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Crossing Boundaries: Autoethnography of Subjective Experiences During Meditation

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Abstract

In this autoethnographic quadrologue, the authors aim to show how meditation experiences defy verbalization in a qualitative research setting. This leads to the insight that an autoethnographic approach may be a much better fit for such an experience, where complex and inexpressible things can be found. This is especially the case since autoethnographic texts include and immerse the reader in the experience. Even though in the case of meditation this can hardly be achieved, this quadrologue aims at conveying some of the struggles and peculiarities of meditation practice. It focuses on the research process leading to the decision to employ an autoethnography paradigm. Thus, the focus of this article is the differentiation of autoethnography from other methodological approaches and the conscious decision in favour of this method, which is rather unusual in German-speaking countries. The authors develop the thesis that both the meditation experience and the decision to employ an autoethnographic paradigm led to the experience of “wandering off the beaten track” and crossing the boundaries of what is usually done in society and social science respectively.

Keywords

meditation, qualitative research methods, subjectivity, autoethnography, perception

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Crossing Boundaries: Autoethnography of Subjective Experiences During Meditation

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In this autoethnographic quadrologue, the authors aim to show how meditation experiences defy verbalization in a qualitative research setting. This leads to the insight that an autoethnographic approach may be a much better fit for such an experience, where complex and inexpressible things can be found. This is especially the case since autoethnographic texts include and immerse the reader in the experience. Even though in the case of meditation this can hardly be achieved, this quadrologue aims at conveying some of the struggles and peculiarities of meditation practice. It focuses on the research process leading to the decision to employ an autoethnography paradigm. Thus, the focus of this article is the differentiation of autoethnography from other methodological approaches and the conscious decision in favour of this method, which is rather unusual in German-speaking countries. The authors develop the thesis that both the meditation experience and the decision to employ an autoethnographic paradigm led to the experience of “wandering off the beaten track” and crossing the boundaries of what is usually done in society and social science respectively.

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I would also like to point out that the limited means of language are actually insufficient to really convey the experience of even the simplest forms of meditation and mindfulness.

Shamar Rinpoche

Characters

Anna-Katharina: Student of Philosophy and International Economics (B.A.), 22 years old.

Stefanie: Student of Educational Science (M.A.) previously Social Work (B.A.), 24 years old.

Christian: Student of philosophy and musicology (B.A.), 28 years old.

Philipp: Student at medical school, previously Psychology (M.Sc.), 30 years old.

Sebastian Engelmann: Postdoc at the Institute for Educational Science, Lecturer of Stefanie.

Paula Weber: Zen teacher and student of Willigis Jäger since 1983.

* These authors contributed equally to this work and share first authorship.

Places

Forum Scientiarum: Central Institute of the University of Tübingen facilitating and organizing interdisciplinary research and teaching events, among them the Studienkolleg. The Studienkolleg is a one-year extracurricular programme for dedicated students from various disciplines to learn interdisciplinary research through various collaborative research projects. Every class features its own topic; for this year it was ‘perception.’ Each research project culminates in a research paper to be published. The Forum Scientiarum is now called Tübingen Forum for Science and Humanities.

Benediktushof: Zentrum für Meditation und Achtsamkeit (Centre for Meditation and Mindfulness), founded in 2003 by Willigis Jäger.

Entringen: a smaller city in the Stuttgart-region.

In the following, monologues are written in italics, while original quotations from research diaries and dialogues are shown in quotation marks.

Introduction

It was one of those hot summer days which were common this year in July. Anna-Katharina stood in the living room of her shared apartment and let her gaze wander through the room. It would not be long before the group arrived. The room was cleaned, the homemade lemonade was filled in a large pitcher full of ice, cookies were prepared on the table, as were pens and paper. A ringing of the doorbell later, Stefanie, Christian, and Philipp arrived.

The group was now complete, and they could start working on their research project, which evolved around the problem of choice of method to explore phenomena such as meditation – somehow hard to grasp scientifically and yet fascinating for the young researchers. They were in the middle of evaluating their data, which consisted of their self-written diaries. The next step was to process the diary entries in a structured way and to form categories for the text passages so that they could then be analysed and evaluated, as the approach of Grounded Theory requires. The rationale behind the study, which consisted of a self-experiment in meditation, writing diaries about the experience, and then evaluating those, was to propose an intuitive approach to both the field of qualitative social research methods and the practice of meditation itself. The group of four wanted to show one way to combine two unusual and little-noticed topics with each other and see what synergies emerged from it. Everyone sat around the somewhat battered wooden table and took out their diaries, tablets, and notes to start their work. With the first passages in their diaries, the group quickly agreed on the categories. For example, almost all four diary entries contained passages about the perception of external stimuli during meditation, personal insights that arose, and negative feelings and experiences that had occurred. Later, there were many overlaps between the initially unambiguous categories. Anna-Katharina had collected the categories on her laptop in a large excel spreadsheet, which lost a lot of clarity and precision in the process. The more categories they had, it became more and more difficult to assign them appropriately to new text passages. “Somehow I have the feeling that although we evaluated the diary passages similarly, we are still partly talking past each other,” said Stefanie with a hint of concern in her voice. “Well, I don’t see it quite that dramatic,” Anna-Katharina replied, “but I have to agree with you. We first had the same category, here for example with the topic ‘problems while meditating,’ and then realized through our discussion that we meant quite different things.” Philipp added: “I’m not so sure anymore whether our approach with categories and Grounded Theory is so useful for us, somehow a lot of content is lost this way.”

Entering Meditation

“Before we go on now and think about how we continue, I think it would be good if we summarize our steps so far,” said Stefanie. “Yes, I’m with you there,” Philipp replied. Anna-Katharina crossed her arms, sat down more comfortably, and remembered the first weekend together:

The Studienkolleg started with an orientational weekend for the students to get to know each other and all the individual interests in the topic of perception. The ideas of my fellow students were more about our five senses: vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch. About the perception of something that lies outside our own bodies. I would have never thought that the others in the large conference room would respond in such a way to the almost esoteric theme of >meditation< and >inwardly directed perception<. I thought to myself that I could definitely learn something for life from a project dealing with meditation. Later, this was also discussed in the group: No matter what we do, we learn something for ourselves in any way. Learning more about meditation, thinking about it and sharing insights about it, seemed like a good thing to all of us. Today I know that the connection between perception and meditation is much more complex and perhaps not so easy to establish. Even today I still ask myself what knowledge we have gained on the subject of perception by engaging in meditation. What have we actually learned about perception?

“At first, we faced the decision whether and how to approach the phenomenon of perception. The question we had to ask ourselves was whether we should interview people who practice meditation, make a self-experiment, or choose the classical path of a literature-based research,” Philipp remembered. Christian added: “Looking back, I don’t know if it was too smart to enter meditation that naively, without reading anything about it, but when others, to whom we explained our project, thought that it would be even more interesting to read what unbiased people feel when meditating, we got encouraged. And we have found similar projects in which researchers also started quite unbiased, for example the work of Antje Lettau and Franz Breuer from the University of Münster (Lettau & Breuer, 2009).” “I am very happy that we finally decided to do the personal experience. Our plan to divide the project into three phases has given the whole project a good structure. The three phases were first, the introductory phase with Paula Weber, which gave us a practical as well as an encouraging introduction to the meditation practice. The second intensive phase followed at the Benediktushof for a meditation course and finally the third phase, in which we meditated at home ourselves. This continued over three months, and we wrote our diaries through all three phases,” added Stefanie. Christian continued with a broad smile “What we have learned about ourselves, and mediation practice is something no one can take away from us.”

On the Relation Between Meditation and Perception

“Sure thing, no one doubts that we learned a lot for ourselves. But how about the relation between perception and meditation? To proceed with the categories, we need to know how we want to answer the question: How are these two ‘phenomena’ connected?” Anna-Katharina made demonstrative quotation marks with both hands. “What is their relation to each other?” Christian claimed: “Putting perception on pause is not possible (Wiesing, 2002, 2015). But we can say that remaining in this posture for meditation puts our perception into a special state because we are not meditating 24/7 and are new to this practice. And because we reach a

stat” of mind in which our perception - in terms of input from outside of our bodies – might not be paused, but drastically reduced. This ‘paused’ perception, or let’s say the not-everyday perception, becomes an influencing factor for a state of meditation – even more: not only a relevant factor but a precondition so to say. Because how and what I perceive is decisive for how I succeed in meditation. Whether I pay attention to the sniffing of my neighbour or the pattern of the wooden floor influences how I meditate.” “And vice versa,” added Philipp, “all research in my discipline is most of all concerned with how meditation influences the psyche and the body. The most prominent example is certainly the Buddhist monks whose brain waves were measured (Lutz et al., 2004), but other research projects have also clearly shown that meditation leads to measurable changes in people (Cysarz & Büssing, 2005; Full et al., 2013).” “So there seems to be a mutual influence of meditation and perception,” Stefanie contributed, “we could maybe picture the connection between meditation and perception as a cycle? This mutual influence outlasts the meditation session: I noticed many little things during the time I was meditating regularly, I perceived the environment much more intense, and not only during the time I was sitting but also afterwards (Droit-Volet, Fanget, & Dambrun, 2015).” “And how is the connection to meditation, did anyone research meditation through autoethnography before,” Christian asked. “What an excellent question,” Philipp exclaimed, “yes, there is – well actually, it depends on where you look at it: Berry (2021) for example writes about meditations in connection to his father’s death, he includes descriptions of meditation similar to our project – but the focus of his study is of course different: we are dealing with perception and not with death. In a similar vein, Bartlett (2015) investigates meditation and its impact on psychotherapy training through an autoethnographic lens. However, meditation is often not the object of study but rather it is part of the process of doing autoethnography. For example, meditation is mentioned regarding how to read or encounter the piece of autoethnography (see for example Stephens, 2021). In these cases, it is not about meditation in the sense of sitting on a pillow and being, but rather in the sense of reading a text that immerses you. Other works take a completely different approach and see qualitative research, to which autoethnography clearly belong, as a form of Zen meditation (Janesick, 2015). But regarding finding out more about perception through meditation with an autoethnographic approach – the field is rather empty.”

Introduction to the Research Method

Everyone, including Anna-Katharina, was lost in thought. She stood up and moved away from the table to fetch a new pitcher of lemonade and cookies from the kitchen. While she filled the pitcher with water, she thought about how the project had been set up:

We chose a highly unconventional way: meditation as self-experiment. We agreed to at least give the whole idea the guise of an experimental setup by dividing it into three phases and to attempt a comparison between our experiences in these three phases. In a handbook that Stefanie showed us, I read about Grounded Theory and how it is – especially at the beginning – a rather vague, curious research attitude in terms of the question: “What is actually going on here?” (Bohnsack, Meuser, & Geimer, 2018). This has given me some certainty and the feeling of academic backing because I was not at all sure about our approach.

In any “normal” research project, the very first step would be a thorough literature review to understand what others had written about the topic and the scholarly debates. But we skipped this step for a reason, we did not want to hear

about the theory but delve right into the practice itself. With hardly any preparation we started with the step of data gathering right away.

To start with gathering data, we got an appointment with Paula Weber, a Zen master in Entringen. For me, there was little new that evening and I knew what to expect because I had previously done the introductory course with Paula at the Benediktushof. I already knew many of her formulations and views, the atmosphere, the seat cushions. The short sitting in the introductory course – the reason why we went to see Paula – triggered a lot in me, I wrote in my diary: ‘I remembered [...] this inner silence. But actually, it is also very difficult, it is not easy, i.e., not carried by lightness. There is no cheerfulness in it [meditation], rather seriousness and heaviness, it sounds simple, but actually it is complicated; and even more difficult to implement.’

Two days later, we packed our bags, rented a car and we drove to Benediktushof. We thought of the meditation course there as the most important phase for gathering data. Every minute that we were not meditating, eating, or sleeping we wrote down notes in our diaries – more or less. Lastly, we tried to continue meditation at home. The idea was that we change the surroundings (Benediktushof vs. home) and observe what changes in our perception and – or let’s say through mediation occur. We succeeded in meditating daily at home for one month, while still writing in our diaries. Now we have these four packed diaries, what shall we do with them?

Anna-Katharina was torn from her thoughts by loud laughter in the living room. She returned to the table with the pitcher of lemonade and a plate full of cookies, where the other group members were talking about amusing experiences during their first meditation.

Autoethnography and its Justification in Science

Sitting down on her chair, Anna-Katharina continued: “Do you remember that Paula was enthusiastic about us as a group and especially found the setting of the Studienkolleg really interesting, but she had to laugh a little when we told her that we would like to meditate and write a diary.” “Yes,” replied Philipp, “she said that quite a lot of people have already done what we were planning. She told us about conferences on meditation where many people showed interest in the diaries and many other researchers that are writing about the process of meditating. At that time Paula already pointed out a problem to us that we encountered later, especially in the evaluation of the diaries. She gave us the hint that *writing* about meditation is not so easy. Stefanie, this becomes totally clear in your diary: ‘When it is quiet on the outside, you notice how loud it is on the inside;’ Paula also said that. I think this is very important for us and our project – to perceive the sound inside. But that is, she said, hard work. In the state of awareness that comes after sensing of the inside, you are no longer an observer of yourself, then you will become one.”

The conversation about diaries, meditation and her own observations as a researcher reminded Stefanie of a different research project, she was writing parallel to this one. While the others talked about the conversation with Paula, Stefanie thought back:

I first came across unconventional qualitative research methods when I told Sebastian about the Studienkolleg. When I was finally accepted and it slowly became clear in which direction the project with Anna-Katharina, Christian

and Philipp was moving, it was also time for me to start my research assignment for my master's degree. This assignment, which I had to tackle as the last exam before my master thesis, was supposed to address a research gap in educational science. Talking with Sebastian about the Studienkolleg, he suggested we have a closer look at the autoethnographic research method. I still remember exactly how I went home after the conversation, made a note: "Possible Method: Autoethnography," and searched the word on the internet for the first time. In German methodological discourse I found surprisingly little about the concept of autoethnography. The little I found showed me that autoethnography seemed to be something unusual and not common.

For example, Ploder and Stadlbauer (2013) report that autoethnography tends to be discussed critically at conferences and researchers are often dismissive of the method². The quite critical discussion of autoethnography has significantly to do with the fact that the researching "I" is mostly strongly restricted in the mainstream of German research practice. The thematization of the researching subject usually remains reduced to the researcher's reflection in the research process itself or to his or her own situatedness (Friebertshäuser et al., 2006; Knoblauch, 2008; Mruck & Breuer, 2003).

It looked like a perfect method for my research assignment because there seems to be a research gap in its application to educational science. I grounded this assumption with the fact that autoethnography, on the one hand, is not anchored in any of the current method books and, on the other hand, raises the question of cognition and visibility of the researching person, which Brehm and Kuhlmann (2018) also note is almost aggressively discussed. Thus, when autoethnography is brought up, it is to discuss it critically. Common accusations are that autoethnography does not follow scientific criteria or that it offers a stage to narcissists. It does not come up to use it as a means of gaining knowledge. The methodology behind autoethnography and thus the recourse to the experiences of the researching self seems to have been applied only in individual projects³ and workshops⁴ so far.

In the meantime, I have made some progress on the research assignment, and I slowly understand what autoethnography is all about. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method (Geimer, 2011), a somewhat different way of looking at the world (Ellis, 2004), which has hardly been present in the German-speaking regions so far (Ellis et al., 2018; Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2013; Winter, 2011). Instead of generating knowledge about the world by reconstructing the

² The research project started in the winter term 2018 and ended in the summer term 2019. At the time of writing the publications about autoethnography were rarer than today. Even during the pandemic there came up some autoethnographic projects <https://www.wbv.de/shop/Corona-Semester-reflektiert-6004820w> and again it is discussed at the Berliner Methodentreffen, one of the largest conferences about qualitative research methods in social science <https://berliner-methodentreffen.de/ws-2022/#AE>. Even though the discourse around autoethnography has progressed in recent years and isolated research projects are emerging that make use of the method. In this paper we would like to present how we as students decided to use the method anyway in 2018.

³ AEDiL – AutoEthnographische Forschung zu digitaler Lehre und deren Begleitung – Sozialwissenschaftliche Methodenberatung (<https://sozmethode.hypotheses.org/996>)

⁴ Online-Workshop „Autoethnografie und Positionierung“ — Professur für Soziologischen Kulturenvergleich und qualitative Sozialforschung — TU Dresden (<https://tu-dresden.de/gsw/sfb1285/einblicke/archiv/interne-workshops>)

experience of others, it is about the reality of the researcher's life itself. Reality consists of individual cases, which are seen here as a starting point, subjectivity is seen as implicit to the social (Knoblauch, 2008, S. 72). This especially the case since the method calls into question the qualitative research paradigm that is common and somewhat dominant. In contrast to ethnography, the aim is not to write about the observation of other people, but to write about one's own experience during the research process (Ellis et al., 2018). This focus on the researchers themselves is very unusual – in common qualitative methods, the researchers themselves do not become the object of interest, if at all; they have to reflect on their assumptions and experiences in the research process (Friebertshäuser et al., 2006; Knoblauch, 2008; Mruck & Breuer, 2003). At first it is really difficult to imagine how such a method should work, because readers are usually less interested in what researchers have experienced themselves and more in how they have observed other people and what this says about social reality. But autoethnography reverses exactly these expectations! Autoethnography assumes that there is no objective research and no representation of facts (Denzin, 1997) and puts immense emphasis on the subjective experience of the researcher. This means that it is hardly possible to write about the observation of others, but one rather writes about one's own observations and experiences. This offers the opportunity for the reader to undergo a process of understanding and insight while reading. This became more understandable for me when I looked at autoethnographic texts. The topics of these texts vary quite a lot; mostly personal topics become the subject, such as coming out as homosexual (Adams, 2011), experiences of grief (Ellis, 1995), or texts about surviving cancer (Goodall, 2012). The texts themselves take on different forms; it could be a story, a poem, a dialogue, or even a theatre. That sounds strange to me, and I have already asked myself here how this fits into the science in which I learned to do research and write. But what I had to understand is that to become more comfortable with the idea of autoethnography, the process of gaining knowledge works differently than with common scientific texts. Normally, when a scientific text is read, readers expect to be presented with the new knowledge gained. One can read a paper or book and take up insights about the object under investigation, discuss them critically, find them valid or not. In the case of autoethnography, however, readers also have an active part, because autoethnographic texts do not present knowledge in the usual sense (Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2013), and they also have an effect on the reader. This assumes that personal stories, for example about a mourning experience, provide a real connection for other people. When someone reads Jonathan Wyatt's text, "No Longer Loss: Autoethnographic Stammering," in which he writes about the loss of his father (Wyatt, 2008), autoethnography assumes that readers know or empathize with the situation and that they start thinking about it. The autoethnographic piece must be written in such a way that readers can follow the story and get involved. The scientific criteria for autoethnographic pieces are therefore adapted: a good autoethnography is characterized by whether they are "lifelike, as believable as possible" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

I don't think that autoethnography is suitable for all research questions, but it is certainly suitable for very sensitive topics or those that need a different framework than a rigid and rule-guided approach. This is why

autoethnographic researchers differ between two types: those who analyse stories and believe in an understanding of research which has to organize data into determined systems, and those who can listen to stories as what they are: subjective experience from which we can learn (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). When I talked to my group about autoethnography, they were always very interested, but I noticed that the process seemed a little odd to them. Christian is still in the most positive mood and likes to compare the writings of Plato or other old philosophers with autoethnography. Anna-Katharina and Philipp, as students of economics and medicine, make fun of the fact that a theatre or a poem can also serve as a means of knowledge in science. I can totally understand that! Our understanding of science is very much shaped during our studies, depending on our disciplines. Now, I'm really surprised that our project has landed us in qualitative research; this is something completely new for them. None of us visited a seminar or workshop on autoethnographic writing. This topic is totally new to us, and it is like we were thrown back into the first semester.

Despite the different approaches and backgrounds we bring as a research group, we are interested in the topic of meditation. At the same time, we also think a lot about the methodological approach. We entered the field, as Grounded Theory would have it, without any knowledge of theory. From the beginning it was clear to us that we want to divide the research into three parts: introduction to meditation; stay in silent monastery; and meditate at home. At each moment we were observers of ourselves and others, and the research diaries were our companions for months. We documented our experiences of meditation, our feelings, and perceptions. We then transcribed the diaries and read them to each other, making initial categorizations, with the first step of open coding (Strübing, 2013, S. 118). Already here we crossed the private and opened them up. All at once we revealed our thoughts, fears, and doubts during the meditation practice.

Nevertheless, it was clear to us that we are not censoring here, the framework of the research group is safe, and yet there is something of a nakedness when others read your research diary which reminds me of Ellis' description of becoming vulnerable for all researchers (Ellis, 2004). During the first categorizations that we record in tables, it has already been noticed that the patterns of interpretation of the text passages are not always clear. Because we ourselves are the subjects of the research, content can always be supported with our own experience and possible misinterpretations can be corrected. More and more we notice that it is not necessarily about the correct interpretation of passages, but about the reflection of our own experiences during the meditation practice: what moved us and why? How do we find words and a methodical approach for the contents that arise in the group's exchange? We documented these discussions, recording them in mind maps and overviews. How can we methodically grasp the fullness of subjectivity?

We already notice that we come to the limits of categorization, too present is the discussion about the respective experiences and the memory of the stay in the monastery. How can we pass on what we have experienced to others as good

and unfiltered as possible. It seems like the object of research requires a different method.

Stefanie listened again to the conversation the other three were having, stopping her train of thought for the moment.

First Attempts at Meditation

They were talking about their first brief experience of meditation during the visit at Paula's. Anna-Katharina pointed out: "Well, we are of course total laymen in Zen. I already noticed that at the Benediktushof. One of my entries in my diary was..." she placed her empty glass on the table, took her blue diary in her hand and read aloud: "I think, if I were even more steadfast and knowledgeable in Zen theory, I wouldn't write like this. I have the feeling that I did not understand the gist of it yet and that I'm working with loose threads.' Nowadays, I think it is very important to distinguish between the different approaches. First of all, meditation means quite literally to think or ponder (DWDS, 2021), that's why you, Christian, probably read Descartes' *Meditation* first. But of course, Descartes did not sit on a seat cushion like we did. Malinowski (2019), however, argues that meditation in the Buddhist sense refers to the state of consciousness and that generally valid definitions are not possible at all; he thus positions against some neuroscientists who would like to give concrete definitions (Cahn & Polich, 2006; Lutz et al., 2008; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Nevertheless, it can be said that there are certain classifications of exercises and practices.

One important distinction is certainly that between secular and spiritual practices. Among the secular exercises, the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), which was made famous by Jon Kabat-Zinn, is particularly well known. He removed the spiritual aspect of the meditation exercises, which until then had always been a vital aspect. He thus made the practice accessible from the perspective of clinical psychology and medicine – and used it mainly to relieve patients of their pain. In opposition to the term 'meditation,' there is a definition of mindfulness, which most scientists agree on. Mindfulness is characterized by the self-regulation of attention and a particular orientation toward one's experiences in the present moment (Bishop et al., 2006). The spiritual paths of meditation can be roughly divided into different regional traditions, such as the Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, or Japanese. The important thing here is that the history of origins is complex and interwoven. That is why different terms from different languages and cultural contexts are all translated as 'meditation' in other languages. What we did with Paula is Zen meditation according to the school of Willigis Jäger. This is first and foremost a Japanese tradition, which Willigis Jäger has decisively transferred to and transformed into the European cultural area. His school is called Empty Cloud and declares itself as spiritual."

"Well, all this information about the history of the practice and spirituality are relevant and interesting; however, I believe that we project highly personal topics into this practice of meditation, don't you agree?" Christian thought out loud, and continued, "Philipp, for example, wrote in his diary that as a 'good' person, you have to be in favour of things that are considered valuable or good, and since meditation is generally regarded as something valuable, you also have to be in favour of meditation. Stefanie, on the other hand, writes about the balance of power in the guided meditation practice. And with Anna-Katharina and me, one can see some of our own reflections; that is, that during the time in the monastery we thought about all kinds of things." Philipp intervened: "Well, what I meant by 'good person' is simply my perception that the meditation practice does not exist in a vacuum, but somehow has a normative component. For me, there is an expectation to stand positively towards meditation – like sporting activities. You should do it because it is good for your body and your health. And here

the 'common' perception of meditation fits seamlessly into the hodgepodge of self-improvement and optimization strategies. Of course, through our project we have learned that there are different meditation practices and not all of them – especially the Zen practice we got to know – convey a different mentality. Before that, it was not so clear to me that meditation can also be about 'futility.' No 'umzu,'* no means to an end – I personally liked that much more." He read aloud from his diary: 'In addition to that, there are the personal expectations of the weekend. For me meditation is implicitly a 'good' or desirable thing. So somehow there is already the pressure that meditation should not only work, no, it should or must also be fun and enjoyable. As a 'good' person, you must be in favour of 'good thing' as well – the implicit expectation sounds to me like this, summarized in one sentence. But what if this meditation is not my thing at all? I wished that I could do something with it. But I think this is anything but guaranteed.' These were my thoughts before our Zen weekend at the Benediktushof. The pressure I felt from others, or I made myself feel regarding meditating becomes clear in the passage just read out loud. Therefore, in retrospect, I am glad that we ended up with the Zen practice, which didn't confirm my assumptions at all – I think that really relieved me. How was it for you, Anna-Katharina? I had the feeling that you also wanted to say something earlier?"

Philipp had put his elbows on his knees, his index fingers pointed in front of his mouth, and he waited for the argument to develop. Anna-Katharina then continued: "I was much more focused on my own perception. I mean, we cannot perceive perception, we cannot see seeing. However, keeping our senses, which perceive for us, still and calm does not lead to less perception, to less sensory impressions, as you mentioned earlier, Christian. On the contrary, this exercise intensifies them immeasurably. Every sensory input is immediate and leads to a thought with incredible presence, which often happens so quickly that the vicious circle can hardly be interrupted. I call it a vicious circle because it leads to a paradox: the 'actually doing nothing' but still having the 'head to burst' full of thoughts. This is what makes the experience of meditation so special and difficult for me. The thoughts express themselves for me in a voice in my head, which comments everything. It comments on impressions that come from outside: a sound, a smell. It comments on stimuli from inside: my foot fallen asleep, a tummy rumbling, a dry mouth. Of course, the voice of my thoughts also comments on my attempts to silence them, mostly maliciously and full of cynicism. Even if it would be completely silent, the real fight only begins then. I think this is perhaps the goal of meditation: to recognize the many, many things that are happening in a tiny moment of 'just' sitting."

"Wait a minute," Philipp rose to speak and explained, "there is a goal in mindfulness exercises, I am now practicing mindfulness so that I can pay more attention to myself or to my environment. There is a real goal and something useful, a reason behind, in other words, the 'why' one meditates: I meditate to relax more effectively, I meditate to be more focused and productive. In Zen meditation, this 'expectation' is completely missing. The fact that we perceive our environment differently or more intensively for a short time is only a by-product of meditation practice. I mean that I actually fell back into everyday life immediately after our meditation phase at the Benediktushof. While meditating at home, outside the monastery, it was exactly the same. For a short fifteen minutes, I was purely focused on myself, but as soon as I was done with it, this feeling of calmness only lasted for a short time. Then suddenly something new came up, I immediately got back into everyday life, and I had to turn my attention to something new."

"And I quote from my diary: 'So what do I perceive? I perceive how restless my thoughts are. That is, I always have some thoughts that are totally unimportant and irrelevant at the moment. If I sit, then I sit. Any quarrel with my sister or the holiday to be planned does not matter at all! Why? Because nothing changes with my thinking. I'm not going to solve

* "Umzu" is a German expression which describes an action with an aim/use.

anything. Of course, I hear the few pieces of advice that we have received from our Zen master. “Try to let go”, “imagine giving your thoughts into a wild mountain stream and let them go”, “breathe out a series of numbers” ... of course we meditate with a goal, not an “Umzu,” but there is an ideal. It is the ideal of complete immersion, of inner peace, in which the moment is completely absorbed in you.’ To be honest with you, I have hardly experienced this stage, even though I have become calmer occasionally. I write here, for example, at the end of the course: ‘I have the feeling that I have become a bit calmer, my inner voice doesn't babble so much unasked anymore. However, during the last session, I wonderfully thoughtlessly planned my new home project and then got lost in the question whether I should buy a seat cushion for 39,30 € or whether I should make it myself. Oh man, it is not easy to “just” sit. A key moment for me in the meditation experience was exactly this experience: it is really not that easy and it wants to be practiced.’” Anna-Katharina ended the quote from her diary and leaned back in her comfortable chair.

Departure

Anna-Katharina put an empty plate on the table and cleaned her hands on her trousers. She looked at their first printed documentation of their categorization attempt from last week that were scattered around the table and at the excel spreadsheet with their categories on her laptop. Actually, the categories should contain everything that the students wanted to express in their diary entries. Nevertheless, their thoughts got entangled again and again in the discussion about her notes. Anna-Katharina expressed the tension of the last hours: “I have the feeling that we explain and complete our diary entries so often again in the discussion until they finally fit into one category. If we really want to be finished by the deadline, then we must stop discussing and simply do what Grounded Theory requires of us, categorize, analyse and write.” “Yes, I agree, we still talk a lot about how we perceived the situation, what we felt and how we look at what we wrote, which distracts us from what we should actually be doing – if we continue quickly, we can simply take the existing categories and scan the rest of the diaries through them,” Philipp brought in after taking a big sip of lemonade.

Stefanie looked nervously over their diaries and said: “Yes, I totally understand what you mean. But to be honest, it was necessary to do this, I mean to discuss our diary entries and to attempt a categorization, to study our inner journey so intensively. I mean, how often did we find completely different categories for the same text passages, or each categorized a statement in a diary differently than what the author actually meant to say, which only became clear through discussion? Each one of us has already felt run over and passed over because he or she cannot recognize himself or herself in the many categories we now have. Boiling it down even more to a few selected categories feels not so good to me.” Anna-Katharina, who was already preparing a new table on her computer, which should serve for the further structured analysis of the diaries, looked up with a frown and said with a twisted expression: “Yes, but now we are already quite far, the first passages are categorized. With the existing categories, we will now simply scan the other passages and make an additional category for everything that remains unclear...” That’s when Christian interrupted her: “Yes, but Stefanie is right somehow. It was quite a special situation when we sat over our own diaries and categorized them. Each of us has perceived and experienced something very special; we were also exposed to very different private situations during the research phase, so it is logical that we feel an urge to note down different things and categories – they all should be included.” Philipp, who wandered through the room with an empty gaze, now took the floor: “Yes, of course, we always perceive different things, but the question is what we want to write in the text afterwards, whether it is important to us that we write about our own very individual experiences while meditating or just about the perception while meditating as something in general.” Stefanie continued: “Yes,

and that's exactly where the problem is: We can't really get a grip on perception through our diary passages, which becomes obvious in the previous analyses. Because the only things we have found out so far about perception are the descriptions about how we feel our bodies and time. I would say, everything else we wrote in our diaries relates to perception in a much broader sense – regardless of what understanding or definition of perception we have. We can find many, many personal stories and thoughts in our diaries, which we could now discuss endlessly. They help us to enter the world of our feelings of that time, but they don't really say much about perception." Stefanie continued resolutely, "If we had diaries from test subjects, the whole research project would be easier for us. We could effortlessly categorize the writings, since there would be no possibility at all for us to ask back how certain passages of text were meant and what it all really felt like. We would simply be analysing these diaries intersubjectively." Philipp, who now poured himself another glass of lemonade, replied, "Yes, I agree with you, Stefanie, but I also think that our diaries are a good thing, we have to stop from interpreting our ex-post experience into them and just take what is written on the paper – after all, we decided on the method at the beginning of the project, we can't dismiss it at will just because it doesn't suit us anymore. We want to redeem a scientific claim to the project." Anna-Katharina then thoughtfully added: "I think I understand the point you are making, Stefanie, but somehow it must be possible for us to achieve this with the Grounded Theory approach after all we have presented this in several colloquia in the Studienkolleg." Stefanie replied: "I don't think that this is impossible; on the contrary, I even think that we are on the right track, we can continue like this and later we can write a text about for example body and time perception, then this whole personal experience will be obsolete." "That's why it might be helpful if we try to think the other way around," Christian threw in and continued: "I mean, maybe it's much more fascinating and also easier to write about personal experiences instead of body and time perception. Because somehow, it's interesting what we have written in the diaries. Philipp charged the whole meditation normatively, Stefanie had massive problems with the control and power situation in meditation, I constantly had Plato in my head and with Anna-Katharina it was noticeable that she found writing about meditation incongruent and was disturbed by the other people in the room. Perhaps we found out more about ourselves than about perception per se. But maybe that is also an interesting fact. Okay, I mean, meditation is extraordinary in itself, so why not try to find out something that doesn't quite fit in standard research paradigms?" "Yes, of course we all learned something about ourselves; we still think a lot about our experiences and reflect on them, but is that enough as a result for the Studienkolleg? And how should we categorize that?" Anna-Katharina asked. "We could also write a play as you reported about autoethnography, Stefanie," Philipp brought in as a joke while he just got up again and walked a few steps through the room.

"Well, it's not that far-fetched," said Stefanie, "if we really want to decide to focus more on the subjective experience we had in the mediation, then maybe we could think about whether autoethnography is a possibility for us." "Oh, you mean this research method which is so unknown, and you are writing your research assignment about?" Anna-Katharina asked ironically. "Yes, well it's just an idea, because actually we went into our meditation project with the same scientific interest in gaining knowledge and wrote about our personal experience. Scholars of autoethnography would now write a story, a stage play or a dialogue about the experiences and think about what knowledge they want to convey." Stefanie replied. "Well, this method is nothing new. What is so unusual about it?" Christian asked the group. "Because, you know, I don't understand the attitude of scientists, and the resignation from the method of expressing knowledge with the help of poems, works of art or in other ways than prose texts. The ancient Greeks did this more than two thousand years ago and today it is called something new. The texts of that time are packed with content, let's just take the Platonic dialogues or other teaching poems (Diels & Kranz, 1952). No honest scientist can deny the works of that

time and their claim to scientific basis (Wöhrle, 2011). In doing so, one would be attacking one's own roots." "Hm..." Anna-Katharina mumbled, "but that's a bit blatant, just writing a story, isn't it? I mean it will be published and writing a story is not really scientific." "We can't write a novel or a play!" exclaimed Philipp, "I agree completely with Anna-Katharina. That is just unscientific, to be honest. If I do my doctorate and other people read that I published a story about meditation, they won't take me as seriously!" "This is exactly the point why autoethnography is still hardly used in the German-speaking area! Whether autoethnography is not scientific, but other methods are, is debatable," explained Stefanie. "I've already told you that the method has received a lot of criticism and is labelled as unscientific (Atkinson, 2010). That's just something different than if we wanted to examine brain waves while meditating or interview Zen masters or analysing diaries from people we don't know – Autoethnography even questions criteria of qualitative research. Using autoethnography would open us the possibility to leave the categories behind us and with that the character of putting our experience in abstract language. Autoethnography gives us the space to tell our experience as what they are: personal stories with emotion and suffering which has the potential. The readers could then see themselves in our positions and feel struggles to formulate our personal experience (Bochner & Riggs, 2014)."

Anna-Katharina, together with Philipp, was still a little sceptical about the method, putting her hands behind her head, she started to speak: "This debate is quite difficult to understand, and I believe that if we were to write something like an autoethnographic story down now, it would be something completely new for us. No one of us has ever put the results of their research and investigation into a story." "Exactly the same as with meditation," Philipp thought aloud, interrupting Anna-Katharina's train of thought as he slowly turned around from the window. "What do you mean?" Christian asked Philipp as he sat down again. "Let's say that meditation is like autoethnography? If that's correct, can we say that meditation is an unconventional method for investigating perception? And autoethnography is an unconventional method for scientific work, isn't it? The Forum Scientiarum is an unconventional, no better, a unique place for interdisciplinary research – right? That all can be combined in a great way: to deal with meditation in the Studienkolleg on the subject of 'perception' through autoethnography, no one can say that this is an arbitrary choice of subject or method: it is rather totally parallel and related. This is because the Studienkolleg, meditation and autoethnography are unique and somewhat outsiders, each in their field or context. We *can't* use any other method than autoethnography for this topic! Now I can understand your point of thought, Stefanie, but still how do we start? And is it really a suitable method? I see it now, but I don't want my enthusiasm to get the better of me..."

Epilogue

Stefanie's input and Christian's idea had given their topic a completely new focus. From the subject of perception, they now arrived at the topic of scientific inquiry. Philipp stood at the window and looked into the Neckar contemplating their newest insights. Between all the categories and their diaries, there seemed to be something for them that they could not yet fully put into words. Anna-Katharina minimized the new excel spreadsheet on her laptop and opened a text document.

"Now I'm not surprised that we've failed with the Grounded Theory," said Stefanie, "I think it would be really interesting to write an autoethnographic story, because in that way our personal struggles and expressions become much clearer to us. I mean, if we really want to represent our experiences, we can't do it with categorizations, because our subjective experience doesn't fit into a category that matches the experience of three other people and each time we break it down in a new category we lose something, these experiences are one

that is not many, they stand as one experience and as a unique (kind of) perception we made.” “So, do I understand this correctly?” Philipp tried to recap. “If we do this autoethnography now, then we stop categorizing and just write about our experience? Do you think our supervisor will agree to the whole thing, after all he is the editor of the volume that will be published as the result of the Studienkolleg, and the focus should be on perception. “Well,” Stefanie tried to calm him down, “I think it wasn’t bad that we started to categorize, so we got a good overview of what everyone wrote in their diaries and we each got a glimpse into what everyone of us perceived. And we had a text-based analytic standpoint to discuss our experiences with meditation and perception even beyond these few written words.” “But do we have enough information to write such a story? How do we start?” asked Philipp and all eyes were on Stefanie, who knew a lot more about autoethnography than the rest. “Well, there is a book that Sebastian recommended to me the other day and that I am reading right now.” Slowly Stefanie yanked a heavy book with colourful cover out of her book. “It is called ‘The Ethnographic I’ and is written by Carolyn Ellis, she is one of the most famous scholars of autoethnography. In the book she presents a seminar on autoethnography in a novel style, which she has conducted with students of different disciplines. You can learn quite a lot from it, I think – but I haven’t read the whole book yet.” “Well, how about we just write an email to Carolyn and ask her what she thinks about all this? Maybe she can better assess whether our project is suitable for autoethnography,” Philipp suggested. “I’m sure she’ll give us great feedback right away,” said Christian, “but we should still send her a rough outline of our project first, or at least a title. And it cannot hurt to start drafting a text; also, we should inform our supervisor that our scientific focus might be changing a little...” Anna-Katharina immediately pulled out her laptop with the new text document, set the font size to 26, and her fingers flew across the keyboard as she typed the headline. A little solemnly she announced: “‘Crossing Boundaries.’ So, guys, what do we write? First maybe what we did in the project and then how we ended up with autoethnography?”

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