship between mindfulness and wellbeing provides room for further investigation.

Embedded assumptions in the Western worldview such as utilitarianism (Berry, 2006; Eaton, 2007), anthropocentrism (Sewall, 1995), duality (Diehm, 2007; Naess,
1973) and consumerism as a path to happiness (Kasser, 2006; O’Brien, 2008) are believed to be inhibiting acting ecologically responsibly. This creates a need to explore ways to re-gain awareness of such assumptions and their implications. Acknowledging that the practice of mindfulness is believed to be a practice to heighten awareness and unveil reality (Das, 1996; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Siegel, 2007), there is room to explore how or what assumptions become unveiled through mindfulness.
Chapter Two: Engaging the Literature

Ecological Seeing: A Way of Perceiving

The most remarkable feature of this historical moment on Earth is not that we are on the way to destroying the world - we've actually been on the way for quite a while. It is that we are beginning to wake up, as from a millenia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, to ourselves, and each other. (Macy, 2009, para 1)

Orr (1991) once said, “It makes far better sense to reshape ourselves to fit a finite planet than to attempt to reshape the planet to fit our finite wants” (p. 3). He speaks clearly to a movement looking inward at who we are, how and why we in the West choose to behave in a destructive manner toward the environment. Others accompany him, in traditions such as deep ecology (Naess, 1973), ecopsychology (Greenway, 1995), Gaia theory (Lovelock, 1979) and biophilia (Wilson, 1984) and re-sound the importance of finding ways to feel more a part of this world and to shift behaviour to begin caring deeply for it.

It has been suggested that a way to shift behaviour is to alter perception (Sewall, 1995). Sewall (1995) believes we are guided through the world by our senses: “the fundamental avenues of connection between self and world” (p. 201). The sounds, tastes, feelings, and sights that we perceive in the world within and the world outside are believed to affect how we come to understand the planet and our selves and how we choose to behave (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Sewall, 1995). In this sense, it is believed that what we perceive affects what we know, and what we know affects what we do (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Sewall, 1995).

Aerts et al. (1994) proposes that perception is affected by worldview. A worldview guides us to pay attention and give value to certain aspects of our internal and external world (Aerts, et al., 1994). It is our map - a tool to help our senses interpret and
guide us through life (Aerts, et al., 1994). Within every worldview there are embedded assumptions filtering how and what is perceived (Aerts, et al., 1994). It is believed that these assumptions also direct how to relate and behave in the natural environment (Aerts, et al., 1994). In the Western worldview, the assumptions that are believed to specifically affect behaviour in the natural world include utilitarianism and anthropocentrism (Aerts, et al., 1994; Berry, 2006; Eaton, 2007; Plumwood, 1999), duality (Brinkerhoff & Jacob, 1999; Naess, 1973) and consumerism as a model to achieve happiness (Brown & Kasser, 2005; O'Brien, 2008). Slowly, many of these assumptions are beginning to be dismantled, by re-searchers such as those in fields of ecopsychology (Roszak, 1995) and historians such as Berry (2006) and Eaton (2007). Through their inquisition, and that of many others, a new way of seeing, a new way of knowing and a new way of being are rising up and shifting our perception, knowledge and behaviour.

Utilitarianism and Anthropocentrism

The worldview of Western culture is thought by some to stem from, amongst other things, a utilitarian – greatest good for the greatest number - (Berry, 2006) and anthropocentric – human centred- perspective (Aerts, et al., 1994; Eaton, 2007; Plumwood, 1999). These two combined are believed to guide Westerners towards perceiving the world through its utility, and particularly its utility to humans (Berry, 2006; Eaton, 2007). That is the greatest good for the greatest number of humans (Berry, 2006; Eaton, 2007). Berry (2006) conveyed his perception of human centred utilitarianism by stating that in the West, the external world is divided into a collection of objects set aside for the use of humans. He believed seeing the world as mere objects restricts one’s view from perceiving aspects of nature, such as a forest, as an “abode of an
infinite number of spirit presences” (p. 18) and forces one to perceive the forest as “so many board feet of timber to be ‘harvested’ as objects used for human benefit” (p. 18).

Filtering the world for its usefulness to humans, is thought to result in a numbing of the senses of what is aesthetically or inherently valuable in its own right (Berry, 2006; Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Sewall, 1995) and also leads to forgetting the “magnificence of our Earth” and thus causes “destruction to our Earth” (Sewall, 1995, p. 204). Filtering the world through these lenses is thus narrow and limiting. It is narrow because it does not have the ability to perceive the entire natural world for its inherent value or its utility to the non-human world. It is limiting because it deprives one from perceiving some of the inherent beauty of life on earth and also because it restricts one from recognizing the devastating effects behaviour has on the external and also the internal world (Sewall, 1995).

Mindful sensing

...experiences of the richness of what is other-than-human are transformative events, events that both expose us to the depths of other-than-human existence, and touch us deep in the recesses of our own being. (Diehm, 2007, pp. 16-17)

Extending perception beyond the human-centred and utility-focused perspectives, is what Sewall (1995) describes as a coming of our senses. That is, a practice of letting go of the embedded assumption of a human-centred utilitarianism and opening up to the possibility that there is another truth of what it means to be human and how to behave while here. She (1995) would prescribe a re-connecting with one’s senses through a practice of mindfulness and awareness, as a means to becoming sensitive to these other truths. By loosening up one’s beliefs of utilitarianism and anthropocentrism and following one’s senses to feel, touch, taste and listen to the earth again, Sewall (1995) believes one may come to perceive, as others in fields of deep ecology (Naess, 1986),
biophilia (Wilson, 1984), and ecopsychology (Roszak, 1992) have, that humans are an integral part of the biosphere, of no more and no less significance than any other component. One may also perceive, as Berry (2006) did, that the natural world is sacred, divine and even magical in its own right and not here for the mere use of humans. One may also shift one’s perception as Leopold (1970) did in his land ethic from “[changing] the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (p. 239-40). Or as deep ecologists (Diehm, 2007) have, by considering the earth as a biotic and interdependent community.

Sewall (1995) suggests the ability to re-construct perception is through heightened sensitivity and practice of mindfulness and awareness. This ability to transcend worldview assumptions, such as anthropocentrism, is re-affirmed by Brinkerhoff and Jacob (1999) who believe mindfulness can help foster a more ecocentric worldview.

A view of duality

…with the proposal of René Descartes that the universe is composed simply of “mind and mechanism”…The thousandfold voices of the natural world became inaudible to many humans. The mountains, rivers, wind, and sea all became mute insofar as humans were concerned (Berry, 2006, p. 18)

Within the Buddhist worldview it is recognized that at the root of suffering, otherwise known as duhkha (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) is a deep longing to belong, to feel at home and to be “connected to something larger than ourselves” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 144). However, feeling this sense of connection to something greater, such as the natural world, can be impeded by a view of duality. Duality is another embedded assumption in the Western worldview (Diehm, 2007; Naess, 1973) that affects perception. It is rooted in Cartesian thought and is the notion that the mind and body (matter) are separated (Varela, Thompson, & Roch, 1991). It is also the assumption that the human mind or spirit is the
idealized and superior version of nature, granted to humans alone and the remainder of nature – the human body and all other matter – is the debased version of nature (Alaimo, 1998; Berry, 2006; Taylor, 1992).

Splitting nature into the ethereal (the mind or spirit) and the abject (the body and the natural world) is believed to bestow superiority upon the human mind and spirit and is believed to give reasoning to use the earth as a dumping ground (Alaimo, 1998). Berry (2006) thought that when Descartes separated the world into ‘mind and mechanism’ in a single stroke he also devitalized the planet and all its inhabitants, except the humans. Where other worldviews would perceive a connection between mind and body and see that, “nature at large as well as the body is viewed as alive, possibly divine” (Roszak, 1992, p. 79), the dualistic worldview is thought to withhold divinity and sacredness for the human mind alone (Roszak, 1992).

It is presumed that those who function out of an assumption of duality act as a reflection of it (Roszak, 1992). Acting in nature, with the assumption of separateness and superiority, is believed to have also led to a law of economics in the West where everything of the earth is up for the taking, is to be processed and used in the consumer society as quickly as possible and disposed of on the waste heap (Berry, 2006). Consuming resources in this manner has led to what is seen as a ‘successful’ increase in gross domestic product (Berry, 2006). However, the devastation it is believed to have had on the planet, by physically draining it of its resources and damaging the very webs-of-life humans are dependent on, makes historians such as Berry (2006) diagnose a deep cultural pathology.
This assumption of duality, which creates a disconnect between the human mind and the natural world, is also thought to create a disconnect between an individual’s mind and body (Roszak, 1992; Varela, et al., 1991). Acting with an assumption that the mind is superior to the body, is said to reinforce a belief that the calculative, rational mode of thinking of the mind, is superior to the meditative, emotional and intuitive mode of thinking most closely associated with the body (Maturana & Bunnell, 1997). Primarily attending to a calculative mode of thinking is of concern for Drengson (1995). He critiques this type of thinking as being a major cause of environmental destruction (Drengson, 1995). It is also of concern for Maturana & Bunnell (1997), who heed warning that when one relies heavily on the rational mode of thinking to solve problems, one forgets to acknowledge that many problems often arise in the domain of relations, and come from a shift in emotion or insight, which is only made possible through meditative thinking (Maturana & Bunnell, 1997). It is then not surprising, that a relational problem solved by a technological fix of the calculative mode of thinking often results in yet another and unanticipated problem (Maturana & Bunnell, 1997).

Without a perception of connection, a valuing of one’s body and the natural world, and low reliance on meditative thinking to perceive and understand relations, it is also not surprising that the dependence of humans on the functioning relations of the biosphere is considered to be so consistently violated and denied (Berry, 2006).

Letting go of separation

Omnia vivunt, omnia inter se conexa; Everything is alive; everything is interconnected. Cicero

…ecological sustainability depends on a fundamental shift in consciousness…this change in consciousness centers on healing humankinds’ alienation from nature in terms of a dualistic subject/object split that permits violence directed towards the earth. (Brinkerhoff & Jacob, 1999, pp. 524-527)
Berry (2006) believed that by becoming aware of perceived separation and by recovering a perception of the universe as a “‘communion of subjects’ a new interior experience awakens within the human. The barriers disappear. An enlargement of soul takes place” (p. 18). Capra (2004) shared a similar view when he said that through awareness one transcends the separation of mind and body as well as self and world and discovers “a profound sense of oneness with all, a sense of belonging to the universe as a whole” (p. 68).

Ecopsychologists believe that reconciling the separation occurs when one can conceptualize extending the self to include the natural world (Amel & Britain, 2009; Diehm, 2007; Naess, 1986). It is thought that this process of extending the self allows for a re-uniting of the mind, body and nature and an ability for them to function as a harmonious whole (Amel & Britain, 2009; Naess, 1986). Bender (2003) and Diehm (2007) suggest perceiving mind, body and nature as an interconnected and interdependent web of life is made possible through a practice of mindfulness and awareness. It is this practice which Barrett (2006) believes allows for recognition of “interdependence with other living beings locally, with regional and global ecosystems, and ultimately with Earth’s ecosphere as a whole…” (p. 424). This belief in the ability to become aware of interconnection is shared by Conn (1995):

Each of us has, with or without awareness, the ability to connect to the whole interdependent web of life on Earth at any moment in any activity in our daily lives. Everything we touch comes from the natural world and connects us to it in the way the strawberries connected me to the sun, rain and soil. (p. 157)

This belief is also shared by deep ecologists (Brinkerhoff & Jacob, 1999) who think that humankind requires a shift in consciousness as comprehensive as the agricultural and industrial revolutions. This shift, they argue, is away from duality and
towards a “sense of unity with one’s natural environment” (p. 528). They also believe this can be made possible through a practice of disciplined meditation and mindfulness, which allows for a movement beyond the ego to a perception and identification with all creation (Brinkerhoff & Jacob, 1999).

Renewing a connection and relationship to the earth is generating increasing interest from re-searchers who are keen to explore how relationships to nature affect ecologically responsible behaviour (Iwata, 2001). Those who have explored the human-nature relationship suggest that a strong connection to nature makes one’s life richer, and more meaningful (Nisbet, et al., 2008). Furthermore, it has been suggested that wellbeing is interwoven with the health of the planet and a sense of separation from nature can negatively affect one’s psychological wellbeing (Nisbet, et al., 2008). Adding to this idea, Diehm (2007) thinks regaining a perception of one’s ecological self, cultivates an awareness of interlaced wellbeing:

…we experience others’ well-being as intermingled with our own: we find that we are pained by their pain and uplifted by their flourishing; the “hurt” they feel, we feel as well. As a result of identification, therefore, the self comes to “include” others since the interests of others are discovered to be bound up with those of the self. (p. 13)

This same sense of interwoven wellbeing is discussed by Hanh (2005), who recites Buddha’s teachings that “this is like this, because that is like that” (p. 42). He called this phenomenon dependent co-arising, which is the concept that my wellbeing depends on your wellbeing and yours upon me. In this sense, in order to take care of an ‘other’ one has to take care of one’s self and through virtue of this he believes we become responsible for each other (Hanh, 2005).
Perceiving interconnection has been suggested to be in part about shifting thinking, as aforementioned. It is also possible that to perceive connection differently, may require not just thinking but also communicating differently. Earlier, the calculative mode of thinking associated with the mind, was discussed as being assumed superior to the meditative mode of thinking associated with the body. This same mode of calculative thought has been associated with a dominant mode of communication in the West, called rhetorical communication (Atzmon, 2001; McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Rhetorical communication, is assumed to date back to 5th century B.C. in a time when the people in Syracuse needed to prove their claims in court, (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). This same type of communication, still dominant in Western cultures, is used to gain influence and persuasion over others (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). In its most extreme form, rhetorical communication is thought to encourage forgoing relationships for the benefit of gaining influence (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996).

