The Experience of Mindfulness and its Nondual Nature in Active Practitioners

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science degree in Health Promotion

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The Experience of Mindfulness and its Nondual Nature in Active Practitioners

Abstract

Mindfulness-based interventions have become well-established in the literature as an effective treatment for various health issues. Its application in psychology is predominantly informed by dualism; however, according to its Eastern traditions, a true understanding of mindfulness is developed via nondualistic ontological experiences that emerge in a mindfulness state. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature as it is experienced in the world. Hermeneutical phenomenology, informed by an interpretivist lens, was employed. A sample of 13 mindfulness practitioners were individually interviewed. The experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature was considered through themes relating to informal and formal practice; agency; ineffability; self-transcendence; and nature. The findings of this study provide new and important information regarding mindfulness and its nondual nature and can help answer the broader socio-psychological question of what it means to be an authentic, integrated, and realized human being.

Keywords

Mindfulness; Nonduality; Qualitative methodology; Phenomenology; Interpretivism
Summary for Lay Audience

Within the field of psychology, there has been an increased use of mindfulness-based programs that have been proven to be an effective treatment for many mental and physical health issues. Regarding its philosophical origins, mindfulness is nondual in nature; however, its usage in the field of psychology is primarily based on dualism. According to its Eastern traditions, a true understanding of mindfulness can only be developed through nondualistic experiences that arise during the practice of mindfulness. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature as it is experienced in the world by those who practice mindfulness. A sample of 13 individuals who regularly practiced mindfulness were recruited for this study. Each participant was individually interviewed. The essence of the experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature was considered through themes relating to informal and formal practice; agency; the ineffability of nonduality; self-transcendence; and nature. The findings of this study provide new and important information regarding mindfulness and its nondual nature and can help answer the broader social and psychological question of what it means to be an authentic, integrated, and realized human being.
Co-Authorship Statement

Under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Irwin, Benjamin Tran was responsible for the study design, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. As members of the advisory committee, Dr. Marnie Wedlake and M. Lisa McCorquodale contributed to the study design and protocol. As members of the defense committee, Dr. Sheila Moodie, Dr. Jonathan Geen, and Dr. Tara Mantler provided insights that contributed to the final thesis document.
MINDFULNESS AND NONDUALITY

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Jennifer Irwin, for providing me with the opportunity to do research on this topic, and for believing in me since the day we met. No matter how obscure my ideas were, she always found a way to bring life to them. She pushed me to become not only the best student I could be, but the best human. Her incredible enthusiasm and patience in working with me during the past two years (especially during COVID) truly created an unforgettable graduate-student experience for me, and her contagious passion for kindness and empathy is something that I will carry forward with me for the rest of my life. She always looked for the ‘light’ within me and sought to keep it ignited through whatever way she could.

I would also like to thank the rest of the Irwin Lab: Katie Shillington, Taylor Labadie, Varsha Vasudevan, Nia Contini, and Julia Yates. I feel so grateful to have worked alongside these magnificent and inspiring humans during these past couple years, and I will forever cherish the memories we made.

Thank you to my advisory committee, Dr. Marnie Wedlake and M. Lisa McCorquodale for their contributions to my study design and protocol.

Thank you to my previous teachers and supervisors: Dr. Danielle Glista, Dr. Sheila Moodie, Dr. Jonathan Geen, and Dr. Imants Barušs, for inspiring my academic (and non-academic) pursuits and for always believing in me throughout my journey.

Thank you to my partner Sydney Phillips for the emotional support she provided throughout my entire academic career. Thank you also to my parents, Dianne Bui and Van Tran for their ceaseless encouragement. Finally, thank you to my cat Chi-Chi for sitting on my lap throughout all the late nights spent reading and writing.
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MINDFULNESS AND NONDUALITY

Introduction

Mindfulness is often defined in the psychological literature as “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Further, Bishop and colleagues (2004) posit that mindfulness is a process of developing insight into the nature of consciousness and adopting a “de-centered perspective” on thoughts and emotions in order to experience them with respect to their subjectivity and transiency instead of their necessary validity and permanence (p. 234). Over the past 40 years, mindfulness has taken root in the West and has become well-established as an effective treatment for a range of mental and physical health issues (Baer, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 2003, 2005; Lynch et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2006). Mindfulness theories in the West are primarily based on empirical research, with studies suggesting that mindfulness acts on mechanisms of acceptance, meta-cognitive awareness, compassion, and re-perceiving to improve health and well-being (Sikh, 2012; Baer, 2003; Lynch et al., 2006).

Mindfulness with respect to its contemplative traditions is nondualistic in nature; a state of awareness that may function both unconditionally and intelligently (Fitzpatrick et al., 2010; Auribindo, 1996; Sikh & Spence, 2016). Despite the significance of nonduality (sometimes termed open awareness, or open presence) as a concept in Eastern philosophical and spiritual thought, it is also (necessarily) ambiguous. It is important to note that the discussion of the literature on nonduality potentially draws more attention to cognitive spheres; while nonduality is necessarily understood through felt experience. Still, there are several notable interpretations of nonduality in the literature. Davis (2011) describes nonduality in the following passage:

In transcending a sense of separate self, one realizes a nondual relationship with Being. It is not awareness or consciousness which is transcended, only the sense of self which is
grounded in separation, narcissism, and defences (the so-called ego in many spiritual traditions). Nonduality does not mean a loss of consciousness but rather a heightened consciousness in which particulars (objects, persons and relationships) can be perceived with greater clarity as the conditioning and cognitive limitations of the ego-based separate self are dissolved, integrated and transcended” (p. 140).

Davis describes the transcended self to be a self-concept that is integrated into a qualitatively more profound perspective, where the sense of separate individuality is dissolved into the flow of experience. In this integration, the self-concept is no longer experienced as ultimately autonomous; rather, an expanded and more inclusive view of the world is experienced. Further, although the individual identity (also termed “ego”) is differentiated from the contents of experience, it is also not separated. Identification with the ego is widely claimed to be at the core of dualistic experience, as it carries filters and expectations that are rooted in “individual needs, history, and cognitive schemata” (Davis, 2011, p. 141) – all of which serve as a barrier to the experience of nonduality. Blackstone (2007) also distinguishes between a nondual experience (typically an isolated peak experience) and nondual realization (typically more stable and lasting transformation). In Vedantic and Buddhist traditions, a nondual experience precedes nondual realization. That is, nonduality is first isolated from experience and, through practice, is integrated into daily life. Experiencing nondual awareness and seeking to integrate it into one’s life is known in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of Dzogchen as “taking the goal of meditation as the path” (Josipovic, 2010, p. 2).

In Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness naturally leads to the realization of ‘no-self’ (i.e. transcendence of ego), and such realization is central to the experience and realization of nonduality (Giles, 2019). A primary distinction between contemporary mindfulness and
mindfulness as taught in Eastern philosophies is that the role of no-self is rarely acknowledged in contemporary mindfulness. Lisa (2014) states:

Western psychology has consistently asserted the primacy of the self and healthy development of the self as a necessity for mental health. Buddhist psychology has no quarrel with healthy development of the mind and heart. In fact, it remains a primary objective of this methodology. However, Buddhist psychology, with its rigorous phenomenological approach, reveals this solid, separate self to be nothing more than an interdependently co-arising stream of shifting phenomena lacking any inherent permanence or solidity (p. 16).

Due to the importance of recognizing no-self in order to experience (and consequently understand) nonduality, as well as its centrality in Buddhist mindfulness practice, the concept of no-self should first be unpacked. The Buddha’s first teaching involved the four noble truths, the first truth being that all life is suffering due to the attendance of sickness, old age, and death. Life involves unpleasant experiences, which includes the loss of pleasant experiences. The second truth is that self-directed cravings are the root of this suffering. The third truth is that in order to overcome suffering, the cravings must be overcome. The fourth truth states that the method to overcoming self-directed cravings is to integrate the eightfold path (in short, this involves eight practices: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, and right mindfulness). Self-directed cravings arise due to ignorance, which in Buddhist philosophy, refers to the belief in the existence of a self (Giles, 2019). Thus, ignorance is the root of all suffering. The existence of a self brings forth a possessive mode of thinking, and attachments to what is perceived to be possessed. It also brings forth cravings to preserve what is possessed, and to acquire more of what can be possessed. Giles (2019) states that the self is a
constructed self-image that is an ever-changing combination of memories, emotions, thoughts, and images that closely influence how we perceive and assess our lives. He likens the false persistence of a constructed self-image to an image on a computer screen. Although it may appear that a single image is moving smoothly across a computer screen, in reality, there are numerous images that appear and disappear in a rapid chain-like succession. This creates the illusion of a single persistent image that moves across the screen. Our constructed self-image is similar in that it is formed from numerous and transient images, emotions, and memories that hold no enduring basis. Giles (2019) notes that realizing no-self and nonduality doesn’t negate the ability to refer to other people or things using names or pronouns. This type of referring is “merely a convention of language; such words need not refer to a metaphysical reality” (p. 7). He gives the example of using the statement “I am thinking”, where the word “I” does not refer to anything in particular and is merely a way to say, “there is thinking” (p. 7).

