MEDITATION IN AMERICAN:
SIMILAR AND DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES AS LEISURE

A Dissertation in
Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

by
Jaeyeon Choe

© 2012 Jaeyeon Choe

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2012
The dissertation of Jaeyeon Choe was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Garry Chick
Head of the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management
Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Andy Mowen
Associate Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

Careen Yarnal
Associate Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

Paul Durrenberger
Professor Emeritus of Anthropology

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

A substantial amount of research has demonstrated that leisure can reduce stress, help people cope with stress, improve mood, and contribute to overall health and well-being (Iwasaki, 2010; Mannell, 2007; Orsega-Smith et al., 2004). Similarly, meditation helps individuals reduce stress and alleviate anxiety and depression (Shapiro et al., 2005), it is cost-effective (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; 1994) and makes people more “insightful” about life (Miller, et al., 1995). The similarities between leisure and meditation suggest that a comparative analysis of them may provide deeper insights into the ways in which both can contribute to improved quality of life. Moreover, since those who engage in meditation do so during discretionary or otherwise unoccupied time, thinking about meditation as a kind of leisure may be fruitful. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the nature of the meditation experience with the additional goal of determining if/and what experiences and outcomes of meditation are similar to and different from those of leisure.

I used participant observation and in-depth interviews to study how individuals experience meditation and its outcomes. I collected data in the spring of 2011 with the Open Meditation Society at Penn State University and a Zen meditation group in central Pennsylvania. I conducted interviews with 16 individuals, including a Buddhist monk, a priest, a teacher, and meditators. Also, in order to assist with study design, I did a pilot study with seven people in February 2009 and a second pilot study using participant observation with a meditation group during the spring and fall of 2010. I participated in the rituals, social events, and other activities with group members, facilitated free meditation sessions, observed them, took notes, held informal conversations and interviews, and conducted formal interviews in order to obtain information that would enable me to address my research questions.
Results indicate that meditators experience stress reduction, spiritual health, self-actualization, flow, mood enhancement (emotion management), and quality of life enhancement, during both their leisure and their meditation. Therefore, meditation and leisure appear to provide individuals with similar outcomes. However, the meditation experience for beginning and veteran meditators differed. Inexperienced meditators reported that meditation can be hard work because they have to consciously concentrate, but doing rituals, praying, and meditating can still be calming and relaxing. They also enjoy the quiet time alone (just for themselves) because they always feel rushed. On the other hand, experienced meditators are interested in achieving higher level of freedom and complete relaxation from worries, thoughts and other external environments. They also focus on cultivating their minds by deep observation, and actively integrating meditation methods into their lives in both work and leisure. Nevertheless, the outcomes for both experienced and inexperienced meditators were similar. This may mirror the experiences of individuals who are taking up a new leisure activity versus those who have been involved in an activity for an extended period of time. This study employs a new lens through which to examine positive experiences and outcomes derived from meditation that renders it similar to leisure.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .............................................................................................................. 7

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. 8

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................. 1

  PURPOSE OF THE STUDY ............................................................................................ 4

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................... 6

  WHAT IS MEDITATION? ............................................................................................. 6
  BUDDHISM ................................................................................................................. 6
  BUDDHISM IN AMERICA .......................................................................................... 8
  MINDFULNESS .......................................................................................................... 9
  MEDITATION AND HEALTH IMPROVEMENT ....................................................... 11
  EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOMES OF MEDITATION ............................................. 12
  STRESS REDUCTION ............................................................................................... 12
  EMOTION MANAGEMENT ....................................................................................... 14
  PHYSIOLOGICAL HEALTH ..................................................................................... 16

  WHAT IS LEISURE? .................................................................................................. 18
  EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF LEISURE ................................................. 21
  STRESS REDUCTION ............................................................................................... 21
  MOOD ENHANCEMENT ......................................................................................... 25
  QUALITY OF LIFE .................................................................................................... 26

  SIMILAR EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES BETWEEN MEDITATION AND LEISURE ................................................. 29
  DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES BETWEEN MEDITATION AND LEISURE ................................................. 32

PRILIMINARY RESEARCH ............................................................................................ 36

  In-depth Interview (Spring, 2009)
  Participant Observation (Spring, 2010)
  Informal Interview: What does it take to be a Buddhist? (July, 2010)
  My prior research

RESEARCH QUESTIONS .................................................................................................. 43

LIMITATIONS .................................................................................................................. 44

Chapter 3 METHODS ..................................................................................................... 45

RESEARCH SITES .......................................................................................................... 47
Chapter 4 RESULTS ................................................................................................................. 64

THE NATURE OF MEDITATION ......................................................................................... 66
STRESS REDUCTION ........................................................................................................ 66
EMOTION MANAGEMENT ................................................................................................. 70
QUALITY OF LIFE ........................................................................................................... 73
THE NATURE OF LEISURE .............................................................................................. 82
STRESS REDUCTION ........................................................................................................ 82
MOOD ENHANCEMENT ................................................................................................... 83
QUALITY OF LIFE ........................................................................................................... 84
SIMILAR EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES BETWEEN MEDITATION
AND LEISURE .................................................................................................................. 86
DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES BETWEEN
MEDITATION AND LEISURE ........................................................................................ 92
IS MEDITATION MORE LEISURE-LIKE FOR EXPERIENCED OR
INEXPERIENCED MEDITATORS ..................................................................................... 103
SUMMARY ..................................................................................................................... 114

Chapter 5 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION ........................................................................ 118

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES ......................................................................................... 126
LIMITATIONS ................................................................................................................... 127
SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ................................................................... 128

Bibliography .................................................................................................................... 131

Appendix A CONSENT FORM ......................................................................................... 141

Appendix B INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ............................................................................. 143
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Summary of Similarities and Differences Between Leisure and Meditation 42
Table 2. Characteristics of Proficient Meditators 59
Table 3. Characteristics of Beginner Meditators 59
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend a big thank you to everyone that has helped me through the arduous task of completing this study. Many thanks to Dr. Garry Chick for advising and helping me through the doctoral research with his patience and great advice. I also thank Dr. Paul Durrenberger to introduce local Zen groups and attend some meditation sessions/events with me for the preliminary study. I also thank Dr. Careen Yarnal and Dr. Andrew Mowen for having made me through this process with their great patience and supportive advice. I also thank my parents who supported me so I could go through this process more smoothly.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Religions offer a variety of situations and events that appear to be leisure or have leisure-like aspects. These include pilgrimages, festivals, feasts, and gaming of various types. The current study specifically focuses on meditation, particularly as practiced in the context of Buddhism. The purposes of this study are to determine the nature of the meditation experience, to see if experiences and outcomes of meditation are similar and different from those of leisure and, if yes, how they are similar and different.

Eastern cultural activities such as meditation and yoga have become lifestyle options and popular leisure activities (Eastman, 2008). For example, it is increasingly popular for New Yorkers to visit Zen centers in up-state New York on weekends (Vora, 2008). These visitors seek spiritual getaways that offer relaxation, peace, and ways to cope with anxiety that recharge the mind and spirit, through meditation, chanting religious verses, and silent self-contemplation (Vora, 2008). While this trend is becoming more apparent, conceptual discussions linking leisure and meditation are still lacking. Although many people meditate, visit temples, and these religious landscapes have appeared more, there is a notable lack of scholarly work interested in Buddhist meditation or related phenomena (Prebish, 1999). Additionally, even though news articles describe meditation as a new leisure style and healthy lifestyle, that needs to be demonstrated with evidence. For example, articles in Los Angeles Times (2008) and New York Times (2008) noted meditation as popular leisure activities.

A basic assumption in this study is that religion is one of the largest suppliers of leisure in the world. Many events associated with religion, such as festivals, pilgrimages, and other social
events, contribute significantly to modern notions of leisure. Anthropologists have been greatly interested in religious festivals and how they relate to other aspects of social life. Chick (1981), for example, studied the organization of the religious festival system in a Mexican village. Spiro (1967) wrote about Burmese supernatural religious activities and how they provide leisure “at the end of a normal workday…the holiday mood that accompanies the nat festivals, a mood that is induced in part by all the conditions absent from this local ceremony—respite from labor, the donning of festive clothes, a plenitude of food and drink, and large crowd” (p. 110). He also describes the activities of engaging in some religious events as, “watching the dancing, sipping tea, and munching on sweets, they exhibit a festive mood” (Spiro, 1967, p. 111), which can be elements of recreational events. Leisure means “unhurried,” and “without regard to time,” or “a mood of contemplation” (Godbey, 2008). Moreover, self-actualization as a shared goal of respite and spirituality becomes an important factor in motivating the ways in which people spend their free time.

As a method of achieving self-actualization or achieving spirituality, people have become more interested in Buddhist meditation. Glazier (1997) emphasizes that ethnographic studies exploring the impact of Buddhism in this society should gain more attention (Glazier, 1997). This is especially important in America, due to the fast growth of Buddhist meditation in the past few decades (Smith, 2002). Meditation, specifically, can be an interesting issue in leisure studies and it demands further attention as meditation and leisure provide similar outcomes such as reducing stress, enhancing spiritual well-being, and improving quality of life. Also, the recreational aspect of religion can contribute to leisure research for better developing and understanding people, culture and society.
In fact, some Americans perceive meditation as ‘a way of life’ or ‘philosophy’. Some people visit meditation centers for many reasons such as learning about different religions/cultures, experiencing a simple and frugal life style, mentally relaxing, coping stress, finding true-self, and achieving self-actualization. In addition, Buddhism is a religion of reason, rejecting faith and ecstasy, which are the typical religious orientations, and “its truths are to be accepted on the basis of reason (applied to experience), and its goal (nirvana) is to be attained by intellectual process of meditation” (Spiro, 1967, p. 260). In fact, Durkheim rejects the belief in gods as a unique characteristic of religion because Buddhism contains no such belief (Spiro, 1966).

In many religions, such as Christianity or Islam, free will is often ceded to a presumably all-powerful god. Hence, there is an external locus of control and very little perceived freedom (everything is “God’s will.”). In Buddhism, unlike those religions, there is no God, and everyone can be a Buddha. Buddha, for example, was a human that achieved absolute wisdom and consciousness. As most meditation principles, especially popular ones in America such as Zen, originated from Buddhism, free will is considered very important in practicing meditation: instead of believing in a God or gods, meditators believe in achieving self-actualization or gaining stillness of their minds by meditating. The emphasis on free will means that there is no obligation or pressure to attend religious services, so that people are motivated to meditate just for relaxing, regardless of whether they are religious or not. Because some meditators are not religious, sometimes do the rituals for fun, and often meditate when they have free time, their activities might be seen as a kind of leisure.
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Despite its potential importance, few studies have looked at the relationship between meditation and leisure. The purpose of this study is to determine the nature of the meditation experience with an additional goal of comparing the experiences and outcomes of meditation in order to determine how they may be similar and different.

There is increasing evidence that peoples’ spiritual experiences may contribute to their spiritual health, stress reduction, intellectual growth, self-actualization, meta-physical consciousness, or cultural awareness (Heintzman, 2002; Possami, 2000). This study will contribute to social sciences regarding meditation in the US, and its functions and meanings. This research may also contribute important insights regarding the nature of leisure. Leisure scientists have not paid enough attention to passive leisure activities, especially in North America, although passive leisure is extremely common. For example, in the recent past three decades there have been many studies about active leisure, such as hiking, canoeing, and kayaking in major leisure journals, such as Leisure Sciences and the Journal of Leisure Research, but very few of watching TV (Chick, personal communication, February 7, 2012). However, TV is much more common leisure for people in the US. There are numerous other passive leisure activities that should be studied further in the field of leisure studies. In addition, leisure research has emphasized the physical benefits while ignoring the positive outcomes of passive leisure can have with regard to health. Thus, this study will contribute to understanding meditation as a form of passive leisure and demonstrate also demonstrate some of the benefits of passive leisure, especially meditation.

In addition to adding the passive leisure literature, this study can contribute to the theory of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1982). Serious leisure means, “the systematic pursuit of an amateur,
hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). As opposed to serious leisure, he described casual leisure as “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasure activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it” (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18). As some Americans engage in meditation for non-religious but many other personal reasons that are similar to serious leisure, serious leisure is relevant to discuss regarding meditation. Also, since they might not look for short-term pleasure through meditation, and meditation requires special practice or certain technique, meditation can be closer to serious leisure rather than casual leisure.

In addition to these theoretical contributions, this study will help us show how meditation can change values and lifestyles in the US and beyond. It is important to note that engaging in meditation may not only provide relaxation, mental well-being or spiritual fulfillment, but also may allow people learn about a simple and frugal lifestyle. This is particularly critical because meditation has been recommended as an effective and cost efficient stress coping strategy (Miller, et al., 1995). Kabat-Zinn et al. (1984; 1992) also claim that meditation can help people effectively reduce stress and alleviate anxiety and depression. Importantly, people can meditate at home or at their convenience once they learn the methods, and it can contribute to their quality of life in a long-term, which connects with the perspective on leisure—non-obligatory activity. Similarly, Mannell (2007) indicates that leisure provides relief from stress, and helps people cope with stress, improves mood, and contributes to overall health and well-being.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Buddhism

Although the current study focuses on meditation, understanding the characteristics of Buddhist philosophy is important as the meditation that this study addresses originated primarily from the Buddhist tradition such as Zen. Buddhism originated in India, spread widely in Asia (Reat, 1994), and it can be broadly divided into Theravada and Mahayana traditions. Mahayana originated in India later than Theravada (Jones, 2003). Theravada Buddhism became popular in Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand while the Mahayana tradition became popular in China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Tibet and Nepal (Reat, 1994). While Theravada and Mahayana retain a unity in core Buddhist teachings, “they evolved distinctive forms and philosophies” (Jones, 2003, p. 11). For example, the Theravada school only emphasizes “self-liberation,” but the Mahayana school stresses helping other sentient beings as well as one’s self-liberation (Dhammananda et al, 2006).

Theravada means “the doctrine of the elders” (Gellner, 2001, p. 45). As one form of pre-Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada has been the most conservative school (Gellner, 2001). In the meanwhile, Mahayana means ‘Great Vehicle’ or ‘Great Way’ (Jones, 2003), and “there are many local variants, laying very different stress on different parts of the scriptural corpus” (Gellner, 2001, p. 48). One cultural anthropologist described aspects of Theravada as follows:

None of the laity and very few monks meditated; the Buddha seemed to be worshipped as if he were a God; Buddhists often worshipped Hindu gods and local spirits and demons,
and shrines to the gods were often found within monastery precincts; Buddhists simultaneously believed in systems such as astrology and therefore explained misfortune in those terms as well as the doctrine of karma; there were rituals which seemed to imply the transference of merit to others and the magical efficacy of sacred objects, in contradiction of the strict individualism, and the moral and psychological rationalism of the scriptures, most Buddhists seemed to be aiming not at nirvana but at achieving rebirth as a god or rich human being (Gellner, 2001, p. 50).

Thus, Theravada does not strongly emphasize intellectual meditation compared to Mahayana. The philosophy of Mahayana is often considered as “the intellection of advanced meditative insight, accessing a profound level of consciousness” (Jones, 2003, p. 11). Also, it provides “a vital foundation for a socially engaged Buddhism, in terms of both intellectual understanding and insightful action” (Jones, 2003, p. 11).

In general, and in both traditions, a primary Buddhist principle is Karma, which is the accumulation of good and evil that we have done in this life from previous ones, and that determines one’s fate in life or rebirth (Spiro, 1967). Buddhism stands “in its place as one of the universally acknowledged moral, intellectual and spiritual systems guiding all humanity into the third millennium of the common era” (Reat, 1994, p. 293). Accordingly, Goldberg (2002) claimed that Buddhism can affect social morality in America. This notion is important for the current study because the new model of morality based on Buddhism can be a motivation for Americans to engage in meditation.

Buddhist principles are also based on reasoning and the main purpose is achieving nirvana, through intellectual meditation (Spiro, 1967). Malefijt (1968) distinguished Buddhism as a philosophical religion. In Buddhism, individuals should follow their own path. There are no entities like the Pope in Catholicism, the Bible in Christianity, or Baptism. As such, Buddhism gives adherents a high level of freedom. Not having orthodoxy or a doctrine attracts some Westerners who are tired of strict religious doctrines that they practiced previously.
(Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Thus, practicing meditation does not require one to be Buddhist (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Therefore, non-Buddhists engaging in meditation may not be motivated by religious reasons but by Buddhist’s ethical value or philosophy or some other reasons.

**Buddhism in America**

In recent years, Buddhism has been spreading in diverse ecological and cultural contexts, especially in North America (Glazier, 1997). Thousands of centers and groups are appearing, and “Buddhist meditation centers, social justice movements, eco-Buddhists, Buddhist Internet sites, and university courses in Buddhism are flourishing” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 285). The World’s Parliament of Religions meeting in Chicago in 1893 is considered as the first appearance of Buddhism in North America (Goldberg, 2006) while scholars and academic programs have been playing an important role of spreading Buddhism in America (Reat, 1994). There has been a dramatic increase of Buddhist communities in America since the change of the U.S. immigration laws 1965, and this growth has resulted in many people visiting Buddhist meditation centers (Prebish, 1999). In fact, the population of Buddhists has increased from 0.2% (1990) to 0.5% (2001) in the U.S. (Eller, 2007). Many Americans who practice Buddhist meditation are not included because some of them consider Buddhism as their lifestyle or spiritual path, not a religion.

Americans became more interested in the practice of meditation from the efforts of Japanese Zen missionaries (Layman, 1978). In the 1970s, Zen became very popular, and “Buddhism appears to offer a viable alternative to Christianity and Judaism in America” (Layman, 1978, p. 31). Particularly, “hippies, intellectuals, students, and professionals” were attracted to learn about the frugal life style (Layman, p. 31).
Buddhism in the West may be divided to four forms: Chinese, Japanese, Theravada, and Tibetan Buddhism (Reat, 1994). Among them, Japanese Zen has been the most popular in American society. Interestingly, “Japanese art, architecture, interior decorating and landscaping, all of which are recognized in Japan as aspects of Zen training” (Reat, p. 287). In fact, Zen practice developed from the Chinese Chan meditation (Reat).

Whereas Zen is the most popular form among Americans, Tibetan Buddhism also has become popular, possibly due to the influence of the Dalai Lama, and has been transformed from “a remote fantasy into a readily accessible alternative” (Reat, 1994, p. 291). “Western fascination with Tibet dates back at least to the time of Marco Polo, who reported upon the isolated mountain kingdom in his famous thirteenth-century travelogue. An entire popular mythology developed around the Utopian land of Shangrila, presumed to be located in Tibet” (Reat, 1994, p. 290).

**Mindfulness**

The term of “mindfulness” is often used for meditation because “meditation” can intimidate Americans who are not familiar with it. Mindfulness is often considered an awareness and “liberating the mind”—realization of impermanence, suffering, and the non-existence of self (Layman, 1978). The true value of a human being is determined by “the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 236). Kabat-Zinn (1994) also stated that mindfulness is a practice for examining who we are, and cultivating the appreciation of each moment that we live. As such, “mindfulness has little to do with religion” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 6).

Meditation helps us wake up from this sleep of automaticity and unconsciousness...to live our lives with access to the full spectrum of our conscious and unconscious possibilities.
Sages, yogis, and Zen masters have been exploring this territory systematically for thousands of years...they have learned something which may now be profoundly beneficial in the West to counterbalance our cultural orientation toward controlling and subduing nature rather than honoring that we are an intimate part of it. This collective experience suggests that by investigating inwardly our own nature as beings and, particularly, the nature of our own minds through careful and systematic self-observation, we may be able to live lives of greater satisfaction, harmony, and wisdom. It also offers a view of the world which is complementary to the predominantly reductionist and materialistic one currently dominating Western thought and institutions (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4).

Kabat-Zinn (1994) wrote that “a diminished awareness of the present moment inevitably creates other problems for us well through our unconscious and automatic actions and behaviors, often driven by deep seated fears and insecurities. These problems tend to build over time...eventually leave us feeling stuck...we may lose confidence in our ability to redirect our energies in ways that would lead to greater satisfaction and happiness, perhaps even to greater health” (p. 5). For example, “when we commit ourselves to paying attention in an open way, without falling prey to our own likes and dislikes, opinions and prejudices, projections and expectations, new possibilities open up and we have a chance to free ourselves from the straitjacket of unconsciousness” (p. 6). Therefore, mindfulness is “a way to take charge of the direction and quality of our own lives, including our relationships within the family, our relationship to work and to the larger world…and most fundamentally, our relationship with ourself as a person” (p. 5).

People...tell me that their time in the stress reduction clinic was the most spiritual experience...they feel that way because it is coming directly out of their own experience with the meditation practice, and not from some theory or ideology or belief system...they are trying to put words to an inward experience which is ultimately beyond labels...whatever their experience or insight was, it will continue for them, that will take root, stay alive, grow (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 264).
Meditation and Health Improvement

Meditation has been used for health improvement rather than just religious practice. For centuries, people in the East have practiced various forms of meditation for improving physical and psychological health (Woolfolk, 1975). Similarly, in the West, meditation has been used as therapy and its use has been increasing due to its effectiveness, for example, in reducing blood pressure and helping better attention abilities. In fact, there are some similarities among meditation methods and Western therapeutic forms (Woolfolk, 1975). Various meditation practices like Yoga, Zen, and other esoteric disciplines all help people “relax” (Woolfolk, 1975). Kabat-Zinn (1984) also wrote that meditative practices like Zen and Yoga have been used as therapy, especially for self-regulation management. Similarly, Shapiro and Giber (1978) found that meditation can allow people to enhance self-regulation strategy. For example, people have chosen many meditation techniques for relaxing without getting involved in them as religious activity (Corby et al, 1978). As such, meditation technique does not require individuals to be religious as long as they are committed for their own therapeutic purpose.

Accordingly, several studies have suggested that meditation is related to psychological health, which is connected with “an integration of a harmonious integration of an individual’s self with other individuals, autonomy, creativity, and a unifying philosophy of life” (Vegors, 1999, p. 19), and meditation has been shown “to increase these qualities in individuals” (Vegors, 1999, p. 19). The qualities of psychological health were “much higher in long-term or advanced practitioners” (Vegors, 1999, p. 20). Therefore, the outcomes of meditation have shown great psychological health, e.g., stress reduction and negative emotion management, and physiological health, e.g., relaxation and intellectual development. However, psychological and physiological health are closely related.
In fact, “the lifetime prevalence of anxiety of disorders in the United States is estimated to be between 15% and 20%” (Miller et al., 1995, p. 192). Therefore, there is a need for effective and cost-reducing interventions to replace or augment the traditional ones, which often are time-consuming and expensive (Miller et al., 1995). As a consequence, meditation has been recommended as a method for reducing anxiety (Miller et al., 1995). For example, “as an adjunct to psychotherapy, meditation has been employed with neurotic populations and with inpatient groups classified as psychotic” (Woolfolk, 1975, p. 1326). Additionally, meditation has been found to lower anxiety, decrease drug abuse, and gain self-actualization (Woolfolk) and regular practices can “lead to improvement in bronchial asthma and decreased systolic blood pressure in hypertensive patients” (Woolfolk, p. 1326). As such, meditation has gained attention in scientific research on outcomes primarily focused on psychological health/benefits like stress reduction, emotion management, physiological benefits such as reducing blood pressure, and other therapeutic functions.

EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF MEDITATION

Stress Reduction

Research discussed and demonstrated the experiences and outcomes of meditation as (1) stress reduction (2) emotion management (3) physiological health/quality of life.

Kabat-Zinn et al. (1992; 1995) conducted research on the effectiveness of stress coping and other treatment of Buddhist meditation over the past several decades. They found that meditation effectively helped the patients reduce depression, stress and anxiety. They reported that people who meditate recover from mental and physical illness faster than people who don’t meditate. People who meditate recovered more quickly from negative life events, too. They also
acknowledged that the meditation is a useful cure because it is “cost-effective”. One session can have about 30 patients at the same time. Even after the treatment, people can continue to do it at home or elsewhere for a long-term. It is not only alleviating depression and stress, but also making people more “insightful” about life.

In Kabat-Zinn’s (1984) study, ninety chronic pain patients practiced mindfulness in a “Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program” for 10 weeks. He found statistically significant reductions in “present-moment pain, negative body image, inhibition of activity by pain, symptoms, mood disturbance, and psychological symptomatology, including anxiety and depression” (p 163). He also reported that “pain-related drug utilization decreased and activity levels and feelings of self-esteem increased” (p. 163). According to the author, “a comparison group of pain patients did not show significant improvement on these measures after traditional treatment protocols,” and “the majority of subjects reported continued high compliance with the meditation practice as part of their daily lives” (p. 163).

Additionally, Johnson et al (2009) reported that meditation may reduce negative psychological symptoms such as “diminished pleasure,” “diminished motivation,” and “little interest or desire for interpersonal relationships” with “psychological recovery such as hope and purpose in life” (p. 499). They indicated that “diminished interest in relationships, motivation, and pleasure are important deficits as they are related to an individual’s quality of life” (Johnson et al, 2009, p. 508). There is a need for psychological treatment improving those, and meditation can “improve individuals’ negative symptoms via the mechanism of positive emotions” (Johnson et al, 2009, p. 508).

Through meditation practices, including Zen and Yoga, people can achieve a deep physiological relaxation state (Alexander et al., 1993). Meditation practitioners showed “more
relaxed physiological functioning, a greater reduction anxiety, and reduced tension on the job” (Alexander et al., 1993, p. 21). Also, meditation can help people reduce anxiety, and release from negative emotions, as the breathing methods encourage the physical systems to relax, as well as to reduce mental activities (Layman, 1978).

Similarly, Vegors (1999) also wrote that healthy individuals are “aware of their own individual feelings and beliefs, and live these in their lives, rather than solely relying on the environment to tell them how to think and act” (p. 21). It appears that meditation helps people develop greater confidence in themselves so they don’t have to think too much of other people’s negative comments, or get affected by higher expectations from the society.

In addition, “a high percentage of Americans who become interested in Buddhism are drawn to it because of their hope for peace of mind and relief from anxiety, and most who stay with it feel that they have attained those objectives” (Layman, 1978, p. 201). They were able to mitigate anxiety through “plenty of outdoor exercise, abstention from alcohol and tobacco, a well-balanced diet, and regular hours of work and rest combine to produce a regimen which contributes to organic health” (Layman, 1978, p. 202). Thus, meditation has contributed people for psychological health by generating positive emotions, confidence and inner strength, and by decreasing self-consciousness.

**Emotion Management**

Many scientists have found that meditation helps with managing emotions. Emotion management is important because “extreme emotional disturbances can adversely affect us,” (Sapolsky, 2004, p. 3) and many diseases can be caused or made far worse by stress. The stress reduction center at University of Massachusetts found that while people practice mindfulness
meditation, the brain effectively stimulates positive emotions like compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Ekman (2007) also discussed the Buddhist view of emotions, as when having awareness by watching themselves, people have more control over their emotions. In fact, “the Buddhists talk about recognizing the spark (that arises to initiate an emotion) before the flame (by which they mean the emotional behavior that enacts the emotion)” (Ekman, 2007, p. 238). Ekman (2007) went on to say that “we would have even more choice if we were able to become aware of the automatic appraisal as it is happening, and modify or cancel it at will” (p. 74). He also mentioned that Henry Wyner, who is a psychiatrist and Buddhist thinker, developed the idea of “the difference between the stream of consciousness and what he called the watcher, ‘the awareness that watches and responds to the meanings that appear in the stream of consciousness’” (Ekman, p. 74). He concluded if we become aware that an emotion begins to drive our behavior, we can consciously choose the most “constructive” reaction to the situation. Ekman’s notion of Buddhist emotion may help a lot of people control their negative emotion so that they have less stress from external factors.

Moreover, Fredrickson et al. (2008) indicate that meditation allows individuals to enhance opportunities for generating positive emotions (Fredrickson et al., 2008). People can increase their attention, positive relations with themselves and others, and health, decrease their self-consciousness, as they meditate more and regularly (Fredrickson et al., 2008). As a result, they become more satisfied with their lives and change their approach toward life to more positive ways (Fredrickson et al., 2008).
Physiological Health

Physiological and emotional/mental health are strongly related (Sapolsky, 2004). When people worry about stressful things that they cannot control, they tend to activate the stress response that causes stress-related diseases (Sapolsky, 2004). Therefore, regulating the mind and reducing stress is important for improving physiological health. Meditation may be one of the methods to better deal with this due to its positive effect on emotional well-being and mental health. People can experience deep relaxation, which is considered as a primary outcome of meditation, with lowering autonomic nervous system arousal (Corby et al., 1978). Additionally, meditation may allow individuals to disengage hyper-reactive responses toward stressors, and encourage natural physiological healing; it also helps them reduce anxiety, anger, and depression (Nidich et al., 2009).

One of the most well-known systematic interventions based on meditation methods is the mindfulness-based stress reduction program. For example, it helped people alleviate physical and psychiatric disorders, improve vitality, and enhance the sense of being in the present (Grossman, 2004). The mindfulness–based stress reduction program also helped cancer patients decrease mood disturbance (depression, anxiety, anger, and confusion) and stress, and gain more vigor; it was effective for cancer patients with a variety of diagnoses, stages of illness, educational background, and ages (Carlson et al., 2001; Speca et al., 2000). The patients also experienced less emotional irritability, cognitive disorganization, and stress through the program (Speca et al., 2000). In addition, the program caused individuals to better deal with their social anxiety disorder and to improve their functionality (Koszycki, 2007). A short-term (8-week) stress management program based on mindfulness-based stress reduction was also effective in
health-care professionals on increasing self-compassion and quality of life as well as reducing stress (Shapiro et al., 2005).

Some research also showed effects on other brain functions. A study demonstrated that meditators displayed higher abilities on “figural originality,” “flexibility,” and “verbal fluency” (Cranson et al, 1991). Meditators had significantly “higher growth of intelligence during their university years than a matched group of students at a major American university” (Cranson et al, 1991, p. 21). Therefore, people may engage in meditation because of those kinds of practical benefits.

- Proficient and Inexperienced Meditators

Several psychologists found different effects of meditation between proficient and inexperienced meditators (e.g., Corby et al., 1978; Herron, 1993; Orme-Johnson, 1973; Vegors, 1999). Some showed that long-term meditators tend to maintain their physical health at a high level. For example, Vegors (1999) reported that “high levels of emotional health correspond to high levels of physical health. Many of the 25-year meditators are in their 40s or 50s…long-term meditators were on average 12 years younger than their biological age on tests of abilities such as near-point vision, reaction time, and cognitive performance” (p. 20). Similarly, long-term meditators reported much less hospital utilization than non-meditators (Orme-Johnson, 1973), long-term meditators largely decreased the use of medical expenditures (Herron, 1993), and “meditators scored much higher on tests of healthy social relationship” (Guttman, 1996, p. 20).

Interestingly, during meditation, experienced meditators displayed increased autonomic “activation” while inexperienced meditators displayed autonomic “relaxation” (Corby et al.,
1978). It is possible to assume that inexperienced meditators look for relaxation through the meditation experience, while experienced meditators try to practice controlling their minds at a deeper level and actively managing their negative emotions (or even transferring destructive emotions to constructive ones). Proficient meditators “decreased autonomic orienting to external stimulation,” (Corby et al., 1978, p. 571) similar to the experience of the Yogic ecstatic state of intense concentration: “The decreased orienting to external stimuli reflects the inward focus of attention” (Corby et al., 1978, p. 571). Similarly, “some Yoga states have found to be associated with electrocortical excitation and increases in oxygen consumption” (Woolfolk, 1975, p. 1332). As such, “the activation appears to be associated with proficiency rather than the techniques per se since the inexperienced control subjects tended to relax rather than become activated” (Corby et al., 1978, p. 571). They suggest that “meditation may give access to a variety of physiological states, depending on the proficiency” (Corby et al., 1978, p. 571). These findings also tend “to discount the current assumption that meditation is indistinguishable from states of deep relaxation,” (p. 571). In short, numerous studies noted that meditation has reliable effects on psychological and physiological health (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Miller et al., 1995).

WHAT IS LEISURE?

Studies of leisure have been based on Greek philosophers’ thoughts about leisure for many years (Sylvester, 1999). To Plato, “leisure was required to respond to this paramount calling, relieving the individual from the necessity to labor for a livelihood…allowing them to live ‘the truth of life of happiness of gods and men’” (Sylvester, 1999, p. 19). To Aristotle, “leisure—freedom from the necessity to labor for a living—was a condition of the good life” (p. 20). Also, he thought that “leisure is necessary for the development for excellence and the
performance of political duties” (Sylvester, 1999, p. 21). As such, the aristocratic Greek philosophers’ definitions of leisure are rather philosophical.

Contemporary ideas of leisure include (1) free time, (2) certain kinds of activities, or (3) a state of mind. In terms of free time, leisure is considered as an activity by free choice (Godbey, 2008) or time free from obligations (Russell, 2001). For activities, leisure refers to recreational pursuits like sports, games, arts, travel, and dance (Russell, 2001).

Leisure also can be defined as a state of mind/existence tied to spiritual celebration or a mood of contemplation (Godbey, 2008). In this sense, leisure is like a way of life, a philosophy, or a psychological condition (Russell, 2001). Pieper (1963) explained that leisure is an active celebration in life, and a way of gaining opportunities for “self-expression,” “self-achievement,” and “self-actualization” (Russell, 2001). This is somewhat different from definitions of leisure in dictionaries that often define leisure as freedom from work or duty, resting, or enjoying hobbies or sports. These definitions do not deal with state of mind or spiritual experience.

Contemporary definitions of leisure often involve social psychological concepts such as intrinsic motivation, self-determination, identity formation, and self-expression (Parr, 2006). Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) “flow” is often discussed as a major leisure concept. He defined flow as an experience of optimal fulfillment and explained that we can exceed our limitations through flow especially during the spiritual practice (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) also found that individuals can experience this flow state when they are accomplishing something worthwhile with a voluntary effort, and intensely concentrating on an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Through this experience, individuals tend to gain a sense of control, and to lose self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Individuals can also experience “being in a zone of present-centered competence, no longer attending to self
or extraneous factors such as time or the surrounding environment. But the matching of challenges and skills, at a fairly high level for the individual is necessary to achieve this experience” (Kleiber et al., 2011, p. 109). Interestingly, if people engage in too relaxing and passive activities regularly, they will feel less challenging enough, thus they will not likely experience the flow state (Kleiber et al., 2011).

As such, individuals may experience flow more often in leisure than work or other obligated activities since leisure allows freedom to control activities and to match skills and challenges (Kleiber et al., 2011). However, when work is enjoyable, it can be leisure too, due to its freedom of choice and self-direction as well as its enjoyment (Kleiber et al., 2011). Thus, individuals can experience flow when they are enjoying what they are doing, and when they are feeling like being in the present moment (Csikszentmihalyi & Kleiber, 1991).

In fact, there are critiques about current definitions and concepts of leisure. For example, leisure indicates “specific historical biases and values related to participation, class, and culture” (Fox & Klaiber, 2006, p. 427). Also, “A more complex and contested history moves the debate about the definition and classification of ‘leisure’…across dominant, alternative, and resistant conceptions within and across human groupings (i.e., culture, nations, and ethnicity) as well as an exploration of who is developing and promoting what definitions and for what purposes” (p. 427). Another problem with definitions of leisure is that they are generally constructed from a “top-down” perspective (Chick, personal communication, 2010). That is, definitions of leisure are determined by “experts” rather than those who are experiencing leisure on a day-to-day basis. Therefore there is a need for ethnographic understanding of both the leisure experience and the outcomes of leisure.
EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF LEISURE

The current study focuses on (1) stress reduction (2) mood enhancement (3) quality of life. Leisure scientists have connected leisure to a healthy lifestyle, which can alleviate stress and depression, promote physical health, contribute to overall well-being, and enhance quality of life (Brown, 1991; Crompton & Iso-Ahola, 1994; Glass et al., 1999; Iso-Ahola & Bisvert, 1995; Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004; Iwasaki, 2003; Iwasaki, 2007; Iwasaki, Mactavish, & MacKay, 2005; Iwasaki, Mannell, Smale, & Butcher, 2005; Iwasaki, Zuzanek, & Mannell, 2001; Ho, 1996; Mannell, 2007).

Reducing Stress

Most health experts believe that stress is the biggest cause of health problems in America (Godbey, 2003), as it can result negative effects on physical and mental health (Brown & Harris, 1978; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1981). Stress can make people sick, as their thoughts influence health (Sapolsky, 2004), and coping resources can change the individuals’ responses toward stressful situations (Kobasa et al., 1982). Individuals’ coping resources can reduce the impacts of stress, whether due to major life events such as divorce, or minor everyday occurrences like being in traffic, and arguments with other people (Caltabiano, 1994). Enjoyable and meaningful leisure also promotes health and life quality (Iwasaki, 2003; 2010). For example, yoga, with values of the harmony among body, mind, and spirit, can reduce stress effectively (Iwasaki, 2010). Similarly, people who participate frequently in cultural and passive leisure activities experience less stress (Caltabiano, 1995). Iwasaki (2010) indicates that leisure helps people reduce stress with various forms like “relaxing or recuperating leisure, leisure-time physical activity, outdoor recreation, health tourism, social leisure, spiritual leisure, cultural
dancing, pet ownership, leisure ‘palliative’ coping for taking a break/having a time-out, as well as more systematic TR practices” (p. 151).

Social leisure can alleviate perceived stress (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993) as good companionship often can help people get through daily frustrations (Rook, 1987) and freely chosen social forms of leisure may be effective in reducing stress (Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991). Therefore, individuals may seek social leisure activities for “informal disclosure of problems, information on alternative ways of looking at a problem and ways of coping with a stressful situation” (Caltabiano, 1994, p. 28). People can also feel relief from stressors when they have a strong belief that social support is available for them (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993).

One of the unique contributions of leisure as a coping strategy is gaining a sense of self-control. People have healthier lives when they feel that they have a higher sense of control (Haidt & Rodin, 1999). As such, stress levels are related to feelings of control, and it even affects the immune system (Godbey, 2003). People can reduce stress from creating an illusion to control it, as optimistic attitudes allow them to feel more positive (Godbey, 2003). As a consequence, as a “free-time, non-obligatory” behavior, leisure may provide opportunities for people to feel empowered (Iwasaki, 2003), and better deal with daily difficulties (Kleiber et al., 2002). Therefore, various forms of leisure can help individuals develop a sense of control in their lives (Iwasaki, 2010; Kleiber et al., 2011), and contribute to stress reduction by providing health-promoting environments (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993).

**Spiritual Health**

Additionally, some leisure scholars have begun to relate leisure to spiritual well-being, spiritual health, and the concept of health in a holistic view of life (Heintzman, 2002). Spiritual
health means “...an elementalistic dimension of holistic health where it needs to be kept in balance with other dimensions of health (physical, mental, emotional, social), as well as an integrative dimension of health where optimal wellness is dependent on spiritual health occurring within each of the other health dimensions” (Heintzman & Coleman, 2010, p. 72). Also, spiritual well-being is defined as “a high level of faith, hope, and commitment in relation to a well-defined worldview or belief system that provides a sense of meaning and purpose to existence in general, and that offers an ethical path to personal fulfillment which includes connectedness with self, others, and a higher power or larger reality” (Hawks, 1994, p. 6).

Spiritual benefits of leisure includes opportunities for spiritual expression (McDonald & Schreyer, 1991); contemplation, reflection, and personal development (Heintzman, 2009); connectedness with self and others (Barnett & Weber, 2009). They also include “reconnecting or restoring our sense of relatedness with our fundamental ground of being” (Dustin, 1994, p. 231).

Among leisure motivations, higher levels of leisure motivations are related to spirituality or spiritual wellbeing, stimulus avoidance (being away from everyday responsibilities/burden) (Heintzman, 2002), and intellectual motives (e.g., learning about different cultures) (Heintzman & Mannell, 1999). Similarly, participating in personal development activities is “the best predictor of spiritual well-being, followed by stimulus-avoidance motivation and frequency of engaging in leisure in one’s own home” (Heintzman & Coleman, 2010, p. 73). Personal development activities include reading for personal growth; spiritual and cultural activities such as Tai-chi and yoga; nature-based recreation activities (Heintzman & Mannell, 1999). People also feel higher levels of satisfaction with the aesthetic-environmental aspects of leisure and perceived them as spiritual wellness (Ragheb, 1993); “solitary leisure” and spiritual well-being
are also strongly related (Heintznan & Mannell, 1999). Additionally, spiritual leisure activities like spiritual reading can help people cope with stress. For example, native Americans in a western Canadian city engage in their own cultural leisure to feel empowered and spiritually cope with stress from other cultural difference-related stressors such as racism (Iwasaki et al., 2006). Moreover, nature-based recreation activities can provide spiritual benefits to people because they can have moments to contemplate, think of who they are, and find their true-self by seeing nature as holistic, being in a quiet and solitude place, and getting away from routine (Heintzman, 2002; Heintzman & Coleman, 2010).

Accordingly, leisure may provide a space and time for self-actualization (Heitzman, 2000; 2009). Many American people seek something more to achieve than the basic needs in life, such as self-actualization (Neulinger, 1981). This can be caused by a higher quality of life, or “reflects a revolt against materialism or the influx of some other spiritual revival movement” (Neulinger, 1981, p. 9). Maslow saw self-actualization as sparked by “peak experiences,” or moments of one’s “greatest maturity, individuation, fulfillment—healthiest moments” (Csikszenmihalyi & Kleiber, p. 94). He also emphasized that to achieve self-actualization, “involvement in an activity must be deep, sustained, and disciplined to contribute to an emerging sense of self” (Csikszenmihalyi & Kleiber, p. 94). In this sense, the benefits of leisure include opportunities for a sense of accomplishment and development of self-esteem as well as relaxation or pleasure (Csikszenmihalyi & Kleiber, 1992). On the other hand, according to Marxist critics, the notion of leisure as self-actualization is “simply a clever propaganda move in the eternal class struggle” (Csikszenmihalyi & Kleiber, 1992, p. 94).
Mood Enhancement

Leisure can help individuals enhance positive mood, and reduce negative mood (Caltabiano, 1994; Iwasaki, 2003; Kanner et al., 1981; Orsega-Smith et al., 2004; Stone, 1987). Individuals can regulate moods through enjoyable leisure as it helps them interpret negative experiences in positive ways (Carver et al., 1989). For example, engaging in nature-based recreation can alleviate individuals to enhance moods and reduce stress (Hull & Michael, 1995). Also, individuals may improve their moods through a short moment/form of leisure such as exercise during a lunch break, casual conversation with co-workers or friends, or taking a short walk (Hull & Michael, 1995). In addition, they can improve positive mood through the flow experience while engaging in enjoyable leisure activities (Caltabiano, 1994).

One of the most adaptive coping strategies is mood enhancement by positive ways of interpreting situations and experiences (Aldwin, 1994; Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1992; Folkman, et al., 1997; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988), and by gaining a sense of control over in their lives with optimism (Kleiber et al., 2011). Individuals can even interpret stressors as new opportunities for their personal development and better deal with the stressors through leisure (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992). Thus, relaxing, enjoyable and meaningful leisure may allow individuals to have a moment to breathe deeply and just enjoy the activities, which often contributes to developing hopefulness (Kleiber et al., 2002; 2011). Similarly, Reyes-García et al (2009) found that social, but not solitary, leisure such as hanging out with family, having a beer with friends, and having guests, contributes to positive subjective well-being among the Tsiman’, a hunter-farmer group in the Bolivian Amazon. They also reported that material good did not appear as an important source of positive subjective well-being, but socializing activities were indicated as more important sources.
Quality of Life

Increasingly, leisure scientists have paid more attention to quality of life relating to leisure (Godbey et al., 2005). Quality of life is a concept associated with mental and physical health. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as “individuals’ perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns.” It includes concern with “physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment” (WHOQOL Group, 1995, p. 1405).

Leisure can be a contributor to perceived quality of life (Baker & Palmer 2006; Iwasaki 2007; Lloyd & Auld 2002). Having leisure for better quality of life is important for modern (or urban) Americans because they often tend to feel rushed; “they never live in the moment” (Godbey, 2003, p. 74). For example:

One can never do enough in our time famine culture. Things can never happen fast enough. Organizations can never be efficient enough. The frantic state of mind produced by such a style of life makes us permanently anxious, perpetually stressed…our society does not widely admire patience. We favor short-term profits, brief conversations, sound bites, and microwave ovens. The ‘bottom line’ mentality is evident in our personal relationships, our businesses, even in our celebrations (Godbey, p. 74).

Thus, during leisure, “many Americans never experience anything fully…true leisure is an idea not only forgotten in our society, but also no longer even understood” (Godbey, 2003, p. 75).

This can be more likely to happen among middle or upper-class Americans, with higher levels of education, as they tend to have a higher “sense of the necessary” and “expectations” (Godbey, 2003, p. 78) such as “what constitutes success, good looks, a good marriage or even a
good vacation”; “what should be done and how quickly it can be accomplished” (p.78). They might feel more stress from the gap between these expectations and goals and reality (Godbey, 2003). Thus, it is possible to argue that people can be relieved from this kind of stress through leisure by adjusting their thoughts with more relaxed mind and attitude towards their lives.