Exploring this rhetorical communication becomes interesting when also investigating a mode of communication dominant in Eastern culture (Maturana & Bunnell, 1997) and more closely associated with meditative thinking. This is relational communication, which is concerned with preserving “the relationship between the two people and the perceived well-being of the “other” (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996, p. 234). In relational thinking, one forgoes influence if it is thought a relationship may be compromised (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Acknowledging the health of one’s relations has an affect on one’s wellbeing (Diehm, 2007) and many environmental problems are seen to come from the realm of relationships (Maturana & Bunnell, 1997)
using, or at least investigating further, a form of communicating that is aligned with persevering and perceiving relationships as valuable.

*Buying happiness*

...having more and newer things each year has become not just something we want but something we need. The idea of more, of ever increasing wealth, has become the center of our identity and our security, and we are caught by it as the addict by his drugs. (Wachtel, 1989, p. 79)

Another embedded assumption in the Western worldview is one of: consumption and accumulation of wealth will lead us towards a greater sense of happiness (Durning, 1995; "United Nations Environment Programme", 2002). In 1776, the words ‘life, liberty and pursuit of happiness’ were adopted from the works of Locke (1690) and integrated into the United States Declaration of Independence. In the wake of World War II, a new theory and model for how to pursue happiness was thought to be born (Durning, 1995). It was believed to have been based on the idea of a consumer society and as retailing analyst, Victor Leblow declared, it was the route to spiritual and ego satisfaction:

Our enormously productive economy...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction in consumption. (Durning, 1995, p. 69)

Four decades later, in 1992, at the global environmental summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, President Bush was asked to consider the devastating environmental effect of the American consumption habits (Kamner & Gomes, 1995). To which he responded, “The American way of life is not up for negotiation” (Kamner & Gomes, 1995, p. 78). His response is thought to affirm the assumption that the American way of life would bring Americans towards the happiness they desired and if environmentally responsible behaviour, demanded they reduce consumption, it would be in direct conflict with the pursuit of happiness (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Kamner & Gomes, 1995).
Based on what is considered to be half a century of overconsumption, and resulting devastation to our environment (Abramovitz, 2003), I believe this embedded assumption and conflict between happiness and environmentally responsible behaviour stands in the Western worldview as one of the largest barriers to reducing levels of consumption and the adverse effects consumerism has on the environment.

*Simply happy*

We are taught to think of freedom as something one has, but it is really the absence of things that brings freedom to the individual and meaning into life. (Wing, 1986, p. 13)

Over 25 centuries before the pursuit of happiness through consumerism was advocated to the American public, antiquity philosopher, Democritus, spoke of happiness as being “a property of the soul” (Diels, 1954, p. 170) and not found through overconsumption or passion for wealth (Michaelides, Kardassi, & Milios, 2005). Democritus recognized the feelings of emptiness resulting from an addiction to wealth and consumption when he said, “when the passion of wealth does not find satiation it becomes worse than the greatest poverty because the stronger the desires are, so are the privations” (Diels, 1954, p. 219).

Others, including those who acknowledge that our consumptive habits are often a grasping towards an outside source to fulfill an inner sense of emptiness and disconnect, share this view that happiness is a property of the soul and not something that can be bought or satiated through wealth:

The empty self… seeks the experience of being continually filled up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathetic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era. (Cushman, 1990, p. 600)
Cushman’s (1990) thoughts are echoed by Winter (2004), who believes that consumptive behaviour is often driven from a feeling of lacking a connection to the natural world and to one’s self. This same sense of meaningless or emptiness is spoken of by Kottler (1999), who believes that one consumes as a method to self-medicate and fill a void and by Kamner and Gomes (1995), who believe that consumptive wants are merely an attempt to “alleviate the anguish of an empty life” (p. 79).

To understand if the pursuit of consumption increases levels of happiness and if it is in conflict with protecting the environment, re-searchers such as Brown and Kasser (2005) study the effects of voluntary simplicity on one’s sense of personal happiness, or in their words, subjective wellbeing. Their (Brown & Kasser, 2005) results show that subjective wellbeing is positively affected by increased voluntary simplicity: “a lifestyle which involves a conscious shift away from material goals and towards intrinsically satisfying pursuits and the autonomous expression of talents and skills” (p. 352). Furthermore, their results show that to have intrinsic goals - goals oriented towards personal growth, relationships, and community involvement – as opposed to extrinsic goals – goals focused on financial success, praise, and image- has a positive effect on one’s level of wellbeing, and correspondingly one’s ability to act ecologically responsibly (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Kasser & Sheldon, 2002). Their results affirm that the West’s assumed path to happiness, through material pursuits, may be misguided and that happiness does not have to be mutually exclusive with environmentally responsible behaviour. These results and beliefs are supported by re-search from O’Brien (2008) and Kasser (2006).
Simplicity through mind-fullness

The concept of voluntary simplicity is not new, having roots in Taoism, Christianity, and Buddhism and having been at the heart of the 60’s environmental reformist movement (Medland, 2003). It is, for many, a method believed to be an antidote to consumerism (Princen, 1997; Rosenberg, 2004) and to increase a sense of subjective wellbeing (Brown & Kasser, 2005). In addition, it is suggested that it is enhanced through the practice of mindfulness and awareness (Amel & Britain, 2009; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Kottler, 1999; Medland, 2003; Princen, 1997; Rosenberg, 2004; Winter, 2004).

In particular, re-search suggests that mindfulness may act to reduce consumerism by encouraging reflection on the environmental impacts of one’s behaviour (Burch, 2000; Princen, 1997; Rosenberg, 2004) and by bringing a greater awareness to an individual’s true needs and their unsatisfactory attempts to fill a void through material goods (Kottler, 1999). Furthermore, Kottler (1999) believes the practice of mindfulness may reduce the desire to fill voids through consumerism by bringing awareness to non-consumer experiences such as Csikszentmihályi’s flow (1988); which is an optimal experience where individuals are fully immersed in an autotelic activity and guided with a sense of: energized focus, oneness or transcendence with the activity, effortless action, and heightened alertness and performance. It may also, as those studying mindfulness-based stress reduction have showed it, be a mechanism to increase one’s sense of wellbeing and reduce one’s dis-ease, by helping to alleviate feelings of stress, anxiety, depression and burnout (Davidson, et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Shapiro, et al., 2005).
Mindfulness and Meditation

Mindfulness

I must confess it takes me a little longer to do the dishes in mindfulness, but I live fully in every moment, and I am happy. Each second of life is a miracle; the dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles! Every conscious step we make, a flower blooms under our feet. We can do this only if we linger not in the past or future, but know that life can be found only in the present moment. (Hanh, 2009, p. 31)

Hanh (2005) spoke of mindfulness as a practice of choosing how to be in this present moment and choosing to be present in this moment. He often used phrases like “when I wash the dishes, I wash the dishes” and “the dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles!” (Hanh, 2009, p. 31) He used these to show that mindfulness is about fully attending to what is one is doing and is also about choosing how one will be while doing it (Hanh, 2005). This reflects Siegel’s (2007) belief that mindfulness is both a practice of meta-cognition and self-regulation, where the mindful individual is not only a self-observer, that is aware of what s/he is doing, but is also paying attention to each behaviour by intentionally selecting a state to be in (Hanh, 2005; Siegel, 2007). Brown and Ryan (2003), in their studies of mindfulness and wellbeing, resound this idea by describing mindfulness as a characteristic of consciousness where attention and awareness are focused on the subtleties of the present experience and one is observing the ongoing internal behaviour and states.

The idea of mindfulness as a practice of being attentive to what one is doing is described in Das’s (1983) description of mindfulness as an experience of “total wakefulness, unified attention, focused awareness and even enlightenment” (p. 303). Similarly, Csikszentmihályi (1991, 1988) depicts it in his studies of flow theory, as being heightened aliveness, energized focus, oneness or transcendence with the activity.
How mindfulness can help to cultivate attentive and focused oneness, or *nonduality*, with the present moment and the experience at hand, is discussed by Das (1996), Hayward (1995) and Kabat-Zinn, (2005), amongst many others. They believe attentiveness and focus is achieved by practicing being present without judgment, without thoughts of averting or clinging to the past or future, or ideas *about* the now and withholding intention to *be* anywhere but in the present moment.

By continually re-focusing and bringing back the wandering mind Hanh (1987) believed that mindfulness allows one to “call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restores it to wholeness so that we can live each minute of life” (p. 14). Believing that the only time to fully live is those moments in which one is fully attentive, Hayward (1995) encouraged a practice of mindfulness. His thoughts are echoed by Thoreau (1854), who once wrote: “Only that day dawns to which we are fully awake” (p. 226), which echoes the concept that the moment is here for to live, but first we must wake to it.

Re-searchers, such as Siegel (2007) and Davidson et al. (2003), have explored the neural processes of an individual who engages in mindfulness. Their studies show that what mindfulness and awareness allows for is meta-cognition and self-referencing by consciously re-routing neural pathways (Davidson, et al., 2003; Siegel, 2007). Suppose an individual were stimulated and their habitual reaction to this particular stimulus was to be angry. Siegel (2007) and Davidson et al. (2003) would argue that by becoming focused and aware, the mindful individual could observe how this stimulus flows in their mind and what habitual reaction is being produced. This is what Cope (2000) would describe as being the ‘witness,’ that is to become the self-observer and to engage in meta-cognition. By becoming aware of the reaction, Davidson, et al. (2003) and Siegel (2007)
believe that the stimulus, which was historically transmitted through a habitual pattern or neural-firing, can be consciously re-focused or re-wired by the mindful individual through a neural pathway that develops a more appropriate response. In the case of the reaction ‘anger,’ this re-wiring could result in a more positive response in the nature of compassion or forgiveness. Hanh (2005) would describe the process of mindfulness then, as being able to transform irritations that create destructive energy into constructive energy.

This practice of transforming energy or reactions is at the heart of re-search, such as Kabat-Zinn’s (2005), which explores the health benefits of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (2005) and Davidson et al. (2003) offer study results from integrating mindfulness based stress reduction, a stream of mindfulness meditation, into health facilities across North America. Their results, as well as others, reveal positive correlations between physical and mental health and mindfulness. In particular, studies show that benefits from practicing mindfulness include reduced stress, anxiety, depression, burnout and recovery from other dis-eases (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Davidson et al., 2003; Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005). Studies have also shown that being mindful, can lead to an improved function of the immune system, an increased perception of equanimity and an increase in compassion and relationship satisfaction (Davidson, et al., 2003; Siegel, 2007).

**Meditation**

The disciple retires to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to a solitary place, seats himself…and with mindfulness fixed before him, mindfully he breaths in, mindfully he breaths out. When making a long inhalation, he knows: ‘I make a long inhalation’; when making a long exhalation, he knows: ‘I make a long exhalation’…thus he trains himself. (Buddha in (Das, 1998, p. 302)

While this re-search focuses on the experiences of practicing meditation as a pathway to train in mindfulness, it is important to note that mindfulness has been
practiced and studied in many other traditions. These include, but are not limited to, the practice of the arts, such as Tai Chi or floral arrangements in Taoism and Buddhism, prayer in Christianity (Hayward, 1995) and the study of flow theory by positive psychologist Csíkszentmihályi (1991, 1988). In Tai Chi, a moving meditation or soft martial art, mindfulness is believed to be attained through movements which are designed to harness chi (energy) and “[allow] the body/mind to function as an integrated whole” (Barrett, 2006, p. 138). In Flow theory, Csíkszentmihályi (1988) studies individuals, particularly athletes, who are engaged in an activity and demonstrate mindfulness or being in the flow.

The practice of mindfulness has been studied for centuries and has made its way across the globe as a simple and yet direct way to come home to ‘now’ (Das, 1996). In the Buddhist tradition, the practice of meditation is 2500 years old and stems from the Theravada tradition of Buddhism (Hann, 1987). It is believed to have first been taught by the Buddha, after he came to enlightenment under the famous bodhi tree (Hanh, 2005). The Buddha taught mindfulness training through meditation “as a sacred way of being in the world” (Das, 1996, p. 303) and as a way of seeing things just as they are (Das, 1996). Through meditation, Buddha believed one could emerge from illusions and dreams of how things are, and come more clearly into the reality of how they actually are (Das, 1996). Buddha taught the practice of mindfulness meditation in the Satipatthāna Sutta, also known as the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Hann, 1987). In this he taught to become aware of one’s body, aware of one’s feelings, aware of one’s thoughts and aware of one’s experiences moment by moment (Das, 1996; Hann, 1987).
While each stream of meditation is moderately different in technique, they are paralleled in their intention of mindfulness. The practice typically begins with sitting, alone or in a group and “simply noticing, simply observing” (Goldstein, 1993, p. 40) the breath and what arises in the mind and in the body. The practice is to “not [search]… not [pull] or [probe]” (p. 77) but to just be aware and to continually “[bring] back the wandering attention over and over again” (Hayward, 1995, p. 69). In this, the practice of meditation is one that “explores, investigates, unveils, and illumes what is hidden within and all around us” (Das, 1996, p. 301).

