



Study to Develop and Assess the Emory Meditation Practice Tradition and Experience (EMPTE) Scale



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Background and Significance

Interest in contemplative practice has burgeoned in recent years as growing evidence suggests that meditation training may have demonstrable effects on cognitive function as well as positive effects on stress, depression and inflammation -- all risk factors for the host of chronic diseases that plague the 21st century.

Despite these promising results, much work remains to be done. But meditation researchers are hampered both by insufficient research tools and insufficient understanding of the scope and sophistication of contemplative practices, which are too often inappropriately grouped under the broad heading of "meditation." Although most meditation research examines modified versions of practices drawn from the Buddhist tradition, little effort has been devoted to defining and distinguishing different styles of Buddhist contemplative practice.

To date, no published work has rigorously assessed the physiological and psychological effects elicited by different styles of practice, nor has any systematic attempt been made to assess how a participant's particular style of practice and his/her level of experience with a particular practice correlates with observed outcomes. In other words, **it is unclear what exactly meditators are doing when they "meditate."** Yet, as traditional contemplative texts associate specific sets of target outcomes (along with a potential set of side effects) with a particular style of practice, it is obvious that the effects of practice will vary according to the techniques used. Accurately assessing a subject's style of contemplative practice and his/her level of experience is critical to evaluating the effect of contemplative practice on physiological and psychological outcomes.

Specific Aims

Our aim is to develop and validate the Emory Meditation Practice Tradition and Experience (EMPTE) Scale, a self-report measure that adequately assesses the following three crucial aspects of contemplative practice: their diverse techniques, their target outcomes, and the experience accrued in their practice.

This scale, which assesses the best-known contemporary Buddhist-based contemplative practices that are most often selected for scientific investigation, will help researchers more clearly define subjects' styles of practice, control for variations between style and experience, and ultimately lead to new findings associated with particular styles of practice.

Methods and Analysis

700 meditation practitioners will be recruited from Buddhist practice centers in Georgia, California, Massachusetts, and New York. Study participants must have attended at least one 10-day intensive meditation retreat or have a minimum of 3 months experience with a Buddhist-based meditation practice.

For the initial test phase, participants will be drawn from Buddhist practice centers in the Atlanta area including (but not limited to) Tibetan Buddhist, Zen Buddhist, Theravada Buddhist, Vipassana, and Insight Meditation centers. In an effort to gather data from practitioners of the most popular styles of practice under scientific investigation, meditation practitioners trained in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) will also be recruited.

Consenting participants will be asked to engage in their typical meditation practice. The duration and style of practice may differ among participants. After completing their meditation session, participants will next be asked to complete the EMPTE questionnaire, as well as a number of psychological assessments that measure relevant subscales of practice including equanimity, emotional intelligence, compassion, empathy, perceived social support, attention, mindfulness, body awareness, depression, anxiety, stress, and happiness.



The researchers will then interview the participants. This structured interview will enable us to determine whether the questionnaire has successfully captured the duration and content of that person's meditation experience.

In order to demonstrate the reliability of the EMPTE scale to categorize contemplative practice and evaluate experience, we will rely on expert judgments that the items on the questionnaire relating to this category adequately represent and are relevant to the construct. Responses to these items will then be quantitatively analyzed. After the first round of testing, items that behave poorly relevant to others in the subscales will be removed.

Scale Preview

The EMPTE Scale covers a range of topics including technique, target outcomes, and experience. The specificity of the questions aim to capture subtle differences between diverse styles of practice, which are often mistakenly grouped under similar terms, such as 'mindfulness,' for example. Various sections of the questionnaire capture quantifiable data about meditation practice (How often do you meditate? For how long?). Narrative sections elicit detail, context and motivation: What teachers do you follow? Was there a life event that inspired you to practice?

Both quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques will be applied to the data.

Sample questions include:

Did you structure your practice?	Yes	No
If yes, did you:		
Recite something you have learned	Yes	No
Use descriptions or arguments from memory	Yes	No
Other (if yes, please describe in space below)	Yes	No

During the meditation session, I monitored my attention to see if it was focused on an object or for some other reason:

- with ease
- with some effort
- with a lot of effort
- with difficulty

If I noticed distractions, I:

- noticed them
- released them and returned to the practice
- did not do anything in particular
- took distractions as new object of focus

When distracted, I was able to return my attention to the object or continue to practice as intended

- with ease
- with some effort
- with a lot of effort
- with difficulty

Did you deliberately evoke or suppress any particular emotion? Yes No

If yes, did you do this by (check all that apply):

- Using a discursive technique (e.g. 'allowing emotions or thoughts to pass like clouds')
- Practicing metta or lovingkindness
- Cultivating an antidote in order to counter a particular emotion
- Using some other technique? (Please describe)

Preliminary Focus Group Results

Three focus groups will be held to test the questionnaire before it is administered. The first group, with meditation practitioners, yielded valuable feedback about the wording of questions, and additional questions that could be added to more fully capture the variety of meditative experiences. Equally important was the enthusiastic validation voiced for the project!

The feedback from the first group will be incorporated into the questionnaire, and a second focus group will be held with meditation researchers.

After incorporating the feedback from that group, a third focus group will be held with meditation practitioners in the Atlanta area who will be asked to engage in their preferred meditation practice, complete the EMPTE scale, and then participate in a focus group. Approximately 8-12 practitioners representative of the various Buddhist traditions will be invited to participate in this focus group.

In the same time frame that the focus groups are being conducted, expert opinion will be solicited from experienced meditation teachers from the various traditions that will be surveyed with the EMPTE scale.

Implications

Refining our ability to assess specific outcomes associated with various contemplative practices through the development of the EMPTE Scale will enable clinicians and researchers to develop appropriate meditation-based programs for specific conditions, as findings may reveal that particular styles of practice are more effective in treating different disorders. Improved assessment tools will also enhance the methodological rigor of this emerging field and contribute to first-person methods of scientific investigation.

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