- Lifestyle and health

Leisure and recreation activities have recognized as health-related (e.g., Neulinger, 1981) since they are closely related to individuals’ physical condition. For example, physical fitness helps individuals increase oxygen consumption and reduce their heart rate (Froelicher & Froelicher, 1991). Also, physical condition and health affect individuals’ mental and psychological well-being (Neulinger, 1981). As a consequence, a leisurely lifestyle with a relaxed attitude and mind has been encouraged for healthier lifestyle (Neulinger, 1981). This especially applies to people who feel always in hurry, and who have never enough time, because they are more likely to get heart disease (e.g., Godbey, 2003; Neulinger, 1981). Therefore, truly relaxing leisure or attitude and having a sense of control in their lives are important for Americans to improve quality of life and health.

Addressing the relationships between lifestyle and health, Dressler (1980), an anthropologist, stated that social relationships, especially voluntary social memberships, have a direct effect on blood pressure, and blood pressures are higher when social supports are low. Dressler (2005) suggested that “blood pressure differences within a community are in part a function of the degree to which individuals are able to approximate in their own behaviors those prototypical behaviors that are encoded in widely shared cultural models. This cultural dimension of individual behavior is referred to as ‘cultural consonance’” (p. 527). Dressler
(2009) defines cultural consonance as “the degree to which individuals approximate, in their own beliefs and behaviors, the prototypes for those beliefs and behaviors encoded in cultural models” (p. 1). Dressler (2005) also found that “individuals who had higher cultural consonance in the domains of lifestyle, which he defined as material possessions and leisure activities, and social support had lower blood pressure” (p. 527). Also, cultural consonance in lifestyle and social support are related to health status (Dressler, 2000); social status in society can influence health (Godbey, 2008; Sapolsky, 2004).

Dressler (1980; 1990) further discussed that people experience “life-style stress” when they cannot afford their preferred life-style due to lack of the economic ability. For example, in lesser-developed countries, individuals are increasingly exposed to American life-styles by mass media and international traveling, but they feel more pressure to achieve the material and social characteristics of that life style. Additionally, Dressler (1990) argued that lifestyle can be an indicator of social status as it shows individuals’ material well-being and how much they adopt culturally valued behaviors. He further reported that lifestyle incongruity, that is, the inability to behave in accordance with a culturally preferred lifestyle, results in higher blood pressure.

Additionally, “individuals with the highest blood pressure are those persons under high stress, but who also show little evidence of coping” (Dressler, 1980, p. 160). Individuals with active coping efforts are more effective at dealing with stress, and this alleviates their reaction to stressors, too (Scott & Howard, 1970). Managing psychological reactions by active coping may result better health status (Cassel, 1970). Also, the belief that one can manage stressful situations may also contribute to health, as “this belief and the extent to which it enhances self-esteem would help to insulate the individual from anxiety and extreme stress reactions” (Dressler, 1980, p. 165).
Finally, another anthropologist, Lurie (1999) also argues that “promotion of leisure activities to alleviate workplace stress and organizational wellness programs have developed with management efforts to improve work design and enhance productivity,” (p. 158) and demonstrated the benefits of leisure in helping workplace stress.

In a nutshell, meditation may help individuals reduce stress, anxiety and depression (Shapiro et al., 2005). Similarly, leisure can reduce stress, help people cope with stress, enhance positive moods, and contribute to overall health and well-being (Iwasaki, 2010; Mannell, 2007; Orsega-Smith et al., 2004). Therefore, it appears as though meditation and leisure may have similar consequences.

SIMILAR OUTCOMES BETWEEN MEDITATION AND LEISURE

Aristotle said that contemplation is “one of the two forms of pure leisure (the other being music)” (Neulinger, 1981, p. 7). There are a growing number of Americans who engage in eastern religions, yoga, and meditation for their leisure or new life style in order to calm the tensions in their lives (Neulinger, 1981). As such, leisure and meditation are similar in that many appear to practice meditation as a form of leisure.

The most frequently reported similar experiences outcomes between meditation and leisure are stress relief, emotion management, and mood improvement.

Stress Reduction

Meditation and leisure both can help people reduce stress. Leisure has been recognized as an effective stress coping strategy (Iwasaki, 2000; Mannell, 2001) including benefits of spirituality through holistic or nature-based leisure activities. Similarly, psychologists
demonstrate that the outcomes of meditation are reducing stress, managing emotions, and contributing to health (Ekman, 2007; Frerickson, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 1994), as well as outcomes unrelated to stress reduction, such as therapy, treatment of memory loss, and mental training.

- Perceived Freedom

Leisure also involves “perceived freedom” and “an internal locus of control” (Godbey, 2008), and these are similar to goals for practicing meditation such as free-mind, and control of emotions. For example, meditation can be similar to leisure as a state of mind or experience, as it involves or even requires high levels of perceived freedom and an internal locus of control. Contemplation, as an aspect of both meditation and leisure, causes people to have a distance and space from everyday stressors and responsibilities, and allows them to have a higher level of freedom.

- Self-actualization and Spirituality

Self-actualization can be a shared goal between leisure and meditation, as spirituality has become an important motivator for people to spend their free time (Schultz, 2001). Therefore, when people pursue self-actualization in their leisure, a meditation center may provide the space and time for the opportunity. This is linked to the concepts of leisure as a state of mind, spiritual celebration, an unhurried tranquil statement, and mood of contemplation (Godbey, 2008).

- Proficiency and Relaxation

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) found that individuals lose track of time and awareness of themselves and feel more relaxed when challenges match their skills during leisure activities.
However, if their leisure regularly involves relaxing and passive activities, they will not likely experience flow because the activities do not require high levels of skill and people do not feel challenged enough (Kleiber et al., 2011). Thus, experiencing flow and the unique characteristics of relaxation (e.g., being in the present moment; forgetting about the outside surroundings) through the flow state requires a certain level of achievement or proficiency for the activity.

The certain level of achievement or proficiency also applies to different experiences and outcomes of meditation practice. For example, proficient meditators experience increased autonomic activation while inexperienced ones show autonomic relaxation through their meditation practice (Corby et al., 1978). Proficient meditators “decreased autonomic orienting to external stimulation,” (Corby et al., 1978, p. 571) and “the decreased orienting to external stimuli reflects the inward focus of attention” (Corby et al, 1978, p. 571). Therefore, “the activation appears to be associated with proficiency rather than the techniques per se since the inexperienced control subjects tended to relax rather than become activated” (Corby et al, 1978, p. 571). Thus, proficient meditators focus more on activating some brain function and being able to control themselves including emotions and minds, while inexperienced meditators tend to try to just relax during their meditation practice.

Thus, people can experience flow states during both leisure and meditation, losing track of time and concentration per se. Skill level and proficiency are involved to achieve this experience; it is necessary that challenges match participants’ skills at a fairly high level to achieve this experience. However, in flow, people lose awareness of themselves, whereas self-awareness is one of the goals of meditation. If people regularly engage in relaxing and passive activities, these choices will not likely promote flow.
Emotion Management

Meditation and leisure may both help with managing emotions. While people practice meditation, the brain effectively stimulates positive emotions like compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Also, through meditation practice, people gain more control over their emotions with awareness by watching themselves (Ekman, 2007). Similarly, leisure can enhance individuals’ positive moods, and reduce negative moods (Caltabiano, 1994; Iwasaki, 2003; Kanner et al., 1981; Orsega-Smith et al., 2004; Stone, 1987). Individuals can improve their moods through leisure by interpreting stressful situations or experiences in positive ways (Carver et al., 1989). Also, even a short moment/form of leisure may help individuals regulate their moods (Hull & Michael, 1995).

DIFFERENT OUTCOMES BETWEEN MEDITATION AND LEISURE

There are different outcomes between leisure and meditation. The primary difference is that the effects of meditation last longer than those of leisure which is often a more temporary solution for taking a break from stressors.

The effects of meditation tend to last longer including managing emotions/physiological benefits/developing intelligence while meditation and leisure share positive psychological effects like tension/stress reduction and anxiety alleviation. On one hand, leisure scholars suggest that experiencing leisure, or being away from difficult situations for a short-term period, allows people to avoid worrying. On the other hand, meditation is not about just avoiding the difficulties or negative situations, but accepting the difficulties, and working on them as new opportunities.
Leisure helps people alleviate physical symptomatology and improve psychological health (Caltabiano, 1988; Langer & Roden, 1976), because it allows them to have opportunities for a break from negative life events or an “escape” (Caltabiano, 1994; Iso-Ahola, 1990; Iwasaki, 2003) and reduce the impact of stress (Kleiber et al., 2011). Accordingly, leisure can help people forget about stressful life events. For example, “by keeping the mind busy, people may temporarily avoid or escape the stress of these events” (Kleiber et al., 2011, p. 390). Similarly, this coping is “a form of a time-out from stressful everyday lives” (Iwasaki & Schneider, 2003, p. 110). Therefore, leisure can function as “a breather” from stress (Iwasaki, 2003). But, it may only have “short-term value,” without enabling them “to adjust more completely to the problem” (Kleiber et al., 2011, p. 390). In short, leisure can be a temporary solution for getting away from stressors (Folkman et al., 1997; Kleiber, 1999; Lazarus et al., 1980).

Research demonstrates that a prime motivation of leisure is the need for relaxation (Buchanan, 1983; Driver & Tocher, 1975) despite its short-term effect. However, individuals may also experience relaxation depending on what kinds of activities they are doing, as “leisure activities vary in the degree to which they are relaxing, individuals may be taking this into consideration in choosing activities for participation” (Caltabiano, 1994, p. 28). Moreover, some scholars pointed out that engaging in a leisure activity does not always have a positive effect, as some leisure can actually cause stress (Schneider & Hammitt, 1995a). For example, the presence of friends or co-workers may cause stress especially if the activity requires certain skills, when the individuals involved simply do not enjoy each others’ company (Caltabiano, 1994; Glover & Parry, 2008; Iwasaki et al., 2002; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000b), or when they engage in coerced leisure.
Moreover, the literature reveals that leisure requires less discipline than meditation and leisure has more activities for physical fitness. Also, meditation contributes to the development of compassionate emotions and brain change while leisure does not appear to have that kind of function. The following table summarizes the similarities and differences between leisure and meditation.

Table 1. Summary of Similarities and Differences Between Leisure and Meditation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Leisure</th>
<th>Meditation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Similar</strong></td>
<td>• Stress reduction</td>
<td>• Stress reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- sense of control</td>
<td>- reductions in anxiety and depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- stress-reduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- free-time, non-obligatory behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Spiritual Health (esp. solitary leisure)</td>
<td>• Self-actualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Flow</td>
<td>• Flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- concentration/clear goals/attention/being in a zone of present-centered competence/no longer attending to self or extraneous factors</td>
<td>• constructive way of spending free time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• constructive way of spending free time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mood enhancement</td>
<td>• Emotion management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- positive reframing</td>
<td>- changes the way people approach life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Quality of life</td>
<td>• Quality of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Different</strong></td>
<td>• Flow</td>
<td>• Intense concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- temporary solution from stressors</td>
<td>- However, self-awareness is one of the goals of meditation. Thus some qualities of flow during leisure are different from one element of meditation experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- social support is important for leisure coping strategy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Flow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- people lose awareness of themselves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- people regularly involve relaxing and passive activities, these choices will not likely promote the flow state</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• leisure requires less discipline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• promotes physical fitness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mental training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Physiological health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- reducing blood pressure/improving functionality (near-point vision, reaction time, and cognitive performance)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• the brain effectively stimulates emotions like compassion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• growth of intelligence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• improving figural originality,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• flexibility, and verbal fluency/retaining an image in visual memory/helping longer attention spans/treatment of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In short, leisure and meditation appear to have some similarities but also some
differences both in terms of the experiences and the outcomes. In addition, we must think of the
possibility of meditation as leisure since people can achieve some benefits of leisure through the
meditation experience. In order to gain some insight into these issues, I conducted three pilot
studies in Spring 2009, Spring 2010, and July 2010, and used information from a personal diary
in 2010, and my prior research (Master’s thesis) in 2008.
PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

-In-depth Interviews (Spring, 2009)

I did a pilot study with seven people in State College, PA for two weeks in February in 2009. The goal of the pilot study was to get a better understanding of meditation experiences in general, develop a conceptual framework, and develop insight into the best way to explore the constructs of interest. I felt that experienced Buddhists, beginner Buddhists and non-Buddhists may have different meanings of leisure. One experienced Buddhist said that “going to a temple, doing rituals, praying, and meditating are definitely leisure activities for me. When I go to a temple to do those activities, I feel very happy. I would call that pure happiness.” Another experienced Buddhist said, “I like to go to a temple because it’s always calm and relaxing. I never go because somebody told me to do so; I am truly self-motivated to go for my own good. I would call it my leisure because I choose to go.” A beginner Buddhist said, “I meditate and go to temples for self-actualization and contemplation. But these things are very hard to achieve if I don’t concentrate, so it can be hard work for me.” If inexperienced Buddhists define leisure differently, though, they could see these activities as leisure. Non-Buddhists said Buddhist temples and Buddhist statues are not religious to them, but they appreciate their architecture and the opportunity that they offer to learn about different cultures. Therefore, going to a Temple appears to be leisure for them.

-Participant Observation (Spring, 2010)

I did a second pilot study using observation and participant observation at “East West Crossings,” in State College, Pennsylvania, in the spring of 2010. I attended weekly meditation sessions on Sundays. Through the project I established rapport, which builds trust between a
researcher (me) and the participants. I experienced that as the participants saw me more often, they seemed to trust and bond with me more. Most important, people talked to me more frequently as time went by and some of them even invited me to have tea time outside of the regular group meetings. Also, informal conversations with them helped me to construct interview questions and adjust them based on their comments and responses.

I observed that people come before the meditation, or stay after meditation, to chat with other people and have tea or make new friends. While they are serious about learning Buddhism and meditation, their gatherings appeared leisure-like to me. Before and after the meditation rituals, the participants stayed for another hour or so, to chat and catch up. The owner of the East-West Crossings led the meditation group and offered tea for everyone after the meditation sessions. Among about twelve women, only three of them considered themselves Buddhists. This led me to consider questions like, “Are you Buddhist? If so, what is being Buddhist? If not, why don’t you consider yourself as a Buddhist?” I also attempted to understand what Buddhism means or what it is to be Buddhist for them. In addition, I planned to ask why they do these kinds of activities in their free time, and how and what outcomes of meditation are similar and different from outcomes of leisure activities.

Through the preliminary-participant observation, first of all, I was able to figure out some basic information about the people who are engaged in or interested in Buddhist meditation. The majority of participants who attended the Buddhist meditation sessions were women who are in their 50s and 60s, living in the local area.

This meditation group follows Tick Nat Han’s Buddhism writings. For example, meditating while sitting on chairs and walking meditation that are easy to do in everyday lives are from his books. According to Tick Nat Han, meditation is not about following the strict rules
but being able to meditate as a part of everyday life. Therefore, he created easy meditation methods like walking meditation. These meditation group women read his words out loud before meditating all together for beginning chanting. They then meditated while sitting on chairs and did walking meditation for an hour, instead of sitting of the floor in the traditional meditation pose.

After the meditation ritual, they stayed and had tea time, and sometimes they did activities like chanting, religious dancing or weekly prepared activities. Meditation ritual itself takes only one hour but tea time, chanting or other activities took another 2 hours or so. Participants seemed to enjoy the time there and just hang out, although they read and talk about Buddhism. Once a lady prepared the chanting and dancing sessions and said that “it is good for mindfulness, and it cleans up a mind!” An interesting thing was that at the end of meditation we bow to the Buddha statue and also bow to each other. When I go to Buddhist temples in Korea or when I went to Thai temples in Los Angeles, California, I never experienced bowing to other Buddhist people. I have only bowed to the Buddha statue and monks. I think this is a different ritual dynamic and worldview of American people—being equal and individual.

Consistent with the literature review of the spreading of Buddhism in America, one afternoon the participants talked about dumpster diving during teatime after meditation. They were concerned that Wal-Mart was going to throw away left over food products after a certain time of a day, and wanted to know when so that they would be able to pick up the food. They also wanted to help children who cannot afford food (a woman said, she was a healer in her past life in an area where people were dying from starvation. She always worries about people who don’t have food. And that’s why she wanted to help starving children because she believes that
it is her mission.) Therefore, the meditation group women were not only meditating but also gathering and wanting to help society.

-Informal Interviews (July, 2010)

In my pilot study, I asked informants, “What does it take to be a Buddhist?”

A (Korean): “Buddhists are people who follow or try to follow the principles of Buddhism.”

B (American): Saying “a Buddhist is someone who follows the teachings of the Buddha” brings up a contradiction... the Buddha taught that one must find one’s own way, so what would it mean to follow that advice? I think a lot of different people and schools of thought have made claims regarding ‘authentic’ Buddhism, and from my limited knowledge, it seems that ‘Buddhism’ has been defined by particular contexts more than by ideas attributed to the historical ‘Buddha’.

Originally, Buddhists were monks. They shaved their heads, refrained from eating meat, they were male, they renounced worldly possessions and followed the eightfold path to enlightenment. Later, anyone could become enlightened and one didn’t need to be a monk in order to pursue enlightenment. Even later, Zen came about as an “anti-Buddhism—pro-Buddha” approach to the teachings.

I remember sitting in the lobby of a small hotel in India with a few Americans and Australians one night. We were talking about faith and religion and I thoughtlessly spouted out “well I’m a Buddhist”. One of the Americans responded “you can’t be a Buddhist, look, you’re drinking a beer.”

What she said made sense. One doesn’t imagine Buddhists sitting around getting drunk. But I think that if one really looks at the teachings, the Buddha never taught us to be Buddhists! I really like drinking beer, but that’s only part of the reason I don’t see myself as a Buddhist.
Then again, I’m not all that interested in being a Buddhist, and I’m not sure that the Buddha was either. The “ist” only reflects membership with a group or identification with a set of predetermined ideas. I think the purpose of the teachings is to help us become Buddhas in specific situations. Buddhist or Buddhism is just a way of belonging to a group. So the only real answer I have to the question ‘what does it take to be a Buddhist’ is that anyone who decides he or she is a Buddhist must be a Buddhist.

C (American):

I’ve been asked questions similar to this one, and it’s by far one of the most difficult to answer, primarily because what constitutes as “Buddhist” seems to be primarily based on the practitioner’s subjectivity in regards to their practice. This seems to stem from one’s particular tradition, culture, and personality. For example, a Pure Land Buddhist from Japan may have a far different answer than a Theravada Buddhist from Sri Lanka.

I believe that what constitutes one as a Buddhist goes beyond heritage, rituals, and doctrinal differences. That which unites the Buddhist world is, in my opinion, impossible to summarize for those who have a genuine interest in the matter. One could explain for hours about the intricacies of the Buddha’s teachings on Nirvana, dukkha, meditation, compassion, etc. Nominally, a Buddhist would constitute an individual who has taken refuge in the Triple Gem, that is, someone who recognizes the Buddha, the Dharma (his teachings), and the Sangha (the community, particularly the monastic order) as holding the ultimate qualities by which one may reflect upon.

If I were to summarize all of that which the Buddha expounded throughout his years, I would have to say that all Buddhists recognize “wisdom” as the highest virtue. Although defined and venerated somewhat differently among schools, wisdom includes “Right View”, which is
what leads to the perfection of all other qualities in the Noble Eightfold Path, and eventually leads one to Enlightenment.

-Personal Diary (May 21st, 2010)

Today is Buddha’s birthday in Korea. I am aware that in Thailand, Buddha’s birthday is sometime in July. It’s a national holiday so our family went to a temple in a mountain about 30 minutes from our home. On the way we picked up our grandmother to join us. She lives alone and often is bored so she seemed very excited to go somewhere with us. She even came out half an hour earlier than the time we were supposed to pick her up and waited for us. In the end of say she seemed sad the big day was over. She said, “so, Buddha’s birthday is over. What would I do now?” It was funny because she is not even a Buddhist.

The temple is located inside a mountain, so not many people came to the temple, despite Buddha’s birthday. But I like this temple for that reason. It’s not a big temple with too many people.

We directly went to the Buddha’s room in the temple. It’s called main building because Buddha’s statues are there. My mom told me to bow nine times in front to of/toward Buddha’s statue. I honestly don’t know why nine times but I did it anyways. Before bowing she put some money in a donation box in front of the Buddha statue. And I was pretty sure she donated my portion of money too, so I didn’t worry about it. After bowing, we walked around the temple. It was beautiful… in a peaceful mountain.

The ritual of celebration started at 11A.M. But we got there around 10A.M. We decided to hike a mountain around the temple for a bit. Surprisingly my 91 years old grandmother joined us to hike. We had such a great family quality time. My sister doesn’t live with us, so we had a
good catching up talk too, sitting in a mountain. It was so relaxing and peaceful. In fact, since
my sister lives in a metropolitan area, she seemed more enjoying the environment.

At 11A.M., we went to the main building for the ritual. A monk started chanting and
people who attended there followed him with chanting. About 20-30 people were there, which is
not many at all compared to big temples. The monk also talked about how Buddha became a
Buddha and his stories. After that we all read out loud of some Buddhist notes, and bowed many
times. It took about an hour. To be honest, in the beginning chanting and sitting at a temple was
relaxing and peaceful, but after half an hour, it was hard to concentrate on listening, bowing and
even sitting. I was being patient because I only have to do this once a year and this is good for
merit-making.

After the ritual we moved to the temple cafeteria. They provided free lunch for everyone.
Interestingly, there were only 20-30 people at the ritual, but I saw 40-50 people at the eating area.
Like a buffet, every individual had to go pick up his or her vegetarian food and soup. They also
had watermelon and rice cake for dessert. My sister picked up two persons’ food for herself and
our grandmother. We all ate and talked. It was not very tasty but I appreciate and enjoyed the
vegetarian food. Some marinated vegetables on top of rice, a piece of watermelon and rice cake.
I ate all of my food because I didn’t feel like wasting any food at a temple, especially on
Buddha’s birthday. Interestingly, after eating, every individual had to wash his or her own
dishes in the kitchen. I washed my grandmother’s dishes.

They actually had coffee for dessert. It was cheap instant packaged coffee, but we all
enjoyed the coffee time with talking and laughter. It was just different because whatever we eat
and drink we have the responsibility to wash plates or cups we use.
After the coffee break, we hung around the temple again. I enjoyed watching the art of the decoration of each building. The color is beautiful and the architecture is amazing. And then we sat down in front of the main building and talked more. Almost around 1:30P.M., we left the temple with smiling and feeling relaxed.

Since we haven’t caught up with our grandmother and she seemed happy with hanging out with us, we invited her to our place for another tea time. Buddha’s birthday gave us family quality time.