While mediation is typically thought to be done through sitting, and typically alone, the intention is not to escape or remove oneself from society, but to prepare for re-entering society (Hanh, 2005). By engaging in such practices as walking meditation, one prepares to bring the practice into daily life. Conducting mindfulness meditation, as Hanh (1987; 2005) demonstrated in the act of washing the dishes, is transferred to all actions in life.

In North America, meditation has most strongly been integrated into people’s lives through the practice of Insight, Zen, Vipassana or Shamata meditation (Das, 1996; Hayward, 1995). For the purpose of this re-search, I look at the two relevant techniques, to my participants, Vipasanna, and Shamata.

Vipassana meditation is one of the more ancient mediation techniques and it is believed to be the essence of what the Buddha taught (“Vipassana and Meditation,” 2009). Before the technique almost disappeared entirely from India five centuries after its inception, it is believed to have been shared with those in neighboring countries and preserved for over two thousand years by a few dedicated teachers in Burma (“Vipassana
and Meditation,” 2009). In the late ‘60s, Vipassana teacher S.N. Goenka began re-introducing the technique in India (“Vipassana & Meditation,” 2009). After he trained many new assistant teachers, the technique was spread to over 90 countries. To learn the Vipassana technique, one typically takes a 10-day course (“Vipassana & Meditation,” 2009). Here one learns the essentials of the technique by following the three steps to training: avoid actions that cause harm, develop a stable and concentrated mind, observe the senses of the body and learn equanimity ("Vipassana & Meditation", 2009).

While many in the West have come to practice meditation through Vipassana and Vipassana courses, others have been introduced to Shamata meditation through the Shambhala tradition of Chögyam Trungpa ("Shambhala", 1994). Chögyam Trungpa travelled to North America in the early 70’s and brought with him a stream of Buddhism, most prominently rooted in Tibetan Buddhism ("Shambhala", 1994). He called this, Shambhala International, a form of Buddhism and a path of spirituality not directly belonging to East or West or any one culture or religion, but one that was intended to gather the wisdom of the past and be a reflection of the contemporary culture ("Shambhala", 1994). In this sense, the Shambhala vision was created to offer a meditation technique, called Shamata, and teachings accessible to everyone, even those amongst a busy life ("Shambhala", 1994). Shamata meditation engages in a series of programs intended to strengthen and stabilize a learner’s meditation practice and gain an understanding of the teachings of meditation, Buddhism and Shambhala ("Shambhala", 1994).

Throughout all practices of meditation, there is a training in mindfulness and with mindfulness comes a learning of equanimity. Equanimity as Buddha taught it is the
ability to work with what ever comes our way and to hold a “balanced state of mind” 
(Mipham, 2005, p. 17). In this sense, it is the ability to not be hooked by negative 
emotions, or to become attached to them, but to calmly abide them, recognizing that in 
time, they too will change (Mipham, 2005).
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Methodology Selection

To choose a methodology, I needed to consider the many aspects that this research reflected. On one hand, this research was about mindfulness, which has been defined from one viewpoint as: monitoring the self as it is lived (Siegel, 2007). This research is also about my personal inquiry and journey of coming to new understandings. In this sense it is about me not as an observer, as classic science would prescribe, but about me as a ‘participant’ in the re-search. Most importantly, this re-search is about the lived experiences of my participants and the experience of other re-searchers in this field who have come before me. I found Heidegger’s’ hermeneutic phenomenology the best methodology to honour these interests.

First defined by Franz Brentano (1874) and fathered by Edmund Husserl (Kock, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1983), the field of phenomenology developed as a shift from the dualist view of Cartesian and positivists thinking where reality was something separate from the human or ‘out there’ (Jones, 1975; Koch, 1996; Laverty, 2003). It moved towards a mode of thinking where it is believed multiple realities exist and are constructed or modified by the knower (Laverty, 2003). In seeking to reclaim what was lost in the scientific and empirical mode of inquiry, phenomenology attempted to bring forward and uncover the lived human experience (Laverty, 2003). It assumes that behaviour is determined by lived experience, rather than by objective, external and physically described reality, and it seeks to describe experiences through the eyes of the participant and the re-searcher (Fouche, 2002).
Arising out of the fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics comes Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). While hermeneutic phenomenology is an approach deeply rooted in Husserl’s phenomenology it strikes a few differences (Austin & Hein, 2001; Laverty, 2003). For one, it shifts the mode of inquisition from seeking to understand how the structural process of consciousness is formed, to an inquiry that seeks to explore one’s existence and one’s experience of being in the world (Austin & Hein, 2001). In this sense, the re-searcher tries to create a rich account of the phenomenon rather than a clear analysis of the participant’s experience (Austin & Hein, 2001). It also shifts away from the Cartesian assumption, of a mind body split, and moves towards the assumption that “a person exists as a being in and of the world” (Laverty, 2003, p. 26). Furthermore, it shifts towards a more interpretive approach (Kvale, 1996). In hermeneutic phenomenology, interpretation is used based on the presupposition that one’s understanding of being-in-the-world is veiled and that through a process of interpretation it can become unveiled (Austin & Hein, 2001; Heidegger, 1962; Stolorow, 2006). The focus on interpretation is highlighted in the term ‘hermeneutic,’ which derives its etymology from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, meaning ‘translate’ or ‘interpret’ (Polkinghorne, 1983). Through the use of this interpretive mode of inquiry, I am guided towards bringing forth some understanding of the phenomenon that these participants have lived.

While the “methodology” of hermeneutic phenomenology is that there is no set methodology (Austin & Hein, 2001; van Manen, 1997; von Ekartsberg, 1986), I chose to incorporate the following into the structure of my research: self reflection, investigating
the lived experience of participants through an interview and interpreting phenomenon through thematic analysis, writing and rewriting (van Manen, 1997).

**Self-reflection**

In keeping with the hermeneutic approach, I engaged in a process of self-reflection throughout this re-search project. Where Husserl’s phenomenological inquiry sees self-reflection as critical to separating and identifying any biases that might influence the research, the hermeneutical approach sees self-reflections as being an essential component to the interpretive process (Laverty, 2003). As prescribed by Laverty (2003), my self-reflections were ongoing and expressed my experience of the process and how it related to the research topic. These self-reflections were recorded in both paper format (journaling) and audio format (tape recording) and have been incorporated into my interpretation, results and discussion.

**Interviews**

**Project Participants**

Each participant arrived at the interview with a unique perspective and was willing and excited to share their stories and insights on this practice they call meditation. The opportunity to just sit with any one of them would be a gift, for in each of their stories lies countless insights on how we can lead both a more fulfilling and more caring way of life. For two months, I combed my network for participants, looking for just the ‘right’ people: the people who were comfortable to talk about their experience, the people who believed they were ready to reflect on their practice and those who were available to offer their time to engage in dialogue. This method of selection follows the hermeneutical approach, where participants are selected for their lived experience in the area of study,
for their willingness to discuss their experiences and for their diversity from other potential participants (Laverty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1983; van Manen, 1997).

I continued selecting interview participants until I had five participants, this marked what I believed was a point of saturation, where no new themes from their experiences were obtained (Morse, 1995). I use the word saturation as a way of also describing the limits of a qualitative analysis designed to share the unique lived experiences of the participants. New participants could and probably would have added a new depth to the themes that arose, or might have even brought forth new themes. However, I began to see that adding more experiences and more perspectives, beyond the five participants, might have diluted the richness and uniqueness of the lived experiences of these select participants. In this way, I believe that, at five participants, the limits of my research, in time and space, were saturated.

The final set of participants consists of four males and one female. Lisa, Walter and David have sat extensively in their practice, with 10 or more years of experience each. Nathan has sat in the monastic life and Dylan has sat often at retreat. Almost all participants practice regularly, if not daily. Their regular practice ranges from half an hour to three hours a day. And their history in meditation extends from 2 to 15 years. Three of the participants are from the Tibetan Buddhist, Shamhala tradition (Lisa, Nathan and Walter), and two are from the Vipassana, or mindfulness meditation tradition (David, and Dylan).

*Interview*

When I say that a being is granted to me as a presence… this means that I am unable to treat him as if he were merely placed in front of me; between him and me there arises a relationship which surpasses my awareness of him; he is not only before me, he is also with me. (Marcel, 1971, pp. 24-26)
My investigation process into the lived experiences of these participants began with an interview, conducted over the phone or in person. As integrity of the participants experiences and confidentiality of their personal information was critical, participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to their interview (Appendix B). In this, each participant agreed to have their interview recorded and their identifying information, such as their name, used.

To call the interactions I embarked on merely ‘interviews’ is a reflection of the limitations of language to capture the lived experience of sitting in front of another and sharing moments of one’s life story. The first moment of engagement with these select few was the beginning of a relationship and a relationship in which my intentions were to build foundations of trust and safety, allowing them to share their stories both freely and without reservation.

As we ebbed and flowed through these simple and yet intimate conversations, I directed the discussions through a few guiding questions I had laid out prior (Appendix A). While these questions acted as landmarks for our discussion, there was a spaciousness and intention created in the interview process to allow the conversation to stay open and take its own direction. The aim behind maintaining openness in the interview process was to allow the lived experience of the participant to come forward without inhibition (Koch, 1996; Laverty, 2003) while still addressing the intention of the re-search. Giving permission to inquire in areas that did not directly address my questions, gave opportunity to take the conversation to a new place, which often brought forth unintended and yet very valuable insights to the area of topic.
As stories were told, in both the words shared and the gestures offered, I attempted to capture not only what was said but also what was left unsaid (K'vale, 1996): noting body language, laughter, silences, the absence of speaking, “the silence of the unspeakable and the silence of being or life itself” (Laverty, 2003, p. 19). Use of an audio recorder captured the essence and content of the interviews and allowed both the participants and I to engage freely in conversation without the distraction of transcribing.

**Interpretation process**

Hermeneutic research demands self-reflexivity, an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment, actively constructing interpretations of the experience and questioning how those interpretations came about. (Laverty, 2003, p. 22)

With the intent to bring forward some meaning from my re-search, the goal of my interpretation process was to bring cohesion to my self-reflections, literature reviews, and interviews. In the spirit of hermeneutic phenomenology, the methodology for my data analysis was not constructed through a set of strict procedures guiding the interpretive process (Koch, 1995), but rather was a continual and circular process of analyzing the context under which the research was initiated and conducted and the content that arose (Laverty, 2003).

Following interviews and transcription, I begin to unveil the experiences as told by my participants by conducting a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a “way of seeing” (Boyatzis, 1998) and identifying patterns that “[bring] together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone” (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). It is also a process which brings forth essential themes to reflect the phenomenon (Benner, 1994). In the eyes of Boyatzis (1998), conducting a thematic analysis brings forth the unique perspective of the researcher:
Often, what one sees through thematic analysis does not appear to others, even if they are observing the same information, events, or situations. To others, if they agree with the insight, the insight appears almost magical. If they are empowered by the insight, it appears visionary. If they disagree with the insight, it appears delusional. (p. 1)

Boyatzis (1998) outlines four steps to conduct thematic analysis. They include sensing themes; doing it reliably; developing codes; and, “interpreting the information and themes in the context of a theory or a conceptual framework” (p. 11). When I use the word theme, I mean a pattern that depicts observations or captures a phenomenon and is drawn either explicitly or implicitly and inductively or deductively from the data and literature (Boyatzis, 1998).

To sense themes, I first worked through each interview seeing it as a unique component. Within each interview, I was guided by van Manen’s (1997) three methods: "the holistic or sententious approach; the selective or highlighting approach; and the detailed or line-by line approach" (p. 93). In the holistic approach, the text of each interview was viewed as a whole with the intent to capture the overall meaning (van Manen, 1997). To reveal statements, which capture the essence of the phenomenon, I used the selective approach. Finally, I used the detailed approach to illuminate the meaning behind each sentence by re-reading sentence by sentence.

Once I felt I had seen the important moments that reflected the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998), I encoded the data using a data analysis tool by the name of HyperResearch. Boyatzis (1998) views the process of encoding as a transition from seeing moments to seeing them as something; that is to see parts of the data as important, and then attributing a code to it. Through this process, my first layer of encoding consists of a total of 74 codes (Appendix C). To ensure reliability that the codable moment is
coded consistently (Boyatzis, 1998), I moved back and forth between the parts and the whole of each interview, careful to not miss or mis-interpret any significant moments.

For the interpretation stage, and the last stage as it is outlined by Boyatzis (1998), I followed the hermeneutic circle approach (van Manen, 1997) of moving back and forth between looking at the parts – individual themes in each interview – and the whole – themes across interviews and within literature. Through a process of writing and re-writing and reflection, I continued to illuminate the themes until meaningful patterns were pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of the collective lived experiences (Aronson, 1994). I used a code-mapping tool as a method to allow themes to develop from the emerging codes and to allow the lived experiences of the participants to stand together as a cohesive and representative view of the phenomenon (Appendix D).

To ensure the validity of my work, I provided the nine themes to my participants for their review and feedback. Co-constructing the data, in this sense, is consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology (Koch, 1995; Laverty, 2003) and is an opportunity to increase validity and enhance the richness of my interpretation offerings.

Limitations

With every method we use to interpret our reality comes certain limits, the points at which we can see no further or no clearer. It is these limits that bring humility to our ability to fully understand, capture and interpret a phenomenon. These limits show us that through our methodology we are bound to meet thresholds in our interpretations. Because both thematic analysis and hermeneutic phenomenology are deeply rooted in the lived experience of the re-searcher and their participants, the interpretations presented here can only be so clear. However, the extent to which one is limited is dependent on
how aware one is and how open one is to see and accommodate to the limits of the methodology used.