In Buddhist philosophy, the realization of no-self is primarily established through the practice of mindfulness (Enger & Fulton, 2012). This practice involves observing the functions of awareness without actively engaging with them; a centering of consciousness which takes note of elements that compete for attention (Giles, 2019). Observing an emotion without active engagement (noting its presence, or lack-of) allows for a deeper understanding of the emotional qualia (Masao, 1985). Mindfulness is originally intended to facilitate the realization of no-self (and consequently nonduality), which liberates one from suffering; and such liberation is considered in Buddhism to be the ultimate form of psychological well-being (Giles, 2019). Giles (2019) suggests that it is the concept of no-self that distinguishes contemporary mindfulness from its Eastern roots. Contemporary mindfulness-based programs that fail to acknowledge the no-self and nondual states, but aim for specific well-being outcomes (e.g. reduce stress) may
indeed achieve their outcome goals; however, the individual will continue to suffer from attachments rooted from the constructed-self which creates a barrier to ultimate psychological well-being (Giles, 2019). From the Buddhist perspective, a mindfulness-based program that does not acknowledge the significance of no-self is similar to tending to a dying plant by painting the leaves green, instead of tending to the roots (Giles, 2019). This perspective does not discount the established efficacy of contemporary mindfulness-based programs, nor should it discourage an individual from using them. It is, however, important to acknowledge that without incorporating no-self and nonduality, the outcome of the mindfulness-based program does not align with the original purpose that mindfulness was employed to facilitate with respect to its Buddhist origins (Weick, 2006). Purser and Loy (2013) used the term McMindfulness to refer to the commercialization of mindfulness programs that increasingly deviate from the original liberative and transformative intentions of mindfulness. This decontextualization of contemporary secular mindfulness-based interventions from their Eastern origins give rise to approaches that focus too narrowly on self-centered advancement, rather than the life trajectory in the search for meaning (Krägeloh, 2018).

It is a common misconception that nonduality is a merged union that excludes any differences or discriminations (Davis, 2011). The experience of nonduality does not dissolve the world into an undifferentiated mass; rather, they “stand out, or reveal themselves in their own unique mode of Being” (p. 140). Likewise, Fox (1995) states that “the realization that we and all other entities are aspects of a single unfolding reality – that ‘life is fundamentally one’ – does not mean that all multiplicity and diversity is reduced to homogeneous mush” (p. 232). In agreement, Davis (2011) notes that nonduality as it is described in Eastern traditions also point to a world that becomes more “real, beautiful, alive, and whole” (p. 140) when the confinement of duality is
overcome. Nonduality, as taught in Buddhism, Vedānta, and Taoism, does not deny the dualistic perspective familiar to the Western world. The presupposed common-sense of the world consisting of an aggregation of discrete objects that interact causally in space and time remains unthreatened by, and co-exists with nonduality. The claim is that there is another nondual mode of experiencing the world that is more veridical to the dualistic mode (Loy, 2012). Chapter one of the Tao Te Ching (Mitchell, 2004) eloquently describes nonduality. Note that the term “Tao” can be interpreted as “the way”:

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name. The unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things. Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations. Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source. This source is called darkness. Darkness within darkness. The gateway to all understanding.

Still, the attempt to describe the concept of nonduality remains uniquely paradoxical and involves difficulties relating to language. Heron (1998) argues that the term ‘nondual’ affirms a duality (while seemingly rejecting it), by saying something is ‘not two’. He prefers to use ‘diunity’, in order to differentiate the “inseparable two – many and one, manifestations and spirit, subject and object – within the one” (p. 14). In this sense, the world is nonplural because the contents of the world are not entirely distinct from each other, but together “constitute some integral whole” (Loy, 2012, p. 16).

Informed by the literature reviewed above, for the purpose of the current study, nondualism was defined as an observing of existence that does not impose a subject-object divide; the distinction between subject-self and object-other is no longer realized (Sikh, 2012). This definition was chosen for its recognition that nondualism sees the individual ontologically
as an interconnected part of the phenomenon, a lens akin to Heidegger’s notion of being (Sikh & Spence, 2016). This ontological truth in which the individual and phenomenon of interest are inextricable parts of the same reality emerges from the experience of an ontological oneness (Saravanamuthu, 2006). Contemporary mindfulness research fails to discuss the ideas of nonduality and no-self (Giles, 2019), yet according to its Eastern traditions, a true understanding of mindfulness can only be developed via nondualistic ontological experiences that emerge in a mindfulness state. The application of mindfulness as therapy in Western clinical psychology is predominantly informed by dualism (Sikh & Spence, 2016). Pure and unconditioned awareness as a central component of mindfulness has not yet been fully integrated into Western clinical psychology, nor is the meaning of mindfulness as a concept well-understood (Lau & McCain, 2005; Brown & Cordon, 2009). Further, nondual awareness is not yet a level of consciousness that is well-recognized or operationalized in the field of cognitive neuroscience (Josipovic, 2010; 2021).

Brown and Cordon (2009) outline four primary reasons describing and operationalizing mindfulness as a construct is important: (1) mindfulness as a phenomenon can only be studied if it is properly defined and measured; (2) investigating mindfulness creates the opportunity to study the particular role(s) of this quality in behaviour and experience which can inform applied research; (3) claims on the efficacy of mindfulness and its mechanisms can be tested with clear definitions and operationalizations; and (4) the study of mindfulness can fundamentally help to develop what is known on the nature of consciousness, its role in human functioning, and how its mechanisms can be cultivated to enhance that functioning.

The practice of mindfulness is very similar to the practice of phenomenology, which is the “rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear in order to arrive at an essential
understanding of human consciousness and experience” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132). This involves bracketing, which is the examination of the researchers’ prejudices in order to consider its influences on data analysis. Bracketing is a concept originally conceived by Husserl (1931) who described the natural orientation as intuitively experiencing the world through imagining, feeling, and judging (Johnston et al., 2017). Bracketing, thus, involves bracketing the natural orientation (i.e. to suspend our thoughts and natural standpoint) in order to avoid inadvertently influencing data analysis. Bracketing can be exercised by making the researcher’s own perspective overtly clear in order to put this knowledge aside (Johnston et al., 2017). Engaging with preunderstandings brings the researcher to the phenomenon of interest and facilitates the ongoing questioning that may further enable and/or limit the development of understanding (Sikh & Spence, 2012). Through the phenomenology of mindfulness, the realization of no-self can emerge, as the contents of awareness (memories, images, emotions, thoughts, etc.) are presented without a distinct “self” that possesses such contents (Giles, 2019).

The purpose of this study was to explore mindfulness and its nondual nature as it is experienced in the world by individuals who practice mindfulness daily. More specifically, the research question was: What are the meanings associated with the experiences of mindfulness and its nondual nature in a sample of active mindfulness practitioners? We hoped to gain a humanistic understanding of the experiential qualities of mindfulness and its nondualistic nature. Expanding the taxonomy of mindfulness to include its nondual nature, as well as advancing the research on nonduality can help answer the broader social and psychological question of what it means to be an authentic, integrated, and realized human being.

**Preunderstandings of the Researcher**
My (primary author) preunderstandings of the experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature developed substantially through my own formal and informal mindfulness practices and reading philosophical and psychological texts during the course of my undergraduate studies (2015 to 2020). Notable works include Barušs (2017); Dass (2010); Hanh (1992, 2001, 2020); Kabat-Zinn (1994); Mitchell (2014); Tolle (2004); and Watts (1999, 2017). In particular, it was the literary works of Tolle (2004) and Dass (2010) that inspired the start of my mindfulness practice in 2016, and shortly thereafter I began to explore the experience of nonduality with respect to my practice which respectively involved breathwork, visualization, and physical activity. Tolle (2004) provided me with a substantial framework from which to begin my formal mindfulness journey as he detailed the mechanisms of the mind, and how to adopt a non-judgemental orientation to awareness and being. Dass (2010) ultimately extended my practice to include an informal mindfulness practice, as he described the significance of adopting a mindful state of being through daily life.

