

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

# Mapping the Meditative Path:

The Effects of Conceptual Knowledge of Meditative Frameworks  
on Meditators' Experiences in Long-Term Insight Practice

By

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## Abstract

*This paper addresses an increasingly contested topic in the contemporary Western vipassanā meditation movement: The dissemination of Buddhist frameworks like the “stages of insight,” the “ñāṇas” first seen in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Visudhimagga text, within cultures of mindfulness. The principal question is two-fold: 1) Would sharing such Buddhist frameworks protect potential Western meditators from possible (and underreported) harms of intensive practice? And 2) Does in-depth knowledge of such Buddhist frameworks help, hinder, or otherwise affect perceived progress for experienced meditators? While a growing body of literature has begun reifying the harms mentioned in the first question, the second question has gone unanswered academically despite being answered anecdotally within spiritual communities. Having struggled immensely myself to reconcile conceptual Buddhist knowledge with my own meditation practice, I hypothesize that knowledge of ñāṇas hinders meditative progress, and conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews of experienced meditators to test this hypothesis. Through this interview-based field work, I construct an intersubjective account of the relationship between cerebral knowledge about meditation – a practice of non-cerebral engagement with one’s direct experience of reality – and meditation itself.*

*Through the research interviews, the hypothesis that conceptualization of the meditative path through ñāṇas hinders vipassanā practice is confirmed, although benefits of meditative frameworks like the “stages of insight” also emerge. A number of themes related to the limitations of concepts emerge as well, fashioning contemporary American insight meditation into a lens through which I deconstruct the general truth of conceptualization philosophically. Pragmatically for meditators, on the other hand, I propose a new map of the meditative path that retains the relevant accuracy of the “stages of insight,” yet lets go of the conceptual trappings they present to Western practitioners.*

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

Sitting in my bed in August 2018 at the *Panditarama Lumbini* monastery in Nepal, I finally cracked, breaking two weeks of nonstop *vipassanā* meditation to turn on an iPad and pour over a book detailing sixteen “stages of insight.” I understood these “stages of insight,” called *ñāṇas* in Buddhist literature, to be something like milestones along the path of insight

meditation, collectively forming a map of the road to enlightenment – a lofty goal with which I’d become obsessed. While I trusted the monk and nun of the monastery (Sayadaw Vivekanada and Sayalay Daw Bhaddamanika) to gauge my progress, my intellectualizing and competitive mind wanted to know: Where am I? Which “stage of insight” is next? How does the map between my current state and the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path – stream-entry, nibbana, liberation – look? Of course, my focus on these questions proved directly at odds with actually walking that path; rather than meditating, I’d become lost in thought. Ironically, the thought in which I was lost was regarding the very practice through which I strived for freedom from compulsive, pathological thinking. Far from helping my retreat or my progress along the meditative path, studying the “stages of insight” and analyzing my practice in light of cerebral knowledge of them produced neuroses and confusion. Two weeks after starting this fruitless analysis, I ended my retreat unenlightened and demoralized, with the palpable feeling that my *vipassanā* practice was going nowhere.

How had this happened? Befuddlement at my predicament of fixating on maps of the meditative path turned into motivation in the academic year following my retreat in Lumbini; I resolved to understand why the knowledge of Buddhist frameworks in my mind seemed such a hindrance to my practice. This paper is the fruit of that resolution, and an exploration through reflexive ethnography of the effects of such conceptual knowledge on Western meditators.

Current leaders in the Western *vipassanā* (insight meditation) movement debate this question which I intend to investigate: Is intellectual, conceptual Buddhist knowledge of progression in *vipassanā* – a practice predicated on direct, corporeal and non-conceptual experience – helpful, harmful or otherwise impactful on meditators’ progress? More specifically, *vipassanā* teachers argue occasionally for, but more often against, disseminating information

about the specific Buddhist framework of the sixteen “stages of insight,” or *ñāṇas*, first seen in its original form in the *Visuddhimagga*<sup>1</sup> text of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. In his book *Mindfulness*<sup>2</sup>, Joseph Goldstein (perhaps the most prominent teacher and figure in the Western *vipassanā* movement) argues extensively against a fixation on conceptual knowledge about the meditative path and its ends. He claims that one of the greatest dangers in practice is a meditator intellectually clinging onto an idea of an end of the Buddhist path (e.g. “emptiness”<sup>3</sup>) before experiencing or embodying it, thus clinging to a concept which, paradoxically, turns out to be a far enemy of the very thing it attempts to conceptualize. Nonetheless, conceptual Buddhist frameworks have boomed in popularity among Western meditators as the practice itself has boomed within Western culture.

While existing anthropological work (Pritchard, 2016<sup>4</sup>; Lindahl et al., 2017<sup>5</sup>) shows Buddhist frameworks’ applicability and classifies many possibilities for affective outcomes of serious practitioners, in this paper I investigate the impact of conceptual *knowledge of* these frameworks. I aim to interpret intersubjective experiences of various kinds of meditators:

1. Meditators who have conceptual knowledge of the framework of the *ñāṇas*, and who furthermore have regular access to the guidance of a primary meditation teacher.
2. Meditators who know the *ñāṇas*, but do not have regular access to a teacher.
3. Meditators who do not know the *ñāṇas*, but who have regular access to a teacher.

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<sup>1</sup> Buddhaghosa. *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. Bhikku Ñāṇamoli (Onalaska, WA: BPS Priyatti Editions, 1999), Ch. XXI.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Goldstein, *Mindfulness* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Goldstein, *Mindfulness*, 75.

<sup>4</sup> Sean Pritchard, “Mindfulness and Beyond: A Qualitative Study of Advanced Mahasi Meditators’ Experience,” *Fielding Graduate University PhD Diss., ProQuest Dissertations Publishing* (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Jared Lindahl et al., “The varieties of contemplative experience: A mixed-methods study of meditation-related challenges in Western Buddhists,” *PLoS ONE* 12, no. 5 (May 2017): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239>.

4. Meditators who do not know the *ñāṇas*, and who do not have regular access to a teacher.

I hypothesize that practitioners who have gained extensive knowledge of the frameworks over the course of their practice will report such conceptual knowledge as being an impediment to their progress (defined by the *ñāṇas* themselves, or in subjects' own terms if they see progress differently) in meditation. Particularly, I expect practitioners to report confusion resulting from the juxtaposition between *ideas* of meditative states and the direct experiences of meditative states themselves, as well as distracting thoughts regarding progress. Nonetheless, I hypothesize that for practitioners who have known the *ñāṇas* but have lacked the guidance of experienced meditation teachers, the knowledge will have offered benefits. Particularly, I expect practitioners to report a sense of validation in learning of the commonality of meditative experiences they have had, and I expect at least some practitioners to report this benefit as outweighing the downsides of knowing the *ñāṇas*.

## Literature Review

To understand the context in which practitioners in the United States may experience any of the aforementioned harms (or benefits) from conceptual knowledge of Buddhist meditation frameworks, we must understand meditation's journey culturally in the U.S. – from 1960s fringe activity to the inspiration for today's fervor for mindfulness and \$1.2 Bn meditation app industry. What has amplified the popularity of meditation in the U.S. cultural zeitgeist is integration with those lenses in America holding perceived credibility – science and medicine, namely. Since Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of transcendental meditation, suggested the practice is

compatible with (and can be corroborated by) Western science, meditation has steadily gained cultural acceptance. Whereas previously it was associated with hippies, psychedelics and the American countercultural movement of the sixties and seventies, science proved a non-stigmatized lens through which it could begin gaining cultural traction. Much like the Western focus on yoga's *asana* limb ("the physical" – just one of eight limbs of yoga, other limbs actually including meditative practices), this partial focus within meditation, emphasizing demonstrable or scientifically-validated results over more esoteric understandings, has slowly earned credibility for the practice in America. Yet, with acceptance from sound scientific research has come zeal and hyperbole from Western media.

As Anna Lutkajtis writes in "The dark side of Dharma," a prevailing view of meditation now holds it "as an exalted technique that has the power to provide healing beyond traditional forms of psychotherapy."<sup>6</sup> Initially, my exposure to meditation was to this simplified story Lutkajtis cites. Western media enumerating a myriad of tangible benefits of meditation (increased density of grey matter in the brain, enhanced neuroplasticity, reduced anxiety, etc.) is what motivated me to ultimately begin meditating out of – being honest about my true thought process – a vague notion that 'the science says it's good.' Western media not only exalts meditation, though, but it furthermore ignores any negative effects the practice might have. Sharon Lauricella's use of frame theory to analyze 764 news stories on meditation from 1979 to 2014 reveals that only six stories reported on any negative aspect of meditation, all six nonetheless reporting positively on meditation overall.<sup>7</sup> Based on this representation, mindfulness enjoys a status as a buzzword to be suggested by some mental healthcare

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<sup>6</sup> Anna Lutkajtis, "The dark side of Dharma: Why have adverse effects of meditation been ignored in contemporary Western secular contexts?" *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 31, no. 2 (2018): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.37053>.

<sup>7</sup> Lutkajtis, "Dark Side of Dharma," 79.

practitioners and college campus counselors. Further, meditation is presented as wholly beneficial, ignoring the multiplicity of meditation (different styles, different traditions, different practices with different aims) and conveying a notion of meditation as a straightforwardly healthy lifestyle decision akin to healthy diet or sufficient sleep. This narrative, while it has exposed many to meditation who might never have found the practice, shrouds the serious challenges underlying a spiritual practice conceived with the existentially threatening goal of destroying one's sense of self.

Buddhist philosophy holds “the self” to be an illusion, per the Pali canon and ensuing texts, and meditation to be a technique for seeing through the illusion, often with destabilizing consequences (*ñāṇas* 6-8 of the “stages of insight,” for example, are called “fear,” “misery” and “disgust”). In the West, while medical and scientific lenses have reframed the goal of self-transcendence into the goals of brain benefits and mental disorder interventions, media has focused only on these positive results, and destabilizing results remain an overlooked reality. Multiple Western practitioners have suffered psychological breaks and even death by suicide as a direct result of *vipassanā* practice, particularly in the context of intensive retreats begun without knowledge of traditional frameworks for meditation. My research will thus touch on concerns of the West appropriating and, through mass media, oversimplifying otherwise nuanced, religiously-rooted Eastern ideas (“Eastern,” an admittedly far-from-perfect term, referring here and afterward in this paper to countries – Nepal, India, Burma, Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian countries – surrounding the origination of Buddhism, Vedic religions and other traditions with analogues to the “stages of insight”). The potential for ignorance of Eastern perspectives to jeopardize the health of unwitting practitioners, particularly given the severity of potential

meditative consequences for such meditators, begs the question: Is ignorance of an Eastern perspective on meditation unsafe?