Boyatzis (1998) outlines three obstacles that affect the visibility of thematic analysis. They include the “researcher’s a) projection, b) sampling and c) mood and style” (p. 10). The limits of projection occur when a researcher is “reading into’ or attributing to another person something that is [their] own characteristic, emotion, value, attitude, or such” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 13). This is most limiting when the researcher has strong ideologies and engages in the temptation to project their values or ideas and expectations onto the participants and data (Boyatzis, 1998). It also occurs when a researcher has too much familiarity with a subject and cannot resist the temptation to project their expectations (Boyatzis, 1998). When acknowledged and accommodated to, the impact of this limit is lessened. Boyatzis (1998) gives four opportunities to reduce projection. They include “a) developing an explicit code; b) establishing consistency of judgment- that is, reliability; c) using several people to encode the information and a diversity of perspectives…; and d) sticking close to the raw information in the development of themes and codes”(Boyatzis, 1998, p. 13). I maintained reliability by continually moving back and forth between the codable moments and the entire work and asking participants to verify the emerging themes as being consistent with their experiences.

Sampling is the second limiting factor to this type of methodology. While “there may not be greater insight in greater numbers … there is an increase in the comfort and confidence that your raw information is not contaminated by unforeseen forces” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 15). In this particular study, with only five individuals selected from
what is a plethora of experiences, my interpretations are affected by the limit of sampling. To address this, I simply come by it honestly and re-affirm that while there is an interest for these results to be generalized, these are simply five experiences and can only be held as that, as rich as they are.

The quality of the feeling, the tone, the subtleness of form, the attitude, the precision and the particularity of this research and results are all a reflection of my mood and style and can be seen as a limiting factor (Boyatzis, 1998). This research is subjective and thus who I am as a researcher, my perspective, my desires and my expectations affect the results of this data. That is to say, I am as deeply embedded in this story as the painter their painting. While it is my subjects I am trying to depict, I am aware that it is only through my brush strokes that I am able to show the interpretations that reflect us all and the insight we have come to collectively share.

A Personal Path: The Author's Context

…one can only speak of a particular aspect of truth, never the whole truth. Hence we should recognize that we may never be in full possession of total and absolute understanding, at least not in language or in the mind. (Kumar, 2004, p. 29)

I come to this re-search as both a student in environmental education and communication and a novice meditation practitioner. My experience in the field of environmental and social action has encouraged me to find mechanisms to sustain my wellbeing while continuing to be a responsible actor in this world. My education has shown me how little I know and how much I have left to learn. My practice of meditation and training in mindfulness, while very limited, has taught me that there are other, and just as valuable ways, that we can come to learn and to perceive the world.
This is an account of five individuals, who at different points in time have begun a practice of meditation and mindfulness and whose stories are now, ever so slightly, joined through this investigation into mindfulness and ecologically responsible behaviour. Their names are David, Lisa, Walter, Dylan, and Nathan. Their practice of meditation ranges from two to fifteen years. Some have sat extensively at retreat or in robes and all take regular if not daily practice. It has been my pleasure to receive their offering of words and insight.

Prior to engaging in these interviews my understanding was that I would be delving into the lives of some incredible people. It was not until I met them, some in person and some over the phone, that I became aware of how much I would come to learn from them. While to speak of them collectively may negate their unique qualities, I believe the following is true: they are calm and collected, rarely bothered by the surrounding environment, or the questions I ask. They take stillness in their breath, and as a result I echo. They are professional and yet warm and open. They are thoughtful, generous and genuine and they all come to me as they are.

**Findings**

My findings begin with an inquiry into how the participants began meditating, what mindfulness means to them and what their experience was prior to meditating. From here, I open it up to an exposé of nine themes drawn from their experiences of how mindfulness affected their lifestyle. I conclude the findings with some of their teachings.
and reflections on how to move forward towards mindfulness and things they ask to be mindful of when considering these results I present here.

A Self Without Meditation and Mindfulness

If there was to be a shift in how participants experienced themselves after meditating, I wondered what their lives felt like before they began or at any point in time in which they stopped meditating and practicing mindfulness. Their experiences include feeling: neurotic, panicky, angry, arrogant, frenetic, speedy, overwhelmed, ungrounded, reactionary, suffering.

For David, he experienced:

… less of a sense of stability, more of a being blown by the winds of seasons, of change…not having the same sense of groundedness in my life... I felt like I was more reactive, less centred, less grounded.

It was similar for Walter who said:

I get insane, I get less able to deal patiently and generously and compassionately with myself and with others and with just life… It affects my stress level and my speediness.

And for Lisa, she told me:

I get more easily overwhelmed, I am much more self-centred… very cyclical, habituated, reactive sort of person.

In Dylan’s experience a life without meditation and mindfulness was bound with many reactions and compulsions:

…[my] mind would be agitated and [I] would be reacting to everything…compulsively reacting to these urges, these cravings, these dislikes, and these likes

And lastly, for Nathan, his experience of stopping his mindfulness practice affected his way of being as well as his perspective:

…I am very ungrounded, I am running around thinking a lot or just totally subsumed in [my] day dreaming… and I am constantly under assault by a
lot of negative thinking… I would start to feel ungrounded… and would forget the fact that things are very simple; that you are just sort of here and it’s no big deal.

Opening the Door to Becoming More Mindful

So what cracks the door to allow us to see or wonder about the potential of a liberated mind; a mind, among other things, that the participants see as being less neurotic, less panicky, less overwhelmed and less reactive? When I asked participants why they had begun practicing meditation they responded almost uniformly with an awareness of their own suffering and a curiosity to see if and how they could change it.

From the voice of Lisa:

…there was a certain amount of suffering and dissatisfaction I found in my life, and so I was wanting to find a way to reconcile that or change that.

and from Walter:

…my usually sort of pat answer is to deal with the mid-life crisis, but it is not that simple, it is not really that simple. Part of it, the classical answer in Buddhism, is suffering, we all suffer…there is also an aspect of curiosity, an aspect of wanting to learn something about meditation practice, about mind, about Buddhism religion.

For Dylan, it was both a calling and an understanding that there was some other, more satisfying experience that was possible in this lifetime:

… when I was 17 I heard about the [Vipassana meditation] technique … and I knew that it was for me, it was like something I was searching for and I didn’t even know. I had a pretty good life, I have had really good karma, everything has just been handed to me, super loving family, close circle of friends, tons of human connection, I am good at everything I do, but yet somehow there is an underlying tone of dissatisfaction, and I some how knew that there had to be something more than these material pursuits.

For Nathan, the door into meditation and mindfulness was rooted in both a curiosity and an honouring of his own discomfort:
I guess I was really just curious about the meaning of life and I would read all these religious books about liberation and complete release from suffering and I just felt too curious, too compelled by an inner longing. And that happened kind of early on, but it took me a while to get miserable enough to honour that.

Lastly, for David it was initiated by an inquiry into the potential health benefits:

…The route I came into mindfulness was not through Buddhism it was through health related issues of John Kabat-Zinn’s model; at the time I had been living with chronic fatigue, and I noticed that meditation seemed to help in some unexplainable way.

*Meditation and Mindfulness*

As my study is largely focused on the art of becoming more mindful and how this might affect one’s lifestyle, including how one acts in and towards the environment, I was curious to know if my participants believed mindfulness was cultivated through meditation. The response was uniform. They believed mindfulness was not just part of the practice of meditation, but it was also something that was cultivated through meditation practice.

Walter shared with me his belief that “one of the goals of meditation is to develop mindfulness.” Similarly, David said that meditation and mindfulness are “… not separate things.” This was reflective of Nathan’s perspective. He said “...You could say that mindfulness is the cornerstone of all meditative disciplines.”

With what appeared to be a consensus, that meditation was among other things mindfulness practice, I began to ask participants how they would define mindfulness so as to ensure we were using the same language.

*Of Mindfulness*

The responses of how mindfulness and meditation relate were quite similar. They ranged from David’s belief that mindfulness “is about paying attention on purpose,
consciously, to whatever [you are] experiencing at the present moment;” to Walter’s view that mindfulness is bringing an awareness to what affect your mental states and physical actions are “going to have on the world around you and on yourself;” and to Lisa’s experience of mindfulness as the act of simply “being present.”

For Dylan, mindfulness was about “being, as much as possible, in touch with the reality of right now.” He noted that when mindful:

...your mind isn’t scattered to the future or the past and it is not overwhelmed with ignorance or emotional imbalance, you are just aware of exactly what is going on right in this moment, in your reality.

While the participants practiced varied types of meditation their experience of how it related to mindfulness (that it in fact did relate) were quite uniform; as were their definitions of mindfulness.

*The Affects on Their Lifestyle*

When participants centred into themselves, found a sense of groundedness and became more mindful of what was actually happening in the present moment, they noticed many profound affects on their lives. Through my analysis and coding process, I have categorized these experiences into nine themes. These themes are presented in a list and then explored in greater detail.

1. *Slowly, slowly:* Many participants noticed the negative affect of living a busy and sped up life, and through mindfulness they began engaging in and seeing the value of slowing down, pausing to experience what is actually happening in the moment and engaging more conscientiously, more mindfully.

2. *Paying attention:* Through a discipline that demands you practice continually coming back to the moment and to attending to what is ‘now,’
many participants experienced a shift in their ability to not only pay attention and be patient while on the cushion, but also to extend their attentiveness and patience throughout their lives.

3. **Reacting versus responding**: Mindfulness allowed participants to be more curious about their sensations, emotions and reactions to the world and began a shift from blindly reacting to situations towards intelligently responding.

4. **Expectations and letting go**: Many participants notice a new ability to let go of some of their expectations and to allow things to just be as they are or to proceed, as they need to without having an overwhelming desire to fix a situation/person, or to be fixed to a certain outcome.

5. **Harmony with ‘other’**: Their ability to be in relationships that were more harmonious with others and the ‘all’ in the natural world increased, as they became aware of their interconnectedness with the ‘all’ in the natural world and the cause and affect of their actions. Values of being compassionate, patient and accepting came forth.

6. **Serving the self**: Learning that how you treat your self has an effect on the entire phenomenal world, many participants explained that engaging more harmoniously with the outside world actually begins with engaging more harmoniously with the inside world and offering service to one’s self.

7. **Internal joy**: Participants spoke of a shift in their understanding of happiness, noting the difference between external and internal sources of happiness and the value of being content with what one has and one’s place in life.

8. **Simplicity**: By becoming aware of their needs and the often negative affects of their wants and attachments on the planet and their lives, participants experienced both a material and a mental simplicity.
9. **Whole knowledge:** Through a practice that called them into their body and their experiences of the ‘now’ some participants noted a shift in their understanding that knowledge became both intellectual and experiential.

1. Quick, Quick, Slow

*Quick, quick.*

To understand what it meant to slow down, participants shared with me the experience of being sped. They said, it is frenetic, it is compulsive, it is the antithesis of mindfulness and for Walter it is called ‘speediness’ and it is part of a lifestyle void of mindfulness. For him:

Speediness … refers to dealing with every situation right away: ‘I have to solve this right now, I don’t care whether it is right or wrong, but I have to do something right now’…When you are speedy you jump to conclusions you say things quickly.

For Walter, it is also reflected in the experience of choosing to not take the bus because you thought it would take up too much time and instead spending that time checking your email, having another cup of coffee and then driving like hell to work.

If you are David, then ‘speediness’ is the experience of having a job where you feel as if you are constantly “batting things down and dealing with things in such a crisis and instinctive way” that it feels like little else but frenetic. It is the feeling, as it is for Lisa, of having a constantly busy mind, regularly falling into distraction and the sensations, as they are spoken of in Buddhist teachings, of the three *kleshas*: aversion, attachment and ignorance.

*Slowly, slowly.*

The alternative: it is spacious, it is satisfying, and it is conscientious. It is ‘slowly’ and in the experience of my participants, it is cultivated through meditation and training in mindfulness. It is the feeling of the heart beat slowing, the body relaxing, the shoulders
dropping and the mind coming back into the present moment to become aware of what
best can be done here and now. For Walter, it is the experience of opening up and
engaging in this moment, tapping into the wisdom of going slowly:

…there is more wisdom involved in taking a few seconds to look at
something and really see it …or the situation or the person or what ever it
might be…and maybe consider it for a minute. Slow down and take a
look and then you can come to a decision as to the best action or inaction
or the best thing to say or the best thing not to say…

Slowing down is also for Walter, a practice that allows for more helpfulness,
more generosity and more compassion:

I am really good at coming up with smart ass remarks, and then
afterwards I realize that if I had been more mindful, a little less speedy,
then I could have said something that was a little more helpful, generous,
more compassionate. So that is definitely something that meditation helps
with, is that it slows down the speediness.

In our interview, Walter spoke to me at length about his heightened awareness of
our ‘plastic’ problem. He tells a classic and very practical story of how speediness and
lack of mindfulness can inhibit one from remembering and making those better choices
that one is aware of, such as reducing our plastic consumption by using fabric bags
instead of plastic:

…our speediness, or lack of it, has an affect on how we deal with the
environment around us and every little thing we do…being mindful makes
you more aware of good choices…getting back to these plastic bags, I am
having an awful time with this, because I will go to do my grocery
shopping and by the time I get up to the cashier I will finally realize that I
have left all my fabric bags in the car…Mindfulness would help me to
remember to take the fabric bags into the grocery store with me.