In 2020, I was certified to facilitate the Mindfulness Ambassador Program (MAP; 2015) with Mindfulness Without Borders™ and since then, I have been formally practicing mindfulness for approximately three to five hours per week. The MAP involves a 12-session curriculum in a group setting that teaches the central components of a mindfulness practice and how to sustain a mindful way of being. The programs also offers a forum to meet with other practitioners to learn how to address personal and social challenges. This shared learning experience emphasizes the practice of authentic listening and sharing in order to dissolve limiting beliefs, biases, and cultural barriers. The program ultimately provides participants with a rich framework on how to effectively integrate a mindfulness practice, formally and informally, through the teaching of universal themes and use of dialogue prompts. I have attended the MAP,
both as a participant and facilitator. My preunderstandings are continuously developed through this ongoing formal practice and is also enhanced through my involvement with mindfulness-oriented communities (both virtual and in-person), as well as my maintenance of a daily informal practice.

The continuous practice of mindfulness (both formal and informal) and involvement with like-minded communities helped me develop insights on consciousness and its mechanisms, which has had a profound effect on my perception of self, the world, and how to carry myself as a living being in the world. My deep interest in the experience of mindfulness and its role in developing nondual awareness ultimately motivated me to conceive and conduct this research.

Influenced by the above-noted experiences, my preunderstandings included: (1) consciousness is not necessarily secondary to the material world; (2) consciousness constitutes an observer which is distinct from, and operates at a higher level than thoughts and other mental stimuli; (3) thoughts interpret stimuli from both the internal and external world; (4) identification with the observer is central to my formal and informal mindfulness practice; (6) a constant mindfulness practice facilitates the realization of nondual awareness; (7) and nondual awareness involves a realization of the connection between consciousness and the material world.

**Methods**

**Methodology**

The experience of mindfulness with respect to its nondual nature is the phenomenon of interest. Hermeneutical phenomenology (Laverty, 2003) informed by an interpretivist lens (Tuffour, 2017) was employed in order to appreciate the felt sense of mindfulness with respect to its nondual nature, and the meanings ascribed to it by active practitioners. Hermeneutical phenomenology (sometimes termed Heideggerian or interpretive phenomenology; Laverty,
2003) is positioned within the interpretive paradigm because it is concerned with understanding humans as existential beings, and their situated experiences in the world. Further, it is an ontological mode of inquiry that allows the phenomenon to be perceived through the telling of participants’ experiences (Wright-St Clair, 2015). The nondual nature of mindfulness as it is currently understood in the psychological literature is not self-evident (i.e. concealed) and therefore a phenomenological approach is needed (Krägeloh, 2018; Wright-St Clair, 2015). This approach will aim to illuminate the enduring nondual nature of mindfulness and arriving as close as possible to understanding the phenomenon and its meanings by allowing “that which shows itself to be seen from itself” (Heidegger, 1927/1962; p. 58).

**Participant Sampling**

Upon receiving ethical approval from the human research ethics board at Western University (Appendix A; Research Ethics Board ID #118918), purposive sampling was employed to invite participants who were already engaged in a mindfulness practice, as the aim of recruitment in a phenomenological study is to access those with a rich experience of the phenomenon of interest (Wright-St Clair, 2015). The primary author posted an advertisement to their social media platforms (Instagram and Facebook), inviting participation by English-speaking adults (over the age of 18) who self-described as practicing mindfulness for at least ten minutes daily for the past month or more. There were no limits on geographic location, and no specific type of mindfulness practice (e.g. formal or informal) was required for participation in this research. Colleagues of the primary author also shared the advertisement with individuals who were known to them as mindfulness practitioners. Individuals interested in participating were asked to contact the primary author via email in order to receive the letter of information and upon confirming their interest, potential participants were screened for eligibility.
The participants’ dispositional mindfulness was assessed using the “Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale” (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2009). The MAAS is one of the most popular instruments to measure people’s tendency to be mindful of moment to moment experiences (Ruiz, 2016) and has been found to have good internal consistency with Cronbach alphas ranging of .82 and .87 in undergraduate students and adult samples, respectively (Brown & Ryan, 2009). Individuals with a mean score of at least 4 on the MAAS were eligible for participation. A mean score of 4 on the MAAS indicates a somewhat frequent open or receptive awareness of, and attention to what is taking place in the present in the day-to-day experience (Brown & Ryan, 2009). Of the 14 participants who expressed interest via email, 13 met the eligibility criteria and were invited to an individual in-depth interview via the ZOOM videoconferencing platform. It has been suggested that a sample of eight to fifteen participants is likely adequate for yielding rich data to allow for deep interpretation of what the phenomenon means (Smythe, 2011). Prior to conducting each interview, participants provided informed consent for audio- and video-recorded interviews and the use of their de-identified data for analysis, and dissemination through a survey hosted by Qualtrics™.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews

Prior to each interview, participants completed a demographic form hosted on Qualtrics™ software which collected information on their age, sex, gender, and city/town of residence. Participants were informed of the researchers’ background as a thesis-based graduate student in the Health and Rehabilitation Sciences Program at Western University. Participants were also reminded of the purpose of the study; the working definition of nonduality used for the study; the approximate time-commitment for the interview (30 to 60 minutes); that there were no wrong
answers; and that they could choose to stop the interview at any time. Participants were also
given the opportunity to ask questions prior to beginning the interview and were encouraged to
ask questions if they arose throughout.

The in-depth individual interviews were conducted virtually using ZOOM
videoconferencing; each interview was audio- and video-recorded. The semi-structured
interviews employed open-ended questions (Appendix B) aimed to inclusively gather rich
descriptions of the embodied experience of mindfulness and nonduality as it is experienced in the
world. Since the literature often discusses nondual awareness as an experience that emerges with
the realization of no-self — a realization facilitated through a consistent mindfulness practice —
questions relating to the participants’ self-concept and progression of their mindfulness practice
were also employed. The interview structure allowed possibilities for participants to express
ideas that could not be anticipated by the interviewer (Wright-St Clair, 2015). Further, the
interview guide was continuously modified throughout the data collection process in order to
facilitate a deeper investigation of emerging concepts. The primary author conducted all of the
interviews which lasted an average of 41 minutes and ranged between 22 to 61 minutes. Member
checking was conducted during each interview in order to verify that the researchers’
interpretations accurately reflected the participants’ experiences, and that the participants’
responses accurately reflected the essence of the felt experience (per Wright-St Clair, 2015).
After the final interview, the primary author determined that a sufficient amount of rich and
relevant data had been gathered during the data collection phase, with new incoming data
producing little or no new information to address the research question.

Reflexive Journal
Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, the primary author used a reflexive journal in order to collect and reflect on preunderstandings on the topic of interest. The journal was also used to record what the researcher thought and felt throughout the data collection and analysis processes. The objective of implementing a reflective journal was to exercise reflexivity and methodological trustworthiness through the questioning of why the primary author was drawn to the topic, how their understandings on the topic changed throughout the data collection and analysis phases, and to illuminate the lens that might have intuitively be brought into participant interviews and data interpretation (Wright-St Clair, 2015). Personal assumptions, goals, and subjectivities were clarified through the use of the journal in order to cultivate an open phenomenological attitude (per Valle et al., 1989).

Data Analysis

Contextualizing the phenomenological approach

In accordance with the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, data collection and analysis were iterative processes (per Wright-St Clair, 2015). The everyday way of perceiving things should be avoided and thus, bracketing was exercised through the use of a reflexive journal, outlining the primary author’s interpretations of the participants’ stories after each interview, as well as throughout the analysis process (per Wright-St Clair, 2015). The ongoing documentation of the researchers’ developing insights through writing provided the decision trail for this research (per Koch, 1994). Throughout the data collection and analysis phases, the researcher also engaged in daily mindfulness meditation practice of at least 1-hour per day, in order for “understandings to not be imposed before the phenomena has been understood from within” (Moran, 2000, p. 4). This practice was especially important to the topic of nonduality, as it is understood authentically only through felt experience. The mindfulness practice in
conjunction with engaging with preunderstandings facilitated the overcoming of conditioning and the emergence of new understandings during the data analysis phase (per Sikh & Spence, 2016). It involved the iterative process of reading and rereading, moving from parts to whole, with the acknowledgement of how preunderstandings merged with the data. The ongoing mindfulness practice allowed for an experiential understanding of mindfulness and its nondual nature and the fusion of horizons.

