

Spring 2018

# Finding the balance: Mindfulness meditations to foster interdisciplinary artistic exploration

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*Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 579.  
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**Metta Bhavana is the Buddhist Act of Nurturing Gratitude. It has been shown to elevate mood and boost creativity—so this page is entirely selfish.**

Thank you, Martha Graham, for never wavering as my mother in modern dance.

The most important acknowledgment goes to Dr. Zachary Dorsey, for which this project, as well as the bulk of my college experience, could never have happened. Always, Cheers.

Thank you to the brilliant cast of characters that is the faculty in the School of Theatre and Dance. You are the reason I studied at JMU, and your attention to detail is unparalleled by any faculty on campus.

To the Honors College that literally gave me my first home at JMU, my most enlightening courses, my second major, some life-long friends, my post-graduation plans, and more deadline extensions than I could have possibly deserved. Thank you for helping me grow from a young adult who knew everything, to a young adult with so much more to learn.

To my readers, Wren Stevens, Rob Mertens, and Kate Trammell, for guiding me in my research, and for some life-altering hugs.

To Matt, Sierra, and Sophie, for making art-making fun.

To the best parents in the world, you know who you are.

Finally, to my best friends, Hannah, Allison, and Halee, for bringing more smiles into my life than there are leaves on a tree.

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## Abstract

While mindfulness has existed as a tenant of prominent Asian spiritualities since the sixth century B.C., the last fifty years have seen an appropriation of mindfulness practices into diverse sectors of American life, including into clinical research. Within the same fifty years, contemporary artists have increasingly pushed their crafts towards interdisciplinary collaborating between and across artistic disciplines. The body of academic research into creativity suggests a correlation between mindfulness practices and elevated collaborative artistry. Thus, this project seeks to answer the question, how can mindfulness practices encourage interdisciplinary artistic collaboration? My contribution to this inquiry consisted of two main studies. First, a case study on myself where, for twelve months, I systematically practiced different mindfulness meditations from religious and secular sources, including breath awareness, walking, eating, listening to Tibetan Bowl music, and *Satsang* gazing. For the second stage of my project, I facilitated two cohorts of collegiate artists in hour-long meditation sessions over the course of twelve weeks. While my own meditative practice appears to be linked with my elevated success as an individual and collaborative artist, the findings from my two cohorts suggest that mindfulness meditations do not contribute to artistic collaboration within just six weeks of initial practice. Towards my discussion of these findings, it may be necessary for collegiate artists to invest more time in their own personal mindfulness routines to reap benefits similar to those which my case study indicate. Surprisingly, my own consistent meditation practice aligned with an increased level of detachment from academia and general responsibility that I have noticed within myself. While this relationship between my meditations and my decreased collegiate involvement indicates only anecdotal relatedness, the literature supports an additional hypothesis that mindfulness may bring about amplified dedication to artistic craft, while simultaneously fostering detachment from urgent responsibilities in other sectors in the lives of meditation practitioners.

## Introduction

Around the second century B.C., somewhere along the bank of the Ganges, the Indian Sage Patanjali wrote into his *Yoga Sutras* a definition of mindfulness that was neglected on the fringe of European and American society for two millennia. Roughly translated, he described mindfulness as “the cessation of movements in the consciousness” (Horan 200). For Patanjali and most other Asian spirituality practitioners, this cessation of mental activity was a noble task to invest one’s time in. The western world was less enthusiastic about quieting the mind (Heffernan). The fast-paced lifestyle in the West shrouded traditional mindfulness meditations in a cloak of inefficiency and detachment from societal expectations. In 1979, though, a recent MIT graduate by the name of Jon Kabat-Zinn opened up a medical clinic in Massachusetts with the intention of using Buddhist meditations to treat depression and stress. He opened the door for serious scientific consideration of the benefits of mindfulness’ cessation of mental activity in a way that mainstream American society had never seen.

In the last fifty years, the western world has been engaging with mindfulness practices from Asia in assorted ways. Mindfulness meditations have become the cornerstone of spiritual movements (Dass *Be Here Now* 38); they have become a tool that everyday Americans use to transport their minds away from “a state of activity to one of quieting down” (davidji 6); these meditations are even the controlled variables in a field of modern medicine that seeks to foster “full attention to internal and external” sensations (Gotink et al. 32). Mindfulness seems to offer many possibilities for a large breadth of people with diverse interests. Personally, my interest is in the arts: in creativity and in artistic collaboration. I am curious, how can mindfulness practices encourage interdisciplinary artistic collaboration? This has been the primary research question of my capstone project for the past three semesters. To address this primary question, I needed to

first examine three main secondary fields of inquiry: what is mindfulness, and what does it do to the human brain? What is successful artistic collaboration? And finally, how can mindfulness be used to foster artistic collaboration?

My project design consisted of three stages. For each stage, artists practiced different mindfulness techniques that I collected from a diverse array of academic and spiritual literature. In this paper I present my literature review as a way of addressing my three secondary research questions. I detail how I designed my embodied research with the artists. I discuss the implications of our findings in light of the contemporary body of research, and I close with my own speculations into the potent and perhaps dangerous ramifications of developing a mindfulness routine as a college student in the western world.

## Literature Review

My research has been a life-altering journey during these past three semesters. I began researching mindfulness in the spring of 2017. I took courses through James Madison University (JMU) on Asian Art and Spirituality, T'ai Chi, and I began attending a meditation club and an eastern spirituality group in Harrisonburg. I enrolled in two semesters of Koru Mindfulness, the course that Holly Rogers initially set up out of Duke University in 2013 to elevate the success of collegiate students by utilizing meditation techniques. These were all ways of dipping my toes in the water—of exploring the different potential paths towards mindfulness and developing a more holistic idea of what my project might look like. The most significant aspect of my preliminary research in mindfulness was through reading. I read eleven guides for mindfulness meditations, all of which demonstrated a variety of meditation methods that were applicable to differing lifestyles (Appendix A is my guided meditation reading list).

As I read these texts and took my courses, two things became clear quickly. First, I was enjoying practicing the different meditations. In class and at home with my books, I found myself in greater states of focus and comfort after I completed each new meditation. The second immediate realization was that “mindfulness” was not the same concept/state for all practitioners who teach it. One day I would read from Davidji’s 2012 book on meditations. His meditations were simple and could reasonably be incorporated into most busy lifestyles. The next day I would pick up Ram Dass’ trippy *Be Here Now* from 1971 and read how I should surrender myself fully and embrace “eternal union with pure energy and pure light” (20). The possibilities of what mindfulness could do seemed absurdly abundant. When I followed the Koru Mindfulness program, I was instructed to focus on my breath for ten minutes a day and begin fostering “attention to [my] present moment experience with an attitude of compassionate

curiosity” (Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 12). Simultaneously, when I listened to the instructions of Henepola Gunaratana in his book, *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, I was told that I could expect “insight into the true nature of reality” and “the ultimate secret to lasting peace and happiness” (195). Curiously, both Rogers and Gunaratana called for a similar ten-minute breathing meditation to achieve their vastly different goals. It baffled me how practitioners of “mindfulness” had such distinct objectives from one another. I knew I enjoyed how I felt after I meditated, but I was unsure what meditation practice I wanted to continue dedicating myself to. Ultimately, to practice mindfulness consistently, I had to create my own operational definition of mindfulness, a journey that started with the history and literature of mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness is, at its core, a product of Eastern religion. The Sanskrit word for mindfulness roughly translates to Awareness (Shea). Throughout Vedanta—the collection of mostly Indian rituals and sacred texts that we commonly refer to as Hinduism—we can see the act of fostering awareness develop as a human responsibility. Around two hundred B.C., when Patanjali transcribed *The Yoga Sutras*, he was codifying the teachings from a preceding one thousand years of Vedic tradition (Horan 200). Patanjali accounted for eight limbs, or types, of yoga. These eight practices were all paths to quieting the mind. Only one of the limbs, Asana Yoga, utilizes the body postures we refer to as yoga today. The other limbs involved moral dedications such as honesty and nonviolence, breath and sensory observation, and inner contemplation as activities one could practice to attain spiritual peace (Davidji 124-126). In the sixth century B.C., in the midst of this Vedic tradition, the Buddha established a different way of nurturing inner tranquility. Buddhism’s Middle Way is founded on the three principles that: we suffer when we do not get what we want; we suffer when we do get what we want because we

are afraid of losing it; and we suffer when we get something we do not want (Rogers “Suffering Succotash”). The Buddha ruminated that the root of all human suffering was our relationship with things. Buddhism is, in essence, a series of values to live by. Something that sets Buddhism apart from Vedanta is its virtue of balance—of not allowing religiosity to overwhelm the responsibilities of daily life. The Buddha knew the turbulence that came from extremism, and he structured the Middle Way as a path to balancing one’s participation in society with one’s spiritual duties. Specifically, the *bhavanas* are meditations that Buddhists use to “cultivate the mind” (davidji 132). Between Vedanta and Buddhism, mindfulness was a dedicated way of living one’s life to achieve a more lucid connection with something greater than mere day-to-day existence. Mindfulness has been, for the majority of its history, a spiritual responsibility.