Lisa, who honours that slowing down may seem anti-intuitive in the Western
world, is a believer that with practice of mindfulness and a slowing of the mind, comes a
sense of spaciousness. It is this spaciousness, she believes, which creates opportunity to
see more clearly how actions affect relationships: with one’s self, with ‘others’, and with the entire phenomenal world.

For David, who found that while the frenetic nature of his work allowed for him to become “very versed in dealing with things quickly” it lacked the “satisfaction of actually having really considered and making a full creative response to [situations].”

2. Paying Attention – The Quiet Revolution

June 18, 2009: Distracted, craving, and averting. I avoid this thesis and my frustration and shame of not being able to simply do it. I just can’t focus; my mind is racing with all the reasons I am afraid I’ll fail. It’s been days since I sat and meditated. My mind is agitated, constantly racing to distractions, the Internet, food, the phone, the Internet again, more food! I need to find some spaciousness, some time just to allow me to regain my self, to slow down and re-focus. It’s time to sit.

David tells me that to pay attention can be revolutionary. The act of paying attention is so deeply embedded in the meditation practice, that it not surprising it has had an affect on the lives of the participants. It was Lisa who noted:

…how busy we are with our lives, not taking time, not going out in nature, being in front of machines all the time … it is no doubt that our attention spans get shorter and shorter.

Through practice of meditation and mindfulness, many participants experienced a shift in their ability to not only pay attention and be patient while on the cushion, but to also extend their attentiveness and patience throughout their lives. This is true for Walter’s experience. He observed an ability to be more attentive and patient in situations. By attending to the situation at hand, he also noticed an ability to conduct, with a new joy, tasks at his work that had previously appeared tedious.

For Dylan, from his practice he noticed being:

…[patient], more content in the moment, being more focused, being able to concentrate for longer periods of time, being more motivated, having better time management.
Similarly, Nathan experienced an ability to engage in tasks a little more consistently:

I think of drawing of the perfect example, you know I can sit down and do a drawing and sort of see it through without being thrown every time I make a mistake. Every little mistake kind of becoming an emotional event, and I think that is consistent for a lot of activities, you are actually able to do an activity a little bit better without being so obsessive when things don’t go your way.

3. If We Do Not REACT, What Shall We Do?

January 5th, 2009. I come across a new journal article called Mindfulness and Sustainable Behavior: Pondering Attention and Awareness as Means for Increasing Green Behavior. My reaction is: ‘SHIT, somebody did it before me.’ I am disappointed, I am even angry, and considering: what’s the point in keeping going with this topic? After a small temper tantrum, I decide to take the other route I learned in meditation of being curious and investigate why I react like this. It appears that the drive to prove something, or to be the first, or to be significant is quite deeply embedded in my thought pattern. If I step back from this article, and begin to evaluate it for its worth, I see that I might come to an alternative response of: isn’t this wonderful that there are others who are exploring and affirming my intuitions that mindfulness might assist us. I might also begin to recognize how my desire to be significant is embedded in my research, despite my attempts to pretend it doesn’t exist or influence my work. I might even see an underlying assumption that is told in my culture’s worldview, that what you do is who you are and how valuable you are perceived to be. But if I am truly mindful then I know this isn’t so, and I don’t have to act out a place where I am defending my significance. This thesis just is, it doesn’t define me, and it doesn’t prove my significance.

Nathan tells me he has heard that emotions only last 90 seconds and the remainder is the story we tell to recreate these emotions. If this were true, then what would happen if we could just wait that 90 seconds and let the emotion pass; or if in that 90 seconds we could acknowledge that the emotion exists and investigate it to see why it is arising and how we could best respond to it? For my participants, this is, in part, the practice of mindfulness: of acknowledging an experience, understanding, or at least accepting it for what it is, then letting it go and if, or where need be, taking action: healthful action, not blind action as Dylan would describe it. This practice has had a profound affect on their
lives. To understand this affect it helps to understand what it is they mean by blind action, or reaction.

*The reaction*

For Dylan, reaction is about taking blind action and it often comes as a result of an aversion to unpleasant sensations or a clinging and craving to pleasant situations:

You see something pleasant and it creates a pleasant sensation, you see something unpleasant and it creates an unpleasant sensation; we are constantly evaluating, judging everything as pleasant or unpleasant and with this comes an experience in the body, which we react to…

With an unpleasant situation …

…you may be a little bit annoyed, or irritated or agitated or offended… and [there] is a sensation, it is a physical thing that is happening inside of [you], [your] breath is quickening a little bit, [your] skin feels a little bit hotter and [you] don’t like it…there is an aversion to it …and you react to the unpleasant sensation.

For David, reaction is a knee-jerk response that occurs when under stress and when we are experiencing a surge of emotions:

I see reactivity as being more of a reflexive response to situations or events, where [we are] using more of a survival, instinctive pattern or functioning. When there is a surge of emotion coming up, and if we are operating from a stressed mode…stimulus shunts to the back of the brain… and then you have a knee-jerk response. …

For Lisa reacting comes from habits generated out of preconceived notions of how things were expected to or ought to go:

It is having pre-conceived ideas of how things are going to go or not go, which leads to these habitual responses that have little basis of truth; they are just these presumptions that become so engrained that they become a reactive cycle of dealing with people and things and life…

*The response*

Participants describe a phenomenon of the response: where instead of reacting blindly to an emotion or situation, they are able to slow down, see the reaction for what it
is and then apply an appropriate response. They describe this response as being, among
other things: a more satisfying, a more conscious, a more generous, a more
compassionate, and even a more intelligent way to act.

For Lisa, whose meditation and mindfulness practice has resulted in less reactivity
in relationships, responding is a process where she:

…[stops] or [pauses]… to actually investigate the emotional response, the
reactive response, you know not shy away from it …allow for some sort of
chance for there to be a choice of how I will respond instead of a
habituated reaction…I can then do what is appropriate whether it is
apologize to someone or whatever it might be and then let it go. Where as
I think before I would really hold onto things for a very long time.

The process of responding for David, is about allowing for a more intelligent
decision to be made:

When you stop and actually ground yourself in the present moment… and
allow the mindfulness process to deepen … you actually start to be able to
access higher cortex functioning, which is prefrontal cortex functioning,
and so you are able to make a fuller, broader decision by [bringing] in
higher levels of consciousness to come up with a response. …It doesn’t
mean you are ignoring the information from the instinctive parts of the
brain, because that is still vital information, but it is how you respond to it
that is the key …[The action] may on the outside still look quite similar,
but the place you come from may be different…there is more of a
conscious response, rather than a reflexive, unconscious reaction…the
intentions, the compassion behind it, the sensitivity behind it, those things
may be of a higher grade, when [you are] responding…So literally
mindfulness makes us more intelligent, because we make more intelligent
decisions, because we literally have more faculty available to us.

The process of responding for Dylan is deeply embedded in the practice of
meditation:

…that is this technique: learning not to react, i.e. blind reaction. Some
people think that means you don’t react to anything you just sit there like a
vegetable, you don’t do anything and you don’t care. No, equanimity is
not indifference; equanimity means you have a balanced mind. It is not
blind reaction it is healthy action. Often times in life you have to take
strong action, if someone is doing something wrong to you, you have to
take strong action against it, but you check yourself, you stay in touch with your sensations and you act out of compassion, or love etc, but you don’t blindly react…this is mindfulness.

To appreciate this process of not reacting, or indulging in our emotional reactions, Nathan talks about how one can choose to investigate an emotion rather than indulge in it blindly:

…. I guess where meditation and this Buddhist wisdom comes into play is it kind of allows you to see that there is another option. It just brings a bit of intelligence into the option, a bit of space, you know so you can kind of start conducting these experiments and see what actually happens when you respond instead or very blindly doing something just because a part of you is craving but then feeling crappy because the other part of you wants to transcend that craving.

He describes, in a very practical sense, the process of resisting the temptation to indulge in one’s emotions and falling into cravings and the sense of freedom that can arise from not reacting:

….recently, cause I am at my mom’s place, there are lots of opportunities to eat cookies and things like this, and if I do then I feel guilty, you know (laughter), because I will get out of shape or something like this. So [I] see the cookie and [I] want the cookie … there is some temptation there. But then [I] just remind myself that my happiness isn’t dependant on this cookie. So I don’t eat it and then there is a little period where [I am] not totally convinced that [I] have done the right thing by leaving the cookie (laughter) … maybe if someone dressed up the cookie, [I] could really be seduced: [I] haven’t totally renounced. But then [I] sort of cross a threshold where [I] know [I] have looked desire in the face and [I] haven’t been overwhelmed by it and then I realize: ‘this is all you have to do, it is not some sort of big deal and I realize I am not so deprived when I don’t follow my cravings’. I guess freedom is the word I would use to describe it because you just feel a little bit more free to not make such a mess of your life, be an addict all the time.

Nathan, as well as many other participants spoke about how observing their emotions and choosing to respond enabled them to avoid what they describe as negative expression of emotions:
… if you can take this other avenue of just sort of observing your emotions then [the emotions] are far less likely to become really hot and lead to extremely negative expressions of emotions, like anger…and if it is really successful then you feel free – you feel when an emotion arises and you think ‘oh usually I call this anger’ but I am just accustomed to calling this feeling anger, I don’t have to call it that it all. I can just sit with it and let it go… or and so you just sort of let the emotion be there and not think [you] have to do anything about it…and you can be this sort of scientist… looking at it with a bit of curiosity… just look at your emotions as opportunities to wake up.

On a similar note, giving oneself the space and time to investigate an emotion, and the sensations that arise with it in the body is enabled, for Dylan, by a sense of trust that he does not need to indulge in the emotion because it too will pass:

…with mindfulness you’re aware of what sensations you are feeling and you are equanimous, which means you are not reacting with clinging or craving to the present situations or aversion to the unpleasant situations, you are remaining with a balanced mind because you know it is going to change so there is no point developing any of those reactions.

4. The Art of Letting Go and Embracing Patience And Generosity

For many participants, part of the practice of meditation and mindfulness is learning to ‘let go.’ This is manifested in their experience of being able to let go of expectations and a need to fix things that are not consistent with their worldview.

Working without expectations and letting go of pre-conceived ideas of how things can or even should work out is something that Lisa has found her mindfulness practice has allowed her to do. She reflects that it has given her the ability to work in a situation (at a drop-in centre for sex trade workers) where she would otherwise feel either:

…overwhelmed by the trauma that the women in the drop-in centre go through in their lives or disillusioned by the slow responses in policy in housing and poverty issues had she not had a practice that allowed her to have a meta view – a long term view - and a sense of working without expectations.
When I asked her how her meditation practice engenders the idea of working without expectations she responded:

I guess it is by seeing how the mind works that I am able to ease up on expectations…for example, if I expect to sit for an hour and to just be in complete samadi, and have no thoughts and no discursiveness and not be planning or strategizing or whatever, I am probably going to be pretty bummed out a lot of the time. So I think just being really patient with myself and with my mind and with the process, it helps me to be able to do that elsewhere in my life.

Nathan too spoke of his experience of how meditation allowed for him to stop trying to fix things and people, himself included:

…in meditation that is kind of what you try to do, is just let yourself be without trying to fix your emotional states. Instead of trying to do something with your emotional state, you just try to observe it and that is certainly a more compassionate way to deal with yourself… I mean sometimes you have to do things, but they always say that if you are always constantly thinking about how you can fix things and living this idealized world that is exclusively within your own head, then you are kind of cut off from information from the real world where the information that is going to tell you what actually needs to be done. So there is just more of a faith that you don’t need to do anything and you can just kind of observe things and you know at the very least, just sort of think warmly about people I mean if you have got to do something you can do that I suppose.

When I asked Nathan to speak a little bit more about his experience of needing to, or wanting to, fix things and letting things go, he responded that it comes with a letting go of both hope and fear:

… I think the big one is just kind of knowing in my own life that to try and fix everything and everyone just made me miserable… it used to be the case that when I saw something that didn’t seem right or someone that was unhappy that if I didn’t tend to it that the world might come to an end….in Buddhism, they talk a lot about trying to free yourself of hope and fear, so I guess it is kind of giving up hope to some extent. Some of the ability to let go comes from having given up hope that things can be fixed, so you are a little more realistic a little bit more aware of what is capable within samsara. So you kind of, to some extent, you relax on the idea that attending to the material universe can actually cause people to be happy, so if you have given up that presumption then fixing things is no
longer so practical, because even if you have fixed everything it still wouldn’t make people happy, you know even if people lived in the nicest homes and all this sort of material aspects of a life were really in order, people still have to work on their own mind.

5. Re-Connecting and Relating to ‘Other’

The practice of meditation and mindfulness has also had a profound affect on the participants’ relationships with ‘other.’ As Lisa describes it, “when I say relationships I don’t mean just personal, human-to-human, I mean relationship to the earth and my relationship to everything around me in the phenomenal world.”

…when I am really present and when I have slowed down and given myself that time and when there is that space created, then my relationship with all of the phenomenal world is a lot different.

How can relationships with the world and all that it encompasses be affected, as Lisa says it was for her, through the practice of being present? For these participants, it begins with a shifting in understanding from a world of duality and separation to a world of no-dualism and interconnectedness; a world, as Lisa describes it, you begin to see “[yourself] in the world and the world in [yourself].”