**Coding**

The participants’ descriptions of the experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature were analyzed using a phenomenological reduction approach (Shaw & Connelly, 2012). The analysis was an inductive and iterative process which involved detailed line-by-line coding (per van Manen, 1990) to categorize the participants’ experiences, thoughts, behaviours, and emotions. In order to understand the meanings and interpretations of experience, the textual transcripts were coded for both their ontological description (identifying experiential content and intentionality) and phenomenological reduction (describing key ‘essences’ and the core structures of experience; Creely, 2016). In order to meet the phenomenon as unprejudiced as possible to come to its precise understanding, a free imaginative variation process and open style of coding was employed (per Larkin & Thompson, 2013; Shaw & Connelly, 2012). This involved assigning themes to interpretations that emerged, and further processing the inclusion or exclusion components from the transcripts to come to the essence of the phenomenon (per Shaw & Connelly, 2012). The purpose of this exercise is to “imaginatively stretch the proposed transformation to the edges until it no longer describes the experience underlying the subject’s naïve description” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 55) in order to determine that a theme belongs to the phenomenon essentially rather than incidentally (van Manen, 1990). These practices together
established a level of reflexivity and rigor, as outlined in Polkinghorne’s (1983) process for phenomenological reduction. Through reflexive consideration of participants’ told experiences, language used, existential themes, subtle understandings, and the constant re-listening of audio-recorded interviews, the elements that characterized the essence of the experience were established. Specific quotes were selected to reflect strong patterns in data, with quote selection distributed across participants in order to represent the data set.

**Results**

This section includes an overview of participant characteristics followed by the presentation of two primary themes and seven subthemes from the interviews contextualized with excerpts from the primary author’s reflexive journal.

**Participants**

The sample of participants for this study ($n = 13$) included 11 individuals who identified as cisgender women and two who identified as cisgender men, aged 23-72 years, all from various small to midsized cities in southwestern Ontario with the exception of one participant being from New York City. All participants scored at least a mean of 4 on the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2009), with the sample mean score being 4.27, which indicates a frequent open or receptive awareness of, and attention to what is taking place in the present in the day-to-day experience. All participants in the sample for this study also confirmed a daily mindfulness practice lasting at least 10 minutes per day, five days per week, that has been ongoing for at least a month. Types of mindfulness practice among participants included several different forms of formal meditation (e.g. transcendental, loving-kindness, visualization, movement, guided), breathwork, journaling, mindful eating, being in nature, prayers, non-attachment, body-scanning, and mindful doing.
**Themes**

For the participants in this study, the nondual experience was necessarily facilitated through mindfulness practice. Through our findings, the essence of the experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature was considered in light of two primary themes and seven subthemes. The first primary theme was the experience of mindfulness with four subthemes: (1) need for practice; distinction between formal and informal practice; (3) agency; (4) transcendence of self. The second primary theme was the meaning of the experience of nonduality with three subthemes: (1) nonduality in relation to mindfulness practice; (2) the ineffability of nonduality; (3) nonduality and mainstream mindfulness.

**The Experience of Mindfulness**

**Need for practice**

A striking theme among the participants’ interviews emerged when asked how they came to practice mindfulness, and what past experiences led them to their practice – many participants described being in a time of need and approached mindfulness out of desperation. Of these participants, many described a struggle with mental health (e.g. anxiety, chronic stress, feeling overwhelmed). Notably, these participants reported that a consistent mindfulness practice offered an imperative reprieve from their mental health issues. In relieving anxiety in particular, participants attributed their relief to various elements of mindfulness which include acceptance, reperceiving, self-compassion, non-judgemental observation, breathwork, focused attention, realization of no-self, as well as movement-based mindfulness practices (e.g. yoga, dancing, hiking). Typifying this theme, a participant stated, “I would say my life kind of fell apart, and I’m an anxious person. The concept of meditation came into my awareness, and so I started one breath at a time.”
Some participants described a struggle with chronic physical pain and used mindfulness practices to help with pain management. A participant mentioned the use of guided-meditations and breathwork as part of their daily mindfulness practice, although they stated the process of pendulation to be their primary mindfulness technique for managing pain, which is a process in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy that involves body-scanning and focused attention. The participant described their experience:

I was struggling with unremitting pain [...] It was out of desperation [...] I started practicing daily meditation as a way of managing the pain [...] as well as trying to use medication. I thought – I needed to do something else here. That became my introduction into mindfulness, and that was years ago, I’ve been practicing it ever since.

Notably, some participants approached mindfulness with a pre-established interest in alternative medicine, while others were introduced to it incidentally through workshops or assignments at the workplace. Several participants mentioned that maintaining a mindfulness practice provided important relief to the constant stressors experienced from being immersed in a fast-paced academic or work-environment, and that without mindfulness, they would be overly attached to what is on their to-do list.

**Distinction between formal and informal practice**

The distinction between formal and informal mindfulness practices was a prominent theme in the participants’ interviews and most participants incorporated some form of both in their daily practice. Participants’ characterized formal practice as an intentional commitment of time (formal activities included sitting-meditation, breathwork, journaling, and movement-based practices such as yoga or hiking), and informal practice as the broader integration of mindfulness in their day-to-day life (informal activities included mindful doing, active listening, non-
judgemental observing). Many participants stressed the synergistic relationship between formal and informal practices, in that formal practice was a more rigorous and fruitful exercise that helped to inform, orient, and gradually solidify the habit of applying mindfulness to day-to-day life (i.e. informal practice). A participant described the distinction between their formal and informal practice by saying:

My formal practice is when I intentionally sit down and have the mindfulness practice of being in this moment, I usually do it with my eyes closed. I come into this moment as it is, which means whatever is here now – so, what does my chair feel like that I’m sitting on? What is my body going through? What is my mind doing right now? What is my breath doing in relation to all of that? Then, my informal practice starts pretty much every morning and I would have to say that it’s now habitual – which now I have to be mindful of it being habitual […] when I get up in the morning, I notice how I’m breathing, I notice any carry-over from the night before or maybe some dreams. And I’ll notice how that affects my breathing.

Notably, the integration of informal practice as described by the participants in this study involved a disidentified relationship with thoughts and emotions (through non-judgemental observation), in order to gain a deeper understanding of their functions, and to also diminish their control over the participants’ behaviours. This disidentified relationship with thoughts and emotions was primarily cultivated through the more rigorous formal practice(s), which was then carried over to day-to-day mindfulness experiences. A participant described their relationship with their thoughts in a state of mindfulness by saying:

Now, I’m in this place where I’m observing the thoughts throughout the day, and I’m not really attached to them whatsoever. I really try to not identify with any thoughts. I’ve
noticed that my energy just stabilizes throughout the day and I’m just present, here, and absorbed in the moment […] Daily practice and routine has allowed a general state of grounded-ness. I think I’ve become very dedicated to it because when I was younger, I struggled with anxiety quite a bit […] once I started integrating these practices daily, I really noticed a huge difference in my energy around people.

Participants in this study also described how their experience of mindfulness progressed through maintained practice. Several participants stressed their initial resistance to approaching a formal mindfulness practice, due to the discomfort associated with sitting with themselves (and being confronted with difficult emotions), especially for those who self-identify to be more cognitively oriented. Interestingly, among these participants, they all overcame this resistance through regular practice. Participants underscored that this particular quality of mindfulness meditation — the necessary involvement of a direct and authentic confrontation to the contents of an individual’s subjective experience, as it is, is not commonly understood. They added that there is a general misconception that mindfulness is a frivolous form of escapism, a distraction from reality, or a state of passivity that reduces the suffering in life. This sentiment was typified when a participant stated:

I think there might be a misunderstanding about what it (mindfulness) is or is not […] there seems to be a tendency to think it’s all rainbows and unicorns. You know, all the good stuff. That’s when life’s good, right? That’s the misunderstanding. It is simply seeing it as it is, not how we want it to be. So, we put out these projections, like (for example) that was a ‘bad’ meditation because my mind was all over the place. Well, did you recognize the mind is all over the place? Because that’s a celebration.
Feelings of frustration, and negative self-directed judgement was reported as a common experience among many participants in this study when they initially began their formal mindfulness practices. Through constant practice, participants came to the realization that the purpose of practice was not about achieving, or non-achieving. A participant spoke to this issue:

When you find yourself straying off course, don’t be judgemental, don’t be harsh. Lovingly call yourself back […] if you want Johnny to come for dinner, you don’t (angrily) say “JOHNNY! GET DOWN here and GO for dinner!” – you (lovingly) say “Johnny… dinner!” And it’s the same thing internally. We have so many places in our lives where we are criticized and judged. It does us such a disservice when we do it, so the minute you notice that, just go into that loving place.

