Constructing Meaning with Spiritual Meditation
How spiritual experiences can influence psychological well being

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Abstract

A qualitative method was used to explore the construction of meaning in relation to spiritual meditation and spiritual experience. Meaning was considered a pathway between spiritual experience and psychological well being. 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who meditate and report having had spiritual experiences during meditation. A cultural analysis was employed to understand spiritual meaning in secular, postmodern Sweden. Meaning was analyzed using a theory of global meaning where the meaning system is made up of three aspects; beliefs, goals and affect. Spiritual meditation and spiritual experiences were used by the participants to construct meaning in all three areas of global meaning. Beliefs about a spirit world and the eternal nature of a soul were confirmed and experienced in spiritual meditation which provided meaning to life and raised self-esteem. The spiritual meditation also helped the participants find and strive for important goals in life, often related to personal growth.

Keywords: Spiritual meditation, spiritual experience, meaning, culture, psychological well being
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Chapter 1 Introduction

1. Introduction

To treat religion as a meaning system is an attempt at understanding the function it has for the individual and to further understand the connections that have been made between religion and psychological well being (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). Turning the attention to spiritual experience in meditation is a way of studying the meaning construction in one domain of religion or spirituality. In Sweden, one of the most secular countries in the world, many people choose to call themselves spiritual and not religious and they choose their beliefs and practices freely.

One method of practicing spirituality is through meditation which can be pursued in group sessions or alone with the guidance of meditation tapes. Meditation and mindfulness has gained attention by health professionals both in Sweden and in the US for its stress-relieving benefits (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Nilsonne, 2004). This thesis studies the health aspects related to the kind of meditation that is considered spiritual. In many ways, spiritual meditation is no different from other meditation techniques, the difference lies in the practitioner’s interpretation of the experience.

These meditations can lead to different mystic or spiritual experiences. By reading research findings and interviewing individuals who have had spiritual experiences, I have learned that this type of experience can be very profound and meaningful. Previous research in Sweden on mystic experiences have focused on spontaneous experiences in a Christian religious context (Geels, 2001). Because meeting Christ has been described as life changing moments for individuals in a Christian context I wanted to explore the impact spiritual meditation can have on a person’s psychological well being by understanding it in relation to meaning.

1.1. Purpose statement and aims

The purpose of this study is to understand the influence spiritual meditation and spiritual experience can have on psychological well being by analyzing it with a meaning systems perspective. Semi-structured interviews will be used to explore the function of spiritual meditation by looking mainly at three different aspects of meaning; beliefs, goals and affect. It aims at understanding if and how spiritual experiences and spiritual meditation help individuals construct meaning as well as exploring what negative psychological effects may come out of spiritual meditation.
1.2. Research questions

There is a main research question and in order to operationalize it six sub-questions have been created. These six sub-questions will be answered one by one in the conclusion. The intention is that the answers to those sub-questions will together provide an answer to the main question.

Main question

How can spiritual meditation and spiritual experiences influence the participants’ sense of meaning in life with regards to beliefs, goals and affect and how can this be used to understand well being among the participants?

Sub-questions

1. How do the participants interpret the spiritual experiences?

2. What psychological states are reported by the participants to have occurred during spiritual experiences?

3. How have spiritual meditation and the spiritual experiences influenced the participants’ feelings and psychological states long-term, and how are they connected to meaning?

4. How can the participants’ belief systems be said to provide meaning?

5. Have spiritual meditation and spiritual experiences influenced the participants’ strivings in life and how are they connected to meaning?

6. How does cultural context in the form of Swedish postmodern culture, as well as the local community context influence the construction of meaning for the participants?

7. How can the relationship between spiritual meditation/spiritual experience and the participants’ psychological well being be understood by using a meaning system perspective?

1.3. Limitations

A methodological limitation of this study is the sample of participants. Even though it is not as important to have a heterogeneous sample as it would be if it was a quantitative study, it is a weakness that I only have female participants. This is due to the difficulty of finding individuals who have had spiritual experiences.
Definitions

The concepts of spirituality, spiritual experiences and well being are difficult to conceptualize but keeping the definitions wide is also a strategy that is tied to the chosen method. A qualitative method relies on some level of openness and flexibility to allow different perspectives to emerge (Creswell, 2009).

**Spirituality** – The participants of this study have not identified with any religious affiliation even though they agree with some traditional religious beliefs. Because they have a personal belief system I use the term spiritual instead of religious. The definition of spirituality is both substantial and functional. It includes beliefs, rituals and personal experiences aimed at what is considered sacred or ultimate truth about existential questions.

**Spiritual meditation** – The following definition of meditation is suggested by researchers who aim at reviewing meditation’s therapeutic use:

[...] essential to a meditation practice is its use of (a) a defined technique, (b) logic relaxation, and (c) a self induced state/mode. Participants also agreed that a meditation practice may (d) involve a state of psychophysical relaxation somewhere in the process; (e) use a self-focus skill or anchor; (f) involve an altered state/mode of consciousness, mystic experience, enlightenment, or suspension of logical thought processes; (g) be embedded in a religious/spiritual/philosophical context; or (h) involve an experience of mental silence (Bond et.al., 2009, p 132).

When I use the term spiritual meditation I refer to the context as spiritual due to the belief system of the participant. However, during my interviews, the participants also shared experiences they have had during states induced through healing, channeling and regression or hypnosis. As such, I have chosen to include these experiences as well. Healing and channeling could fit into the same definition but I have decided not to investigate this in detail because the focus is not on the individuals’ state of consciousness, but rather on the experiences they have had.

**Spiritual experience** – Initially I used the term mystic experience but due to the diversity of experiences and the range of intensity I changed it to spiritual experience. There is also the fact that not many participants referred to their experiences as mystical, to them it’s a natural part of meditation and even everyday life. It is however a part of their spiritual belief system that involves a belief in a soul and the afterlife. Some of the experiences during meditation are about childhood memories and are thus not directly related to any transcendent dimension or spiritual realm but these are also included in the analysis. Because the participants shared these experiences with me, it would be difficult to leave them out when looking at the entire meaning system which involves all experiences in meditation, and not just some. Some of the participants have also had spontaneous spiritual experiences outside of meditation and these are also part of the analysis for the same reason.

**Well being** – Well being refers to psychological well being which is closely related to the model of meaning system by Park (2005) that is used as a theoretical lens. The following six constructs have been suggested by Ryff (1989) and have been frequently used to measure well being: self-acceptance, positive relations
with others, personal growth, autonomy, environmental mastery and purpose in life. I have not used these constructs directly but they show how the meaning system can be used as a relevant indicator of well being. Purpose in life is the one that Parks’ meaning systems theory captures but the other constructs can also be found in her theory because, as I will explain when I present the theory, meaning is more than the subjective sense of life as meaningful, it is part of other areas in life as well.

1.4. Research review

An initial search was made during January of 2012 for relevant material about spiritual experiences and meditation, preferably in combination. The search was conducted in the databases PubMed and PsycINFO (Ovid), accessed through the Uppsala University library. The following search words were used: mysticism, mystic/mystical experiences, spiritual experiences, religious experiences, meditation, yoga, meaning, effects of mystic experiences, and altered states of consciousness. I chose articles related to psychology as opposed to biology (neurology, physiological measures) and I did not go through studies on specific religious mysticism and famous mystics. Instead I looked for recent studies with subjects that have been tested through quantitative or qualitative measures. I especially searched for articles containing the words meaning making, however, I only found one. I also used Google Scholar where I found a few more, and eventually I ended up with 16 articles.

In June 2012 another search was made due to a shift in the research question with a bigger emphasis on well being. From the previous 16 articles I had found, I kept 4. The first database I used was Pubmed and the search words were: meaning and spirituality, and spiritual experience and meditation. This search resulted in several articles about how clinicians can treat patients by incorporating the patients’ beliefs and rituals into their therapy. My interest, however, was in articles on how patients or non-patients construct meaning of their spiritual experiences and therefore, only a few articles were chosen. The next database I used was Psycharticles. I began with a basic search for “spiritual experience meditation”. This gave over 2000 hits (including books), but surprisingly few of them were about meditation. An advanced search was then carried out with the following search words: spirituality and meditation and well being, meditation and meaning, meditation and spirituality and health, and religious experience and meaning. These search words all gave few hits (between 5 and 28), some relevant, some not (as they did not include information about meditation). I also had trouble accessing a few of them. I then tried searching “meditation and consciousness states”. This gave 423 hits (including books). Most of these studies had measured states, often neurological measures and effects on attention and memory, however, none of them included specific spiritual or mystical subjective experiences.

A search for “spirituality and meaning” gave more relevant results, but out of the 165 hits, many were book reviews. My final search was in the database Psycinfo where the following search words were used: mysticism and well being, religious experience and well being, and meditation and mental health. These search words received between 6 and 62 hits and I found a few articles on medita-
tion, spiritual experience and well being. Out of this second search in June 2012, a total of 9 articles were chosen and an additional 4 were found through the reference list of the initial 9 (to check scales that were used in the study).

Spirituality, spiritual experiences and well being

There are many studies that have linked religiosity to health, some negative but most of them show positive psychological effects (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Often, the variable of religiosity has been measured through church attendance and frequency of prayer but more and more studies are concerned with capturing spirituality as a construct overlapping with, but still separate from religion. Spirituality is seen as being part of religion but can exist apart from it as well. It relates to a search for the sacred and the subjective experience of the sacred (Ellison & Fan, 2008; Underwood, 2006; Ivtzan, Chan, Gardner, & Prashar, 2011).

Underwood (2006) has developed a scale to measure spiritual experiences in everyday life. She differentiates between these experiences and mystical experiences which she sees as more life-altering and less common than spiritual experiences. The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) includes experiences that are interpreted with a religious framework and those that are not. It includes constructs such as “awe, gratitude, mercy, sense of connection with the transcendent, compassionate love, and desire for closeness to God. It also includes measures of awareness of discernment/inspiration and transcendent sense of self (Underwood, 2006, p 181).” The constructs were developed through qualitative analysis from interviews with people from different religious affiliations as well as agnostics and atheists. It was intended to be used in health research but is now widely used by other disciplines across cultures. Underwood points out, however, that this scale is not to be understood as a measure of spirituality because that would have to include more than just subjective experiences of feelings and sensations.

The DSES has been included in the General Social Surveys (GSS) in the US and Ellison and Fan (2008) used the results from 1998 and 2004 to research the relationship between daily spiritual experiences and well being. The GSS gives samples of around 1000 participants. The hypothesis was that the DSES would correlate with psychological well being and that it would be the association between religious practices and well being. Because the DSES uses the word “God” in some, but not all, statements, Ellison and Fan (2008) decided to differentiate between theistic and non-theistic spiritual experiences to see if there was a difference in how they correlate with well being. Assessment of well being was done with measures of “psychological distress, happiness, excitement with life, satisfaction with self and optimism about the future (p. 252).” Sociodemographic characteristics were adjusted for, and six different types of life stressors were included. The result showed no interaction between the DSES and stress but it did show a positive relationship with psychological well being. There was a strong relationship between the DSES and all positive psychological outcomes for both years. This result remained after accounting for sociodemographic factors as well as conventional religious practices. They also noticed a stronger relationship for non-theistic than for theistic experiences. The DSES could not be seen as a mediator which means that it has value in itself and not just as the core of conventional religious practice.
The following study made further attempts at differentiating the constructs of religion and spirituality in their relationships to well being by comparing different groups of participants who were chosen out of their levels of religious involvement and spirituality (Ivtzan et al., 2011). They had 205 participants with different religious affiliations in London placed in one of four groups: “(1) a high level of religious involvement and spirituality, (2) a low level of religious involvement with a high level of spirituality, (3) a high level of religious involvement with a low level of spirituality, and (4) a low level of religious involvement and spirituality (p. 1).” Comparisons were made with the following constructs of well being: meaning in life, self-actualization, and personal growth initiative. Groups (1) and (2) had higher scores on all three measures of psychological well being. This study thus came to the same conclusion as the previous one, that spirituality can be treated as separate from religious practice and deserves to be studied more as a construct that relates to well being.

Not all studies point to positive effects of mysticism and spiritual experiences. Ghorbani and Watson (2009) found introverted mysticism (time, space and ego dissolves) to be a predictor of psychological dysfunction with both American Christians and Iranian Muslims. Interpretation, on the other hand, correlated with healthier psychological functioning, but only in the Iranian sample. The researchers believe that this could be connected to having a religion that is more supported by one’s culture. There are also case reports of people experiencing psychological problems following Zen meditation retreats (Yorston, 2001) and there are patients who themselves attribute their psychological problems to spiritual awakening (Valanciute & Thampy, 2011). This last problem is discussed by the clinicians as being connected to western practitioners of eastern meditation or yoga techniques without any proper knowledge of what it is about.

It is still well known that a large portion of the population (at least in the US) have had some kind of spiritual experience at some point in their lives indicating that it is a part of healthy psychological functioning (Wardell & Engebretson, 2006). There is concern among health professionals that these kinds of experiences are sometimes falsely linked to psychopathology. As one study in the U.S. shows, it is more common among therapists with a psychodynamic, cognitive or behavioral orientation than those with a humanistic/existential to attribute spiritual experiences to psychopathology (Allman, De La Rocha, Elkins, & Weathers, 1992).

**Spiritual meditation and well being**

Meditation in itself has shown to be related to positive psychological and physical functioning. Kabat-Zinn (1982) has developed a non-religious mindfulness meditation program for use in clinical settings. Kabat-Zinn discovered a significant pain reduction in patients reports after using these meditation and mindfulness exercises and the “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” (MBSR) program has since been studied by others with indications of positive psychological health benefits, particularly in coping with stress (Carmody & Baer, 2008; Grossman et al., 2004).

Whether or not the subjects in the above studies experienced certain spiritual or mystical experiences during their meditation sessions is unclear. According to the literature on MBSR, it involves observing one’s thoughts and sensations as
well as the surrounding environment but it never includes a goal of connecting with the sacred. Those interested in researching the religious and spiritual impact on the health benefits of meditation have separated religious and secular forms of meditation in order to compare any possible differences. Pargament (2005) did a study in the US where he compared three groups of participants that were placed in a spiritual meditation group, a secular meditation group or a relaxation group. The main difference between the meditation groups was their meditative phrases. The subjects in the spiritual group chose a phrase that included the word God. Such as “God is joy” or God is peace” (p 375). Those in the secular group used phrases such as “I am joyful” or “I am good” (p 375). The relaxation group received similar instructions as the others with the exception of how to mentally focus while resting in a comfortable position. The participants filled out the Mysticism scale which showed a significant difference in that the spiritual meditation group had had more spiritual experiences both during meditation and in everyday life. They also showed significantly less anxiety and more positive mood than both other groups.

Cole and colleagues (2012) performed a similar study on patients with metastatic melanoma in Pittsburgh, USA. Before assigning the patients to one of three groups (spiritual meditation, secular meditation or a control group) they checked that all subjects considered religion or spirituality as somewhat important. The participants took part in different forms of guided meditation with the spiritual group having religious or spiritual language included in the meditation. Both meditation groups also completed exercises at home following written instructions or a CD recording. The study showed that although the participants, regardless of group were still in worse psychological and physical health, than normal due to their illness, the participants in the spiritual meditation group showed lower depression and more positive affect than the two other groups, especially in comparison with the control group.

Implementing this perspective on spiritual experience and spiritual meditation, Birnbaum and Birnbaum (2004) tried out a guided meditation as a form of therapeutic suicide intervention. It was done as a group workshop at a conference on suicide held in Alaska. The participants signed up and consisted of 5 lay people with a history of suicide attempts and 35 health professionals. The researchers view suicide as a spiritual illness since it revolves around the most basic existential choice to live or die. They see meditation as a way of adopting an observing self that is better able to listen to the person’s authentic desires and needs. The underlying philosophy is one that separates the mind from the soul. Each can be said to have a voice and the voice of the soul will ultimately promote life, not death. This inner voice is “that of inner guidance, inner wisdom, or intuition, which may serve as a direct and immediate source of knowledge, independent of ego-function and sense perception (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2004, p 220).” The intention with the guided meditation was to help participants get in contact with that inner voice in order to receive the knowledge that they needed at that time in their lives. Once in a deep relaxed state, they were given instructions to visualize a safe place and open up to guidance. After the session there was opportunity to share with the group and these comments were recorded. Participants also wrote about their experience and these descriptions together with the transcribed comment were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and inductive ground theory.
Out of the 40 participants, 27 reported meeting a presence of some sort. Some gave tangible and others gave abstract descriptions. It could be a late family member, a person they didn’t recognize or some sort of presence which emanated love and compassion. All but one had positive experiences. That participant reported being frightened by the vision of angry eyes staring at her and she said she would never try meditation again. The others felt they had received positive messages and had feelings of being looked after and being loved. Some participants even said it was difficult to terminate the meditation because they did not want to leave that positive state or the person they had encountered. One man, who met an older lady during the meditation reported: “The agitation, worry, distress vanished and, not like the usual disappearance of feelings, I felt or rather knew that everything would be and already was alright (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2004, p 223).” The researchers see this together with other similar reports of strong positive feelings of connectedness and acceptance, as indications of therapeutic potentials of this kind of spiritual meditation. At the same time, they acknowledge the fact that therapists must be prepared to handle negative experiences and make sure the subject is able to handle visions of different kinds. For this reason they advise against using this kind of therapy with clients who are, or have been, psychotic or have borderline or dissociative personality disorders.

Spirituality, spiritual experiences and meaning

To understand how spirituality is connected to well being there has been research on the construct of meaning. Meaning is seen as fundamental to peoples’ understanding of their world and theories on meaning have been around for a while but only recently has it been tested as a mediator between spirituality and psychological functioning (Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Park, 2007; Wnuk & Marcinkowski, 2012).

Mascaro and Rosen (2004) developed the Spiritual Meaning scale (SMS) to be able to differentiate from personal meaning which does not include religious or spiritual beliefs. Personal meaning includes having a philosophy or framework for living while spiritual meaning is a concept that involves “the perception that life itself has meaning that individuals can not only discover but in which they can participate in a way that results in a sense of calling or of feeling called on by life to pursue a particular purpose (Mascaro & Rosen, 2006, p 174).” They have tested these meaning constructs together with measures of hope and depression. The studies were conducted in the US. For personal meaning, two scales were used; the Personal Meaning profile (Wong & Fry, 1998) and the LRI-R (the Life Regard Index-framework sub-scale) (Debats, 1998). The study also included a measure of the Big Five personality traits. It turned out that both the spiritual and personal meaning had positive correlations with hope and negative with depression. This relationship existed beyond the Big Five. Another study by the same team tested the SMS and the LRI-R-framework again with depression and hope and they added stress to test if meaning can be seen as a buffer against stress. 143 college students participated in the study. Both personal and spiritual meaning correlated positively with hope and negatively with depression but there was no significant correlation with stress. This suggests that meaning can remain stable and act as a resiliency factor for stress.
In a similar study 115 university students in Warsaw, Poland completed questionnaires that measured spiritual experiences, meaning, hope and psychological well being. The purpose of the study was to see if meaning can be understood as a pathway between religiosity/spirituality and well being. Religiousness and spirituality were used as equivalents even though the researchers acknowledge that spirituality can stand on its own. They still see it as core element of religiousness and the participants all identified themselves as Roman-Catholics. The DSES was used to measure spirituality and meaning was measured using the Purpose in Life Test (PIL). Spiritual experience had a positive correlation with satisfaction with life but it went from being significant to insignificant when meaning was introduced. To confirm its mediating role, the Sobel test was used and it showed that both hope and meaning mediates the role between spiritual experience and satisfaction with life as well as positive effect (Wnuk & Marcinkowski, 2012).

The following study used a qualitative approach on the same topic. Mattis (2002) interviewed African American women to understand their spiritual meaning making in the context of coping. An analysis was made in order to find non-overlapping thematic categories. She ended up with eight descriptive themes that point to the way events are interpreted and how this meaning informs the way the subjects cope. The categories were: “(a) interrogating and accepting reality, (b) gaining insight and courage needed to engage in spiritual surrender, (c) confronting and transcending limitations, (d) identifying and grappling with existential questions and life lessons, (e) recognizing purpose and destiny, (f) defining character and acting within subjectively meaningful moral principles, (g) achieving growth, and (h) trusting in the viability of transcendent sources of knowledge and communication (Mattis, 2002, p 312).” Mattis’ work shows how important it is to understand how people construct meaning. A religious or spiritual belief system provides a framework that is used to interpret why things happen, how the person should act and what attitudes are chosen over others. Some of the women in the study declared that they rarely share their beliefs with anyone outside their friendship network out of fear of being labeled as insane.

The studies I have mentioned, on spirituality, health and meaning making, seem to assume that a person’s meaning making and belief system is secular, religious or spiritual. The work by DeMarinis (2008) highlights the fact that people can have mixed worldviews that are both secular and spiritual and can include elements from different religions. This is explained against the backdrop of the cultural context of Sweden where a postmodern lifestyle leads people to reject a single meaning system that would be too limited to provide all existential answers that the person needs.

The most extensive work on mystical experiences in Sweden has been carried out by Geels (2001) who collected the writings of individuals who claimed they had met Jesus. These individuals described their experiences that often had occurred many years previous. Most of the subjects came from a Christian background and a common theme for them was that their religious experiences had happened in a time of crisis. In most cases, this event had had a tremendous impact on the subjects as it helped them cope with this crisis, and in some instances, it had even meant the difference between life and death. The experiences described in the study, were never achieved through meditation, they were spontaneous mystical experiences. The study shows, however, how spiritual or mystical experiences can change a person’s life.
Reflections on research review

The research suggests that spirituality and spiritual experiences are important constructs in meaning which has been shown to correlate with well being. To understand this process there is a need for more qualitative work. Only one study used meaning making to understand spirituality in a qualitative analysis of interviews and this was connected to the person’s entire belief system and rituals, not to specific experiences during meditation. Meaning making has, just like the above mentioned study, focused much on coping strategies. The current study aims to explore meaning in all of life, not just as means of coping with stress. It is also less inductive because it rests on a theory that covers several aspects of a meaning system.

If, as the suicide prevention study says, there is therapeutic value in guided meditation there is also a need to understand more about the long term effects of the experiences the participants have, as well as how individuals deal with experiences that are negative. I also find it important to report what kind of spiritual experiences are referred to when research is done on meaning and health. People have different kinds of experiences and so naturally this will lead to different interpretations.

There is also a gap in research of this kind in a secular cultural context such as Sweden. Pargament’s study differentiates between secular meditation and spiritual meditation by adding the word God. I believe there are other kinds of meditation that do not include reference to God that can still be considered spiritual. The guided meditation in the suicide prevention study is an example of that which I believe is a common kind of spiritual meditation in Sweden.

1.5. Material

The material in this study will consist of empirical data collected through face-to-face interviews with 8 subjects. The subjects are women between the ages of 37 and 77 who have all had some kind of spiritual experience during meditation. Most of them have also had spontaneous experiences not connected to meditation. The subjects were found by contact with meditation groups, yoga studios and through acquaintances. The interviews will be semi-structured, meaning there will be certain questions that I have prepared and these questions are based on the theoretical framework that will guide this study. There will also be room for follow-up questions. The questions will be about the spiritual meditation and specific spiritual experiences they tell me about.
Chapter 2 Theory

2.1. Presentation of theory

To understand the connection between spiritual experiences and psychological well being I will use a theoretical framework that centers around the concept of meaning. The theories that I use will influence the choice of questions for the interview as well as the analysis. The keywords I use are meaning, well being and culture. Since the construction of meaning takes place in a cultural context this is an important aspect to take into consideration. To create a theoretical model I have chosen two theories which answer to these keywords and they will each be presented below. Some critical questions will be raised and finally I will create a model of how the theories will be used in this study.

Meaning system

The main theory that will be used is a theory developed by Park (2005) in psychology of religion. It is anchored in the perspective of human beings as meaning seeking and this meaning making creates a system that can, but does not need to, include religious beliefs. It is, however, a theory developed with the intent to understand the mechanisms of religion and spirituality and how these influence the person’s interpretative schemas and well being. The idea that meaning is connected to a core sense of purpose in life and thus to positive psychological functioning has been part of psychology since Frankl’s (2006) work on how people can survive concentration camps. He showed that meaning making can be such a powerful coping strategy that it can provide positive feelings in the worst of situations.

In the conceptualization of this theory global meaning is made up of three aspects; beliefs, goals and affect. They reflect the cognitive, affective and motivational components of a meaning system. Studies on meaning and health has centered around the subjective feeling of meaningfulness but according to Park (2011) this is not enough to fully understand meaning in people’s lives. First of all, it’s important to understand where this meaning comes from. What is the underlying philosophy that provides this sense of life as meaningful? This belief system or worldview is the lens through which all aspects of life is interpreted and understood. Behavior, cognition and emotions are all connected to a person’s appraisal and so it is important to understand what the person holds as true about the world and the self. Further, meaning is not just a feeling it is also embedded in the things people choose to strive for in life. From the small things to the large things people have a set of goals and these may not be in their immediate awareness. Having meaning also does not have to be an indication of positive well being. A meaning system can include destructive tendencies as well.
Belief- The belief system is capable of providing meaning to life. It makes up the core schemas that are used to interpret the world. According to Park (2005), a religious/spiritual belief system will make up the core part of the meaning system and influence all other areas, even beliefs that are not explicitly religious. It can include beliefs on fairness, control, predictability and the self and its part in the world.

Goals- These goals can be both what the person wants to do and who he/she wants to be. It can be related to work, spirituality or relationships, any part of their life where the person aspires to achieve, what is held as most important in life. However, it is not to achieve that is a predictor of well being but the aspiration, to sense that one is heading in a certain direction. A sense of direction or purpose gives life meaning. Research also indicates that spiritual or religious content in personal goals has strong influence on well being (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998).

Affect- The subjective feeling that life is meaningful has been found to relate to psychological well being. This is the main area that has been researched in meaning and health. Other positive states such as joy, gratitude, hope and forgiveness have been suggested as pathways between religion and health.

Together, the three aspects described above, form global meaning or meaning system. According to Park this system is mostly outside of people's awareness and remains stable until something traumatic or difficult happens in life. Then there can be a need to change some part of it and that’s what she refers to as meaning making. The function of a person’s meaning system becomes apparent in times of stress and this is where the focus is in research on meaning making or coping (Park, 2011). When something traumatic or stressful happens there is usually a discrepancy between global meaning and the appraisal of the event. The person then has the choice of two alternatives; changing appraisal of the event or change global meaning.

Culture

A meaning system is always constructed in a social context and is somehow connected to culture. This perspective will influence both research tools and analysis and therefore a definition from cultural psychology will be used to compliment Park’s theory. Cultural psychologist Ratner (1996) has developed a concept that builds on previous psychological perspectives on culture as shared concepts and meanings. Culture is socially constructed and the individual acts according to these meanings as well as creates and recreates them in social interaction. Ratner calls this view mentalistic because culture is, just like psychological processes, mental. What he adds to this perspective is the concept of activity as key in the way culture is defined. The mental concepts are tied to practical social activity. He also highlights the different structures that exist within a culture. Sociologists are well aware of this as are psychologists but according to Ratner they tend to overlook this when a cultural perspective is taken into consideration. This is why
he called for a revised cultural psychology where psychological functioning is seen as a product of the way individuals take part in practical social activity.

These practical social activities include owning, producing and distributing goods; establishing families; educating; playing; governing; investigating and understanding the world; producing art; treating disease; adjudicating disputes; and constructing religion (Ratner, 1996, p 411).

In developmental psychology activity has been emphasized by Vygotsky (in Ratner, 1996, p 414). He viewed practical activity such as children’s play with toys as important to their development in learning to separate meaning from objects. What Ratner is missing from Vygotsky’s work, along with other activity theorists like Luria (in Ratner, 1996, p 415), is the discussion of what kind of social system exist in the specific culture.

In addition to concepts and meanings, Ratner (1996) includes emotions in the equation. Emotions are also constructed in different cultural activities. What kinds of emotions are appropriate in specific situations and environments is learned and it includes religious services and rituals. To exemplify, Ratner uses an example from Sri Lanka where sadness is dealt with in religious institutions and they practice Buddhist meditation to overcome sorrow. In Buddhism there is an acceptance of suffering as part of human life and sadness is expected and shared. Therefore it is experienced differently than in western societies where sadness is more often dealt with in solitude and can lead to clinical depression. Sadness is seen as a deviant state because it impedes achieving behavior.

The cultural perspective will be used in three ways in this study. First, I will compare the material in large to the Swedish culture and the way religious meaning is constructed. Sweden is here treated as a postmodern country. This is mainly relevant in the construction of religious/spiritual belief. The term postmodern is defined as an age that opposes the modern age where reality is treated as something outside the person that can be known through reason. A postmodern perspective is that reality is a social construct and knowledge is subjective (DeMarinis, 2008). Postmodern people, religious or not, are choosers and consumers (Bauman, 1998). Sweden is seen as an individualistic country where values of self-expression are important as shown by the World Value Survey (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

Sweden is also a secular country in that, compared to most other countries in the world, not many people identify with a religion or are active members in a congregation. The term secular does not however refer to a decline of religion. Results from the World Value Survey suggest that there is rise in spirituality while there is a decline of the importance of God and traditional religion (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Even though there is a rise in spirituality I would say that spiritual experiences are outside the norm and this is the second aspect of culture that will be addressed. Here, the participants’ own personal view of the Swedish culture will be highlighted.

The third way of applying a cultural perspective is more in line with Ratner’s idea of activity. Meaning happens in what we do in the external world, not just the internal. I will therefore describe the actual context that the spiritual meditation takes place in, meaning the institutions and people that are involved in the meditation, the experiences and the belief system. A major part of this is the participants’ background, their family and what kind of community, if any, is present today.
Triangle of assessment

Before explaining the model that is used in this study, which is a combination of the two theories above, I will use DeMarinis (2003) triangle of assessment to analyze each theory on three different levels; meta-, theoretical and applied level. The triangle is also referred to as the triangle of responsibility since DeMarinis sees it as crucial that researchers take responsibility to properly assess the theories that are used so that it is clear which underlying philosophical assumptions are present, if theories can be combined, and if they are relevant for the research being conducted. These underlying assumptions can be both explicit and implicit. Either way, it is important to understand and explain so that the methodological process becomes transparent. It is therefore connected to the validity of the study. The levels are to be considered building on one another and having different strengths. The meta-level is the foundation and any changes here will change the other two levels. This is what the whole theory rests on. The theoretical level is the middle and changes here will affect the top level, the applied level which holds the research tools.

As well as being a theory used in psychology of religion, Park’s (2011) theory is also part of positive psychology where the focus is on abilities as opposed to disabilities. Being able to make meaning is fundamental to both physical and mental health and it is seen as necessary for increasing satisfaction with life and happiness. There is also a great deal of weight on coping. One of the main strengths and functions of the meaning system is to work as a resource when dealing with minor or major difficulties in life. However, it can also be part of increased stress if a conflict arises between the belief system and an event that is hard to understand. Health is therefore connected to the person’s appraisal of events and their interpretation.

The meaning system is constructed by the person but it takes place in a cultural context. This awareness exists in Park’s theory but is not dealt with directly. Much of the research that the theory is built upon has been conducted in the US and therefore things may look different in other countries that have different social systems than the US. This does not mean that the theory is not relevant in other contexts. It would only be irrelevant if the need for meaning making was connected to culture alone, but this need is considered inherent in basic human functioning so this aspect is universal while the character of the meaning system and how it is constructed is subject to cultural influence. One of the things that can differ between cultures is the way religion or spirituality is incorporated into the meaning system. Park recognizes the fact that even though religion is present it does not cover all of the different parts but she does agree with Pargament (1997) that for those who hold religious or spiritual beliefs as important they make up the

\[...\] core part of their meaning system, influencing their global beliefs, goals and a sense of meaning in life. [...]

The influence of religion on global beliefs is far-reaching. In addition to explicitly religious beliefs, such as the existence of God and the possibility of an afterlife, religion informs other, less-explicitly religious beliefs, such as fairness, control, coherence, benevolence of the world and other people, and vulnerability (Park, 2007, p 320).

This view is inconsistent with a more postmodern approach where people combine parts from different religions and belief systems to create a mixed
worldview. According to DeMarinis (2008) this is common in a country like Sweden because the postmodern way of thinking is that people reject the idea that one single system would be capable of providing all the answers. There is a questioning of ultimate knowledge through reason and each is left to create his/her own truth.

Another aspect of Park’s model that is lacking is that cultural activity is also part of the meaning system together with beliefs, goals, and feelings. According to Ratner (1996) practical activity is as much part of culture as are concepts and meanings. What his theory lacks is constructed instruments on the applied level but it provides philosophical and theoretical understanding on how culture is integrated with psychological phenomena. It complements Park’s theory since the awareness of cultural influence is there but nothing is said on how. Culture exists both as socially constructed and shared concepts and meanings, and as practical social activity. This practical activity is different in different social systems and therefore, when analyzing meaning systems, appraisals and emotions the researcher must look at what knowledge is produced in the social system. There is a dialectic view on activity and psychology, individual and environment.

2.2. Framework

The model pictured below illustrates what will be used from each theory and in what way. Park’s theory is the main theory that describes how meaning is conceptualized and in what ways it is affected by, and affects, the experiences of spiritual meditation. Culture is the context in which the meaning system is formed and spiritual meditation is assumed to affect psychological well being through this meaning system as well as culture.

Model 1 Theoretical Working Model

Referring back to DeMarinis’ (2003) triangle of assessment the model can be explained in the following way:
**Meta-theoretical orientation level:** The framework rests on two fundamental assumptions; a social constructivist view of reality and knowledge where meaning is constructed in a cultural context and that meaning is essential to psychological health because the search for meaning is a human need.

**Theoretical system of operation:** On a theoretical level meaning is part of cognitive, motivational and affective components. A person’s meaning system is made up of beliefs, goals, affect and it is a major part of how a person is able to cope with adversity and stress in life. The Swedish culture is seen as a postmodern, secular culture.

**Applied instruments/methods:** The method relies on subjective reports of experiences and well being, in this case semi-structured interviews.

The actual spiritual experiences are present on each level. On a meta-level spiritual experience is part of culture and a part of a person’s worldview. On the next level the experiences can be part of the meaning system as well as coping in different ways. On the applied level the data collection and analysis of spiritual experiences will be through the participants own descriptions of their experiences in the interviews.
Chapter 3 Method

Qualitative method

A qualitative method is often used when a new area needs to be explored and there are no theories that can be used to test hypothesis. It is also useful when an area has been researched using quantitative measures and there is a need for another kind of understanding of the way the relationships can look and also to show nuances that are often missed in statistics. In the current study the latter is more the case. Qualitative research is about studying people’s actual experiences in a natural setting as opposed to an experimental one (Kvale, 2007). The research tradition rests on theories of social constructivism and postmodernism. This means that the researcher has an important part in the process. She is not seen as an objective data collector as could be the view in a more positivist approach. The researcher is instead an active participant in the production of knowledge (Malterud, 2009).

The method uses theories of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Malterud, 2009). The philosophy of phenomenology entails that the individual’s subjective experience is knowledge which has scientific value. The theory is concerned with capturing the essence of meaning and reaching precise description of experiences so human behavior is understood from the individual’s own perspective. Hermeneutics is a tradition of literary interpretation and aims to find meanings in texts and conversations. The researcher’s tool is interpretation and this interpretation rests on the researcher’s standpoint, previous knowledge and often a theoretical lens. This study is not clear-cut phenomenological or hermeneutical. As Malterud (2009) points out, there is often a mix of both approaches in qualitative studies because there is a need for both a description that is close to the participant’s words but also an interpretation of what that means. The most important thing is that the researcher is aware of which of the two is most prominent. For this study, the hermeneutical approach is more relevant since I am taking the experiences shared with me and interpreting them using a theoretical framework. With this said there is a need for balance since the participants voices are of important value and too much theoretical interpretation can lead to a reductionist result.

The way that qualitative method differs from quantitative is that concepts and hypothesis, instruments and analytical techniques can be changed according to the information that comes up during the process. This means that the researcher does not have clear steps to follow and must make decisions according to circumstances. It is also the strength of the method because it is open and able to handle unforeseen information. This is why it is ideal for ground theory where an inductive approach is used and the material leads the way. For the current study however, a theoretical framework has been chosen to inform instruments and analysis which makes it more deductive. This does not mean that no new hypothesis can come up in the process. Because it uses a qualitative method, there is flexibility in the re-
search to leave room for new insights that can lead to the forming of new hypothesis and questioning of how the original theory has been constructed.

Malterud (2009) discusses what qualifies as scientific research in qualitative method and she suggests three main criteria that need to be met in order for the study to be considered having scientific value; relevance, validity and reflexivity. Validity will be explained below. By relevance she refers to the knowledge it adds to the scientific field. That is why a research review is important before commencing any new research. Reflexivity is a way to deal with the fact that the researcher always stands at risk of being biased. Since we have to give up the idea that the researcher can be completely objective, reflexivity is an approach that lets the reader know where the researcher stands and it allows the researcher herself to question her choices and interpretations. Throughout the process it is important to clarify my own knowledge on the subject, my anticipations (implicit hypothesis) and to question my choice of method and the results. There is no way of knowing if the results in a qualitative study like this one are true or false. It is more about finding valid arguments and therefore the researcher must consider alternative interpretations and weigh these against the conclusion that has been chosen.

Data collection

The material is based on 8 interviews. The sample is strategic, meaning it is selected on the premise that the sample will be able to answer the research question. Representativeness is not a relevant aim in a qualitative study, as it would be in a quantitative one (Malterud, 2009). There is no specific population to whom I wish to generalize my findings. Malterud suggests that there should be variation in the sample. If it is too homogenous there are nuances that can be missed and there is less chance of finding new questions. My sample consists of all women above the age of 36. It is therefore quite homogenous in terms of sex and age but I was not able to find more people due to limited time and resources.

What was important when I searched for participants was that the person practices, or has practiced meditation and that he or she has had some kind of experience during meditation. The first search for participants was done among acquaintances. I sent an email on facebook to two individuals that I knew were interested in spirituality (belief in astrology, tarot, spirit world, reincarnation) and told them about the study, the purpose and what kind of interviews would be conducted. I asked if they would be interested or if they knew someone who might. This resulted in one person agreeing to participate and this was someone I had met before. I also wrote an ad that I sent via email to a few places in Uppsala, Sundsvall, Stockholm and Örnsköldsvik that give courses in meditation, some with a clear spiritual purpose, and some with a more secular approach to meditation. This resulted in five individuals contacting me with an interest to participate. I also told people I met during this time that I was looking for participants and I got in touch with the final two this way.

I met the participants in their homes and recorded each interview on a tape recorder. The interviews were semi-structured which means I had specific questions that I went through but they were quite open and there was room for follow-up questions to topics raised by the interviewee. The interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. They were then transcribed and those who wanted could go through the transcribed material and give me additional information and explana-
tion of parts that I had not understood or missed due to poor sound quality (disturbances in the background).

Data presentation

In presenting the data I will provide the perspective of the informant. This means that if they told me they experienced a past life that is what I will say but this does not mean I make any kind of assumption about what the experience actually was. This is also not of any interest in this thesis nor in the psychology of religion. The only relevant issue is what the experience means to the individual and how they interpret it.

All quotations by the participants are translations from Swedish. In translating there is the possibility of changes in meaning because in translation there is always an element of interpretation. Overall I think the meaning has been conveyed accurately so the translation is not considered to be a significant weakness of the study.

Analysis

The analysis is a structured way of going through the material, and interpreting it in order to answer the research question. There are a few different ways of going about it but as Kvale (2007) points out, these different techniques are only tools to aid the process practically but it is up to the researcher to do the analysis. This analysis focus on meaning of the material and the program Open Code was used to dissemble the texts into smaller meaning units connected to codes. These codes were then grouped together in different categories. The categories were taken from the theories and the codes were created according to expectations and what actually came up in the interviews that could be connected to the categories.

A template strategy is what best describes the analysis style for this study. It starts with a list of categories and may also include predefined codes taken from a theoretical framework. The text is then divided according to these categories and new units are identified which are then compared with the original theory (Malterud, 2009). For this study the theory provided categories (domains of global meaning and cultural context) but no codes. The codes where then created during the analysis process. The focus in the analysis was to divide the material into one of the four categories; affect, belief, goals and cultural context. The codes helped to highlight common themes in each category which then formed subcategories that describe the way meaning is constructed in each domain.

Below is a list of codes in their respective category. In the beginning this list was longer but it has been cut down to those codes relevant for the analysis and this was based on which codes came up often and in most interviews and if they had a connection to meaning.

**Affect:** meaningful, positive, negative, peace, security, coping, self.

**Beliefs:** God, intuition, religious, soul, afterlife, reincarnation, seeking, personal, scientific, secular, knowledge, spiritual.
Goals: personal development, joy, presence, serenity, love, forgiveness.

Cultural context: conversations, friends, family, background, meditation group, activity, acceptance, non acceptance, society.

Validity and reliability

The reliability and validity of the study are important aspects to consider when reviewing the final product and questioning the accuracy of the results. The researcher must then be aware of the criteria for validity and reliability before the study begins to make sure they are met. The reliability of this study refers to the instruments which would be the way the interviews and the transcriptions have been done. To test the interview questions, I did a test-interview where I spoke to the participant about the questions after the interview was completed. The reason was to check if the questions were difficult to understand. It turned out some of the questions about goals and strivings in life were hard to answer. The first theoretical framework I intended to use was more oriented toward goals. As a result of the test-interview I made changes both to theoretical framework and also the questions. The number of questions about goals and strivings were cut down to two. Goals are also difficult to identify for the person so one question was about what they value most in life. I removed a theory on personal strivings from the framework and put more emphasis on Park’s theory and added questions related to that theory. To be able to use the test-interview in the study I complemented the interview with the additional questions via email.

For high validity, first of all, one must ask if the terms and the method chosen are relevant for the topic and research question (Malterud, 2009). Secondly, there should be some level of transferability. Due to the nature of the material and its subjective character, the study cannot be replicated but it can be done with another sample using the same method. Malterud further argues that if there is high validity the results should be able to be applied to different contexts. This is always difficult to know but even though qualitative research does not aim to generalize in the same way quantitative research does, there is an intention of being able to make use of the results in other areas. There is no reason to believe that the 8 individuals that have taken part in my study are completely unique in the way they make meaning of spiritual experiences. Another aspect of validity that Malterud brings up is consistency. The study needs to have something that holds all parts together. In the current study the theoretical framework together with the keywords is what binds together each part of the process to make a consistent whole.

When it comes to the validity of the knowledge gained from interviews, Kvale (2007) suggests three approaches; to check, to question and to theorize. Here validity is defined as “quality of craftsmanship” (p 123). Checking refers to making falsification attempts, asking the crucial questions to make sure one is not measuring something other than what is intended. When questioning the study, Kvale highlights the importance of understanding the area by doing a research review and to understand the purpose of the study. Theorizing is another way of gaining validity. Using a theory or developing a theory during the course of the study is a way of showing how the material is interpreted and understood. This is where the focus has been in this study.
While conducting the actual interviews, the researcher can validate the information along the way by asking the interviewee if the way the answers have been understood is correct. By wording the information differently the researcher can check if the meaning of the answers has been understood the way the participant intended. This was done in each interview and I also checked the answers between the participants to see if they had understood the questions the same way. An additional way of validating the study is to have a second party check the coding of the interviews. This is done to achieve intersubjective consensus (Kvale, 2007). Ideally, there would be more than two people doing the coding and cross-checking. In this case I presented the coding of two interviews to the instructor who agreed with the way the coding was done.

The collection of empirical data is always influenced by the position and previous knowledge of the researcher. In this case my previous knowledge is interest in similar belief systems as the participants but no experience of guided meditation or spiritual experience. My personal belief in a spiritual side of life was an advantage in the interview situation because it made the participants comfortable talking about it openly. My lack of spiritual experiences can be seen as a disadvantage because they are difficult to understand. But the absence of experience also means I won’t draw conclusions based on personal experience.

Malterud (2009) suggests that the validity of the interview answers can be checked by having the participants read through the transcribed material to see if there were any misunderstandings or if they feel they didn’t get their point across. All participants were offered to read the transcriptions. One said she didn’t need to read it and one of them didn’t have the time but six of them did read it. Out of these six one added information to the original answers in order to avoid misinterpretations. The other five responded that they were happy with the answers.

Ethical considerations

The ethical guidelines relevant to this study are concerned with the well being of the participants; before, during and after the interviews. The main guidelines according to Kvale (2007) are informed consent, securing the confidentiality and considering the consequences. No information is included in the study that comes from conversation with someone before they agreed to participate. I also made it clear to them the purpose of the study and what kind of questions would come up in the interview. Since the topic of religious or spiritual belief is such a personal thing to many people I also briefly explained my own spiritual beliefs before the interview to make them more comfortable sharing their own. This was part of the briefing that Kvale suggests and the debriefing consisted of asking the participant at the end if they wanted to add anything. It is important to make sure the person feel that they had the opportunity to share everything they wanted to. To secure the confidentiality I will not disclose any information that can tie the information to the person. All names are therefore fictitious.

Among the risks that the participants face Malterud (2009) mentions misinterpretation. To avoid this I gave the participants the opportunity to read through the transcripts. There is the alternative to let them take part of the results however this will include my interpretation as a researcher. Since they are not familiar with the theories used there is a risk that they do not recognize their answers any longer.
Therefore I have chosen to let them give me feedback on the transcripts and then they will then see the end result.
Chapter 4 Empirical Data and Analysis

4.1. Presentation of empirical data

The table below provides an initial overview over background information. The participants are all female and ages range between 37 and 77. They all have a personal, spiritual belief system today and practice yoga or meditation on a regular basis. The main differences in background are what belief system and practices where present in the family during their upbringing. Only one had a clear Christian upbringing. Most of them had quite secular families with some church attendance or grandparents with Christian beliefs. A few had some sort of spiritual presence such as parents who believed in spirits, astrology or healing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Upbringing</th>
<th>Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Secular, some spirituality</td>
<td>Meditates alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Secular, some Christianity</td>
<td>Leads group meditations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Meditates alone, sometimes in group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Secular, some spirituality</td>
<td>Meditates alone, sometimes in group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Meditates alone, teaches channeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Klara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>Kundalini Yoga teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mona</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Secular, some Christianity</td>
<td>Meditates in workshops, sometimes alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Secular, some Christianity</td>
<td>Meditates in group, sometimes alone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Background information. Secular upbringing refers to absence of religious or spiritual beliefs and/or practices.
Annie

Background

Annie is 44 years of age and she was born and raised in Sweden. Her family is also from Sweden. Religion was not a part of her upbringing. Her mother had an interest in spirituality and Annie recalls that her mother had books about astrology but it was never something they talked about. Her father was most likely an atheist. When he died her mother took her to a séance. At this point Annie was around 20 but as a teenager she thought she could feel the presence of spirits. There had been some contact with the church and Christian faith. She believed in the afterlife from an early age but rejected the Christian belief in hell. Around the age of 20 she took an interest in meditation together with a friend. She learned techniques with mantras and she started doing yoga.

Experiences

Annie has had a few spiritual experiences, some have happened during meditation and some occurred spontaneously. During a group meditation she felt she left her body and flew into space and she sensed there was a silver line binding her soul and her body together.

You can feel like you get help in the group as well. That you feel safe or that, it can become stronger when you meditate in a group. And then all of a sudden I felt like I flew out into the universe. Now it sounds like, I’m not psychotic. But I flew away. (Annie, 3:124-127)

During a spontaneous prayer where she asked for God’s existence she suddenly had another feeling of leaving her body. Another time she was praying for her son’s health and while she had her hands on him she saw flashes of light coming out from her hands. A couple of other experiences took place during a group meditation. One where she was taken back to the time before her birth and she experienced that we all come from a white light. At another point she experienced meeting her spirit guide. Apart from these experiences she has had a number of experiences where she could sense the presence of a spirit.

Belief and personal interpretation

When asked to interpret or explain the experience where she left her body she says she doesn’t know what actually happened. She acknowledges that the explanation could be scientific, that it all happens in her mind. At the same time she does believe that people have a soul and that this soul leaves the body at the time of death. In spiritual literature she has read about a silver line that binds the body and the soul together and she finds this interesting since she read this after the experience and not before. She defines herself as a seeker. But her belief that life does not end with the bodily death has long been a conviction.

I wouldn’t say I belong to this or that faith, I have my faith and that is my conviction. I have a conviction and that, I believe we live several lives, I do. […] I believe
there is, I call it God but if we ask Christianity they probably wouldn’t call my God, God. It’s a force or love. (Annie, 5:215-217,220-222)

She also says that in seeking she takes from different religions to find what seems true to her. Annie believes that we live many lives on earth and that there is some plan or destiny that we follow.

Positive affect and coping

The main thing that meditation has given Annie is a feeling that no matter what happens around her and no matter how much stress she experiences she knows that there is an inner peace which she refers to as a drop of God. To know that this inner peace or love is always there provides security even when she cannot experience it.

No matter where you are and no matter if there is trauma or arguments or whatever it is, I know that somewhere in there you can have peace and quiet. And that I know from meditation. Then if I do it is another thing but the feeling I know. It is possible to find peace. (Annie, 8:350-353)

Even though the experience she had during a group meditation, where she sensed the light we all come from, happened over ten years ago, she still carries that feeling with her and it gives her a sense of comfort. Another experience she still thinks about at times is when she experienced meeting her spirit guide. His name was Enjoy and she interprets it as a message that she should never forget to enjoy life as long as she is here and to be grateful since we never know when it will end.

And then I felt I came in contact with, but that must have been a guided meditation as well, that I somehow, yes, that I came in contact with a spirit guide or whatever you call it. And that image also became an image that I carry with me as well as his name; Enjoy. And that is that you should enjoy life, try to seize and be in the now and all that. So that’s the most important because all of a sudden it’s over. And you forget to be grateful and enjoy the now because actually that is what is most important. (Annie, 12:556-563)

Annie experiences life as meaningful but she can’t say that this has changed from her spiritual experiences. She does believe there is some larger purpose with life but her main source of meaningfulness is her role as a mother. She believes in destiny to some degree but she takes responsibility for her own actions. Meditation has helped her through difficult times because it has made her more in touch with an inner peace. Her beliefs have also helped her because they make her less afraid of death.

Negative affect

She mentioned that the out-of-body experience she had during the group meditation was a bit scary but overall she remembers it in a positive light. When asked if she has had frightening experiences she described a regression where she experienced what was interpreted as a previous lifetime where people took her child away from her. During the experience she suffered emotional pain and she said that just talking about the experience brings back the pain.
Goals

When talking about goals in life she mentioned a few different areas. Although she has not consciously set up goals in life she aspires to enjoy life. She wants to have fun and have a job that she enjoys. Her friends have always been important to her so making time to socialize with them is important to her as well as spending time with her son. She makes sure to exercise in order to keep strong and healthy. Health and general well-being is an important goal which she says spirituality can help her achieve. To have mystic experiences have not been a goal for her and she says that they have probably not changed what she aspires for in life.

Cultural context

Annie goes to séances, group meditations and courses in communicating with spirits. It is not a major activity in her life but something she enjoys from time to time. She has a small group of friends who shares this interest with her. When meditating, she usually takes time during the day and finds an empty office space at work where she can sit in silent for a moment. She also feels that when she spends time at the gym it is a form of spiritual practice since she is focused on her body and can let go of thoughts. Apart from her friends she can talk to people in the meditation group about her experiences. She says that having a few people to talk to about these things is enough for her. She refrains from talking about it with people at work because she believes that you can’t talk to anyone about these things. At the same time, she feels she has no need to. When it comes to society she feels it is becoming more accepting of these kinds of experiences and refers to a TV-show about mediums.

Marie

Background

Marie is a Swedish woman, 77 years of age. She was raised on the countryside in a family that according to her was not very religious in that they didn’t talk about it. There was some contact with the church however but it seems it was more a social activity that spiritual. She began meditation when she met her current husband around the age of 50 and they now run a meditation group together. The group usually has around 70-80 members and they meet each week.

Experiences

During meditation Marie has several times received messages that she does not understand but are directed to other people. They come to her as images and sounds. This often happens in group meditation so she brings a pen and paper so she can write down the message which she then passes along to the person after the meditation. The first time she meditated she was with a friend and she saw an image of the friend’s stepmother getting carried out of the hospital on a stretcher. It turned out the woman died the same night. At another point, in group meditation, she received a message that one of the female members of the group should
have a clean clothes-rack. At first she thought it would be too strange to say anything to this woman, but when she did, the woman understood the message because she was in the process of cleaning out after her late husband. Marie can also see spirits when she is not meditating. Often she can see them when she attends funerals.

The most fun, you are not supposed to say this, the most fun is to go to a funeral. Yes, I do see them. They are free. […] he was sitting on the piano. He sat there dangling his legs and looking at everyone who was there. Do you understand? It was so much fun. (Marie, 12:561-562, 564-565)

Belief and personal interpretation

Marie has a personal belief system that involves Christian belief such as the message to love and the power of prayer, but she opposes some things the church stands for, such as the message of the crucifixion. Her belief system includes astrology and destiny. She believes in a soul that goes through many lives on earth as long as it has something to learn. She has a conviction that every child is born with an inner seeing and hearing, what may be called intuition, but this is forgotten as the child grows up in a system that promotes scientific reasoning and reading instead of experiencing. The skill that a medium has is, according to Marie, something everyone is born with so anyone can train it and be able to communicate with spirits.

Robert and I lead a group, there are probably 70-80 of us and among other things we have courses and meditation. Meditation every week and many have gone there for ten years and they regain the inner seeing and the inner hearing. Many who go to mediums, what kind of people are they? There are no mediums or special people. They have regained their origin, that which they had with them. It can be the inner hearing or the inner seeing. (Marie, 2:91-95)

She believes that meditation has to do with understanding who you are by silencing thoughts connected to ego and forgiving past events from your childhood for example. When she receives messages in meditation she interprets it as knowledge past along from the spirit world.

Positive affect and coping

To Marie, the visions are not important and they are nothing strange to her. She has accepted that they have always been a natural part of her and that they only became stronger with meditation. Meditation has helped her connect with who she is and be able to stay more present in life. She experiences life as meaningful and this has strengthened in the process of learning to accept and love herself. There is also a physical sensation connected to this.

The body becomes more fragile by the years but on the other hand, the more I go in to this, the lighter I get in my body and somehow I will probably turn and become more alert. I have this feeling. Like now I’m lighter in my body than I was when I was young. Back then you went around and dragged your feet behind you and it was so far and oh so boring. Now I’m light. (Marie, 11-12:545-549)
Being present has also made life more exciting. The feeling of meaningfulness and feeling at peace with herself was present before she began meditating and does not seem to have been affected by the mystic experiences she described but she says that meditation has made this feeling more present in her everyday life. She feels that she has no control over what happens in her life and that this feeling is liberating. Meditation has helped her through tough times and mainly because of the social support of the meditation group.

Negative affect

Marie does not recall any frightening or uncomfortable spiritual experiences. The only thing that has been difficult is when memories from her childhood have been brought to the surface in meditation. The memories can be of hurtful events but she sees this as positive because they offer an opportunity to understand, forgive and let go. It is an important step in personal development because she believes our childhood events can leave anger in us that remains until adulthood.

But never go after those you do not understand and get angry. Because they do as good as they can and you shall leave them alone. But look, what do they reflect in you? Is it that time you were six years old and had your hand in a fist? Do you see? That’s why you get angry with other people, because you have nothing to do with them. Simple. And that’s the foundation of meditation, to try and remove and things come up. (Marie, 3-4:148-152)

Goals

One of her main goals in life is freedom. She wants to feel free and in many ways she relates it to freedom from financial struggles and demands from school and work. Today she is retired and feels she has achieved her goal of freedom. What she holds as most important in life is the meeting between people and the love that can exist in that meeting. Meditation is a way for her to achieve the goal of silencing the thoughts in her head that keeps her from being free and loving towards herself and others. Personal development is important to her and she sees every experience in life, including mistakes, as opportunities for growth and learning.

Cultural context

Marie came in contact with meditation when she met her husband. She attended a course with a spirit who communicates through a person. The spirit is called Ambres and he has become known through Swedish television and books by Shirley MacLaine. Apart from that she does not believe in taking courses and reading about spirituality. Her upbringing on the countryside taught her that common sense and experiencing life is the most important ways to gain knowledge. Now she runs a meditation group together with her husband. She has many views on how society hinders peoples’ possibility for spiritual growth. She sees religion as one of those obstacles but mainly the misuse of power and greed. To Marie it is important to have a few people to talk to about spirituality and she has support from the meditation group. Even though she has friends that do not believe in the same things she does it does not bother her. She talks to them about other things and even though those conversations seem less important to her the love is equal
and that is the most important thing to her. She believes that Swedish society is becoming more open and she connects this to an idea of destiny for society and the world as a whole.

Tina

Background

Tina is a 53 years old woman born and raised in Sweden. She says that religion was not part of her upbringing but perhaps spirituality since her mother wasn’t like others. Her mother meditated a lot and worked with a book by Louise Hay which is about healing oneself. Tina says that her mother would take care of sickness before the doctors did anything and she always knew what was in the gift boxes given to her before she unwrapped them.

For example, she always knew what was inside a gift box. You could never give her a gift without her knowing what it was. So you would test her in every way. Big packages, small packages, everything, but it never worked. And then she was this kind of person who, she healed herself. [...] She meditated a lot and worked a great deal with Louise Hays’ book. It was her Bible. She worked a lot with it and she really fixed most things, even teeth that got fixed even though no one had done any work on them. So strange things have happened with her. (Tina, 1:10-12, 17-21)

Tina’s mother had had a near death experience which she shared with Tina and because it was a positive experience Tina was not afraid of death and knew that life would go on after death. Tina’s grandfather worked as a healer up north. The hospitals would contact him when a patient was bleeding too much and he stopped it with his hands. When Tina was 12 she tried meditation for the first time.

Because I know, as a 12-year old, that was my first experience of meditating and I sat and looked into a candle as you can do. I had read somewhere you can do that. And then I met an image of my grandfather who was dead and I got so scared and then I didn’t do anything for many, many years. And I had never seen my grandfather because I had never met him so I asked my grandmother to show me a picture of him. It was his image that had come up like this. He looked very special. (Tina, 1:33-38)

This experience scared her so much that she didn’t meditate again until later in adult life. After a divorce she felt she needed someone to talk to for guidance and turned to a medium that referred her to a meditation group when she was around the age of 35.

Experiences

The first time she meditated again after her experience as a child was together with a meditation group and she saw a bright light and had a powerful positive feeling.
So I went there and was a little afraid at first and I joined the meditation. And the first time I was there it happened, what I was afraid of, that something special would happen. But I didn’t become scared. It was okay because it felt good. It wasn’t threatening in any way like it had been when I was young. Then I sat there with a bunch of other people and meditated and all of a sudden all I see is this light that comes like this and glitters, oh it was so pretty. It was so very pretty and then, and I just felt: Wow! It was that kind of feeling. (Tina, 2:56-62)

She saw the same light at another meditation at home, and this time her illness disappeared. Her neck had swollen because she was sick but after the meditation the neck was back to normal and she felt well. Another reoccurring thing is that she hears loud sounds while meditating. She describes it as tones coming from all different directions and going inside her. She has had a few instances of seeing past lifetimes and she has also experienced meeting deceased family members during meditation. In one experience of a past lifetime she sensed feeling happy and this meant a lot to her. In another one she experienced dying alone. An important event in Tina’s life was the death of her son. He past away from a brain tumor three years after the doctor’s discovered it. A few spiritual experiences have happened in connection to this event. The first one was when they drove him to the hospital for the first time. He was ill but they didn’t know what was wrong. Tina rested for a while and saw images of a church, a coffin and the numbers three and five. She then knew that he would die and that they would have three to five years left together. Later on she had a vision that occurred spontaneous, outside of meditation, where she saw a man in a hood who told her there’s not much time left. This scared her a bit and she went to her sons room and it turned out he had seen the same man and told his mum it was death who came by to let them know it’s time soon. After Tina’s son had died she had a vision of him. This also took place outside of meditation while she was on the phone with her friend and the friend had an experience of seeing flashes of light around her at the same time Tina saw her son.

Belief and personal interpretation

Ever since Tina was a child she has had a conviction that there is a God but that God is not found in church, it is found inside every person. She doesn’t know where she got this from because her mother didn’t believe in God. Tina has always felt there is something more to life than what we can see but she doesn’t know exactly what to call it and she doesn’t need to put it into words. She believes in life after death and reincarnation. Tina’s mother had a near death experience which made Tina interested in these experiences so she has read a lot about that and some other types of books that friends have recommended. Because Tina’s mother told her after the experience that dying is nothing to be afraid of Tina has never been afraid of death.

There was an image on TV before, when the sun went down it would lay down on a cloud. That’s what it’s like to die, my mum said. And how bad can that be? It looked really nice. (Tina, 5:200-202)

When she experiences receiving messages she interprets it as another world contacting her to guide and support her. Many of the experiences she has had have made her develop as a person and she believes that this was the purpose and main-
ly to make her deal with her son’s death in a positive way and be able to stay present for him during this difficult time.

She sees every person as essentially energy and when the body dies this energy remains, making it possible to meet people who are no longer with us. She doesn’t want to put a label on her belief. She says she believes in life and she believes in herself. While she has had experiences of past lifetimes she says that these images might just as well be her own mind giving her what she needs at that time and if they are that or actual lifetimes has little importance to her.

Positive affect and coping

Many of the experiences that Tina has had revolve a lot around coping since many of them helped her through the time her son was dying. She says that everything she has experienced has made her less afraid of death, more present, and more calm and patient as a person. She says that people who have known her from the time she began meditating do not recognize the person she is today. She says that her experiences mean a lot to her and looking back, she is thankful for having had all these experiences because they made her who she is today.

[The experiences] mean so much to me. Now that I have the answers to what happened in my life after all this I can say that if I had been the same person I was before all this started I wouldn’t have been able to deal with my life. It really is like that. I wouldn’t have been sitting here and feeling as good as I do. So many times I think to myself, thank God so many strange things have happened in my life to make me as strong as I am. (Tina, 5:220-224)

One of the main things that have made Tina so strong is fearlessness. When she was younger she was very insecure, and many things frightened her. She was also dependent on others and she used to experience a lot of self blame. Today she is more independent and she is fearless. Although her mother’s near death experience had made her less afraid of death at a young age, Tina’s own experiences as an adult further helped her overcome this fear. For instance, she had to talk to her son about death when he was very ill, and she feels that without the spiritual experiences in her life and her beliefs, it would have been much tougher for her to be able to do that and to be present for her son.

It made me stay present during the whole time, one hundred percent. And I don’t think I would have acted the way I did during the time he was sick and made him so calm with the fact that he was going to die. And to be able to talk about this thing with death and to be in it, to have the guts to give this opening and say: So how do you look at it? You don’t ask your children that. How do you look at the fact that you might die? What do you think is going to happen? Yes, I have been wondering that too, he says. I’m thinking about it. What do you think, mum? Well I have an image. Do you want it? And so he got my image of what I think death is. You don’t know. (Tina 6:249-256)

One thing that stands out when Tina talks about how she and her son approached death, is their sense of humor. Tina and her son both believed in the afterlife so they would joke about what would happen after he was gone. Other things in her life also made her stronger, such as going through a divorce and meeting with a therapist. Her spiritual experiences have made her feel a deep sense of peace in-
side and it has given her a trust in herself, as well as the source of the messages she receives. She has learned that no matter what happens in life she can only control her attitude to it and she has learned to look at what is healthy instead of focusing on what is unhealthy. For example choosing to have fun and laugh with her son instead of being depressed that he had a brain tumor. And because Tina received messages about what was to come she could be at peace knowing that there is a plan and there is meaning in what happens. Tina’s experiences with past lives gave her an understanding of her struggles in life. For instance, the reason she has always felt lonely even with people around her was made clear to her when she experienced dying alone in a past life. The time she felt truly happy in a past life gave her knowledge of what happy means and where in the body she would feel it. It was a feeling she didn’t know for a long time and had been searching for. When asked if she feels life has meaning she says that before she had money but was poor, now she has less money but feels rich because everything that she has been through, including spiritual meditation, has made her more aware of the small things in life that have great value.

Negative affect

The meditation Tina did when she was 12 frightened her very much. At first she was too scared to tell anyone about what had happened but after three months she told her mother. Her mother listened but didn’t talk to Tina about what it meant. The experience left Tina too scared to try meditation again until she was 35.

One of her experiences of meditating involved a loud sound and this sound was so loud that she felt after a while that it was too much to endure. She then asked for it to stop and the sound stopped in that instance. Another experience that she felt was frightening was the encounter she had with a spirit in a cape. She first said: Hi dad. She knew it wasn’t her dad but she tried to convince herself it was only her father who came and visited because the person frightened her. After sharing the encounter with her son, who hadn’t been scared by it, she was no longer afraid of it either.

Goals

Tina sets up goals for herself but at the same time she points out that it is important for her to live here and now and not in the future. That is what she values most, to live and to be present in the now. With meditation her goal has been to quiet the thoughts and rumination and not to have spiritual experiences. She has reached this goal to the point that it is painful for her when she finds herself rummating. In those instances she usually goes for a walk to practice mindfulness until her mind quiets down. Personal development has been an important goal for her. She sometimes writes down her goals on a piece of paper. She recently found one of those that she wrote ten years ago. She wanted to become a more patient person and feels she has reached that goal now and she feels that she owes much of it to all the meditation and spiritual experiences she has had.

Cultural context

Tina didn’t begin meditation until she was 35 but before that a spiritual side to life had been a part of her upbringing since she had a mother who performed self heal-
Tina’s first contact with meditation was in a group meditation where she continued going but most of her meditating is done at home in solitude. Now a big reason for going to the group meditation is to meet new people. She used to have a special room for meditation where she would sit every evening. When she started having experiences she accepted it and didn’t feel a need to discuss it with people. However when she had an experience she thought was a bit scary she turned to a person she knew who worked as a medium to ask what it was about. Tina says that you cannot speak to a doctor about these things because they would label you as insane. Tina knows that some people probably think she is strange and she would never talk about these things at work. She doesn’t care about that though. She is comfortable knowing that people believe in different things and she has a group of friends she can talk to. They have also had some experiences, not as many as Tina but she feels they don’t judge her. Tina says that many people who meditate and experience things tell her that some things are dangerous to do on your own but Tina doesn’t care because she has a trust in herself and she is no longer afraid of meditation. She feels that Swedish society is getting more accepting when it comes to spiritual experiences. She mentions TV-shows about spirits and that people are no longer as surprised when she shares her experiences with them. Tina’s children have been present and seen what she has seen. This means a lot to her. It brings joy to be reminded of the spirit world and she is happy she can share this with her children. One experience that was very important to her was shared with a friend of hers and this was important because it made her more certain that it actually happened.

Sandra

Background

Sandra is a 46 year old woman born and raised in Sweden. When she grew up her family lived in a haunted house. A few people who spent the night at her house, including Sandra herself, were frightened from hearing strange noises in the house. Sandra’s family accepted that what they heard was a spirit and they gave him a name. Sandra’s parents were members of the Swedish church and Sandra had been baptized, but they were not religious. Her grandmother was Christian and would pray with Sandra at night but that was pretty much the only contact Sandra had with religion as a child. She began meditation as an adult after two failed relationships. She felt she had changed herself to the point of not recognizing herself and so she needed to find herself again. She felt a strong pull towards reading books about spirituality and eventually contacted a meditation group in her city.

Experiences

An experience that Sandra recalls clearly is when she was meditating and suddenly heard a loud sound and then saw her daughter as if she had been looking at a photograph. Only her daughter had long black hair and was dressed like a Native American. She also saw a person she recognized as her spirit guide and she knew that what she saw was a past life where she was Native American and her current
spirit guide was her husband in that life. A few times Sandra has experienced a past life and recognized her grandmother as well as a person who she has seen at the gym.

Another time while meditating she listened to a meditation tape that would take the person meditating back to the moment of birth and so she experienced being a baby and lying in the arms of the midwife. She often receives messages or answers in meditation. If there is a question she has about something in her life she can get an image or a feeling that gives her the answer. Sometimes the answer comes later, after meditation. She can also get a feeling that she should get a pen and paper and she then starts writing down the words she hears and they are messages to her and others.

Sandra has had spiritual experiences outside of meditation as well. When she was out walking and a person came towards her that made her afraid, she asked for protection and could tell that the person went around her in a way that made her feel someone was walking next to her to protect her. She can also see and sense spirits. She heard the spirit in the house they had when she was a child but it wasn’t until she started meditating that she could see spirits.

Beliefs and personal interpretation

Sandra has a personal belief where she takes from every religion. She prays to Christ as well as her spirit guide. When asked who she think answers her questions in meditation and gives her the help she needs she said:

Who it is that answers? Oh, I have no idea. Well, Christ, my spirit guide, my helpers, the ones that want me to, well get to where I should. (Sandra, 6:243-244)

She believes in reincarnation and a spirit world. She believes her experiences of past lives are actually past lives. She is not a member of any church and she doesn’t like the ritual of visiting graves since she feels she can contact her loved ones anywhere she is. She believes in the good in people and that it is time for that goodness to become stronger in the world. She believes in a destiny and that there is a plan for each person that they are here to learn lessons. Her relationships taught her to stand up for herself and she believes this was the intention all along. Her belief in a spirit world and that life continues after the body has died has strengthened due to her experiences.

Positive affect and coping

When Sandra first began meditating she felt it was just what she needed. The outside felt chaotic and meditation gave her the peace inside that she needed after the divorce. She felt like she didn’t know herself any longer and as soon as she started meditation she felt that it was like finding herself.

I was almost like Julia Roberts in that movie, Runaway Bride. You know the one? I didn’t know which egg I liked, so to speak. So then, when I started meditating, it was as if all peace fell into place. It was exactly what I needed. (Sandra, 2-3:90-94)
The experience Sandra had when she asked for protection left her with a safe feeling of having protection there when you need it. Mostly her experiences have given her a new dimension in life. She is aware not only of a physical world but of a spiritual one as well, and she says it provides comfort. Especially knowing that she can meet loved ones who have passed away and whom she misses. She says that after she began meditating she enjoys life more and feels it has a deeper meaning.

So it does change things. What I experience during meditation has given me a whole new dimension in life. I am less afraid of dying than thinking about if it’s going to hurt. Do you understand? And that at least I want to die in many years so I can experience this life first but it has received a much deeper meaning. I think I enjoy life more since I started meditating. (Sandra, 9:368-372)

The experiences have given Sandra a new self image because she now knows that she is not only the physical body but also a soul. She is aware of her intuition and feels that there is knowledge inside her that she can access when she needs it.

I have seen that I am much more than the physical body. I am also a soul. And that soul is full of lives from previous lives. [...] So I can retrieve knowledge from myself. Like intuition for example, it’s not located in your heart or your liver; it’s in your soul. I am calmer. Calm and harmonious in knowing that I am, well, safer. With all the knowledge that is, that I know I can retrieve it when I need to. (Sandra, 10:450-455)

Sandra says that meditation has helped her through tough times. It has provided her with a sense of peace inside and it gives her energy. She leads a very active life, and says that the energy she gets from meditation is what makes it possible. Meditation is very important to Sandra and she sees it as a fundamental activity for maintaining good health which is why she makes sure to keep up her meditation on a regular basis. She can tell that there is a difference in the way she experienced life before and after she began meditation. Her life had meaning before but it was mainly because she had children. Now she feels there are more dimensions in life, making it more exciting. She also feels lighter now. Before she felt heaviness and a burden that she says has been lifted and she feels she is no longer alone.

Negative affect

During meditation, Sandra has not felt scared or uncomfortable. The times she has experienced fear is when she has encountered spirits or energies that are, as she puts it, not pleasant. She says that just like there are people that are not friendly, there are spirits that also aren’t. Sandra was frightened as a child when she heard strange noises in her home, and as an adult there was one instance when she asked her mother to spend the night because she was scared to sleep alone. But in spite of all her encounters, she says that the TV-shows, like Ghost Whisperer, that people watch are even scarier. She doesn’t want to watch that show because she finds it too scary.
Goals

What Sandra values most in life is life itself. To be able to spend time with her children and that they are all healthy. She has several goals in her life. Exercise is one of them and another is personal development. She always strives to be better at her job. She works as a health professional and she always tries to be patient in her talks with the patients. She also tries to treat other people the way she wants to be treated herself. She says it’s difficult sometimes but she tries. Sandra feels that her goals of self improvement have been there before she started meditating but have become stronger after. It’s very important for her to be honest with herself. Meditation gave her a push in the right direction with finding herself again and since then she makes sure to be honest with who she is and what she wants in life.

Cultural context

There had been some but little contact with the Swedish church and Christianity as Sandra was growing up. She searched for spirituality herself by reading book about it. Someone had given her a pamphlet to a meditation group and so she called them and started attending their meditations. She continues to go there but she also meditates alone. She finds that meditation can be done in different kinds of situations, walking or preparing food for example. She uses meditation tapes as well but usually just sits and lets her mind quiet down. Now the spirit world is a part of her everyday life. She feels it is important to have a few people close to her that she can talk to about her experiences. She doesn’t want to talk to anybody about it. She believes that if she would tell people at work for example they would think she is nuts. But she can talk to friends, her mother and the people in the meditation group. When asked how she feels about the fact that some people don’t understand her she said:

It does feel difficult. For me that’s, it’s my world. My experience of this physical world is that there is a spirit world as well. That is something comforting. […] Then there is, with this spiritual life follows much responsibility. I think. You can’t just go out and preach that there is a spirit world. You have to choose what you say to people so they don’t get scared. (Sandra, 7:307-308,314-316)

She feels that Swedish society has become more accepting of these kinds of experiences. She refers to TV-shows, the popularity of yoga and that meditation can be recommended by doctors. Her own experience is also that people are more understanding today than they were eight years ago.

Lena

Background

Lena, a 55 year old woman from Sweden, was brought up in a Christian family. She says that spirituality was not a part of her upbringing but the church attendance and rituals such as confirmation were very important to her parents. They were quite strict and Lena had to attend Sunday school. For a while Lena was a teacher at the school but due to differences in belief system she later turned away
from the church. Her personal belief system was something she was born with so there was a conflict in what her parents and the church taught and what she felt was true. She remembers as a child, knowing that people are greater than they seem, that we never die, we only change bodies.

It sounds crazy but that’s what it was like because I knew it was that way. And that you didn’t need to be afraid and that life was really about having fun and finding yourself and finding balance with yourself and people and try different things and so on. So that basic view was something I had in me from the very beginning and then it got colored by my parents’ view on things and the view of the surrounding community. (Lena, 1:44-48)

Lena also remembers seeing and interacting with spirits when she was a child. They were called her pretend friends. She also did healing on animals. People in the community knew this and regularly brought their pets to her when they were sick. She was known as the village’s little healer. When she was older, about nine or ten, she gave healing to old people in the form of joy and love. She saw that they were lonely and sad and so she visited them to give them positive energy.

Until late teenage years she had a way of falling into a state of meditation automatically but she somehow lost that when she got older and other things in her life took her attention. Around the age of twenty she felt there was too big of a mix up between who she was and what she did. She felt she needed to find herself again, who she was beyond her actions, and so she started setting aside time for meditation which she did in solitude.

Experiences

Of all the experiences Lena has had during meditation, the one she feels is the most powerful is when she has an experience of knowing that she and everyone else is an eternal, divine force. That everyone is connected and everyone and everything is perfect the way it is, even the strange or odd is in some way perfect. She usually begins her meditations by asking herself who she is.

And then I usually ask: Who am I? And then I often feel in myself who I am beyond everything I do. And I experience the divine in me. And when I experience the divine in me I feel that it is universal. That divinity is in everyone around me and in everything. So that’s why I have this feeling that we are all connected in some way. We all share this divinity and everyone has this beauty inside them. And not more or less but equally, it’s like an eternal flow. So that’s the thought I work with in meditation. (Lena, 3:101-107)

Sometimes this experience is so powerful it is like an instant knowing of how everything and everyone is connected and she finds it difficult to explain.

If it comes in a meditation and I tell my husband about it, there are no words to describe it. I would have to write 15 books, an entire series, to describe what I experienced because it is like it comes, it comes immediately and it is so big. Ah! This is the way precisely everything is connected. (Lena)

Lena also receives messages from spirits both outside of, and during, meditation. One that she recalls is when she was worried for her son because his dad didn’t want to have any contact with him. During a meditation she met a man who told
her not to worry about her son because he would look after him and give him the support he needs on a subconscious level. During this message she also experienced a powerful feeling of love, joy and hope. At other times she has received messages that she will go through tough times but that she must know that she will have support during this time, from the spirit world, so she is never alone.

And it’s been, just when it’s been the most difficult, when there have been many things that have been difficult in my life, it’s been like those amazing, I’ve gotten that little extra, that personal kind of direct help and they have communicated to me with images. And that they know that it’s going to be worrisome for me and difficult then they have been able to come to me and say: For some time, it’s going to be very difficult for you for about six months but you must know that we will lift you and carry you in those moments when it’s too hard. So don’t doubt that, don’t think you are going to be alone. We will be there for you during those periods. (Lena, 4:168-175)

Lena describes a couple of experiences during meditation that she found to be a bit frightening. One time she was alone and when she opened her eyes she was unable to see her body. She then thought: Enough. And she was back to normal state and could see her body again. At another time she was doing meditation with her husband where they looked at each other and suddenly everything turned black. She couldn’t see him or anything else.

Belief and personal interpretation

Lena has arrived at a belief system by picking from every world religion that she feels is true. She prefers that which unites the religions. She does feel the closest to Buddhism because they teach that what other’s call God is that which is in every one of us and we are united as one. This is what she knew as a child and so when she searched for answers in books as an adult she realized that what she knew as a child was still true. When she grew up she got a bit insecure of her beliefs because of her Christian upbringing. The knowledge that she receives in meditation is what she believes is the truth about people and life. So meditation also helped her regain her childhood beliefs that we are divine and we are connected and we are free to experience life.

I fell out of track for a while during my upbringing but then I came back to: But darn it, this thing I believed when I was young and that I knew was true, it is still really true and it feels like it’s right for me. And I found a balance in that so that’s why I have kept doing that part. Anything that makes people free I like. Let people be and look for themselves in their own way. That’s what I have adopted and so I live that way myself. (Lena, 1-2:48-53)

These experiences helped her see the wholeness more clearly. She does not believe in sin or death. She believes we have lived many lives on earth and even though she has seen her past lives she believes that there is no reason to care about them. Our purpose is to be present in the current life. This is where we resolve our issues.
Positive affect and coping

The experiences Lena has had with knowing who she is and seeing that everybody is equal and perfect just the way they are have helped her feel better about herself and be able to be more loving and forgiving towards others. Knowing she is something bigger than the person Lena and something apart from her actions she can enjoy life more, relax and feel confident that things are okay. Before she felt she needed to “change the world” and she was quick to judge herself. Now she experiences more tolerance while also feeling more engaged in the world. She has gained a stronger sense of meaning in life. This meaning is attached to the feeling of everything and everyone being connected and being perfect. She feels there is no need to create meaning because life itself is meaningful. Even when she experiences tremendous sorrow she somehow knows there is meaning in that as well. We are here to experience and so all experiences are meaningful.

Meditation has helped Lena cope with difficult things in life. She feels that when she sets aside time for meditation in the morning she is better able to focus on what is important and not waste her time on irrelevant things. Her experiences have made her less likely to react in a negative way if someone treats her badly but if she does then meditating helps. She then allows herself to experience the hurt or anger or whatever emotion there is and to receive relief from reconnecting with who she is. Usually she also sees more clearly the real reason to her reaction, that it may not have anything to do with the other person, it is Lena’s self esteem that she needs to work on and not let other people decide her worth. Also knowing that she is never alone has given her strength when things have been difficult in life.

Negative affect

Lena remembers the time between she was 15 and 25 as difficult years because she felt she was alone in her beliefs and experiences. She says she felt so different from everyone else she felt like an alien. She really didn’t have anyone to talk to about it so it was a tough time for her.

When she was a child she had a couple of frightening experiences since she could see spirits and she didn’t always know if they were spirits or if they were just as real as anybody. There was a big man who would visit her when she had gone to bed at night. This scared her and she would call for her parents help. The time during meditation when she opened her eyes and couldn’t see her own body was scary to her. For a moment she thought she would disappear. But she was able to come back immediately so she has never been afraid of meditation. She knows there is nothing to be scared of.

Goals

Lena values love the most. Life itself is eternal so you don’t have to work on that and health is valued highly as well but it doesn’t matter if you have good health if you don’t have love. So unconditional love, no matter what the object is, is what she values the most and this has grown stronger in her with meditation. An important goal for her is to be true to herself. The truth is not always so clear so being honest is something she always works to improve. Another thing she strives for is to know who she is and to know that she is good no matter what she does.
And to feel this is something that she believes is not only good for her; it’s good for people around her as well.

Because it’s so easy to think that just because I have done this thing which is good, and that’s good, you want results, it means I become good. But to try to find beyond all that, to try to find that you are so darn good even if you don’t do jack and that you are allowed to be that I think is important. So I feel if I can find that and live in that the world will change in that as well, around me. So I try to find deeper and deeper dimensions. (Lena, 12:574-579)

Cultural context

At an early age Lena questioned what was taught in Sunday school because she was born with knowledge about who she is. She could remember past lives and when she brought it up with her parents they told her that it’s wrong to believe in reincarnation. That belief belongs to another religion and that is not what we believe in Sweden. When she questioned things like the idea of confirmation and the way the Church judges Judas she was told by the priest they were stupid questions. As an adult she again had conflicts with the church because when she got married she wanted to change certain things they said in church. Because of their resistance against this she then decided to leave the Swedish church.

During the time she was younger and felt alone in her beliefs, she looked for priests who had a more open view, and that believed we do live several lives on earth, but she still didn’t feel support and that is why she turned to other religions. Lena felt she got some answers from Buddhism but she decided to just accept that she was alone in this and must walk that path alone and hope that others would join her eventually. Now she has people around her that share her views. Her experiences also helped her to regain the conviction she had as a child. She knew that she was bigger than this and had a self worth that lies beyond her actions, but as she grew up she felt that society and jantelagen make people think they are worth less and that they must constantly achieve things in order to be accepted and liked.

Today she feels that society has become more accepting of spirituality. She refers to doctors that come to her to understand more about healing and what it means for one’s health to have the outlook on life that she has. And although she now has more contact with people who are working with spirituality in different ways she says that non acceptance can come from those people as well. They have different views on what is right and what is wrong and she says that some of them judge her because she leads a life they don’t believe a spiritual person should. Like the fact that she drives a motorcycle, wears wire bras and drinks alcohol. So for her, the main thing she wants to teach people is to follow their own path and stay true to who they are.
Klara

Background

Klara is a 45 year old Swedish woman who works as a teacher in Kundalini yoga. She grew up in a family where anything but a scientific approach was out of the question. Especially her father was very opposed to religion and any kind of spiritual beliefs. Klara’s reason for becoming interested in spirituality and yoga is a bit different from the other participants of this study. She had a horse that she wanted to compete with but the horse was not in good shape. After trying many different strategies she got a tip from her hairdresser to get help from a person who communicates with animals and does healing. Klara continued seeking help for her horse from alternative ways of thinking and approaching health. She soon felt that it wasn’t about the horse, it was about herself. So she saw someone who did healing on her and she took a course in healing. When she discovered and experienced that there is a spiritual world she couldn’t understand why she had never considered it before.

Experiences

The first experience Klara recalled was a spontaneous one that she didn’t understand until afterwards. Her dog had died and a couple of days after that Klara began feeling very dizzy all of a sudden. She laid down to rest but her head just kept spinning. When she felt better she called a friend that is a medium and she said that’s what the dog felt like when she passed. When Klara heard this explanation she felt in her entire system that it is the truth. Later Klara has also been able to sense the presence of the dog. Klara also recalls an experience she had when her horse was put to sleep. When the horse was lying on the ground Klara gave it healing to help the body release the trauma. The blood started running slower and she saw a hoard of horses running across the sky and then one of them, a horse she recognized as her previous horse, came down to fetch the horse that was dead. These horses have also showed up during a yoga session. In Kundalini yoga they have moments of rest or meditation and during this time she saw and felt the horses close to her on each side of her head. She could feel their breath against her skin.

In yoga, Klara has experiences that are quite physical. She has a sensation of being grounded to the earth while the top of her head is opened up to the universe.

So it’s a movement of energy that you actually feel physically in your body and once you have found this lining in the system and you feel it, it’s really totally calm. And you know that if you move the slightest it will weaken, this experience, the physical experience as well. If you only come like this, if I move my head now, the spell will break. (Klara, 4:188-193)

Klara also receives messages during meditation. Sometimes she asks questions but she says that if you want it too much it won’t happen but sometimes when you just want to sit in silence then a feeling can arise that will give you the answers you need.
Belief and personal interpretation

Klara believes both people and animals have a soul that continue to live after the physical body has died and it will go through several lives as long as it has more to learn. Her belief system is something she has acquired both through personal experience and through studying the yogic philosophy when she trained to become a teacher. She says that when you hear something you know is true you believe it not because someone tells you to but because you feel it in your body, in your entire system.

She believes in the yogic teachings of the ten bodies; one physical, three mental and the rest are energy bodies. The three mental bodies consist of the positive, the negative and the neutral. All need to be present but there needs to be balance and the decisions should always be made by the neutral mind because that is the one that knows what is best for the soul. She has also gained knowledge from the courses in healing. She says that what they teach can be a bit different from the yogic philosophy but the core is the same so she has not had any problems combining them. Together with her own personal experiences she decides what is true to her. She has also felt that a lot has been confirmed by the fact that her children, one daughter in particular, are open and communicate with spirits. She feels she has been able to integrate her beliefs with everyday life. There is no difference between the spiritual side to life and everything else. It is all one and the same. She says her experiences have affected her way of believing in a major way. She also feels that she has found her thing. She had been searching for some time but when she discovered Kundalini yoga she feels that it is a package that involves everything you need to do and to know.

Positive affect and coping

The experiences mean almost everything to Klara. She explains how her newfound understanding of the world helps her deal with it:

> It means I have an understanding of why I’m here and I can understand what happens around me. […] So many crazy things that happen. But with this knowledge I can have an understanding, I can have an acceptance and I can relate to it in a way that keeps me well so that I’m not eaten by this crazy world. (Klara, 6:266-267,269-271)

She can now see how badly she had been affected by her father’s negative temper. But with her knowledge and the balance she gains from daily yoga and meditation, she can handle it differently so that it won’t affect her anymore. She is also grateful she has had the experiences she has because her daughter can wake up in the night, scared because someone is there and Klara thinks that if she had not had experiences herself or any belief in it then she wouldn’t have been able to help her daughter get through those frightening experiences.

> So I use all my yogic knowledge in my role as a mother, extremely clear on one of them. She has had, in many periods, very spiritual experiences at nights and woken up. And I see she is not there, she is not at home at all. She is in that middle state where she is practically unresponsive. Can look at me but doesn’t see me. And just hysterical and screams and I see that she sees something she is terrified of and how I manage to guide us out of it and to be able to understand it and then when she can
Klara experiences life as meaningful and feels we are here to learn lessons. It can be to stand up for who we are or know that we are amazing no matter what we do. Her experiences have made this view much stronger. Even though she used to be a happy person and had a good upbringing she feels that with what she knows now, life seems pointless if she would believe that we only have this one life and nothing more. She is also happy to have discovered a philosophy that provides her with knowledge and a technique that she feels is perfect for her. She feels like she doesn’t have to search any further.

Klara also feels like she has more control over her life than she did before. She still has many lessons to learn and she gets off track sometimes. The difference is that now she knows how to get back on track. She has the tools to find the balance again when things become difficult. All her experiences have also changed her as a person. She says it’s almost funny what a turn she has made from her squared life where everything was right or wrong, black or white to what she is like today. She is much less judgmental towards others. Even though it still happens automatically she can detect it and correct it.

Negative affect

Klara has heard many stories of bad or frightening experiences by other people but says she is very fortunate to have never had a negative experience. She says that this is probably due to the fact that she did not enter her search for spirituality because of inner chaos that she thinks is quite common among other seekers.

Goals

What Klara cherishes most in life is her family but also yoga. She says that with what she knows today she wouldn’t want to live a second without yoga. Her main goal is always to land in the neutral mind, to be in touch with her soul in everyday life. It’s one thing to do it in quiet meditation but it’s a challenge to do it when things are happening around you.

Cultural context

Klara has practiced yoga for nine years and has worked as a teacher for the past three. Her first contact with yoga was when she tried yoga for pregnant women. Now she does yoga or meditation every day. Her search for alternative ways of helping her horse made her come in contact with people who work with healing and as mediums. The woman who communicated with animals was Klara’s main source of information and support in the beginning when she had experiences that were new to her. She felt she could trust her and she also felt she could trust herself to know what was true. She then took a course in healing herself and the network of people extended. She feels that it was very important for her, the first few years, to have support by people who shared her experiences. She thinks it would have been very difficult to only have had people around her that didn’t believe in it. That may have meant that she hadn’t developed the ability to experience the spirit world and connecting with her soul the way she has. Now she is more secure
in who she is and the experiences she has. They are much more a natural part of everyday life so she doesn’t have the same need to talk to someone every time something happens.

Today she shares the belief in the spirit world with her daughter. Her dad still does not believe in anything like that at all but she doesn’t feel it’s a problem. They respect each other’s viewpoints. Interacting with her dad also gives her insight into the yogic philosophy about what happens when you let the negative mind be the most dominant. She doesn’t feel it’s a problem that other people around her may not believe what she does and may think it’s strange. She is comfortable with being a bit different and she has accepted that there is no point in trying to persuade others to believe what she believes. When it comes to society at large she feels that people are becoming more and more interested in yoga and it’s happening quite fast. She has noticed that many do yoga as a form of exercise but she believes even then it can be beneficial for their soul. She has no worry that she will be out of work in the future.

Mona

Background

Mona is a 37 year old Swedish woman. She says that religion was not a major part of her upbringing apart from her grandmother praying with her at bedtime and that she went to the daycare center at church when she was four or five. She does remember that they talked about God and Jesus at home. She also recalls liking a particular song about Jesus that they used to sing at the daycare center. Ten years ago she lived with a close friend who went to workshops for meditation and so Mona got curious and went along.

Experiences

In many of the meditations Mona has done she has experienced past lives. One that she remembers clearly is when she experienced being a girl who had been through very rough things and she felt a sharp pain in her back. Mona has had problems with her back ever since she was a teenager but after this meditation, two years ago, her back has been almost completely free of pain. In one group meditation she was so deep in meditation that she can’t remember everything but she remembers waking up from the meditation and feeling that she was a soul and not a body. She felt she did not belong to earth and that being here was just painful. Another time, her friend gave her healing and all of a sudden they both experienced being in the time of Jesus and they felt a strong sensation of Mother Mary, as if Mona had been her or part of her. Mona can also sense the presence of spirits and she receives messages in meditation. She then hears words. One time she heard the words: “Go forward. You can do this. You know you can do this.” Another time she heard: “You are of the highest and you know it.”
Belief and personal interpretation

When Mona has experiences of past lives she believes these are actual past lives because she believes that we live several lives and that we have been around as souls for longer than humanity has. She also believes that we are all part of one soul in a way and that each cell can be a soul. This makes it possible for many people to have been one and the same person. That is how the person who holds many of the workshops Mona attends, explains why it is possible for Mona to have been a part of Mother Mary.

Mona has always had a belief in God and Jesus although she didn’t think much about it until ten years ago when she took up meditation. She doesn’t read the Bible though because she is skeptical to its accuracy. Her belief in reincarnation came up when she started meditating but she feels this knowledge has always been there but on a subconscious level. She feels her belief system would not be the same if she hadn’t gone to the workshops but that it may have caught up with her some other way.

Positive affect and coping

Two or three years ago Mona found a peace in life that she hadn’t had before. She feels confident that there is more to life than this and that there is a meaning to it all. She feels a comfort in knowing we have lived many lives before and will continue to live many more.

Well I have become much calmer and more at peace because I have a confidence in life and that this is not the only one and there is meaning in what is. And that we have been through things before and will be later on as well so then it feels much more secure to live. And that peace, it wasn’t long ago that I discovered it, maybe two, three years ago. (Mona, 4:191-195)

Mona’s experiences have given her a deeper understanding of life. She is able to see it in a bigger perspective and not get overwhelmed with small hassles and stresses in life. She still does that but in the back of her mind there is knowledge that there is a meaning with everything and things will work themselves out. Mona explains how her experiences have affected her self-image:

In my own view, I have grown. I have gained more self confidence and I have become a bigger person because I know that I have capacity and I am a part of everything or that I make a difference. A little more like that, that there is meaning in me being here. (Mona, 6:250-252)

The messages she received in meditation that she should believe in herself have helped her gain confidence and strength. She also feels her philosophy have helped her cope with loss. When her mother passed away it had been very tough for Mona’s sisters to deal with it. It was difficult for Mona as well but she experienced calmness throughout the process that she didn’t see in her sisters who don’t share her beliefs.
Negative affect

The time Mona had the experience of not belonging to this world she had a couple of minutes of emotional pain before she could release it. She came out of it with the help of the person who lead the meditation and then she felt good.

And I don’t know what happened during the meditation because I wasn’t in that state of consciousness; I was so far in the subconscious. But when I woke up I felt I didn’t belong to earth. I was outside somewhere. I was a soul. I wasn’t a body and I felt that being on earth was really difficult and hard for me and I didn’t want to do it. So then she helped me to get over it. Because as you experience it in meditation it becomes so strong that you get either really sad or upset or very strong emotions arise that you can’t control. And then she guides you so you calm down and release and feel much better. (Mona, 2:56-63)

In the long run the experience has left her with a positive feeling of being a soul even though the initial feeling was difficult to handle. The same thing can happen when she has experienced past lives. Coming out of the meditation she can still experience sadness or feel upset.

Goals

Mona has always valued love, joy and health but feels that with her new belief system she follows the principle that the biggest in life is love. Love is all there really is and this feeling has become stronger in her from the experiences she has had. Her goal in life right now is to find out what she should work with. She knows that she wants to work with people and to give healing in some way.

Cultural context

Mona prefers to do the kind of meditation where someone guides you through an experience. She also finds it hard to make time for spiritual practice in everyday life and that is why she makes sure to attend workshops a couple of times a year where they have a weekend filled with meditation sessions.

There are so many different parts that need to be pieced together with work and home and household and children and practice and, yes, so right now it’s a lot. And then spirituality must take a step back actually. And maybe that’s also the reason I try to get away to these things in order to maintain it. Because otherwise it’s easy to lose it in everyday life, to meditate or to take a quiet moment to myself. I don’t have the time, or don’t have the time, I don’t prioritize it. (Mona, 6:261-266)

Because of the strong emotions that come up in these meditation it is important for the participants to receive guidance by someone to be able to release these emotions after the meditation is over. Mona has always trusted the person she has been with and has therefore never been afraid of what she might experience. She feels that it is important to have people to talk to about her experiences but it needs to be someone who has had similar experiences since they are so difficult to put into words. She has a friend she can talk to and a part from that there are the people at the workshops and at the courses she has taken in reiki healing. She is okay with the fact that many people around her wouldn’t understand her experi-
ences or philosophy. She just accepts that they are not ready for it yet. But she has been approached by people who are interested in hearing about what she has done at the workshops and she feels that more and more people are opening up to alternative ways of approaching life and health. She believes Swedish society will continue in this direction.

But I notice that more and more people are interested. They know I have gone to the reiki course and go to these mambo jambo weekends and then they’re a little curious. What do you do really and what do you believe? Then it is fun and you can share in an easy going way. But I don’t go into details. I think it’s hard for others to understand.

Alice

Background

Alice is a 57 years old woman born and raised in Sweden. Although she remembers following her grandmother to church once in a while, she wouldn’t say her family was religious and she refers to herself as an atheist when she was young. About fifteen years ago she started searching for harmony in life. She has always been an anxious person and her search for harmony became a spiritual search. She read books of all kinds and soon decided to try meditation.

Experiences

Alice recalls a few experiences in group meditation where they were instructed to visualize following a path leading up a mountain and meeting people along the way. During one of these she experienced entering paradise where she had a feeling of total peace that lasted for a while after the meditation as well. In another meditation they were told to go down into a basement where they would meet their greatest fear. She opened the door and the room was empty. Afterwards the people in the meditation group helped her to interpret what it meant.

She also receives messages in these meditations that can be in the form of thoughts that’s she recognizes are not her own. Usually the messages are about her struggles with not being good enough. There has also been a spontaneous experience of being contacted by a woman who had passed away. This woman was a friend of a friend and so Alice passed along the message she had gotten from the woman to the friend including something she didn’t understand what it meant but the friend understood what it meant. Alice has also done a type of meditation that is intended to take you back to a memory from the past that needs to be forgiven. During one of these sessions she met her dad who had passed away. There had been problems with her relationship with her dad and during the meditation she experienced him giving her a big hug and telling her that no one should make her think she is not good enough.

Belief and personal interpretation

Alice has formed a personal belief system out of all the books she has read. She used to be an atheist but started to believe in some kind of universal force or ener-
gy. It used to feel strange to her to refer to this a God but now she can call it God as well. She believes all religions point to the same truth even though they have different ways of expressing it. She believes people live many lives and that we decide ourselves what lessons we want to learn before we enter a new life. She believes we are here to learn about life, ourselves but mostly about love, being able to love unconditionally. When it comes to the experiences she is humble in the way she explains them and says that you don’t know if you have actually met a deceased loved one or you imagined it. She says she decides to believe they are with us and helps us because it’s more fun that way but she accepts that she will never know for sure. She says that if you believe in these things you also have to understand that many of your questions will never be answered.

Well if you have this interest, you have to somehow think it is okay that you don’t understand everything. You have to settle with, I mean you simply can’t understand it. So you have to settle on the fact that you can’t understand, you can’t explain. Instead you have to choose whether you believe in it or not. And then I think it is more fun to believe in it. (Alice, 7:335-338)

Positive affect and coping

The experiences Alice has had add something extra, something exciting to everyday life. She also feels she has found a meaning in life that she lacked or didn’t understand before she began her search.

It’s a zest to life, these things. I think it’s exciting what you are going to experience. And I can think I may have gained another meaning to life. I’ve been a seeker and this has made me found a meaning to life that I didn’t quite understand or didn’t have before I started. (Alice, 4:174-178)

Her experiences together with her belief system have helped her to be more forgiving towards other people, to be able to recognize that we all try our best. This view has helped her to accept herself more as well. She still has to work on her self esteem but she feels she is more okay with who she is. Alice wanted to have a talk with her mother because she felt they needed to work on their relationship. Before she approached her about this she used channeling as a way of gaining the strength she needed but also to ask for advice about what to say. She got the advice she needed and had a talk with her mother.

I think it helped me feel calm because in a way I felt like I had someone there to help me. It is something that may be only imagination but that can take you far. (Alice, 5:224-225)

She has felt that in general the messages she receives during meditation have helped her and her well being. She has suffered from anxiety but feels better now. She still experiences anxiety but can cope with it better. She believes her well-being has improved thanks to her spiritual search, both from reading books and meditating. She also feels that believing that spirits are with her and help her gives security.
Negative affect

Alice cannot recall any type of negative experience. She has never been afraid of the spirit world. When she experiences past memories in meditation these can bring back negative emotions from that time but Alice views the whole experience as positive since she is able to forgive and let go.

Goals

Alice believes in striving for love and forgiveness. She sees that forgiveness is important not only for the one who is forgiven but also the one who forgives. She tries to be understanding and accepting. She has also come to understand that true happiness lies in doing good. She makes sure not to seek happiness in material things and to let go of things that she doesn’t need.

Cultural context

Alice has attended group meditations, séances and courses in channeling, healing and psychometrics. In group meditations the people help to interpret each other’s experiences. The interpretations are often about personal development. When Alice had the experience where she entered an empty room the others helped her to see that it was about her fear of not being good enough. The empty room symbolized that there is really nothing to be afraid of. Alice explained that in the beginning she experienced some stress over the fact that everyone else in the meditation group was having vivid experiences with clear images and Alice could get any of those. Now she is happy with receiving messages the way she does. Even though she rarely has images she understands the messages and that’s what’s most important. Alice has a few friends she can talk to about her experiences. There are people around her that she would not talk to because she knows many are skeptical and can be judgmental. Her family members don’t share her beliefs but she is okay with that because they are still accepting. She feels there are two sides in Sweden, the nonbelievers and the believers and she thinks more and more are starting to believe in the spirit world. When she has attended larger séances she has spotted people she wouldn’t have expected to see there. Alice has never sought professional help for her anxiety.

Summary

Although all participants have had different kinds of experiences during meditation, there are a few similarities in positive affect. Keywords are peace, meaning, security and fearlessness of death. Meditation has given them peacefulness inside. To what extent they manage to bring this peace into everyday life is different as is the extent to how much they practice meditation. Everybody feels life has meaning. They have all had this feeling before the experience but most of them believe this sense of meaning has grown stronger from both experiences and the knowledge they have gotten through reading books and talking to people about their beliefs. Security has repeatedly come up in the interviews. This is often connected to their belief in spirits and that they receive help from the spirit world.
Their experiences with the spirit world differ but all of them have had some level of sensing the presence of spirits. This also is connected to the feeling of not being afraid of death. This in turn has helped a few of them cope with the death of loved ones.

With negative affect the most common thing is a fear of spirits, more so when they were young. Most of the participants can tell about one or two scary or unpleasant experiences but often the experiences have been interpreted in positive ways afterwards and none of these experiences have left them afraid of meditation. The exception is when one woman meditated as a 12 year old girl and had a frightening experience. This made her not wanting to do meditation again until she was 35.

The belief systems are quite similar between the participants. They have different ideas of God, if it is an immanent or a transcendent God and if they pray to God or not. But they all believe each person is essentially a soul that lives many lives. Their belief systems have in some of them been strengthened by their experiences. To some it has been conviction that was there before they started meditating and with some it was quite a new discovery through both experiences and studying. This is partly connected to their upbringing, whether or not there had been a spiritual awareness in the family.

Keywords in goals are love, forgiveness and personal development. All of them have strivings in life. Both work related and who they want to be, how they want to treat people. Being true to oneself, discovering who you are and what you want is a part of meditation so this practice helps them achieve their goals. Many of them see love and forgiveness as important strivings in life.

The cultural aspects that have been brought up are non acceptance as well as acceptance. They all see that there are people who would judge them if they would talk openly about their experiences but to most of them it’s not a big problem since they have a few friends they can talk to and feel that’s enough. At the same time they all feel that society in large is becoming more accepting. Many of the participants have come into contact with meditation through meditation groups. The people in these groups also help interpret the experiences. Books are a common source of knowledge but the participants are trusting in themselves as the main source of authority for truth.

4.2. Analysis

In the presentation of the data the information was separated into different categories which signified different parts of the meaning system. For the analysis I will combine these parts to provide an understanding of the entire meaning system and what significance spiritual meditation and spiritual experiences have in this meaning system. I will follow the theoretical working model that was created before the data collection and was presented in chapter two. The connection to well being will be presented in two ways: short-term and long-term. The short-term influence is the immediate psychological state that has occurred during and shortly after the meditation. The long-term influences of the experiences are what they have left the participants with. The constructs of meaning and well being cannot be separated from culture. This perspective will therefore be present throughout the anal-
ysis and it will move on two levels; individual (inner subjective representation of culture) and context (society and community).

Meaning system

All of the 8 subjects I interviewed believe in a spirit world and the experiences they have had with this world makes it more than a belief. For many of them, it is a conviction or it’s a natural part of life. The awareness of a spirit world gives them positive feelings of security and that there is always help to receive. But it can also create fear. This is especially true for those who had encounters as children. But as Sandra says, some spirits are unkind, just like some people are. None of the participants live in fear of the spirit world. It is clearly a source of comfort but negative feelings can arise depending on the experience. Apart from the comfort of having spirits around that can help there is also meaning in knowing that life continues. This puts life in a larger perspective or as some participants phrase it, it gives life a deeper dimension. This conviction or belief that life continues can provide ease to the fear of death or even diminish that fear. It means they are able to handle others’ passing and they are less afraid of dying themselves. The spirit world is thus present in the meaning system not just as a belief, it also creates both positive and negative affect and it is involved in coping.

Even though the belief in a spirit world is strong to the point of conviction not all parts of the participants’ belief system is a conviction and there are gaps in what they know. Many of the participants said that they can’t explain exactly what the experiences are or who or what gives them the messages. This goes along with the postmodern way of thinking that you may have to accept that some things will never be explained or understood. It is more about your truth than the ultimate truth. Certain parts of their belief systems seem to be about ultimate truth and that is the eternal nature of life and the power of love. The fact that they can’t understand everything that happens is okay. They don’t have the need because they only need to trust that they are safe and that they can receive help in some form. To know who provides it is less important.

Belief in past lives provides meaning to this life because it is set in a larger context and plan. The self is also extended beyond this identity. To what extent the experiences affected this belief for those who have had past life experiences is unclear but it provides them with a source of knowledge that is their own and not something someone told them or something they read. The belief system affects the view of the self in more ways than this. They know they are more than the body, they are a soul and there is an identity beyond the ego or the traditional sense of self. This knowledge and the experience of it is a reoccurring theme in most of the interviews. So to boost self-esteem in this way does not necessarily mean that they see their self as good, instead they know that they are more than the self. It is not the person who is good but the deeper source of what we are is perfect and so meditation can help to distance oneself from our usual perception of self and identity. This makes it easier to accept yourself because the value does not lie in what you do. Who you are goes beyond body, personality and personal history.

The participants report that the immediate feelings that have come up during spiritual meditation have mostly been positive. The subjects often describe a feeling of peace and this is what usually is expected of the person who meditates, that
they will reach a state of stillness where the thoughts are silenced and there is a deep sense of being present in the now and in the body. The participants have different beliefs about God and what God is but they all believe in a positive energy that is within everyone. To reach this state of peace can therefore mean you are in touch with God, the divine or a positive energy that is or is connected to the very source of life. This brings meaning to meditation beyond having a break from everyday thoughts and worries. It means to connect with God or a positive energy. So the meaning system, in particular the belief system, is not only used to interpret what happened but it also allows for certain experiences. There is an expectation of what spiritual meditation is which predicts certain experiences. The feeling extends beyond the meditation because it leaves the subjects knowing that this peace is within them at all times even when they can’t experience it directly. Just like the fearlessness of death, so too does this feeling help them cope with difficult periods in life.

Everybody answered yes to the question if meditation has helped them through tough times. They can see there is meaning even in adversity. Spiritual meditation has helped them stay present and balanced in order to be able to deal with stressful situations. When stressful things happen in life the meaning system is made apparent through its abilities to provide coping resources. According to Park, a stressful event can lead to meaning making in two ways; reappraisal of the event or changing the meaning system. For some of the participants, stressful events in life were the reason they made spiritual meditation a part of their meaning system. For Alice and Klara it made them form an entire new meaning system while for most of the participants it was about focusing more on the spiritual aspect of their current meaning system.

Negative feelings have also come up in spiritual meditation such as fear and sadness or feeling upset. The negative feelings have in most cases not extended beyond the experience itself. The only long-term negative effect of a specific meditation was when Tina had an experience as a 12-year-old that left her too scared to meditate again until she was 35. The negative psychological state that Lena reported during her teenage years up to her 20’s was not due to negative spiritual experiences, it was due to her feelings of being alone in her beliefs and experiences. At that time she didn’t have anyone close to her that shared her meaning system.

Other negative feelings have come up in spontaneous spiritual experiences of sensing spirits. If there is a belief in spirits, that they are real beings that surround us and can contact us wherever we are, there is the possibility of fearful reactions to this. If the same things would happen to someone without this belief I would expect more immunity to negative feelings. At the same time there would also be an absence of positive interpretations of certain events that for the participants can indicate a loved one being present. Overall the belief system gives meaning to small things in everyday life because they can be seen as indication of spirits. With small things I mean sounds and sensations and not actual images of spirits because that would be difficult to go unnoticed by anyone no matter what their belief system is.

Spiritual meditation has helped the participants get in touch with who they are and what they want. This is especially clear in the cases of Tina and Sandra who took up meditation after a difficult divorce. Together with their belief system the participants have set up goals and meditation has helped them to stay in touch with their inner knowledge and peace that they need in order to reach these goals.
The participants belief in destiny and the importance of life lessons, has given them a sense of direction in life even though they may not be aware of what their lessons are. It’s an implicit goal. Meditation along with messages can help them stay on track and be in touch with their intuition in order to keep strong and make the right decisions in life. It is not an active striving but an awareness that brings meaning to their lives. Life lessons can be seen as an overarching goal of this life-time. The participants may not be aware of what the lesson it is but it seems that they are conscious of steps to take in order to help them do what they are meant to do. The spiritual meditation has also been a goal in itself in order to sustain the spiritual side to life.

The way belief systems are formed and the way spiritual experiences are interpreted can be said to reflect Swedish culture as being postmodern and individualistic. The participants are their own authority for truth. They do not give one readymade belief system the whole authority of explaining their world. The exception is Klara who has chosen Kundalini yoga as her philosophy. She says she has found the one philosophy and technique that provides her with all that she needs to understand and function in the world. On the other hand, this does not mean she rejects science. She was raised in a family where science was seen as the highest provider of truth. Now she can combine the philosophy of Kundalini yoga with other teachings like what she learned in reiki healing courses as well as science. Just like the other participants she says she believes what works for her. She says that when you hear the truth you feel it in your entire system. This is a trust that she shares with the other participants.

The goals and strivings of the participants also reflect the individualistic view of Swedish society in that they are focused on their personal needs and happiness. On the other hand they connect this to a larger perspective. Like Lena and Klara say, their personal strive for acceptance, happiness and being present will bring joy to others around them. It is also about taking responsibility and setting an example. By loving oneself you make it easier to love others while at the same time setting an example for others to follow. Marie, Klara and Lena all work with teaching spirituality to others. Sandra, Mona and Alice see their personal goals as not just happiness for themselves but a part of making this world a better place for everyone.

The participants have all been or are in contact with a spiritual community of some sort. This is usually a meditation group or people they meet at courses and workshops. These people help each other to interpret the experiences but as Alice points out, in the end it is up to you how you wish to interpret the experience. In guided meditations there needs to be a certain level of trust in the person who leads the group into meditation. Mona has gone to someone who has also written books on the subject and so she seems to hold quite a lot of authority compared to others when it comes to interpreting experiences. The construction of meaning is thus in some ways influenced by the leader of the meditation group as well as the other participants. The leader can influence the actual content of the experience as well as helping the person to interpret it. But in the end it is up to each person to decide what the experience means to them.

There were questions in the interview about non acceptance by society but Lena said that non acceptance exists in the spiritual community as well. There are certain images of what a spiritual person should be like and how they should behave. Aside from this the participants have found support in the communities. It is important for them to feel that they are not alone in their beliefs and experiences.
Sandra was the only one who said it is difficult that these beliefs are not accepted by most people around her but she seems to be able to handle it. The rest said that it doesn’t bother them that other people have different beliefs or think they are crazy. They take it lightly and feel that it is becoming more and more accepted. To feel secure in one’s meaning system is on some level dependent on the possibility to share it with others but it seems this group of people doesn’t have to be big. The main difference is between having no one and having at least one person to confide in and discuss beliefs and experiences.

**Model 2.** Categories of global meaning with subcategories that reflect the meaning system of the participants.

### Belief
- Belief in an afterlife or spirit world
- We can receive help from the spirit world
- We live many lives on earth
- There is a plan to this life and lessons to learn
- Self as a source of knowledge
- Self as a soul

### Affect
- Positive self-esteem
- Inner peace
- Sense of security
- Fearlessness of death
- Sense of meaning in life
- Frightening experiences

### Goals
- Enjoy life
- Forgiveness and acceptance
- To practice meditation or yoga
- Learning life lessons

4.3. Conclusions

In this section the result from the analysis will be used to answer each sub-question of the main research question: How can spiritual meditation and spiritual experiences influence the participants’ sense of meaning in life with regards to beliefs, goals and affect and how can this be used to understand well being among the participants? The answers to the sub-questions will together provide an answer to this main question.

1. How do the participants interpret the spiritual experiences?

The participants generally interpret their experiences out of belief in a spirit world that we can communicate with and receive help from, that people are connected in some way, that they have intuitive knowledge, that they are a soul that has lived
many lives and that the future can be foretold. Some of the participants are still aware that they can’t know for sure what happened, if the experience was with another dimension/being or within them.

2. What psychological states are reported by the participants to have occurred during spiritual experiences?

One of the main functions of meditation is to reach a state of inner peace and this is frequently reported in the interviews. There have also been descriptions of experiences that have caused strong feelings of joy, happiness and comfort. These have been spontaneous sensations or connected to past lives or meeting spirits, some of who have been family or friends who have passed. In past lives or childhood memories difficult emotions such as sadness or anger have come to the surface and can remain, like the positive feelings, for a short time after the meditation as well. There have also been feelings of fear in meeting spirits in and outside of meditation as well as fear of the unknown like when Lena couldn’t see her body anymore or when Tina was overwhelmed with an intense and loud noise.

3. How have spiritual meditation and the spiritual experiences influenced the participants’ feelings and psychological states in the long-term and how are they connected to meaning?

The feeling of inner peace has stayed with the participants and just knowing that they can access it is comforting in times of stress. This inner peace also has meaning depending on how it is interpreted and for most of the participants the inner peace can be seen as God or a positive energy. There is greater presence in life which helps them appreciate the small things. That makes it easier to experience a sense of meaning in life because even in adversity there can be awareness of the positive aspects. Spiritual meditation is also used as a coping strategy together with their belief system. They seek answers in meditation for guidance and they are better able to cope when loved ones die because they know they live on and they have been able to meet them after they have passed.

4. How can the participants’ belief systems be said to provide meaning?

The participants’ belief systems give them meaning by putting their lives in a larger perspective. They believe they have lessons to learn in this life so even difficult times have meaning because it is an opportunity for personal growth and learning about life. The experiences have given Lena the perspective that the purpose of life is to experience life and that includes all experiences, both good and bad. This perspective gives life meaning even without any personal construction of meaning such as setting up goals or making a difference in the world. The belief that they are more than the physical body also provides them with knowledge they can use to see themselves in a different light. It makes it easier for them to forgive themselves and to see themselves as something bigger than just
the body and the personality. This in turn can create a feeling that there is a meaning with the person’s existence beyond what he or she does.

The knowledge that they can receive help from the spirit world gives them a sense of security and a feeling that they are not alone. They are also less afraid of death which helps them cope with the loss of a loved one. They can see meaning with death because it does not mean the end of something. Instead it is seen as a passing from one dimension to another.

5. Do spiritual meditation and the spiritual experiences seem to have influenced the participants’ strivings in life and how is it connected to meaning?

First of all meditation has helped some of the participants get in touch with themselves in order to find out what they want. Meditation has also helped the participants find out what is important in life. It has helped them to strive for appreciation of the present moment to be able to enjoy the small things in life. The value of forgiveness and acceptance has become stronger since they began meditation together with a spiritual search. Because they all feel there are benefits with regular meditation this practice has become a goal. To have goals is part of a meaning system according to Park and spiritual meditation helps the participants find goals for themselves, as well as help them in the striving towards these goals.

The experiences have in many cases confirmed their belief in destiny and that we are here to learn lessons. Learning lessons is therefore an implicit goal in life. They don’t always know what the lesson is but just knowing there is a plan for growth there is a sense of goals in life which gives life meaning.

6. How does cultural context in the form of Swedish postmodern culture as well as the local community context influence the construction of meaning for the participants?

There are parts of the participants’ way of constructing meaning that seem to be a reflection of postmodern, individualistic Swedish culture. They reject one authority or single meaning system as being able to explain everything. The participants trust themselves as the authority for what is true. But many of them also acknowledge that you cannot be certain of exactly what happens during meditation or who gives the messages. But they are comfortable with not knowing everything. There is an acceptance that it is impossible to be able to explain everything that happens. The individualistic values are also reflected in the participants’ goals. Personal development is a common theme. But becoming a better person is also connected to the larger community around them since cultivating qualities such as acceptance and forgiveness is beneficial both to themselves and the people around them.

All participants felt a need to be able to talk to someone about their experiences, sometimes for help with understanding what had happened. They all have some people in their lives for this purpose and usually they have met them in courses and meditation groups. The meditation groups also have a moment after the meditation when each person can tell the group what they experienced and they talk about how to interpret it. Lena is the only one who went through a period in life when she didn’t have anyone to talk to because her family was Christian.
She tried to approach priests about it but no one understood her or could relate to her beliefs and experiences. This was tough for her because it made her feel alone. That people don’t believe in spiritual experiences or think they are strange is not a major problem for the participants. Most of them feel they don’t need to convince others about their beliefs. They are happy having a few friends who share their beliefs. Sandra was the only one who expressed that it’s a bit difficult that people around don’t share her view of the world as spiritual. Most of them said that they choose carefully who they talk to.

7. How does the meaning system perspective reflect the relation between spiritual meditation/spiritual experience and the participants’ psychological well being?

The way the theoretical framework relates spirituality to well being is in the way the spiritual meaning system which includes beliefs, goals and affect provides a sense of meaning to life. The participants have benefitted from the spiritual meditation in a number of ways while they also have had negative reactions to it. Mostly the meditations have created positive feelings such as peace and happiness. The negative feelings have come up when the meditation has been about bringing back memories from either childhood or past lives. Some of these memories have been negative but in the long run the participants interpret the experiences in a positive light because it was necessary to bring the memories back in order to be able to forgive and let go. Other negative feelings such as fear have come up in encounters with spirits, either in or outside of meditation.

The belief and the experience of a spirit world have mostly been positive for the participants. One of the reasons for this is because they have been able to share this belief with others. In the one case when a participant had no one to share her experiences with it created a feeling of being alone and being different from others. Apart from this the belief has provided all participants with a sense of meaning and they have been able to use their contact with spirits as a coping strategy in small worries as well as in adversity. Coping has been part of dealing with death and dealing with stress.

The meaning system has also had positive effects on their self-esteem. Knowing and experiencing being a soul or positive energy that is eternal and to some participants divine, has helped them to accept, forgive and love themselves. This view has helped them forgive and give others love as well and this is an important striving in their lives. According to Park’s theory it is important to have strivings in order to feel life is meaningful. The spiritual meditations have been a part of finding goals and to reach them.
Chapter 5 Discussion

Empirical reflection

It’s difficult to compare the result of this study with previous research since there are few qualitative studies on spiritual experiences and meaning making. But the indications of a relationship with spiritual meaning making and psychological well being are in line with previous research. Geels’s study on spontaneous mystic experiences in a Christian context reveal the strong coping effects of spiritual experiences. This is also true for spiritual meditation just like the suicide prevention study that explored the therapeutic qualities of guided meditation shows. Some of the participants in this study turned to spiritual meditation at a time in their lives when they felt they needed guidance and to reconnect with themselves.

The results also show that spiritual meditation is not just a coping strategy in times of crisis it is also helpful in everyday stress. That meditation can be used as a stress relief has been known for a long time but spiritual meditation provides stress relief in more ways than just getting the mind and body calm. Since it is connected to a belief system that includes a spiritual view of the self as well as the peace that arises during meditation it gives stress relief by creating meaning and by being a part of personal development. This is why Park (2011) stresses the importance of understanding a person’s underlying philosophy in order to understand the source of having a sense of meaning in life. Had the participants been part of a quantitative study of the effects of meditation on stress levels we may have missed out on the connection between the two.

Earlier research on the topic has mostly used a quantitative method. This study shows how a qualitative method can be used to understand more about the relationships between spirituality and well being. That is what Mattis (2002) did and there are some similarities between her study and this one. Her sample was a bit different since it was a group of Christian, African-American women. They used some meditation but more prayer and communication with a transcendent power. Still some similar aspects of meaning making can be found such as the belief in destiny or purpose of one’s life, learning life lessons, achieving personal and spiritual growth in difficult times and trusting in a transcendent source of knowledge. The main difference is that in this study the participants had more focus on the inner self and the direct communication with a spirit world.

Contributions

The result of this study contributes to the area of spiritual meaning making. It reveals some examples of how spiritual meditation as well as spontaneous spiritual experiences can be part of a person’s meaning system and what effects they might have on psychological well being. It shows how the construction of a spiritual meaning system can look in a Swedish cultural context where the individual pick
freely what he or she believes in. However, some of the participants have not been able to choose completely freely because sensing or seeing, even interacting with spirits happened already in their childhood.

One of the participants mentioned meeting with a psychotherapist and one of them, who suffered from anxiety, chose not to get professional help. In Sweden it is difficult to find professional psychological help that incorporates a spiritual aspect, especially if one rejects the Christian doctrine. People can therefore see a therapist where they may be reluctant to talk about any spiritual experiences and they can attend meditation groups where there is no professional psychological therapy. Hopefully people who lead meditation groups are observant of the state people are in that attend and are open to suggesting to the person that they seek professional help as a complement to spiritual meditation. And an availability of psychotherapy that can incorporate spiritual meaning making in therapy might make people with a spiritual worldview more inclined to seek professional help when they are going through stressful periods in life.

I also agree with Birnbaum and Birnbaum (2004) that spiritual meditation is not suited for people with a history of psychosis because some experiences can apparently be quite frightening and they are experienced as real. The participants in this study have been able to deal with such experiences so as not to leave any permanent negative effect. It was more difficult however for the participant who had a negative experience with meditation as a child.

Theoretical reflections

Park’s theory is difficult to measure but it worked well as a guideline for what areas in meaning making are involved and how they are connected to well being. The three aspects, belief, goals and affect were all present as relating to the spiritual experiences in some way. According to Park, global meaning is quite stable throughout life. Some beliefs seemed to have been present and stable throughout life, but in many ways the participants in this study are seekers. They search for knowledge and experience of the sacred or of truth, in particular about who they are. That is a major function of spiritual meditation, to connect with who you are beyond the person and what you do and think about yourself. It is knowledge that is cognitive but it is also knowledge that is experienced. While practicing meditation, yoga or taking courses in healing or channeling, the participants have searched for answers in literature.

It seems that Park’s theory is largely based on set religious beliefs that are only challenged when something very difficult happens in life like the loss of a loved one. From the material gathered in this study I would say that the construction of a meaning system is a constant process. Perhaps some basic beliefs about the world and the self are quite constant while parts of the belief system are always evolving. Park also says that meaning making happens when the person doesn’t understand why something happens and they have to make an appraisal of the situation to establish why it happened. In a way, the meaning system of the participants in this study informs them that things happen for a reason, that there is a larger plan. However, this plan is not necessarily known or understood and there seems to be acceptance in that. There is also acceptance that we can’t understand everything and we don’t have to.
I do find that the participants have a meaning system that gives them a sense that life itself is meaningful and so there is no need to create personal meaning even though that is also an aspect in their lives. This can be connected to what Mascaro and Rosen (2004) mean when they say that spiritual meaning is different from personal meaning or a secular meaning system where the meaning of life is totally dependent on the person creating it. Park (2005) also suggests that religion offers a meaning system that is more existentially satisfactory than a secular one. I can’t draw any conclusions like that but this study does show the strength in a spiritual meaning system.

I would also like to bring attention to DeMarinis’ (2003, 2008) contribution of mixed worldviews. She says that in Sweden people don’t have a religious or secular meaning system, they have mixed worldviews where they take from many belief systems and combine for example scientific worldviews with spiritual. I think the material in this study reflects this. The participants construct their worldviews in a personal manner and they combine scientific, religious and spiritual interpretations of their experiences.

Another thing that this study adds to the theory by Park is the place of practice in global meaning. She puts a lot of emphasis on religions’ influence on meaning system through beliefs but not so much through rituals or practiced such as spiritual meditation.

Reflections on method

The qualitative method was chosen in order to understand how spiritual experiences are interpreted and used by the individual to create meaning. I found that I was able to understand this to some degree at least but a major obstacle is the fact that no one is completely aware of their meaning system. A person can share what they believe in but it’s more difficult to know exactly what strivings are present and what is important to the person. Like Park says, it’s important to look at how much time and energy people actually spend on certain parts of their lives to understand the goals they have and what they value. As I only had the persons information to rely on I had to look at implicit information to understand their goals.

Then there is the problem of asking about experiences that happened many years ago. As these experiences were special and something out of the ordinary I can expect that the memory of them should be quite good. But I also wanted to know what psychological effect they had on the person and this is also difficult for the participant to know. They may think the experience didn’t have any major impact when actually it may have affected them strongly. Or the other way around, they may think that experience changed a lot but in reality their meaning system looked the same afterwards and life continued in the same manner as before. In a study like this, where time only allowed for a few interviews this problem is something I have to accept. A way of complementing the information from a semi-structured interview could have been to also use a different kind of measure for each participant such as a questionnaire measuring meaning in life in relation to spiritual experience. There are measures of mystical experiences and other measures of meaning in life and other kinds of health measures but none that combine them as was the purpose in this study. There was also no time for creating such an instrument.
The collection of empirical data is always influenced by the position and previous knowledge of the researcher. In this case my previous knowledge is interest in similar belief systems as the participants but no experience of guided meditation or spiritual experience. My personal belief in a spiritual side of life was an advantage in the interview situation because it made the participants relaxed in talking about it openly. My lack of spiritual experiences can be seen as a disadvantage because they are difficult to understand. But the absence of experience also means I won’t draw conclusions based on personal experience.

The validity of the material has been checked in a few different ways. Firstly by asking during the actual interview if I understood correctly and asking follow-up questions for clarification. Then the participants were given the chance to read through the transcriptions and make changes if they felt they misunderstood a question. The coding process was double checked by the instructor. This provided some level of validity to how the data was interpreted by using codes and categories. The categories were taken from a theory of meaning and the use of a theory is another way that gives validity to the study. It helps to make the study transferable, meaning it can be done in a different context as well. The theoretical model that informed both the interviews and the analysis can be used in other studies in other contexts and it should make the results open to comparison between one another. It also provided consistency to the research process. Each step was built on the previous one with the focus on meaning in the center.

A qualitative study does not aim to generalize but the results should have some usage in other areas with other individuals. The results suggest that the way these participants construct meaning from spiritual meditation and spiritual experience is not unique to these 8 individuals. An indication of that is the similarity between their stories even though they don’t know each other (apart from three of them who belonged to the same meditation group) and come from different parts of Sweden.

Suggestions for future research

This study explored the relationship between spiritual experiences and well being through the perspective of meaning. In order to understand to what extent these kinds of experiences influence well being there is a need for quantitative research as a complement. Quantitative research would allow for other measures of well being than the theoretical perspective of global meaning. The participants in this study were all female so in the future there is need for male participants in case there are gender differences in the way spiritual meditation is used and experienced. There is a possibility of gender differences since culture is a major factor in the construction of meaning.

Coping was not the main focus in this study but several aspects of spiritual meditation and coping came up and I think this is an area that needs more research. There are indications that spiritual meditation and channeling are used both as everyday coping with minor stresses and coping with difficult events in life such as the loss of a loved one.

Global meaning is a construct that includes many aspects of spirituality and well being so it is difficult to measure and future research could benefit from narrowing down this construct and focus on more specific pathways between spirituality and well being. Religion and spirituality has often been labeled as “a search
for the sacred” (Paloutzian & Park, 2005) and this can be seen in the material but what also stands out is the search for the true self. I think this may be one of the things that separate modern (or postmodern) type spirituality from traditional religion and the way it has been conceptualized in psychology of religion so far. Spiritual meditation has in this material shown to be part of a kind of personal development that seems more psychological than spiritual. In line with DeMarinis (2003, 2008) observations of mixed worldviews this points to the fact that there are no clear boundaries between the spiritual and the secular. It is also a cultural reflection of an individualistic culture where the self is the authority of truth. So to search for God or the sacred may for many people be the same thing as searching within yourself to find out who you are and that is where the boundary between spirituality and psychology blend together.
Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the relation between spiritual meditation/spiritual experience and psychological well being by using a meaning system perspective. Meaning has been suggested as a pathway between spirituality and well being and a theory of global meaning by Park (2005) was used to guide the collection of data as well as the analysis. Global meaning refers to a person’s meaning system that includes three parts; beliefs, goals and affect. This meaning system is used to interpret the world and the self and provides meaning to life. To have a sense of purpose in life has been linked to psychological well being. The meaning system is not considered to be in direct awareness to the individual but has powerful influence on cognitive schemas, behaviors and emotions. It is made more apparent in times of adversity and meaning making has mostly been researched in the context of coping.

A qualitative method was used and 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women between the ages of 37 and 77. They were found by contact with meditation groups, yoga studios and through acquaintances. They have all had some kind of spiritual experience during meditation or outside of meditation. A template style analysis resulted in subcategories that were used to describe the construction of meaning and relate it back to the theoretical framework. The framework consisted of theories of global meaning and culture.

The results can be said to reflect the Swedish culture in that the belief systems and the construction of meaning were typical to a postmodern and individualistic culture. The participants trusted in themselves to know the truth while acknowledging that not everything that is experienced can be fully understood. Spiritual meditation and spiritual experience related to meaning in all three categories of global meaning and this perspective allowed for an understanding of the participants’ well being. Belief in a spirit world was experienced both during meditation and for some of the participants also outside of meditation. The belief of having spirits around that can help gave the participants a sense of security and brought a deeper dimension to life.

That the self is experienced as a soul that lives many lives gave meaning to life itself and created a positive self image. The participants were able to be more accepting and forgiving of who they are because they were able to separate the true self from what they do. That they experienced past lives gave them a sense of purpose in life. We are here to learn lessons and grow. This means they can see meaning even in difficult times. Spiritual meditation was also used as a coping strategy both in daily stress and dealing with death of a loved one. It also helped them discover and strive for important goals. The short-term effects of spiritual meditation revealed that although most are positive there can be negative experiences as well. Some have experienced fear when meeting spirits. They have also experienced sadness and anger when past memories have come to the surface but this has been interpreted as something positive because it allowed them to forgive and let go.
The study showed how a qualitative method can be used to understand the pathway between spiritual experience and psychological well-being through a meaning system approach. The theory by Park has been developed with a more traditional religious context in mind and the results of this study show how a meaning system can be constructed within spiritual communities that are not tied to organizational religion. There is much focus on discovering the true self and there are no clear boundaries between spiritual growth and personal development on a more psychological level.

Due to the nature of the experiences described by the participants there is a suggestion that health professionals who recommend meditation as a therapy are aware of the possibility of negative experiences. It may not be suited for everyone. Although all participants have experienced health benefits from meditation, psychological problems should be dealt with together with a professional psychiatrist. Since fear of being labeled insane came up in the interviews there is a need for more understanding of spiritual experiences by the psychology profession.
Bibliography


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Appendix

Interview questions

1. What is your age?
2a) Have you lived in Sweden all your life? b) If not, where and for how long?
3. Which part of Sweden did you grow up in?
4. Was religion or spirituality a part of your upbringing?
5. Do you practice meditation or yoga or both?
6. What kind of meditation/yoga?
7. For how long have you practiced it?
8. How frequently do you practice it?
9. What was the reason you began practicing meditation/yoga?
10. Have you had one or several mystical experiences?
11. Would you tell me about the experience/experiences?
12. Was the experience something you had anticipated?
13. Was it a positive or negative experience?
14. How would you explain the experience?
15a) Did you have knowledge about that kind of experience before it happened? b) If not, where did you seek for knowledge?
16. What does the experience mean to you?
17a) Did you want to talk to someone about your experience? b) Who could you talk to about it?
18. Did you feel there were people around you that you could not or did not want to talk to about it?
19a) What do you think people around you think about these kinds of experiences? b) What does that mean to you?
20. Tell me about your beliefs or worldview.
21. Does it look the same way today as it did before the experiences?
22. Have the experiences changed your beliefs?
23a) What do you value the most in life?
24. Do you have things you strive for in life? It could be things you want to do or the kind of person you want to be.
25a) Do you experience life as meaningful? b) Has this been affected by the experiences?
26a) Have the experiences affected the way you see yourself? b) If so, how?
27. Do you feel that you are in control of your life?
28. Has meditation/yoga helped you through difficult times in life?
29. Have your beliefs helped you through difficult times in life?