David echoes this perspective:

…for me a big part of mindfulness is engendering, is promoting the interconnectedness of all things…all the Buddhist teachings point to the interconnectedness of all things… and so there comes an awareness and appreciation of the earth and the sea and the sky all being part of who we are. We can’t separate those things from each other without global ramifications … and if you don’t get that because you’re from a view where everything is separated, know that in the mindful world we come to see that everything is totally interconnected, it all comes from the same place…once you realize that you can’t act the same way.

Shifting from seeing one’s self as separate to seeing one’s self as deeply interconnected with the entire world brings awareness for these participants that actions have an effect. Dylan describes this when he says:
… the entire universe is governed on cause and effect, and every millisecond you are causing things, through your vibrations, through your thoughts, your actions and this causes a ripple outwards.…

Dylan also notes that through acknowledgement of cause and effect of one’s actions and an awareness of interconnectedness, more conscientious actions are generated:

…you suddenly realize ‘oh look there are other people” and suddenly you are thinking of other people, noticing other people have needs, how can I help them, how can I avoid hurting them… you are suddenly seeing things from ‘other’s’ point of view, not just yourself. You are not just thinking well I want to drive to work, and I want money, and I want this and that, you begin thinking well I have this comfort but how is it affecting other living creatures, how is it affecting other people, are they comfortable, are they happy? …If everyone practiced meditation, there would be no environmental issues, because you become so much more conscious of other people, of other things, of other living beings.

This understanding of how one fits into the world and becoming conscientious of one’s effects was re-iterated by Walter:

If you are more mindful about what your place is in the world and how you are fitting in, then you are bound to more concerned about the effect you are having on the environment and the world around you.

Walter also noted that his mindfulness had allowed him to deal with challenging relationships in a more compassionate way:

…meditation has certainly increased my mindfulness and… my ability to deal with myself and the world and deal with other people in a more mindful way, a calmer way, a more sane way… dealing with challenging relationships is a little easier when I am a little more mindful, a little more patient, a little more compassionate.

Lisa found that her mindfulness practice generated more generosity and patience in her relationships, while Dylan noticed a new sense of compassion:

Dealing with people, you don’t develop hatred towards them because you know … they are just reacting to the pleasant or unpleasant sensations just like you do and so when someone shoots negativity at you, you just have compassion for them, because that person is dwelling with hatred inside of
them so you are like ‘oh I was there once, I know exactly how it feels, and it still happens to me all the time,’ so you are a lot more compassionate for people.

Nathan was also of the belief that mindfulness can generate positive qualities, such as compassion and these can lead towards a more well-behaved person, in their social and environmental relationships:

… the fruit of all this meditation is the birth of a lot of positive qualities, like compassion. A lot of positive qualities, which would have their expression as environmentally responsible activities… meditation leads to a naturally more well-behaved person in all respects, including the environmental realm.

A few participants also spoke of how their practice had affected their relationships to the point that it had increased their desire to want to serve others. Dylan spoke of his experience of serving at the meditation centre he stayed at:

So there is this feeling to serve others, and when I am staying at the centre it is just so fulfilling and you are just so happy to be serving others, to be helping others.

6. We End Where We Begin

Being kind to yourself lets you be kinder to others -- and that just might be the finest gift you can give to the world. (C. Huber, personal communication, June 16, 2009)

While all participants spoke of how mindfulness had enabled them to have more harmonious relationships with ‘other,’ a few noted that one’s relationship to ‘other’ paradoxically begins with one’s relationships to one’s self. This idea arises from a sense of interconnectedness and cause and effect. David spoke on this topic. From his perspective:

If everybody overnight became mindful, for instance, (being in the fantastical realm at the moment) we wouldn’t have another war, we wouldn’t have the conflicts we have between people, we would instantly be protecting our environment, because how could you not? But it has to start paradoxically with ourselves, because it is not about out there, it is about in here (pointing to himself)… because it isn’t until we individually
look at our relationship with out there, with the people, with the places, with the environment, with the ‘other,’ that we come to realize that when we are damaging ‘other’ we are actually damaging ourselves… you have to start with yourself, and as you start with yourself, necessarily that starts to include how you relate to the world around you too. But in our culture we don’t get that, in our culture it is all about selfless service, but paradoxically it is all about mindfulness, you have to start offering compassion to yourself, because otherwise if you are doing it all out there (referencing to the rest of the world) and ignoring this little piece of divine blob, then how authentic is your practice out there? Because this is the most divine bit that you have been given, so if you are ignoring that, with out taking caring of it, then how on earth can you start taking care out there?

In this sense, David believes that starting with one’s self is not just “about healing ourselves, it is about healing the planet, and mindfulness is one way to do that.” So how we take care of the ‘other’ divinity appears to be, from the perspective of David, a reflection of how we take care of our own piece of divinity. For Dylan this is exemplified by noting that we reflect our thoughts and feelings about ourselves onto the world:

…when you are happy yourself, you want to make others happy, when you are miserable, angry, mad at the world, you only want to share that misery with other people, even if deep down you know at an intellectual level ‘oh I shouldn’t share my misery, I shouldn’t be pushing my negativity on other people…when you are in a super happy mood…you want to do good for people, you want to treat them well, and everyone looks beautiful and they are all your friend. When you get up and you are angry and upset, everyone seems to be out to get you, they seem viscous. You begin to thing: ‘what did they mean by that, why are they doing that to me, why are they trying to ruin my life?’ So everyone is a reflection of yourself…

To then take the time to sit on the cushion and to become more aware and present is, from the perspective of David, not only an incredible way to affect change but also one of the most radical things you can do:

…when you are sitting on your cushion, that is the most radical thing you can actually do. And it seems like the most passive thing in the world, and yet the outcome …of actually going into your experience is radical…you don’t get that unless you have experienced it, otherwise it is like ‘what the hell are they talking about,’ but it actually is the most radical thing you
can do. Because you first of all affect the change in yourself, and often, in
my experience, by some miraculous process, that impacts other people,
without you necessarily trying to.

Both Lisa and Dylan also speak of this act of giving service to one’s self. Lisa’s
experience of practicing *tonglen*, a technique in mediation where one breathes in a
particular aspect of suffering of an-‘other’ and offers in the out breath an offering of
resolution to the ‘other,’ was most powerful when she began offering compassion and a
release of suffering towards herself:

… when I first started to do it (*tonglen* practice), I really practiced with the
emphasis of suffering of others, and I never really connected to the
practice… it wasn’t until I sat at a *dathün* this past winter and the
instruction was much more emphasized on caring for oneself and one’s
own turmoil … something just really shifted for me … I feel like it really
was such a gift to give to myself and it was really caring and softening and
generous.

For Dylan, he expressed how actions of service, while benefiting the ‘other’ are
first and foremost obliging the ‘self.’ And that through mindfulness one sees that what
one does to the ‘other,’ one does to the self:

Most people think: ‘oh I should be more environmental for the benefit of
others, I should be more moral for the benefit of others, I shouldn’t harm
other people for their sake,’ and at the apparent level that is how people
think. In actuality they are doing it for themselves, because when you’re
recycling, or not driving your car or looking out for someone, you are
doing it out of a place of compassion, you are generating compassion
inside of you and this is a very wholesome mind-state to be in. When you
are like ‘I don’t care about anyone, I am just going to do whatever I want,’
it is a very unhappy, unwholesome mind-state, and you are generating
anger and dislike inside of you… you are burning yourself. So you start
going from the apparent reality of obliging others, to realizing that you are
only obliging myself, I am only helping myself and I am only hurting
myself when I do or don’t abide by my morals …It seems selfish, but
actually everything we do is for selfish reasons… When I say something
negative I generate hatred, I generate anger, that burns me that makes me
unhappy. When I generate compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy I
am rewarded with this pleasant feeling. When I am generous when I give
to others, when I serve others I am rewarded with this pleasant feeling…. And when you make a difference inside you that is going to translate to
the world around you and when you have enough individuals doing that, that is what is going to change the world. Not intellectualizing, not writing books, not reading books, not getting talks, not writing papers, not getting degrees (no offense) but practicing changing the habit pattern in your mind.

7. Pleasure Comes From an Outside Source, Joy Comes From Within

The title for this section, pleasure comes from an outside source, joy comes from within, is a take on one of Dylan’s favorite quotes (Tolle, 1999, pp. 29-30) and it sets the tone of the theme of wellbeing that arose in the interviews. As participants spoke of offering compassion, generosity, patience, loving-kindness, to one’s ‘self’ they also noted a shift in their sense of wellbeing, their levels of happiness. Dylan speaks of how through his practice his understanding of what it means for him to be happy has changed from external pleasure to internal joy:

Well when you buy a new car, yes you are happy, for a short period of time, because your happiness is based on an outside object…Sure you can buy things and pamper yourself and treat yourself and have power and fame, and have people looking up to you and that’s probably going to make you think that that makes you happy, but that is based on outside objects and is mostly based on your attachment to those objects. And like the universal nature of reality is that it is always in flux, always in change and when you develop such attachment to these things (even the human body which is constantly decaying) sooner or later they are going to be gone and your happiness is going to be gone. And so the happiness I am talking about comes from within. It is a sort of clear, tranquil, serene, positive understanding of your reality, which gives you strength when the ups and downs of life come. Pleasure, when you buy a new car, feeling physical pleasure, getting drunk, it makes it harder when the unpleasant sensations come, you feel this pleasure you revel in it, you create so much attachment to it, clinging to it, craving for more, and when the bad things come and everything goes wrong in your life you feel unpleasant sensations, you feel very agitated and it is so much harder to deal with those things because you have so much attachment. Attachment and misery go together, you have so much attachment to the good things that now the bad things have come you can’t face them. The happiness I am talking about is this joy that comes from within, that is not caused by anything outside, it is caused by not getting what you want, but wanting nothing, being satisfied, and content in the moment and this is the kind of happiness that gives you strength when everything goes wrong, because
you say everything goes wrong but this is going to pass and no one can take this inner strength away from me.

Lisa also spoke of this internal joy as arising from an experience of becoming more content with what one has and where one is in life and not living in the jealous realm that can cultivate desires and cravings.

7. It is What You Do With Your Mind and Not What You Fill Your Closet With

It was the potential of a more fulfilling life outside the material pursuit that drew Dylan in to the practice of meditation and to the Buddhist philosophy. He, among many of the other participants, spoke of how meditation and mindfulness practice had generated a shift in their level of material consumption. Dylan, in particular, spoke of being quite consumer conscientious prior to practicing meditation but also believed that his practice helped him to acknowledge and respond to his desire for material gain:

I am more mindful about how much I consume, I don’t buy things unless I need them, and I try to have as few possessions as possible. When I moved I could fit all my possessions in four Tupperware containers. There is just less materialism, less concern with material gain, possessions, that kind of image that you put forth to people.

On a similar note, David spoke of how meditation and a greater sense of mindfulness had led him to look at his own behaviour and the affect his choices were having on the environment and others. By living “more according to what [he] needs as opposed to what [he] wants” and by simplifying what his needs are David has experienced a “vast simplification of [his] life.”

For Nathan, the experience of reducing his material consumption came, in part, as a result of becoming aware of the misguided pursuit for material gain, or as it is sometimes known in the West: the pursuit of happiness
…these days I am a big advocate of simplicity- of not having a lot of stuff- I have just moved out of the abbey and I am back at my parents’ place and they will be moving soon, we are just drowning in stuff, and we are just one house. It is amazing how much stuff people have, and how so much of it has virtually no bearing on their day-to-day happiness. You know most of it resides in boxes and closets and basements and stuff like this. And there is so much work that goes into producing something and so much of the earth has to be plowed under just to produce some little trinket...

consumerism is like an addiction, you just keep having to raise the bar to stimulate yourself, because you buy this one thing and then you become kind of dull to the reality of it, so then you need to go buy something even glossier to stimulate yourself. I think meditation brings you more to the present moment and you start to see that things are pretty interesting, just your average old thing. So you don’t feel so poverty stricken all the time. I guess you just become more nourished by what you have. I think that monks and nuns are great example, because on a material level they have virtually nothing and they are very happy people! So it really goes to show it is what you do with your mind and not what you fill your closet with.

Nathan also spoke of not just a material simplicity but also a mental simplicity that arises from letting go of needing to fix everything, including one’s emotional states and all that goes on in the material world.

8. Experiencing Knowing

My participants call my attention to see that mindfulness and the practice of becoming deeply aware of one’s experiences can bring forth a different way of knowing. They also teach me that how one comes to know something can affect how dedicated one is to behaving in accordance to it. Dylan, in particular, speaks of the difference between knowing on an intellectual level and knowing on an experiential level. From his perspective, he says one needs to experience ideas, such as being mindful, beyond an intellectual level to know they are true:

…you can have all the best intentions in the world and you can understand everything at an intellectual level: “I should do this, I should do that, I should not do this, I should help others” … but people need to experience things to know that they are true, for sure. Otherwise it is just like blind faith, it is like a religion, like ‘oh I don’t want to go to hell, so I do this.’
And once we have experienced these ideas, he believes one has a knowing far deeper than any intellectual understanding:

You know it is much better to be living with compassion in your heart than greed, you know it is much better to be living with love in your heart than hatred because you are happier, you are better off.

David spoke of a similar perspective when he relayed a story of a 10-day mindfulness seminar he took that was also taught in a prison setting. He spoke of the seminar having a transformative affect on the inmates and their relationship with their victims:

….no longer could they see it as being ‘out there,’ they started to see their relationship to their victims, to the world. You know, and that is what is going to change it, not somebody telling them to do it, but actually feeling it for themselves.