Opinions range wildly on the skillfulness of disseminating traditional Eastern frameworks, with many lineaged monks and nuns as well as mainstream voices in the Western *vipassanā* movement refraining from talking explicitly about meditative progress or about *ñāṇas*. Other voices, like that of Daniel Ingram (a medical doctor who meditated in the lineage of the Burmese monk Mahasi Sayadaw for twenty-five years and wrote a book widely read in Western *vipassanā* circles), have thoroughly disseminated the frameworks, spurring controversy within American cultures of mindfulness in the case of Ingram's *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha (MCTB)*.<sup>8</sup> This controversy came to a fore in May 2020 with the article "Meditation Maps, Attainments Claims, and the Adversities of Mindfulness," in which ordained monk and Buddhist scholar Bhikkhu Anālayo criticizes Ingram's concern with and dissemination of Buddhist meditation maps for their excessiveness.<sup>9</sup> *MCTB* not only enumerates, but explicates and speculates about the sixteen "stages of insight," or *ñāṇas*, at great length. The book came up (always unprompted) in seven of the twenty interviews I conducted for this research, and interview subjects mentioning it spoke to a litany of important considerations: Whether knowledge of the stages of insight induces meditators to be counter-productively competitive; the potential for *ideas* of experiences to pervert phenomenological, subjective perceptions of experiences; or the potential for knowledge of a stage to validate meditators in their struggles with roadblocks specific to that stage. These questions prove consequential for meditators and for the practical application of anthropologies of spiritual traditions including meditation, yet

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book* (London: Aeon Books Ltd., 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Bhikkhu Anālayo, "Meditation Maps, Attainment Claims, and the Adversities of Mindfulness," *Mindfulness*, no. 11 (May 2020): 2109, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01389-4>.



academics lack research-based answers to them. While spiritually-oriented anthropology has emphasized hermeneutical methodology, focusing both on knowledge and on interpretation of knowledge (e.g. Kaldybay et al., 2016)<sup>10</sup>, I hope to fill a gap of relating such interpretation to tangible practices with respect to Buddhism.

The little academics have gleaned about meditation's effects in the past few decades tends to be neuroscientific (Ricard, Lutz & Davidson, 2014).<sup>11</sup> There does exist a nascent field of anthropological work on the subject also, including Sean Pritchard's validation of the "stages of insight."<sup>12</sup> Pritchard's work cites the challenges of what qualifies as data in the Western study of meditation, with Western scientific trials looking only at objective, third-person data (that which can be measured and quantified, and that which is material), rather than subjective narratives or accounts of phenomenology. These limitations point to the importance of integrating Eastern perspectives, evidenced in "Measuring Cognitive Outcomes in Mindfulness-Based Intervention Research" by Vanderbilt's Dave Vago et al.,<sup>13</sup> and by Dr. Dorsana Dorjee, who points out in *Psychology Today* that Americans give greater credibility to claims containing neuroscientific terms, regardless of merit, even though neuroscience is "an inherently reductionist science."<sup>14</sup> What neuroscience reduces, and what has proved central to the Buddhist perspective on meditation over millennia, is subjective and infinitely dimensional first-person experience. Beyond the issue of third-person objective vs. first-person subjective data, the contemporary

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<sup>10</sup> Kainar K. Kaldybay, "Anthropology of Buddhism: The Importance of Personal Spiritual Maturity and Vital Aims," *International journal of environmental & science education* 11, no. 11 (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Matthieu Ricard, Antoine Lutz and Richard Davidson, "Mind of the Meditator," *Scientific American* 311, no. 5 (2014): 1114 – 1138, <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican1114-38>.

<sup>12</sup> Pritchard, "Mindfulness and Beyond."

<sup>13</sup> Dave Vago, Resh Gupta and Sara Lazar, "Measuring Cognitive Outcomes in Mindfulness-Based Intervention Research: A Reflection on Confounding Factors and Methodological Limitations," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 28 (August 2019): 143 – 150, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.12.015>.

<sup>14</sup> Dusana Dorjee, "What the Neuroscience of Meditation Does and Doesn't Show," *Psychology Today*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-meditative-mind/201808/what-the-neuroscience-meditation-does-and-doesn-t-show>.

Western neuroscientific perspective also lacks what Eastern perspectives offer in temporality – another issue broached by Pritchard.<sup>15</sup> Whereas traditional Buddhist texts explicate meditation’s potential effects over the course of a lifetime (or multiple lifetimes), modern scientific studies are limited to either trial periods of a few weeks, or observational studies of experienced meditators, who are inevitably subject to selection bias.

Granted, findings based on neuroscience’s short-term trials as well as longitudinal, material observations have been substantial. On the medical side, the University of Massachusetts medical school cites eighteen unique conditions for which Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR, the clinical treatment developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn) proves helpful, including depression, heart disease and fibromyalgia.<sup>16</sup> Similar evidence exists behind the use of dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and other mindfulness-based interventions rooted in the third wave of cognitive behavioral therapy, endorsed by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and other mental health advocates. Robin Carhart-Harris of Imperial College, London, notes that within Western paradigms “people tend to associate phrases like ‘a higher state of consciousness’ with hippy speak and mystical nonsense,” but that contemporary neuroscience “is potentially the beginning of the demystification, showing its physiological and biological underpinnings” for those whose conception of “evidence” is physical.<sup>17</sup> In other words, scientific validation of meditation has represented a ‘way in’ for Western and secular audiences, who without it might have rejected meditation on its religious grounds.

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<sup>15</sup> Pritchard, “Mindfulness and Beyond.”

<sup>16</sup> “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Training,” MBSR, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://mbsrtraining.com/>.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Carhart-Harris et al., “Increased Global Functional Connectivity Correlates with LSD-Induced Ego Dissolution,” *Current Biology* 26, no. 8 (April 2016): 1043 – 1050, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2016.02.010>.

Despite their importance, however, scientific perspectives hold limited scope and can easily be misapplied. The medical perspective, for instance, might reframe meditation as an interventionist response to health ailments for those in the West, whereas it was originally developed in a Buddhist context (actually before that, in the context of Vedic and yogic traditions) as a tool of spiritual liberation, or enlightenment. Further, the scientific perspective presents its effects only through the third-person, objective data already mentioned, struggling to impart meaningful information about subjective experience. The premise of Western lauding of meditation, then, relies on an epistemology connecting these two – posturing such data as a map onto the territory of subjective experience. When meditators encounter the negative side-effects Lutkajtis alludes to,<sup>18</sup> they manifest as subjective first-person suffering (in the form of anecdote or narrative), blindsiding those who have only read positive reports of meditation’s effects from sources of science and media. Jared Lindahl et al. address such underreported effects in their landmark anthropological and interdisciplinary effort from 2017,<sup>19</sup> with Lindahl being in Brown’s department of religious studies and serving as director of humanities research in Willoughby Britton’s *Clinical and Affective Neuroscience Laboratory*. The qualitative research of the study uses interviews to identify fifty-nine types of first-hand, intersubjective meditative experiences, most negative, across seven domains: somatic, affective, cognitive, perceptual, conative, sense of self, and social. These anthropological findings represent some of the first validation of meditation’s less-reported negative effects – those predicted not by previous Western research, but by Buddhist spiritual frameworks – underscoring the gap in Western biomedical literature which particularly misses the negative effects of meditation.

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<sup>18</sup> Lutkajtis, “Dark Side of Dharma.”

<sup>19</sup> Lindahl et al., “Varieties of Contemplative Experience.”

While the research of Lindahl et al. may corroborate these ancient Eastern frameworks of meditation, it still represents observational study rather than experiment. So, while it may demonstrate a potential for adverse effects amongst meditators, it doesn't portend to demonstrate effects of meditation in the more general and ordered sense represented by the *ñāṇas*. Furthermore, on average, the subjects of Lindahl et al. prove highly experienced with meditation, including many meditation instructors and longtime practitioners. The heavy experience of the subjects suggests that studying the more esoteric or negative results of meditation may prove difficult within any controlled experiment that frames meditation as an intervention and studies its effects merely in the beginning phases of a potential meditative path. Thus, in studying meditation's effects, even more limiting than the third-person objective nature of our approach to science may be the issue of temporality. As we consider the "stages of insight" in their most recent form (first modeled in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Sri Lanka by the *Visudhimagga* text,<sup>20</sup> which revised earlier forms of the stages found in the Pali canon), we may find that information about the later *ñāṇas*, or sequential stages of meditative progress, proves rarer.

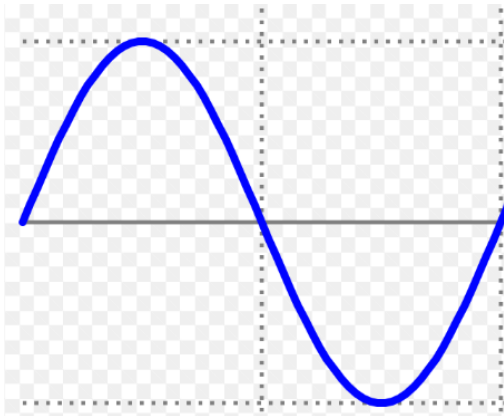
In order, the *ñāṇas* are: (Knowledge of) 1. Mind and Body; 2. Cause and Effect; 3. The Three Characteristics; 4. The Arising and Passing Away; 5. Dissolution; 6. Fear; 7. Misery; 8. Disgust; 9. Desire for Deliverance; 10. Re-Observation; 11. Equanimity; 12. Conformity; 13. Change of Lineage; 14. Path; 15. Fruition; 16. Review. This *ñāṇa*-based model is still employed today to understand development in *vipassanā* ("insight," as opposed to *samatha*, or "concentration" / "tranquility") practice, particularly in the Eastern *Theravada* Buddhist tradition, and lineaged practices like that of the late Burmese monk Mahasi Sayadaw.<sup>21</sup> In

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<sup>20</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Ch. XXI.

<sup>21</sup> Mahasi Sayadaw, *Practical Insight Meditation* (Unity Press, 1972).

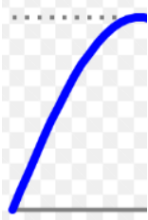
*MCTB*<sup>22</sup> and other writing, Daniel Ingram (whose primary retreat experience has been in the tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw) analogizes meditative progress, per the stages, to a mathematical sine function, with (rough) benefits on the vertical axis and movement through meditative stages on the horizontal axis:



While any graphical representation of progress in *vipassanā* may be reductionist, Ingram's exemplifies the potential problem with temporality in neuroscientific controlled experiments. If we entertain that meditation presents experienced practitioners with those negative results predicted by Buddhist frameworks of a meditation path (Pritchard's research and the interdisciplinary work of Lindahl et al. add credence to the idea that it does), it appears plausible that results of contemporary scientific research on meditation speak only to the (positive) beginning phases of a meditative path. Our current plethora of empirical benefits and wholly positive media outlook on meditation, then, could simply represent a limited view of its effects:

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<sup>22</sup> Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*.