Agency

In mindfulness, the act of non-judgemental observation can be likened to an open sense of curiosity, as explained by a participant:

Whenever strong emotions arise, (I am) just being curious about what they’re doing there […] I do try to take a moment and not do anything – try not to distract myself – but just see what’s happening […] you know, emotions can feel uncontrollable sometimes. Then, I regain a sense of agency, because I can always go into that perspective, it’s something I can always do. I feel empowered to know that I’m not just swept away in whatever the circumstances […] I think agency is the biggest thing.

Another participant expanded on this idea of maintaining a sense of agency over emotions through mindfulness, by pointing to its influence on behaviour. They said, “if I’m having a physiological response, and I’m able to identify that as a trigger […] (it’s) that antecedent before something happens. I have that choice now to make a choice, to choose that response.” Later in
the interview, when asked how their practice influenced their relationships with others, a participant provided an anecdotal experience that demonstrated this sense of agency and its realized benefits:

This morning for instance, I was trying to coordinate a Thanksgiving, where you’re having to look at all these different schedules. I could feel before I actually thought, I could feel my stomach getting clenched. So now, I know when that happens [...] I’m more familiar with that quarter-second warning, when it creeps into my stomach before it goes up to my head. So, I’m more aware of those physiological responses that might prevent me from saying something that I might regret. So, in that way, my practice has helped me in my everyday exchange with people. That’s not to say I do that all the time, but I’m definitely more aware of that physiological kind of gut responses before something comes out of my mouth – so I can choose a response versus a reaction.

Improved relationships with others due to mindfulness practice was a claim made by all participants in this study. A participant shared, “for example, today, I took my partner’s hand after a very rushed morning and took a breath with him intensely. Because I know that he was up here (points to head), ruminating. So, bringing us back to present.” Similarly, another participant added:

(My practice has) allowed for me to slow down and become more aware of judgements I have toward the outer world, people, places, whatever… and provide space for them to be outside of what I think they are, it doesn’t put people and things in boxes as much and so it allows you to experience the world more. It’s like an ambiguous thing that you can’t always clamp down, a bit more greyness. It is leaving the door open to all things which
includes the possibility of miracles. So, if you don’t crack the door open, then something completely unexpected couldn’t happen.

Several participants in this study noted that it is precisely this greater acceptance of uncertainty that acts to reduce feelings of anxiety – which then also contributes to improved relationships as they are able to communicate from a more grounded, and patient state of being. Participants described a greater enjoyment when spending time with family and friends, due to their developed comfort with the present moment (rather than ruminating). Rather than compulsively seeking distractions, a participant noted that they are completely content with simply being present to others, and another participant stated that the most important person/people in the world was whoever was next to them at any given moment. It is this full presence offered to others, without desire to be somewhere else, that creates a “mirroring” effect in others – that is, to inspire a similar state of presence within others through the simple, yet trained practice of mindful being. Several participants in this study also noted a greater acceptance to uncertainty, which played a role in reduced feelings of anxiety.

**Transcendence of self**

Interestingly, another prominent theme that emerged in the interviews was the realization of no-self that arose from mindfulness practice. A participant explained:

The more mindful you are, the less present identification with self is. You (typically) identify with emotions, thoughts, and belongings, but they’re fleeting, and not really you […] the nondual aspect, for me, is to break out of what I think is me, and other, and existing in the space between… the shared experience.

Another participant added to the notion of no-self, claiming that although the ego is transcended in nonduality, it is never extinguished:
The ego is always there. It’s a matter of paying attention to what it’s doing in its little corner, or sometimes in the center of the arena […] we need to befriend our ego, as the moment we try to deny something – that’s not mindfulness. It’s that idea of recognizing and observing that something is there which can be observed […] if you’re observing ego, then who’s observing it? Thus, you are not the ego if you can observe the ego.

Further, the participants that did mention this realization of no-self also later provided tremendously rich descriptions of their felt experiences with nonduality.

The Meaning of the Experience of Nonduality

Nonduality in relation to mindfulness practice

For the mindfulness practitioners participating in this study, the meaning of the experience of nonduality was inextricably connected to their mindfulness practices. Participants described their mindfulness practice to be the impetus to nondual realization and experience. Common sentiments that emerged in the participants’ interviews when asked about the qualities of nonduality were sentiments relating to impermanence, connectedness, sense-of-belonging, bliss, contentment, gratitude, effortlessness, and spiritual fulfillment.

An interesting pattern emerged in the participants’ interviews was that the participants who reported to be intimately familiar with the nondual experience (and thus provided tremendously rich accounts) were also deeply familiar with its originating Eastern philosophies (i.e. Vedantic tradition, Buddhism, Taoism). Their familiarity with the topic came from books, the internet, or formal guidance (e.g. attending a silent retreat or receiving guidance from a spiritual teacher). One participant explained that the nondual experience does not necessitate the study of its Eastern roots; however, these teachings do serve as “signposts” that subtly hint at the
specific orientation from which the experience may be realized. Another participant commented on this subtly:

In explaining that (nonduality), I have to scale it back again to recognize there are some steps along the way in the journey to experience that (nonduality) […] there’s a significant amount of practice. I don’t know, I think I’m talking in circles here – how do you get from A-to-Z when there really is no B-to-Y on the way? We’re very good at practicing things to make them more concrete, to then just drop it away.

Participant stressed that the idea of there being a certain “direction” to nonduality is inherently limiting its true nature, as it is not a “place” separate from where we are, and is rather an ever-present, and ever-accessible state of being that exists right here, right now, and need only be revealed through the realization of no-self. Notably, several participants also recognized the necessary transcendence of self (i.e. disidentifying with ego) in order to understand nonduality. A participant likened this process to a transition from the small i (the ego) to the big I (transcended sense of self) when describing the nondual experience:

I perceived it (nonduality) as - I don’t know if scary is the right word? I think because it was something that I hadn’t experienced before. And when I say i, I’m talking about little i and not big I. So, when ________ (participant’s name) had an experience of something more than ________ (participant’s name), it wasn’t frightening, but it was like ah, what’s this? and wow, that’s really cool. Then, of course, that’s ________ (participant’s name) saying that. And then what happens is wanting to get back to that place that is always here, but still feeling like it’s somewhere separate, and then that becomes as barrier to the meditation practice, in my experience. It’s like oh, that was so good – I want to get there again. And then not recognizing that there really isn’t far
away, but we’re creating that distance, and even in that mindset of *oh, I’ve got to get there again*, pushes it away.

**The ineffability of nonduality**

The paradox of using language to describe nonduality was an obvious theme in each interview. There was a felt resistance in attempting to conceptualize nonduality, experienced both by the researcher and participants. For instance, a participant stated:

> It’s interesting, right? I kind of chuckle and stop and say, you’re *studying* this (nonduality), so we’re trying to put words and stuff all around the stuff that we can’t put any words around. And I run into that when I’m working with some of my students, you know, we’re trying to encapsulate it, or capture it, and any words we use just *limit* what we’re trying to *un-limit* […] I would say that’s my felt experience when I’m trying to explain it to other people.

Another participant was also met with this paradox, and explained:

> I feel like it’s kind of funny. Language is dual in its own nature. I guess the best way to explain it is that I have one foot in having the attention on my breath and body, and the other foot is just completely merged with the moment. I’m just kind of *here* and witnessing what’s happening. I’m not thinking about the past or future, or what I’m going to say next to someone, or the next thing I have to do. It’s very much a flow state. I would say the biggest indicator of nonduality, or a nondual state, is that I’m not *asking* if I’m there. There are no questions arising like ‘Oh, how am I feeling right now?’ – and it’s interesting because I noticed it’s the ego identifying with the “I” […] that’s what separates us from the rest of the physical world. When the ego quiets down, you just become merged with everything. It’s not necessarily like you *become* one – as if you’re
not one, and then you are one, it’s more like you experienced the oneness that we are already [...] one foot in being, and one foot in doing.