As a Whole

The value mindfulness has had on these participants’ lives extends far further than I am able to capture here. While the results presented tend towards believing that mindfulness has had an affect on their wellbeing, perception and behaviour, there are a few reminders the participants leave with me to be complete their views. They show me that mindfulness is a practice that will not lead to perfection, it requires discipline and it is not the only thing that will lead towards shifting behaviour (Appendix F).
Chapter Five: Discussion

Breathe now,
find that space of calmness,
the place within you that knows these feelings of anxiety too will pass.

Trust that what you put out into the world now doesn’t have to change a thing,
The world can go on as it always has,
with your words a mere pebble falling.

It will create an effect,
as all things do,
But let it go on its falling without your expectation,
for where or how it should fall now too.

- Taylor, 2009

The Disclaimer

I sit in the woods, sensing the cool wind pass over my body. Externally, the world feels soft and still. Internally, I feel a ball of tension settled in the pit of my stomach. I am beginning to write my discussion and this beginning marks an apparent end. In my culture, we divide the world into beginnings, middles and ends and we give particular significance to ends, as they mark the arrival at a destination and usually a point of achievement and understanding. To arrive at the end is also to arrive at the climax, the point at which all prior knowledge is coalesced into one moment, or one idea and this moment unifies the entire work and gives meaning to all that has come before. The reality though, is that while this discussion is at an end it is also one mere point in a process and no more significant than what has come before and what will come after.

The format of this thesis, with clear beginnings, middles and ends, stems from calculative, linear thought. In calculative thinking, to understand something one takes a stance of objectivity, which creates a sense of detachment from that which is being
studied and allows for some sense of apparent truth to be discovered (Plumwood, 1999). Alternatively, to understand something through meditative thinking one takes the stance of subjectivity. By seeing one’s self as immersed in the whole experience, one comes to know that there is no absolute truth to be known but mere interpretations that can guide us towards greater understanding, but never full knowing. The challenge when writing this discussion arises due to the nature of the thesis content and research approach, which are both rooted in meditative thinking. Thus, to describe the effects of mindfulness through the lens of calculative, linear thought and to then prescribe lifestyle shifts as a result of mindfulness or to offer set truths, feels contradictory to this re-search topic of mindfulness and methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology. This thesis then, is not about prescribing effects of mindfulness, or listing all the things we can come to know and experience from mindfulness. Rather it is simply about offering experiences and demonstrating how heightening one’s sensitivity can influence one’s life, one’s ability to perceive ways to live here well and to understand the gaps in our assumptions or challenges of our behaviour.

I am taught that one approaches mindfulness without expectations that it will lead anywhere, but that it will allow for engaging more fluidly with the reality of the moment. It would be my hope that the reader would approach this re-search in the same way. That is, to see that while I offer some general themes of how mindfulness has affected these participants’ lives, the benefit to the reader is perhaps to not question if these experiences are true for all who practice mindfulness but to question is this true for me? What is the experience I have from reading this re-search and what affect are these ideas and concepts having on my experience of my self? By engaging one’s self more fully in the
re-search the reader becomes a part of the process and a part of the search for the benefits of being mindful and aware.

*Discussing Mindfulness*

The virtues of slowing down, of focusing, of simplifying, of letting go of expectations and fixed ideas, of learning to respond to situations and of harmonizing with the self and the ‘other’ are such incredible styles of life that have been experienced more fully by these practitioners of mindfulness. Mindfulness does not prescribe these lifestyles per se, but it appears that it does liven one’s senses to be able to perceive ways of being here that are potentially more peaceful, more compassionate and more healthful. I do not doubt that further study would bring forward more experiences of such joyous ways to be here and that deeper practice of mindfulness would heighten sensitivity to understand how such lifestyles benefit one’s life.

*Extrapolating the Experiences*

From the experiences shared and the literature reviewed, I am coming to see that mindfulness is in part a practice of becoming aware of habitual patterns and assumptions and also a practice of finding balance in one’s life and in all one’s relations. The Western worldview is supposedly riddled with assumptions and patterns of behaviour that are causing damage to one’s self and the planet (Berry, 2006; Drengson, 1995; Eaton, 2007; Kasser, 2006). Re-searchers and environmental educators have long been intrigued as to how one can re-shape, or re-educate one’s self to live here more harmoniously (Orr, 1992; Roszak, 1992). Through a practice of mindfulness that was believed to affect wellbeing (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Davidson, et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Siegel, 2007), to shift perception (Brinkerhoff & Jacob, 1999; Sewall, 1995) and to alter behaviour (Amel & Britain, 2009; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Rosenberg, 2004), the
question that arises for me is: where this has been the case for participants, what can we come to learn from their experiences? If the experiences of these individuals can teach us something, it will be to reveal some assumptions embedded in the Western worldview and to share their stories of how mindfulness in their life facilitated more healthful and harmonious relationships with their self and others in the entire natural world.

When one thinks of fostering a more healthful relationship with one’s self and others, focus might not be the first thing that comes to mind. Through a practice requiring they become disciplined and focused on the moment, participants shared with me their awareness of both the health benefit and joy of being more attentive and focused throughout their lives. They also shared how being more focused cultivated patience. Siegel (2007) believes that focus allows for increased capability to transform one’s mental flow, allowing for the ability to disengage from thought patterns that lead to such things as depression and anxiety. These participants also believe it can affect wellbeing by allowing them to be more attentive and to find joy in what they are doing in the present moment and to be more attentive and accepting of them selves and those around them. Recognizing focus was something participants felt they lacked in their life, a further question to re-search arises for me: why is it that these participants lacked focus in the first place and is there a hidden assumption in the Western worldview that has moved Westerners away from cultivating or valuing concentration?

Throughout their interviews, these participants also shared the value of slowing down and brought to light the question of: why are we moving so fast and what advantage is achieved from such a fast pace? While the benefit of slowing down seems so apparent when said aloud, the value only becomes truly clear when lived. Recognizing
the frenetic life was both unhealthful and a distraction from what was truly important in their lives, participants began the practice of slowing down. Being aware that slow knowledge (Orr, 1996) and slow food (Aniere, 2005) movements are becoming increasingly popular in Western culture, these participants’ experiences intrigue me to question how else and what other benefit one can gain from slowing down? As I consider, as Drengson (1995) had, the vast and numerous decisions the Western world has made frenetically, including many technological fixes, I question what could have been learned and what could have been seen from slowing down? Would we have come to learn of patience and to trust process, as these participants did? Or would we have seen the other embedded assumptions these participants reveal to me? Assumptions, for example, that one can know a problem enough to come to a solution and if there is a problem then one should fix it and fix it now!

Coming face to face with one’s expectations that the world, or one’s friends, or even one’s self does not necessarily need to be fixed, or not necessarily by you, may be challenging. However, these participants share with me that this might be the case and it doesn’t have to feel so daunting. Through their practice of slowing down, they each found great benefit in taking time to really consider a situation, a feeling, a perspective etc. before reacting to it, or ‘fixing’ it. They believed that by slowing down, they were more apt to see some of their misguided assumptions, or behaviour that led them to the notion things can or should be fixed or changed. The participants showed me that there is care, patience and even generosity involved in taking time and letting go of expectations. They also noted that slowing down could have wonderful benefits in one’s relations, including the one with the self and those held with the planet. They believed this to be
true, because they saw giving space to a situation, emotion, etc. could result in a more
compassionate, or forgiving, or more aware response. It could also result in the wisdom
to simply let be what is.

The idea of letting be, may seem foreign to Western culture, especially if it means
not doing something, or waiting to do something when there is an apparent problem.
This idea however, of taking space and of learning when to act and when not, is reflective
in the experiences of these participants and deeply embedded in the words of Lao Tzu’s
writings on leadership (Wing, 1986). Lao Tzu (Wing, 1986) spoke so clearly of the
practice of non-doing, or *wei wu wei*, as an art and a skill of leadership where one comes
into tune with the rhythm of the natural world and perceives when to act and how to act.
He taught that one could know when they were in the flow of action, or in healthful
action, by becoming aware of how they were engaging their self (Wing, 1986). If it was
a feeling of forcefulness, then one was most likely creating harm and if it was a feeling of
effortless action, then one was likely acting in accord with nature and the natural flow of
life. This is not just an intriguing idea, but a truly practical tool that one might foster in
Western culture and education, in one’s self and in ‘problem solving.’ It is a tool I am led
to believe requires awareness and mindfulness and a tuning into our body and meditative
thinking.

Learning to become aware of one’s body and the wisdom it offers is another
lesson these participants offer. It is also a lesson revealing an assumption that I believe is
deep within Western culture. The assumption is that the knowledge of one’s body and
corresponding emotions and intuitions are misguided and cannot be trusted. Or said
differently, it assumes that the knowledge drawn from the rational mind is superior to the
knowledge of the meditative mind, that which draws from our emotions and intuitions of our body. Without strength in this emotional mind, it would be unlikely we could know when to engage in this flow that Lao Tzu speaks of and become the leaders he believed we could be. This is not to say one should be rid of the rational mind, but in order to function to one’s full potential and to become great leaders requires fluency in both forms of thinking and corresponding intelligences: emotional and intellectual (Goleman. & Cherniss, 2001). To have the fullest perspective and understanding then requires balancing one’s self and creating harmony and co-operation between one’s mind and body.

These participants’ experiences lead me to believe that without tuning into one’s meditative mind it would also be unlikely to fully experience interconnection and the cause and effect of one’s actions. I am informed that the assumption guiding Western perception towards such disconnect is duality (Roszak, 1995). By tuning into the sensations of their body, the participants perceived the boundaries between their mind and their body, and their self and the world dissolving, allowing for a profound sense of interconnection and interdependence. Playing into this understanding of interconnection is their experience of perceiving, on a physical level, the effect their actions have on an ‘other’ and on them selves. Through a perception of interconnectedness, these participants shared with me their new sense of responsibility and compassion to all ‘others’ and to them selves. Gibson (2009) believed understanding that one had an affect on ‘others’ was critical to being a leader. These participants’ experience of feeling interconnected with both their selves and the world questions the truth and the value of the assumption of duality. Their experiences also demonstrate how mindfulness, which
can facilitate tuning into one’s body, may be a vehicle to discovering interconnection and regaining a sense of respect and compassionate action towards one’s self and the world.

Their experiences of knowing more clearly the rhythm of their body and the patterns of their mind bring these participants to also question the benefit of consumption and attachment. Through their interviews they spoke of desires to consume and cling to things, people and situations and how unhealthful this really was. Where others have also questioned the health and environmental impacts of Western material consumption (Amel & Britain, 2009; Burch, 2000), these participants bring to light the possibility that consumption of and attachment to unhealthful thoughts, emotions, situations, events etc. might also be impacting the environment. While at first glance the idea that consuming thoughts or events could effect the environment may be a reach, for these participants it is quite true. The belief is that consuming, as a result of clinging or craving, ultimately denies one’s self from the possibility to live freely in the moment. Where freedom is believed to come from being able to make a choice, mindfulness and being aware of one’s craving or clinging is believed to foster the ability to choose if that choice will be healthful or not. These participants, as well as other re-searchers (Brown & Kasser, 2005), believe that how healthy one is affects how able and likely one is to act ecologically responsible.

If the goal is to heal this planet then the healthy self is one that these participants believe must be cultivated first. This belief is that what one offers to the world one offers to one’s self. Therefore, offering an unhealthful action to the world has a negative effect on one’s self. To begin learning why and when one is acting in a harmful manner, and being able to choose differently, is believed to be cultivated through awareness and
mindfulness. Through this belief, the participants uproot two other assumptions in the Western worldview. They are of self-less service and secondly, that we can take care of the planet and others before we take care of our selves. Deep within Western culture is this notion that one can offer service without the expectation of result or reward, this is called selfless service. While generally a nice ‘idea’ these participants contradict it with their lived experiences and bring to my attention the value in understanding the ‘reward’ of one’s actions. Their experiences show that with every action there arises an equivalent sensation in the body. This is coherent with Hanh’s (2005) concept of dependent co-arising. That is, actions generated from emotions such as love and compassion, generate pleasant sensations or ‘reward’ in the body; and unpleasant sensations in the body are generated from actions manifested from expressing negative emotions such as guilt and anger. In this sense, one cannot do anything without it having an affect on them. Becoming aware of unhealthful thoughts and actions and the effect they have on one’s self and mindfully choosing to cultivate healthful thoughts and actions ultimately increase one’s wellbeing (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Siegel, 2007). By increasing one’s wellbeing, it is believed by these participants and re-searchers such as Brown & Kasser (2005) one is more likely to act ecologically and socially responsible. To take care of the planet and others then, is first about becoming aware of what ‘reward’ one’s actions are having on one’s self and then choosing those that are healthful and thus increasing one’s wellbeing.

To come full circle, these participants unveil some hidden assumptions in the Western worldview that have affected their lives. By cultivating a more healthful relationship with their self and by training their minds to perceive sensations and
assumptions, to stay focused and to understand the effects of their actions, it is my understanding they have cultivated lives that are more healthful and correspondingly more respectful and compassionate and caring to all of their relations.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

For so long in the West, we have relied heavily on our rational minds as the source of knowledge that we have correspondingly come to mistrust our intuitive bodies as another source of knowledge (Maturana & Bunnell, 1997). It is my belief, that this mistrust has re-enforced a severe disconnect between mind and body, already fostered by the Cartesian view of duality, which separates and gives superiority to the mind. To reconnect to one’s body and the wisdom it can provide, including an ability to think meditatively, I am seeing that one needs a practice that takes one into the body and livens the senses. My understanding of mindfulness now, is that it can be a way to experience the world in a more open, and more aware manner and with heightened sensitivity. I see that it draws one into the body and awakens points of sensation that have lain dormant. I understand that mindfulness, however, will not lead to anything one doesn’t already know, but it is a process of re-gaining awareness to what they have always known – a remembering. It taps into places of deep wisdom and opens up one’s perspective to see the world in all the colors and textures, tastes and sounds, and deep feelings that humans were designed to perceive. I acknowledge that mindfulness acts as a regulator and by practicing it diligently one can become aware of things such as embedded assumptions in their worldview, or patterns of thought and behaviour, that are detracting one from one’s needs and ultimately one’s centre of wellbeing. In different times and different cultures what one would experience becoming aware of would likely change. But in this culture, what these participants show me is that what one might become aware of through mindfulness is the notion that slowing down is essential to be effective and healthy, as is training in attentiveness, patience and focus. The world is interconnected and becoming
aware of the effect one has on others and they have on one’s self is essential if to building harmonious relationships. Simplicity really is bliss, or at the very least it is heightens a sense of joy. Taking time to observe habitual patterns, instead of blindly reacting, is key to leading a more healthy and harmonious life. Lastly, healing the planet really does begin with healing one’s self.

Address to Readers

Most goals are not achieved by single acts of will, even heroic ones. They are achieved by sustained acts of will, that is, by a change of habit, of custom and of culture. (Dublin, 1990)

To environmental educators, I offer this work as first a piece for you and you alone. For it is when you take care of your self that you can offer the world your truest gifts and without the wrapping of negative emotions, such as guilt, pain, and disempowerment. Mindfulness can be a great tool to reconnect with your self and to learn what you need to sustain your wellbeing in order to continue on your path as an educator. I leave you with the words of Maturana & Bunnell (1997):

The most important thing you can do as a teacher is to expand your own living, to expand your own awareness and to accept your own adequacy and legitimacy, and follow your own desire to live in love and participation as an integral singularity in the society, biosphere, and cosmos. (p. 9)

To those who develop educational programs, I ask you to sincerely consider the cost of perpetuating assumptions that one’s mind and body is disconnected and that one must rely heavily on rational thought alone. I ask you to go into your own experience of a time when you have felt in tune with your body and listened to your deep and sensitive intuitions. I ask you to recall this memory and the sensations that arose, as you trusted your self and the experience of believing in the wisdom your self offered. I ask you as you design programs to consider teaching others how to re-gain their own sensitivity, so
that they too can share your experience of trusting their selves and re-gain the skill of using their full-mindedness.

To those who question our educational system, I offer you mindfulness as a tool to step back and see the full perspective of how our current model has been designed and which assumptions embedded in it are misleading. On your route to offering new models I offer you the perspective of Thomas Merton, who questioned as you do now, and who believed that what we needed was not an educational system that mass-produced more ‘successful’ people but an educational system that produced, “…more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every shape and form…people who live well in their places…people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane” (Orr, 1991, p. 4). I also suggest reviewing and drawing from current education processes that reinforce interdependence and interconnection and may also foster the insights that practice of mindfulness has presented here.

To fellow re-searchers, I offer you this piece of work as a reminder to continue researching for the benefits a practice of mindfulness and awareness can have in your own lives. I also offer you this as a stepping-stone to further research on how mindfulness can affect our perception and help to shift some of the embedded assumptions that are believed to be having such negative effects on the health of our planet. As well, I offer this as a benchmark to re-search the effects of integrating mindfulness practices in the lives of environmental actors as a method to achieve balance and sustainability in their lives.

Finally, to those who wish to begin a practice of mindfulness, I offer you meditation as one way to train in this, but acknowledge that there are many other forms
of mindfulness training. Mindfulness can be trained through other meditative practices such as sport, the arts and prayer. It can also be trained, daily and through a simple practice of taking a few moments to come back to your breath and becoming aware of your sensations and the world around you. Acknowledging what you feel right now and what it is in this moment that is detracting or bringing you closer to your needs and your centre of wellbeing.
**Staying**

I see you now friend,
you sit with me,
in a place I have always longed to be.
Where the world is a little stiller,
a little more open,
a little more free.
I am with you now friend,
and I see what you now see.
The song of the violet flower,
the touch of the still air,
the whisper of the silent stone.
Remind me this is a place I want to be.
and call me back here please friend,
when I have the urge to leave.
So I can stay with you just a little longer friend,
and perceive life here,
in *this* moment we share.

-Taylor, 2009
References


Gibson, G. (2009). Who you are is how you lead: How the power of conscious leadership can shape the leader you want to be. Toronto, Canada: LIA Publishing.


Communication Theory and Research Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associate.


Appendices

Appendix A – Interview Guide

1. I would like to begin with a few questions about your meditation history
   a. Do you practice a particular type of meditation?
   b. How long have you practiced meditation?
   c. How often and for what length of time do you practice?
   d. When did you start?
   e. Why did you start practicing meditation?

2. I would like to talk a bit about mindfulness, and I wonder if you have a definition of mindfulness you would mind sharing with me?

3. Do you believe there is a relationship between meditation and mindfulness? Please explain.

4. Since you began meditating, and practicing mindfulness, have you noticed any influences it has had on your lifestyle?
   a. If yes, please describe this influence.
   b. If no, has the practice of meditation influenced your life in other positive ways?

5. Do you see your lifestyle changes resulting from meditation influencing how you act in and towards the environment? Please explain.
   a. Do you feel that these changes are unique to your lived experience, or have you experienced others practicing meditation who have responded in similar lifestyle changes? Please explain.

6. Has your practice of meditation affected your perspective of or relationship with the natural world? Please explain.
   a. If so, can you speak to certain teachings from the Buddhist traditions, which have influenced this relationship?

7. a. Has there been a period of time when you stopped meditating altogether?
   b. If so, for how long did you stop?
      i. Do you recall it affecting the lifestyle changes you previously mentioned?
      ii. Do you recall it affecting how you acted in and towards the environment?
   c. If not:
      i. Do you believe that the lifestyle changes you mentioned would persist if you stopped meditating?
      ii. Do you believe that if you stopped meditating it would affect how you act in and towards the environment?
Appendix B – Research Consent Form

Title of project: Mindfulness and ecologically responsible behaviour
Researcher: Alicia Taylor
Researcher email: ********** Phone: ***.***.****
University Affiliation: Royal Roads University
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Catherine O’Brien
Program Head: Dr. Rick Kool

Thank you for accepting my invitation to participate in a research study on mindfulness, meditation and ecological responsible behaviour. This research project is a requirement of my program at Royal Roads University. Should you wish to verify my credentials with Royal Roads University please contact the program head of the School of Environmental Education, Dr Rick Kool (email: **********).

This document constitutes an agreement to participate in my research project. Your participation in the study should require no more than 2 hours of your time and will consist of an interview (~ one hour), and a follow up discussion (~1 hour) at a later date, to verify statements and interpretations.

Information will be recorded in hand-written format and tape-recorded (with your permission) and, where appropriate, summarized or directly quoted, in the body of the final report. All names and identifying information will be kept confidential unless consent has been given. Participants will have the opportunity to verify statements and interpretations of their interview prior to publication. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential and tapes and transcripts will be retained until the project is complete.

A copy of the final report will be published. A copy will be housed at Royal Roads University, available online through UMI/Proquest and the Theses Canada portal and will be publicly accessible. Access and distribution will be unrestricted. Segments of the report and findings may be used in future publications or presentations.

Please note, that you are not compelled to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and any data acquired will only be used with your permission. Similarly, if you choose not to participate in this research project, this information will also be maintained in confidence.

Please identify your preference for use of your name and any identifying information by selected one of the following choices:

☐ I give consent to use my name and any identifying information in the final report and in future publications or presentations and acknowledge that I will be asked to verify the use of any direct quotations or interpretations of my experience prior to publication of the report.

☐ I request that my identity, including any identifying information, is kept anonymous throughout the report and any future publications or presentations. I acknowledge that I will be asked to verify the use of any direct quotations or interpretations of my experience prior to publication of the report.

Please identify your preference for use of a tape recorder during your interview:

☐ I give consent to be tape recorded during the interview process.
☐ I request that my interview be conducted without the use of a tape recorder

By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): __________________________________________________

Signed: _____________________________________________________________

Date: _________________

Name of researcher: (Please Print): ____________________________

Signed: _____________________________________________________________

Date: _________________
Appendix C – Codes and Frequency

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Appendix E – Glossary

Chi – life process, or flow of energy

Dathün: month long meditation retreat

Dukkha: “The first noble truth deals with dukkha which, for want of a better English equivalent, is inappropriately rendered by suffering or sorrow. As a feeling dukkha means that which is difficult to be endured” (Maha Thera, 1988, p. 47).

Ecologically responsible behaviour: “behavior that consciously seeks to minimize the negative impact of one’s actions on the natural and built world (e.g. minimize resource and energy consumption, use of non-toxic substances, reduce waste production).” (A. Kollmuss & J. Agyeman, p. 240)

Equanimity: evenness of mind

Five moral precepts: no killing or harming sentient life; no stealing or taking what is not given, no sexual misconduct; no false speech; no taking of intoxicants

Kleshas: unhealthy emotions, also know as three poisons, or three fires: ignorance of the truth; attachment; aversion

non-dualism – to have oneness with something, someone, some experience. “Nonduality means ‘not two,’ but ‘not two’ also means ‘not one.’ That is why we say ‘nondual’ instead of ‘one.’ Because if there is one, there are two. If you want to avoid two, you have to avoid one also” (Hanh, 2005, p. 45)

samsara: perpetual wandering: the wheel of suffering that we perpetuate by doing the same things time and time again.

Suffering: see dukkha

Samadhi: state of consciousness arising from higher levels of meditation
Subjective well-being: a self-report of one’s happiness based on measurement of three variables: positive affect – consisting of pleasant emotions such as happiness and joy; negative affect – consisting of unpleasant feelings such as fear and sadness - and; life satisfaction – a global assessment of one’s quality of life (Andrews & Whitney, 1976; Diener, 1984; Emmons, 1986).

Tonglen: sending and taking meditation

Vipassana: type of meditation, also known as insight meditation
Appendix F – Further Thoughts From the Participants

Practice Leads to Practice

Though mindfulness has had an affect on their lives, I am called upon by Walter to remember that meditation practice does not lead to perfection. In fact, in the eyes of Walter that is not the goal, rather the goal is to practice:

… you have to be careful with the word ‘goal’ because it implies that you can become a perfect meditator, and it is not really about that, it is about practicing. It is a practice, and you always practice.

And so you practice, and you continue to practice if you want to be mindful, because as Dylan says:

… it is all well in good to tell people to be more mindful … but the mind is such an untrained thing; our minds are so wild… and unless you diligently, repeatedly, persistently train the mind on a day to day basis, you can’t just get up in the morning and think ‘oh I am going to be mindful, I am going to be mindful from now on,’ because as soon as something happens, you feel a negative feeling and you just react to it. You can’t help it, it is so hard; even if you train your mind everyday it still overpowers you from time to time. So it is all well in good to tell people to be more mindful, you will feel more well adjusted, you feel more happy, of course that is true, but it is easier said than done. You actually have to put in a lot of effort.

And so again they say, practice:

…it is key… it is not about how much you meditate but how often you meditate and that makes a big difference… and of course your mind is always going to wander but you just keep bringing it back, the more you keep bringing it back and bringing it back, it makes a difference and it is a triumph and it is a step forward.

And as one practices on the cushion, David remarks on the value of also taking it off the cushion too:

.... mindfulness is about living a mindful way. There is no separation between your time on the cushion and your life, they are one in the same thing.
Affecting Change in Our Lives

The meditation practice these participants speak of is one that requires discipline and a certain amount of patience to stick to it, even when it gets tough and even when the fruits of mindfulness are uncomfortable. Walter asks that when choosing to embark on the journey of mindfulness, to remember that just as the goal of meditation is not to achieve perfection, it is also not to solve all one’s problems:

…it has an affect, but to oversimplify it to say it has helped you … is not really the point. Meditation is a surprising thing, it is not as if it solves all of your problems, but maybe it makes you more aware of your problems, maybe it makes you more aware of a constructive way of dealing with them, but it doesn’t solve them. It might even make you aware of a whole bunch of problems you never thought existed before. But you also develop some tools for dealing with them, or at least looking at them.

And what one sees, these problems, this suffering, this pain that may arise from practice, while they may be daunting and difficult, in the eyes of David they may be the motivator to propel us towards affecting great change:

How do most of us affect change? It is through some kind of suffering, and pain. That is the most productive motivator of all; that is why people come to see me, it is because they are in pain… If we don’t increase our level of consciousness fast enough then we will be bludgeoned through the affect of our continued behaviour….but it may be that we have to go through a painful process to increase our consciousness.

Behaviour in The Environment

While participants have noted on many occasions in this analysis that mindfulness has had many affects on their behaviour towards the environment and all in the phenomenal world, they ask me to remember that there are other key contributors to this change. They included exposure and influence from community, environmental groups and media. To this end, Walter notes that his level of awareness of what things he could do to affect change in the environment came through friends who have knowledge in
areas such as environmentalism and ecology. His accentuated the point by saying that while:

it is really good to be aware of the problems and it is good to be mindful but it is really good to have people around us who remind us of what can we do right now.