Over time, Western civilization moved away from the concept of spiritual obligation. In particular, the scientific process allowed for a material understanding of the world, while more spiritual traditions were seen as having little relevance to the modern world (Emmons and McCullough 378). Then in the 1960s and 1970s, two professors out of Harvard and MIT helped to bring Eastern mindfulness into American mainstream. In 1961, Professor Richard Alpert began testing the effects of psychedelics on himself. Over the course of the 1960s, LSD led Alpert to the realization that “something was wrong in the world” (Dass *Be Here Now* 2). He left his post at Harvard and traveled to India. It was there that he found an ambiguously Vedic guru who enlightened him to his future path as a teacher. That was how Harvard’s own Dr. Richard Alpert shed his identity and became Ram Dass—one of the most influential spiritual leaders of modern time (Gibby). While Dass began leading a generation of hippies through *bhakti*, or devotion, MIT’s Jon Kabat-Zinn began sharing Buddhist philosophy with the clinical world. In 1979 he founded the Stress Reduction Clinic to treat pain and depression with secular versions of

Buddhist bhavana. Despite America's long-held reservation towards the detachment from society that eastern monks perpetuate, mindfulness began finding its way into secular American life (Heffernan). While its historical context is still a tricky territory for more conservative scientists, this ancient Eastern pillar of healthy living has begun finding clinical appropriation.

After I briefed myself on mindfulness' spiritual roots, I dove into the scientific literature from the last forty years to address my first research question: what does mindfulness do to the human brain? I examined the secular definitions of mindfulness that these researchers have used. I also worked towards understanding the capacity that mindfulness might have on artistic development. To that end I organized the findings of this academic literature into two questions: do long-term meditators have elevated cognitive functionality? And are short-term meditation practices similarly impactful in elevating cognitive function? I also examined the criticism around this field of scientific research, which I will summarize at the end of this section.

Do long-term meditators have elevated cognitive functionality? This field of research is all but definitive: spirituality practitioners of Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan Buddhism exhibit "significantly altered brain structure" (Boccia et al. 1; Fox et al. 48; Sedlmeir et al. 1139). These three meta-analyses demonstrate the findings from a body of some 150 meditation studies. It appears that long-term meditators have eight main neural regions that are altered from brains of the general populous (Hölzel et al. 56; Fox et al. 48). This above-average neuroplasticity is evident in the long-term meditators with their capacity for elevated memory, emotional regulation, self-awareness, attention, self-compassion, and adaptive behavior (Manna et al. 46). Clinical research consistently confirms the effect that mindfulness practices have on brains of long-term meditators.

From that, I examined if short-term meditators could expect similarly elevated cognitive functionality. Jon Kabat-Zinn’s mindfulness rehabilitation program, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), is the most commonly studied and verified meditation practice that delivers cognitive benefits. It is an eight-week long program in secular mindfulness techniques that aims to reduce stress and amplify cognitive functioning in people suffering from chronic depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. As Gotink et al. put it,

the goal is not to reach Nirvana or Enlightenment. Instead, by learning to recognize automatic reactions, and letting go of dysfunctional ones in a non-judgmental manner, participants gain a new coping mechanism that studies have shown to improve perceived stress, anxiety, depression, and quality of life in all types of patients. (32)

This clinical meditation routine—though firmly rooted in Buddhist philosophy—has gained credibility for its successful secular treatment of people with mental illnesses like depression and anxiety. Curiously, MBSR has also been found to reduce stress in people who do not suffer from a chronic disorder (Chiesa and Serretti 593). Because of MBSR, mindfulness meditation is a suitable resource for a broad majority of mainstream Americans, both clinically well and unwell.

MBSR is different than traditional meditative techniques in duration and goal of the meditations. Gotnik et al.’s meta-analysis compares the distilled mindfulness techniques in MBSR with the longer spiritual practices. They found that, similar to life-long meditators, people who went through MBSR for eight weeks had “changes in brain structures and activity” (33). Short-term meditation practices actually affect the structure of people’s brains. And these structural changes can have multitude effects. In another meta-analysis, Lebeda et al. found that meditation:

improves people's cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal functioning [...] Positively affects the efficacy of stress regulation [...] Improves the ability to concentrate [...] Decreases the fear of being judged, as well as reduces aversive self-conscious experience [...] Increases the ability to respond in a non-habitual fashion [...] Increased ability to switch perspectives [...] Leads to the improvement of working memory [...] Also reduces the fear of judgment. (22)

In reference to such an extensive list of benefits, Fox et al. maintain a degree of skepticism (50). Essentially, some scientists feel that a wide variety of positive mental effects following from a relatively straightforward intervention appears too good to be true.

Indeed, there is a serious problem of researcher bias in the field of mindfulness practices. Most studies demonstrate a severe lack in quality studies that put forward legitimate or falsifiable theories as to why meditation is effective in treating a plethora of ailments. Of the reputable studies, there is a low bar of methodological quality in their research designs (Sedlmeier 1140). That is, they rarely utilize a control group. Instead, they measure a single group of people before and after a long period of meditation. The problem is not that mindfulness meditations are ineffective in treating clinical issues; the problem is that researchers have yet to pin down an acceptable theory as to why such practices are so effective. As Catherine Wikholm puts it, “with the successful meditative therapies, like MBSR, that have been clinically shown to reduce anxiety and depression, we do not fully understand the ‘active ingredient’ that generates these positive results” (Wikholm). Research has demonstrated the strength that mindfulness meditations have on the brain, even though we are currently unsure why they work so well.

After piecing together my own understanding of mindfulness, I turned to my second question: what is successful artistic collaboration? This question is important because artistic

collaboration—especially across artistic disciplines—may be more pertinent to contemporary artistry than ever before. Why? One factor is that artistic movements of the twentieth century (such as Surrealism, Dadaism, and Post-Modernism) introduced a new fascination in the artistic process (Tucker 76). Both artists and audiences are intrigued by the ways that people can come together and explore the frontiers of possible artistry. In his article in *The Huffington Post*, Amit Gupta examined a handful of famous collaborations from the last seventy years, from Walt Disney and Salvador Dali to David Byrne and Brian Eno. Gupta was intrigued by the process that these creative pioneers went through in their partnerships. He argued that by taking artists out of their solitude and asking them to simply share their ideas with each other, “happy accidents” often occurred that produced artistic advancements (Gupta). He found that the process of artistic collaboration seems to fuel creative exploration.

As just one example of such collaborative explorations, I discovered that The Exquisite Corpse Company systematically produces collaborative performance art that captivates audiences. This Brooklyn-based company is populated by playwrights, performers, visual artists, designers, musicians, and composers. Sometimes they bring in cinematographers to add additional dimension to their immersive live performance pieces. Their most recent creation from 2017, *A Ribbon About a Bomb*, uses poetry and prose from ten different writers, site-specific art installations from four painters and sculptors, and an original score performed by a drag queen with an electric guitar (Cote). Their work seeks to break down the formal barriers around artists, as well as to collaboratively generate innovative productions. Author and architect Zoe Cooper observed a selection of similar site-specific artistic partnerships in 2014, and commented that successful artistic collaborations, “demonstrate the results of opening up the

creative process to peers with diverse skill sets” (Cooper). Collaborations demand give and take, which challenge artists to evaluate what the boundaries of their craft really are.

Another demonstration of successful artistic collaboration comes from Shane Koyczan’s spoken word poem, “To This Day” (2013). It was produced as a short film with musical accompaniment and animation. The animation was generated by media company, Giant Ant, who facilitated a collaboration of eighty-eight animators. Each animator tackled ten seconds of the poem, thus deriving an intricate and compelling supplement to the music and poetry. The video has since gone viral and has now been seen more than twenty-two million times on YouTube. (A link to the short film is in my work cited page, and I encourage anyone with the time to take a break and witness this artistic collaboration. Consider the diversity of artistries that meld together to make this exceptional piece.)