This issue of temporality in controlled experiments might give us pause in considering scientific epistemology in general. This more general question spans beyond the bounds of my paper, but here, I suggest there exist severe consequences to ignoring alternative – meaning non-neuroscientific: anthropological and religious – frameworks for meditation, due to the temporality issue. In the 2018 *Therapy Today* article, “Dark night of the soul: Duncan Barford explains why mindfulness is associated with risk of severe negative psychological effects,” Duncan Barford stresses that consequences of meditation’s negative effects, especially for the unprepared practitioner, can include psychological breaks.<sup>23</sup> Christine Vendel writes in the news article, “*She didn’t know what was real*”: *Did 10-day meditation retreat trigger woman’s suicide?*, about the tragic story of a young woman who in June 2017 emerged from intensive *vipassanā* “incoherent, suicidal and in psychosis.”<sup>24</sup> Vendel, substantively bucking the media trend Lutkajtis finds of “all good news stories,”<sup>25</sup> reports that the woman was found dead ten weeks later.<sup>26</sup>

The severity of these stakes evidences why we may be irresponsible to ignore Buddhist frameworks for meditation in the West. These religiously grounded models accounted for dangers in the practice centuries before the West’s lauding of the practice, enumerating stages

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<sup>23</sup> Duncan Barford, “Dark night of the soul: Duncan Barford explains why mindfulness is associated with risk of severe negative psychological effects,” *Therapy Today* 29, no. 6 (July 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Christine Vendel, “She didn’t know what was real: Did 10-day meditation retreat trigger woman’s suicide?” *Pennsylvania Real-Time News*, June 29, 2017, [https://www.pennlive.com/news/2017/06/york\\_county\\_suicide\\_megan\\_vogt.html](https://www.pennlive.com/news/2017/06/york_county_suicide_megan_vogt.html).

<sup>25</sup> Lutkajtis, “Dark Side of Dharma,” 79.

<sup>26</sup> Vendel, “Woman’s Suicide.”

like “fear,” “misery” and “disgust” which have only recently been validated by rigorous Western research. As already discussed, scientifically supported effects of meditation are valid and substantial, and the scientific perspective through which we’ve accepted meditation culturally has allowed Americans skeptical of religion (yet persuaded by science) to benefit. However, combining our scientific findings with Buddhist frameworks is essential to our overall understanding of what is possible for meditators, both pragmatically and theoretically. On the pragmatic level, the frameworks constitute an important warning for anyone led by wholly positive media portrayals to try meditation; they reify meditation’s real dangers, which lie in those stages of insight (stages 5-10) which comprise the “*dukkha ñāṇas*,” or “knowledges of suffering,”<sup>27</sup> analogous to what Christian mystic St. John of the Cross termed the “dark night of the soul.”<sup>28</sup> (Note: The research of Lindahl et al. was originally titled *The Dark Night Project*). Heeding the warning indicated by Buddhist frameworks of meditation might correct for overly positive impressions of meditation formed from scientific findings and media messaging. Heeding the warning specifically by considering the reality of the *ñāṇas* might furthermore counteract what Edward W. Said describes in *Orientalism* as a Western tendency to appropriate Eastern ideas using our own paradigms and abandon the ideas’ original epistemologies: “From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist’s work.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to further corroborating the *ñāṇas*’ pragmatic relevance anthropologically in this paper, I engage the gap between neuroscientific and spiritual epistemologies of meditation’s

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<sup>27</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Ch. XXI.

<sup>28</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Untitled Poem*, trans. Evelyn Underhill (New York: *New American Library*, 1974), 83.

<sup>29</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 283.

effects philosophically. As such, I draw on Dan Arnold’s work on Buddhist epistemology<sup>30</sup> (which connects Western physicalist Jerry Fodor and Indian Buddhist philosopher Dharmakirti as reductionist in their own rights), Peter Klein’s and Gregory Bateson’s work in skepticism (on “Infinitism”<sup>31</sup> and on the notion of mapping the territory that is reality,<sup>32</sup> respectively) and Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism.<sup>33 34</sup> While this paper is not predominantly philosophical, this literature will set up a broader discussion of attempts – neuroscientific and religious, through language and through mapping – to understand what the practice of *vipassanā* is and does.

## Methods and Interpretation

The subjects of Lindahl et al., drawing from substantial meditative experience, report many meditative results and experiences not found in modern neuroscientific literature, whether due to the short time-frame characteristic of scientific trials or the inaccessibility of first-person experience to neuroscientific work. So, to look at the impact of knowledge of *ñānas* empirically, I study meditators with substantial (at least six consecutive weeks) experience in long-term silent *vipassanā* meditation retreats and with at least two years of experience meditating in general. I interview twenty subjects with experience at retreat centers in the traditions of S.N. Goenka,

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<sup>30</sup> Dan Arnold, *Brains, Buddhas and Believing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Peter D. Klein, “Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13, Epistemology (1999): 297 – 325, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2676107>

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Bateson, “Form, Substance and Difference,” *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing co., 1972), 448 – 465.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Benson, “Derrida on Language,” *Philosophy Now*, no. 100 (2014). [https://philosophynow.org/issues/100/Derrida\\_On\\_Language](https://philosophynow.org/issues/100/Derrida_On_Language).



Mahasi Sayadaw and other inspirations for the Western *vipassanā* movement, and I use these semi-structured interviews as a lens into the relationship between conceptual meditative knowledge and actual meditative experience. I solicit the intensive American yogis who serve as my interview subjects from the *Insight Meditation Society* founded in Barre, MA by the American meditation teachers Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg and Jack Kornfield. At the time of my invitation to participate in this research, the yogis and I have just finished a silent *vipassanā* meditation retreat at IMS of either six or twelve weeks in length. These interview subjects' levels of meditative experience (beyond the minimum of having practiced for at least two years), levels of familiarity with meditative frameworks and levels of access to teachers all vary; thus, I can investigate my research question with respect to these dimensional axes on which subjects differ.

I envision my contribution in this paper centering around descriptions in interview addressing not only my question – *whether* knowledge of *ñāṇas* (or of other frameworks) helps, hurts or impacts progress – but also addressing *how* such knowledge makes an impact phenomenologically. I collect data concerning (in addition to the questions thus far) how knowledge of *ñāṇas* has impacted subjects' experiences with meditation and perspectives on meditation in general, how knowledge has impacted subjects' relationships to positive meditative experiences and how knowledge has impacted subjects' understandings of negative experiences in meditation, e.g. experiences relating to *ñāṇas* 5-10, the “*dukkha ñāṇas*,” or “knowledges of suffering” or “dark night of the soul.” These manifold possibilities for categorizing negative meditative “stages” and states serve as a testament to the inherent subjectivity and imperfection of conceptualizing direct experience, broaching a philosophical question of the validity of categorizing our subjective realities in general. As such, I also envision this paper contributing to

our understanding of conceptualization itself, with *vipassanā* meditation serving as a lens into the epistemological truth (or lack thereof) behind concepts, models and even language itself.

Scientifically-minded or skeptical readers will likely question the fact that my research contains assumptions which reify the *ñāṇas* and Buddhist frameworks, and indeed, I conduct my research open to the possibility that subjects do not corroborate Buddhist models. Nonetheless, and especially given existing validation of the models from scholars like Brown & Engler,<sup>35</sup> Lindahl et al. and Pritchard, I test the impact of knowledge of the models under the assumption that for many advanced practitioners, the models prove salient. The aims of data from interviews are to: 1) Add to the literature on the relevance of the *ñāṇas*, especially the *dukkha ñāṇas*; 2) Add to the nascent literature on the implications of Westerners' exposure to mainstream media narratives in lieu of such Buddhist frameworks; and 3) Generate an answer to my original question regarding in-depth conceptual knowledge of meditative frameworks. From these answers, I will develop a practical framework for conceptualizing meditative progress based on what interview subjects have found conceptually useful (and not useful). Finally, rather than exhausting the implications of my results only on how meditative frameworks may serve meditators in practice, I will furthermore explore how frameworks serve our understandings of direct experience (meditative or otherwise) in theory. Included in and informing that goal will be the aforementioned discussion of modeling in general and of the limitations of abstract concepts and language to fully encapsulate the dimensionality of reality.

First, from the interview data, I will parse out emergent themes related to my research question and all its sub-questions, and synthesize these themes into discussion with one another

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel Brown and Jack Engler, "The Stages of Mindfulness Meditation: A Validation Study," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 12, no. 2 (1980).

to form an account of the subjects' relationships to concepts. While the sections of this paper following the results will employ these discovered relationships to concepts as a lens into conceptualization in general, the results speak specifically to meditative conceptualizations. Of course, the breadth of what *vipassanā* meditation is (simply an observation of direct experience, in the most general sense) can encompass conceptualizations spanning far beyond a particular practice performed in a seated posture on a meditation cushion. As we will see, subjects frequently relate their meditative experiences and emergent conceptual understandings to their lives as a whole. In these interviews, my questioning begins broadly (my interview guide can be found at the end of the paper, before the citations) and in very general terms so as to allow subjects to define what *vipassanā* meditation is to them and how it relates to their lives in their own terms. Based on these definitions offered by subjects, I use the semi-structured nature of the interviews to probe into subjects' personal conceptualizations before asking them about the publicly known conceptualizations (e.g. the "stages of insight") being studied.

## **Results**

*Note: Pseudonyms are used in the place of actual names for all research participants.*

Many recurring themes around conceptual knowledge and its relationship to meditation practice emerge from my semi-structured interviews. Although I will point out exceptions in the results where they do exist, by and large the conformity and coherence of interview subjects' responses are striking, and responses lend themselves easily and intuitively to the intersubjective

accounts of the themes that follow. Anticipated and hypothesized themes (the limitations inherent to concepts; discerning conceptual vs. experiential knowledge; concepts' potential to alter perceptions of experiences; the harms of attachment to concepts; the difference inherent between maps of a territory (like the meditative path) and the territory itself; difficulties resultant from a focus on progress; difficulties resultant from "the comparing mind;" the intersubjective reality of negative meditative experiences, like those connoted by the notion of "the dark night of the soul;" a sense of validation resultant from learning of the commonality of such negative experiences; other silver linings of conceptual knowledge of meditative maps) certainly emerge. Yet, also emergent are some unanticipated intersubjective consensuses regarding conceptualization: The intersubjective reality of a particular meditative insight into impermanence which practitioners experience as a "high" on the path, and which closely fits descriptions of "the arising and passing away," or the fourth "stage of insight;" the proclivities of Western culture and the Western mind in particular to encounter conceptual neuroses in meditation; a newly manifesting feminine voice in American *vipassanā* bolstering an embodied, heart-centered (as opposed to head-centered) approach to practice; the prudence of communicating a warning regarding the possibility (inevitability, according to some interview subjects) of negative effects and existential challenges resulting from intensive insight meditation. Overall, respondents find conceptual knowledge and maps of the meditative path to be overwhelmingly more hurtful than they are helpful to insight practice. However, exceptions exist amidst some of the emergent themes, and respondents indicate that more important than the question of possessing conceptual knowledge vs. not possessing such knowledge is the question of how one relates to conceptual knowledge.