-My prior research

I used evidence from my Master’s thesis (Choe, 2008) as a background in order to develop and refine my questions for this study. I collected motivation data, using Beard and Ragheb (1983)’s Leisure Motivation Scale, in 2007 from 179 non-Buddhists who were visiting a Buddhist temple in Chinatown, Los Angeles. Results indicated that they were “intellectually” motivated (i.e., they want to discover and learn about new things) and were highly motivated by the prospect of being in a calm atmosphere, experiencing mental relaxation, and relieving stress (i.e., Stimulus Avoidance sub-scale). Accordingly, the visitors to a Buddhist temple as a non-Buddhist may wish to visit a temple to learn of new cultures or religions and because of a desire to seek relief from the stress of a busy life.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the meditation and leisure literatures, as well as my own previous research experience, I developed the following research questions for this study.
1. What experiences and outcomes are associated with meditation?

2. What are the similarities and differences between the experiences and outcomes of meditation and the experiences and outcomes of leisure?

3. Are there differences in how experienced and inexperienced meditators perceive the experience and outcomes of meditation? If yes, what are these differences?

**LIMITATIONS**

The study was limited to two Buddhist meditation groups in State College, Pennsylvania, and participants were limited to meditators randomly selected from several meditation groups in State College, Pennsylvania, which is a university town. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the population of meditators in the U.S. as a whole. The results also cannot be generalized to meditation traditions other than Buddhist, such as Sufi, Jain, or even secular meditation.
Chapter 3

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to determine the nature of the meditation experience as well as to determine if experiences and outcomes of meditation are similar and different from those of leisure. If yes, how are they similar and different?

For data collection in this study, I used a descriptive ethnographic method, using participant observation, informal, and formal interviews. Participant observation is the foundation of cultural anthropology (Bernard, 1994), and cultural anthropologists develop ethnographies primarily via participant observation. Participant observation involves “getting close to people and making them feel comfortable enough with your presence so that you can observe and record information about their lives” (Bernard, 1994, p. 136). Informal interviews can also be done during the participant observation. For example, cultural anthropologists “interview people informally during the course of an ordinary day of participant observation (p. 208), “interview people on their boats and in their fields” (p. 208), or interview people in their offices (Bernard, 1994). Formal interviews can also be called structured interviewing and the most common form is the questionnaire (Bernard, 1994). A questionnaire may be “self-administered, or it may be administered over the phone or in person, but in all cases the questions posed to informants are the same” (p. 237). According to Bernard (2006), ethnography can involve fieldwork, interviews, surveys, archival data, library work, experiments, and the use of particular methods depending on what a researcher wants to know; superior ethnography uses numbers, words, and pictures. Therefore, I participated in the rituals, social events, and other
activities with study participants, facilitated free meditation sessions, observed them, took notes, conducted informal conversations and interviews, and conducted formal interviews in order to obtain answers to my research questions effectively. For comparative purposes with respect to the outcomes of leisure, I used the existing literature on leisure outcomes, as given above in the literature review.

The objective of this research is to gain a better understanding of the perceived nature of the meditation experience in general, thus open ended/informal/unstructured interviews were preferred, in addition to semi-structured and formal/structured interviews. Participant observation was used in order to understand what people actually do in the meditation settings, other than doing religious rituals, and how they perceive those activities and meanings. I chose to observe a small sample of groups in their meditation meetings.

Neuroscientists and psychologists (Johnson et al., 2009; Koszycki et al., 2007; Nidich et al., 2009; Vegors, 1999) increasingly have studied similar topics to the current study, the outcomes of meditation, including psychological health/benefits like stress reduction, emotion management and physiological benefits such as reducing blood pressure. While most research on meditation is experimental, there is a need for participant observation and in-depth interviews to examine individuals’ perception of stress reduction, rather than only measuring physiological symptoms, for a broader and deeper understanding. Due to the lack of previous research methods on this topic, I began my investigation by attending and observing the religious rituals, meditation, and other various activities e.g., social events with the Buddhist meditation groups. By doing so, I tried to explore why people engage in meditation, how they experience meditation, what kinds of benefits they expect to gain or have gained, and if and how they may incorporate the perspective of leisure in their experiences. These methods helped me develop a detailed, holistic description
of what they are doing, not limiting the data to formal interviews. Besides helping with descriptions, I mainly used the participant-observation data to develop interview questions, and later clarify the interview data. The participant-observation data also helped me understand and give me more insights about transcripts when I analyzed the interview data.

Since I conducted my pilot study with a meditation group in the spring of 2010, I continued attending rituals, meditation and Buddhism seminars. I did participant observation with the Open Meditation Society at Penn State University, and the O-An Zendo Center, a Zen meditation group in central Pennsylvania. I interviewed 16 meditators and compared how the depth of experience of engaging in meditation affects the meanings and benefits to them. I also attempted to examine how experienced meditators and inexperienced meditators perceive the benefits differently, and how the length and dedication of the practice affect different outcomes. Furthermore, I examined how those different outcomes can be related to their concepts and outcomes of their leisure.

**RESEARCH SITES**

For the two initial pilot studies, I attended the meditation rituals on Sundays for observation and informal conversations with participants for two to three hours at a local Buddhist-themed café in State College, Pennsylvania. Based on the information from these observation and informal conversations, I constructed questions, and conducted the actual data collection with the Open Meditation Society at the Pennsylvania State University for four days a week (Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays), and the O-An Zendo Center in central Pennsylvania on Sundays. Additionally, I recruited more participants for formal interviews throughout the campus at Penn State University, as well as from the Buddhist meditation groups.
from the Open Meditation Society at the spiritual center on campus, and the O-An Zendo Center, a local Zen center.

This study was shorter than most anthropological fieldwork, which is usually one year or two years, but Bernard (2006) noted that many studies using participant observation can be done in weeks or a few months. The key to high-quality, quick ethnography is going into a study with clear questions (Handwerker, 2001). Accordingly, from the information gained through participant observation, I prepared questions to ask to achieve the goal of high-quality quick ethnography. For instance, I learned that most did not consider themselves Buddhists, and they did lots of other activities like chanting, dancing, eating together, feasting, having a tea time, and having an art exhibit with the meditation group people (they are called, “Sangha”). They also did rituals and discussion sessions to cope with stress, anxiety, and life crises. Therefore, while doing the participant-observations and interviews, I was prepared to get information as much as possible, and in order to do so, I brought clear questions to ask: What is your purpose in coming here?; What do you experience while meditating?; What are the benefits of meditating to you?; What other activities do you do in your free time?; How are other leisure activities different from or similar to this experience? Most important, during the participant observation, enhancing “quality of life” as a primary benefit of meditation appeared, so I included a question about the subject in the formal interviews: Do you think meditation enhances the quality of your life? If so, how?; How are the experience and outcomes of meditation similar or different from those of leisure? The information I got from those questions would allow me to respond directly to my research questions. I would also get information regarding the experience and outcomes of leisure from the literature and information about the experience and outcomes of meditation from my field research.
SAMPLING

I conducted in-depth interviews with 16 individuals in State College, Pennsylvania in the spring of 2011. The number of 16 informants met the need for data saturation. Guest et al. (2006) reported that “after analysis of twelve interviews, new themes emerged infrequently and progressively so as analysis continued” (p. 74).

Most informants were volunteers from the participant observation meditation groups in which I participated. This helped the flow of interview and contributed the depth of information. Sample selection criteria were (1) if they are Americans, and (2) if they practice meditation. Among the 16 individuals, I included a few key informants as they have more in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon. For example, I attended one-day retreat at the Penn State campus in 2010 for my pilot study, and met a Buddhist monk who came for the retreat from up-state New York. After the retreat was over, I talked to him about my research and asked him if he was interested in participating in my study. He said that he is very interested in, and then we started communicating. I did a formal interview with him, but we occasionally chatted about Buddhism in America, meditation among Americans, visitors or mediators at his monastery and so on. A few months later, as we became friends, I asked more questions about his personal background and more sensitive questions such as why he became a monk, and what his previous religion was. He was born and grew up in New Jersey; was Catholic; trained to be a monk in Taiwan for three years; became a leading monk at a Chan monastery in up-state New York. As we communicated a lot almost on a weekly basis, he became a key informant. Also, as he has been practicing meditation and studying as a monk, he could provide me more in-depth knowledge and perceptive views about meditators in America.
Rapport gained from participant observation for a few months helped the process of recruiting participants, especially for formal interviews. After “hanging out” and having intensive interactions, many people volunteered to participate in this study. Our relationships contributed the quality of interviews because our mutual trust opened them to talk about their life histories and let me ask direct (or sensitive) questions. Additionally, even after the interviews were done, some continued asking how my study was going and were willing to discuss my findings. They would say, something like, “You got it right,” “Actually I think …,” and “in the 1970s …” adding explanations to my observations and analyses with their knowledge and experiences. For example, with the Open Meditation Society, the meditators appreciated my contribution to the group as a founding vice-president. I offered meditation lessons twice a week, held social events, advertised the group, and took care of other paper work. While working for the group, gradually we built trust among us. Thus, despite being a researcher, they might feel that I am one of them, and that made my data collection easier.

Interestingly, most considered themselves non-Buddhists but they were interested in Buddhist meditation, regardless of their religious affiliation. In fact, in my pilot study, among twelve members of the meditation group, only three considered themselves Buddhists. Some had other religious affiliations, so Buddhist meditation may be something other than a religious experience or activity for them. Going to a church is their religious obligation but coming to the meditation meeting was their personal choice. As such, Christians can be Buddhist meditators. I asked participants why they engage in meditation in order to find out how the practice functions and what it means to them, and if that can be leisure for them, through what kinds of activities such as visiting meditation centers and enjoying the art, having tea time, attending events, and doing yoga with other people, or meditating itself. Consistent with the pilot data, in the data
collection for this dissertation, among 16 participants, 13 people considered themselves non-Buddhists. They also showed a strong opinion that they are not religious but spiritual; some beginner meditators mentioned that it is their lifestyle or a stress coping strategy rather than a religion.

Table 2. Characteristics of Proficient Meditators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mr. C</th>
<th>Mrs. B</th>
<th>Mrs. T</th>
<th>Mr. S</th>
<th>Mr. G</th>
<th>Mr. D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Monk</td>
<td>Zen Priest/Artist</td>
<td>Meditation teacher/English Editor for international students</td>
<td>Professor in art history</td>
<td>Meditation teacher</td>
<td>Yoga/meditation teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The length of practice</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>32 years</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>About 30 years</td>
<td>About 22 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Characteristics of Beginner Meditators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mr. P</th>
<th>Mrs. C</th>
<th>Mr. P</th>
<th>Mr. W</th>
<th>Mrs. T</th>
<th>Ms. D</th>
<th>Ms. L</th>
<th>Mr. K</th>
<th>Mr. H</th>
<th>Mrs. G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Lecturer/graduate student</td>
<td>Masseuse</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Finished M.S. &amp; volunteering</td>
<td>Research associate</td>
<td>Finished M.F. A. &amp; volunteering at the Zen center</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Graduate student/part-time high school teacher</td>
<td>Yoga teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The length of practice</td>
<td>10 years (on&amp;off)</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>5 years (on&amp;off)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>A few weeks</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment of Participants and Human Subjects

I recruited meditators through local meditation groups following approval from the Penn State Institutional Review Board (IRB). I also asked my friends if they know anyone who practices meditation. Once I was introduced to potential participants, I explained my research and informed them of my affiliation with Penn State University. I asked if I could contact them to schedule an interview, and if they said yes, I made an appointment with them. I had not met anyone who said no, thus no one refused to do it. I met with participants in a reserved room at the Spiritual Center at Penn State. As long as they signed the consent form (Appendix A), I conducted an interview for about one hour.

For protecting human subjects in a study, I maintained confidentiality of subjects to protect them and to allow them to speak freely. The recordings were stored on my personal computer. Only I have access to the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed in three years, in the year 2014. The data will be reported without participants’ names or photos. All information will be strictly anonymous.

DATA COLLECTION

Since there are few studies on the nature of meditation and meditation as leisure, I observed people and experienced what they were experiencing with them. As Bernard (2006) noted, participant observers “go out, take notes, talk to people, watch and listen, and bring it all together.” Therefore, instead of developing hypotheses, I gathered data by describing the details about the phenomenon and what’s going on with the participants’ meditation experience as a case study. The biggest advantage of doing participant observation was that as I interacted more with the informants, I learned both what I wanted to know and what I should have wanted to know.
The Open Meditation Group was created by a couple of Penn State graduate student (including myself) and a professor who wanted to meditate together. The group does not emphasize a specific religious background but it generally offers a free meditation session an hour per day during the week. It is open to students, faculty, staff and local people. Anyone can drop in at their convenience and relax.

I attended mediation meetings four days a week with the Open Meditation Group at the spiritual center at Penn State University during the spring semester of 2011. My involvement was more than just participatory as I also hosted and facilitated two meditation sessions per week, organized the email lists, emailed updates to members, advertised the group both on and off campus, created and distributed flyers, and performed other administrative tasks to support the group. For example, I organized a potluck event in April 2011 to promote the group and permit socializing. Through these avenues, I provided my services to the group, thus developing my relationship with the participants, both formally and informally.

Additionally, on Sundays I visited a local Zen center, “O-An Zendo,” to participate in meditation, and to socialize with visitors, practitioners, and leaders. I attended their meditation session that includes an hour discussion on meditation practices, an hour sitting and walking meditation in the center, and another half an hour walking meditation outside in the garden area. The group was a bit bigger than the Open Meditation Society group as the Zen center usually has 16-17 people at a time. I meditated with them, and talked with some of them when the sessions were over or before they started the meditation practice. By observing those activities and practicing in the events, hanging out with the meditators, and practicing meditation by myself over four to five months, I attempted to compare how meditation skill or quality differs between
beginner meditators and experienced meditators by how long they have practiced meditation, and to examine how that affects other aspects of life.

In order to better understand the context of meditation practices, I continued practicing meditation every evening at home. My own practice was important to better understand what participants were saying. For example, some participants noted that as they practice more they can concentrate better, and integrate their practice into their life. Also, a few mentioned that meditation is not about just relaxation but cultivating their minds, thus they have more control over their emotions and life. I also experimented with this in my own meditation practice and made the following notes about my experiences:

It was relaxing, peaceful and quiet. I tried watching my breath and chanting inside to get away from any thoughts. To be honest, there were moments that some thoughts came to my mind, but I tried getting away from them.

My meditation was good. It was much better, which means less thought racing in my head compared to the last fall when I went to the meditation retreats. I guess while practicing almost everyday this semester, I have “gained more skill to meditate”... I realized that I have desire to be free from all the thoughts, interpretations and negative feelings. I’ve observed myself being a little freer from them.

I could do the meditation better than before through this data collection-participant observation. I was happy with my meditation getting better and I can focus more easily... I left the room with great feeling and calming down, and feeling happier.

I made another few times of conscious breaths. It felt relaxing, but “more than just relaxing by emptying negative things. I felt cleansed.”

Last year of this time, I thought meditation is relaxing, having a quiet time/space, and trying to learn to appreciate and be more positive about life. But, as I meditate more regularly and seriously, cultivating the mind seems amazing...watching myself, observing my mind, and “gaining the control over” seem to be a powerful thing. So, I guess it’s really about “freedom” from thoughts, and something more than just relaxing. Of course, it still provides relaxation, but it goes deeper. I think there are even more benefits after or while cultivating the mind consciously.
Bernard (2006) claimed that some studies are impossible to conduct without participant observation, and my study is one of them because meditation can be a sensitive topic to talk about. According to him, participant observation opens things up and makes it all possible to collect all kinds of data the researcher wants, and the researcher can study as much as possible. As such, I could collect life histories, attend rituals, talk to participants, listen to their life histories, and ask direct questions. For example, I was able to hear participants’ life crises and how they motivated them to engage in meditation on a regular basis. Without intensive relationships with informants, it would have been impossible to get this kind of in-depth information.

Through intensive and long-term interactions with participants, researchers can gain an “intuitive” understanding about them (Bernard, 2006). It took time and effort to make the participants feel comfortable and close to me. By attending religious rituals, meditation sessions, and other social events, gradually I gained trust from them, and they helped my research by sharing their life histories. This was consistent with Bernard’s notion that once participants trust that the researcher will not betray their confidence, they will have ordinary conversations and ordinary behaviors in his or her presence (Bernard, 2006). Study participants often recommended useful books about American Buddhism, introduced me their friends who meditate, and let me borrow useful CDs and books. After gaining rapport, I was also able to speak with confidence about what I had learned. Also, they liked asking me questions like how people do Buddhist rituals in Korea compared to theirs. With more time spending and building relationships with people, the data collection process went smoother. Eventually I was able to speak convincingly about what I had found after collecting data from this kind of environment.
Reducing reactivity was an issue: when I first showed up in the meditation group for the pilot study, some of the informants seemed suspicious of me. I was the only Asian person there and not in their age group. I was a complete outsider in the beginning. But as time went by, I became less of a curiosity and I was able to ask more questions and talk more with them comfortably. Based on this experience, when I studied the Open Meditation Group and the Zen center people, I knew better how to ask questions carefully and gradually. I started making conversation about their meditation experiences in general, and as we became closer by meditating together regularly and hanging out in social settings, I was able to ask more specific questions. Bernard (2006) wrote that when informants don’t care much of your comings and goings, they will just conduct ordinary behaviors and conversations and you will be surprised at the direct questions you can ask. He went on to state that they even let you administer surveys, conduct and record interviews, take notes, walk around with a stopwatch, clipboards and a camera. As such, I was able to take photos of the meditation groups and social gathering scenes, and the photos helped me analyze data by providing effective visual forms when I wrote field-notes.

For in-depth interviews, I probed themes surrounding the topic of interest such as quality of life as a primary benefit, and life crisis for an initial motivation, meditating, and their perspectives on leisure. With regard to themes, I had been modifying questions and research directions during the research in order to better investigate ideas and obtain clarification based on the participant observation.

Interviews were digitally recorded, with consent, and fully transcribed. I took notes immediately after the interviews. Interviewees remained anonymous.
I interviewed 16 individuals formally. I interviewed key informants including a monk, a Zen priest, and a meditation teacher about three times. I also informally interviewed more than five times of a 30-year-long practicing meditator as he is willing to share his experiences. For the rest of the 12 individuals, I interviewed them once for about an hour. I included the informal interview data in the field notes thus I used them when I analyzed the notes.

Observation was useful when addressing the research questions that request insiders’ views about a phenomenon. Bernard (2006) stated that when researchers want to know what participants “actually do,” there is no better way than watching them. Researchers are then able to add details and thoroughness based on scientific and systematic work fieldwork (Winzeler, 2008).

Therefore, I observed informants and what they were doing, as well as talking to them and asking them questions, e.g., if they perceived meditation as leisure. However, eating with people, feasting, socializing, chatting, having a tea time, hanging out with people, meeting new people, and doing chores together appeared to be leisure to me. For instance, the Zen center celebrated many events with music, dancing, food, and laughter, all of which seemed to be leisure. Furthermore, some participants showed up or dropped in the meditation sessions when they had nothing to do, or when they ‘just felt like it’ and those seemed to contain the element of leisure. There were also some people who visited the meditation meetings or the center just once or twice out of curiosity or just for new experience—“as leisure.”

I used a descriptive ethnographic approach to achieve observations of what the participants were actually doing. This is why the perspectives of emic and etic views are important when understanding a culture. The emic view means understanding a culture through an inside perspective such as “folk beliefs and in cultural anthropologists’ striving to understand
culture from ‘the native’s point of view’” (Morris et al, 1999, p. 781). The etic view means understanding a culture through an outside perspective like “anthropological approaches that link cultural practices to external, antecedent factors, such as economic or ecological conditions, that may not be salient to cultural insiders” (Morris et al, 1999, p. 781). On one hand, I looked closely from an etic view, does it look like leisure to an external observer (myself) based on external definitions? On the other hand, through participant observation, I focused on an emic view, does it feel like leisure to participants based on their own definitions? As Bernard (2006) pointed out, I switched back and forth from the insider to the analyst, and kept checking, “did I get it right?” This process gave my study higher reliability and validity. Building rapport with the participants made this process possible, and significantly contributed to doing so. I felt free to ask and check with informants about what I had observed, and they also were interested and willing to discuss on my observations and findings.

When I came back and made conversations with them, I was able to ask, “Was I right? Did I get it right?” I often get answers from constantly meditating and hanging out with them. I am also asking myself, “Is this your leisure? How is this similar and different from your own (or other) leisure? How does this meditation enhance your quality of life? Or, does it? What’s the nature of your meditating?”

I think making conversations about meditation, and hearing his 30 year-long meditation stories helps me to understand what meditation does to American people at a personal level and also to my research. The conversations and stories he shares in his car on the way to the Zen center and on the way back have been the best data ever in my research! I was also able to ask him informally if what I’ve observed and thought sound fine with him.

Observation helped me to understand how people behave during and before/after meditation center visits, meditation group meetings or meditation ritual practice. For instance, what kinds of activities people do other than meditating and rituals? There were social
gatherings with food, walking around in the woods near the Zen center before the meditation session, doing yoga together, having a tea time, discussing personal practices and life, cleaning up the Zen center as a volunteer, hanging out and reading books in the small library area or borrowing books, planting flowers or donating some plants in the garden of the Zen center, and so on. I kept notes including an objective description of facts, a personal journal, and a theoretical analysis, in order to effectively understand the data.

I attempted to examine if there were any patterns among the participants, based on the length of practicing meditation or anything else such as their demographic or socio-economic characteristics. For example, the longer they engage in them, the more they may feel meditation practices serve as relaxation because they have more control over their emotions, and feel more relaxation during meditation, through the still mindset.

I attempted to explore if the informants had same ideas about what leisure means to them, besides definitions of leisure from scholars. Listening to what they think leisure is was meaningful for my study—bottom-up communication. As Spiro (1967) noted religion is what your informants say it is, leisure can be what my participants say it is, too.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

I brought all of the data together as an ethnography, integrating the themes from interviews along with the field-notes. As I used participant observation for a starting point for conducting interviews, the transcripts and the field-notes had common themes on participants’ initial interests and motivations, life crises; quality of life, slowing down and stress coping; leisure related concepts; and similarities like relaxing, and differences like meditation requiring
more discipline and structures. The interview data had more details while the field-notes contained general information.

In my initial investigation, I investigated and analyzed the pilot study data alongside the analysis of themes from the literature review. From this analysis, I had several themes based on investigation of questions from the literature review and the pilot study. For example, why do people meditate? What are the benefits of meditation? What are the similarities or differences between meditation and leisure? Based on these questions, I closely analyzed my transcripts and field-notes.