Contrary to Gupta’s philosophy, however, that any collaboration will generate artistic advancement, *The Exquisite Corpse Project* exemplifies an artistic collaboration that proved unsuccessful. Unlike The Exquisite Corpse [Theatre] Company the film, *The Exquisite Corpse Project*, is a documentary film about the making of the movie, *The Exquisite Corpse Project*. Yes. In 2013 the sketch comedy group Olde English set out to make a film through a non-conventional process. There were five different screenwriters, each of whom wrote fifteen pages of the full script. The biggest obstacle was that each writer could only see the last five pages of the script before he received it to contribute his fifteen pages. In this way, their film mimics a Surrealist art exercise, The Exquisite Corpse, where every artist is privy to only a small section of the figure that the previous artist has created. At the end, The Exquisite Corpse exercise generates a piece of collaborative visual art that connects many artists to each other through unseen lines. When Olde English set about creating *The Exquisite Corpse Project*, director Ben

Popik quickly saw the potential in revealing the process as part of their end product. The film that paying costumers—such as myself—can experience is a mashup of the actual movie that was made and a behinds-the-scenes documentary about the struggles the writers went through creating the script. The film is quite bad. It actually tore Olde English apart because of how damaging their collaborative process was. Importantly, they reveal in their documentary that they did not put much planning into the structure of their collaborative experiment. Instead, they picked up a Surrealist exercise and figured, as friends, they would work well together. I bring up this case of collaboration-gone-wrong because it was an important lesson I had to acknowledge as I crafted my project. While Gupta points out the exciting potential that artistic collaboration holds, I found that Olde English's *The Exquisite Corpse Project* exemplifies the possible failure that any artistic venture, even collaborative ones, must face.

Indeed, if artistic collaborations do not commit to a systematic process for generating material, they may even be at a greater risk of failure than individual art projects. In 1985, a conference and symposium organizer by the name of Harrison Owens crafted a process for collaboration called Open Space (Owens). Open Space is a collection of tenants, such as “Whoever Comes Are The Right People,” and “Whatever Happens Is the Only Thing That Could Have,” that serve to deconstruct the general hierarchy in production rooms and open spaces up for more natural and spontaneous collaboration (Owens). Owen finds that collaboration often creates hierarchies with certain positions on the top. Directors are an easy example of this. In a theatrical production, it is the job of a director to facilitate all of the collaborators. While that can merely be the director's role, it often grants directors license to take control or micromanage the tasks of other artistic collaborators. Anyone's role in a collaboration need not place them in a position of authority above other collaborators. The lighting designer's role in a theatrical

collaboration is unique and an equally vital role to that of the director. So, logically, the designer and director should have equal voices in the production room. Amy Clare Tasker writes on HowlRound her experience collaborating with the Open Space method: “it’s truly liberating to admit that [we don’t have all the answers] and begin work from a place of curiosity and vulnerability and shared responsibility.” This is where strong artistic collaboration may come from. Tasker is referencing her experience with the London theatre company, Improbable. This company uses Open Space as a part of their production development. Of particular relevance to creative exploration, Tasker says that collaboration will happen exactly how it will. She says that this mentality helps her and Improbable to, “let go of our expectations of ourselves and each other, and respond to what’s really happening in the moment” (Tasker). This imperative to release oneself from predetermination reminded me of Jon Kabat Zinn’s definition of mindfulness. He calls mindfulness “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (qtd. in Booth). The first quotation from Tasker references the practical utility in relinquishing expectations on how artistic processes should run. The second quotation from Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as a symptom of fostering a similar open-mindedness that Tasker is describing. There appears to be a link between the mindfulness that clinical science has been examining, and the collaborative orientation that Open Space generates for producing successful artistry.

With that in mind, my third and final research question is, how can mindfulness be used to foster artistic collaboration? The best entry point into the scientific understanding of mindfulness on collaborative art making is through creativity. There is solid research into the effects that mindfulness meditations have on creativity. In Lebuda et al.’s meta-analysis of dozens of contemporary studies, they found trends that, “meditation training enhances creative

thinking and creative performance” and that “even short meditation can effectively stimulate creative abilities” (22). Later in their discussion, they go as far as to say that, “creativity seems to require mindfulness” (24). It is essential to my own research that mindfulness meditations impact creativity, and these studies support that assumption. However, when Roy Horan wrote a different meta-analysis examining the link between meditators and creative people, he suggested that meditations seem to heighten creativity, but “only on individuals that find it worthwhile” (200). This implies that only artists who are committed to continued artistic development will experience the benefits of a meditative practice. Artists who rank as more creative (based on Horan’s creativity assessment) have been shown to engage more regularly and more cohesively in artistic collaborations (Baas et al. 783; Tollefson-Hall). With that in mind, I had to establish that I would focus my study only on student artists who demonstrated an eagerness for further development through mindfulness meditations.

So, what are the mindfulness meditations that researchers are studying that produce creativity? Unfortunately, because of the diversity of mindfulness meditations, most studies have examined different practices from one another. While Baas et al.’s durational study on creativity assessed mood-enhancing meditations, Lebeda et al. found utility in MBSR therapy towards elevating creativity. Horan even found a creativity link exclusively in *Sanyama*, an obscure meditative practice from Patanjali’s era that focused on elevating superhuman abilities. Put simply, a singular creativity meditation has yet to be conclusively supported by clinical research. However, most all mindfulness meditations that these studies have analyzed are clinical treatments that mimic Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR therapy. Because his background is in Buddhism, Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR and most of the proceeding mindfulness-based therapies are all rooted in the Buddhist bhavanas.

The primary purpose of Buddhist meditation is to train the mind to be still. There are three bhavanas, or ways to cultivate the mind: *metta*, *samatha*, and *vipassana* (davidji 132). To best explain these meditative styles, I will intentionally be shifting my writing over to a guiding, second-person voice, when appropriate. I model this decision after Jon Kabat-Zinn's authorial voice. Especially in his 1994 New York Times Best Seller, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, the text reverberates with the lessons from the triad of bhavanas. As such, as I explain these practices I will be mirroring the guiding tones of Kabat-Zinn and others, like Rogers, davidji, Nhất Hạnh, and Dass. Their instructional styles all utilize second person indicatives. I too will describe these practices with a guiding, second person, voice.

Metta bhavana is an observation of gratitude. You practice metta bhavana by contemplating the aspects of your life that you are thankful for. These acknowledgments may be as large as your gratitude for that job offer, or as simple as your appreciation of that Demi Lovato song that just came on the radio. Thích Nhất Hạnh's philosophy posits that all we have to be grateful for is in the present moment (qtd. in Kabat-Zinn 25). For instance, the way I have been practicing metta has been to say "thank you" before I eat. Since there is so much to be thankful for, metta meditation needs not be a complicated activity.

Samatha bhavana is the act of focusing. When contemporary meditative practitioners describe this practice, they refer to a meditation's single point of focus as the anchor (davidji 133; Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 37-39). In a simple breathing meditation, the anchor is the physical sensation in your nose of air entering and leaving your body. In a walking meditation, the anchor is the precise feeling of your feet on the floor as you slowly walk back and forth. A samatha meditation simply challenges you to maintain your attention on a single anchor for a period of time, and to keep coming back to that anchor when your mind wanders.

Vipassana bhavana is the act of opening oneself up to the fullness of an experience by practicing non-judgmental observation of the moment. This third method of cultivating the mind appears less straight-forward. Indeed, most Buddhist practitioners recommend devoting a few years to focusing one's mind through samatha before dedicating oneself to vipassana (Davidson 134). The idea is to maintain focused attentiveness in the present moment. All people—even monks—are prone to assess their situations as either favorable or unfavorable; things we should and shouldn't do. We are then easily distracted by thoughts of *what we should be doing*, and these thoughts remove us from our attention in the present moment. Vipassana is founded on non-judgmental observation because our habitual inclination is to scrutinize our thoughts and actions. You practice observing the mere objectivity of your situation to prevent yourself from being swept away on the currents of judgment and evaluation. Take Rogers' version of vipassana meditation (*Mindful Twenty-Something* 124-125): you may sit comfortably and observe the thoughts that pass through your mind. As thoughts arise, you consciously title each thought ("planning," "worrying," or simply "thinking") and then release the thought and reopen your senses to the room around you. Alternatively, DASS demonstrates vipassana with his exercise, *The Witness* (*Paths to God* 256-258). While navigating your day, imagine a silent observer watching your every move. The Witness sees you choose the Oreo Delight Donut in place of the garden salad for lunch. (And dinner.) The Witness also sees you put yourself down for twice choosing the donut instead of the salad. Importantly however, The Witness is not evaluative. It does not judge the salad as a healthier choice or see your diet as unsatisfactory. It simply observes you, moment to moment. Ideally, as you cultivate a sense of The Witness in your moment-to-moment existence, you may begin to recognize your situation and actions as they are,

instead of how they should be. The Witness is simply an exercise to energize our capacity for non-judgmental observation.

Most of the academic literature does not refer to the different types of meditations by their bhavanas. Instead, these three styles have their clinical counterparts in *gratitude*, *focused attention*, and *open monitoring*, respectively. Emmons and McCullough define metta bhavana as gratitude, and put forward that dedication to periods of consistent meditative gratitude can dramatically shift people's attitude (377). This is significant for artists when we read Emmons and McCullough in tandem with Baas et al. Baas et al.'s research indicates that a positive mood and disregard for judgement positively correlates with creativity and collaboration (779). Manna et al. document the clinical terms that the second two bhavanas are given: "focused attention and open monitoring" (46). Through samatha practices, meditators boast higher levels of attention than non-meditators (Fox et al. 48). These meditators who maintain a practice of focused attention regularly demonstrate an elevated creativity ranking as well (Lebuda et al. 22). Finally, vipassana, or open monitoring, meditations are effective in elevating practitioners' capacity for both attention and non-judgment (Manna et al. 48). The benefit of attention and non-judgmental observation on the artistic process is great. Kabat-Zinn finds that non-judgmental observation through vipassana meditation can open up "deep reservoirs of creativity, intelligence, imagination, clarity, determination—" and he goes on (9). Indeed, the "craft of attention" was the essential skill that art education professor Sally Armstrong Gradle worked to cultivate in her course out of Southern Illinois University (140). In this World Art class, Gradle utilized Thích Nhất Hạnh's meditations to set an atmosphere of non-judgment as her students approached less conventional genres of visual art. She determined that increased *observation* and decreased *evaluation* led her class to find greater appreciation for the art they were consuming. In a quote

form one of the mothers of modern dance, Martha Graham exemplifies vipassanic action in her appraisal of time: “All that is important is this one moment in movement. Make the moment vital and worth living. Do not let it slip away unnoticed and unused” (qtd. in Kabat-Zinn 45). By all this, it appears that vipassana meditations have been clinically shown to foster a non-judgmental attitude, which is a positive factor in creative collaborations.

Thus, the three qualities that these bhavanas cultivate, gratitude, attention, and non-judgment, seem to promote creativity and successful collaborative practices (Baas et al. 779; Lebuda et al. 22; Tollefson-Hall). Once I came to that conclusion, I decided to design a project that would test the effect that bhavana-style meditations might have on artistry and collaborative exploration.

In summary of my literature review, I set out to better understand how mindfulness has become a tool for cognitive development in the hope of identifying meditative practices that encourage interdisciplinary artistic collaboration. I found that contemporary research into the effects of mindfulness indicate that meditation actually affects the structure of people’s brains (Boccia et al. 1; Fox et al. 48; Sedlmeir et al. 1139) and can elevate cognitive functions, such as memory, attitude, self-awareness, attention, and non-judgmental compassion (Emmons and McCullough 377; Hölzel et al. 56). These positive effects are evident in long-term meditators (Manna et al. 46) as well as people who have only spent eight weeks meditating regularly (Gotnik et al. 33). I am confident that these findings can be applied to my project design because of the work done by Chiesa and Serratti, which indicates that, not only clinically depressed or traumatized individuals, but all people can experience these benefit from mindfulness meditations (593). I realized that collaboration is a process-oriented way of expanding one’s artistic capacity (Gupta; Tucker 76), and that collaboration works best when it is intentionally

designed with attention, non-judgment, and a grateful attitude (Baas et al. 779; Tasker). Because gratitude, focused attention, and non-judgmental observation are qualities that bhavana meditations elevate (Emmons and McCullough 377; Manna et al. 48), I have concluded that bhavana-style meditations have the strongest chance of encouraging interdisciplinary artistic collaboration in short-term meditation practitioners. These discoveries, as well as the majority of the work I consulted, were the factors that went into the design of my capstone project.

## **Project Design**

My project consisted of three main components: a case study of my own experience with mindfulness meditations over three semesters; two interdisciplinary arts meditation groups that I assembled and led for six weeks each; and two evening gatherings with the interdisciplinary artists that generated the exhibition material for a gallery-style presentation. The majority of my project has been dedicated to the exploration of meditations and mindfulness practices. All of the people who participated in my research are artists by training, so I made the assumption early that our findings would reflect the impact of meditation on individuals for whom artistic development mattered—a necessary quality for mindfulness meditations' success in creativity amplification as demonstrated by Horan (200).

### Case Study: My Durational Mindfulness Practice

I have been observing my own experience practicing different mindfulness meditations over the last twelve months. For every book on meditations I read, I tested out each new meditation at least twice. After each period of mediation, I would then sit for two minutes and observe my surroundings and my own internal well-being. I recorded for myself my experience of each meditation directly afterwards to help me remember what specific guidelines were affecting me. I was assessing my mood and feelings on that day (metta bhavana), how often my mind wandered over the duration of the meditation (samatha bhavana), and my aptitude for observing my interior and exterior sensations without judgment (vipassana bhavana). While there have been days that I missed, I have meditated with one of approximately forty different specific practices every day since the beginning of my project last spring. After the first six months, I replaced my written journal for the act of speaking my gratitudes and experience from my day's meditation out loud to myself.

My goal with practicing all these different meditations was to develop an understanding of which mindfulness meditations might actually impact my artistry. Through my embodied research with this project I found some meditations that worked well—that provided me a sense of elevated attention and gratitude. I also practiced many meditations that did not foster in me these qualities that I was looking for. To weed out the meditations I wanted to explore from the rest, I needed an operational definition of mindfulness. The way I created an operational definition of mindfulness for my project was to simply experiment with what felt satisfying and creatively stimulating. I then wrote out my own definition of mindfulness to encompass all of those practices that benefited me. That definition goes: “mindfulness is the act of maintaining exquisite attention and curiosity around a single activity.” This definition draws heavily on the common secular operational definitions that clinical researchers use. For instance, Holly Rogers, founder of Duke University’s Koru Mindfulness, defines mindfulness as, “the act of paying attention to your present moment experience with an attitude of compassionate curiosity” (*Mindful Twenty-Something* 12). Our working definitions are similar. They both specify mindfulness as an act of attention, as well as involve the importance of curiosity around whatever our current experience is. I crafted my own to be slightly different from Rogers’ in my use of “maintaining,” an active verb that I have found to be a more precise indicator of the process of mindfulness. I also changed “experience” to “activity” because, while “experience” is an accurate generalization of all the facets that mindfulness meditations can apply to, I find that “activity” is a more accessible object for our attention. This is the definition I provided all my participants in the next stage of my research.

## Applied Research: The Cohorts

In short, I brought together a group of artists to practice different mindfulness meditations with for one hour, twice a week, for six weeks. My initial goal was to expose these artists to mindfulness through the meditations that I found the most beneficial for my own personal artistic exploration. I intended to incorporate structured time into our meetings to also share our artistic ideas with each other. My hope was that through sharing our other collaborative acts, Gupta's "happy accidents" would result. Each week we assembled in a purple carpeted group study room of JMU's Student Success Center, finding refuge in a space where no one from the outside could see into our room. We would check in with each other on what was happening in our day, I would introduce a new meditation, and we would practice it for ten minutes together. Because the meetings were an hour long, I assumed that there would be more time for the artistic collaboration component. What actually happened was that we would spend our remaining time discussing how these mindfulness meditations had been immediately impacting our lives. At the close of six weeks with this first cohort, I reached out and pulled together more artists to conduct a second cohort for another six weeks. We found similar results.

In full, the story of my Mindfulness in Integrated Arts cohorts is slightly more elaborate. In late spring of 2017 I began reaching out to faculty around JMU to solicit names of promising students to be part of my "Mindfulness in Integrated Arts" cohort. I spoke with professors in Dance, Theatre, Music Composition and Performance, Paint, Sculpture, Graphic Design, Fibers, Photography, Cinematography, and Creative Writing. As professors and friends helped me compile a list of candidates for the cohort, I began reaching out to these students and having small artist dates with them. After contacting some thirty-five students and meeting with nineteen of them, I selected the ten who I felt were the most eager to dedicate themselves to this

exploration of meditation and artistic collaboration. I sent them all a message with a schedule poll to determine the greatest number of people who could meet together for an hour twice a week. Because of everyone's divergent schedules, the final cohort ended up being just a group of five artists. At that point, midway through the fall semester of 2017, I was finally able to send the official cohort my enthusiastic welcome message (Appendix B).

I wanted this cohort of artists to represent a wide spread of talents. I wanted to explore how the different mindfulness meditations impacted a range of artists. There was a music theatre major with a passion for dance, a studio art major who concentrates in painting and drawing, a SMAD major with a minor in creative writing who also performs stand-up comedy, and two dance majors: one who explores dance dramaturgy and film, and one who double majors in religion.

We met twice weekly for six weeks. I based the design of our meetings on a combination of Koru Mindfulness' group meditation model and davidji's insight on maintaining a consistent meditative practice. davidji instructs that meditation inspires the strongest results when it is incorporated into a daily practice (60). This is how Koru's four-week classes are structured. Although students meet once a week, they are expected to meditate on their own every day in the interim. A certified instructor leads students through two or three new meditations in each of their ninety-minute-long weekly sessions. Gotnik et al.'s previously mentioned study also demonstrates that MBSR, an eight-week course of daily mindfulness meditations, produces "similar brain responses" to that of long-term meditations (39). Because of the complexity of the participants' schedules I decided that we would meet for six weeks together.

Our cohort met twice a week for one hour. That decision was also born out of necessity, though, based on the successful guidelines from Gotnik et al., davidji, and Ram Dass, daily

meditation meetings would have been ideal. Unfortunately, the confines of our active schedules prevented this dream from becoming a reality. Instead, we all agreed to dedicate ten minutes every day to an individual meditation. To support my participants in this commitment, I provided them with meditation logs (Appendix C) to reflect in after each day's meditation. These logs are inspired by the two classes in Koru Mindfulness I took at JMU. When I made these forms, I included one section to write gratitudes—drawn from metta bhavana and supported by Gotnik et al. (377)—and a section for them to reflect on their experience with the meditation. The latter section is a trick that I found helpful in my own practice as a way of retaining the experience of the meditation. At the close of our cohort I did not collect these logs. I stated at the beginning that the logs were personal to the same extent that journals are, and that my participants need not fear my monitoring of their logs. Charles Duhigg—author of the 2014 bestseller, *The Power of Habit*—explains that humans are more likely to commit to a habit if we have multiple factors enforcing our practice (75). I provided them the logs, less for my own data, and more as a tool to enforce their consistent practice of our meditations.

Even after narrowing my possible meditations by the ones that fit my operational definition, there was a diversity of practices to choose from. Koru's meditations are all ten minutes long. Kabat-Zinn's MBSR meditations vary from twenty to forty-five minutes. Ram Dass is an advocate of Buddhist practices that call for hour—or *hours*—long meditations. Davidji finds that thirty minutes is the ideal duration for a daily meditation, but also encourages beginning meditators to try shorter intervals first and work up to thirty minutes a day (132). In *The Power of Habit*, Duhigg examines contemporary research on habits and establishes that daily repetition of an activity—even if it is short—is the most effective method for solidifying an activity as a habit. I determined that the length of our meditations was the less important factor as

these participants began practicing mindfulness. More important was that the meditations be accessible and not so long as to prohibit anyone from reasonably finding time for them every day. It was clear that all my participants were thoroughly involved as artists and students already, so I chose to explore ten-minute long meditations with them.

I chose ten meditations to explore together over our twelve meetings. I drew from the large pool of meditation I had been practicing on my own, but limited my selection to the meditations that could be condensed down to ten minutes. Because of this restriction, half of the meditative practices are from Koru’s curriculum. The meditations I chose to explore with the cohort were the ones that I found the most immediately and enduringly effective in my own practice. Throughout this section on the specific meditations, I will refer to a “posture of dignity.” This indicates a sitting position with both feet flat on the floor, hands at rest in your lap, and a back that is straight but never uncomfortable. I will also refer to points of focus as “anchors.” As in samatha bhavana, an anchor is a tool we can use in meditation to attach our focus to. When our minds unconsciously wander from this anchor—and they will inevitably wander—embrace these moments with curiosity instead of judgment. Unless otherwise stated, eyes will gently close for all meditations.

- Biofeedback—Sitting with a posture of dignity, breathe in through your nose for four counts. Then hold the breath in your lungs for four counts. Exhale for four counts. Sit with empty lungs for four counts. Repeat. (davidji 61-62)
- Breath Awareness—Sitting with a posture of dignity, begin breathing in through your nose. Breathe out. Let this breath be natural and unaltered. Hone your attention to one place on your body, perhaps your nose or belly, where you most acutely feel the sensation of your breath. Maintain attention on that anchor point. (Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 22-23)
- Walking—Stand outside or with at least fifteen feet of floor in front of you. Keep your eyes open, and look down at your bare feet. Begin walking slowly: first your heel rises, then the ball of your foot. You swing your foot forward. Plant your foot heel-first. Then

repeat with your other foot. In this meditation, the anchor is the physical sensation in your feet. (Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 75-76)

- Gatha—Sitting with a posture of dignity, begin breathing naturally. Silently to yourself, think the following lines on your inhales and exhales:

(In) *I know I am breathing in*

(Out) *I know I am breathing out*

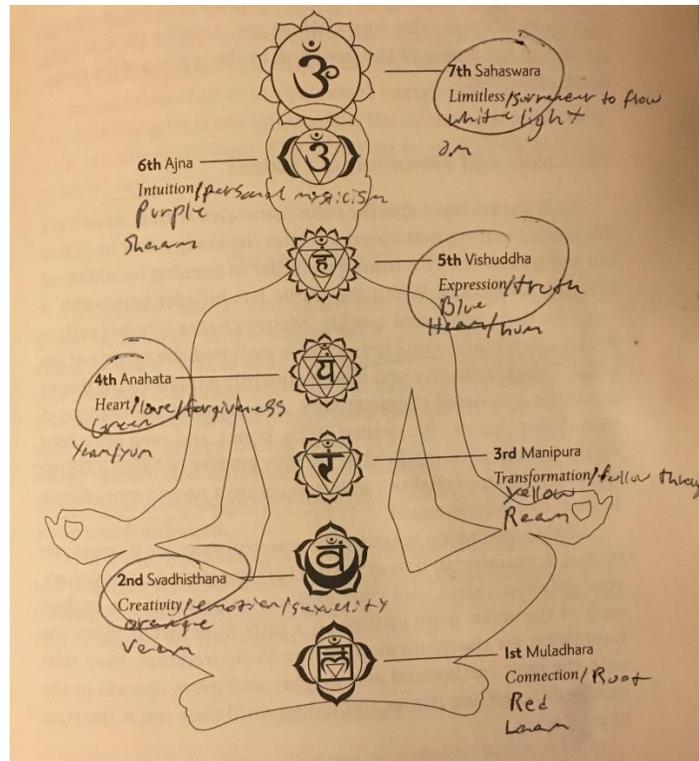
(In) *I calm my body and mind*

(Out) *I smile*

(In) *I dwell in the present moment*

(Out) *I know this is a precious moment* (Nhật Hạnh 10)

- Guided Imagery—Sitting with a posture of dignity, imagine a place where you are completely content. Bring this place to life with specifics sounds, smells, colors, textures, and people. Add or subtract anything from this imagined moment. Sit and explore this moment for the duration of the meditation. (Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 122-123)
- Tibetan Singing Bowls—Sitting with a posture of dignity, turn on an audio track of singing bowl music. Listen gently. When your mind wanders, release your thoughts and return to the music. (Rose)
- Eating Meditation—Place a small meal in front of you. Perhaps just a pistachio to start. Sitting with a posture of dignity, embrace the meal with all your sensory ability. How does it look? Smell? Taste? Lick it. Your anchor is fluid for this meditation, and is always whatever you are doing. Thus, attempt to only do one thing at a time. Once the food is in your mouth, allow your tongue to remain still while you bring your hand back down to your lap. Exercise your curiosity as you explore this food. (Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 157-159)
- Satsang—Sit with a posture of dignity four feet across from another person. Keep your eyes open and stare into the point between your partner’s eyes. Relax, and observe your partner. (Dass 297-298)
- Labeling Thoughts—Begin a Breath Awareness meditation. When your mind wanders, silently think, “thinking,” and then release the thought. This meditation utilizes vipassana non-evaluative observation in addition to the samatha anchor. (Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 125-126)
- Chakra Tuning—Sitting with a posture of dignity, begin breathing naturally. Examine the following diagram (davidji 98). There are seven chakra points, and in this meditation you will focus on them individually. Take, for instance, the Svadhithana point. To tune it, focus on the color orange, and the qualities that the point is tied to: creativity, emotions, and sexuality. On your outbreath, hum the sutra “vaam” on any note you want. Breath in, and repeat this sutra three times. (davidji 93-110)



Per the advice of my Koru teacher, I facilitated these meditations as a group exploration as opposed to a lesson on mindfulness. That is, I shared with my participants what I knew of the meditation, and how I had found success practicing it. I did not instruct them how they should practice the meditations. Instead, I utilized recordings to guide our group through meditations. These recordings were either available to me as an aspect of one of my meditation courses, or a useful description from a book that I recorded myself narrating. I emphasized that they may find something I enjoy unpleasant or want to explore an aspect of the meditation that I did not personally appreciate. They had as much ownership on their experience with the meditations as I had with my first times doing them, and it was not for me to say what each of us would get out of the different practices.

We practiced these different meditations in our meetings. We also discussed our work as individual artists and our goals for the kinds of collaborative art projects we could imagine

creating. My goal with this cohort was to develop five different collaborative art projects over the course of our six weeks together. However, because of the extended time we dedicated to discussing our mindfulness practices, we did not have adequate time during our meetings to address collaborative art projects. We did, however, share two long conversations about our experience with the mindfulness practices—one at week three and one at week six. In these conversations, my participants shared that they were using some of the practices to supplement their individual practices, and also that they were discovering elevated degrees of autonomy in their lives; they were observing the ways they were spending their time, and noticing that much of that time was spent on things they did not value. One participant shared that she had begun using biofeedback before dancing to help her maintain focus. Another found that he was involved in two film projects he did not care about, and determined to focus more intentionally on his own interests the following semester. Finally, one of my participants and I shared a hard conversation about the way she was distributing her time. She found through our practices that she was overworking herself with all her commitments. I shared with her that one of my greatest take-aways from my mindfulness practice has been that change can only happen in the moment—it is not something to be put off for the next year, month, or day (Duhigg 46; Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 69; Kabat-Zinn 157). So, while we only had two weeks left of our meetings, this participant and I came to the realization that she needed to withdraw from our cohort if she was to respond to the observation she had made about her cluttered schedule. We missed her, but I was also pleased that she had come to the decision as a way of embracing her own practice of mindfulness.

At the close of our six weeks together, I decided to duplicate this component of my research and pull together another cohort of artists. In the spring of 2018 I brought together

another four artists—a dramaturg, a director, a photographer, and a dancer—so I could once again observe their engagement with mindfulness. We practiced the same meditations, and shared similar conversations about how the concepts of mindfulness were affecting our attitude towards our own artistry. This group did not discuss the same discomforted attitude around their schedules. That is, we did not feel that mindfulness meditations had opened our eyes to the ways we were allocating our time in activities we cared little for, which was a discussion we returned to multiple times in the first cohort. The second cohort did demonstrate greater levels of satisfaction with the mindfulness practice as a whole, sharing that it had become a highlight of many of their days. Again, I encouraged us to pursue collaborative art projects in our free time between the meetings. Similar to the first cohort, this group did not find the time to produce any finalized collaborations.

#### The Gallery Presentation: Evening Meetings

As the culmination of my research I delivered a presentation on my process and findings to an intimate audience of thirty people. While I presented, tapestries of watercolor designs hung along the walls. My cohort participants created these tapestries in my home over two nights of relaxed art-making and meditating. Because we had yet to generate any artistic products as a part of our cohort meetings, I invited all nine of the participants to my house so we could practice meditating in a more relaxed environment. I wanted to experiment with this environmental factor before letting go of our attempt to foster artistic exploration. In my own experience over three semesters of meditating, I had come upon the crafts of figure drawing and water coloring. While I had not come across either of these practices as meditations in my reading, I had been instructed in both of them at a mindfulness retreat I went to in the spring of 2018 (Tollefson-Hall). I found that both figure drawing and water coloring functioned well as samatha bhavanas

in the way they demanded thorough concentration. I decided that these would be the meditations we could practice during our two evening gatherings. Both gatherings lasted two hours, and I brought pizza for everyone to enjoy. The evenings consisted of the extended version of davidji's chakra meditation (93-110) interspersed with ten-minute periods of silent figure drawing and water coloring. I asked everyone to jot down small reflections on their paintings to demonstrate where each meditation had taken them. I was thrilled by the pieces of art we put together across the two evening sessions. The paintings were vibrant and captivating, while the written reflections echoed some of our best conversations about the effects of mindfulness. I exhibited this art around the walls as I presented in March 2018.

## Discussion

I designed this project as an exploration of the ways that mindfulness practices can inform collaborative art. After three semesters of work, the project has become mostly an exploration of the effects of mindfulness meditations on college students in general, while my emphasis on integrated art has mostly faded away. I believe the primary issue came from my project design. I intended for the students in my cohort to build their own artistic collaborations in their free time outside of our twice-weekly meetings. One participant in the original cohort did develop an idea that originally came to her in our cohort meetings, and she completed it after our term as a cohort had ended. I attempted to encourage them into developing collaborative projects in their own time by sharing my own collaborations in the arts with them, but I ultimately was one of only two people in the groups who created anything with others. I believe that is due in part to the design of our group; I did not give them much in the way of incentive to go out and spend more time on extracurricular art. I also believe it is due to the demographic of my participants. I specifically reached out to professors and friends looking for students who were highly involved and already creating compelling art. I felt that that was an indicator of quality artistry and that those would be the best students to work with. Reflecting now, I see that their involvement was also a drawback on their ability to invest in my mission fully: they were stretched too thin.

A key to more artistic collaboration may have simply been more time together. I look back to my research into interdisciplinary artists: The Exquisite Corpse Company does exceptional work with myriad types of artists. They meet daily to generate and rehearse their work, in much the same way devised theatre artists create their pieces. If there were a body of

students willing to commit more than two days a week to such a project, I believe that art could be coupled with this project's research into mindfulness in a more generative way.

This project demonstrated two significant discoveries for me. First, mindfulness has in fact affected my own artistry in both predicted and unexpected ways. Second, although the artistic results in my cohorts were not what I had expected, I believe that mindfulness may still hold potential for further artistic collaboration with artists who can dedicate more time. Just as I was beginning to research and practice mindfulness meditations I also began writing spoken word poetry. I do not want to attribute this new exploration to mindfulness because they began practically at the same time; they appear to be coincidental, not causal. Months after writing my poems, however, I began performing them. Baas et al. say that a diminished fear of judgment is an indicator of artistic success (779). After practicing meditations for four months, I found myself comfortable to stand up and perform my own words in front of strangers at an open mic in a small bar. While the stage was not Carnegie Hall, the pressure had been unthinkable for me when I first began writing four months before. I was still nervous to perform when it finally happened, but I could take solace in the lesson I had been learning through my practice that whatever happened would simply happen, and I had the choice whether to evaluate the experience as a success or as a failure.

Since then, I have taken larger steps towards embarrassment and potential failure in my poetry. I now perform weekly at different open mic sessions. I have read in front of a two hundred-person audience, and most embarrassing, I have asked my friends to follow a new social media presence, Zak Gordon Poetry, as a way of furthering my legitimate work as a "poet." I cannot say if I would have reached this point as an independent artist without my daily

meditation practice. But I can say for sure that my committed mindfulness practice has had a relational effect with my personal artistic development.

Towards my artistic collaboration, I have also experience unprecedented success in the past three months. I have collaborated with a musician to create well-received performances at the weekly open mics. The work I have been able to develop along-side a visual artist has been accepted in an Artist of the Month exhibition later in May. Most satisfying to me, I've become a part of the collaborative art group, Dance in My House (Appendix D). We collaboratively generate performance pieces of poetry, dance, music, and dramaturgical conversation. After our first performance, we were accepted into the Shenandoah Fringe Festival—a paid gig. We were also accepted into JMU's academic conference, MadRush, where we were recognized for our unique and engaging performance. We have found that the most successful pieces we make come out of a low-stakes, collaborative mentality. Very much in line with Amy Clare Tasker's findings with the Open Space collaborative method, we are doing as she instructs as we "begin work from a place of curiosity and vulnerability and shared responsibility" (Tasker). I brought forward the initial idea to not let our titles get in the way of how we managed each other. Instead of bringing on an additional director, we all share responsibility for our end product. Because there is no one higher in the chain of command to turn to in the face of questions, we have had to "let go of our expectations of ourselves and each other, and respond to what's really happening in the moment" (Tasker). I thoroughly appreciate Open Space's method for collaboration, because it functions on the tenants of mindfulness. Again, I do not know if I would have found myself in a place to collaborate effectively with my peers had it not been for my daily engagement with mindfulness. I am positive, though, that my readings and meditations have informed my current position as a burgeoning artist who is newly exploring the collaborative potential in poetry.

The second significant discovery this project has revealed for me about mindfulness' effect on artistry has been that an exposure to mindfulness theory can open collegiate artists up to greater satisfaction with their own crafts. The conversations I facilitated across both of my cohorts demonstrated that these nine artists appreciated the power mindfulness meditations had on their mood and perceived abilities in their fields. Some artists have begun using the relaxation qualities of meditations (Chiesa and Serretti 593) to set them up for more engaged performance and creation. Other participants shared that the vipassana observation meditations (Rogers *Mindful Twenty-Something* 125-126; davidji 134) have begun enlightening them to their own attitude on their current artistry, and their ability to impact the projects that they invest in. During one of our meetings for the second cohort, one participant proposed a theory for this secondary discovery. This participant asserted that she has been experiencing the impact that these mindfulness meditations have had on her own personal artistry, but she also feels that six weeks was not enough time for her to begin applying her mindful practice to artistic collaborations. This theory is supported by my case study of myself: while this meditative practice seems to be related to my increased confidence as an individual performer, it still took months longer to begin finding success in collaborative pursuits. A new hypothesis that is supported by my project's findings is that collegiate artists simply need a more open schedule to begin collaborating effectively.

I see a necessity for a further durational study to test this hypothesis that collegiate artists who practice mindfulness meditations will see positive effects, such as attitude shift, focused attention, and non-judgment. I propose that mindfulness either needs more time to ruminate and become a consistent part of the artist's routine, or that the artistic benefits that I have personally experienced can only come about when mindfulness practitioners have adequate time to dedicate

to their meditations and their artistic crafts. The best way I can imagine accomplishing this task is to open up a course on mindfulness meditations for artists. That way, a larger body of students will engage with the practices for sixteen weeks. Homework could even structure artistic collaboration in a way I have been unable to. I believe a course such as this could dramatically shift the way students engage with each other in their scholarly creative development.

Until such a course is offered, this project can and should be utilized as a resource for further studies into mindfulness practices in the arts. What I have demonstrated through my research is that mindfulness meditations have the capacity to enhance qualities that are beneficial to successful artistic collaboration. My own experience as an artist engaging with mindfulness has been a thoroughly successful one. My development in collaborative poetry is the most satisfying of my artistic accomplishments in my four years as a student within a college of visual and performing arts. I have established a model for other artists to explore mindfulness meditations through, and I have investigated how nine other artists applied this model to their own emerging practices as collaborators. This study serves as a guide for how to engage with mindfulness, while also challenging future researchers to go further with my work on collaboration in the arts. There is bountiful work left to be done with mindfulness and collegiate artists. May this be one of many such explorations.

## **Conclusion**

While this project has been highly rewarding for my personal artistry, it has also taken a significant toll on my academic identity. Up through the mid-point of my junior year, I took between twenty and twenty-four credits per semester. I was involved in the extracurricular theatre productions to the point of sleeping in the theater multiple nights in a row. I did every assignment and studied adequately for every exam. Since beginning my research into mindfulness, I have watched all of those personal qualities change. I have taken serious steps away from the theatre program I once called my home—at least, the place I slept. I am now enrolled in fewer classes than ever before, and I complete fewer assignments in the courses I am in. I want to examine this change in my life as a possible correlate of my project, with, of course, and understanding that any connection can be relational at best.

General degrees of “senioritis” are an obvious culprit for all of these changes, and I am happy to award at least partial credit to simply slowing down as I approach the end of my college career. Still, this has been such a significant shift in my identity as a student that I want to consider the possibility of mindfulness’s influence. I ponder this because I am indebted to my education; to the Theatre department, to the Honors Program—now College—to my academic mentors and project advisors who have guided me through my hardest challenges at JMU. I am thankful for the work that I have gotten to do here. Still, over the course of my meditations, I have found myself intentionally detaching myself from the external validation of grades. For the duration of this year until recently, I have been surprised with myself merely coasting on Bs and Cs and not meeting all of my deadlines. This is unlike me, or perhaps this is indicative of the new mindful me.

Master mindfulness practitioners do not function in the same way as commonplace people in our society. In his introduction to *Being Peace*, Arnold Kotler (Thích Nhất Hạnh's primary editor for over thirty years) describes his subject's social presence: Thích Nhất Hạnh is "a cross between a cloud, a snail, and a piece of heavy machinery—a true religious presence" (viii). Indeed, if you care to examine any recording of Nhất Hạnh speaking ("Awakening the Heart") you will experience his nearly unmanageable slowness. It is a trend in the scientific literature around the effects of mindfulness to very clearly delineate the difference between the work being done in the West on "Contemplative Studies" from Eastern spirituality. Indeed, despite his groundbreaking accomplishments in bringing Buddhist practices into the mainstream of American culture, Jon Kabat-Zinn has always been intentional about the way he characterizes his Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction therapy: he says he has had to "find ways to speak about [mindfulness] that avoided as much as possible the risk of it being seen as Buddhist, new age, eastern mysticism or just plain flakey" (Booth). There appears to be a notably inefficient quality to traditional mindfulness practitioners that does not fit well into American culture. In Gotnik et al.'s study of Kabat-Zinn's MBSR, they found it necessary to note a significant difference in their sample population and the general population of traditional practitioners: "Monks or nuns are not expected to experience a lot of stressful events in their monastery [...] Western participants, however, are more likely to experience stress in daily life" (Gotink et al. 39). While long-term mindfulness practitioners function within their own spheres, that functionality may break down if subjected regularly to higher-stress situations. A mindfulness practitioner who embodies a responsibly peaceful lifestyle in other cultures may appear slow or under-dedicated by the standards of always-on American society.

This begs the question; if mindfulness is a product of a different life-style with different productivity goals, how can mindfulness meditations successfully translate into our higher-stress and higher-demand Western lives? Catherine Wikholm argues it does not translate well. In her book, *The Buddha Pill*, she reminds her readers that mindfulness was never intended as a key to happiness (qtd in Booth). Patanjali's yogis were a tool to quiet the mind and grow closer to god. The Buddha's bhavanas were designed to detach rigorous practitioners from the seductive euphoria of bodily existence. Ram Dass' entire school of mindfulness is founded on the fundamental fallacy of our identity, and the redistribution of our actions away from our selfish egos. Detachment is the goal of most traditional meditative philosophies, not greater happiness or creative success.

While the overwhelming body of academic research into the effects of mindfulness meditations on depression and mood focus on secular meditative practices, Wikholm argues that, while it is plausible to engage with meditative practices from a secular entry point, meditations lead us to become more spiritual (Wikholm). Despite their brevity, ten-minute meditations have a large impact on the way we navigate our lives. Even within six weeks, my first cohort of artists demonstrated a shift in the way they chose to allocate their time. My one participant took so much ownership over her present-moment experience that she left the cohort with only two weeks left. Mindfulness meditations are designed to shift our entire value system, and are, in fact, not as non-committal as they appear.

This returns me to my particular situation: where I now understand that mindfulness has led me to restructure my priorities. I find that I have begun neglecting many academic homework assignments as well as spending less time with acquaintances in favor of dedicating more time to writing poetry and spending time with a smaller circle of friends. When I have a small

homework assignment due, and my close friend asks to watch the sunset, I will most likely opt for the amazing view with an amazing friend over accomplishing the small assignment that I care less about. I must clarify that this is not mere procrastination. I was already well accustomed to the seductive song that procrastination can sing years before I began practicing mindfulness meditations. What I am currently experiencing is different. I feel that, in the same way it encouraged my participants to reconsider their priorities and how they spend their time, mindfulness has encouraged me to actively contemplate what is most important to me, what I value. When I look at my assignments, it is not that I do not feel like putting in the effort, but that I am making a mindful decision to disregard the homework. I believe that this attitude that has entirely sprung up in the last eight months came out of my vipassana meditations. In these meditations, I have challenged myself to broaden my awareness towards whatever I am experiencing. When I observe my dedication to homework, I find that I am doing the work for the grade, not because I am trying to learn, or even care for, the material. I now have a desire to live with integrity to my values. Grades—as someone who does not intend to go immediately to graduate school—have relatively little value for me in comparison to how much value I put into quality time with friends. I have been considering my situation in relation to my participant who removed herself from our mindfulness group. If I am pouring my time into homework for no reason other than for my grade at the expense of my friendship, which I do value, it feels like I am merely letting my circumstances happen to me instead of taking ownership of my own situation. It feels like the dignified choice is to dedicate my life to what I value, and not merely what I am expected to do.

If my new philosophy is simply a product of senioritis, then I believe President Dwight D. Eisenhower also had senioritis. One of my mindfulness teachers once shared this quote of his

with me: “I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent.” The implications of this quote are that important things—like fostering a friendship or learning to play an instrument—do not appear immediately on our to-do lists. They fall underneath the more urgent things—like completing the math worksheet, and spending that extra hour in rehearsal. In the long run, we will remember and hold pride in the important things, while the moment-to-moment urgent things will be quickly forgotten. Thus, it becomes acceptable, even admirable, to cut corners on urgent work.

Of course, it is problematic to simply neglect one’s responsibilities if they do not directly connect to the big-picture goals. Doing the dishes today is not something I will remember in twenty years. I will not think fondly back to the time I completed washing my sink-full of peanut butter-caked dishes. Still, I must do my dishes. Otherwise I will have nothing to eat off of, my apartment will smell, and my roommate will be furious. I am now considering the things that I have maintained as vital to my daily routine. I sleep every night. I eat at every meal time—and I do not work when I eat. I practice guitar for twenty minutes every morning because I have always wanted to learn. I meditate for ten minutes and then observe my attitude for another two. I also require myself to write for at least forty-five minutes every day.

Whenever I hear advice from noteworthy artists, especially authors, they say to practice your craft every day without exception. I want to be that kind of artist in the same way I want to be a dedicated meditation practitioner. It is apparent to me that committed meditators and successful artists have something in common: the practice of their craft is non-negotiable in their schedules. I have adjusted my priorities around the model of Important vs. Urgent, where long-term goals outweigh immediate needs. It makes me uncomfortable that such activities as reading, hanging out with friends, and even showering have, in my past, often seemed like luxuries in the

business of academia. Even now, while I examine the necessity of rededicating myself to my urgent responsibilities, I shiver at the possibility that I will relegate these parts of my life back into the luxury bin of “I’ll do it tomorrow.” Crucially though, mindfulness meditations simply do not generate more hours in the day. With the accumulation of more priorities for my artistic and inner growth, less important activities must pass away into the void of incomplete, a label I do not wish to become intimate with.

Mindfulness meditations do have a clinically verified effect on treating depression and anxiety, elevating memory, regulating emotions, promoting self-awareness, attention, and compassion (Boccia et al.; Fox et al.; and Gotnik et al.). While there is less consensus on meditations’ impact on creativity, my project supports Horan’s suggestion that meditations are effective on boosting creativity “only on individuals that find it worthwhile” and can dedicate themselves to the cultivation of both their artistry and their meditative practice (200). Yet, can all these benefits be worthwhile despite the risk of detaching oneself from our contemporary world?

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was revolutionary in his endorsement of balance. His story was that of an indulgent prince who saw the cruelty of existence and dedicated himself to a life of denial and asceticism (BBC). When he was on the brink of death from self-imposed starvation, he realized that neither one of his extremes—indulgence nor denial—had brought him closer to inner peace. He then began treading the path of the Middle Way and exemplified a life of balance; balance between the suffering that comes from worldly attachment and the societal rejection that comes from vigorous isolation.

If my experience throughout the journey of this Honors research project is indicative of a larger trend, then perhaps balance remains the most promising possibility for collegiate artists looking to establish a habit of mindfulness.

## Appendix A – Resources for Developing a Personal Meditation Practice

### Books on Meditation

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## Appendix B – The Original Email to the Five Participants in my First Cohort

Hello all, welcome, and congratulations on being selected for our Mindfulness in Integrated Arts project!

As I said in my poll email last weekend, it was an honest treat meeting some of the fantastic artists from around JMU so far this semester. Seeing so much excitement for this initiative was humbling, and frankly has gotten me more than ready to get into meetings with y'all.

Of all the potent and passionate artists at JMU, I would like to officially offer the five of you a seat at our table together for the rest of this semester.

I believe we are all able to meet on **Tuesdays and Thursdays between 6:30 - 7:30 PM**. If meetings at this time no longer suit you, please email me.

I appreciate how precious an hour slot in the evenings can be, and I know how involved all of you are. A foundational goal of this project for me is to give my participants more calm and thought mobility in your pursuit of creating art. These meetings will be a time for intentional relaxation - and dare I say, joy making - in our weekly calendars.

If we are all able, I would like to kick off our first meeting this Thursday (from 6:30 - 7:30 PM) in Group Study Room A on the first floor of SSC.

At this meeting, I will be able to elaborate and answer your questions on how our weekly meetings will run, and what your role can be as an artist outside of our group times.

I would also love you all to introduce yourselves to your new cohort of collaborators. To prepare for this introduction, I am asking each of you to **please come ready to explain who you are as an artist, what you like to do, and how you can add to our group as we develop a mindfulness practice together**. If you have samples of your work or images/recordings that you want to share, please bring them. If that is not how you choose to represent your work, that is fine as well.

That's all.

Congratulations and thank you again for being such driven and talented students. Despite sharing so many wonderful meetings these past weeks, I had marginal challenge picking you five to spend the upcoming half of the semester with.

Let's begin.

Happy Day,  
~Zak Gordon

**Appendix C – The Meditation Log That I Created Based on Koru’s Log Model**

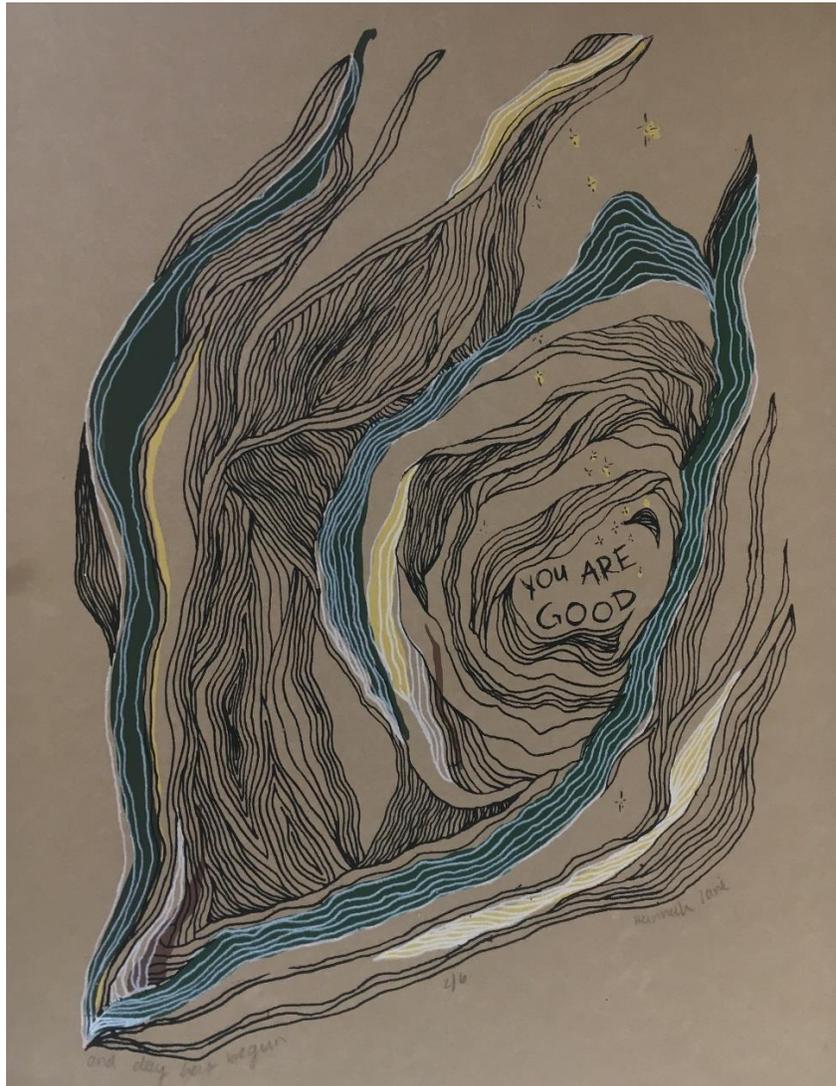
**MIA Meditation Log**

2 Things I Am Grateful For:

Reflection Since I Last Wrote:

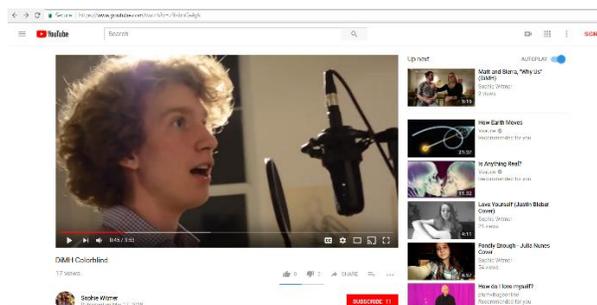
Today is a good day to have a good day. 😊

**Appendix D – Demonstrations of Successful Artistic Collaboration I Have Engaged in After I Began Meditating**



**(Art by Hannah Jane, to be exhibited as part of a collection in Three Notch'd)**

~



**(Music Video for Dance in My House's Collaborative Piece, "Colorblind"**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9isbnGeAyk>)

**(Text of a poem that I recently created as part of a collaborative effort with Dance in My House for the Shenandoah Fringe Festival)**

Earhart

Say her name:

Amelia.

When you see seagulls fly

I want you to say her name:

Amelia.

When propellers spin and engines churn

Her name is all you will hear above the whirr:

Amelia.

When your hair flaps back and you can feel

Tears pulling at the edges of your grin

I want every inch of your skin to cry out in  
revelation:

Amelia –

Because I no longer can.

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