Due to this paradoxical nature of describing nonduality using language, it is sometimes easier to describe what nonduality is not, rather than what it is, as this often points more closely to the how nonduality could be experienced. Notably, a participant claimed that they frequently experienced nonduality through their 45-minute breathwork routine. They likened their nondual experiences to oscillations to indicate the fleeting nature of the experience; primarily caused by the habitual identification with ego. A common idea mentioned by some participants in this study on the experience on nonduality is that distractions are fundamentally a barrier to the nondual experience. Another participant stated that in a nondual state, there is no craving or desire to entertain or distract oneself; rather, there’s a full contentment in simply observing and experiencing. Simultaneously, the borders between sense of self and the surrounding space become less obvious – a broader space of awareness that also doesn’t feel forced. They determined ‘satisfactoriness’ to be an adequate descriptor of the experience. A participant also added that for them, the largest barrier to the persistent experience of nonduality was transcending the ego. They described a deep attachment to the ego in the way that they are self-driven – the constant assessment of “this is what I currently have, this is what I want to do, and this is how I’m going to achieve it.” They described their current mode of being as too ego-centred to experience a persistent mode of nonduality. Another participant shared an account of their first experience of nonduality which occurred through attending a 10-day silent retreat (based on Advaita-Vedantic philosophy, which is based on nondualism). Attendees of the retreat were required to sit for approximately 10 hours per day with limited activity and an emphasis on restricting distractions. Attendees were not allowed access to writing materials or their
cellphones. They were also not allowed to practice yoga. They were restricted of anything that
might be used to distract the mind. The participant explained:

The first couple of days, I’m like “yes, I can do this!” That’s the ego creeping in, and you
start to really see how the mind is very interesting, and entertaining. By day four, my
brain was screaming “get me out of here.” There were no distractions. I couldn’t use
anything as a distraction, except to be the witness of what’s really going on (in the mind).
After 10 days, you really realize how crazy it (the mind) is, and I don’t mean that in a
negative way – just how much it does its own thing, it’s got a circus going on up there.

Another participant likened nonduality to ‘grey’, and duality to ‘black and white’. In reflecting
with their own (fleeting) experiences of nonduality, they explained the difficulties with adopting
a persistent nondual awareness in the following quote:

It is not natural for me (nonduality). I feel like it’s the path of least resistance to go into
the black and white (dual) experience of yourself. But the grey feels a lot more intimate,
you know? Like you’re really getting in close to yourself. Whereas black and white, it’s
very distant, to completely judge yourself or judge another. It’s like holding them at
arms-length, like ‘Woah, stay over there, I’m going to put you in this box’ – there’s not
much love there. It’s cold and mechanical […] I think it’s a human desire for certainty.
There’s a relief of anxiety, when it’s all in a line. But when you say “Actually, that’s
interesting, who knows?” or “What if I wonder what’s behind that?” and “That’s
interesting, I’m learning something about myself that didn’t fit into a past idea” – it’s
interesting, but it’s uncomfortable. You can’t just pin it down, and there’s an anxiety to
pin it down […] I don’t know if in the grand scheme, (nonduality) is the natural way, and
we’ve just become so pushed into a mode of being that it just feels natural now […] in
my own experience, it (nonduality) feels unnatural. On autopilot, I just can’t do that. It
doesn’t come easy – I don’t know if it’s probably culture, or my upbringing – it’s
imposed a lot of things I’ve taken in that don’t’ really encourage the grey. Education
doesn’t encourage the grey, they go “It’s this way or that way, don’t get too imaginative.”
Especially becoming an adult. Adults really lose that imaginative quality, so when you go
outside the box, there’s resistance.

The ineffable quality of nonduality was described as better understood through the subtlety of
words expressed in poetry. Another participant offered a poem (which they also adopted as a
meditation) to describe the embodied understanding:

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

After reading the first line of the poem, the participant stated:

I am going to step out of that for a minute. If someone had trouble with the word God,
then it could be holy, or love, or nature, or it could anything. It resonates with me, so I’m
good with that.

The participant also mentioned that when used as a meditation, there’s a few minutes between
each phrase to breathe into that “space”. The poem originated from a Hebrew Scripture (Psalm
46:10) and illustrates the process of realizing no-self and consequently nonduality. It begins with
the affirmation that the subject is inextricably connected to a higher being. With each subsequent
line, the gradual reduction of language is apparent, especially the omission of the “I” statements
which can symbolize the transcendence of self. More broadly, the poem can symbolize that through the practice of mindfulness (i.e. be still), the ultimate realization is a pure and unconditioned state of awareness (i.e. to simply be). In other words, the “many” dissolves into “one”.

In considering that nonduality was primarily a felt experience, a participant stated that the embodiment of a physical activity can facilitate the experience of nonduality. They mentioned that when dancing, for example, one may lose the sense of self and merge with the activity – and that the separation between self, song, and dance dissolve into a single animation of experience; the physical manifestation of music. They added that:

Movement seems to lend itself to a nondual state. When you look at it, it’s like a metaphor. When you’re sitting still, there’s a stiffness and rigidness there, like that black and white experience. You say I’m just this, but when you’re moving, it’s like you’re this and that at the same time […] there’s a reason why we’re in physical bodies even with nondual awareness.

Another striking theme among the participants’ -- when describing a specific nondual experience -- was being in nature. For example, one participant described looking at the night-sky while camping at Algonquin National Park as “looking into the eyes of god” and realizing nonduality, and another participant described their sense of absolute wonder and awe upon looking up at the African sky.

The realization of nonduality appeared to also have a profound influence on a participant’s fear of death, as they stated:

I was actually quite sick. And, to the point where you know being in the hospital, being in ICU, and they call the family in – I was actually quite content, in recognizing that I might
transition from this physical realm to the big I, and that was another defining moment in recognizing I wasn’t afraid. And that’s something else that I think comes from our meditation practice – that ability to recognize that there’s something more […] even in a time like that, I lend that to my meditation practice of nonduality.

When asked what sort of cognitive behaviours are occurring in the experience of nonduality, several participants stressed that it was much more of an embodied experience, rather than cognitive. These participants described that “their energy” dropped closer to the heart, rather than the head. A participant likened the mind to a snow-plow, and stated that it was easy to fall into the trap of thinking the best way to live life is to plow through everything with the mind: “It’s like the head is the snow-plow and you just don’t care that there’s grass, you don’t care that there’s a tree, you just care about going through. That doesn’t work.” They also added that it is natural that some individuals are more mentally-centered than others – “you work with what you have.”

When another participant was asked if there were any questions that were not asked that they would like to answer before ending the interview, they chuckled and said, “I don’t know that you should have asked me anything.” Indeed, the inquiry of nonduality, especially as a concept, often felt redundant and groundless. Nonduality in its true nature actively resists analysis; such resistance was very much felt by the researcher (and seemingly by the participants as well) with each question asked. In fact, the resistance felt even stronger after each question, as more layers and details were being added to the concept. The more prodding and probing, the further away from truth. The felt experience of nonduality necessitates the peeling-back of these layers to come to a primordial and essential understanding. This raises the question – if a resistance was felt, then did that indicate at least some presence of the phenomenon (evidently
not to its fullest degree under the confines of language)? It seems to be a human desire to categorize concepts and experiences, yet this experience in particular resists such categorization. To understand nonduality, there need not be any questions asked at all; in a nondual state, there would be no “one” asking the question. This dialogue in itself takes a dualistic stance—we are talking in circles. It also feels wrong to romanticize or to assign a certain desirability to the nondual experience, as in its purest form, there is no “one” to romanticize or desire the experience, it just is. The analytical mind is the wrong tool for the job. What this research achieves is perhaps the telling of what the ineffable experience is “not”.

**Nonduality and mainstream mindfulness**

When the participants in this study were asked if they thought nonduality had a place in contemporary mindfulness, there was a general agreement on its benefits and importance within the realm of mindfulness at-large, although many participants acknowledged the barriers and complexities involved with understanding nonduality. It was mentioned by some participants that mainstream mindfulness practices are often approached as a “quick-fix” and is often seen as a tool to enhance self-directed achievement. A participant commented on the position of mindfulness in the West:

I feel like the Western perspective has extracted it, and made it really clinical, like all of these well-being outcomes. And I think when you use mindfulness, it is not a means to an end. I think that’s missing the point entirely, and I don’t think that allows for nondual awareness, really, at all. It’s all *just reduce your blood pressure*, and *feel a little bit less anxious*, and so that closes the door to even experiencing nonduality [...] I think naturally it (nonduality) is a part of mindfulness, but I think maybe the approach that’s been
happening in the mainstream keeps the doors closed to all things that can’t be put in boxes.