Once I collected the information, I listened to the digital recordings of the formal interviews and made full transcriptions of interviews. Then, I analyzed the transcripts along with the field-notes. From the pilot study data, interview transcripts, and field-notes, I gained about 450 pages of descriptions (interview data were double spaced, and field-notes were single spaced). This research method allowed me to have “thick description” about the phenomenon. This involved the search for the multiple and deeper meanings in the data (Bernard, 2006).

As a next step, I looked for the ‘significant statements,’ sentences or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experience certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). After collecting the information, I put the data together under each question, such as outcomes of meditation, similarities and differences between meditation and leisure and so on. I then compared and analyzed the participants’ perspectives on motivations, benefits, and meditating as a leisure experience. Under each topic, I put the closely related quotes and notes, and thus I could visually organize the information.

As part of my search for significant statements, I focused on keywords that appeared most frequently in my data set. The majority of participants said that meditation helps them
“reduce stress and anxiety,” and “slow down.” I also focused on questions and topics that were frequently addressed. Such topics included: (1) the initial interests and motivations—coping strategy/life crisis, spiritual path but not religion, and cultural curiosity; (2) quality of life—clearing minds and slowing down, cultivating a frugal lifestyle, being ‘present’, becoming more compassionate, learning the holistic worldview, and managing negative emotions; (3) the similarity to leisure—relaxing, freedom or free-ing, experiencing ‘flow’, and socializing; (4) the differences from leisure—relaxing with alertness, essential/healthy leisure, discipline, structure, effect on other aspects in life or work, leisure for meditation, being woven together, physical exercise, pressure for fun, and lasting longer of the effect. These topics that were the most frequently mentioned from the data were based on my literature review, confirmed with the field-notes, and developed with the transcripts.

Surprisingly, while analyzing the data, I investigated new strands of inquiry that appeared multiple times in the transcripts and field-notes. I found that proficient meditators share similar experiences as opposed to beginner meditators about their meditation practice. I also learned that their practice and the length of it even affect their leisure experiences. For instance, in the course of my investigation I found that beginner meditators experienced or expected different benefits of their practices compared to proficient meditators. Beginners focused more on just relaxing and having a quiet time getting away from daily hassles, while proficient meditators focused on cultivating their minds and developing compassionate attitudes. Therefore, I added new categories of how proficient and beginner meditators have similar and different perspectives about their meditation and leisure. After adding these themes, I went back to the field-notes and transcripts, and looked at how the two groups of people say different things, focusing on those that were most frequently mentioned from each group. While doing so, I found that meditators
who had practiced more than 20 years showed a similar tendency as opposed to meditators who had practiced less than 20 years. So, I drew the line between proficient and beginning meditators at more or less than 20 years of practicing. There was one exception of a Buddhist monk who had practiced for the past 10 years, but since he had been practicing very intensively as a monk, I included him in the proficient meditators’ group. Thus, I created sub-categories of proficient (N = 6) and beginner meditators (N = 10), then revised my initial literature review and refocused my research questions.

Bernard (2006) wrote that “since total objectivity is, by definition, a myth, I’d worry more about producing credible data and strong analysis…gain rapport, and be in a position to ask good questions and to get answers” (p. 349). Accordingly, I tried to achieve verification and validity through seeking multiple sources such as interview transcripts, field notes from two different meditation groups, and a literature review. This helped me to confirm if/how participants thought my documentation and interpretation reflected what they wanted to say about their experiences of meditation. Cope (2005) also noted that a description of a phenomenon as represented by the researcher can be a personal interpretation. I discussed the findings and interpretations with participants as part of the validation and verification process through re-visiting the research site. I also talked to a Buddhist monk and some experienced meditators who have practiced for more than 30 years about my interpretation and analysis and if they thought I misrepresented or misunderstood anything. For instance, the following statements are from my field-notes:

Other than the 3 hour formal interviews, weekly conversations on meditation with Mr. S like 1-2 hours have been extremely useful for developing thoughts, understanding what’s going on, how Buddhism and meditation started and spread in this culture, confirming my thoughts with them.
I also made conversations about meditation, and hearing his 30 year-long meditation stories helps me to understand what meditation does to American people at a personal level and also to my research. The conversations and stories he shared in his car on the way to the Zen center and on the way back have been the best data ever in my research! I was also able to ask him informally if what I’ve observed and thought sound fine with him.

Therefore, my sessions with key informants were extremely helpful in interpreting data gathered from the other informants. Additionally, I met with my advisor once a week to discuss findings during the participant observation, which helped to craft the direction better.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The majority of the participants were retired professors, professors, college instructors, graduate students and undergraduate students due to the data collection location, a college town. See Tables 2 and 3 above for the personal characteristics of sample members.

Four days per week in the spring of 2011, I observed the Open Meditation Society on campus. Open Meditation Society is a free meditation group that anyone can drop in to meditate. Usually students and faculty came by at their convenience, and in general three or four people were present. It is located in a small meditation room at the spiritual center on campus that is quiet and relaxing. The group does not emphasize any kind of religious tradition but its purpose is providing a space for relaxation.

On Tuesdays (2PM-3PM) and Thursdays (12PM-1PM), I hosted the meditation sessions for an hour per day. On Wednesdays, a meditation teacher who had practiced for about 30 years hosted an hour meditation session and also another one-hour book discussion session. She also offered half an hour of teaching meditation for a beginners’ session. The session was from 6:30PM to 9PM. On Fridays, a graduate student/high school teacher who has practiced for the past 10 years hosted a mindfulness meditation session for one hour between 12PM to 1PM.

I was able to conduct informal interviews with three to four people at a time, as we had a short introductory time before the meditation, and a discussion time after the meditation. So, we introduced each other in the first 15 minutes, meditated for 30 minutes, and discussed how the meditation would go for the last 15 minutes. I naturally could understand why they come to
meditation, why they keep coming to meditation, what their leisure activities are, and how meditation and leisure are similar and different.

At the Zen center on Sundays (10AM-1PM), I also observed and did informal interviews with about 15 people (depending on how many people show up on that day). This Zen center is in a more remote area from the campus, and has a quiet and holy atmosphere as the location is in the woods, about 25 minutes from campus. This place was more relaxing than the campus meditation society location. The Zen center building is surrounded by lots of beautiful trees, so people can feel the nature. It almost reminded me of a monastery. It is also very quiet because people are encouraged not to talk once they get into the building. There was no pressure to talk and that is why it was relaxing for me. On the second floor, there is a big meditation room with big windows that people can look out at the nature with lots of trees. Right next to the meditation room, there is a small library filled with many books on Buddhism and spirituality with three or four chairs and a small table. On the first floor, there was a restroom and a garage.

At 10AM, usually 15-17 people get together in the library area and sit in a circle and discuss a concept of Buddhism for an hour by the Zen priest’s lead. The Zen priest was a Caucasian woman who is in her early 60s. She offers a three hour meditation session that includes an hour discussion about practices, an hour and half indoor sitting and walking meditation session, and half an hour walking meditation session. We did the walking meditation in the garden area that is right in front of the Zen center building. There is a walking trail in the woods so we walked along with it. It was really relaxing to walk in the woods like that.

With this group, I did informal interviews while we were having discussion session or at social events. Sometimes they had social time with snacks after the three hour meditation session, thus I got to chat with them through the social events. The data from those informal
interviews helped me construct and revise my formal interview questions. The informal interviews were more conversational without forcing informants to answer to specific questions. I listened to them talk about what they were interested in regarding their meditation practice or life in general. This was primarily preliminary data collection, but as I continued, it helped to guide and add to my data and solidify research directions. The data gave me more insights on the background of the participants’ meditation and leisure experiences, and helped build trust between the participants and me that contributed to the formal interviews. Later, I did formal interviews with 16 people based on the informal interview and observation data. In the pilot study, meditation groups were mainly older females, but the meditation groups for the data collection did not show significant differences in gender distribution.

Data analyses indicated that informants viewed meditation as encompassing several kinds of experiences and outcomes. These experienced and outcomes include reducing stress, that meditation is a spiritual path but not a religion, managing emotions, and enhancing quality of life. These experiences and outcomes will be examined below. I will use italics to emphasize parts of quotes with italics.

**NATURE OF MEDITATION**

**Reducing Stress**

Fourteen participants (N =14) expressed that they started meditating after experiencing life difficulties such as death of spouses or parents, a painful divorce, a hard break up, stress and anxiety, depression, or a major job task transition. They used meditation as a coping strategy to overcome those difficulties. Additionally, most participants (N = 15) indicated that they meditate for dealing with daily stress or anxiety.
Dealing with Life Crises

Most participants shared their life crises as an initial motivation or engaging in meditation on a regular basis. From formal interviews, a few participants indicated that:

My father had died when I was 27, and it was very painful. There were a lot of things that were just not resolved. And I was pretty depressed. So I would go to meditation.

When I got more into weekly meditation was after I broke up with a guy…I had so much pain, I couldn’t even sit after I got out of the relationship. I kept meditating and kept working at it like that. But you know, it’s got better!

I was kind of depressed (while doing my Ph.D. in Psychology), and things seemed rather meaningless…one (reason for meditation) was searching for meaning…Almost like I needed to catch my breath.

Those who shared their life crises during the interviews were among those I had met over weeks and months through the participant-observation. They seemed to be more open about their experiences, some of which were sensitive. As meditation helped them to overcome those difficult situations in their lives, they still practice, and they have more commitment when they have problems because they are confident that meditation will help them solve their problems. One participant became a meditation teacher and dedicated her life as a full-time meditator. She even changed her English name to Tibetan name, and has lived in a meditation center over 20 years. Thus, for some people, meditation is a tool for surviving or an ultimate goal to achieve.
Dealing with Daily Stress

All of the participants (N=16) said that meditation also helps them reduce stress and anxiety and that motivates them to keep practicing. For example, from informal conversations during the fieldwork, one meditator said that her husband and she both were under stress from not having a clear direction for the future as they both did not know where they were going with their graduate degrees. Due to the frustration, they had been fighting a lot, but she did not want to let that continue, so she decided to meditate to calm down and manage stress. According to her, since she started meditating, there has been less fighting, and she thought it had been helping herself and the relationship. That motivated her to keep coming to the meditation sessions. She also encouraged her husband to join, but he said he was too busy to do it. So, she said that she had been meditating for himself too. I am not really sure how this works for him, but she believed that meditating him helps their relationship. Maybe she could understand him or his situation better while meditating and thinking of him in a calm and quiet atmosphere.

I also personally experienced dealing with stress through meditation. I started meditating every night at 9PM regularly. I sat for about 15 minutes and tried to empty my mind. I initially started doing this because I was having a hard time facing a job search. I felt like I needed something to calm myself down and be ok with this situation. Since I had heard a lot of from my participants that meditation helps them deal with difficulties, I wanted to try, too. And I experienced the benefits. I think I stayed calm and accepted the situation that I am facing. I also worked on appreciating what I have now.

Similar stories about dealing with stress effectively through meditation experiences appeared in the formal interviews. For instance:
I was having difficulties with anxiety and a very strong and uncomfortable self-consciousness…always ‘checking’ myself. I noticed definite changes in my mental state, happier and calmer.

I’ve been looking at prevention for myself…to alleviate stress…I was experiencing a lot of anxiety and stress, and having trouble focusing, so I thought meditation can help me focus my mind, and help with stress.

My future is little unknown to me, so meditation helps calm me down and have faith…something will show up and to become a better person…really know myself, better to myself and to others.

As such, many participants mentioned that they meditate to cope with stress, and manage anxiety. Also, one participant reported that he had dealt with his stress through smoking (drug). But since he joined the meditation group on campus, he felt like meditation is “a real method of coping,” and good for the brain. It seems that meditation is a healthy way to cope with stress and anxiety for a long-term, instead of drugs or alcohol. Therefore, meditation can be a cost effective stress coping strategy that can possibly replace or supplement other medicine or treatment.

Interestingly, many participants mentioned that Buddhist monks and meditation teachers appeared to be the happiest and most peaceful and compassionate people that the participants know and they want to be like, or at least try to be like them. Thus, becoming a happy and peaceful person attracted them to engage in meditation.
Spiritual Path, But Not a Religion

Thirteen participants (N = 13) reported that they do not consider themselves as Buddhists but they perceive that meditation is their spiritual path, and meditation is also guidance for their lives. They expressed that they liked to have a free choice of religion, and interestingly most grew up in Catholic families.

During the participant-observation, one participant reported that he likes mindfulness meditation because the principle is flexible, but not too strict. He said that he likes meditating at least for five minutes at home everyday because it calms him down, and makes him energized.

From the formal interview, a few participants noted that:

Buddhism is liberation from dull suburban life and oppressive Christian morals and a rebellion for me than a serious religious pursuit.

I like Buddhism because there are so many groups without teachers. And organized religions are all about like spreading and getting more people, and Buddhism is not just like that.

It seems that the non-obligated practice/engagement or more open personality of Buddhism attracts these people who do not want to be tied to a religion or a strict doctrine, and who consider themselves not religious.

Managing Negative Emotions

I learned that meditation helps the participants better manage emotions. Many (N = 9) often mentioned that meditation helps them not be trapped in negative experiences and thoughts.
During the fieldwork, one participant said that meditation changed his attitude toward life. For example, he is able to interpret negative experiences as positive ones, especially when dealing with small negative things every day. He was also going through a tough time with a union regarding a forced early retirement, but he took it as a new opportunity to find something more interesting for his life. He emphasized that through meditation, “not the obstacles disappear but to learn as you get through them…learning to see obstacles as a gift and learn that they can be opportunities.” Another participant shared that she used to get upset when things do not go in her way because she expected people (around her) to be the same but, with the meditation practices, she started accepting the fact that people are different.

One participant said that after he started meditating, he is ok with what he is doing, and what society tells him to do does not matter much to him anymore. He also wants to be in the state that he does not get affected by outside happening. He further discussed that he has gained skills for predicting negative emotions, protecting himself from them, and becoming less self-conscious about himself. He said having the power of better controlling his life is amazing.

Similarly, from the formal interview, participants reported that:

I allowed myself to be where I am. More accepting, and less wanting.

We can transform negative emotions or cease from generating attachment to thoughts…free ourselves from being pulled along by emotions, then every situation is seen clearly. Buddhism teaches us to generate wisdom and follow according to what the situation needs. We use intellect in a skillful way.
It doesn’t really matter what’s coming in front of you. It’s ok. And you are ok with it. Whatever it is. You can bow to it, and accept it. This is the way things are!

It taught me that kind of not reacting all the time. Like, somebody in traffic, or something you know, somebody saying something stupid, you know, like I try to be less quick or judge people.

Practicing letting go of thoughts...because thoughts change fast. We get caught up in it...Is it true? It’s not. Just thoughts...made me more aware of stop having thoughts.

I seem to be able to stay a lot calmer, or take some time to pause between things that happened. My life slowed down a little bit. I noticed that I am not as anxious as I was and I can more easily accept and work with various forms of discomfort—physical, psychological and emotional.

The participants emphasized that they are having more control over their emotions. Several (N = 8) reported that meditation practice helps them interpret negative events as positive things, and overcome difficult experiences by transferring them with a positive consequence. It also seems that learning about meditation principles and practicing it helps them be less extreme about things.

I have two speeds: off or fast-forward. That’s it. So, finding balance of things is generally really difficult.
Some of the Buddhist things have been very helpful for me that everything doesn’t have to be so extreme. You don’t have to LOVE or HATE something. It’s ok to be neutral… I am much happier… Buddhism in that aspect helped me to have a healthy relationship.

As such, gaining control of negative emotions helps them balance and focus better; meditators emphasized the importance of a positive attitude and interpretation toward life. I also achieved some of this skill so that I can cancel negative thoughts before they develop more in my mind. I did not strongly believe this but after training regularly over a few months, I was able to control my mind. I would not say this is some kind of religious thing, but I would say this is mental training to live happier. I feel that I save more time and energy to do something better or something more productive. I also think that this is the greatest benefit of practicing meditation for myself.

Quality of Life

All of the participants (N=16) reported that they are able to better manage stress, anxiety and depression, balance life, and learn a simple life style. Most mentioned that meditation has been healing, promoting happiness, and enhancing a great life. For example, the practice helps how to communicate with people, relate to people, and connect and re-connect to themselves and others. Some experienced meditators (N=3) reported that if there are obstacles or negative feelings, they bring them to the meditation practice to work on. They also mentioned that it helps them become more aware of their own harmful habits so that they can fix or improve them. The most frequent themes appeared in the field-notes and interviews as follows: (1) clearing the mind (2) simple mind and frugal lifestyle (3) becoming more compassionate (4) learning the holistic worldview.
-Clearing the Mind

Most participants (N = 9) noted that the meditation practice helps them clear their minds of negative thoughts and that helps them to stay focused on important things.

During the fieldwork, we often discussed how meditation practice allows us to solve problems in life. Once, I asked an experienced (30 year-long) meditator, “How and why that happens? Energy? Or because we change? Or, both?” He replied that our minds become clearer, so we see things more clearly and that causes things to go smoothly. He shared a story that while he was working on his doctoral dissertation, he just walked around the library, and he would randomly find a really useful book for his dissertation. He said that it was just good intuition as in Sanskrit, ‘intellectual’ means ‘intuition’. And he practiced meditation back then. He needed to meditate from the dissertation stress and laughed.

Similarly, from the formal interviews, four participants reported that:

My mind becomes less heavy, clearer, and more concentrated, if I have to solve a problem.

Most people’s lives are really not focused because their inner lives are Chaos. When that inner life gets focused, and you get it in touch with Buddha, everything gets clearer.

I feel that it clears my head and it gives me a little piece of the day where I can simply contemplate and reflect on things without getting too caught up in ‘me’.
It feels much calmer and more settled, and the mind is not racing, I am not as stressed, and I can also problem solve more clearly. I can think more clearly or strategize better.

Based on these comments, it appeared that meditators can concentrate on important things with the clearer minds through the meditation practice, as when they feel calmer they tend to make better decisions and make fewer mistakes. For example, one participant said that if he meditates before he is trying to pack the car, somehow everything fits in much easier because his mind is clearer. Thus, he reported that meditation helps things come easier and it’s a practical use.

- Cultivating a Frugal Lifestyle

Participants appreciate little things in life more, so they feel more content with their lives. For example, a practicing Buddhist monk in upstate New York noted that people who practice Buddhism are discovering that “a materially-centered mindset is quite burdensome” and that “a simple mind and a lifestyle that is frugal” are more spiritually fulfilling. He emphasized that “with little desires, one is content,” a sentiment that the participants also acknowledged. Therefore, appreciating and learning to maintain a frugal lifestyle makes them feel more content.

Similarly, in the meditation meetings, several meditators (N = 5) discussed this attitude toward their lives. I also developed this kind of attitude through the meditation practice. Whenever we do the walking meditation, the Zen priest said, “Feel the root and appreciate the ability to walk.” It’s a very simple thing to think of but I haven’t really considered that kind of appreciation. When I made very slow steps and walked around the room, I tried to appreciate my ability to walk, and thank my feet and legs. I was reminded that how much we should
appreciate our healthy body that we often forget. Also, reading very positive and spiritual words in the meetings made me more thankful to life in general. One very interesting thing is that while reading these field notes, I feel like they were written by someone else. Usually I am do not appreciate small stuff like that. Also, it is clear that my writing is more expansive with a larger vocabulary right after visiting the Zen center or after regular meditation.

Several participants reported similar ideas in the formal interviews:

People who meditate, and people of many spiritual traditions that are introspective and meditative—are discovering that a materially-centered mindset is quite burdensome. So through spiritual practice, they are learning that to have a simple mind, and a lifestyle that is frugal, and based upon fulfilling needs is much for fulfilling spiritually.

One becomes calmer due to having more control over one’s mind. There are less burdensome thoughts and the mind is more settled if the mind is more calm, then naturally one will feel more content because there are less desires or aversions to things.

If you haven’t decided that’s what you wanted, you wouldn’t suffer at all.

We always think really big things make us happy, really big change for life like material things. I think small things make us happy too.

Suffering is caused by desire.
Similarly, one participant emphasized that Nirvana means emptying, not a perfect world like a paradise:

After seven years, he (Buddha) decides or has epiphany…You know the word, Nirvana. It means to ‘blow-out’ or ‘extinguish’. Most of people think of Nirvana as a heaven, perfect, wonderful (world)…Almost blow out the candle. So there is, nothing there.

They stressed that learning the attitude of satisfying with the situation, and minimizing expectation about life allow them have happier lives. Therefore, learning a simple and frugal lifestyle is an asset of meditation for them.

-Being in the Present

Meditators noted that being in the present or trying to be in the present helps them not to worry about the past and future. Thus they were able to focus on concentrating on the present rather than wasting time thinking about the past and the future such as regrets, people’s negative comments, or planning their work. Meditation helps them better manage negative experiences by reinterpreting them as positive experiences. For example, they realized that negative situations are actually not negative, but their interpretations or habits made them look negative, so they try to accept things as they are. This helps them gain more power to control negative experiences. Thus, meditation is a form of therapy for them. For example, one participant said that she reads whenever she eats, so she doesn’t get a chance to appreciate the taste of food. She also said that last night, her husband picked up and brought really delicious and expensive Thai food, but she was talking about something for the whole dinner time, when she realized the food
was good, the food was all gone! She was sad the good food was all gone without fully tasting it. We often talk over food so we don’t get a chance to taste and truly enjoy it. For example:

That’s all we have, really is this moment. Not being attached to feeling like this everyday. Everything is just as it is. Neither good or bad.

When you are meditating, you only worry about the present, not think about the future and past. And you enjoy your present.

One of the messages I was told in meditation was that every time you actually begin to thinking, rambling, you have to catch yourself… and watch yourself.

Many participants shared that they often felt like they are behind, and not catching up with themselves. For example:

I have something that trouble with…enjoying where I am. I sometimes feel like behind the schedule… but the past and future don’t actually exist. The only thing that actually exists is this moment. This exact present moment, which is constantly being pushed or converted.

I feel like I am always looking at what things will be, what I am gonna be…or what did I do? What are my regrets? …I infrequently think about where I am, and what’s going on around me. And this particular moment…gaining control, something like that through a mechanism like meditation was so attractive to me.
It helps focusing on what I am doing, just focusing on whatever it is, what I am doing at that time. You know, I try to just be here now…to be present.

Based on these comments, it appeared that many participants find the practice of being in the present makes them stay focused on important, constructive things, and enjoy what they are doing better by not worrying about the past and the future.

-Becoming More Compassionate

Many participants (N = 4) reported that they have become more compassionate toward other people. For example, one participant shared that, throughout his years of the meditation practice, he feels more compassionate and, when he is looking at some people who are frustrated at small things all the time, he feels for them. Also, another participant said that she feels like this person was a part of her in the past life, and the other person was also a part of her, so she feels that we are all connected.

From my personal experiences, I learned that my research participants are really eager to help. For example, a participant asked me first before I even asked him to get together for an interview, and wanted to know about how my research was going. I have gotten similar impressions from other participants too. I hear comments like, “Thanks for giving me this opportunity to share my experience/thought with you,” or “I appreciate to have this kind of reflective moment to think of.”

Once, a meditator wanted to try a disaster meditation for Japan and personal difficulties. We did meditate by following her guidance. She asked us to close our eyes, think of Japan and
any personal difficulties, and let them go. As follows, several stressed the importance of developing compassion toward other people.

Clarity of the mind increases meaning that we are more aware of ourselves, and our environment, including other people and we can make better decisions on how to adapt to situations. When the mind is calm, and has less self-centered desires, we make decisions that are in favor of others. We see more of the totality of what’s happening and act based on that for the benefit of all, as opposed to ‘my’ benefit.

The mind’s self-centeredness is lessened until it is gone. The mind is emptied of selfishness. Truly calm and truly clear then one is free to have a very lively and compassionate response to people and situations…

Therefore, as meditation itself emphasizes wisdom and compassion, meditators like growing their compassionate attitude to other people.

-Holistic Worldview

Interestingly, a few participants (N = 3) said that they learned a holistic view about the world and life. Also, learning about the holistic view positively influences their health and stress management by making them less self-centered, and by helping them understanding their interaction with the bigger entities and connection with other people, nature or the world.

When that (spirituality) is taken care of, everything else falls into places. When that is functioning well,
that radiates out to every aspect of our lives. And that helps the deepest problem...Even psychological problems...depression? Ultimately, it's a spiritual problem...consequence of a fact that we don't really know who we are.

A few participants (N = 3) mentioned that they feel connected or re-connected to themselves, other people, the world, and the environment with the meditation experience. A participant reported that “In Buddhism, we are all connected, is very important to me.” Similarly, another participant said that “I am just a small part of whole universe. It’s not that I control the universe or the universe controls me. But we have to interact.” A Zen priest also mentioned that:

Zen practice must have both, heart and mind for understanding and seeing clearly, directly—what is true and what is real, and then opening the heart. Your heart naturally opens because you see how you are connected to everything.

This might be related to the holistic view of life and the world. Several participants mentioned that they feel connected or re-connected to themselves, other people, the world, and the environment with the meditation experience.

In summary, participants indicated that they meditate for reducing stress, managing negative emotions, and quality of life. They reported that they could reduce stress through the meditation practice because it helps them deal with life crises and deal with daily stress. Surprisingly, they strongly expressed that meditation is a spiritual path, but not a religion. In addition, the respondents described that meditation helps them enhance quality of life because it allows them to clear the mind, cultivate a frugal lifestyle, be in the present, become more compassionate, and develop holistic worldview, as well as manage negative emotions.
THE NATURE OF LEISURE

The nature of the leisure experience will be discussed from two perspectives. First, views of leisure, the leisure experience and outcomes in terms of such things as stress reduction and other psychological and physiological benefits, in the leisure literature, were reviewed above. Second, the nature of the leisure experience and its outcomes among informants in this study will be examined. Finally, I will compare the experience and outcomes of meditation as described by informants with those they described as typical of leisure. My comparison will include both similarities and differences between meditation and leisure.

Reducing Stress

Leisure scholars argue that enjoyable and meaningful leisure promote health and life quality (e.g., Iwasaki, 2003; 2010), and leisure helps people reduce stress. For example, people who frequently participate in cultural and passive leisure activities experience less stress (Caltabiano, 1995). Iwasaki (2010) indicates various forms of leisure activities that can help relaxation, such as “relaxing or recuperating leisure, leisure-time physical activity, outdoor recreation, health tourism, social leisure, spiritual leisure, cultural dancing, pet ownership, leisure ‘palliative’ coping for taking a break/having a time-out” (p. 151).

The above information that leisure helps reduce stress was confirmed by my interviews. For example, three participants reported:

I do so many things…I do dance called Zumba; I do Pilates; I like to cook something fancy like baking…I like to watch movies…Exercise makes me relaxed…
I like to read, I like stories, I find it truly relaxing to read really good stories, mostly they have to be blissing, not about like serious, or murder, or even intense romance, hahahah.

I choose to go for walks, practice Tai-chi, or do healthy activities which involve less brain-work to keep the body healthy and to rest the brain and most important, I choose activities that can be conducive to calming and clearing the mind.

The participants expressed that their leisure engagement help them to relax. Surprisingly, most meditators prefer passive activities over active pursuits. They reported that they enjoy passive leisure activities such as yoga, Tai-chi, reading, and going for a walk. They might seek to calm themselves down or just relax during their leisure time instead of seeking excitement or competition.

**Mood Enhancement**

Leisure scientists find that individuals can have positive moods and manage negative moods through leisure (e.g., Caltabiano, 1994; Iwasaki, 2003; Kanner et al., 1981; Orsega-Smith et al., 2004; Stone, 1987). They may argue that individuals are able to interpret stressful experiences in positive ways while engaging in relaxing and pleasant activities or socializing with fun people (Carver et al., 1989). Also, even a brief leisure experience may help individuals regulate their moods (Hull & Michael, 1995) because it distracts them from stressful situations.
For example, it might help to enhance mood by chatting with colleagues in a break time, going for a short walk, or exercising during the lunch break.

In fact, my participants did not verbally recognize mood enhancement through their leisure but I personally experience it through my own leisure. For example, when I was sitting in the meditation room and looking out the windows at the Zen center. I enjoyed seeing the beautiful view of nature; it helped enhance my mood and become more positive. I did not necessarily concentrate on the meditation practice during this, I think it was my leisure. Thus, even though leisure or even a short break can allow individuals to enhance mood and manage emotions, they might not recognize it. For this current study, it was not easy to prove this outcome of leisure.

Quality of Life

Leisure can contribute to quality of life (e.g., Lloyd & Auld, 2002; Baker & Palmer, 2006; Iwasaki, 2007). This is especially important for modern Americans because they often feel rushed, and feel “they never live in the moment” (Godbey, 2003). Also, Godbey (2003) noted that “many Americans never experience anything fully...true leisure is an idea not only forgotten in our society, but also no longer even understood” (p. 75).

Many participants reported similar experiences during their leisure engagement. They emphasized the balance lifestyle through their leisure. For example:

I should be strong to deal with this (a difficult situation). Well, don’t just be mentally strong, but be physically strong too. So I should work out more. I should make my body stronger, as well as my mind stronger. So last week I purchased the contract at the North gym. Because again, I think the balance.
There is kind of a WHOLENESS...I try to develop a life style based on these principles of meditation, so I alternate types of activities, and some of that I find that are helpful to maintain strength, and health are physical activities, and for that, I like to walk, run and bike.

I find that the whole the centrality of all of that, cooking for example, how what things like to be together, and the taste, and it’s all SACRED…There is kind of alchemy, sacredness of cooking. And it’s amazing how it’s like a package of a life force. It comes in a red pepper, salary, something in egg, all these different packages and life force of energy. And you bring them together, and every time I eat a meal I think it’s a miracle. Not my cooking, but just like when I look at a bowl. In this culture, what it takes to my cereal to get to my bowl together…probably took a thousand of people. And who knows, how many miles, and how many seasons, just to exist at all, is a miracle…we coordinate ourselves to able to have the food…and everything else.

Therefore, the meditators try to find balance of their life and create a healthier life style through their leisure. They also showed that they like learning about different cultures through leisure. For example:

(For leisure) Playing and writing music, poetry, and literature, in general…I think it helps you to think in a lot of ways…for instance, creativity…When you hear things differently by playing jazz, and then see things differently by playing music. I mean, see things through…like painting or drawing. It’s enhancing view of the world. It’s like you see more of things.
The whole cultural exchange is...something I really enjoy in my life. And it happens often because most of my clients are from other countries. So, I get to be reaching some other perspective. Just people put words together that I work with, it just opens my mind cuz it’s so creative that I would have never thought.

I love other languages. I speak and write, read French...I realized this is like something in my soul, in my body, really loves... Just like, it feeds me.

In short, meditators engage in leisure to reduce stress, improve mood, and enhance quality of life as the literature review indicated. The interview data confirmed those benefits of leisure. Interestingly, the meditators (15 out of the 16) enjoy passive and cultural leisure activities to achieve the benefits. Additionally, they showed some interest in learning different cultures. The majority of participants were introduced to “Buddhism”, “World Religions,” or “Eastern Philosophy” classes in college. Several participants said that they like learning different languages when I asked them what they do for leisure or in their free time.

**SIMILARITIES BETWEEN MEDITATION AND LEISURE**

Leisure, as described in the literature and as described by my informants, has both similarities to and differences from meditation. The similarities that were most frequently mentioned were relaxing and reducing stress. They reported that leisure and mediation are similar because both are relaxing, and neither of them are work. Also, some meditators said that leisure is not distinct from their meditation because it is all part of practice. Most meditators emphasized that the goal of meditation is gaining more freedom, which is an important element of leisure. One might refer to meditation as freedom through discipline.
Reducing Stress

All participants mentioned that both meditation and leisure are relaxing. In fact, in the meditation meetings, we always discussed the ends of meditation as relaxation and getting the mind off too much thinking.

One participant does biking, yoga, and fixing things/building things around his house for leisure. He said that biking is similar to his meditation practice because there is no specific end. He mentioned that (school) work has specific ends, so meditation and biking are similar in that they are not like work. He sometimes goes biking without knowing where he will go, but he said that his experience is that he doesn’t think much while doing it and is not thinking about anything else.

I found that meditation practice is relaxing especially when I was slowly walking into the woods in the garden area as part of the walking meditation at the Zen center. I also felt like I lived far away from the nature and was coming back to it little by little. Additionally, meditating was always relaxing because in the practice, silence was allowed unlike many other situations in daily lives.

The interview data confirmed that:

I guess obviously neither is work. And I guess both can be relaxing.
Meditation should be the most relaxing thing. It may be a bit challenging to get the hang of it. But if one practices, the more one is used to doing it the more relaxing it becomes, concentration should be done with a relaxed body and mind.

Most participants (N = 15) believe that meditation is relaxing, and a serious meditator said it must be the most relaxing thing they do. Similarly, participants reported that they feel relaxed through their leisure. For example:

Exercise makes me relaxed…when I finish it body is relaxed like meditation. To relax my body…because I am always like this (a tensed pose).

Another participant said that she likes doing kick-boxing and it is relaxing because it is a physical activity. However, she has to focus on the movements and breathing, like meditation, and because she can’t think of anything else but has to concentrate on the movements, it feels relaxing.

I learn all the moves and putting all the moves together into a sequence. I can’t really think about anything else than that. So I can’t think about work when I am there. So, it’s almost like meditation. I have to be in the present listening to the instructor and practicing what we are doing. So, kick-boxing has been almost like a meditative thing for me and that focuses my mind what I am doing just that.

Thus, participants perceive that leisure and meditation experiences can be similar because they both provide relaxation.

-Freedom or free-ing
The concept of ‘freedom’ was often mentioned during the interviews (4 out of 16). A monk pointed out the importance of freedom for meditation. For example:

My mind is much less bound up by worry or self-consciousness, or wanting...so it’s much freer...It’s helpful in having freedom from wanting, wanting, wanting...Eventually, the mind doesn’t crave nearly as much for the things.

We would not be imprisoned by our low time...I am not contained in those. I am everything. I can’t be reduced to that, to those sensations...We could be free from them.

Buddhist practice is about freedom, freedom from suffering. And there are lots of ways to release suffering. If somebody has pain in his or her body, he or she can take a pill or get a massage. The real suffering that causes everything else is the suffering that comes from not really understanding, and knowing who we are.

It liberates people.

When you feel solid grounded free, once you taste that you really want to manifest more and more.

It’s not that I feel obligated, as much as I just love it. I just want and desire it so much. And I appreciate the fact, and I also figure that if you look at 24 hours a day, how much time do you turn our mind to the Dharma and train it to be unconditioned...So, I would like to spend as much time as possible and an
unconditioned state...I find if I do it the first thing, I kind of that mind being for the day, and then it’s kinda of unfold based on that understanding, way of being, instead of conceptual thinking.

A few participants (N = 4) agreed that meditation can be leisure but still pointed out how they are at least slightly different. For example:

Maybe (meditation is leisure). I do it (meditation) for a personal reason in free time. I run, hang out with friends, and read. But, they don’t require discipline like meditation does, so that’s the difference.

Yeah I think you can consider this… as my time like leisure itself is to let you do for yourself it’s not a matter of being selfish but… something that is not for work, not for family, just for you.

Eventually meditation becomes the state where body and mind are at complete rest. That is quite freeing. Then one can keep this freed mind and apply it to different situations in life, while working, the mind can remain open, calm, free, yet respond to situations, active yet still.

Some meditators mentioned that they want to meditate regularly, but they feel lazy or busy. Even though most mentioned that discipline and structure differentiate meditation from leisure, I found that some meditators who don’t regularly meditate have similar attitudes towards meditation and leisure: they meditate when they can and when they want to. A participant said that:
I want to meditate every day at home but, it’s not easy. I feel lazy…hahah…like oh I don’t want to do it right now. Maybe later…

Similarly, some meditators (N = 3) often mentioned that they meditate when they feel like, which is how they defined leisure—doing something when they feel like it.

Sort of (feel obligated)… I feel bad when I don’t. I don’t feel bad, but I feel like I should… Of course… and I usually meditate once or twice a week. So, I am not one of those people who meditate every day. Oh, maybe after retirement.

They indicated that they meditate when they have free time or when they want to do it just like their leisure.

-Flow

Several meditators (N = 3) mentioned that they experience an intense concentration—‘can’t think of anything else’—while engaging in some leisure activities, e.g., running, playing music, and drawing, which is a similar experience to meditation. They did not mention the word “flow” but it seems like a similar experience as they get into the activity very deeply without caring about outside happenings and with intense concentration. For example, when I discussed the similar qualities of leisure and meditation with a participant, he said that playing music is similar to meditation because he can’t think of anything else, just playing music. Similarly, another participant said:
I think that both music and art, and meditation all require, at least exist, certain brain states…when you play music, you getting to this zone…you are in this place that is what happens in meditation. It’s similar they both in brain states… they both take place in these modes… so you start playing, and you begin to hear what you are playing, and you hear and you feel it, and then becomes black-out you are playing. And you hear that, and you feel that, and it feels on itself. This cycle of hearing, feeling and playing, and as you keep going further into this music... sort of forget about everything else. I guess I am getting really close to present… It’s very close to focus things because you are not thinking about anything. You are not even thinking about playing. You just do it. You are thinking about what you want in your head, you think about what you want to hear, and you forget what you are doing: lose control of your hands…that way you are sort of able to focus on that sound...So really interesting to be in present like that. I think similar for art…very focused cuz you have a canvas, or drawing pad…it’s a very clear focus, this is your world…this is it. There is nothing else exist outside this canvas…So, it’s really close to focus the experience. I think meditation, how I’ve been doing it, is similar brain state in that everything else sort of evaporates. But it’s more open, it’s more blank… the similarity that you can’t be really thinking that much, at least consciously. You just sort of allow your brain to do something. That’s why I’ve been practicing meditation that has been more open-awareness, so… it’s interesting.

They mentioned that when they engage in some leisure activities for a certain time, they get into those very deeply with a very intense concentration and are not able to think about anything that is happening outside. They perceived that the focused and concentrated state that they experience during the meditation practice is similar. Also, that is a main component of flow, thus it is possible to assume that meditators experience flow during their leisure and meditation.

**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEDITATION AND LEISURE**

On the other hand, there are different qualities between leisure and meditation. Some meditators mentioned that “leisure is more like doing whatever I feel like doing,” while
meditation comparably requires more discipline, schedules and structures. Also, meditation methods affect other aspects of life such as relationships and work, but leisure is more for enjoying the moment and escaping from worries during the short-term. Some meditators mentioned that leisure (hanging out with friends, getting a massage, having a beer, laughing with friends, and forgetting about it) is a temporary solution from worries and difficult situations. However, meditation is a solution for a long-term because meditation deals with problems at a deeper level, and the effects last longer.

Relaxation

Even though “relaxing” is a similar quality between meditation and leisure, some different elements on meditation regarding the attitude of relaxation were discussed. Some meditators emphasized that the kind of relaxation is different from just relaxing through watching TV or doing other fun activities because they actively have to work on forgetting the negative feelings through the practice. I also thought meditation is relaxing, having a quiet time and space, and trying to learn to appreciate and be more positive about life. However, as I meditate more regularly and seriously, I learned that cultivating the mind is more important than just sitting without doing anything and eventually the cultivation would bring me more peace and deeper relaxation. From watching myself (my thoughts) constantly, I was able to gain control, which allowed me to cancel negative thoughts and made me more relaxed when I was meditating but also when I was not meditating. Thus, I realized that it is about “freedom” from thoughts and something more than just relaxing. Four participants pointed out this quality of how relaxation through meditation is different from just sitting. For example:
You can say that the actual practice of meditation includes relaxation, attention, and awareness.

The practice precisely is relaxing and learning about stress, and what causes it. Then one learns to resolve stress, and the internal causes as opposed to escaping some external stress.

I don’t know if people would consider it leisure or an essential practice. I can only answer in terms of what kind of attitude to have towards meditation. Some people see meditation and retreats as kinds of vacations where they just go once in a while to relax and enjoy themselves like going to a spa. This may be some people’s approach. However, those kinds of people aren’t able to really get benefits from mediation. They just see it as a kind of external activity that they do to ‘get away’ or to enjoy themselves for a bit. Then go back to the stress and worry of daily life. That’s a ‘meditation tourist’ attitude, I guess you can call it or ‘retreat center tourist’.

All the while trying to maintain a mental state of relaxation yet alertness, calmness yet clarity, as opposed to running here and there to try to get as many pleasant sensations as possible. So more than leisure, it’s nutriment! Essential nutrients for each day. ‘Nutriments’ for mental nutrition. Take twice daily in the morning and evening with a cushion and some water.

Thus, meditators would experience relaxation but with more alert attitude. Also, if they feel some stress, instead of avoiding it, they try to find the reason for it and try to understand the situation. After working on this and practicing, they can feel more relaxed not only when they are meditating but also when they are doing some other activities. They pursue relaxation
through the meditation practice, but they also pay much attention to create healthy lifestyles and minds.

Accordingly, two meditators pointed out that meditation can be considered as a form of healthy or essential leisure because it requires a healthy attitude. For example:

Meditation is an essential practice, not just fun, and not just a way to fix our problems... without doing the work of applying our awareness to daily life. So you may want to be careful in using the word leisure and how you present your point because going for a massage is a kind of healing leisure. But it doesn’t get to the point, whereas meditation and self-reflection are ‘essential’ leisures that can help us resolve stress in the midst of stress.

Monastics may do things that are similar to some people’s leisure activities but the attitude may be different. Whatever we do, we should ask, ‘Is this healthy for the body and mind?’ ‘Can we learn something useful by doing this?’ ‘Will it help to cultivate a clear and calm mind?’ and that’s one way to see if an activity is beneficial or not.

Therefore, one of the benefits of meditation can be relaxation, like leisure, but it may require individuals to pay more attention to a healthy attitude and alert minds. This is why meditation may require more commitment than leisure and a regular schedule to practice mind cultivation. I personally experienced that, after practicing meditation over a few months, I had gained the skill of controlling the mind. Thus I feel more relaxed in general and focus more on a healthy mind and body.
Discipline

As a consequence, meditation requires more discipline than leisure. Several participants (N = 4) mentioned that leisure is doing something for “a personal reason,” “enjoyable,” “in my own time,” and “for myself.” But, meditation requires more discipline. For example:

The difference would be, for leisure I do whatever I feel like, whereas meditation, at least I am trying to follow some discipline… I have a deeper commitment to meditation, more commitment than to Elk Creek Café.

Leisure is kind of like when people do things that they like, or to get a kind of enjoyment from doing a hobby, etc. It can be a kind of pleasure seeking. Usually monastics, due to their code of discipline, do not do things like that but rather make use of all time as a way to practice cultivating their minds rather than letting the mind run after something pleasurable or leisurely.

I really want to be more regular about that, more committed… it’s at this time, and it’s a set thing. And I know there are gonna be the other people there, so there is kinda accountability thing, and whereas home is easy to… I realize I can say, ‘Ok, I am gonna meditate everyday at six o’clock.’ Well, I am not always at home at six o’clock... I’ve been thinking that lately, choosing that time in the morning, like getting up earlier that might work out because then nothing can really interrupt that.
Based on these comments, they emphasized that meditation requires more structure and discipline than leisure. Additionally, one participant shared his experience of achieving the first stage of 7 or 8 stages of practice, similar to Nirvana, where he can be in a very peaceful zone by his own control. People may not experience this kind of achievement through their leisure activities. This requires a great amount of mental training and dedication.

Also, in certain traditions like Mahayana or Rinzai Zen, the disciplines are even stricter. When I went to Buddhist temples in Korea (Mahayana), I had to sit on the floor and tolerated the pain for hours, and ‘tolerating’ is part of practice. Unlike this, in mindfulness meditation, with the Penn State meditation groups, they were more into relaxing and taking one’s own comfortable position and place. The meditation leaders would emphasize that meditation should be relaxing but not involve struggling or trying to force anything, but let the thoughts go, watch, then accept and become interested in those thoughts. Thus, each tradition requires different levels of discipline. However, from the meditation meetings, we concluded that even though the ways of practicing or dealing with mind while meditating, the end is the same, which is not thinking. Also, one participant who meditated for the past 30 years, mentioned that experiencing a long-term retreat is important for learning about cultivating the mind. He said that without experiencing a long-term retreat, like 4-5 days of meditation, it’s not easy to experience cultivating the mind.

In addition, not only tradition matters but also how many years of practice (or even participants’ age) can affect how much you are relax. For example, one participant said that he’s been meditating for about 10 years. I asked him if the longer you meditate, the easier you can concentrate. He said that it is true and getting older helps, too. Thus, it seemed that several factors help meditators to cultivate their minds better or achieve deeper levels of relaxation.
These include the tradition, the length of practice, participation in a long-term retreat, and age. Participants all agreed that they can achieve those through a good amount and level of discipline.

Structure

I found that some meditators have a structured meditation schedule and the structure was discussed as a characteristic that differentiated it from leisure. For example, meditation group meetings and sessions have set times in certain places by following certain rules.

A typical day of the Zen center on Sunday would be that 16 or 17 people sit around in the tea and library area and discuss a topic related to their practice for an hour, then go to the meditation room and do the sitting meditation and walking meditation in the room. After that they go outside and do the walking meditation in the garden area.

For the Open Meditation Society, on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, with one meditation leader, 3 or 4 people drop in, and sit together for about half an hour including a short introductory session and a short discussion session for about 15 minutes after the meditation to share how each one’s meditation went. Only T’s session on Wednesday is longer and more structured, as T used to be a meditation teacher. She also provides a half an hour introductory session about how to sit and what is a meditation session for beginners. After that, 7 or 8 people sit together, and then they do an hour book discussion session. For example:

< O-An Zendo center meditation schedule >

10AM-11AM: Discussion (They discuss a topic related to their practice with tea)
11AM-1PM: Chanting-Sitting meditation-Walking meditation-Zazen sitting-Chanting-Walking meditation outside-Singing songs.

<T’s meditation session with the Open Meditation Society>
Wed. Meditation Session – open to all

6:45-7:15 Introduction to Meditation (good for first time meditators or for review)
7:30-8:00 Meditation - sitting (silent meditation)
8:00-9:00 Discussion (currently studying the book entitled Shambhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior)

Accordingly, the informants shared their structured meditation practice schedule as below:

I guess they (Leisure and Meditation) are not very different. However, the formal sitting meditation, or any other formal meditation that I do is important, usually, not always, sitting in a quiet place, protected, in a shrine. So that’s different: a place that happens. And I think most everything else is pretty much the same.

I do yoga and Tai-chi. That’s part of my practice. And then I walk, I do Kinhin (walking meditation) every morning. From 9AM to 10:30AM, I walk in the wood… So, I try to meditate for half an hour in the morning. And I go for a Kinhin for an hour and half. And then at 4 o’clock I do yoga, and about quarter to five, I start Tai-Chi. And then from 5 to 6, I meditate.

I think, for meditation, I really make it a priority, and I schedule it, whereas I go to the gym--I don’t schedule. Maybe I have this intention that I am gonna do it. And I may or may not do it. I may not go to a bike ride, I may not get the book read today, whereas (for) meditation I am making more of like an appointment with myself.
Because it’s a certain time of the day, that works for me. Ok, 7:30 Wed, I am with this group, will work. I can schedule that...Maybe I make it more of a priority. I may not cook something that I wanna cook even though I have the time.

Obviously no during the winter (regular gardening). I don’t like (to garden) every Thursday night. Some ways, meditation is more structured than other leisure.

Another participant said that he wants to make meditation practice a consistent thing, “like exercising, you can’t work out once and expect the benefits.” She expressed that in order to fully take the benefits of meditation she thinks she has to meditate on a regular basis consistently. One participant noted that it is important to set a certain time to practice meditation, especially in an academic job. He feels like he works for seven days a week and constantly thinks about his work and research. Thus, he wants to have a time to block himself from work and just relax with meditation. However, I have to note that leisure can also be structured like watching TV at 9 P.M., or playing golf at 9 A.M., and just maybe not as much as meditation.

**Effects on Other Aspects in Life**

Most participants (N = 8) mentioned another difference is how meditation affects life and work, unlike leisure. Some mentioned that it is not about spending time on meditation, but more like investing time because of the constructive outcomes, such as effective stress reduction, that allows them to be more focused at work and be more efficient. They said that:

Meditation has an effect on how I do things,

When I meditate on a regular basis, it’s easier to simply stay with the fish to just eat and to enjoy.
Also, it helps me concentrate and to respond to things rather than just react. Furthermore, mediation relaxes me…to slow things down and clear my head. It slows me down and helps me take things a little less seriously…When I’m meditating on a regular basis, I also can usually remain centered when these things happen. I don’t get so caught up.

I am more focused… I think it helps me stay focused on what’s important.

Similarly, several participants mentioned that they incorporate meditation principles into their work. As opposed to this, several noted that hanging out with friends, laughing with them, forgetting about worries, doing drugs, drinking, and just keeping busy with activities which seem like leisure, are a temporary solution. For example:

They look for that (getting away from difficulties) in drugs, in alcohol, or in entertainment, in filling up their planner… in all kinds of distractions to fill that feeling.

People develop the ways of tricking themselves? Make them think it’s gone away. So, let’s say you are frightened. You say, just have a beer. Or, how about I go out with friends and we will laugh. Forget about it. But it really hasn’t gone away. Will come up again…so it’s like we all develop temporary solution.

The control that I can gain from this sort of practice would help me…physical health as well as mental health, my work ethics, and my intention to balance.

Many participants (N = 9) also mentioned that with their clearer minds, they can make better decisions and see more things (i.e., solutions). They also noted that their days, weeks, and
lives go more smoothly when they regularly meditate because they have clearer and calmer minds.

From meditation practice throughout the year, I realized that we consume a great deal of energy thinking about unimportant things and worrying about things that we can’t do anything about. As a result, when we need energy to do important things, we feel we do not have it because of unnecessary consumption. Therefore, I felt like I am saving energy by meditating. Similarly, one participant said that he felt so tired and sleepy but, after meditation, he always feels more energized. I was also feeling tired and didn’t want to go to meditation but, after meditation, I didn’t feel sleepy anymore. I planned to go home straight after meditation, but I actually decided to get more work done before going home.

I also met one participant who did her master’s thesis project on “Zen.” A lot of the titles for her art work were “contemplation”, “wonder”, and so on. Later, when I had a formal interview with her, I mentioned this and she said that is what she hoped people would notice. Most of her photos for the thesis exhibition are very little things in everyday life, e.g., a part of street, or green onions, etc. It was shown as “appreciating” little things in life.

Furthermore, several meditators mentioned that calming themselves down and clearing their minds help them be more efficient at work. For example:

If I just take the time, then I think I am more efficient. As far as time, it pays off…As investment whereas spending time, cuz easy to think I am sitting here doing nothing…Especially I think in American culture, you should always be doing something. Hahahah! Work harder, work longer, work more, all these.
Making time for meditation seems like an investment for them because it eventually makes them work better. In short, meditators incorporate the meditation principles into their work, life, and other activities, and try to have a positive attitude in their lives.
IS MEDITATION MORE LEISURE-LIKE FOR EXPERIENCED OR INEXPERIENCED MEDITATORS

Results indicate that meditators experience stress reduction, spiritual health, self-actualization, flow, mood enhancement (emotion management), and quality of life enhancement, during both their leisure and their meditation. Therefore, meditation and leisure appear to provide individuals with similar outcomes. However, the meditation experience for beginning and veteran meditators differed. Inexperienced meditators reported that meditation can be hard work because they have to consciously concentrate, but doing rituals, praying, and meditating can still be calming and relaxing. They also enjoy the quiet time alone (just for themselves) because they always feel rushed. On the other hand, experienced meditators were interested in achieving a higher level of freedom and complete relaxation from worries, thoughts and other external exigencies. They also focus on cultivating their minds by deep observation and actively integrating meditation methods into their lives in both work and leisure. Nevertheless, while their meditation experiences differed, the outcomes for both experienced and inexperienced meditators were similar. This may mirror the experiences of individuals who are taking up a new leisure activity versus those who have been involved in an activity for an extended period of time. Therefore, the positive experiences and outcomes derived from meditation appear to be similar to those from leisure.

Similarities Between Meditation and Leisure: Experienced Meditators

Stress Reduction

Experienced meditators perceived that leisure and meditation are not distinct because they are “all woven together” in life. Engaging in leisure is also part of their meditation practice.
These include being very mindful about what they are doing and asking if activities are healthy and beneficial for them and others. As such, experienced meditators focus on “cultivating their minds” by deep observation and actively and consciously integrating meditation methods into their lives.

Meditation can have an element of leisure but it should be presented as essential and healthy leisure, which is different from general leisure activities because meditation is designed for healthy outcomes and it should be done every day.

One participant also mentioned that sometimes people feel stressed in leisure because of the need to make sure they have fun. Thus, to experienced meditators or monks, meditation can be more relaxing than other kinds of leisure because it requires a completely relaxed mind and attitude, and freeing from everything.

-Freedom

Freedom or free-ing was frequently discussed because according to the experienced meditators, meditation is all about “liberating” oneself from desire and suffering. They may experience a higher level of freedom that is free from desire, wanting, and worries as well including physical freedom. Perceived freedom is one of the important concepts in leisure but the freedom that experienced meditators talk about and experience can be distinguished from perceived freedom. Meditators indicated that finding the “true-self” in a deeper level by a deep observation of themselves helps them solve problems in the long-term, instead of escaping from
them just for the moment or trying to forget about them. Experienced meditators also may perceive leisure as a mindset in life, not focusing on activities.

Additionally, experienced meditators do some “leisure activities for meditation.” They do particularly yoga and Tai-Chi in preparation for meditation to sit better and strengthen the physical ability to meditate. They also said that they could concentrate on meditation better after doing yoga.

**Similarities Between Meditation and Leisure: Beginner Meditators**

**Stress Reduction**

Beginner meditators said that meditation and leisure are similar because neither of them is work, and both help relaxing. Most pointed out that meditation helps them calm down, and reduce stress and anxiety. They also enjoy freedom from responsibilities, work stress, worries, thoughts, internet, and phone calls. Also, they try to calm themselves down, so when they go back to the “trouble-zone,” they are able to handle the situation better. I also learned that beginners tend to appreciate or enjoy the quiet time in the meditation room or meditating alone. As such, beginners try to solve the immediate problems in their lives through meditation with relaxation and calming themselves down.

When there are volunteers or visitors here at DDRC, we may take them for some ice cream or to a nearby park, so that they can enjoy the beautiful scenery or go to some place (museums) where they can learn something about culture, art, or something like that...
Flow

Several (N = 5) mentioned that during their meditation practice, they had an experience similar to flow that they would experience while they were running certain miles (especially dedicated runners), playing music instruments, and drawing. Although they did not use the term “flow,” what they described was similar to the flow state. For example:

Like painting or drawing, it’s just enhancing the view of the world. It’s like you see more of things…when you think about that, why I ever wanna go back to watch television? So things that occupy my time: Music, painting and drawing… I do more of that, which is really good for brain…

Beginner meditators explained that, at a certain point, they forget about everything but just being present, experiencing the moment of not thinking of anything else, like when they meditate for a certain period of time. For example, when they are running, playing music or drawing, they experience not being able to think of anything else and feeling like being in the moment. The beginner meditators said that this is similar to their meditation experience for concentrating or focusing on not thinking about anything.

Conversely, experienced meditators did not mention this similarity (the ability to not think about anything else is meditation to beginner meditators). Experienced meditators emphasized more on cultivating the mind, having deeper understanding of themselves and others (finding true-self), and gaining wisdom and compassion through meditation while beginner meditators seem to understand meditation as a way for slowing down, relaxing, and taking some time off from responsibilities. Also, some experienced meditators mentioned that concentration and focusing on not thinking are not true meditation as meditation is more than that. However,
meditation can mean many things depending on the tradition, thus it is difficult to conclude that what is a more true-meditation experience.

-Social and Solitary Aspects of Leisure and Meditation

Furthermore, socializing was a similar element. Leisure scholars (e.g., Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Caltabiano, 1994; Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Rook, 1987) argue that social leisure activities may help alleviate stress, and freely chosen social forms of leisure can more effective in reducing stress. Similarly, people can achieve similar outcomes through meditation, especially when they regularly visit or join meditation groups and when they seek spiritual and social support. Participants did not mention “socializing” as a similarity, but I observed that people have a tea time, chat together, make new friends, organize social events and feast together as a leisure activity in the meditation group meetings and the Zen center. This appeared more at the Zen center as they have visitors, beautiful architecture and environment, various social events and yoga classes and retreats.

In fact, leisure is a social activity but also can be solitary, and it can be both active or passive. Many people enjoy solitary leisure like spiritual reading, being in a quiet and solitary place, and getting away from routine (Heintznman & Mannell, 1999; Heintzman, 2002; Heintzman & Coleman, 2010) for relaxation, personal development, and spiritual well-being. This quality of leisure appears to be similar to the crux of meditation as people meditate to get away from worries or daily burdens and also see to learn about themselves and different cultures.
On the other hand, beginner meditators mentioned that leisure is something that they do when they feel like and whatever they want to or enjoy doing. Their perceptions on leisure and meditation seem more like the contemporary concepts of leisure including free time, particular kinds of activities, or a state of mind. Many participants mentioned that they don’t feel obligated to meditate and chose to practice meditation regardless their families’ traditional religion. For instance, one participant expressed that she came to meditate because her husband was out of town and she had nothing to do. At the Zen center, there were also people who visited just one time or few times, or some people come and meditate when they feel like it, but not on a regular basis.

In addition, a few beginners reported that meditation and leisure are similar because both are “just for me,” and “my own time.” They enjoy getting away from obligation and enjoy the quiet time alone that is relaxing. This appeared in their meditation practice: they don’t feel obligated to meditate, but they want to do it due to the positive outcomes. For instance, they noted that the day, week, or their life goes better and more smoothly when meditating on a regular basis.

Most related their leisure to free time, not being occupied, freedom from responsibilities, and enjoying what they want to do. Experienced meditators noted that meditation practice is about liberating and free-ing from desire, wanting, and suffering at a deeper level. Even though there are some differences between the perceived freedom of leisure and the higher level of freedom of meditation, it is interesting to think about different kinds or levels of freedom in this context. Meditation can be similar to leisure as a state of mind or spiritual experience; meditation involves and helps develop a great perceived freedom and internal locus of control.
Godbey (2008) claimed that leisure involves perceived freedom and internal locus of control. In conclusion, meditation and leisure share some similar element on freedom, although there might be differences between what kinds of freedom, and how people gain it, and how long they have to engage in the activity.

**Differences Between Meditation and Leisure - Experienced Meditators**

The primary leisure activities among experienced meditators were Tai-Chi, yoga and walking in the woods. These activities help meditation, or can even be a part of their meditation practice. While experienced meditators perceived that meditation and leisure are all woven together in their lives, they discussed differences such as leisure activities as preparing for meditation. While beginner meditators separate their leisure from meditation, experienced meditators perceived that they do some leisure activities like Tai-Chi and yoga in order to better prepare for their meditation practice. According to these meditators, Tai-Chi is designed for meditation, and yoga helps to sit longer and develop flexibility and strength.

These meditators also emphasized that leisure should be healthy and beneficial to themselves and their relationships with others. A Buddhist monk suggested that meditation can be considered as “essential or healthy leisure,” because, despite the similar qualities between leisure and meditation, people practice or enjoy meditation for positive outcomes such as “developing a healthy mind and body on purpose.” However, other leisure activities don’t primarily focus on cultivating their minds. For example, people play sports just for relaxing or having fun with friends. Unlike leisure activities, meditation focuses on cultivating healthy minds.
Woven Together

Three experienced meditators reported that meditation and leisure are not separate, but all woven together. Some participants also emphasized meditation in daily life. For example:

Meditating while eyes are open…the ultimate goal is just not to close your eyes and sit down and, and block everything out. Look at Buddha, his eyes are slightly open. They are not completely closed. He said he likes to meditate when you are talking with some people, when you are riding a bicycle, when you are playing music, it should be something that happens all the time…You will see it when Dal Lai Lama is talking. He is very in the present. He’s always meditating. He’s letting just all come through. Not getting trapped in it.

Yoga was a way for me to, when you assume the posture, in a yoga pose, there are kinda combination of meditation and movement. Because when you take a posture you are still. Then you are breathing, then…you are also moving into the posture. And you are moving out of the posture.

Surprisingly, two meditators also perceived that their leisure activities are helpful for their meditation practice as follows:

There are lots of ways they are similar and different…one of the reasons I started doing yoga was in order to sit better, to sit longer. Because I needed greater flexibility in my legs, my body, to be able to sit for. I’ve been on a retreat where we’ve meditated for nine hours a day. I needed to be physically in shape, since I started meditating relatively late in life. I needed to get my body into shape. That is the reason for starting yoga.
There (yoga) is an activity in the posture. It’s breathing, it’s stretching your muscle, but it’s more meditative activity. You are very mindful about where your body is, how you are stretching your muscles, so it’s body awareness.

Tai-Chi is a moving meditation. When I am moving in Tai-Chi, I feel really connected with energy, with energy of universe. And I try to do Tai-Chi outdoor. Because as you move Tai-Chi, you can get in touch with the wind, and the energy on the plant, just, become a kind of partner, with the energy around you. So, those are two practices that I find really enrich my meditation practice. And meditation is the most significant thing. And these other practices enrich it. They begin, they help you make a transition from the cushion to moving around in the world.

They (leisure activities) are different from meditation in that, they don’t sort of intentionally bring you to the place, where you can have what in our practice is called Prishna, which means wisdom, which comes as consequence of settling the mind first, stopping the mind from its busy-ness, then developing concentration. And out of that comes insight, or wisdom Prishna. In Tai-Chi and Yoga, those are practices which are not oriented toward insight, they are oriented toward themselves. We do this to exercise our bodies, to become one with our bodies, to connect with the energy of the universe, and they have less to do with that penetration into reality into who we really are. So, it’s not that zazen or Zen sitting meditation has a goal, it’s that there something that happens in it naturally. That doesn’t happen in the other two. Not in the same way.

And there are many ways to get there. You could get there through Tai-Chi. You could get there through yoga. You could get there through dancing. You could get there through painting. You could get there through walking in the wood because these are all Dharmas. Everything teaches. So anything can get you there. They are all pathways. That’s what’s so wonderful about the fact, that’s what I love about the practice because it’s not dogmatic. It doesn’t say this is the right way, this is the only way, you know. In
Zen, I think Buddhist practice generally, but certainly in Zen, it’s your way. And there are many vehicles that you can take. And what’s you are drawn to as a person, you know I love to dance, I love to move, so my practice is, and I like to make art. So, my practices tend to be those. But when I am doing them, I feel like I am practicing my spiritual path.

I first get up, have a little routine… I do little Qigong… that’s designed, prepared use to meditate. So, I do that. And I make my tea. Some tea, and little snack. And then I sit down.

Therefore, it appears that some experienced meditators engage in certain leisure activities like yoga, and Tai-chi in order to help their meditation practice. They do not separate those activities from meditation but perceive them as part of meditation.

**Alertness and Cultivating the Mind**

Experienced meditators reported that leisure and meditation are both relaxing but meditation requires *alertness* and a *relaxed attitude*. These *attitudes* may contribute to a deeper and complete relaxation. A monk said that meditation is relaxing, but also requires alertness. This is related to cultivating the mind rather than just sitting and resting. However, meditation has various meanings to different people, depending on what kind of tradition they practice and how long they have been practicing. Some experienced meditators who passed into more advanced stages of meditation may experience a different level of relaxation through meditation. They were calmer and more in control of their state of mind.

**Leisure as a Temporary Solution**
Experienced meditators mentioned that some leisure activities (having a beer, hanging out and laughing with friends) are “temporary solutions” for forgetting about the difficulties and stress in life with effects that do not last long. They mentioned that the effects of meditation last longer because meditation practice helps to solve problems for the long-term; meditation deals with or heals the deeper problems.

Three participants even mentioned that they felt stress during certain leisure activities. For example, some worry if social events will go well and sometimes they run around to have fun without knowing what they are doing—just being busy with fun. Sometimes people have to engage in coerced leisure or competitive games that make them more stressed. Unlike these, meditation may give them some peaceful time. For example:

They may not even know why they run... even during leisure time. It becomes running to have fun...Some stress about trying to have fun, and making sure it goes well. Afterwards, they feel more exhausted than before… people may just see meditation like a spa.

Thus, four experienced meditators think some leisure activities that are only for pleasure are only a temporary solution for difficult situations while meditation practices can be a long-term solution for stress and problems. Also, they even perceive that some leisure activities can cause stress if people focus too much on making sure the events go well or feeling pressure to have fun.

**Differences Between Meditation and Leisure: Beginner Meditators**

Beginner meditators pointed out that meditation methods affect other aspects in their lives in constructive ways such as dealing with work stress, relationships, and better managing
their emotions. Unlike leisure, meditation makes them focus on important things such as well-being or more positive things in their life. Meditation especially helps them to not get caught up in negative things but to respond to those obstacles instead through contemplation. Therefore, some of the reasons that they keep practicing meditation are these benefits.

Many participants mentioned that meditation requires more “discipline” compared to their leisure activities, and more structured, especially in a formal sitting, in a set time with a meditation group, while leisure is “doing what they are feeling like and whenever they want to do,” but meditation requires to follow some rules. They said that they meditate regularly, but don’t hang out with friends or go to a café on a regular basis.

One participant reported that meditation and leisure are different because leisure activities require more attention to make sure they go well. She said:

Other activities you really have to engage to this, like I really have to pay attention what I am doing. Like if I am baking I really have to pay attention. Otherwise something bad will happen. And when I watch a movie, I have to pay attention for the story.

On the other hand, leisure scholars often suggest that having leisure helps people avoid worrying, or not thinking about difficult situations. However, if people use their leisure time in collaboration with meditation, they can learn how to embrace the difficulties, not just avoiding them by being busy with leisure activities. If meditation is leisure, it has both temporary and long-term benefits. In a sense, meditation provides that kind of leisure space to people.
SUMMARY

The majority of participants first became interested in meditation through college courses like “Buddhism,” “World Religions,” and “Eastern Philosophy.” They visited local Zen centers to begin their practice. Most said that they are spiritual, but not religious. Thirteen out of sixteen participants did not consider themselves Buddhist (the three who did were a monk, a Zen priest, and meditation teacher) and strongly expressed that they are not religious. Many (about 10 out of 16) grew up in Catholic families (one in a Jewish family). These findings are consistent with Durkheim’s notion that Buddhism is highly philosophical.

Results indicate that meditators experience stress reduction, spiritual health, self-actualization, flow, mood enhancement (emotion management), and quality of life enhancement, during both their leisure and meditation. Therefore, meditation and leisure appear to provide individuals with similar outcomes. However, the meditation experience for beginning and veteran meditators differed. Inexperienced meditators reported that meditation can be hard work because they have to consciously concentrate, but doing rituals, praying, and meditating can still be calming and relaxing. They also enjoy the quiet time alone (just for themselves) because they always feel rushed. On the other hand, experienced meditators are interested in achieving higher level of freedom and complete relaxation from worries, thoughts, and other external distractions. They also focus on cultivating their minds by deep observation, and actively integrating meditation methods into their lives in both work and leisure. Nevertheless, the outcomes for both experienced and inexperienced meditators were similar. This may mirror the experiences of individuals who are taking up a new leisure activity versus those who have been involved in an activity for and extended period of time. This study employs a new lens through which to
examine positive experiences and outcomes derived from meditation that renders it similar to leisure.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purposes of the current study are (1) to determine the nature of the meditation experience from the perspectives of experienced meditators and inexperienced meditators, (2) to determine similarities and differences between the experiences and outcomes of leisure and meditation for experienced meditators and inexperienced meditators, (3) to determine if meditation is leisure for experienced meditators and inexperienced meditators, (4) to compare leisure outcomes with meditation outcomes based on the literature, and the fieldwork. The study was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What experiences and outcomes are associated with meditation?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the experiences and outcomes of meditation and the experiences and outcomes of leisure?
3. Are there differences in how experienced and inexperienced meditators perceive the experience and outcomes of meditation? If yes, what are these differences?

I will discuss the results as they pertain to each of the research questions below.

What experiences and outcomes are associated with meditation? The primary experiences and outcomes associated with meditation among members of the sample appeared to be stress reduction, management of emotion, and improved quality of life. Most participants noted that the meditation practice helps them clear their minds, relax, and slow down. Numerous studies in the literature review support these aspects of meditation outcomes: meditation
practices encourage people to experience deep psychological and physiological relaxation (Alexander et al., 1993; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Miller et al., 1995; Woolfolk, 1975). Meditation can also help people as a breathing method encouraging the physical systems to relax, as well as to reduce mental activities (Layman, 1978). In fact, many psychological studies demonstrate this. For example, meditation practitioners showed “more relaxed physiological functioning, a greater reduction anxiety, and reduced tension on the job” (Alexander et al., 1993, p. 21). Interestingly, the majority of participants engaged in meditation for relaxation rather than a religious commitment, and Corby et al. (1978) found that people have chosen to meditate for relaxing without getting involved in them as religious activity. These findings about outcomes of meditation are important because there is a need for effective and cost-reducing interventions to replace or augment the traditional ones, especially in the American society as stress and anxiety have threatened people’s health (Miller et al., 1995).

In addition, meditation may help participants better manage negative emotions and situations, and they even learn to see obstacles as gifts and new opportunities. Meditation has allowed them to have more control over life and negative thoughts, and achieve the sense of balance. Similarly, Ekman (2007) argued that if we become aware that an emotion begins to drive our behavior, we can consciously choose the most constructive reaction to the situation. As such, meditation can allow people to enhance self-regulation strategy (Kabat-Zinn, 1984; Shapiro & Giber, 1978). For example, meditation can “improve individuals’ negative symptoms via the mechanism of positive emotions” (Johnson et al, 2009, p. 508), and can allow individuals to enhance opportunities for generating positive emotions (Fredrickson et al., 2008).

Many respondents also reported that meditation enhanced their lifestyle/quality of life in the following ways: cultivating a frugal lifestyle, clearing the mind and slowing down, being in
the present, becoming more compassionate towards other people, and developing the holistic worldview. As a consequence, the participants became more positive, more content, happier, and healthier. Thus, they seemed to enjoy and keep cultivating healthy lifestyles through their meditation practice. This finding is also supported by the literature review. For example, Fredrickson et al. (2008) noted that individuals can increase their attention, positive relations with themselves and others, and health, decrease their self-consciousness through meditation. As they practice more and regularly, individuals become more satisfied with their lives and change their approach toward life to more positive ways (Fredrickson et al., 2008), and meditators showed much healthier social relationship (Guttman, 1996). From the current study data and literature reviews, meditation can be recommended as a method for reducing anxiety, and improving quality and balance of life.

What are the similarities and differences between the experiences and outcomes of meditation and the experiences and outcomes of leisure? The participants reported the similarities as relaxing, experiencing an intense concentration and involvement, and enjoying the activity from their free choice. They also noted that both activities are “just for me” and “my own time,” not for other people, and chances for getting away from obligations/daily hassles and enjoying the quiet time alone.

Furthermore, socializing was a similar element between leisure and meditation. Through meditation meetings, people have a tea time, chat together, make new friends, organize social events and feast together as a leisure activity in the meditation group meetings and Zen center. They also have visitors (who are not necessarily meditators, and who want to enjoy the beautiful architecture and environment), and people who like to join various social events and activities
like yoga classes/retreats. Interestingly enough, meditation and leisure as solitary activities can be similar too as opposed to the social events as they like to engage in both activities to get away from everyday hassles and social contacts.

On the other hand, the participants noted differences between meditation and leisure. According to them, meditation requires more discipline and structure. Also, it has its own purpose towards healthy goals like wisdom and compassion. Some also perceive meditation practice as an essential activity for them. They pointed out that meditation visitors who are not practicing meditation on a regular basis seriously would not experience the true benefits of meditation.

Interestingly, even though relaxation can be similar in quality between meditation and leisure, some noted that the kind of relaxation through meditation practice requires more attention and a more relaxed attitude. Also, they can find the source of stress and learn about it and deal with it at a deeper level instead of avoiding it by occupying their time with all kinds of leisure activities. They also expressed that sometimes leisure can cause stress if they are engaged in coerced leisure or doing something that is too competitive and accompanied by stressful people. As a consequence, they pointed out that the effects of meditation last longer because they solve problems for a long-term period by dealing with the problems at a deeper level, as leisure can be a temporary solution. Another difference mentioned was the effect on other aspects in life or work. They do the leisure activities for the moments, but they try to embrace the philosophy of meditation into their lives. They pointed out that the meditation allows them to deal with work stress, relationships, and better manage their emotions in constructive ways. Meditation also makes them focus on important things such as well-being or more positive things in their life.
Are there differences in how experienced and inexperienced meditators perceive the experience and outcomes of meditation? If yes, what are these differences? The majority of participants expressed that meditation helps them relax, but beginner meditators and experienced meditators perceive their outcomes of meditation differently. I did not know about these differences before collecting and analyzing this data, and believe these findings are important regarding meditation in the leisure context. Therefore, this can be the most striking part of the current study. In fact, several psychologists found different effects of meditation depending on proficiency of the meditators (Corby et al., 1978; Herron, 1993; Orme-Johnson, 1973; Vegors, 1999). These findings are different from the general assumption that “meditation is indistinguishable from states of deep relaxation” (Corby et al, 1978, p. 571). Beginning meditators seemed to achieve relaxation while veteran meditators would cultivate the minds and gain the control of emotions in the long-term.

Beginning meditators noted that primary outcomes of meditating are calming themselves down and reducing stress and anxiety. According to the interviews, they like to enjoy freedom from responsibilities, work stress, worries, thoughts, and social contacts even for an hour a day, or a week. It seemed that they use the time of meditating and space of meditation center/room as their own opportunities for relaxing and being alone. When they engage in regular meditation or attend meditation sessions, they can feel free to get away from other responsibilities and everyday burdens—blocking themselves from the world. Unlike watching TV or other casual leisure, participants did not need to feel guilty about “not doing anything” but were able to enjoy the time alone and also felt like doing something useful and healthy for them and their bodies.

Additionally, several beginning meditators reported that they had a similar experience to flow while meditating. When in flow, they start forgetting about what is happening outside, and
stop thinking about anything especially when running a certain number of miles, playing music
ingredients, and painting. They experienced high level of involvement and intense
concentration during meditation as well as those activities. Interestingly, none of the veteran
meditators mentioned this experience of meditation practice. Thus, it is possible to assume that
beginning meditators try to concentrate or forget about things during meditation while veteran
meditators actively work on their minds. Maybe beginner meditators experience relaxation
through the flow state when engaging in leisure, while experienced meditators can experience
something more such as gaining control of their minds or obtaining power of managing their
emotions by brain activities.

Some psychological research supports this inference. For example, during meditation,
beginning meditators displayed increased autonomic activation while inexperienced meditators
displayed autonomic relaxation (Corby et al., 1978). The inexperienced meditators were also
found to “relax rather than become activated” (Corby et al, 1978, p. 571). On the other hand,
beginning meditators were found to have “electrocortical excitation and increases in oxygen
consumption” (Woolfolk, 1975, p. 1332) during meditation. Thus, inexperienced meditators
may look for relaxation through the meditation experience, while experienced meditators try to
practice controlling their minds at a deeper level and actively managing/preventing their negative
emotions (or even transferring destructive emotions to constructive ones).

Similarly, the current interview data provide evidence that veteran meditators focus more
on seriously cultivating their minds instead of simply getting away from everyday burdens or
stress. They were more dedicated to the practice. They also tend to use specific meditation
techniques or traditions such as Chan, Zen, and Shambala Buddhism, while beginners do not
care much about the tradition but use general meditation skills such as mindfulness. One
participant reported that he uses a certain meditation technique to cure his youth memories because bad youth memories could cause depression in an adult life. He was also dedicated to work on negative emotions and bad memories through meditation practices, and he believed that it worked well for him.

Also, veteran meditators liked to achieve mind control. From my observation, I learned that those veteran meditators who had meditated more than 20 years and still meditate every day seemed much more peaceful and do not feel much stress or disturbed by small hassles in life. They did not say they achieved Nirvana, but I felt that they had higher control over their emotions and life. They are extremely positive and peaceful. In fact, Corby et al (1978) found that proficient meditators “decreased autonomic orienting to external stimulation” (p. 571); “The decreased orienting to external stimuli reflects the inward focus of attention” (Corby et al, 1978, p. 571). As such, veteran meditators seemed to stay more focused with important and positive things instead of getting frustrated at small things in life.

As they might gain the control over their minds, they can achieve higher level of freedom, which they do not feel affected by outside happening such as people’s negative comments or any negative events in life. Freedom or free-ing was discussed because meditation is all about “liberating” and free-ing from desire and suffering. They experienced the higher level of freedom from desire, and worries as well as physical freedom. The perceived freedom is one of the important concepts in leisure, but the freedom that experienced meditators talk about and experience is distinguished from the perceived freedom. They mentioned that finding ‘true-self’ in a deeper level by a deep observation of themselves helps them solve problems in the long-term, instead of getting away from them just for the moment or trying to forget about them.
Interestingly enough, experienced meditators perceived that leisure and meditation are not separate because they are all woven together in life. Engaging in leisure is also part of their meditation practice. They are mindful about what they are doing and ask if those activities are healthy and beneficial for them and others. They seemed to have a great balance in their lives and achieved a healthy life style. Consistently, long-term meditators tended to maintain their physical health at a high level (Vegors, 1999). For example, “high levels of emotional health correspond to high levels of physical health…long-term meditators were on average 12 years younger than their biological age on tests of abilities such as near-point vision, reaction time, and cognitive performance” (p. 20). As a consequence, long-term meditators reported much less hospital utilization than non-meditators (Orme-Johnson, 1973), and substantially decreased the use of medical expenditures (Herron, 1993). Thy also achieved much higher qualities of psychological health—“an integration of a harmonious integration of an individual’s self with other individuals, autonomy, creativity, and a unifying philosophy of life” (Vegors, 1999, p. 19). Finally, the veteran meditators actively and consciously integrate meditation methods into their lives to have more satisfying and healthier life.

In short, in the case of meditation in central Pennsylvanina, people use meditation for relaxing, calming down, reducing stress, getting away from work/worries/negative experiences, and managing negative emotions, all of which affect life in a positive and constructive way. There are similarities and differences between meditation and leisure, but they engage in meditation in their free time and for enhancing quality of their lives. Therefore, meditation can be a useful and positive way of spending free-time or in a form of leisure with long-term solution for solving problems.
Through interviews and participant-observation, this study contributes to the flow theory (intense concentration and involvement) regarding the relationship between challenge and skills. Similar to the leisure skill and flow state relationship, beginning and veteran meditators appeared to experience the meditation state differently. For example, veteran meditators focus on activating some brain function and being able to control themselves including emotions and minds, while beginning meditators tend to try to just relax during their meditation practice.

The result of meditation and leisure data from this study also contributes to the theory of serious leisure. Non-Buddhist Americans engaging in meditation, and especially beginning meditators’ perception on meditation, seemed to be similar to serious leisure rather than casual leisure. Explaining the concept of serious leisure, Stebbins (1982) provided six qualities:

(1) Individuals have to persevere when facing difficulties, and they should maintain the positive feelings over the momentary frustration, anxiety, and fatigue; (2) they have to develop a personal career of the activity—“enduring pursuits with their own background contingencies, histories of turning points, and stages of achievement or involvement” (Stebbins, 1992. p. 6); (3) it provides the essential requirement such as special knowledge, training, or skill, for the individuals’ careers in leisure activities; (4) individuals should gain psychological and developmental benefits, including self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, and social interaction; (5) through the activity, the individuals also differentiate them from others in the social world, in terms of “special beliefs, norms, events, values, traditions, moral principles, and performance standards” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 7); (6) individuals should show strong identification with the activities—they are engaging in the particular activity with pride, tending to exhibit the excitement and satisfaction. Accordingly,
meditators who are not religious showed similar qualities in their meditation engagement, and thus, meditating can be an example of serious leisure.

This study also demonstrates the benefits of leisure and meditation. Meditation and leisure both can help people reduce stress. More specifically, my study shows that individuals who meditate may experience benefits such as stress reduction and lower blood pressure without added medical costs. “Leisure, given that it is generally regarded as freely chosen, under the control of participants, a means of compensating for life’s stresses and strains, and often social in nature, seems as though it would be an excellent means of adapting to stressors arising from other life domains” (Chick, personal communication, 2012). Accordingly, leisure, including social and solitary leisure, has been recognized as an effective stress coping strategy (Iwasaki, 2000; Mannell, 2001). Individuals deal with daily stress by a short break or leisure with friends or co-workers, and also release stress by engaging in solitary leisure like reading. Similarly, psychologists demonstrate that the outcomes of meditation are reducing stress, managing emotions, and contributing to health (Ekman, 2007; Fredrickson, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Individuals feel strong social support from other meditators at the meditation center, enjoy social events, and also meditate alone quietly to alleviate stress and anxiety.

Moreover, while meditation has not been recognized as a leisure activity in the field of leisure studies, the results of meditation may be similar to those reported from leisure activities such as relaxation, stress reduction, and anxiety alleviation. Meditation can be one of the passive leisure activities like reading, gardening, and going for a walk. As cultural and spiritual leisure activities have been growing over the past few decades, meditation as leisure should gain more attention and the literature review should more expanded on the topic in the leisure studies field, especially as it provides useful outcomes to people.
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Though limited in scale, the current results reported in my study have important implications for the field of leisure studies. I collected my primary data during four months of participant-observation, including informal interviews, as well as sixteen formal interviews. Four of the interviews were conducted over several sessions with longer hours, as they were with key informants.

Generally speaking, data collected through the participant-observation and formal interviews did not diverge on key points, though some differences between them yielded insights. For example, certain information only appeared in the observation data set such as perceptions on meditation as leisure or meditation as a social activity. The participants did not relate their meditation practice to leisure and described that leisure as social but did not mention meditation as a social activity. However, based on my observations over a few months, I learned that meditators participated in various kinds of social activities such as yoga retreats, monthly potlucks, tea time (with chatting), movie nights, hanging out with other meditators after the meditation ends, gardening together, playing music at social events at the Zen center, and feasting together, which seemed very social to me. Thus, it was useful and interesting to conduct the actual data through participant-observation and informal interviews because participants were more engaging and shared more information at a deeper level. In addition, conversations flowed more naturally in informal settings of data collection. Therefore, I was able to find out more about the phenomenon through it than just from the formal interviews, and that contributed to the depth of understanding.
LIMITATIONS

Though I found interesting results and gained satisfying answers to my research questions, I would like to acknowledge some limitations. There was no clear line between proficient meditators and beginner meditators. Some were relatively new, some were in-between new and old, and some had returned to meditate after ten years or more, and began the practice again recently. Thus, as a researcher, I had to draw distinctions between them without an objective or scientific basis for the study. The average time that the proficient participants had been meditating was approximately 30 years, based on the consistent opinions about their meditation practice and leisure experiences. Also, I have to note that the proficient meditators’ perspectives on their practice and its relation to leisure might be affected by their age, not only their meditation experiences as most of them were in their 60s. Not only did experienced meditators grow in their practice over 30 years, but also when they began their practice meditation had different cultural connotations.

The participants were also mostly professors and students who live in a small university town in central Pennsylvania in the year of 2011. Thus, my findings do not represent universally generalizable results.

Although potential problem/issue with my results is that my interpretations were based on an analysis of the recurrence of similar concepts in the participant opinions, my observation, and key informants’ feedback on my observation. Thus, the results are subject to their and my perceptions rather than perfectly objective understanding of the phenomenon. This could be remedied by conducting the study over a longer period of time with many more samples at more meditation centers.
Finally, the nature of the local Zen center and the campus meditation group did not allow me to do a large scale ethnography about their meditation experience, as they are not real monasteries or Buddhist temples. However, the fact that people easily get together to meditate without a space limitation could be a unique characteristic of the phenomenon in America.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Based on those limitations, more research can be done in the future as follows:

1. A majority of meditators pointed out that meditation and leisure both provide them relaxation, and improve perceived freedom in their life. However, the kinds of relaxation and freedom were different between proficient and beginner meditators. Proficient meditators emphasized that they experience absolute relaxed minds through the meditation practice as they can be free from thoughts, while beginner meditators just relax from daily stress or responsibilities. As this is an interesting point, this must be further investigated with more in-depth views. This is interesting because though participants expressed relaxation and freedom can be similarities between meditation and leisure, there are also different kinds of levels involved. This may contribute to the concept of true leisure that Godbey (2008) mentioned while discussing the meanings of leisure.

2. My definition of experienced or proficient meditators was vague, depending on kinds of experiences. For the current study I defined proficient meditators as those had practiced more than 20 years with daily/intense practice. However, one proficient meditator indicated that he thinks the experience of a intensive meditation event like 10 day-long retreat is very important to be a proficient meditator as it provides a different level of the meditation experience such as
deeper cultivation of the mind. I did not closely examine this as most of my participants had not been on this kind of intensive retreat, but in future research, this can be added. Investigating how long-term retreats can change practice such as cultivating minds and quality of life would be a relevant and interesting project. Although this might be important, if there are more beginner meditators in the society, examining about the pattern of beginner meditators’ behaviors and perceptions can be important. Roberts and Chick (1979) pointed out that difference between proficient players and inexperienced players “raise the problems of sampling for some cultural patterns since only experts can give the most advanced, technical, or developed view of the pattern” (p. 97). Thus, two separate studies on the proficient meditators experience, and beginner meditators experience should be conducted in the future.

3. I used a descriptive method to provide more depth information but it is incomplete and static, as its simple analysis is based on the frequency of the concepts, and this remains an exploratory study. Thus, quantitative techniques could be added for more ethnographic information, more systematic data analysis, and more visualized presentation of the results. Finally, a longer participant-observation, like one year or two years of study, may contribute to provide better and deeper information about this phenomenon.

4. Since meditation practices were recognized as strategies for managing stress and emotions, local or commercial recreation organizations might offer meditation classes to people who are interested in reducing stress and anxiety with lower costs.


Chick, G. E.. Personal communication, November 22, 2009

Chick, G. E.. Personal communication, December 21, 2009


Iwasaki, Y, Zuzanek, J., & Mannell, R. C. (2001). The effects of physically active leisure on


Appendix A

Implied Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Meditation in America

Principal Investigator: Jaeyeon Choe, Graduate Student
814 Ford Building
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 321-7185; jzc172@psu.edu

Advisor: Dr. Garry Chick
801 Ford Building
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 863-1941; gchick@psu.edu

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to determine the nature of experience of engaging in Buddhist meditation/visiting the meditation center with secondary goal of determining if it is leisure or leisure-like, and whether Buddhists or non-Buddhists experience meditation/meditation center visits differently in terms of it leisure-like qualities.

2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to answer 5-6 questions on an interview. The interviews will be audio recorded by a digital recorder. The recordings will be stored in the researcher’s personal computer. Only the researcher and her advisor will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be destroyed in three years, which is the year of 2014.

3. **Duration:** It will take about 50 minutes to complete the interview.

4. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The interview does not ask for any information that would identify who the responses belong to. In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared because your name is in no way linked to your responses. The data will be stored in the researcher’s personal computer and the researcher and her advisor only have access of the data. The data will be destroyed in three years.

5. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Jaeyeon Choe at (814) 321-7185 with questions or concerns about this study.

6. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.
You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

Completion and return of the survey implies that you have read the information in this form and consent to take part in the research. Please keep this form for your records or future reference.
Appendix B

Interview Questions

As gaining more information on the phenomenon and the participants, my primary questions were revised as follows:

For example, the original questions included:

- Are you Buddhist/non-Buddhist? How did you learn about this temple? Why did you start meditating?
- What is your purpose in coming here?
- What is leisure to you? What is your definition of leisure?
- Do you experience visiting temples as leisure? If so, what do you do for leisure in this temple (can you list)?
- Why are those activities (considered as leisure) leisure to you? How so?
- How do you think you experience leisure differently from Buddhists/non-Buddhists?
- What are the benefits of meditating to you?
- What other activities do you do in your free time? How are other leisure activities different from this experience?
- Also, how is meditating similar to other leisure activities?
- What is your gender/education/occupation/age/geographical background/religion? How long have you been engaging in meditation (and, how these affect their experiences/meanings)?
The issues of “quality of life” and dealing with “life crises” as a primary motivation came up during the participant observation via informal conversations. Therefore, the following questions were added in to the formal interviews.

• When did you start meditating?
• How long have you practiced?
• Are you obligated to do it? How about if they didn’t meditate?
• Have you been to the long-term retreat?
• What is your purpose of meditating? Why have you been practicing meditation?
• What kinds of outcomes have you gained?
• What kinds of outcomes do you want to gain?
• How often do you practice?
• Do you enjoy practicing?
• Do you think the tradition matters for quality of meditation/benefits?
• Do you consider meditation to be leisure? If not, why not? How is it different/similar?
• Do you think meditation enhances your life satisfaction? Examples? For example, do you start appreciating little things in your life?
• Do you think meditation enhances quality of your life? Examples? For example, do you perceive you have better well-being?
• Do you apply the meditation methods to other situations in your life (or work)?
• Do you think meditation practice affects your diet/eating habits?
• Where do you practice meditation?
• What is leisure to you? What is your definition of leisure?
• Do you experience meditating as leisure? If so, what do you do for leisure with this meditation group (can you list)?

• Why are those activities (considered as leisure) leisure to you? How so?

• What are the benefits of meditating to you?

• Is meditation similar to other leisure activities in any way? If yes, how?
Jaeyeon Choe
Curriculum Vitae

814 Ford Building
Penn State University
University Park, PA 16802
Phone: (814) 321-7185
E-mail: jzc172@psu.edu

EDUCATION

   Major: Recreation, Park, & Tourism Management
   Minor: Cultural Anthropology; Concentration: Cultural Geography
   Chair: Dr. Garry Chick

M.S. (2008) California State University, Long Beach (CSULB)
   Major: Recreation and Leisure Studies
   Emphasis: Travel and Tourism
   Chair: Dr. Michael Blazey

B.A. (2004) Sookmyung Women’s University, Seoul, Korea
   Major: Business Administration
   Emphasis: Marketing
   Chair: Dr. Yong-gu Suh

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2012 March-     Assistant Professor
                Tourism Management
                Dongbei University of Finance and Economics
                Dalian, China

2008-2011     Teaching/Research Assistant
                Recreation, Park and Tourism Management
                The Pennsylvania State University