According to the interview subjects, a meditator’s access (or lack thereof) to a teacher is critical to determining what relationship to conceptual knowledge will prove most skillful for that meditator. Subjects feel that the more access a meditator has to a teacher, the less useful and the more harmful conceptual knowledge is likely to be. Further, those interview subjects who do have regular access to a primary teacher themselves (twelve of the twenty subjects) express less interest in conceptual knowledge of the path than do the eight respondents without a primary teacher. The ten interview subjects familiar with the *ñāṇas*, or “stages of insight,” report many more of the negative effects of conceptual knowledge than do the ten subjects unfamiliar with that particular map, although the subjects familiar with the *ñāṇas* also report more positive and impactful meditative experiences. Four subjects – all familiar with the *ñāṇas* – report personally experiencing something that strongly fits descriptions of the fourth *ñāṇa*, or “the arising and passing away” – an insight into impermanence (one of the three characteristics of all things in Buddhism) that subjects describe as being fundamentally transformative. No subjects describe meditative experiences closely corresponding to any other *ñāṇa* in particular (other than perhaps the eleventh *ñāṇa*, equanimity, but subjects describe equanimity more as a quality of mind in general than as a particular meditative experience). However, while subjects’ descriptions don’t reify any of *ñāṇas* five through ten in particular, many descriptions certainly reify the difficult meditative territory suggested by these “*dukkha ñāṇas*,” or “knowledges of suffering,” in general. Knowledge of the *ñāṇas* correlates positively with descriptions of this territory (most often referenced by subjects more colloquially as “the dark night of the soul”), yet also correlates positively with more positive experiences like “the arising and passing away” and equanimity. No clear correlation emerges between descriptions of certain types of meditative experiences and whether subjects have regular access to a primary teacher.

The correlations and broad data above come from the sorting of practitioners into the theoretical sets outlined in the “Research Questions and Hypotheses” section of this paper:

1. Meditators who have conceptual knowledge of the framework of the *ñāṇas*, and who furthermore have regular access to the guidance of a primary meditation teacher.
2. Meditators who know the *ñāṇas*, but do not have regular access to a teacher.
3. Meditators who do not know the *ñāṇas*, but who have regular access to a teacher.
4. Meditators who do not know the *ñāṇas*, and who do not have regular access to a teacher.

The first set includes the interview subjects Freddy, Jerome, Amanda, August and Becca. The second set includes the subjects Mitchell, Nicolas, Ostella, Varun and Victor. The third set includes the subjects Eeshan, Teresa, Ahnjung, Tobias, William and Jaya. The fourth set includes the subjects Liliana, Yadira, Hansette and Gilles. As already mentioned, the meditators familiar with the *ñāṇas* (sets 1-2) speak most extensively to the relationship between meditative experience and conceptual knowledge of it. Among these meditators, those without regular access to a primary teacher (set 2), and especially Ostella and Victor, speak more negatively about their personal difficulties with conceptual knowledge of *ñāṇas*. Of conceptual knowledge in general, though, all the subjects speak more negatively than positively, suggesting a decisive answer to the second of my two primary research questions – *Does in-depth knowledge of Buddhist frameworks help, hinder, or otherwise affect perceived progress for experienced meditators?* Respondents collectively indicate that such knowledge hinders practice more than it helps, with set 1-2 (and especially set 2) illuminating how it does so with respect to the *ñāṇas*. A clear answer to my first question – *Would sharing Buddhist frameworks protect potential Western meditators from possible (and underreported) harms of intensive practice?* – also emerges, and that answer is ‘Yes.’

To begin our journey through subjects' responses, though, it will prove helpful to highlight subjects' perspective on why negative effects of intensive insight practice do, in fact, exist. Many subjects view their practice within a Buddhist worldview that applies to their conduct in life generally, and view the role of practice as “purifying” that conduct by unearthing underlying mental defilements. Liliana says:

*It's only the positive stuff that gets talked up, but actually, if you want to [meditate deeply], you're going to have difficulties come up... it's a process of purification, and it's really ingrained stuff coming up, and I don't think a lot is said about that, certainly not in the media descriptions of meditation practice. It's always talked up as being a pretty positive thing, and it is a positive thing, but you can't hide from stuff. Because it's a process of purification... greed, hatred and delusion [the three main mental defilements in Buddhism] are going to come up, and the only way out is through. You can't bypass it.*

Liliana goes on to mention the term “spiritual bypassing” as a common trend she observes in which Westerners, viewing meditation as “only good” (per media depictions), practice as a way to feel good about themselves without expecting to have to introspect on negative patterns within. While “people have a misconception that it's purely about stress reduction” (according to Jerome), Gilles corroborates Liliana's take: “The beautiful [results of practice] will come, but there are a lot of things you have to clean up first.” Eeshan speaks of a general obliviousness to this “process of purification” in the Americans he encounters who take up *vipassanā* meditation: “People I talk to, they are not ready to accept that there is something to be worked on within themselves. However their life is going, it's going good, and there is nothing to be looked on, changed or worked on.” Per Ostella:

*We have a new problem in the West, which is that people come into practice with all sorts of ideas about practice making you happy, practice giving rise to positive or pleasant experiences. And those are their own problems conceptually if you go into practice believing that's going to happen and really getting gung-ho about it, and then you start experiencing things that are distinctly unpleasant.*

If the aim of meditation is to cut through delusion and illusion, the expectation that such a process *wouldn't* be unpleasant (especially if paired with the Western framing of mindfulness as a mental health intervention) can set meditators up for catastrophe. As Mitchell puts it,

*There's a lot of difficulty that can come with disillusionment. It can make depression worse... I think there's a great danger in 'prescribing' meditation for intense depression or trauma... and the unfortunate thing is we're learning by making mistakes; really sensitive or fragile people who are desperate for help are unfortunately the victims.*

Interview subjects universally speak to the reality of some negative experiences in intensive insight meditation, and Buddhist frameworks like the “stages of insight” [*ñāṇas*] point to the existence of many of these negative experiences. Given Western culture's lack of awareness of *vipassanā*'s unpleasant effects, such pointing from Buddhist frameworks stands to offer the West a more holistic picture of the practice. Victor explains that for him, “the dark night of the soul” [*dukkha ñāṇas*], as a mental model or a metaphor or a framework for thinking about the path... it's been really helpful to have that frame.”

Yet, the very frame that has explained these negative experiences and offered Victor a sense of validation regarding them has itself caused *further* negative experiences for him, due to the dangers of approaching *vipassanā* practice conceptually in general. While the naïve concept of meditation as “only good” causes obvious harm, Victor has experienced a mirror-image form of harm from the overly-detailed concepts of *ñāṇas*, “stages” and maps in *MCTB*.<sup>36</sup>

*I think I've suffered a lot from too-early exposure to them. I was reading about these things on my own, not with the guidance of a teacher, and I think that for me at least (but I know this is true for a lot of other people)... with my hypermasculine, striving, somewhat perfectionistic, self-deprecating tendencies – Western tendencies – having exposure to this without guidance was a mistake that I didn't really anticipate being so significant. Like if I'm talking to someone who's just beginning on this path, one of the things I'd recommend to them is like, 'if this is your disposition, maybe don't read*

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<sup>36</sup> Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*.



*Daniel Ingram, and if you're gonna read Daniel Ingram, have a teacher who can help you understand and take it lightly,' because without that, these things can become just like torture devices. [One of the teachers on the 3-month retreat] once said, 'I think Daniel Ingram was hired by the defilements [Buddhist mental defilements] to write that book'... it gives one a perfect mechanism to always feel inadequate... when used skillfully I think [the maps] are probably really powerful tools, but when used improperly, they take one out of a loving awareness and into a critical awareness – out of loving, receptive, accepting, curious into critical, analyzing, cold, striving, wanting awareness – an awareness with an agenda. I'm looking at the present moment, and I'm looking over its shoulder... constantly trying to interpret my experience as opposed to love my experience. The difference between those two things for me is almost the difference between suffering and not suffering.*

As mentioned in the literature review, seven subjects cite *MCTB* as a conceptual source inundating them with maps of the meditative path. Five of these subjects mention the book (and its concepts of the “stages of insight”) impacting their practice more negatively than positively, but none characterizes its effects more negatively than do Victor and Ostella. Ostella in particular reports that her mind’s resulting fixation on *ñāṇas* was “deeply traumatic,” particularly during a 70-day retreat at the monastery *Panditarama Lumbini* in Nepal (where I happened to sit a 30-day retreat, and where “stages of insight” form the basis for meditation instruction):

*I had read Daniel Ingram's book... I went and read Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha in one sitting, and I had a like highlighter and a pen, and I was trying to figure out what stages I had experienced... if I could go back and erase one thing, it would just be to have never read that book. That book really messed with me. My practice [before that point] was just not very goal-oriented, and then it became just – 'get enlightened'... [meditation had been] this wonderful, rewarding, meaningful part of my life, and then it became this thing that I needed to achieve. So I guess personal background is I was a super good student; I went to Stanford undergrad, I went to Yale Law School, I was like a real achiever. And I think [meditation] started to help me get a little space from that achievement orientation... so then the thing that had given me some space became, like, my 'mother object' of achievement.*

Ostella isn't alone in relating an obsession with achievement in *vipassanā* to an academic background. Ahn Jung says, “[meditation maps] really trigger my overachieving student mind... comparing mind was too strong for me, and I think it ended up being very unpleasant for me. I

think one of the main reasons was that reminded me of my competitive culture of academia. It felt like I'm not in the retreat center, but in a conference.” Beyond academia specifically, I'll expound on subjects' reflections on the hindrances of Western intellectualization (one of the interviews' unexpectedly emergent themes) more generally later in the results section.

To expand now on the limitations of conceptualization more generally, though, let us consider the very notion of representing direct experience with concepts. “I think there's different kinds of knowledge,” says Teresa. “So there's experiential knowledge, and then other types of knowledge – knowledge we can learn from books.” Being an investigation into direct experience, *vipassanā* is “really about that experiential feeling into it, so [it's important] not to bypass that with intellectual knowledge,” she says. Intellectual knowledge, August says, will “always be a concept. The thing is that experiences you have in meditation are very non-conceptual, so if you're just trying to understand it through words, it's never going to relate.” Of course, the disconnect between experiential and intellectual knowledge is a great challenge in writing this paper, and in approaching the topic of *vipassanā* meditation scientifically at all. Liliana argues that “the scientific model is never going to – by its very nature – come out the other side in terms of understanding the world. Because there's a mysterious element to it, and a cosmic element to it. Science is a limited tool trying to encapsulate something that's unlimited.” Leaving the world as a whole aside for the moment, Liliana's point proves resonant with other subjects at least with respect to subjective, first-person, direct experiences like those in *vipassanā*. In response to my eleventh interview question about someone attempting to understand meditation intellectually rather than experientially, Jerome offers the analogy that “it's the difference between reading a whole bunch of essays written about a painting, and then going and looking at the painting... they don't know what it is, because their mind is still in the

conceptual, discursive world.” As Eeshan puts it, “that person would be missing absolutely everything. Just knowing about meditation is very little. The huge part is experiencing it on your own.” In the view of my interview subjects, not only is conceptual knowledge incapable of elucidating meditative experience, but it furthermore threatens to saddle meditators with many hindrances in their practice.

Namely, themes of “comparing mind,” overemphasis on progress and concepts altering perceptions all substantiate subjects’ general aversion to concepts about the meditative path. Ostella reports concepts altering her perceptions of meditative experiences and even causing delusions about having certain experiences – a sort of projection that other subjects confirm as common. Teresa says, “I’ve heard many people comparing their practice, and I notice that when terms like ‘Samadhi’ are floated and defined, there’s... attachment that would form.” “The *Jhanas* [attainments of concentration, or *samatha*, practice] are a very good example of that,” Liliana adds. “I think people get obsessed with that, and that’s not really the aim of practice... the whole thing with sharing of meditative experiences, I think you have to be really careful, because then you set up other people [to wonder] ‘why didn’t I experience that?’ or ‘what’s wrong with me?’ or ‘I want that.’ I mean, talk about a trap; ‘I want that’ is the whole problem.” Indeed, Eeshan says, “when I hear people sharing, I sometimes feel a burden or a pressure that in order to really see the fruits of my practice, I need to have those experiences.” Concepts about meditative results in general spur these hindrances in subjects, and conceptualizations of the meditative path like the *ñāṇas* in particular prove resoundingly unwanted.

Below are seven responses to my fourth interview question (about familiarity with and belief in frameworks like the “stages of insight”) that represent the sentiment of the subjects who aren’t particularly familiar with maps of the meditative path:

*I never was really interested in things like this, because I know me, and I think if I would know these maps, I would make some kind of plan... it feels no good for me. I just meditate without any plans. – Hansette*

*I've made a point of staying away from them, for the very sake of not wanting to induce craving for [a] particular goal... [practice] is all about letting go, and if I'm trying to make something happen, I'm not practicing 'not doing' and letting go. – Nicolas*

*Thinking about it doesn't help me at all. It doesn't help my practice, it just makes me feel bad, that measuring up against like 'I should have experienced this,' or 'I still don't feel like I've had an insight into that' or whatever. It creeps in sometimes, but I try not to entertain it a lot. – Yadira*

*Thinking about those things very directly is limiting... having bite-sized pieces of knowledge without the experience of embodiment can lead people to false refuges. – William*

*I think if I read about the maps, it would stress me out. It would activate some kind of conceit. – Tobias*

*I have a lot of friends who kind of lose sleep about where they are on the path... I've never trusted that. It feels like a really finite way to think about what happens. – Mitchell*

*I don't want to [know the maps in more depth] because then I might evaluate where my meditation is going and question where I am. I don't want to do that because my mind is already overly analytical, so purposefully I did not read about them in depth, I just know them broadly. – Amanda*

Whether subjects are or aren't familiar with maps, though, they nearly universally speak negatively of shared concepts of the meditative path and meditative experiences. However, a notable exception is subjects' acknowledgement that they find inspiration and motivation to practice in stories of the highest meditative attainments and of enlightenment. Eeshan, Tobias and Amanda mention this inspiration briefly, and Freddy speaks about it with regard to monks in the Thai Forest Tradition of meditation:

*I do believe in Ajahn Mun being fully awakened... and I think that gives me a sense of confidence that 'yeah, there are people who have walked the path to its end in the*

*modern age, ' so I would say there is at least some degree of wholesomeness in hearing about those experiences. They have been inspiring for me in showing that it [enlightenment] is possible.*

The aspect of frameworks like the “stages of insight” about which subjects speak most positively is their potential to provide validation to meditators struggling through difficult territory on the path. As August puts it, “it’s good for there to be a lot of experience reports out there for people to have a better understanding of what [meditators] generally go through. There’s a sense of ‘I’m not doing it wrong’ ... in a lot of the tough places, it feels good to know that there’s not something wrong with your particular practice.” Yadira says that “there’s a gratification in recognizing ‘oh, this is happening now, and that kind of fits a description I’ve heard,’” and Ostella echoes the same notion: “I could imagine the maps being really comforting at some point, being like ‘oh, that’s ok. I’m not going crazy; this is actually supposed to happen, or at least many people who have taken this path have experienced similar things.’ So it could be reassuring.” Mitchell proves a strong example of a meditator benefitting from this reassurance, as he shares a story in which the validation of models of the path allowed him to continue practicing:

*I went through a really protracted period of depression that took a few years to get through, and it was really helpful to have people who were qualifying for me that ‘oh, this a thing that happens as we begin to lose delusion and see the unstable nature of reality.’ So that was one thing I found really useful, and then when that ended, it was much easier to feel that period in my life having a distinct value... so that was a way that maps helped me keep going [and feel support].*

To the credit of the much-derided *MCTB*, Freddy cites this validation as “the main benefit Daniel Ingram talks about – his motivation for sharing – that when one is experiencing the *dukkha ñāṇas* [*ñāṇas* five through ten], one doesn’t feel so alone.”

While subjects' confirmation of negative experiences (like those suggested by the *dukkha ñāṇas*) in *vipassanā* is expected, less anticipated is the result that four subjects describe accounts of a meditative experience closely resembling descriptions of "the arising and passing away" – the fourth *ñāṇa*. As Freddy describes it, there is "a quickening of noticing. The mind [becomes] very sharp in terms of noticing things very fast, consciousness kind of dissociate[s] from... a sense of 'I' and then there would be this fear, like 'what is happening?'" followed by a particulate, sensate, somatic experience of impermanence. Freddy, who is familiar with the "stages of insight," does conjecture that this experience was that of the fourth *ñāṇa*. Nicolas also references the stories of this (apparently) particular intersubjective experience, or "stage of insight," as described by meditation teachers: "I feel like dharma teachers are intentionally pretty inscrutable, [but] they'll point to an experience of impermanence that can get really granular and really immediate, like you're seeing change happen on a very, very quick level moment-to-moment." While the interview subjects' accounts constitute evidence that "the arising and passing away" represents a reified milestone along the meditative path, they also warrant heavy caution in conceptualizing such an experience.

Subjects urge caution for Westerners in particular, who may be uniquely prone to becoming lost in concepts and fixated on progress, as Victor, Ostella and others claim to be. Teresa says, "in our hyper-intellectualized society, where being able to have knowledge and then express knowledge and share knowledge is epitomized as what society wants, or what the university wants, I don't really know if that applies to the meditative domain – I don't think that so much aligns with the Buddha's teachings." Jaya says that "Westerners in particular strive way too much, and it totally gets in the way of our practice. We have to undo so much of the 'doing' and just fall back and relax and just pay attention in such a different way." She uses this Western

tendency as yet more reason not to invest in the conceptual knowledge of maps like the *ñāṇas*: “I think that probably would just get in the way, because we’re already so goal-oriented – our Western minds – we want to check the boxes... it works both ways. It can be a roadmap, but it’s just a description.” Descriptions may be useful insofar as they offer validation of difficult meditative experiences, although Ostella suggests that even that usefulness of maps decreases proportional to the supportiveness of the teaching environment, or teachers, surrounding a meditator. Ultimately, subjects’ responses in interviews suggest concepts of the meditative path being useful in only a narrow range of circumstances – when teachers are scarce and/or meditators need validation in dealing with challenging experiences.

As an alternative to conceptualization, this research’s interviews reveal an unanticipated theme: The shift from a head-centered approach toward a heart-centered approach to *vipassanā* meditation. Tobias says, “because of my conditioning as a Westerner, I always think about the thinking muscle being so overutilized at the expense of more receptive qualities of knowing.” Exemplifying such receptive and heart-centered qualities is the practice of *Metta* – a Pali word for “loving-kindness” – which every interview subject lauds to some degree, whether briefly or at length. Teresa calls it an “incredible opening of the heart,” Gilles stresses, “loving-kindness is the concept from meditation that has most affected my life” and William says, “the feeling of love or care or compassion – it’s kind of tangible in the body, and you feel a sense of warmth. You feel connected to other people.” Jerome also describes *Metta* as an embodied experience, and Mitchell echoes the notion that connection to other people (and beings in general) is a worthy end or aim of the meditative path. A more feminine voice is emerging in Western Buddhism, according to Mitchell, and that voice emphasizes “enlightenment not as an escape

from the world, but as a radical acceptance of life” and life-giving nurture, which he relates to a more heart-centered culture.

So, returning to the research questions, what role do maps of the meditative path have to play in such a newly emergent culture of American Buddhism, if any? While subjects overwhelmingly eschew maps and models, Jerome suggests they may remain necessary in some capacity:

*If you had a traditional Tibetan guru system, where you had a guru who spent time with you all the time telling you what step to take next, you might not need a map. But so few of us can access that, and the reliability of someone with that much control is questionable, so I think the only realistic alternative is to have maps, so people can access some sense of where things are supposed to go.*

It is evident from the research interviews that the type of maps found in *MCTB* prove excessive and counter-productive, yet also evident that the “only good” map of meditation’s effects currently held by many Americans is blatantly inaccurate. From an exchange I have with Teresa as we conclude our interview, a middle way between these two dubious maps emerges:

*Teresa: Can I ask you a question?*

*Reiman: Sure.*

*Teresa: Out of all the questions that you’ve asked... [I’m wondering] if there’s one that you’d like to answer yourself and if you could share that with me.*

*Reiman: Hmm... I mean I have a clear answer to all of them. I’ve been out of the mode of saying what I think; it’s weird to switch back to it.*

*Teresa: Yeah! You’ve been in such receptivity mode.*

*Reiman: Yeah... I guess the big motivator for doing this research is that I became inundated with ideas about how the path is supposed to unfold in terms of the “stages of insight” at a pretty early stage in my practice, and it greatly affected the way I approached practice. I got into some really intense striving, was completely and totally goal-oriented, was constantly trying to hold my experience up to ‘is this this stage?’ or put it into some kind of box. And I think there was a usefulness in that, because it allowed this intense striving nature, which is a*



*part of this personality, to surface and for me to renegotiate my relationship with that, but it was very distressing and left me extremely confused. It sometimes left me in dismay, thinking that I was going to be in this “dark night of the soul” forever. So, what I’ve come to just from hearing from others and as my own practice has developed is that these maps and models point to something real, but infinitely dimensional reality and the lived experience of sitting, and of living, of being, can never be encapsulated by a box, or a linear model or concept... I do feel as if the concepts harm more than they help, although... I do think it’s good to know that such a thing as the “dark night of the soul” is a possibility when all of media coverage of meditation in America is essentially entirely positive, and brands it as this harmless lifestyle practice akin to good diet or exercise, and just, you know, only good. It can unearth existentially threatening difficulty, so I think awareness of that is useful, but I guess the big thing I would stress is just to hold concepts loosely, because concepts are fundamentally limited in their ability to capture reality. And as you said, intellectual knowledge and experiential knowledge are different things.*

*Teresa: Wow, you could write that up [laughs]. And I laughed when you said “the dark night,” because I’ve heard other people say that, but I clearly don’t know what it means, and now I’m intrigued and I may very well go to the conceptual sources [laughs] to figure that one out.*

*Reiman: Yeah... I’ve heard from people in these interviews who have done what I did and gone through all the conceptual sources, and they feel like they wish they could unlearn it all, but then I’ve heard from people who, they’ve read about it and been like, ‘Oh! That period in my life – that really hard period – wasn’t just a waste of time. It was a part of this process.’*

*Teresa: Right! That makes me think about the purification – like they [Buddhists] talk about purification [difficult periods of purifying defilements in the mind] and purity [pleasant periods thereafter]. That was so helpful to me, and probably everyone, to know that there’s this ebb and flow in practice.*

## **Implications for Meditators – A Practical Map**

The ebb and flow of practice mentioned by Teresa constitutes what, after conducting these research interviews, I conclude to be the most useful model of the meditative path – a map bordering on banal, but apt in light of this research. I’ll term this practical map the “Ups and Downs” model. The model is simply that, as the name suggests, practicing *vipassanā* entails “Ups” and “Downs.” This may be contextualized within the “path of purification” (entailing

alternating periods of difficult “purification” and pleasant “purity”) alluded to by many interview subjects, or it may not. It may be construed in terms of *ñāṇas*, or it may not. It may be expounded upon with all the nuanced conceptualizations of the “stages of insight” as they appear in the *Visudhimagga*<sup>37</sup> or in Daniel Ingram’s *MCTB*, or it may not. My research interviews suggest such expounding to be largely unhelpful and impractical. What is practical, however, in light of the overly positive and simplistic depiction of meditation highlighted in this paper’s literature review, is that our working model of the meditative path communicates the potential for existential and mental challenges – “Downs” – to result from intensive *vipassanā* meditation. These “Downs,” as with the “Ups” of a meditative path (which aren’t to be overlooked amidst this discussion of the negative effects of meditation!), vary greatly in length and severity, based on my research interviews. In the experiences of some meditators, they may present challenges so minor and/or short-lived that the meditators are only barely aware of a concept like “the dark night of the soul,” as with Teresa. For other meditators, they may present challenges as severe as psychotic episodes that can result in death by suicide, on which I’ll elaborate in this paper’s concluding sections. Further, the “Downs” may come to define long periods of months or even years within a meditators’ life (as with Mitchell or myself), thus warranting the warning currently missing from the Western narrative on *vipassanā*. While *MCTB* goes to unhelpful and impractical levels of depth on the subject, leaving multiple of my interview subjects who are familiar with the book wishing they weren’t, Daniel Ingram at least correctly identifies the need for this warning. My research corroborates what he writes of any meditator who delves deeply into *vipassanā* practice (i.e. experiencing major “Ups,” or experiences like the “arising and passing away”), yet remains naïve to the “Downs:”

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<sup>37</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Ch. XXI.

*Soon the meditator will learn what is meant by the [ancient Zen] phrase, “Better not to begin. Once begun, better to finish!” as they are now too far into this to ever really go back. Until they complete this progress of insight, they are “on the ride” and may begin to feel that the dharma [the Buddhist path, or truth] is now doing them rather than the other way around, as they will progress inevitably and relatively quickly, usually within days, into stages five to ten, which [are not] pretty. The rapture and all the bells and whistles die down quickly, and the meditator may even be left raw as if hung over after a night of wild partying.<sup>38</sup>*

While my interview subjects overwhelmingly found concepts about the meditative path to be unhelpful, and meditators could presumably be hindered even by a concept as simple as “Ups and Downs,” the sense of validation subjects reported coming from knowledge of potential “Downs” stands to ease self-doubting difficulties of those “Downs.” Further, we might doubt whether it is actually possible for meditators to approach practice devoid of *any* concepts about the path. In justifying the depth to which he maps the meditative territory, Ingram repeatedly suggests in *MCTB* that in the absence of apt frameworks consciously known, meditators will operate subconsciously off of *some* framework, even if that framework is made up or implicit. Implicitly and as already discussed, many Western meditators operate on an “Only Ups” framework of meditation, which clearly does not fit the reality of the meditative path. This “Only Ups” framework has been enabled in large part by the relegation of our understanding of meditation’s effects to scientific and medical lenses, which in turn has been enabled by a secularization of the practice. In *The Triumph of Narcissism: Theravada Buddhist Meditation in the Marketplace*, C. W. Huntington, Jr. argues that this secularization (and industrialization) of ancient Buddhist teachings has excised from them their heart.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*, 211.

<sup>39</sup> C. W. Huntington, Jr., “The Triumph of Narcissism: Theravada Buddhist Meditation in the Marketplace,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 3 (September 2015): 624 – 648.

If secularizing meditation into an “Only Ups” map and discarding *vipassanā*’s religious roots proves just as detrimental to its heart of as does an over-conceptualization of the practice, does the “Ups and Downs” model actually represent a happy medium between the two? To be such a happy medium, the “Ups and Downs” model must not only improve upon the inaccuracy of “Only Ups,” but it must retain at least the degree of accuracy within the “stages of insight” that proves relevant. In the research interviews, two subjects (who are familiar with the maps, have experienced something resembling “the arising and passing away” and have corroborated the reality of negative meditative territory like the *dukkha ñāṇas*) reflect on the sense in which the “stages of insight” seem accurate. Freddy says, “I do feel like at a high level, my experience has aligned fairly well with the stages,” but also says that his meditative path has been less clear-cut than explicit stages would indicate: “When I start experiencing a certain stage for the first time, the flavor of the previous stages will still come up.” Freddy’s ultimate conclusion regarding the accuracy of “stages of insight” pragmatically validates the loss of conceptual nuance with which an “Ups and Downs” model would come: “For me, I didn’t feel like the detailed breakdown into sixteen stages provided me with much benefit.” More convincingly yet, August’s conclusions regarding the *ñāṇas* support our practical map: “It’s been very obvious that my practice will follow this general curve, where there are these ups and downs, and there is this peak at the ‘arising and passing’ and then it does dip, like in the dark night, and then it does level out at equanimity. But I haven’t found the particularities of any stages to be particularly helpful for me.” Thus, the (admittedly limited) research interviews which speak to the accuracy of the “stages of insight” suggest that the primary sense in which the map proves more accurate than an “Only Ups” American scientific map is simply in accounting for “Downs” as well as “Ups” on the meditative path. By adopting the “Ups and Downs” model, we stand to avoid the type of

excessive conceptualization that has proven a detriment to many Westerners' practices while simultaneously preserving that accuracy of the "stages of insight" which practitioners find relevant. The "Ups and Downs" model represents a skillful middle way between the risk of excessive intellectualization and the consequences of myopic secularization.

### **Implications for Mapping – The Theory of Theory**

In addition to this pragmatic appeal that we cease secularizing meditation, I suggest we also consider religious frameworks for the purposes of our philosophical pursuit of truth. While highly theoretical, what follows will produce conclusions relevant in situating our investigation of the meditative path, and could perhaps inform interpretations of physicalist neuroscientific research as well. In *Brains, Buddhas and Believing*, University of Chicago professor Dan Arnold likens the Buddhist position that fundamental consciousness underlies all things (advanced by ancient Indian philosopher Dharmakirti) to contemporary philosopher Jerry Fodor's arguments for physicalism.<sup>40</sup> Whether taking consciousness or electrons and quarks as an object, either philosophy proves reductionist, its basest grounds represented by a human categorization. Regarding meditation specifically, per the evidence presented thus far that meditation can produce negative effects unseen in biomedical and neuroscientific literature, the Western (physicalist) scientist is unable to claim her reductionist model bears superior predictive power to that of the Eastern Buddhist. So, whereas a Western scientist might point out that the predictions of general relativity theory have enabled the advent of cellphones and other technology, the

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<sup>40</sup> Arnold, *Brains, Buddhas and Believing*, Ch. 1-2.

subject of meditation subverts any corollary notion that science is inherently more predictive of first-person subjective experience than is religion (for the temporal reasons already mentioned, at the least). Regardless of how many true predictions exist regarding brain benefits or other objective effects of meditation, the research of Britton, Lindahl et al., Pritchard and Brown & Engler<sup>41</sup> has validated the prevalence of those subjective, often negative, first-person experiences predicted in Buddhist text and not in neuroscientific literature. The research of this paper has furthermore corroborated that prevalence, and while it hasn't necessarily validated the *ñāṇas* as a whole, it has at least validated the fourth *ñāṇa* – the first major “Up” of our practical model – as well as the difficulties to which the *dukkha ñāṇas* point – the “Downs” of our practical model.

With Eastern meditative frameworks on better predictive ground than Western neuroscientific frameworks (by accounting for “Downs”), is the Buddhist account of meditation “true,” or does it merely represent a closer approximation of truth? With Freddy and August concluding in the research interviews that the “stages of insight” equate to a rough fit of the meditative path, yet subjects as a whole resoundingly claiming that the conceptual nature of the maps can't capture the reality's dimensionality, it would seem approximations of truth are the best we can hope for. No matter how apt the framework or how warranted its nuances, any given framework is built of categorizations, and in the case of the “stages of insight,” each particular *ñāṇa* represents such a conceptual categorization. Even if we were to grant that each *ñāṇa* points to an experience or “stage” as real and distinct and the “arising and passing away” – the only explicit *ñāṇa* for which this research provides support – the philosophical truth of our meditative

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<sup>41</sup> Brown and Engler, “Stages of Mindfulness: A Validation Study.”

map would still rest upon a belief that a *ñāṇa* is something “real,” something more than a mere concept.

Philosopher Peter Klein, in “Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons,” advocates for a view of “Infinitism,” of which the “central thesis is that [a] structure of justificatory reasons is infinite and non-repeating.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, underlying any belief one holds is yet another belief, ad infinitum. If we adopt Klein’s “Infinitism,” and decipher the web of beliefs behind the epistemology of a worldview by infinitely inquiring for justifications of justifications, we will ultimately arrive at some underlying assumption, like that of fundamental consciousness, of fundamental physicalism or of the notion that a *ñāṇa* is a fundamentally “real” thing. Such an assumption equates to a categorization of something either physical or abstract, the categorization existing in the mental world of its maker either way. In the “Form, Substance and Difference” section of his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson extends Klein’s logic, analogizing the web of beliefs of a person or worldview – a model, like those of Buddhism and Western science – to a map of territory:

*What is the territory? Operationally, somebody went out with a retina or a measuring stick and made representations which were then put on paper. What is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal representation of the man who made the map; and as you push the question back, what you find is an infinite regress, an infinite series of maps. The territory never gets in at all... Always, the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps, ad infinitum.*<sup>43</sup>

Buddhists frequently make a similar analogy between direct meditative experiences and intellectual knowledge of those experiences, as Teresa and many other subjects did in my research interviews. The teacher S.N. Goenka, widely known for bringing intensive *vipassanā*

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<sup>42</sup> Klein, “Infinite Regress,” 297.

<sup>43</sup> Bateson, *Ecology of Mind*, 461.

retreats to America, writes in the article *Experiential Wisdom* that “knowledge of superficial, apparent truth is not true wisdom. In order to understand the ultimate truth, we must penetrate apparent reality to its depths” by meditating.<sup>44</sup> So, sources in both Western scientific epistemology and Buddhism converge here on a claim: No model, whether scientific, Buddhist or of other grounding, can be absolutely true. No map can truly encapsulate the territory it describes; it may hold predictive power and prove apt as a framework; it may even prove more apt than other frameworks; yet it will always prove inadequate in comparison to the dimensionality of the territory.

Jacques Derrida’s work *Of Grammatology*, foundational to the philosophy of deconstructionism, also questions our ability to come into direct contact with the territory of reality, extending the question particularly to human use of language.<sup>45</sup> Derrida’s work is relevant to our discussion of mapping territory with termed “stages of insight” because language may be construed as our most fundamental framework – the basest map on which we rely to mentally navigate reality’s territory. According to Peter Benson in “Derrida on Language,” Derrida’s interest in the “underlying condition of all languages” leads him to a conception of language as a set of categorical symbols based on contrasts: For instance, the word ‘red,’ defined in contrast to other colors, describes a perception resulting from “the response of certain reactive cells in the retina.”<sup>46</sup> As Bateson would frame it, the word ‘red’ enables one to transmute one’s retinal representation of a sight into a map that can be interpreted and understood as describing a particular color. Yet, “since ‘red’ is also a universal, referring to all possible experiences of the colour, both real and imaginary,”<sup>47</sup> its categorization or modeling of that experience cannot

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<sup>44</sup> S.N. Goenka, “Experiential Wisdom” (December 21, 1998), Awakin.org.

<sup>45</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>46</sup> Benson, “Derrida on Language,” *The Problems of Presence*.

<sup>47</sup> Benson, “Derrida on Language,” *The Problems of Presence*.



capture the infinitely dimensional (or at least manifold) possibilities of ‘red.’ Seeing how misaligned understandings may ensue from a verbal map as simple as ‘red,’ it is no stretch to imagine that immense misalignment in understanding ensues from a verbal map like “kundalini awakening,” like “the arising and passing away” (which Ingram describes as analogous to a “kundalini awakening”)<sup>48</sup> or like the stages of meditative insight as a whole.

For Said also, no person or concept “today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.”<sup>49</sup> Following from the notion of language as a system of representative labels and symbols – a lacking map of a territory, or an imperfect model in and of itself – there exist “inevitable gaps to be negotiated between experience [communicating reality] and reality [itself].”<sup>50</sup> Embodying such gaps is one of Derrida’s key ideas: “the philosophy of presence.”<sup>51</sup> For Derrida, “presence” means lack of mediation – direct engagement with “the territory” of Bateson or the “ultimate truth” of Goenka. Derrida, albeit in a different context, concurs with Goenka’s distinction between intellectual (or communicated) knowledge and true reality. As he puts it, “we are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it.”<sup>52</sup> Nowhere is our “dispossession” clearer than in written language, according to Derrida. While speech might create an illusion of language as truly attaining presence,<sup>53</sup> in the cerebral process of producing and reading the written word,

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<sup>48</sup> Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*, Part IV, Section 4.

<sup>49</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1994), 336.

<sup>50</sup> Benson, “Derrida on Language,” *The Problems of Presence*.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 141.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 12.

we may observe how disconnected these mere categorical symbols are from infinitely dimensional reality.

In sum of the philosophical portion of this paper: 1) Compared to the Western scientific perspective, Eastern explanations of meditation's effects stand on better predictive ground; 2) maps and models can never totally represent reality; and 3) language itself constitutes such a model, fundamentally incapable of bridging the gap between the "presence" of reality – the territory we strive to map – and our intellectual understandings. These philosophical difficulties manifest in contemporary science's shortcomings explaining the possibilities of meditative experience. Beyond Western academia, though, a frenzy of disagreement even within Eastern religious models of meditation serves as a testament to the suggestions that no model can ever quite 'hit the nail on the head,' and that language can't convey truth in any objective sense. The *Theravada* Buddhist model of the meditative path claims that one progresses through the "stages of insight" for four cycles before becoming a fully enlightened being (an 'arahat,' as they label it), whereas Tibetan Buddhists believe one traverses their own stages of insight eight times, which Ingram mentions while noting that others anecdotally report feeling as if they've cycled through the stages twenty or thirty times while still not being fully enlightened.<sup>54</sup> Zen Buddhism offers yet another account, supplementing and supplanting language (perhaps Derrida, if he took up meditation, would have opted for Zen!) by depicting the journey toward enlightenment through ten ox-herding pictures. The challenges Derrida flags, as Benson alludes to in the Judeo-Christian tradition,<sup>55</sup> actually warrant a heavy reliance on interpretive material, be it pictures or

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<sup>54</sup> Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*, Part V, Section 37.

<sup>55</sup> Benson, "Derrida on Writing," *The Problems of Presence*.

the parables and metaphors characteristic of religious text. We ultimately derive meaning interpretively, regardless of whether the material we're reading is rigorous logic or story.

I echo Said's claim that "all knowledge that is about human society... rests upon judgment and interpretation. This is not to say that facts or data are nonexistent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation."<sup>56</sup> The science through which meditation became popular in the West rests upon interpretations of third-person (and temporally limited) data; contemporary anthropology rests upon interpretations of field work; Buddhist frameworks rest upon interpretations of religious text. While some anthropological work (Pritchard, Lindahl et al.) has validated the salience of Buddhist frameworks over (or at least in addition to) science, each remains a map of territory that cannot be perfectly modeled. However, this theoretical point does not mean there don't exist pragmatic reasons (imperatives, even, considering the severe psychological consequences of foolhardy meditation) to integrate Buddhist ideas into our understanding. Even if all models are "wrong," Milton Friedman illustrates the usefulness of modeling through analogy in "The Methodology of Positive Economics." He entertains a model we "know" to be "wrong" – that a tree's leaves consciously decide to move rapidly or instantaneously to positions of maximal sunlight, incorporating physical laws into their calculus. Friedman then reasons:

*Is the hypothesis rendered unacceptable or invalid because, so far as we know, leaves do not "deliberate" or consciously "seek," have not been to school and learned the relevant laws of science or the mathematics required to calculate the "optimum" position, and cannot move from position to position? Clearly, none of these contradictions of the hypothesis is vitally relevant... Despite the apparent falsity of the*

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<sup>56</sup> Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (Vintage, 1981), 240.

*“assumptions” of the hypothesis, it has great plausibility because of the conformity of its implications with observation.<sup>57</sup>*

By the same logic, whether ideas of fundamental consciousness or of the “stages of insight” are philosophically “true” has little bearing on the importance of their potential to warn meditators of the dangers of a potential “dark night of the soul.” Rather than suggesting any particular perspective on meditation *isn't* meaningful, the philosophy of deconstructionism actually suggests they all can be:

Without religious frameworks, apt Buddhist warnings of possible psychological damage facing unwitting meditators would not exist. Without anthropological work like that of Pritchard or Lindahl et al., the scientifically-minded rationalist misled by news articles might doubt such a warning. Without the validation of meditation via science from the 1960s to the present, most American meditators would be culturally estranged from the practice (even more than they may be already). They would be safe from its dangers but also barred from its benefits, which are immense according not only to the Western media but also to Goenka, Mahasi Sayadaw, Ingram, countless Buddhists and myself. The academic who wishes for the welfare of his readers, then, will encourage in them an awareness of Eastern as well as Western perspectives on the effects of meditation. I advocate not only that we legitimize culturally foreign perspectives this way, but furthermore that we legitimize the diversity of perspectives within our own academic culture. Both neuroscience and anthropology are, among other things, forms of communication – implementations of the imperfect model that is language – insofar as neuroscientists and anthropologists publish their work. These publications in traditionally disciplinary journals can

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<sup>57</sup> Milton Friedman, “The Methodology of Positive Economics,” *Essays In Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 19 – 20.

be as interdisciplinary as academics collectively make them, and can include reference to other fields. Lindahl et al. represent a strong example in publishing anthropological research informed by religious studies through Willoughby Britton's *Clinical and Affective Neuroscience Lab*, and I hope to contribute to further work following their example.

While my treatment of each particular field I've covered has been coarse throughout this paper, cherry-picking neuroscientific results in the name of summary and accounting for the seminal *Of Grammatology* in just over a page, I hope my appeal to interdisciplinarity (and receptivity to culturally foreign ideas) has been thorough. I hope to have done through this writing what I call for in scholarly communication at large – synthesizing perspectives ethically and presenting them in a way true to their own intent, for the benefit of readers. In encouraging Western researchers to convey meditation holistically, rather than leaving Western media to repurpose disciplinary findings for profit and mislead the public about the existentially consequential practice of meditation, I see an ethical onus. I see an ethical onus, too, in the grounds on which I do so. That is why when I repeat as a rhetorical device that lives are at stake – that a young woman named Megan Vogt died by suicide in June 2017 as a direct result of intensive *vipassanā* meditation<sup>58</sup> – I do so with hesitation. I still do so, but with sensitivity toward the loss of human life that bolsters this argument; I do so because I believe the acceptance of the argument – for an interdisciplinary and balanced communication of meditation's effects – could save human lives in the future.

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<sup>58</sup> Vendel, "Woman's Suicide."

## Of Mysticism and Psychosis

Megan and I were separated by just four days of age when she died. She “wasn’t the first to die by suicide after a meditation retreat... and she wasn’t the first to go into psychosis or experience serious mental issues after taking a grueling course, which can involve 10 hours a day of strict meditation.”<sup>59</sup> According to her parents, she was a happy and grateful person with no thoughts of suicide before entering her retreat. The 10-day retreat, of the tradition of S.N. Goenka, began March 2017 – the same time during which I was beginning diligent daily meditation based on my vague impressions of scientific findings, unaware that meditation presents existential risks. Vendel recounts the chilling sequence of events behind Megan’s death as follows:

*Megan “was so happy about... the retreat,” her mother Kris said. “She thought it was going to be such a good thing for herself,” [but regarding picking Megan up at the retreat’s end, Kris reported]: “Never, ever, was I prepared to see what I saw”... Megan Vogt tried to bolt back into the [retreat] center, asking for a knife to kill herself. They got Megan back into their vehicle and started driving home. Vogt immediately began trying to kill herself by attempting to jump out of the moving vehicle.”<sup>60</sup>*

Yet, according to Clifford Saron, a neuroscientist at the *Center for Mind and Brain* at UC Davis, in mainstream culture “retreats are viewed as essentially not risky.”<sup>61</sup>

One year following Megan’s tragedy, in March 2018, I entered my own first meditation retreat – a 10-day silent *vipassanā* retreat in the tradition of S.N. Goenka, structurally identical to the retreats of Megan and many others who have died by suicide after intensive *vipassanā*. Even

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<sup>59</sup> Vendel, “Woman’s Suicide.”

<sup>60</sup> Vendel, “Woman’s Suicide.”

<sup>61</sup> Vendel, “Woman’s Suicide.”

though emotionally-grounded personal anecdote is scarce in academic writing, I share mine to contrast it with Megan’s story: About two weeks before Megan died by suicide, I had a meditative experience that seismically shifted my perspective on life, myself and what is possible in meditation. While I had no idea how to categorize what had occurred at that time, shortly thereafter I read Daniel Ingram’s book,<sup>62</sup> and was convinced that what I’d experienced was the fourth stage of insight, or the “arising and passing away.” I was convinced of this because Ingram’s description of this “stage” matched what I’d experienced with extraordinary precision, and as such I was convinced not only of the reality of the fourth “stage of insight” in particular, but also of the reality of all sixteen “stages of insight” in general. Of course, immediately following the “arising and passing away” within the Buddhist framework are “stages” five through ten – the “*dukkha ñāṇas*” – or the “dark night of the soul,” which could have been the meditative territory that haunted Megan psychologically. As I entered (what I perceived to be) that same territory, I did not do so armed with any particular knowledge or ability that Megan lacked; I cannot offer any surefire reason why her fate did not befall me, other than luck. To make a distinctly non-academic, non-rigorous statement, I feel a connection with Megan that compels this writing. Why, ultimately, should academic standards of formality and empiricism (to which I’m still partially beholden, even now, crying while writing) restrain one from sharing information that could serve as a relevant warning to fellow travelers of a meditative path?

My own experience walking such a path, as well as Megan’s tragic death, constitutes such a warning – that Buddhist meditation practice aimed at mystical ends of spiritual self-transcendence may lead instead to psychotic ends of literal self-destruction. The comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell said that “the psychotic drowns in the same waters in which the

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<sup>62</sup> Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*.

mystic swims with delight,”<sup>63</sup> and the “stages of insight” suggest that meditators might expect to relate to these waters psychotically (or at least with fear, misery and disgust) before ever (if ever) relating to them mystically. Indeed, in my own meditative journey I suffered through a period of debilitating psychosis in March 2019. On the heels of intensive practice and psychologically challenging personal circumstances, I spent about two weeks reeling in an entropic mental state within which, similarly to Megan two years prior, I didn’t know what was “real.” Over these two weeks I slept an average of one hour per day, not sleeping at all most nights, and developed a number of paranoid delusions about the world around me. I suspected all technological devices I encountered of spying on me, suspected bees I encountered of being spying drones and suspected that my entire life up until that point had been manipulated and filmed. This delusion is actually common enough (several hundred cases have been reported) to have been colloquially named “The Truman Show Delusion” by the psychiatrist and neurophilosopher brothers Joel and Ian Gold. Of course, having actually been on reality television from 2013 to 2015 likely made me more prone to it, but from my subjective perspective, intensive spiritual practice catalyzed this period which proved a terrifying time for myself and my concerned family.

My memory of the time is hazy, but I recall many troubling events that weren’t a far cry from Megan Vogt’s erratic behavior: I cried and screamed hysterically in a park while trying to explain my delusions to my partner, randomly walked towards strangers’ homes (which my partner thankfully stopped me from entering) and suddenly sat or lied down in public without warning or clear reason, refusing to get up. I recall seeing paintings appear to morph and inexplicably change form, feeling overwhelming somatic pains throughout my body and

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<sup>63</sup> Stanislav Grof, *Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 239.



breaking down in panic attacks while on a plane. It is impossible to objectively disentangle the many factors that could have driven this behavior – underlying mental disorder (e.g. a schizophrenic tendency), acute psychological reactivity, the effects of extreme sleep deprivation, meditation-induced psychosis, etc. – but there exists little doubt in my mind today that intensive spiritual practice spurred much of the difficulty. Because I view my meditative path as a key ingredient to this psychotic bout, I feel compassion for all practitioners who find themselves in such dark psychological territory in the wake of *vipassanā*, and I feel particularly compassionate toward practitioners who begin meditating oblivious to such possibilities. I feel an emotional connection (something seldom of weight in social scientific writing posturing as rigorous and objective) to all those who walk any path of spiritual practice exposing them to the risk of psychosis, of the “*dukkha ñāṇas*” or of a “dark night of the soul” (regardless of which map we use to construe a comparable territory). And, as I wrote before my digression into personal anecdote (also scarce in formal academic writing), I feel a connection to Megan Vogt.

In addition to transcending cultural and disciplinary constraints, my final suggestion in this paper’s conclusion is that we break free of the norms preventing us from imbuing our academic work with personal meaning. These norms entail extensive formality and discourage clauses like the one I used repeatedly above, “I feel.” Yet, breaking them doesn’t imply any degradation of merit. “I feel,” “I think” and “the evidence shows” are not mutually exclusive, and each rests upon what Klein terms infinite and non-repeating justifications, after all.<sup>64</sup> Derrida claimed that within the contrasts found between the interdependent symbols of language, we play favorites,<sup>65</sup> most obviously we favor words like “good” over words like “bad,” but more subtly

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<sup>64</sup> Klein, “Infinite Regress,” 297.

<sup>65</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 147.

we favor “thinking” over “feeling,” or at least we have historically favored thinking over feeling. Perhaps today this latter favoritism is shifting as we move from a head-centered culture to a heart-centered culture, but in academia we might still assume a phrasing is more apt or true because it is dense, or academically “sophisticated.” Having employed dense language since childhood to demonstrate our competence to teachers, professors, advisors and scholars, resorting to jargon is a sort of second nature for the academic, in my view. Is this pertinent, though? Granted, academics of all stripes, but particularly those in the natural sciences, must use formal language when referring to a field’s established terms. When I criticize academic writing, I criticize only the tendencies of the academic to *unnecessarily* nominalize, imbed dense conceptualizations in writing and complicate sentence structure. This sort of self-criticism is uncommon in academia, perhaps because as academics studying others (be they other cultures, objects or ideas), we feel little compulsion to reflect on our own semiotic culture. Perhaps, as Clifford Geertz writes in “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” we lie like “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”<sup>66</sup> We have difficulty reflexively evaluating those webs of academic jargon and compulsory attempts at objectivity.

Our means of communicating are important, though. Our eventual impact on society at large comes from communicating our contributions – from speaking, from writing. Whether or not we intend through that writing to persuade, we do persuade. We persuade readers either that our findings are apt, that they are wrong or that they are boring. Our work being read at all implies some nonzero level of persuasion, but the reach of that persuasion has diminished in recent years. In a *Pew Research Center* study highlighting “stark fissures” between the

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<sup>66</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 3 – 30.

consensus of academics and that of American citizens on a range of issues, Cary Funk and Lee Rainie show through survey data that from 2010 to 2015, both scientists and citizens perceived scientific enterprise as losing influence in society.<sup>67</sup> Put more frankly: *The average American cares less than ever before to read academic writing*. Academics who don't view this fact as problematic, then, write to and amongst themselves, with little incentive to change formal styles which serve their goals of peer-reviewed publication. Yet I contend that our writing, as it stands, *is* problematic. If we don't connect with the public, mass media remains capable as ever of filling the gap in our stead, as it has done in communicating a harmfully simplistic portrait of meditation to masses of Westerners. I call for a move toward less formal, jargon-laden writing – writing that resonates with the non-academic, that conveys emotional as well as logical meaning, allowing us to write less exclusively amongst ourselves and more impactfully to others.

In closing, one of the best-known stories from Buddhism is the 'raft parable,' from the *Sutta Pitaka* of the Pali Canon.<sup>68</sup> In it, the Buddha compares his teachings to a raft – to be used by practitioners to cross the river between themselves and enlightenment, but not to be clung to. Though interpretations vary (naturally and inevitably, per the nature of language), Buddhist scholar Damien Keown describes the raft as being constructed of various provisional understandings of Buddhist teachings that are inevitably imperfect<sup>69</sup> (as any teaching conveyed through language is bound to be). Provisional and imperfect models of meditation's effects are all we have to use today, as ever, and many in the Western public are eager to use them. The use of scientific and religious models of meditation, however, remains married to our cultural interpretations of these models. The prevalent interpretation from mass media, lionizing

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<sup>67</sup> Cary Funk and Lee Rainie, "Public and Scientists' Views on Science and Society," *Pew Research Center* (January 29, 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Karem Tej Sarao, "Sutta Pitaka," *Buddhism and Jainism* (Encyclopedia of Indian Religions, 2017), 1156 – 1160.

<sup>69</sup> Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 165 – 191.

meditation through myopic medical and scientific lenses, represents an incautious raft that appears to float, but falters for people like Megan Vogt. For those people's sake, let us use the set of symbols that is language skillfully. As researchers, scientists, anthropologists and other academics across disciplines, let us drop any sectarianism – be it cultural, disciplinary or stylistic – which inhibits our ability to offer pieces of raft. Through the pieces, let us provide the best raft we can – none of it perfect or philosophically “true,” but its synthesis helpful for those hoping to cross the river.

## **Guide for the Research’s Semi-Structured Interviews:**

*Note: Bullet-points are optional probes for follow-up; \*s represent importance.*

1. Why do you meditate?
2. Of the experiences you’ve had during sits (meditation sessions), which stand out to you?
  - Meditative states
  - Insights
  - Others’ experiences
    - Validation \*
3. Other than from practice itself, where have you gotten your knowledge of meditation?
  - Teachers – retreats, online
  - Books
  - Spiritual Communities
  - Maps / models
4. Now I’d like to talk about maps of progress in *vipassanā*. There are many models for how the meditative path unfolds – the “stages of insight” in *Theravada*, the ten ox-herding pictures of Zen, and other frameworks. How much stock do you put in maps like this?
  - Reason for learning \*
  - Discussion with teachers
  - Studying ahead \*\*
5. How can a practitioner use the maps effectively?
  - Personal use \*
  - Validation of progress
  - Self-assessment \*\*
6. How might a practitioner misuse the maps?
  - Predominant maps thoughts
  - Anticipating progress
  - Competitiveness
  - Teacher-assessment \*

7. We've talked about effective and ineffective use of the maps for an individual. Now I'd like to talk about the effects of the maps collectively, as various figures within American *vipassanā* like Daniel Ingram have made them more widely known. What effect do you think this popularization of the maps has on American *vipassanā*? \*
  - Belief in meditative path
  - Enlightenment as realistic
  - Rigid ideas of progress
  - Dark night warning \*\*
  
8. Many mainstream *vipassanā* voices like Joseph Goldstein talk about the dangers of over-studying the maps, but the usefulness of a cursory knowledge of them. What aspects of meditation would be better understood if everyone had this cursory knowledge?
  - Dark night / Dukkha *ñāṇas*
  - Knowledge vs. experience \*
  
9. How does your personal understanding of meditation now compare to how you understood meditation before you began practicing?
  - Intellectual meditative knowledge
  - Media depictions
  - Expectations
  - Practice vs. life \*
  
10. How have these changes in how you understand meditation affected the types of experiences you have "on the cushion?"
  - Thinking about meditation during meditation
  - Categorizing sensations \*
  
11. A big tension in meditation research is that meditation's effects are felt in the subjective first-person, while our scientific findings have come from objective third-person data. Say a person knows all the neuroscience, but has never actually meditated: What understanding of the practice might this person be missing?
  - Abstract benefits
  - Concept vs. reality
  - Neurophenomenology \*
  
12. Which results of meditative practice are difficult to explain?

- Effects on character
- Medical / health
- Ideas capturing reality
- Buddhist parables \*

13. What misconceptions do people have about *vipassanā* practice?

- End goals
- Thinking as “bad”
- Intensive retreat

14. What misconceptions do even experienced practitioners have about *vipassanā*?

- Locking into one model
  - Medical / neuroscientific / anthropological
  - Spiritual / Buddhist / esoteric
- Stages of practice
- Paths

15. If you taught, what would you do differently from most meditation instructors?

- Discussing enlightenment \*
- Addressing misconceptions

16. If you were conducting this interview, what else would you ask?

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