Before the end of an interview, a participant shared a compelling point when asked if they had any final insights else to share:

I noticed that […] you didn't ask about anybody's religious or spiritual practice. Was that intentional? And the reason why I ask is as a social worker, my real interest is bringing spirituality into conversations with people. I just read a study where in the States, they surveyed people - and this is valid, they have access to hundreds of thousands of people at a time for their surveys - over 50% of respondents and upwards of 60% said they were either religious or spiritual. As practitioners, we don’t like to talk about spirituality or religion, but people want to talk about it because most people identify with one or the other. So, my whole thing, for my own professional work, is to crack open that nut a little bit more, because I think it truly is holistic care, and let’s break the taboo of spirituality and religion. Like, it’s okay to be religious. […] But secularism is the dominant structure – so if you look at it from an anti-oppressive social justice lens, I would say that having conversations with people about religion and spirituality is actually the anti-oppressive practice. Because you would be surprised - that’s why I asked - how many people actually do identify with some form of religion or spirituality, and then you decide how you want to define it. I would say nonduality could be synonymous to spirituality […] That’s why I think yoga and mindfulness took off the way that it did when it came to the West, because as a society, we were starved and cut-off from that part of ourselves. And I think that it brings people back to the question of “what is this all about, why am I here?”
[...] But it gets people through shit. And that’s important to look at. You’re right – as researchers, it’s the elephant in the room. So, talk about the elephant in the room!

Discussion relating to religion and spirituality was acknowledged to be tremendously important, not only due to the topic being rooted in such traditions; but indeed, several participants mentioned their association with various different religions and/or spiritual philosophies that possibly inform their understandings of nonduality.

Of all participants in this study, only one explicitly stated that they are not familiar with nonduality, nor did they believe they had experienced it.

**Discussion**

As a reminder, the purpose of this study was to explore the meanings of the experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature in active practitioners. More specifically, the research question was: What are the meanings associated with the experiences of mindfulness and its nondual nature in a sample of active practitioners? Active practitioners in this study described an array of experiences related to mindfulness and its nondual nature. The first primary theme found in this study was the experience of mindfulness, with subthemes: (1) need for practice; (2) distinction between formal and informal practice; (3) agency; (4) transcendence of self. The second primary theme found in this study was the meaning of the experience of nonduality with subthemes: (1) nonduality in relation to mindfulness practice; (2) the ineffability of nonduality; (3) nonduality and mainstream mindfulness.

Participants in this study made an imperative distinction between informal and formal mindfulness practice and emphasized the importance of a formal practice for experiencing nonduality. Participants attributed their mindfulness practice as the facilitator to the realization of no-self, and consequently nonduality. While mindfulness itself is not nondual awareness, it is a
way to approach it in Buddhist philosophy; through observing open awareness without any specific object of focus, thus minimizing phenomenal content via use of mantra or focused attention (Mills et al., 2020). Participants in this study also emphasized the transcendence of self as the impetus to nonduality, which is an outcome of mindfulness taught in Buddhist philosophy, yet is regularly omitted from Western mindfulness-based programs (Giles, 2019). The experience of no-self is considered a transpersonal experience in the psychological literature, and through rigid mindfulness practice, facilitates the nondual experience through the overcoming of obstructions by mental afflictions (Kalff, 1983). These findings corresponded with (and ultimately reinforced) my preunderstanding of the observer orientation which operates at a higher level than thoughts and other mental stimuli, as well as the preunderstanding that this orientation is central to the formal and informal practice of mindfulness. These findings also corresponded with my preunderstanding that a constant mindfulness practice facilitates the realization of nondual awareness.

Participants in this study were acutely aware of the agency they felt through their experiences with mindfulness and nonduality. Participants stressed an initial resistance to mindfulness practice due to the discomfort associated with difficult emotions and thoughts. Over time, their consistent mindfulness practice and nondual awareness cultivated a sense of agency over their thoughts and emotions, and how they respond to adversity. These findings also reinforced several of my preunderstandings, specifically that consciousness constitutes an observer which is distinct from, and operates at a higher level than thoughts and other mental stimuli, and a constant mindfulness practice that involves identifying with this observer facilitates nondual awareness. Indeed, nonduality has been frequently described in the literature using a metaphor related to a mirror and its images: As a mirror does not make preferences on
what images it reflects, nondual awareness equally reveals whatever experience is happening (Josipovic, 2016). In this way, nondual awareness does not abolish contents of experience (i.e. thoughts or emotions), but rather the individual becomes free within the scope of their own experience, as it is (Josipovic, 2016).

The participants in this study repeatedly underscored being in nature as a facilitator for the nondual experience, which corresponded closely with my preunderstanding that nondual awareness involves a realization of the connection between consciousness and the material world. Interestingly, nonduality has been suggested to be at the foundation of ecopsychology, and transpersonal psychology, as they are “based on the recognition of a fundamental nonduality between humans and nature; failure to experience, value, and act from this nonduality creates suffering for both humans and the environment” (Davis, 2011, p. 140). Davis (2011) believes ecopsychology and transpersonal psychology are bridged by nonduality, a state of awareness that ceases to be confined exclusively to the ego. Indeed, most of the participants in this study that reported nondual experiences while out in nature appear to have also described what is known in ecopsychology as a “peak experience”.

The ineffability of the nondual experience was a salient theme in each interview; the experience was not as easily described by participants conceptually as it was figuratively. As was underscored in this study’s findings, nonduality as a philosophical assertion is undoubtedly ambiguous and seemingly counterintuitive. During the interviews, there was an active resistance felt through the attempt to conceptualize nonduality from cognitive spheres; and the necessity of felt experience for a true understanding of nonduality. This resistance reinforced my preunderstanding that nondual awareness constitutes identifying with an observer that operates at a higher level than thoughts and other mental stimuli. Engaging in the interview process
facilitated an identification with thoughts, which might have created the felt resistance.

Nonduality cannot be understood conceptually, as Loy (2012) posits that conceptual knowledge is inherently dualistic, in the sense that it is “knowledge about something, which a subject has, and such knowledge must discriminate one thing from another in order to assert some attribute about some thing” (p. 4). Due to the dualistic nature of conceptual knowledge, Loy adds that “the nondual experience, if genuine, must transcend philosophy itself and all its ontological claims” (p. 4). While the nondual experience itself does not involve philosophizing, the subsequent attempt to reflect-on and describe the experience could potentially lead to a variety of descriptions, perhaps even contradicting ontologies that emerge from the same phenological ground. Consequently, it is a possibility that different philosophies are being founded on and attempting to draw from the same nondual experience (Loy, 2012). Loy stresses the self-defeating conflict with philosophy in its attempt to conceptualize nonduality as an inherently dualistic system; despite an impetus to philosophy being the reaction to the divide between subject-object; the original need of “alienated subject to understand itself in relation to the objective world it find itself in” (p. 4).

During the interviews, the primary author perceived a gradually increasing distance from the phenomenon as the questions became more complex (continuously probing) and deeper cognitive spheres were explored, as participants had to make an increasingly creative use of language, subtleties, stories, and poems. Krägeloh (2007) recognized this unique complication in studying nonduality. They stated that the aim to reify experiences through use of phenomenological reduction means that this approach is unable to capture nonduality, “as the inconceivable and ineffable will evade us the very moment we try to grasp it” (p. 7). The subject-object orientation includes a location, and therefore pure experience (nonduality) cannot be
situated into an individual consciousness (Feenberg and Arisaka, 1990). However; individual consciousness can be situated in pure experience, and therefore individuals do not possess an experience; rather, it is an experiential flux that creates individuals (Krägeloh, 2007). These statements align with the challenges participants experienced with attempting to grasp nonduality conceptually.

There are several limitations identified with this study, largely relating to recruitment methods. First, in recruiting participants, the eligibility criteria focused on individuals who practiced mindfulness. The focus of this research leaned more closely to the inquiry of the nondual experience first, which necessarily derives from the experience of mindfulness. It might have been more effective to focus eligibility criteria on individuals who are specifically practitioners of nonduality, and in doing so, the inquiry into their experiences in relation to their mindfulness practices would have remained equally feasible. This is due to the fact that the realization or experience of nonduality necessarily involves the experience of mindfulness, but not vice-versa. The focus on recruiting practitioners of nonduality would have opened up the potential for a larger presence of the phenomenon. This is not to say that the participants in this study did not bring forth the phenomenon – they ostensibly did to differing extents, although methodologically speaking, specifically recruiting for practitioners of mindfulness may have presented a barrier to the phenomenological study. It was also methodologically flawed to recruit active practitioners of mindfulness if it was at all a possibility that they do not practice nonduality, since the aim of purposive sampling in phenomenology is to ensure that the phenomenon is present during data collection. That said, we were granted with phenomenological insights into where nonduality sits in relation to a small sample of individuals who actively practice mindfulness. Each participant scored at least a 4 on the MAAS scale and
for reference, a sample of 42 members of a Zen meditation center in New York scored a mean of 4.38 on the MAAS; whereas a sample of 42 adults (comparison group) scored 3.85 (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Another limitation to this study was that mindfulness was not explicitly defined in the eligibility criteria. Although it was defined in the letter of information, mindfulness can mean many different things, depending on the participants’ interpretation of mindfulness. Thus, this lack of definition opens the door to a mindfulness that does not at all recognize nonduality or its Eastern origins. Had we defined mindfulness as taught in Buddhist philosophy for example, there would be a potential for a larger presence of the phenomenon of interest. Furthermore, the frequency of mindfulness practice (at least 10 minutes daily, five days per week, ongoing for at least a month) was an ambiguous frequency decided by the researcher and that has no valid basis in the literature to represent an “active practitioner” of mindfulness.

**Conclusion**

This research is the first hermeneutic phenomenological study that explores the experience of mindfulness and its nondual nature. Despite the paradoxical nature of nonduality as a concept, this study revealed discrete themes associated with nonduality as a felt experience, and discrete practices that lead to the realization of nondual awareness. This study also shared firsthand accounts of mindfulness practitioners (some of which derived from the contemporary practice of mindfulness as opposed to its Eastern origins) that have (claimed) to experienced nonduality, and rich descriptions of how it is expressed in the lived world, as well as what it is not. Although the conclusions made from hermeneutical phenomenology are not generalizable in a postpositivist structure, the implications of the interpreted understandings are offered for consideration to researchers and practitioners that work with mindfulness-based programs – especially those in the fields of transpersonal psychology and ecopsychology. Through exploring
a deeper understanding of mindfulness and its nondual nature as it is experienced in the world, we aimed to inform and consequently enhance future research and interventions that incorporate mindfulness. Mindfulness-based interventions that aim to enhance well-being may benefit from the effect nonduality has on affect, which is a release of habitual emotional responses founded on excessive self-other fragmentation and the uncovering of love and compassion as one’s natural affective baseline (Mills et al., 2020). Emotional regulation in the frame of nondual awareness considers change in the bottom-up emotion processing, rather than the more cognitively intensive top-down approach. Mills (2020) also stated that while there is limited research on nondual awareness, there are studies that indicate better well-being in individuals who experience transpersonal states. For example, in a clinical setting, nondual approaches are increasingly being used, and are especially helpful in cases concerned with the following: (1) existential issues; (2) dissociating from the embodied dimension of experience; (3) dependency issues; (4) issues involving the false self; and (5) people with compulsive and rigid styles of personality (Josipovic, 2016).

The findings of this research provide important new information for mindfulness researchers and practitioners who seek to understand the meanings associated with the experience of mindfulness and nonduality. Further, the study of mindfulness and nonduality as a phenomenon can fundamentally aid to build on what is known on the nature of human consciousness with respect to human functioning and, consequently, how its mechanisms can be developed to improve human functioning (Brown & Coron, 2009). Finally, the knowledge gained may motivate mindfulness practitioners to continue their practice in order to cultivate their nondual awareness. These insights may serve to inspire a more sensitive and holistic
approach to teaching mindfulness to individuals in the West for maintained or improved overall well-being.

References


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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2005.11.026


https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12141


Smythe, E. (2011). *From beginning to end: How to do hermeneutic phenomenology*.


Appendix A

Western Research

Date: 28 June 2021
To: Dr. Jennifer Irwin
Project ID: 118918

Study Title: The experience of mindfulness and its non-dual nature in active practitioners

Study Sponsor: Western University
Application Type: HSREB Initial Application
Review Type: Delegated
Meeting Date / Full Board Reporting Date: 06/July/2021
Date Approval Issued: 28/June/2021
REB Approval Expiry Date: 28/June/2022

Dear Dr. Jennifer Irwin

The Western University Health Science Research Ethics Board (HSREB) has reviewed and approved the above mentioned study as described in the WREM application form, as of the HSREB Initial Approval Date noted above. This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

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<th>Document Type</th>
<th>Document Date</th>
<th>Document Version</th>
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<td>21/June/2021</td>
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<td>Recruitment Materials</td>
<td>21/June/2021</td>
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<td>Recruitment Materials</td>
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<td>References_Ethics_June 21</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>21/June/2021</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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</table>

No deviations from, or changes to, the protocol or WREM application should be initiated without prior written approval of an appropriate amendment form Western HSREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

REB members involved in the research project do not participate in the review, discussion or decision.

The Western University HSREB operates in compliance with, and is constituted in accordance with, the requirements of the TriCouncil Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2); the International Conference on Harmonisation Good Clinical Practice Consolidated Guideline (ICH GCP); Part C, Division 5 of the Food and Drug Regulations; Part 4 of the Natural Health Products Regulations; Part 3 of the Medical Devices Regulations and the provisions of the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA 2004) and its applicable regulations. The HSREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000940.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Patricia Sargeant, Ethics Officer (psargean@uwo.ca) on behalf of Dr. Philip Jones, HSREB Chair
Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Mindfulness and Non-Duality Study

Script prior to interview:

Once again, I’d like to thank you for participating in this study. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of mindfulness and its non-dual nature in active practitioners. More specifically, our research question is: What are the meanings associated with the experiences of mindfulness and its non-dual nature?

Non-dualism can be defined as an observing of existence that does not impose a subject-object divide; the distinction between subject-self and object-other is no longer realized. Non-dualism sees the individual ontologically as an interconnected part of the phenomenon. That said, of course, we’d like to acknowledge that non-dualism may express itself in whatever way that it does for you, in your lived world, and it’s exactly that in which we are exploring today. Through seeking a deeper understanding of mindfulness and its non-dual nature as it is experienced in the world, we aim to inform and consequently enhance future research and interventions that incorporate mindfulness.

Our interview today will last approximately between 30 to 60 minutes during which time I will ask you about your mindfulness practice, how you experience mindfulness and non-duality in your world, and the meanings associated with your mindfulness experience. This is a semi-structured interview that will employ open-ended questions that aim to inclusively gather rich descriptions of the embodied experience of mindfulness and non-duality through your stories. There are no wrong answers. You may choose to stop the interview at any time.

Before we begin this interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions]

If any questions arise at any point in this interview, please feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

Before we start, I need to ask you a few consent questions to ensure we have record of verbal consent for the following items:

The video and audio of this interview will be recorded for data analysis purposes and will be accessible to the research team only. Just before we begin, I’d ask you to please provide your verbal assent that you understand and agree to this. ☐ YES ☐ NO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Mindfulness Practice</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about how you came to practice mindfulness. Can you describe what past experiences led you to your practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Probes:</strong> Probe for sources of knowledge, and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**rationale behind choice of practice**

Tell me about what mindfulness practice means to you.

*Probes:*
What does it look like?
What does it feel like?

When do you practice mindfulness?
How often do you practice?
What type of practice? (examples?)

How does your mindfulness practice influence your daily life?

How does mindfulness/non-duality affect your relationship with your surrounding and others around you?

---

**Non-dual nature**

From your perspective, tell me what non-duality means to you with respect to your mindfulness practice.

What is it like to experience non-dual awareness?
- In your daily life?
- In mindfulness practice or meditation?

Tell me more of what the experience is like.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me about specific times in your life when you experienced non-dual awareness? How long does it last?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you developed a non-dual awareness through mindfulness or some other way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How did you come to develop non-dual awareness?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tell me about an event where you experienced non-dual awareness through your mindfulness practice. (Probe for sources of knowledge and examples of experience)</td>
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<tr>
<td>What kind of effect do you think your experience with mindfulness and its non-dual nature has or had on your self-concept, or life in any way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How often do you experience non-dual awareness?</td>
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<td>Are there instances in your daily life, outside of your formal mindfulness practice where non-dual awareness arises?</td>
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<td>Can you identify any stages in the</td>
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</table>
progression of your non-dual awareness through your mindfulness practice?

What would you advise your former self (when you first began practicing mindfulness) from where you stand right now?

What is important to you about non-dual awareness?

How might non-duality be incorporated into a mindfulness practice?

How has non-dual awareness helped or hindered you in your daily life?

What are barriers to developing non-dual awareness?

How do you navigate communicating to others from a non-dual perspective?

**Conclude**

Before we conclude this interview, is there anything that you would like to add to this conversation that we haven’t already discussed? If so, what would that be? What else haven’t I asked you that I should have?
Curriculum Vitae

Name: Benjamin Tran

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:
Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
2015-2020 B.A

Honours and Awards:
Ontario Graduate Scholarship
2020-2021

Related Work Experience:
Teaching Assistant
Western University
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Graduate Research Assistant
Western University
2020-2021

Undergraduate Research Assistant
Western University
2018-2020

Publications: