

The Challenges of Goenka's Vipassana

How Participants of the Ten-Day Course
Make Sense of the Intense Internal Experiences
Induced by Vipassana Meditation

Jan Wallentin

LUNDS UNIVERSITET | CENTRUM FÖR TEOLOGI OCH RELIGIONSVETENSKAP

RHBM78 History of Religions Master's Thesis 30 hp

Supervisors: Esther-Maria Guggenmos & Johan Nilsson

Examinator: Paul Linjamaa

January 2023



Abstract

In this study, 28 individuals were interviewed about their experiences and interpretations of S. N. Goenka's ten-day Vipassana course, which involves intense meditation practices. A phenomenographic analysis of the interview material identified six qualitatively distinct categories of Vipassana experiences, and found that 22 out of 28 respondents had Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSE), described in earlier research as "a type of sensation moving throughout the body described with the language of vibration, energy, current, or other related metaphors."¹ These experiences were reported to range from extreme pleasure to overwhelming and frightening sensations. The most common interpretation of the Vipassana experiences was through a therapeutic framework linking inner pain to body memories of past traumas, challenging the standard interpretation of Vipassana within the Goenka movement.

The study highlights the need for further research to better understand the nature, implications, and prevalence of ELSE experiences in the Goenka tradition, as well as in other meditative traditions where ELSEs have been reported, such as within Tibetan and Zen meditation, and Kundalini practices.

Keywords

Goenka, *dhamma*, Vipassana, meditation, meditation retreats, ten-day course, ELSE experiences, adverse experiences, anomalous experiences, subtle energy, Theravada Buddhism, modern Buddhism, body psychotherapy, secular spirituality, phenomenography

¹ David Cooper, et al., "'Like a Vibration Cascading through the Body': Energy-Like Somatic Experiences Reported by Western Buddhist Meditators", *Religions*, 12. 1042. DOI: 10.3390/rel12121042 (2021) p. 1–27, p. 5.

1. Making Sense of a Powerful Technique	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Disposition	4
2. A Phenomenographic Interview Study	6
2.1 Research Design	6
2.2 Gathering and Analyzing the Material	10
2.3 Validity and Reliability	14
3. Ordinary Participants and Unordinary Experiences	16
3.1 The Goenka Movement – a Brief Historical Background	16
3.2 Is the Goenka Movement Buddhist?	17
3.3 Studies about the Goenka Course Participants	18
3.4 Shifting the Focus of Goenka Research	20
3.5 The Ordinary Participants and Trends within Contemporary Spirituality	21
3.6 The Challenging Effects of Intense Vipassana Meditation	25
4. Making Sense of the Vipassana Experiences	29
4.1 Overview of the Chapter	29
4.2 Some Characteristics of the Group of Respondents	30
4.3 Experiences of Vipassana Meditation During the Ten-Day Course	32
4.4 Interpretations of the Vipassana Experiences	51
5. Summary of the Findings	61
5.1 Question One – The Experiences	61
5.2 Question Two – The Interpretations	62
6. Discussion	63
6.1 The Outsider: No Dhamma and No Equanimity	63
6.2 The Experiences: How Vipassana Changes the Participant	64
6.3 The Interpretations: How the Participant Changes Vipassana	67
6.4 Reflections on the Study	69
6.5 Suggestions for Further Research	69
References	71
About the figures	76
Appendix 1 – Interview-request	77
Appendix 2 – Interview-guide	78
Tables and figures	
Figure 1. Finding the categories of description	9
Figure 2. The daily schedule for the ten-day course	29
Table 1. What the respondents say they have experienced	33
Table 2. How the respondents interpret their experiences	53
Table 3. Similarities between Goenka’s Vipassana and body psychotherapy	56

Apart from giving birth, I can't remember any similar level of pain.

(W52, two courses)

It felt like energy was coming out of my hands, out of my whole body, out of my feet.

(M29b, four courses)

"How pleasurable are the feelings from one to ten?"

"Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. [laughs] Yeah."

"Have you experienced these feelings in other contexts before trying Vipassana?"

"Doing drugs, but I feel Vipassana is more stable. It's natural."

(NB35, five courses)

1. Making Sense of a Powerful Technique

1.1 Introduction

Intense meditation retreats, such as S. N. Goenka's ten-day Vipassana course, can lead to powerful, transformative, and sometimes highly challenging experiences. However, there is limited scientific knowledge about the nature of these meditative experiences and how course participants interpret and understand them.

The Vipassana course, developed by Goenka's teacher U Ba Khin and further refined by Goenka during hundreds of Vipassana courses held in India in the 1970s and 1980s, is a rigorous form of meditation practiced in complete silence over ten days. Participants are taught to observe their inner "subtle sensations" through a special body-scanning technique and are encouraged to approach any unique or unusual feelings this evokes without judgment. The course starts at four o'clock in the morning and includes eleven hours of meditation per day. During the latter part of the course, the meditation is done in noble posture (*addithana*), which requires participants to remain completely still for an hour at a time.²

The Goenka course is based on Theravada Buddhist teachings but is advertised as non-religious and non-sectarian, promising to offer a "universal remedy for universal ills."³ Vipassana is presented as Buddha's original meditation technique, passed down through a chain of select teachers for over 2,500 years.⁴ While the Goenka movement emphasizes the development of equanimity towards all sensations, there has been little focus within the movement on

² The rules of the course are available at Dhamma.org, "Introduction to the Technique" *Vipassana Meditation* (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/code>> accessed December 22, 2022.

³ Dhamma.org, "Welcome" *Vipassana Meditation* (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en>> accessed December 22, 2022.

⁴ Dhamma.org, "Vipassana Meditation" *Vipassana Meditation* (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/vipassana>> accessed December 22, 2022.

the specific, and sometimes challenging, somatic experiences induced by the Vipassana technique.

Despite the growing popularity of meditation and mindfulness practices in recent years, there has been relatively little research within the scientific community on challenging meditative experiences. The first comprehensive study on this topic was conducted as recently as 2017 in the VCE study at Brown University.⁵ This pioneering investigation involved approximately a hundred seasoned meditators from various traditions and identified about sixty different types of unexpected, challenging, difficult, distressing, or functionally impairing experiences, including a phenomenon called “Energy-Like Somatic Experiences” (ELSE), which may shed light on the inner workings of Vipassana meditation.⁶

Energy-Like Somatic Experiences are described by Cooper et al. as “*sensations moving throughout the body described with the language of vibration, energy, current, or other related metaphors.*”⁷ These ELSE experiences, which may include cascades of energy flowing rapidly through the body, were commonly reported by the Goenka meditators interviewed in the VCE study and are consistent with the expected effects of Vipassana, as described by Goenka in his lectures at the ten-day course.⁸ Participants in the study described their ELSEs using metaphors such as strong internal feelings of electricity or waves of vibrations moving through the body. This flow was experienced as getting stuck in certain areas, leading to pain, and described as the energy “knotting” or being blocked. The respondents in the VCE study also reported instances of this internal energy building up to intense levels and moving up and down the body repeatedly, a sensation also described by Goenka.⁹ However, Cooper et al.’s findings are based on a small sample of Buddhist meditators from many different traditions, including Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan meditation. While there have been a few other qualitative studies investigating the ELSE experiences, so far, there has been no research on the prevalence or impact of ELSEs among participants of the Goenka courses.

The Goenka movement has a global reach with over 160 centers worldwide and around 150 000 annual participants in its courses.¹⁰ The Nordic center Dhamma Sobhana, located outside Ödeshög in Sweden, recently invested in a new meditation hall with plans to increase

⁵ Jared Lindahl, et al., “The Varieties of Contemplative Experience: A Mixed-Methods Study of Meditation-Related Challenges in Western Buddhists”, *PLoS ONE*, 12(5) e0176239. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239> (2017) p. 1–38.

⁶ David Cooper, et al. “‘Like a Vibration Cascading through the Body’: Energy-Like Somatic Experiences Reported by Western Buddhist Meditators”, *Religions*, 12. 1042. DOI: 10.3390/rel12121042 (2021) p. 1–27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸ William Hart, S. N. Goenka, *The Discourse Summaries: Talks From a Ten-day Course in Vipassana Meditation* (Dhamma Giri, Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1987).

⁹ Cooper et al., p. 7. Hart & Goenka, p. 34.

¹⁰ Michal Pagis, Masoumeh Rahmani, “Vipassana Meditation as Taught by SN Goenka”, in D. G. Bromley (ed.), *World Religions and Spirituality Project* (2015) <<https://wrludreels.org/2016/10/08/vipassana-meditation>> accessed December 22, 2022. Vipassana Research Institute. “S. N. Goenka” *Vipassana Research Institute*. (no date) <<https://www.vridhamma.org/S.N.-Goenka>> accessed December 22, 2022.

its annual participant count from 1,800 to 3,000.¹¹ To secure a spot in one of these classes, participants must apply on the first day the course is released on the Dhamma Sobhana website and hope to be selected via lottery due to the high demand.

Previous research on the Goenka movement and its participants includes the Swedish scholar Katarina Plank's dissertation *Insikt och närvaro*¹² and studies by Pagis,¹³ Rahmani¹⁴, and Melnikova¹⁵, among others internationally. However, most of this research has focused on the emic perspective of the movement, focusing on "insiders" or "tradition bearers" rather than the experiences and varying interpretations of the vast majority attending the courses, the ordinary course participants or "outsiders."

This thesis aims to fill this gap in the Goenka research by examining the experiences and interpretations of 28 individuals who have participated in one or more ten-day Vipassana courses at various centers around the world, including the Nordic center Dhamma Sobhana. This sample is diverse and includes beginners, returners, and experienced or very experienced Goenka participants. By exploring the subjective perspectives of these individuals through semi-structured interviews and a phenomenographic analysis of the interview material, hopefully a deeper understanding will be gained about the range of their meditative experiences, how they compare to the ELSEs identified by Cooper et al., and how these experiences are understood and interpreted by the participants themselves.

There are two research questions:

1) *What meditation experiences have the respondents had during the ten-day Vipassana course, and how do these experiences compare to the Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSE) described by Cooper et al.?*

2) *How do the respondents interpret their experiences of Vipassana meditation?*

The first question aims to examine the range of specific experiences reported by the participants during the Vipassana course and to compare these experiences to the ELSEs described by Cooper et al. The second question seeks to understand the different ways the participants make sense of their Vipassana experiences and how these varying interpretations influence their understanding of the meaning of Vipassana meditation.

Finding the answers to these questions is not only crucial for understanding the experiences of "outsider" participants within the globally established and rapidly growing Goenka

¹¹ Dhamma Sobhana, "New Dhamma Hall at the centre" *Vipassana Meditation Centre Dhamma Sobhana* (no date) <<https://sobhana.dhamma.org/en/new-meditation-hall>> accessed December 22, 2022.

¹² Katarina Plank, *Insikt och närvaro: akademiska kontemplationer kring buddhism, meditation och mindfulness* (Göteborg: Makadam, 2011).

¹³ Michal Pagis, *Inward: Vipassana Meditation and the Embodiment of the Self* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

¹⁴ Masoumeh Rahmani, *Drifting Through Samsara: Tacit Conversion and Disengagement in Goenka's Vipassana Movement*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹⁵ Nora Melnikova, *The Modern School of Vipassana – a Buddhist Tradition?* Dissertation (Prague: Masaryk University, 2014).

movement, but it also contributes to the neglected field of studies on how meditation is subjectively experienced and interpreted by the meditators themselves.

Through this study, we can also gain a better understanding of the potential benefits and risks associated with intense meditation, information that other researchers or meditation teachers could use to develop strategies to support practitioners if adversely affected.

The investigation can also increase knowledge about the ELSE phenomenon, which is also reported in the VCE study among meditators from traditions such as Zen and Tibetan meditation.¹⁶ To date, there is no established medical framework for understanding these experiences of internal energies and vibrations, making them a highly intriguing neurological and psychological phenomenon that warrants further investigation beyond the realm of religious studies.

Although intense meditation courses such as the ten-day Goenka course may currently be perceived as a niche phenomenon with little impact on mainstream society, the growing popularity of meditation may lead more people to seek out advanced meditation techniques like those described in this thesis, making intense, and potentially challenging, meditative experiences significantly more widespread.

1.2 Disposition

Chapter 2: A Phenomenographic Interview Study

This chapter describes and discusses the study's research design, analyzes the method's strengths and weaknesses, and considers the quality of the study in terms of validity and reliability. The study's limitations are also outlined, along with reflections on positionality. In addition, a detailed description of the process of finding respondents, conducting interviews, and analyzing interview data is provided.

Chapter 3: Ordinary Participants and Unordinary Experiences

After providing a condensed history of the Goenka movement, this chapter discusses the Buddhism of the movement and reviews previous research on the participants of the Goenka movement. It also highlights the importance of shifting the focus of Goenka research from "insiders" to ordinary participants and their experiences. Since these ordinary participants are often described as "spiritual seekers" in earlier research, the chapter also discusses some fundamental trends in contemporary spirituality. The chapter concludes with an overview of the scarce research available on challenging meditation experiences, specifically the ELSE experiences described by Cooper et al.

¹⁶ Cooper et al., p. 5.

Chapter 4: Making Sense of the Vipassana Experiences

In chapter four, the study's findings are presented, beginning with a brief description of the group of respondents. The chapter discusses the identified phenomenographic categories of Vipassana-induced experiences reported by participants and compares these experiences to the ELSE experiences identified by Cooper et al. It concludes by identifying the different ways these experiences are understood and how some of these interpretations seem to significantly change the meaning of the Goenka course and Vipassana meditation, compared to how the course and Vipassana have traditionally been interpreted within the Goenka movement.

Chapter 5: Summary of the Findings

This chapter summarizes the results of the research.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In the final chapter, the results of the study are discussed in terms of how the Vipassana experiences might affect the participants and how, on the other hand, the participants' interpretations may also challenge the meaning of the Goenka course and Vipassana. The chapter also includes reflections on how the interview material could be further utilized and offers suggestions for some urgent areas of future research within the almost totally neglected field of challenging meditative experiences.

A Note About the Terminology

There are a number of Buddhist terms in the thesis, all introduced in Pali, the scriptural language of Theravada Buddhism, which is the tradition of the Goenka movement. I will use the Pali words and not the Sanskrit ones, as these are the terms used in the ten-day course (that is: nibbana, not nirvana, dhamma, not dharma, kamma, not karma, etc.). For ease of reading, the diacritical marks have been omitted.

2. A Phenomenographic Interview Study

2.1 Research Design

2.1.1 A Phenomenographic Approach

This study aims to examine the meditation experiences described by the respondents and to understand how these experiences are interpreted. To achieve this, phenomenography will be used; a qualitative, inductive, empirical approach originally developed within education research by Ference Marton.¹⁷ This method, which is closely related to grounded theory (as described by Glaser and Strauss),¹⁸ is specifically designed to explore the diverse ways individuals experience and interpret the world around them.

Phenomenography, which originated at the University of Gothenburg in the late 1970s, emerged as a reaction to behaviorist approaches in pedagogy, which often favored teachers' perspectives and neglected the varied ways in which students may understand the subject being taught.¹⁹ For instance, if there are multiple ways to interpret and solve a math problem, it is unfortunate if a math teacher is only aware of one approach. Marton defines phenomenography as: “a research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them.”²⁰

Phenomenography has traditionally been used in educational studies. However, in recent years it has gained popularity in various other fields, including nursing, information literacy, psychiatric care, sustainable development, and sport science.²¹ According to Tight, approximately 12,000 academic publications have mentioned or utilized the phenomenographic method since the 1970s, with 84 percent of these studies published after 2000.²² The approach has been particularly popular in the UK, Australia, and Scandinavian countries.²³

¹⁷ Ference Marton, “Phenomenography – Describing Conceptions of the World Around Us” *Instructional Science* 10, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00132516> (1981) p. 177–200.

¹⁸ Barney Glaser, Anselm Strauss, *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).

¹⁹ Conrad Zygmunt, Anthony Naidoo, “Phenomenography—An avant-garde approach to extend the psychology methodological repertoire” *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 19(1), DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2018.1545061, (2022) p. 1–19, p. 3.

²⁰ Ference Marton, “Phenomenography – A Research Approach to Investigating Different Understandings of Reality” *Journal of Thought* 21, no. 3, (1986): p. 28–49, p. 31.

²¹ Zygmunt & Naidoo, p. 2.

²² Malcolm Tight, “Phenomenography: the development and application of an innovative research design in higher education research” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19:3, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2015.1010284, (2016): p. 319–338, p. 326.

²³ Gerlese Åkerlind, “What Future for Phenomenographic Research? On Continuity and Development in the Phenomenography and Variation Theory Research Tradition”, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 62:6, DOI: 10.1080/00313831.2017.1324899 (2018): p. 949–958, p. 955.

Despite its potential utility in understanding the diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices, phenomenography has seen limited use in religious studies. A search of the publication database at Lund University Library identified only ten studies that included the words “phenomenography” and “religion.”²⁴ These studies examined topics such as how Chinese school-children understand death, and the spiritual dimension in psychiatric patient-nurse relationships.²⁵ ²⁶ Thus, one of the potential benefits of this thesis is applying the phenomenographic method in the study of religion, potentially increasing its visibility and use within this field.

2.1.2 An Overview of Phenomenography: Key Terms and Practices

According to the phenomenographic approach, it is impossible to directly observe the world as it is (the first-order perspective). However, it is possible to study how individuals describe their experience of the world (the second-order perspective).²⁷ Within phenomenography, these descriptions of experiences are called *conceptions*.

A conception differs from an opinion in that it is an unconscious assumption about the world, that is not actively considered. While forming an opinion involves weighing and choosing between different options, a conception is taken for granted and seen as self-evident.²⁸

According to Marton, our conceptions form the framework within which we experience the world:

*[The conception] stands for what is implied, what does not need to be said or cannot be said, because it has never been subject to reflection. They constitute the frame of reference within which we have gathered our knowledge or the basis on which we build our reasoning.*²⁹

Conceptions are the basic units of phenomenography and are identified in the first stage of analysis. In the second stage, similar conceptions are grouped into *categories of description*. For example, one might have several single conceptions, or descriptions of the world, such as “disease comes from germs,” “pain is the result of nerve signals,” and “consciousness is an

²⁴ The article search was made on December 22, 2022, using LUBsearch Discovery, Lund University Libraries, <https://www.lub.lu.se/>.

²⁵ Mun Wong, Chinese preschool children’s understanding of death, *Early Years*, 42:2, DOI: 10.1080/09575146.2019.1686466, (2022): p. 247–262.

²⁶ Daniel Frank, et al., “Investigating Culturally-Contextualized Making with the Navajo Nation: Broadening the Normative Making Mentality”, *Engineering Studies*, 12:3, DOI: 10.1080/19378629.2020.1821694 (2020) p. 177–194.

²⁷ Marton, “Phenomenography — Describing Conceptions of the World Around Us”, p. 177.

²⁸ Staffan Larsson, *Kvalitativ analys: exempel fenomenografi* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1986), p 20–21.

²⁹ Ference Marton, Lennart Svensson, Marton, Ference, Svensson, Lennart, *Att studera omvärldsuppfattning. Två bidrag till metodologin* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, Rapporter från Pedagogiska institutionen, no. 158, 1978). Cited in Larsson, p. 20–21.

emergent, transitory phenomenon,” which could be grouped into a category of description called “a medical view of man.”³⁰

In phenomenography, it is essential to ensure that each category of description is *qualitatively distinct* from other identified categories. As Larsson explains, this difference should be as clear as the difference between water and ice.³¹

An intriguing aspect of the phenomenographic approach is that it suggests that there are *only a limited number of qualitatively distinct ways of perceiving any given phenomenon*.³² This may seem surprising given the diversity of individuals and their interpretations of the world, but it is important to remember that each description category must differ from all other perspectives. In phenomenographic studies, the number of identified categories of description, or unique perspectives of a phenomenon, is typically around five.³³

Phenomenography allows for a wide range of data sources, as conceptions can be found in any statements about the world, including articles, books, films, cartoons, popular culture, propaganda, commercials, and more, from ancient Sumerian clay tablets to contemporary memes. The preferred method of data collection, however, is the semi-structured interview, which enables a closer examination of conceptions through follow-up questions and finding individuals with varying perspectives of the world through *contrastive sampling*.³⁴

As mentioned, phenomenography aims to identify as many different ways of understanding or experiencing a phenomenon as possible and to group these understandings into categories of description.³⁵ The research is considered complete when no additional unique categories emerge from the interviews, at which point the researcher has reached the *outcome space* of the study. While it is always possible that a rare “black swan” interpretation could be uncovered, it is, according to Zygmunt & Naidoo, only necessary to interview a limited number of people, around 20 to 30, using purposeful sampling to ensure variation, to identify the most widespread interpretations of a phenomenon.³⁶

³⁰ In many ways the categories of description resemble Kuhn’s concept of paradigms, but on a smaller scale. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

³¹ Larsson, p. 21.

³² Marton, “Phenomenography — Describing Conceptions of the World Around Us” p. 181.

³³ Tight, p. 320.

³⁴ Åkerlund, p. 956.

³⁵ Larsson, p. 29.

³⁶ Zygmunt & Naidoo, p. 7.

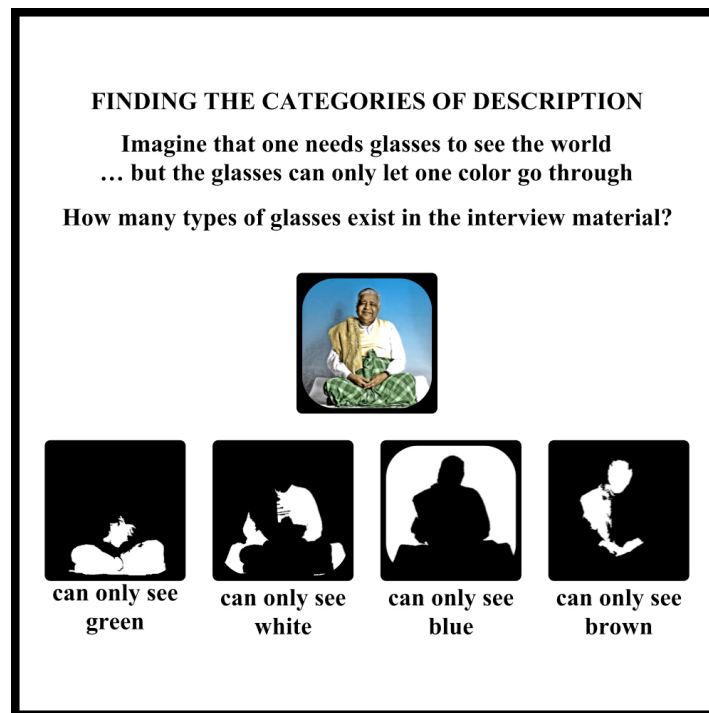


Figure 1. Finding the categories of description

To make the phenomenographic method more concrete, consider the figure above. In this analogy, the categories of description are thought of as different sets of colored glasses that allow the observer to view the world, but only in one color at a time. For example, if someone is wearing green glasses, they will only be able to see green aspects of the world, such as grass. If they wear blue glasses, they will only see blue aspects, such as the sky, etcetera. To investigate which “glasses” (*categories of description*) respondents are using or to see what kind of glasses the optician has available (*the outcome space*), the researcher must carefully listen to what shades of color (*conceptions*) the respondents describe in the interviews. If the respondents describe shades of green, there must be green glasses available; if they describe shades of blue, there must be blue glasses, and so on.

2.1.4 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Phenomenographic Approach

The phenomenographic method is specifically designed to identify a range of distinct categories of description, or fundamentally different viewpoints, related to the topic of investigation. In this case, a phenomenographic approach will hopefully reveal the major ways Vipassana is experienced and understood, deepening our knowledge of how this meditation technique is perceived by its practitioners. Furthermore, after having identified these categories, they can serve as a starting point for future research, which could be either quantitative, such as a survey to assess the frequency and distribution of specific experiences and interpretations, or qualitative, exploring the most noteworthy experiences and interpretations in greater depth.

The phenomenographic approach has been used for over forty years within educational research and has a strong track record investigating how individuals experience and interpret

a phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews provide a detailed and nuanced understanding while also allowing for the insights of multiple individuals to be considered rather than being limited to the narrow perspective of a single case study. In addition, this approach's inductive and empirical nature allows for discovering unexpected information, as opposed to a theory-driven approach like discourse analysis.³⁷ Furthermore, this approach allows for cumulative studies that bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative research.

Phenomenography and other versions of grounded theory have been criticized for potentially producing predictable and trivial findings in some cases.³⁸ However, this argument is more applicable to fields where there is already a significant amount of information available. In the case of the Goenka course and Vipassana meditation, there is scarce knowledge about the ordinary participants' experiences and interpretations, making the phenomenographic approach valuable for providing a comprehensive overview.

Another potential criticism is that phenomenography relies on interviews rather than extensive field observations, potentially leading to a superficial understanding of the phenomenon. While this is a valid concern, it is worth noting that there have already been several ethnographic studies conducted on the inner workings of the Goenka movement. These studies may also have limitations, such as the risk of becoming too immersed in the subject and losing sight of the larger context. In contrast, the phenomenographic approach offers a more distanced perspective, which may be beneficial at this stage in the Goenka research.

2.2 Gathering and Analyzing the Material

2.2.1 Reflections on Positionality

As a researcher, I have my own experiences and interpretations of Vipassana meditation. In October 2021, I attended a ten-day Goenka course out of curiosity about how I would react to the extended period of silence, and I also wanted to learn a proper meditation technique. During this course, I had intense Vipassana experiences that I later discovered closely aligned with the ELSE experiences described by Cooper et al.³⁹ After the course, my interpretation of these experiences has varied as I have considered different interpretive models, including the model provided by Goenka in the course's evening lectures.⁴⁰

After deciding to write a Master's thesis about Vipassana meditation, I researched the Goenka movement's history, past participant studies, and studies about the effects of meditation, including the limited research available about challenging meditation experiences, and ELSEs. I also continued to practice Vipassana meditation for one hour daily, as I found the internal sensations fascinating, and the meditation beneficial. In September 2022, I returned to

³⁷ For critique against discourse theory as theory driven, see for example Mats Alvesson, Kaj Sköldböck, *Tolkning och Reflektion: Vetenskapsfilosofi och Kvalitativ Metod* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2017) p. 367–370.

³⁸ For critique against grounded theory as trivial, see for example *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³⁹ Cooper et al.

⁴⁰ These lectures are summarized in Hart & Goenka.

Dhamma Sobhana as a voluntary server to gain a different perspective on the ten-day course and, if possible, to recruit study participants.

As this thesis aims to examine the wide range of qualitatively distinct perspectives on Vipassana meditation, I'm interested in all kinds of descriptions of experiences and interpretations. My perspective is just one of the many possibilities available, and I do not claim it to be more "true" than the perspective of anyone else.

2.2.2 Gathering the Material: Semi-Structured Interviews

Finding the Respondents

As mentioned above, phenomenographic studies aim to identify how people perceive and understand a phenomenon and typically require a sample size of 20–30 respondents. In this study, I sought to recruit participants from the September 2022 ten-day course at Dhamma Sobhana, where I volunteered as a server. However, when I contacted the center in advance to request permission to approach other participants at the end of the course, the center declined, citing the need for participants to absorb the impressions of the course in peace, without external disturbances. The center also stated that they had no interest in participating in the study because of a lack of time.⁴¹

As a result, I did not approach any participant at the Goenka center while the course was still ongoing. However, as a volunteer worker, I was included on the contact list made by some of the other servers. In addition, I asked the passengers on the transfer bus from the center to Mjölby if they would like to participate in an interview a couple of weeks later when they had digested the course experience (see appendix 1). Since the bus had already left the center and the course was over, I did not see any ethical issues with this recruitment process. None of the participants objected to being asked, and 36 out of the 40 passengers expressed interest in being interviewed. However, only ten of these participants were interviewed due to time constraints.

In total, 28 respondents participated in the study. Of these, ten were recruited on the bus, seven were recruited via the servers' contact list, five were suggested by respondents, four were personal acquaintances, and two were suggested by personal acquaintances.

While the recruitment method proved efficient in quickly gathering a pool of respondents within the time constraints of a Master's thesis, it may not have been ideal for identifying the full range of interpretations of the course. To further expand the phenomenographical outcome space in regards to interpretation, it would have been beneficial to use contrastive sampling to find additional respondents differing in characteristics such as age (there was a lack of younger respondents in the sample), education level (most respondents in this study had high levels of education), approach to the course (none of the respondents had left the course early) and religiosity (nearly all respondents in this study were non-religious).

⁴¹ Email correspondence with Dhamma Sobhana 30 July 2022. This seems to be a standard response to researchers approaching the Goenka movement's European centers.

Semi-Structured Online Interviews

Because the respondents were from various parts of Sweden and Europe, I conducted the interviews online using the video conferencing platform Zoom.⁴² The respondents could choose whether or not to use the camera during the interview (two chose not to use the camera).

I obtained consent before recording the interviews, and the respondents were informed that they could end the interview at any time and decline the use of the recording after it was finished. I also assured the respondents that their names would not be used and that the recording would not be published or shared with anyone beyond possibly a seminar.

If it had not been for time and geographical constraints, conducting the interviews in the respondents' homes would likely have been preferable, as this would have been a more intimate and personal environment. Some of the themes revealed through the interviews, such as adverse experiences and mental health issues, may have been described more thoroughly in a personal interview setting, as the anonymity of the online interview may have made some of the respondents less forthcoming.

The interviews were semi-structured, following the recommended interview method for phenomenographic studies. Two pilot interviews were conducted to test and refine the interview guide.

According to Zygmunt and Naidoo, phenomenographic interviews typically begin with contextual questions focused on building rapport. After that, there is a transition to primary questions using an identical opening scenario for every participant to ensure the same phenomenon is being studied in the same way with each respondent.⁴³ This approach was used when designing the interview guide (see appendix 2).

Rapport was established through open-ended questions about the participant's background, and the more structured part of the interview usually did not begin until after approximately twenty minutes, following the recommendation of Aspers.⁴⁴

The primary questions about the course, respectively about the experiences and the interpretations, were identical in all interviews:

“When you reflect on the (first) course, what do you remember about it?”

“Could you describe in detail what you experienced while doing Vipassana meditation?”

“How do you interpret these experiences?”

These questions were then followed up in respective interview segment with why questions, such as “why did you feel that way?”, “why was that important to you?” to elicit thick descriptions. According to Zygmunt and Naidoo, unstructured follow-up questions help respondents to immerse in the details of their experiences and are often helpful in eliciting underlying meanings.⁴⁵

⁴² <https://zoom.us/>

⁴³ Zygmunt & Naidoo, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Peter Aspers, *Etnografiska metoder: att förstå och förklara samtiden* (Malmö: Liber, 2011) p. 146.

⁴⁵ Zygmunt & Naidoo, p. 9.

The interviews were of varying lengths, with an average duration of about one hour and fifteen minutes. A couple of the interviews were over two hours, and the shortest was forty-five minutes.

Several well-known problems can arise during interviews, such as interviewer bias, respondent bias, miscommunication, memory errors, and social desirability bias. In addition to handling these general issues, there were also specific error sources relevant to the interviews in this study. For example, some of the Vipassana experiences reported were quite spectacular, and it is possible that some of the respondents wanted to impress the researcher, leading to an unconscious pressure to deliver something “fascinating” when being interviewed. On the other hand, it is also possible that some respondents did not elaborate on their experiences because they assumed that the researcher, being a Vipassana meditator, already knew about them. There is also a culture of silence within the Goenka community regarding meditation experiences, as a preoccupation with these experiences is considered a sign of spiritual immaturity, which may have hindered some respondents from sharing what they have been through.

One challenge in researching Vipassana meditation is that the experiences can be difficult to describe due to their unique nature. Many of the respondents struggled to articulate their inner sensations of Vipassana meditation. In future research, using Michal Pagis’ method of meditating together with the respondent before the interview may help facilitate the description process by establishing rapport and creating a mindset conducive to discussing inner sensations.⁴⁶ Alternatively, when words are insufficient, respondents could be encouraged to describe their inner experiences through sketching or painting. Other methods used in clinical psychology to elicit rich descriptions of inner sensations may also be worth considering.

2.2.3 Analyzing the Material

The content of the interviews was partially outlined and partially transcribed in full. The outlines and transcriptions of the interviews totaled approximately 100,000 words or 200 pages.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using the computer program *f4analyse*, designed to facilitate scientific coding and analysis of qualitative text data.⁴⁷ During the analysis process, the following steps recommended by Zygmunt and Naidoo were applied:⁴⁸

1. The focus of the study (interpretations and experiences) was identified and formulated into specific research questions.
2. I familiarized myself with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times.

⁴⁶ Pagis, p. 127.

⁴⁷ <https://www.audiotranskription.de>.

⁴⁸ Zygmunt & Naidoo, p. 11.

3. I divided the material into meaning-carrying units and gave every unit a short description. A unit could be a single sentence or up to a paragraph in length. A total of 1667 such units were identified in the material.
4. A number of these meaning-carrying units were identified as conceptions about experiences or conceptions about the interpretation of experiences.
5. I grouped similar conceptions into tentative categories of description.
6. I refined the categories of description by comparing them with each other, striving to make them qualitatively distinct.
7. I continued with this process until all conceptions regarding experiences and interpretations had been categorized within a unique category of description.

2.3 Validity and Reliability

According to Larsson, a critical aspect of verifying the quality of a phenomenographic study is ensuring that the categories of description are distinct.⁴⁹ To confirm the reliability of the study, inter-rater reliability tests can be conducted, in which another researcher attempts to replicate the distribution of individual concepts among identified categories of description. These tests have typically shown relatively high levels of reliability, around 75 percent, according to Larsson.⁵⁰

It is worth acknowledging that researcher subjectivity is inevitable in qualitative research, and another researcher may potentially divide and name the phenomenographic categories differently. Despite this, inter-rater reliability tests could probably provide a measure of consistency to the research. Unfortunately, there was no time for such tests in the current study. Still, the categories of description have been distinctly identified, and a test could be done at a later stage as the interview material, and the coded conceptions are available.

Lincoln and Guba argue that the validity of a study is determined by its trustworthiness in four areas: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.⁵¹

Credibility	The findings should be recognized by experts in the field, withstand persistent observation, and be able to be triangulated using different methods.
Transferability	The findings should apply to other times, settings and situations.
Dependability	The findings should be able to be replicated by other researchers using the same methods.

⁴⁹ Larsson, p. 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Lincoln, Yvonna, Guba, Egon, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1985).

Confirmability The findings should not be influenced by researcher bias.

Reviewing the design of this study in these four areas, the study is *dependable*, as the empirical material is available for inter-rater reliability tests; it is *transferrable*, as the identified experiences and interpretations could apply to other groups of participants and other meditation courses; it is *confirmable* as there is no specific tendency or research bias, other than the inevitable subjectivity of the personal perspective, and, finally, it is also *credible*, as the results of the study seem to correlate in large parts to what is known from earlier studies in the field of challenging meditation experiences, such as Lindahl et al.⁵² and Cooper et al.⁵³, and from studies about the Goenka courses, such as Plank,⁵⁴ Pagis,⁵⁵ Rahmani,⁵⁶ and Melnikova.⁵⁷

⁵² Lindahl et al., "The Varieties of Contemplative Experiences."

⁵³ Cooper et al.

⁵⁴ Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*.

⁵⁵ Pagis.

⁵⁶ Rahmani, *Drifting through Samsara*.

⁵⁷ Melnikova.

3. Ordinary Participants and Unordinary Experiences

3.1 The Goenka Movement – a Brief Historical Background

In the early 20th century, Burmese politicians who sought independence and liberation from colonial rule began to view Buddhist meditation as a means of constructing a new national and collective identity.⁵⁸ As a result, they supported the establishment of meditation centers throughout the country, which led to the emergence of around two dozen schools of Vipassana meditation.⁵⁹

One of these schools was founded by government official U Ba Khin (1899–1971), who claimed to be teaching the Buddha’s original meditation technique that had been passed down for 2,500 years through an unbroken lineage of teachers.⁶⁰ It was U Ba Khin who first developed the ten-day Vipassana course used by the Goenka movement, which is specifically designed to teach the Vipassana technique to laypeople in a minimal amount of time.⁶¹

In 1969, U Ba Khin commissioned his student, Indian-Burmese businessman S. N. Goenka (1924–2013), to spread the Vipassana course to India.⁶² As Buddhism was not popular in India, Goenka reframed the course as a non-sectarian teaching of *dhamma*, a universal doctrine of morality (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*) that would be acceptable to all, regardless of religious affiliation. According to Goenka, the Vipassana technique was a “universal remedy for universal ills,” as stated on the Goenka movement’s website.⁶³

During the 1970s, Goenka traveled throughout India, teaching over two hundred meditation courses, and the first Goenka centers were established.⁶⁴ In the 1980s, the Goenka movement gained a foothold in Europe and the United States, and in the 1990s, the number of centers increased rapidly around the world.

Today, the Goenka movement is the largest *dana*-funded (gift-funded) Vipassana organization in the world, with over 160 official centers, hosting approximately 2,500 courses per year for nearly 150,000 participants.⁶⁵ ⁶⁶ Most of the centers are located in India.

⁵⁸ Pagis, p. 23.

⁵⁹ Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*, p. 71.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84–96.

⁶¹ Melnikova, p. 42.

⁶² Daniel M. Stuart, *S. N. Goenka: Emissary of Insight* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2020) p. 89.

⁶³ Dhamma.org., “Vipassana Meditation” *Vipassana Meditation*. (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/vipassana>> accessed December 22, 2022.

⁶⁴ Stuart, p. 94.

⁶⁵ Pagis & Rahmani.

⁶⁶ Vipassana Research Institute, “S. N. Goenka” *Vipassana Research Institute*. <<https://www.vridhamma.org/S.N.-Goenka>> accessed December 22, 2022.

The Nordic center Dhamma Sobhana, established in 2002, is one of fourteen European Goenka centers.⁶⁷ In 2021, the center invested in a new meditation hall in an effort to increase the number of participants from 1,800 to 3,000 per year.⁶⁸ Located in the vicinity of Ödeshög, Dhamma Sobhana is administrated by the Swedish Vipassana Foundation, a non-profit organization.

According to historian Daniel M. Stuart, the author of a recent Goenka biography, success in the Goenka movement is often measured by popularity, with the number of courses taught, the number of people participating, and the development of new meditation centers serving as primary benchmarks.⁶⁹

3.2 Is the Goenka Movement Buddhist?

Katarina Plank, a Swedish researcher, conducted long-term fieldwork within the Goenka movement, spending approximately two hundred days at various Goenka courses in the early 2000s.⁷⁰ In her dissertation, *Insikt och närvaro (Insight and Presence)*, Plank argues that the Goenka movement adapts its presentation of Buddhism to different target groups based on their level of engagement.⁷¹

The first level is aimed at the general public and is distinctly secular. When interviewed, Goenka would not speak about Buddhism but rather about the *dhamma*, the teaching, emphasizing that he was a Vipassana practitioner who taught a meditation technique, not a religion or ideology.

The second level is aimed at participants in the ten-day course. During this course, the Vipassana technique is contextualized within Theravada Buddhism through Pali terms and references to Buddhist scriptures. Participants are introduced to fundamental Buddhist doctrines and receive information about the previous teachers in the Goenka lineage.

The third level is aimed at participants who wish to take longer courses, which requires a personal commitment to Goenka as a teacher and the Vipassana technique. During these extended courses, Goenka relates Buddhist cosmological and prophetic notions, according to Plank, who has participated in one 20-day and one 30-day course.⁷²

The fourth level is aimed at teachers within the Goenka movement, who get access to special material for answering questions and providing instructions to be used during ongoing

⁶⁷ Dhamma Sobhana, "The Centre in Sweden" *Vipassana Meditation Centre Dhamma Sobhana* (no date) <<https://sobhana.dhamma.org/en/the-centre-in-sweden>> accessed December 22, 2022.

⁶⁸ Dhamma Sobhana, "New Dhamma Hall at the centre" *Vipassana Meditation Centre Dhamma Sobhana* (no date) <<https://sobhana.dhamma.org/en/new-meditation-hall>> accessed December 22, 2022.

⁶⁹ Stuart, p.137.

⁷⁰ Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*, p. 30.

⁷¹ The four levels: Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*, p. 75–80. Pagis & Rahmani confirm this: "Novice students are exposed to selected and limited parts of the Buddha's teachings, while advanced meditation courses introduce more theoretical elements, including Buddhist cosmology." Pagis & Rahmani, p. 7.

⁷² Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*, p. 30.

courses. This material is not to be distributed outside the teacher group. Some practices, such as chanting, are only taught to teachers.

Plank asserts that the purpose of the four levels is mission-strategic. Within the Goenka movement, it is believed that elements associated with religion, such as rituals and symbols, should be downplayed to avoid deterring potential participants from learning the Vipassana technique.⁷³

3.3 Studies about the Goenka Course Participants

Katarina Plank's dissertation thoroughly examines the Goenka movement's historical development and current functioning. It is a pioneering work that includes a survey of Buddhism in Sweden and an analysis of how Buddhist-rooted mindfulness has been established in secular contexts. However, the dissertation lacks empirical data on the experiences and interpretations of ordinary Goenka course participants. Plank took a practitioner's perspective during the study and deliberately refrained from conducting in-depth interviews with individual meditators or more comprehensive surveys.⁷⁴ There is only a limited written questionnaire with 23 respondents, which covers topics such as participants' backgrounds and motivations for taking the Goenka course.⁷⁵

The first major international studies focusing on Goenka participants have been published relatively recently: Michal Pagis *Inward* (2019)⁷⁶ (based on her dissertation in 2008) and Masoumeh Rahmani's *Drifting through Samsara* (2022).⁷⁷

Michal Pagis' study is derived from her extensive ethnographic fieldwork at two Goenka centers and interviews with sixty Vipassana meditators, twenty in North America and forty in Israel. She periodically followed a dozen of these participants for an additional three years and interviewed some of their relatives and friends.⁷⁸

Pagis notes that most of her interviewees describe their first Vipassana course as a transformative experience. Nearly all of them report having strong emotional experiences during or after the course, accompanied by a changed relationship with their body and emotions.⁷⁹

However, Pagis is more interested in how Vipassana meditators incorporate their practice into everyday life than in their intense course experiences. She describes regular Vipassana practice as a means for meditators to access their "inner lining," a place of retreat and recovery from the demands and stress of the external world. According to Pagis' informants, the

⁷³ Ibid., p. 80.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 30–31, p. 35.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷⁶ Pagis.

⁷⁷ Rahmani, *Drifting through Samsara*.

⁷⁸ Pagis, p. 7.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 129.

goal of Vipassana meditation is to become a better person with stronger relationships and greater control over negative emotions. Thus, despite its appearance as an introverted activity, Pagis argues that Vipassana meditation can be seen as a social activity. She compares Vipassana meditation to other body-centered inwardly activities that can provide a temporary break from the fast pace of modern life, such as going for a solitary evening jog, exercising at the gym, taking a smoke break, or religious activities such as fasting, praying, or singing.⁸⁰

Masoumeh Rahmani's study *Drifting through Samsara*⁸¹ examines the conversion and disengagement narratives of Goenka meditators based on interviews with 26 individuals.

According to Rahmani, most of her respondents have attended the Goenka course to "develop the mind," a goal popular within the context of the human potential movement and contemporary spirituality. In addition to participating in Vipassana retreats, these respondents have attended various workshops and seminars focused on personal growth, creative therapies, mind-control training, and yoga. A smaller group of Rahmani's interviewees are instead motivated by the goals of the holistic health movement, to "heal the body and mind," and have a background in practices such as acupuncture, homeopathy, massage therapy, and psychic healing.⁸²

Vipassana meditation has two goals: to improve daily life and move closer to enlightenment. However, many of Rahmani's respondents are intimidated by the idea of *nibbana*. Rahmani cites a Goenka participant with several years of involvement in the movement who says, "Where is enlightenment? I don't know if I want it if it's going to take me away from earth."⁸³

Rahmani's participants have various reasons for wanting to leave the Goenka movement. One of these reasons is traumatic experiences. Four of her 26 respondents provided firsthand accounts of unpleasant and negative experiences associated with Vipassana meditation, such as disorientation, depression, and suicidal states. These problems often persisted for months, according to Rahmani. Additionally, two other respondents said they witnessed their friends having disorienting experiences after participating in a Goenka course.⁸⁴ Although Rahmani's primary focus is on conversion and disengagement narratives, she notes that: "the field that explores unusual and adverse effects of meditation remains underdeveloped and in dire need of scholarly attention."⁸⁵

Most of the Goenka centers are located in India, where the ten-day course seems to be perceived somewhat differently than in Europe. This is noted by researcher Nora Melnikova who attended fifteen Goenka courses, the majority of them in India, during three years of field-

⁸⁰ Pagis, p. 15.

⁸¹ Rahmani, *Drifting through Samsara*, p. 19.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

work.⁸⁶ While Melnikova's dissertation focuses on categorizing the Goenka movement, she notes in passing that Indian participants seem to be more interested in Goenka's theoretical *dhamma* teachings than in the practical instructions of Vipassana meditation. Many Indian participants, even those who are very experienced Goenka attendees, do not practice Vipassana meditation at all during the courses, according to Melnikova. Instead, they stick to the preparatory technique of Anapana meditation, which consists solely of following the breath.⁸⁷

This Indian approach to the Goenka course starkly contrasts with the attitudes Melnikova has encountered among participants at Goenka centers in Europe. European meditators often have difficulty relating to Goenka's theoretical teachings, as they come from a different cultural background and have no previous knowledge about the Buddhist *dhamma* or Indian philosophy. However, they are fascinated by the experiences of the Vipassana technique. Melnikova cites one German participant who says, "I find [Goenka's] teachings odd, but the technique works perfectly."⁸⁸

3.4 Shifting the Focus of Goenka Research

Even though several researchers have conducted long-term fieldwork within the Goenka movement, relatively little has been written about the intense somatic experiences induced by Vipassana meditation or how these experiences are interpreted by ordinary participants. There could be many potential explanations for this knowledge gap, but the following two reasons will be discussed further below:

- 1) The focus has been on Goenka insiders rather than ordinary participants.
- 2) The focus has been on the emic goal of equanimity rather than on intense experiences.

3.4.1 Focus on Goenka Insiders rather than Ordinary Participants

Plank, Pagis, and Melnikova have all completed numerous courses and engaged in years of fieldwork to gain an understanding of the Goenka movement from the inside.

Plank has a pronounced practitioner perspective. Pagis is interested in how people use daily meditation, focusing on Vipassana participants that are so invested that they have made meditation a part of their everyday life. Melnikova's research question centers on classifying the Goenka movement.

Plank refers to Goenka insiders as "tradition bearers," individuals who are deeply embedded in the Goenka tradition and have a unique relationship to it compared to ordinary participants.⁸⁹ Pagis, on the other hand, uses the term "career meditators" to describe insiders who

⁸⁶ Melnikova.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁸⁹ Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*, p.237.

become deeply involved in volunteer work at Goenka centers, rearranging their lives to allow for as much meditation as possible, often seeking partners among fellow meditators.⁹⁰

While “tradition bearers” and “career meditators” seem well-represented in previous research on the Goenka movement, the vast majority of participants in Goenka courses are outsiders, or as Plank calls them, “clients.”⁹¹ These clients may participate in many courses without becoming deeply involved in the movement or significantly influenced by its ideology.⁹² As a result, they are freer in their interpretation of the meaning of the Goenka course and Vipassana meditation than the insiders. However, the experiences and interpretations of these ordinary participants, the vast majority, are largely unknown.

3.4.2 Focus on the Emic Goal of Equanimity rather than Intense Experiences

While Rahmani’s study does have the perspective of ordinary participants, its main focus is on conversion and disengagement narratives rather than the intense Vipassana experiences, or interpretations of these experiences.

According to Goenka, the Vipassana technique consists of two parts: awareness and equanimity. Meditators are encouraged to become aware of their inner sensations, which can be experienced as intensely painful or immensely pleasant inner energies and vibrations, and to regard these sensations and everything else in life with complete equanimity.

However, it is considered poor form within the Goenka movement to be overly impressed by the inner sensations induced by Vipassana meditation. Teachers encourage students to avoid getting attached to their experiences and to refrain from discussing them with others. As a result, Goenka insiders may not be inclined to talk about the extraordinary feelings or challenges they encounter during Vipassana meditation when interviewed by researchers, as mentioned above. For ordinary participants, on the other hand, the potential for exciting experiences may be an essential factor in their decision to attend a Vipassana course or return for additional courses.

3.5 The Ordinary Participants and Trends within Contemporary Spirituality

According to Plank, it is common for ordinary participants, the “clients” of the Goenka courses, to have a background in contemporary spirituality.⁹³ This is supported by Rahmanis’ study, in which 24 out of 26 respondents identified as “spiritual seekers.”⁹⁴

As it is probable that the participants in this study also have this background, it is worth examining some major trends within contemporary spirituality as identified by experts such as Heelas, Woodhead, Hornborg, and Frisk.

⁹⁰ Pagis, p.138–139.

⁹¹ Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*, p. 237.

⁹² Katarina Plank, “Mindfulness i svenska kontexter” *Religionsvetenskapligt Tidsskrift*, 61, (2014) p. 35–54, p.48.

⁹³ Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*, p. 175.

⁹⁴ Rahmani, *Drifting through Samsara*, p. 17.

The sacralization of life

In many traditional religions, the world is viewed as a vale of tears, of little significance compared to eternal life that awaits beyond. This has been reversed in contemporary spirituality, where earthly life is generally considered of utmost importance. According to Paul Heelas, “spirituality” has increasingly come to mean “the sacralization of life.”⁹⁵

Self-spirituality

Since the 1950s, the individual has become of prime importance in the modern culture of the West, a trend referred to as the “subjective turn” by philosopher Charles Taylor.⁹⁶ According to Heelas, contemporary spirituality is “self-spirituality,” a belief in the sacredness of one’s self.⁹⁷

Personal freedom

Spiritual seekers choose freely from various religious traditions and create a spiritual bricolage that suits their taste. There is no desire to submit to a structured belief system – the motto is “try it out and see what it does for you.”⁹⁸

Powerful experiences

A popular goal within contemporary spirituality is “self-actualization.” At the top of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the self-actualized person is genuine, good, creative, playful, and unconstrained by social conventions.⁹⁹ Maslow also developed the concept of “peak experiences,” which are the exciting, exhilarating, elevating, and ecstatic experiences that the self-actualized person should strive for.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Paul Heelas, “The Spiritual Revolution: From ‘Religion’ to ‘Spirituality,’” in Linda Woodhead (ed.), *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 412–436, p. 434.

⁹⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 26.

⁹⁷ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: the Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) s. 29.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹⁹ David Thurfjell, *Det gudlösa folket: de postkristna svenskarna och religionen* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2015) p. 138.

¹⁰⁰ Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1964).

Health and well-being

Contemporary spirituality emphasizes the importance of holistic health and feeling good. Rather than just focusing on curing medical ailments, the individual should strive for optimal well-being.¹⁰¹ In this sense, spirituality can be seen as a “religion of health,” according to Hornborg.¹⁰²

Spiritual techniques

To achieve personal and spiritual growth, individuals can choose from a wide range of techniques imported from various religious traditions. These techniques are not “religious” in the traditional sense, as they have been removed from their local and historical contexts and modified to suit contemporary goals such as self-development and worldly success, according to Hornborg.¹⁰³

Speed and efficiency

As with everything in the modern world, spiritual change is expected to happen quickly. Courses, classes, and retreats are expected to provide transformative insights that can be immediately put into use.¹⁰⁴ This demand for speed and efficiency means that the spiritual techniques being taught can not be too complex or time-consuming. Most teaching in contemporary spirituality is done through time-limited courses, according to Frisk and Åkerbäck.¹⁰⁵

Spiritual but not religious

While “religion” is often associated with institutionalized faith, collective rites, traditions, and dogma, all terms with negative connotations within contemporary spirituality, the word “spiritual” is typically linked with fascinating experiences, sacred wisdom, and existential truth.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Anne-Christine Hornborg, *Coaching och lekmanaterapi: en modern väckelse?* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2012) p. 61–62.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p 111.

¹⁰⁵ Liselotte Frisk, Peter Åkerbäck, *Den mediterande dalahästen: religion på nya arenor i samtidens Sverige* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2013) p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ Heelas, “The spiritual revolution”, p. 414.

Interestingly, the ten-day Goenka course, originally developed within the context of Buddhist modernism in Burma in the 1950s, happens to almost perfectly align with the above trends.

Spiritual but not religious	On the Goenka movement's website, Vipassana is presented as a distinctly secular "non-sectarian" technique: "Vipassana is an art of living, a way of life. While it is the essence of what the Buddha taught, it is not a religion." ¹⁰⁷
Speed	The Vipassana course is designed to be fast and efficient. As stated on the Goenka website, "With the dawning of the 20th century, the teachers of this tradition began to experiment with shorter times to suit the quickening pace of life." ¹⁰⁸
Spiritual techniques	During the course, a potent and, presumably, ancient meditation technique is taught that is relatively simple to learn and can be used in daily life.
Health and well-being	While not curing specific physical ailments the Vipassana technique is said to increase health and mental balance. According to Goenka, the meditator will need less time to sleep and always be full of energy. ¹⁰⁹
Powerful experiences	The Vipassana course involves a retreat of complete silence and extensive meditation, which can lead to intense, transformative experiences.
The importance of freedom	There are no demands on the participants after the Goenka course. It is gift-based, and there are no systematic recruitment attempts.
Self-spirituality	Vipassana meditation is a private, inner practice that can be performed independently, with the only thing of importance being the individual's inner world.

¹⁰⁷ Dhamma.org, "Questions & Answers About the Technique of Vipassana Meditation" *Vipassana Meditation* (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/qanda>> accessed December 22, 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Hart & Goenka, p. 60.

A sacralization of life

Vipassana meditation will make the participant enjoy and become more present in everyday life, according to Goenka: “Life becomes characterized by increased awareness, non-delusion, self-control, and peace.”¹¹⁰

3.6 The Challenging Effects of Intense Vipassana Meditation

3.6.1 Research on the General Effects of Meditation

There has been a wealth of research in recent decades on the benefits of daily meditation, including reduced symptoms of depression, lower perceived stress, improved sleep quality, and healthy aging, as noted by Lambert et al.¹¹¹

While the effects of long meditation retreats such as Goenka courses are less researched, a study by Szekeres and Wertheim found that the Vipassana course reduced stress and increased well-being, self-kindness, and mindfulness among 122 participants. These improvements persisted, though somewhat weakened, after six months.¹¹²

3.6.2 Research on the Challenging Effects of Intense Meditation

Intense meditation can, however, pose challenges for practitioners. This has been recognized within Buddhism for centuries, with scriptures offering guidance on dealing with “meditation sickness.” According to Juhn Y. Ahn in *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation*, traditional symptoms of problematic meditation experiences include hallucinations, terror, lethargy, depression, dizziness, and pain.¹¹³

Until recently, the field of challenging meditation experiences was largely unexplored, with only a few isolated case studies involving small numbers of participants.¹¹⁴ One notable study is Jack Kornfield’s 1979 investigation, which documented a wide range of experiences at a Vipassana retreat, including feelings of rapture and bliss for some participants, and hallu-

¹¹⁰ Dhamma.org, “Questions & Answers About the Technique of Vipassana Meditation” *Vipassana Meditation* (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/qanda>> accessed December 22, 2022.

¹¹¹ D. Lambert, et al., “Adverse effects of meditation: A review of observational, experimental, and case studies” *Current Psychology*, February, DOI: 10.1007/s12144-021-01503-2 (2021) p. 1–14, p. 1.

¹¹² Roberta Szekeres, Eleanor Wertheim, “Evaluation of Vipassana Meditation Course Effects on Subjective Stress, Well-being, Self-kindness, and Mindfulness in a Community Sample: Post-course and 6-month Outcomes”, *Stress Health* 5 (2015) p. 373–381.

¹¹³ Juhn Y. Ahn, “Meditation Sickness” in Miguel Farias et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 887–906, p. 888.

¹¹⁴ In a recent literature review, Lambert et al. found a total of 39 scientific articles that mentioned at least one adverse effect of meditation. Out of these articles, 11 were case studies. Lambert et al., p. 1. This number could for example be compared to the over 16,500 articles about mindfulness found in a literature review by A. Bami-niwatta & I. Solangaarachchi. “Trends and Developments in Mindfulness Research over 55 Years: A Bibliometric Analysis of Publications Indexed in Web of Science” *Mindfulness* 12 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-021-01681-x>, p. 2099–2116, p. 2099.

cinations, involuntary body movements, and out-of-body experiences for others.¹¹⁵ Another study by Shapiro (1992) focused specifically on the adverse effects experienced by 27 long-term meditators, with two-thirds reporting at least one adverse effect of meditation.¹¹⁶

In 2017, however, a research team at Brown University led by clinical psychologist Wiloughby Britton and religious historian Jared Lindahl published *The Varieties of Contemplative Experience* (VCE), an extensive study specifically focused on a selection of meditators who have had unexpected, challenging, difficult, distressing, or impairing meditation experiences.¹¹⁷

The VCE study is based on interviews with over a hundred seasoned Western Buddhist meditation practitioners and experts in Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan traditions. The study documents about sixty different categories of adverse experiences, including perceptual changes such as hallucinations, cognitive changes such as delusions, and affective changes such as emotional blunting, re-experiencing traumatic memories, pain, fear, anxiety, depression, and disrupted sleep. In some cases, these challenging experiences also significantly impacted the meditators' social relationships and ability to maintain employment.¹¹⁸

According to Lindahl et al., having a social and cultural framework that helps to understand and make sense of intense meditation experiences is a crucial factor in managing them. From a Buddhist perspective, for example, encountering challenging or disruptive experiences during the process of meditation may be viewed as a normal and potentially valuable part of the spiritual journey.¹¹⁹

In the VCE study, only a small number of respondents sought psychological help, with some viewing their difficulties as minor and others fearing that they might not be understood or might be diagnosed with a mental illness. Many meditators were also hesitant to take medication, as it was considered shameful within their meditative community and tradition.¹²⁰

Lindahl et al. also identified a process of secondary victimization, in which meditators' negative experiences were often blamed on themselves, being told by their teachers that they had misunderstood or misused the meditation technique.¹²¹ Lindahl et al. argue that this victim blaming may discourage disclosure of challenging experiences and contribute to underreporting.

¹¹⁵ Jack Kornfield, "Intensive Insight Meditation: A Phenomenological Study" *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 77 (1979) p. 41–58.

¹¹⁶ Deane H. Jr. Shapiro "Adverse Effects of Meditation: a Preliminary Investigation of Long-Term Meditators" *International Journal of Psychosomatics*, 39, (1992) p. 62–67.

¹¹⁷ Lindahl et al., "The Varieties of Contemplative Experience."

¹¹⁸ Jared Lindahl, et al. "Challenging and Adverse Meditation Experiences: Toward a Person-Centered Approach" in Miguel Farias et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 841–864, p. 842.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 858.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 855.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 857.

There is practically no Swedish research on challenging meditation experiences. The only contribution I have found is a 2019 Master's thesis by psychology student Andreas Frank.¹²² Frank's study is inspired by the VCE project and involves interviews with seven meditators who have had unexpected, challenging, and difficult meditation experiences. Many of these experiences were described as difficult to integrate and unpleasant or frightening. Frank notes that several interviewees had difficult experiences while participating in Vipassana courses of ten-day intensive meditation.¹²³ One of Frank's respondents described her meditation experience as "a train that didn't go where she had intended."¹²⁴

3.6.3 Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSE)

Several articles have been published based on the interview material collected in the VCE-project.¹²⁵ Of particular relevance to Vipassana meditation is Cooper et al.'s "Like a Vibration Cascading through the Body," which focuses on Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSE). These are defined as "a type of sensation moving throughout the body described with the language of vibration, energy, current, or other related metaphors."¹²⁶ ELSE experiences can be transient, recurring, or sometimes last for months or even years.¹²⁷

Respondents in the VCE study described these energy-like somatic experiences using metaphors such as waves of energy, electrical charges, or a vibration moving through the body. Other descriptions included references to water, such as rip tides or rivers. Some reported blockages, with the energy "starting to knot." Some even described the ripple of energy as having an agency of its own.¹²⁸

Energy-like somatic experiences were the most commonly reported somatic (bodily/corporal) experiences in the VCE study, with over 60 percent of practitioners with somatic challenges reporting them (42/68). While not all ELSEs were found to be distressing or impairing, some practitioners experienced severe impacts, such as difficulties with daily tasks or problems with relationships and employment.¹²⁹

¹²² Frank, Andreas, *Meditation är inte bara en dans på rosor*, Master's thesis, <<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/59801>> (Göteborgs universitet, Psykologiska institutionen, 2019).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹²⁵ Willoughby Britton, et al. "The Varieties of Contemplative Experience" *Brown University – The Britton Lab* (no date) <<https://www.brown.edu/research/labs/britton/research/varieties-contemplative-experience>> accessed December 22, 2022.

¹²⁶ Cooper et al., p. 5.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5, p.11.

According to Cooper et al., similar experiences of internal waves of energy and vibration have been documented in various spiritual traditions throughout history, including the *Upanishads* of ancient India and classical Chinese medicine, and they have been popularized in the West as “Kundalini Awakening” in the works of C. G. Jung and Stanislav Grof, among others.¹³⁰

In the VCE material, Cooper et al. found that a specific group of respondents had a crystal clear understanding of their energy-like experiences. These were the Vipassana meditators from the Goenka tradition, who tended to describe their experiences as *subtle sensations* – sensations that are actually *expected* during the Goenka ten-day course, as we will see in the next chapter.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Ibid., p.5.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 17.

4. Making Sense of the Vipassana Experiences

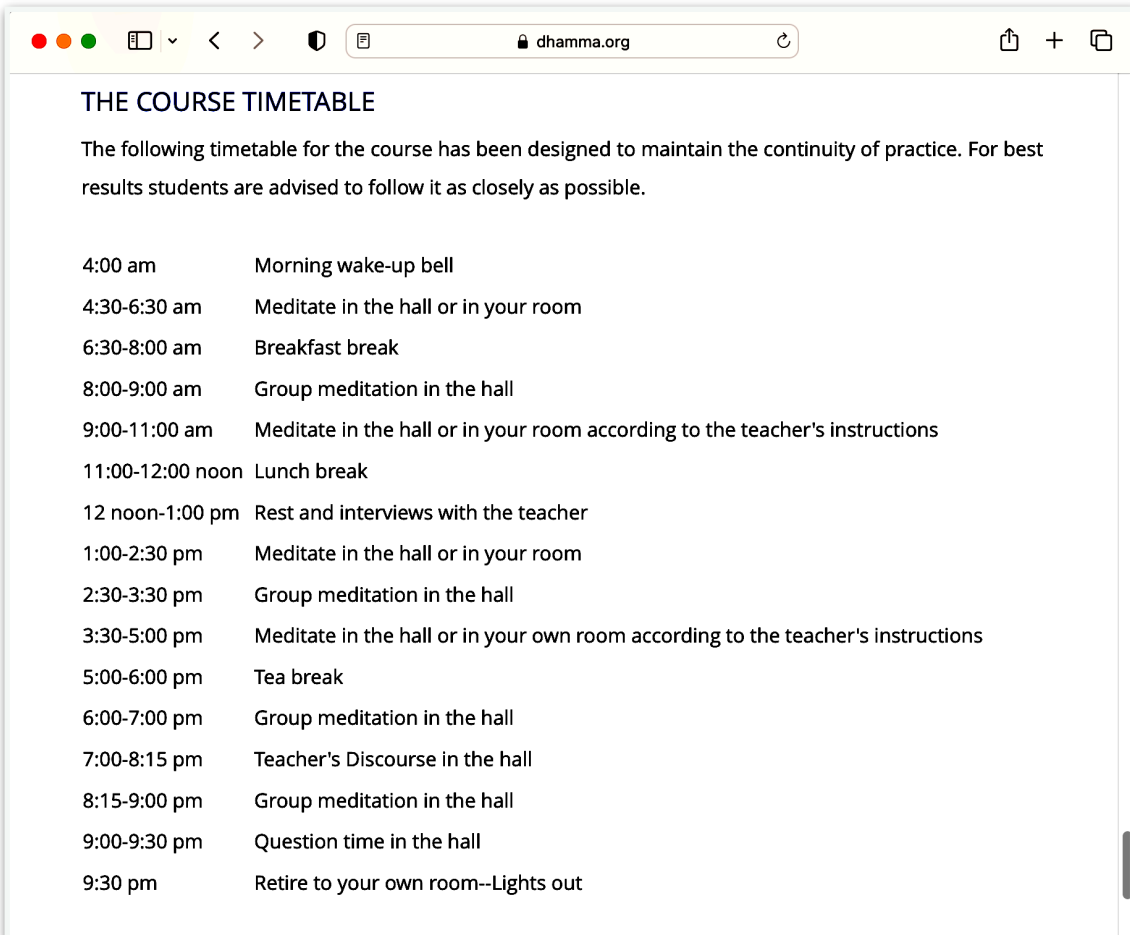
4.1 Overview of the Chapter

There are two research questions in this study:

1) *What meditation experiences have the respondents had during the ten-day Vipassana course, and how do these experiences compare to the Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSE) described by Cooper et al.?*

2) *How do the respondents interpret their experiences of Vipassana meditation?*

The chapter begins with a brief description of the respondent group. Then, the results for each research question are presented in separate sections, with a summary of the findings provided at the beginning and end of each section. The first research question, which focuses on the respondents' experiences, will be discussed in greater detail as it is essential to fully understand these experiences before analyzing the interpretations.



THE COURSE TIMETABLE	
The following timetable for the course has been designed to maintain the continuity of practice. For best results students are advised to follow it as closely as possible.	
4:00 am	Morning wake-up bell
4:30-6:30 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room
6:30-8:00 am	Breakfast break
8:00-9:00 am	Group meditation in the hall
9:00-11:00 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room according to the teacher's instructions
11:00-12:00 noon	Lunch break
12 noon-1:00 pm	Rest and interviews with the teacher
1:00-2:30 pm	Meditate in the hall or in your room
2:30-3:30 pm	Group meditation in the hall
3:30-5:00 pm	Meditate in the hall or in your own room according to the teacher's instructions
5:00-6:00 pm	Tea break
6:00-7:00 pm	Group meditation in the hall
7:00-8:15 pm	Teacher's Discourse in the hall
8:15-9:00 pm	Group meditation in the hall
9:00-9:30 pm	Question time in the hall
9:30 pm	Retire to your own room--Lights out

Figure 2. The daily schedule for the ten-day course.

4.2 Some Characteristics of the Group of Respondents

4.2.1 The Composition of the Group

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 28 respondents. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom, with an average duration of about one hour and fifteen minutes. Of the 28 respondents, 17 were recruited in connection with the researcher's work session as a server at Dhamma Sobhana in September 2022, while the remaining one-third were recommended by respondents (5) or were personal acquaintances (4) or recommendations of personal acquaintances (2).

The respondent group is composed of 15 men, 12 women, and one non-binary individual. The majority of the respondents are Swedish, with most of the others coming from neighboring countries in Scandinavia and Northern Europe.¹³² The mean age in the group is 43.¹³³

4.2.2 General Observations about the Group

This is a relatively small group of respondents, suitable for a qualitative study. The respondents do not necessarily represent the experiences and interpretations of Goenka participants in general or provide insight into how the Goenka course is experienced and interpreted in other parts of the world.¹³⁴

Approximately one-third of the respondents are beginners and have only completed one Goenka course, one-third are returners and have completed two courses, and one-third are experienced or very experienced Goenka participants and have completed from three to sixteen courses.¹³⁵

Many of the participants have attended courses at various Goenka centers around the world. While all the respondents have done at least one ten-day course at Dhamma Sobhana in Sweden, some have also taken Goenka courses in India and other countries, including New Zealand, Australia, the US, Malaysia, Spain, Germany, Poland, Italy, or England.

Two-thirds of the participants live in large cities, with ten living in Stockholm. Most are married or have a partner, and about a third of the participants have children.

75 percent of the participants have a university education. They work in a variety of fields, with the most common being media/PR, finance/banking, and service/restaurant. Mentioned frequently as special interests are various types of yoga and the twelve-step program (AA).

¹³² One of the respondents is from Spain, and one is from Australia.

¹³³ The mean age of men is 44,5 years, and the mean age of women is 42,3 years. The youngest respondent is a 22-year-old man, the oldest is a 63-year-old woman.

¹³⁴ As mentioned, according to observations by Melnikova the Goenka course seems to be perceived differently in Europe compared to India, for example.

¹³⁵ Nine have completed one course. Seven have completed two courses. Ten have completed three, four or five courses. One has completed ten courses, and one has completed sixteen courses. It appears to be common for respondents to work at roughly the same number of courses that they have participated in. The respondent who has attended ten courses has also served at ten, while the respondent who has participated in 16 courses has served at another 16. To attend 16 + 16 Goenka courses, which typically last for twelve days each, including arrival and departure, requires 384 days.

One-fifth of the respondents have had drug-related issues. Two-thirds have attended therapy, usually due to stress or burnout syndrome.

When asked about religion, almost all respondents expressed strongly unfavorable views while at the same time speaking positively about spirituality. They often present spirituality and religion as opposites, with spirituality seen as beneficial, admirable, and interesting, and religion perceived as narrow-minded, old-fashioned, and constricting. Only two out of twenty-eight respondents have any religious affiliation, and even these two state that they do not like religion.¹³⁶ Most respondents give vague answers about their personal beliefs, often stating that they do not know what they believe but that “there might be something more.” The label “spiritual but not religious” would likely be acceptable for most respondents in this group, who tend to be fiercely non-religious. As such, the theoretical framework of secular spirituality, as described by Fuller, among others, may be an appropriate way to understand the majority’s views.¹³⁷

Over 80 percent of the respondents admitted to having very little knowledge of Buddhism. Even among those who had taken multiple Goenka courses, only a small number had read any books about Buddhism or considered themselves well-versed in the subject. However, all respondents had a positive attitude towards Buddhism when viewed as a philosophy rather than a religion, and the majority expressed interest in learning more about it. No one of the respondents identifies fully with the Theravada Buddhist interpretation of the world, as explained by S. N. Goenka in the evening discourses of the course.¹³⁸

Before attending the Goenka course, two-thirds of respondents had tried other meditation practices, such as secular mindfulness or non-Goenka Vipassana. In addition, four respondents had practiced Transcendental Meditation (TM).

The majority of respondents described regular Vipassana practice as having significant physical and mental benefits. However, only one-third (11 out of 28) maintained a daily meditation practice, and just two respondents followed Goenka’s recommendation of meditating for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening.

Although some respondents expressed strongly negative views about the course content and the Goenka movement, all participants in this study would still recommend others to take a Vipassana course.

¹³⁶ Two respondents identify as Christian, four as atheists, and two identify as non-religious Buddhists. The others do not state any specific religious identity.

¹³⁷ Robert Fuller, “Secular Spirituality” in Phil Zuckerman and John Shook (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) p. 1–19.

¹³⁸ Hart & Goenka.

4.3 Experiences of Vipassana Meditation During the Ten-Day Course

4.3.1 Summary of the Findings

This section addresses the first research question:

*1) What meditation experiences have the respondents had during the ten-day Vipassana course, and how do these experiences compare to the Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSE) described by Cooper et al.?*¹³⁹

Using a phenomenographic approach, six qualitatively distinct categories of descriptions of Vipassana experiences were identified in the interview material:

- 1) Descriptions of **increased focus & sensitivity**
- 2) Descriptions of **gross shallow** sensations
- 3) Descriptions of **subtle shallow** sensations
- 4) Descriptions of **subtle interior** sensations
- 5) Descriptions of **subtle interior flowing** sensations (ELSE)
- 6) Descriptions of **anomalous experiences**

The fifth category, “descriptions of subtle interior flowing sensations,” closely align with the ELSE experiences defined by Cooper et al. as “a type of sensation moving throughout the body described with the language of vibration, energy, current, or other related metaphors.”¹⁴⁰ In this sample of respondents, around 80 percent (22 out of 28) reported experiencing these kinds of ELSE sensations during their Vipassana practice at the course.

The experiences described by the respondents generally correspond to the experiences outlined in Goenka’s instructions for the ten-day Vipassana course. During the first three days of Anapana meditation, participants are asked to develop their ability to focus. On the fourth day, the Vipassana technique is introduced, and participants are asked to scan their bodies, looking for sensations of tinglings and vibrations. As the course progresses, participants are encouraged to look for more intense sensations, culminating in the experiences of “free flow” and, for some meditators, the stage of *bhanga*, in which one, according to Goenka, “experiences the ultimate truth of mind and matter: constantly arising and passing away, without any solidity.”¹⁴¹

However, there are discrepancies in the interview material compared to the expected, ideal Vipassana experience described by Goenka. Some respondents have not felt the promised subtle sensations, leading to feelings of failure and achievement anxiety. The majority of respondents who have experienced these sensations described them in diverse ways, not corresponding to Goenka’s instructions, such as feeling the contours of inner organs or having energy flows spurting out of the body. When asked for analogies, some referred to experi-

¹³⁹ Cooper et al.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁴¹ Hart & Goenka, p. 57.

Table 1. What the respondents say they have experienced during the 10-day Vipassana course

TYPE OF MEDITATION	CATEGORIES OF DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTIONS	PERCEIVED ABILITY	NEGATIVE FEELINGS	POSITIVE FEELINGS
Anapana-meditation (3 days focus on breath)	1) descriptions of increased focus & sensitivity	surprised by the ability to sharpen focus learning how to control focus	ability to hyper-focus	problems to concentrate boredom pain from sitting	increased calmness
	2) descriptions of gross shallow sensations	don't feel anything blind areas can't get inside the body	ability to stand pain better	intense pain from sitting feelings of failure	love to learn a technique
	3) descriptions of subtle sensations	sensations of tingling, vibrations, buzzing on the skin level	ability to feel vibrating, buzzing, energetic sensations on the skin level of the body	numbness, blank spots	amazement
	4) descriptions of subtle interior sensations	sensations of vibrations, tingling, energy, electricity, or waves inside the body can sense body organs	ability to feel vibrating, buzzing, energetic sensations in the interior of the body	interior pain interior numbness	pleasure
	5) descriptions of subtle interior flowing sensations	sensations of a stream of energy sensations of a moving pressure sensations of rapid change "feels like taking psychedelics"	ability to dissolve interior pain	trouble sleeping	intense pleasure
	6) descriptions of anomalous experiences	dissolution of body boundaries (<i>bangla</i>) energy flowing out from the body extrasensory perception visions, hallucinations tremors, shakings unity with everything	ability to dissolve body boundaries	overwhelming, too intense unresolved issues – no help feeling of unreality not in control and nowhere to go	ecstatic pleasure
Metta-meditation (1 day compassion)					pleasure and harmony

ences they had with psychedelic drugs.

Additionally, many respondents struggled to maintain the emotional equanimity prescribed by Goenka and were surprised by unexpected changes in their abilities, including heightened focus, increased awareness of internal sensations, and higher pain tolerance.

Two respondents reported that their intense Vipassana experiences led to the development of long-term mental issues, resulting in extended periods of sick leave.

4.3.2 Developing the Hyper-focus: Descriptions of Increased Focus and Sensitivity

The first technique taught in the Goenka course is Anapana meditation, in which participants are instructed to concentrate solely on the flow of breath in and out of the nostrils. This practice is designed to sharpen the mental focus necessary for feeling the subtle sensations of Vipassana later on.

While this may sound like a trivial task, many first-time participants among the respondents reported finding it extremely hard, feeling bored and restless, experiencing increasing physical discomfort from the long periods of sitting in an unfamiliar position and struggling to keep their focus on the flow of the breath. For example, a 46-year-old woman (W46) said: “I thought, how can anyone be able to concentrate for more than three or four breaths? How is that even possible?” Or, as stated by a 62-year-old man (M62): “It feels crazy to sit for three days trying to feel the air against your upper lip. It’s boring. I don’t want to be romantic about it: it’s really, really boring.”¹⁴²

To facilitate concentration and help participants develop their ability to focus, the course environment at the Goenka center is designed to minimize distractions. There is no talking allowed, and meditation is done with closed eyes while sitting still for extended periods of time. Participants are not allowed to use phones, computers, writing materials, or books and are encouraged to stay inside as much as possible. Servers prepare the meals and take care of any practicalities.¹⁴³

Everything from the strict rules and the detailed routines in the daily schedule to the hours of confinement inside the meditation hall can be seen as contributing to the creation of a temporary laboratory of sensory deprivation, where even the smallest impressions are emphasized, such as the sound of a cough from a neighboring meditator, the chirping of a bird outside the window, an itch on the back of the neck... Hours after hour, all attention is on the subtle but constant flow of air going in and out of the nostrils, which serves as a guiding force or “steering oar” for keeping the meditative concentration.

Many of the respondents were surprised at how quickly they were able to increase their capacity to focus during these first three days of the course:

¹⁴² The quotes of the respondents have been slightly revised for the sake of clarity and ease of reading.

¹⁴³ The rules of the ten-day course can be found at Dhamma.org, “Introduction to the Technique” *Vipassana Meditation*. (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/code>> accessed December 22, 2022.

I was surprised at how much one can sharpen one's mind in a fairly short period of time. In a couple of days, very much happens, and one can get into a level of detail and observe every single point or part of the body. (W41, first course)

4.3.3 Getting Stuck: Descriptions of Gross and Subtle Shallow Sensations

The interviews reveal that several respondents fail to perform Vipassana according to Goenka's instructions. When attempting the meditation, they can only feel the shallow sensations typically experienced during a body scan. Goenka refers to these ordinary feelings of the body as "gross sensations," meaning they are crude and course, in contrast to the "subtle sensations," as in delicate and exquisite, that Vipassana meditation aims to uncover. So, to understand the disappointment of some meditators "only" feeling gross shallow sensations, we first have to understand what "subtle sensations" might feel like.

"What was challenging about the first days?"

"It was that you had this monkey mind and difficulty with concentration. Can we really not do something other than think about our upper lip? Especially on the third day, and still on the fourth day in the morning, just thinking and thinking about this upper lip. But then, in the afternoon, Goenka asked us to shift our attention from the lip to the top of the head. And from that point, I was no longer irritated and just amazed for the rest of the course." (W62, first course)

On the fourth day of the course, the Vipassana technique is introduced. Respondents report that by this time, their consistent focus on the breath and nostrils has made their upper lip and the tip of their nose highly sensitive. As Goenka has predicted in his evening discourse the day before, most respondents now notice that they have begun to feel a buzzing, tickling, vibrating sensation on their upper lip area just under the nose. Many of the first-course respondents describe this tingly, prickly feeling to be very odd – it's something that they have never experienced before.

Following Goenka's instructions, most of the respondents find that they can move this tickling, vibrating sensation from their upper lip to a coin-sized spot on the top of their head. Then, by intensely focusing on this spot, they can increase the tickling, buzzing, and vibrating feeling to cover their entire scalp area. After adjusting the focus of attention to a size of about a square decimeter, they can then move this "focus-patch" to discover similar vibrations and tinglings in various parts of the body: moving the attention from the head to the neck, to the right shoulder, down the right arm to the right hand, and then doing the same exercise on the left shoulder, left arm, and left hand, slowly and meticulously scanning the body for the prickly, tickling, vibrating sensations "part by part, piece by piece" as Goenka advises in his instructions at the course.

So, how can we understand this special Vipassana feeling of tickling, prickling, and buzzing vibrations? Goenka refers to it as the feeling of "subtle sensations," which is an ap-

appropriate term as the sensations are reported to be too delicate to last when one starts to move around.

Most respondents do not use the specific emic term “subtle” but rather describe the feelings as tinglings, vibrations, and energy, words also used by Goenka. However, “subtle sensations” is a helpful phenomenographic definition to distinguish this category of description within this study, as it indicates that these experiences are qualitatively distinct from the “gross sensations” of an ordinary body scan. The emic qualities of the terms “subtle” and “gross” also make them appropriate, as they already have distinct connotations within the Goenka movement, in contrast to alternate word pairs such as “delicate” vs “crude”, or “sublime” vs “physical.”

The subtle sensations are described in the interviews as ranging from vaguely to, sometimes, extremely pleasant. Many respondents have a hard time describing exactly what they experience. When asked for analogies, three respondents compared it to the feeling of pins and needles one gets when sitting with legs crossed for too long. The medical term for this is “temporary paresthesia,” which usually results from a nerve placed under sustained pressure.¹⁴⁴

“Have you had any similar experiences?”

“Yes, we have a saying in Danish that you have ‘rice in your foot.’ You know that tickling sensation in your foot if you haven’t moved it for a while? That’s what it felt like, but all over my body.” (W23, one course)

It’s like when your leg falls asleep, and then when it wakes up again, there is this intense tingling sensation. That’s how it feels in my hands, for example, but not as intense, more subtly, like this, yeah, tingling vibrating sensation. (W25, six courses)

Imagine, for instance, that your leg falls asleep and starts to tingle as it wakes up or that you have been working out very hard and you are lying down with your eyes closed, feeling how your whole body vibrates. It’s that kind of vibration that you can experience in a more compressed and intense form. And the more you focus, the more refined this sensation becomes, and you can control it with more and more precision. (M42c, three courses)

In the first days of practicing Vipassana meditation, participants are encouraged to move their focus slowly, starting at the top of the head and ending at the tips of their toes. A complete body scan, at this stage, should take about ten minutes to complete, according to Goenka. These kinds of subtle sensations are described by the respondents as felt on a shallow level, on the surface of the body. Thus this category of descriptions is referred to as: “descriptions of subtle *shallow* sensations.”

¹⁴⁴ National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. “Paresthesia” *All Disorders* <<https://www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/paresthesia>> accessed December 22, 2022.

So when I started where my crown is on the top of my head, I quickly felt small tickling sensations on my scalp. And when I was calm in my mind and focused, these small tickling sensations spread from the top of my head to the back of my head and down my face and neck. Then I focused on my throat, and these small tickling sensations continued down my back and to my feet. (W23, one course)

Feeling Only Gross Shallow Sensations

Some respondents find it difficult to experience more than brief and fleeting episodes of subtle sensations during Vipassana meditation, even after attending multiple courses. Rather than progressing, they remain stuck, feeling only the gross shallow sensations typical of a normal body scan.

Listening to Goenka's lectures and instructions about the unique qualities of subtle sensations while being aware that other meditators can access them can sometimes lead to feelings of failure and achievement anxiety:

It shouldn't be a sign of failure, but it's hard not to come to that conclusion. I often get stuck, and it's hard to put aside the feeling that I want the vibrations too much. (M57b, two courses)

And since I don't have such wonderful experiences during meditation in that way... [laughs] Those thoughts have come... am I doing something wrong? I start comparing, striving – why don't I get these vibrations? (W40a, two courses)

Blind Areas

Some respondents have trouble feeling any sensations at all in certain regions of the body. Goenka refers to these numb body areas as "blind" or "blank."¹⁴⁵ Experiencing blind areas is reported to be even more unpleasant than experiencing areas of pain.

I find it very uncomfortable to have blind spots where I can't feel anything. I would say it is the most unpleasant thing for me. Better to sit in pain than not to feel. It's like having taken anesthesia; you can't really feel anything at all. (W40b, five courses)

Dealing with Physical Pain

All respondents report having experienced intense pain during their Goenka courses. For many participants, especially beginners, this seems to be one of the most vivid memories.

The first question about the course was always phrased: "When you reflect on the first course, what do you remember about it?" In almost all the interviews, the answer to this question began with a reference to pain, often connected to the long hours of sitting in meditation posture: "I felt like my knee would explode" (M42a, two courses), "I had terrible pain in the back" (M57b, two courses), "I was afraid my leg would drop off" (M43a, two courses).

¹⁴⁵ Hart & Goenka, p. 16.

During the later part of the Vipassana course, participants are instructed to sit in determination (*aditthana*, noble posture), remaining completely still for the hour-long meditation. This leads to a harsh confrontation with rising pain levels, according to many respondents:

When we sat down for the first hour, I chose a comfortable position, and after about half an hour, it was like someone started twisting my leg; it hurt so much. And then I remember I thought like this: 'How interesting – no one is twisting my leg, and I'm sitting exactly the way I sat before it started to hurt, so obviously, nothing is getting broken.' And then it got worse and worse and worse, but I still managed to stay in the position even though it was like torture. (W55, one course)

When asked to rate the pain on a scale from one to ten, with ten being the most excruciating pain one could ever imagine, several respondents answered with a ten, while most rated the pain above eight.

"How would you rate your pain level on a scale from one to ten?"

"Very high. But not ten; it is not like I have felt that I... well, but it has hurt really, really bad! [laughs] I remember thinking once that if I opened my eyes, I would discover that my legs were on fire. So, if ten is equivalent to dying, then an eight, perhaps." (W40b, five courses)

During the course, participants are instructed to observe their pain equanimously, without reacting. This is intended to help the meditators understand the Buddhist truth of *anicca*, that everything constantly changes and that even the most potent pain will eventually lose its grip. The moment when a truly severe pain suddenly fades away is described as being very pleasurable.

It was like all the pain disappeared. Have you experienced that too? All the pain disappeared and everything just dissolved; it just vibrated like little diamonds in the whole body, and it was so amazing. (W52, two courses)

For many respondents, it is a revelation that one can deal with pain in a non-reactive manner, and this newfound ability is often described as empowering. Some respondents report how they apply this method in everyday life. For example, one participant has used this pain-handling "superpower" of equanimity at his gym to perform an increased number of weight-lifting repetitions:

Then, I thought that the next time I would only observe the pain equanimously. And when I did that, I could do 43 repetitions without any problem. It wasn't the pain that made me stop; it was a lack of strength. There have been several experiences like this that have convinced me that this Vipassana teaching is the real deal. (M57b, two courses)

4.3.4 Entering the Body: Descriptions of Subtle *Interior* Sensations

For most respondents, the ability to experience subtle sensations at the skin level is just the beginning of a series of surprises as they learn the Vipassana technique. Next, they recount how, following Goenka's instructions, they were able to move their focus inside their body, suddenly plunging beneath the skin into a hitherto unknown world of tingling, vibrating, and buzzing sensations in the body's interior. This fourth category of Vipassana experiences can thus be defined as "descriptions of subtle *interior* sensations," qualitatively distinct from the categories of "subtle *shallow* sensations", "*gross shallow* sensations", and "increased focus and sensitivity" mentioned above.

In addition to beginning to feel the vibrations and tingling sensations inside the body, some respondents also describe a feeling of something moving under the skin. For example, a respondent reports feeling snakes moving under the skin around her neck.

A third type of description, in addition to feelings of vibrations, or electricity, is the ability to feel the contours and workings of one's internal organs. One respondent described this experience as "walking around inside my body, feeling my lungs, heart, spine, and different bones in my arms and legs," adding that it was "totally new" and "very interesting." (W62, one course)

According to the current understanding of the nervous system, it seems quite impossible to feel the contours and workings of internal organs in such a physical way, and only a few respondents report having this experience.

Discovering the *Sankharas* – Dealing with Inner Pain

For many respondents, the subtle sensations experienced during Vipassana meditation are so pleasant that they conflict with the practice's primary goal of developing equanimity towards all cravings and aversions:

And then I began to have these small vibrating feelings, which was fantastic. And I kept hearing Goenka say, "don't have cravings about this," which was difficult because it was very, very nice. (W62, one course)

However, by scanning the subtle sensations within their bodies, participants also become aware of areas of tightness, knots, soreness, and pain—referred to as "*sankharas*" by Goenka. According to Goenka's cosmology, *sankharas* are old volitions – cravings and aversions – that we have collected throughout this and previous lifetimes. These *sankharas* are the *kamma* that cause us to feel bad and hinder our progress toward enlightenment. To rid ourselves of this *kamma*, we must observe the pain of the *sankharas* equanimously.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Sankhara is a word with many meanings within the Goenka cosmology. In *The discourse summaries*, Goenka defines sankhara as: "(Mental) formation; volitional activity; mental reaction; mental conditioning. One of the five aggregates (*khandhā*), as well as the second link in the Chain of Conditioned Arising. Sankhara is the *kamma*, the action that gives future results and that thus is actually responsible for shaping one's future life." Hart & Goenka, p. 87.

Nearly all respondents who reported experiencing subtle interior sensations (22 out of 28) also reported feeling the pain of the *sankharas*, which is sometimes extremely intense:

So the pain I experienced was... Apart from giving birth, I can't remember any similar level of pain. And it wasn't any dangerous physical pain – as soon as I moved, it was gone. (W52, two courses)

“How does a sankhara feel for you?”

“It can be in the form of like pain, for example. I think mostly pain, huh? When you feel pain, and this pain is getting really hard or concentrated and hurts, there are big sankharas, huh? And the resolving is basically when you feel like it's getting softer and softer; you can feel the pain moving. It's not stable.” (M43b, five courses)

For many respondents, the experience of observing the *sankharas* dissolve is an essential part of Vipassana meditation. While respondents may interpret the pain differently, all see the dissolving of the pain areas as a healthy development and a sign of correct practice. However, the *sankharas* do not seem to become less numerous or intense the longer one meditates – in fact, the opposite appears to be true: “So in a way, the better I have got with Vipassana, the stronger stuff has started to come up” (W27, two courses).

4.3.5 Sweeping from Head to Toes: Descriptions of Subtle Interior *Flowing* Sensations

As the Vipassana course progresses, participants are instructed to shift away from the slow, meticulous process of body scanning and instead move their attention rapidly through the body from the top of the head to the tip of the toes. This rapid downward “focus wave” leads to the experience Goenka calls “free flow,” a sensation of intense, electric, tingling vibrations that seem to rush through and permeate the body. These descriptions of flow differ significantly from the subtle interior sensations described in connection to the part-by-part body scan. They are therefore classified as a fifth category: “descriptions of subtle interior *flowing* sensations.” These are experiences that perfectly match the ELSE experiences described by Cooper et al. as “a type of sensation moving throughout the body described with the language of vibration, energy, current, or other related metaphors.”¹⁴⁷ 22 out of 28 respondents describe these kinds of ELSE experiences, or “subtle interior flowing sensations” as they will be referred to in this study, to remain qualitatively distinct from the other identified categories of Vipassana experiences.

The free flow is described in various ways by the respondents. Some compare it to a sparkling, fizzling liquid, such as a stream, rain, or flood, that can dissolve the painful *sankharas*. Others describe the sensations as shifting very rapidly, with one respondent saying “in milliseconds” and another comparing it to swiftly riffling through the pages of a book. In addition to being described as liquid or rapidly changing, some also describe free flow as a moving pressure, like being rubbed with a heavy blanket.

¹⁴⁷ Cooper et al., p. 1.

According to the respondents, subtle interior flowing sensations can be intensely pleasurable. Goenka is aware of the allure of these experiences and repeatedly warns against “playing the game of sensations” in the evening discourses:¹⁴⁸

*People reach the stage sometimes on the 7th day, or 8th day, or 9th day (...) where all the solidity gets dissolved, and there is a very free flow of subtle vibrations throughout the body. The energy is flowing throughout the body, and it feels so pleasant, so pleasant! Ah! Wonderful! This is bliss! This is ecstasy! (...) And you develop so much attachment to it. Ah, I got it! I got it! Without understanding that this is equally impermanent, changing, changing.*¹⁴⁹

When asked to rate the free-flow experience on a scale from one to ten, where “ten” is the most intense pleasure one could ever imagine, many respondents, without hesitation, rate the experience at ten, and most of the respondents rate it above eight.

“How pleasurable are the feelings of doing Vipassana from one to ten?”

“Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. [laughs] Yeah.”

“Extremely pleasurable?”

“Yeah, it could be.”

“Have you experienced these feelings in other contexts before trying Vipassana?”

“Doing drugs, experimenting with drugs, but I feel Vipassana is more stable. It can feel like drugs like you’re high on drugs; it can feel this way. But its more healthy, and you learn how not to cling to it. It’s natural. (NB35, five courses)

Four respondents compare their experience of free flow during Vipassana meditation to experiences taking perception and mood-changing drugs like MDMA/Ecstasy or psychedelic substances.

Many respondents report feeling rising energy levels in connection with being in the free-flow part of the Vipassana course. This is such a common phenomenon that Goenka addresses it in the evening discourses. However, according to Goenka, not sleeping is no problem:

Quite possibly, at times, a serious student may not get a deep sleep. Half asleep, half awake, very good. And in some cases: the whole night, no sleep. Wonderful! The whole night no sleep, but you keep lying down with closed eyes. No sleep! It doesn’t matter! You are aware of the sensations. (...) If there is no sensation, you’re aware of re-

¹⁴⁸ Hart & Goenka, p. 61.

¹⁴⁹ Transcription of Goenka’s discourses, day 3, from Vipassana Research Institute, “10 day Vipassana Course – Day 3” (no date) *Vipassana Meditation* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXXnSK2a47w>> accessed December 22, 2022.

*spiration all night, and the mind is very equanimous. The next day you get up so fresh as if you have come out of very deep sleep, very deep sleep.*¹⁵⁰

4.3.6 Total Dissolution: Descriptions of Anomalous Experiences

The Greek word *anomalos* means irregular, uneven, or unequal and is the opposite of *homalos*, which means the same or common.¹⁵¹ Following Cardeña et al. (2014), an anomalous experience can be defined as an experience that deviates from ordinary experiences or the usually accepted explanations of reality:

*We define an anomalous experience (AE) as an uncommon experience (e.g., synesthesia), or one that, although it may be experienced by a significant number of persons (e.g., psi experiences), is believed to deviate from ordinary experience or from the usually accepted explanations of reality according to Western mainstream science.*¹⁵²

This study is concerned with descriptions of subjective experiences, so there will be no effort to answer ontological questions such as: “did streams of energy *really* flow out of this respondent’s hands?”

In the interviews, over a third of the respondents (10 out of 28) describe experiences that can be categorized as anomalous by the above definition.

On the one hand, this could be considered a surprisingly large share, especially as this is not a strategic sample of very experienced Vipassana meditators, and some interviewees only feel gross shallow sensations. On the other hand, the Goenka course, with its sensory deprivation, and eleven hours of meditation per day, can be said to be almost *designed* to induce anomalous experiences.

One could argue that even the “expected” feelings of Vipassana meditation: subtle interior sensations, and subtle flowing sensations, could be categorized as anomalous experiences as defined above. They are certainly not common nor ordinary outside of a Goenka context. But categorizing all Vipassana-induced subtle sensations as anomalous experiences would lead away from the fact that there are specific experiences that the respondents themselves describe as being extraordinary, that is: more extraordinary and significant than the “typical” subtle sensations of free-flowing internal waves of energy and vibrations.

In the evening discourses, Goenka mentions an extraordinary experience one can encounter doing Vipassana meditation: the *bhanga* experience, where the body seems to dissolve into pure vibration. According to Goenka, to experience *bhanga* is to experience the world as it truly is – without any solidity:

¹⁵⁰ Transcription of Goenka’s discourses, day 7, from Vipassana Research Institute, “10 day Vipassana Course – Day 7” (no date) *Vipassana Meditation* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4twJT1RfiM>> accessed December 22, 2022.

¹⁵¹ Etzel Cardeña, et al., “Introduction: Anomalous Experiences in Perspective” in Etzel Cardeña, et al. (eds.), *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2014) p. 3–20, p. 3.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

*Solidified, intensified emotion and solidified, intensified sensation both dissolve into nothing but vibration. This is the stage of bhanga – dissolution – in which one experiences the ultimate truth of mind and matter: constantly arising and passing away without any solidity.*¹⁵³

Several of the respondents describe anomalous experiences of dissolution:

Sometimes it feels like there is no solidity in parts of the body. (W25, six courses)

The skin border that separates me and the outer world gets erased. (W57a, one course)

All pain disappeared, everything dissolved, and the body felt full of vibrations, like little diamonds. (W52, two courses)

The boundaries of my body were dissolving. (W34, one course)

The body was dissolved, and I was only eyes. (W40b, five courses)

One of the respondents claims that he can have several *bhanga*-experiences during a single Vipassana sitting:

I get bhanga states where everything dissolves. It's the most intense, but I wouldn't say it's the most pleasant experience. In the last two or three courses, I have gone through several bhanga states during one meditation. (M29b, four courses)

However, another respondent, a 57-year-old psychotherapist who has experienced the feeling of dissolution through Vipassana meditation, is not as impressed, as he has experienced a similar phenomenon in music therapy sessions:¹⁵⁴

If I hadn't had these experiences, I would have thought, "Oh, wow, this must be the solution to everything." But as I have worked with music therapy, where body scanning is a part of the process, and these kinds of peak experiences are pretty standard, it wasn't very remarkable. It is, more or less, what one could expect would happen in a course like this. (M57a, one course)

Many respondents report feeling intense energy levels during the free flow part of the Goenka course, and some describe moments where it feels like energy or light is emanating from their bodies:

It felt like energy was coming out of my hands, out of my whole body, out of my feet. (M29b, four courses)

¹⁵³ Hart & Goenka, p. 57.

¹⁵⁴ The Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM).

It felt like light was coming out of me. (W23, one course)

It felt like I had a veil of energy around me, and that I could feel everything the veil touched. (M42c, three courses)

Descriptions of visions are also quite common in the interview material, including visions of spiders, the body being filled with ants, or seeing flames in other meditators' eyes.

One respondent reports being constantly invaded by the memories of fellow meditators:

“For example, I can get a memory from my meditation neighbor. It can go through my brain, and it’s not mine.”

“How do you know it’s not just your imagination?”

“That’s the thing. The best thing for me is to ignore it. And it’s also the advice from the assistant teachers, that you have to ignore these things, or else you will become crazy. But sometimes I just know. The memory I sense could be something very random, something I’m not at all familiar with. (NB36, five courses)

A 34-year-old woman felt struck by enlightenment while sitting on a children's swing in a park in Mjölby after the course:

You could think that enlightenment is happiness, but it wasn't happiness. It was like... like being so empty that you're just full of energy... like you're full of consciousness. And I was crying because of that, but it didn't hold any emotion in me; it didn't hold any attachment. If something had happened, like I would have physically died at that moment, there wouldn't have been any resistance or anything. I felt completely liberated. (W34, one course)

4.3.7 Spiritual Emergency: Feelings of Fear and Anxiety

Many respondents describe the Goenka course as “tough” or “hardcore.” While all of the respondents interviewed would recommend the course, they all did so with a caveat, stating that it is unsuitable for people with unstable mental health or unresolved traumatic experiences.

It is considered normal that a few participants leave the Goenka course after a couple of days. Some of the reasons cited in the interviews for leaving include the physical challenge of sitting for long periods or difficulty getting enough sleep: “I felt complete anguish for ten days, I didn't sleep and had panic attacks.” (W52, two courses)

Several respondents expressed concern about losing control or being overwhelmed by the internal flows of energy and vibration:

I felt it was scary to be drawn deeper into the vibrations. It felt like drowning. (W46, one course).

It was really overwhelming, like, okay, what is happening to me? This is crazy. (M29b, four courses)

I had this fear that this was not good for my mental stability. Like, can I handle it if it becomes too much? (W34, one course)

According to Cooper et al., some meditators in the VCE study reported experiencing strong body tremors and shakings during ELSEs. This phenomenon was also reported by several respondents in this study:

I was frightened because of shaking attacks after meditation (M29b, four courses).

My body vibrated all night; I couldn't sleep. (M44, one course)

Suddenly my whole body began to shake, and after the shakings, my clothes were drenched in sweat. (M57b, two courses)

There are differing views among the interviewees about the level of assistance provided by the assistant teachers during the course. Some respondents reported no individualized flexibility or real response to questions, while others found that the assistant teachers provided helpful responses to questions about the technique and personal issues.

A female respondent who has lived as a server at two Goenka centers for about a year said that the attitudes of the assistant teachers vary: "Some assistant teachers have really helped me. Some just answer the same thing." (W25, six courses)

Three respondents are trained psychologists, and they are skeptical about the assistant teachers' ability to handle cases of mental instability: "I don't think they have the competence" (W40a, two courses).

Some participants report having problems making the subtle energies and vibrations disappear after the course.

"Why didn't you continue to meditate when you came home if it was a pleasant experience?"

"Yeah, it was because it took over; it took a little bit over for me. It was not that pleasant because I couldn't control it. It was more like it was controlling me."

"Did you get afraid?"

"No, not really afraid, but I was disturbed. I couldn't stop it. It was like a trip, eating too many hashish pancakes and not being able to get out again." [W62, one course]

4.3.8 Mental Issues Associated with Vipassana Meditation

No scientific research is available on the prevalence of participants developing mental issues in association with attending a Goenka course. However, in this study, two respondents attribute their mental health issues to their Vipassana experience. These issues have had such a significant impact on the respondents' lives that they have had to stop working for eight and two months, respectively.

It is important to note that the following descriptions are subjective experiences, and none of the respondents have been diagnosed with a “Vipassana-related” illness. In medical terms, the first case is labeled as burnout syndrome, and the second is labeled as psychosis.

I did not actively seek out respondents with mental health issues; these two cases came to my attention by chance.

M44, one course – Diagnosis: Burnout Syndrome

This respondent is a 44-year-old man with a steady job in finance and no previous history of mental illness. An avid yoga practitioner, he went to the Vipassana course at Dhamma Sobhana on friends’ recommendations in 2020, hoping to deepen his meditation practice and learn a practical day-to-day meditation technique.

During the course, he had what he describes as “psychedelic experiences” and powerful feelings of vibrations during the night. Finding this worrying, he asked the assistant teacher for advice and was told that everything was normal and that all sensations should be approached with equanimity.

As the course progressed, he had increasing difficulty controlling the feelings of vibrations. He became very sensitive to sounds and had to cover his ears during Goenka’s instructions. He also experienced pain in his eyes, which he associated with repeatedly visualizing the body scan from head to toe. He approached the assistant teacher several times about his problems, but the response was always the same: to regard the sensations equanimously. According to M44, the feedback he received felt very scripted.

Upon returning home, the feeling of vibrations persisted for several weeks, albeit becoming progressively weaker. M44 struggled to focus at work; for example, he found it impossible to keep his concentration reading on the computer screen. Seeking psychiatric help, he was diagnosed with burnout syndrome, which resulted in eight months of full-time sick leave before he began to recover slowly.

M44 believes that his symptoms correlate with Directed Attention Fatigue (DAF) which could have been induced by the intense hours of focused body scanning during the Vipassana course. At the time of our interview, approximately two years after leaving Dhamma Sobhana, he still had problems with concentration, including difficulty working long hours, avoiding social gatherings, and situations with too many stimuli.

M44 claims to have had no problems with stress or fatigue before the course and is convinced that the Vipassana course caused his problems. His doctor believes that the meditation may have triggered the burnout syndrome, but it was likely not the primary cause.

Being stoical about the situation, M44 does not rule out that the Vipassana technique can be beneficial for some people but advises first-timers to proceed with caution:

I think the Vipassana technique might be a bit too powerful to be put in the hands of people with no meditation experience and no idea what the consequences might be. It's not like you get a warning when they say: “so that you know, after this course, you

might not be able to work for half a year.” The promise is that you can live a better life afterward. (M44, one course)

After the course, M44 has been in contact with the assistant teacher about his problems. However, he is not satisfied with the teacher’s response, which has been that he failed to perform the Vipassana technique according to the instructions.

M44 believes that the Goenka movement should develop resources to aid participants with adverse experiences, as there must be many cases like his own, considering that around 150,000 participants attend the courses each year worldwide.

He also thinks there is a problem with assigning responsibility within the Goenka movement, as the course instructions are given by the now-deceased Goenka through pre-taped discourses and meditation lessons, while the assistant teachers, the center manager, and voluntary servers are bound to follow Goenka-prescribed instructions in their dealings with participants.

During his problems after the Vipassana course, M44 came into contact with M42c, the next respondent. As I was interested in getting as many views of the Vipassana experience as possible, I asked M44 to introduce me to M42c, who agreed to participate in the study.

M42c, three courses – Diagnosis: Psychosis/delusions.

M42c is a 42-year-old single parent and film producer. Like M44, he has experience with yoga practice. He has had a troublesome childhood and has attended therapy.

M42c describes experiencing powerful interior vibrations and energies during his first Vipassana course. He was mesmerized by the power of the meditation technique:

It was like, you know, Matrix... like I had taken some pill and suddenly realized that there was another dimension of my body and being. It was love at first sight, an inner revolution. (M42c, three courses)

He describes how he lost control of the subtle energies in the latter part of the course. One night, he felt the energies form a vortex that extruded through his anal opening. This vortex, or ball of energy, stayed between his groins until the following morning when it returned inside his body again.

He had great difficulty sleeping because, as he describes it, he saw “visions of blazing fires” as soon as he closed his eyes. When he talked to the assistant teacher, he was advised to stop meditating because he was doing it too forcefully. Despite these curious and frightening sensations, M42c remembers crying out of gratitude on the last day of the course, as it had been such a transformative experience.

After the first course, M42c could not return for a new course because he had recently become a father. When his daughter was three years old, he decided to try Goenka’s Vipassana again.

During this second course, M42c experienced energy leaving his body through his anal opening and forming a hose that spurted splinters of energy toward his face. On the last day

of the course, he felt the vortex of subtle energy go into his heart, filling it up until it felt like it was going to explode. Terrified, he ran to the assistant teacher, who told him to remain equanimous and observe the sensations.

After the second course, M42c continued to experience strange Vipassana sensations and became exhausted from these never-ending energy experiences, which left him unable to walk more than about 100 meters. He was worried about his ability to care for his daughter and asked a friend to check on him regularly to ensure he was alive.

In his search for answers, M42c turned to the internet, where he discovered accounts of others who had experienced similar problems after participating in Vipassana. He also learned about the potential connection between Vipassana and Kundalini experiences. Seeking further guidance, M42c contacted Bonnie Greenwell, a therapist and Kundalini specialist, who suggested that he may have undergone a Kundalini-rising.¹⁵⁵ Through Greenwell, M42c connected with a group of individuals who had also undergone intense Kundalini experiences. These conversations helped M42c understand that a Kundalini-rising can be a spiritually transformative event while also being very challenging to navigate.¹⁵⁶

After his energy experiences subsided, M42c felt stable enough to attend a third Vipassana course, motivated by his desire to explore the Kundalini energy further. However, after a couple of days, the assistant teacher sent him home, saying he was not balanced enough to complete the course.

On the night he returned home, M42c purposely invited the Kundalini energies to take control of his body and felt the energy take a seat in his heart, lungs, and spermatic duct. These three centers drained him of all his energy, and he struggled with feelings of depletion and the inability to sleep. At the suggestion of a friend, he sought psychiatric help and was prescribed anti-psychotic medication. He was on sick leave for two months.

When I interviewed M42c, he was still trying to integrate the Kundalini force into his body organs and described his energy levels as very low. Despite all that had happened, he was grateful for the Kundalini experience and described himself as a very fortunate individual in a spiritual sense. He also wanted to investigate the experiences in his work as a film producer.

Like M44, M42c was not satisfied with the help he received from the assistant teachers at the Vipassana course. He described himself as an unusual case, but pointed out that Kundalini energies are a familiar phenomenon and that these kinds of experiences should not be unknown to Goenka teachers. He believes there ought to be some routine in place to handle them.

¹⁵⁵ Bonnie Greenwell, "The Kundalini Guide" *Kundalini Guide* (no date) <<http://www.kundaliniguide.com>> accessed December 22, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Kundalini Collective, "Home" *Kundalini Collective* (no date) <<https://www.kundalinicollective.org>> accessed December 22, 2022.

4.3.9 Summary of the Findings: An Overly Potent Technique?

In this section, the following research question has been addressed:

What meditation experiences have the respondents had during the ten-day Vipassana course, and how do these experiences compare to the Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSE) described by Cooper et al.?¹⁵⁷

It was found that the experiences could be divided into six qualitatively distinct categories of descriptions:

- 1) Descriptions of **increased focus & sensitivity**
- 2) Descriptions of **gross shallow** sensations
- 3) Descriptions of **subtle shallow** sensations
- 4) Descriptions of **subtle interior** sensations
- 5) Descriptions of **subtle interior flowing** sensations
- 6) Descriptions of **anomalous experiences**

Furthermore, it was found that the fifth category perfectly matches the ELSE experiences defined by Cooper et al. as “a type of sensation moving throughout the body described with the language of vibration, energy, current, or other related metaphors.”¹⁵⁸ Of the 28 respondents in this sample, 22 reported experiencing these sensations during their Vipassana practice.

Additionally, it was noted that the more intense Vipassana experiences could trigger feelings of fear and anxiety. In the final part of this section, two cases of respondents with mental issues alleged to be associated with the Vipassana course were described in some detail. While cases like these may be uncommon, it is difficult to determine their exact prevalence due to a lack of systematic research on the topic of mental issues related to Goenka-style Vipassana.

As mentioned in chapter three, the Vipassana meditation technique is, according to the Goenka movement, supposed to have been invented by the Buddha, and then it has been used as a secret spiritual technique by a select group of Buddhist monks for hundreds or even thousands of years before being transferred to the first lay teacher Saya Thetgyi and his student U Ba Khin. Following this emic description of the history of Vipassana meditation, it is only in the last century that this practice has been taught to laypeople as a way to increase well-being.

M44, the economist that associates his burnout syndrome with Vipassana, questions if it is a good idea to teach advanced spiritual techniques to ordinary people:

So, I think that if I had been a Buddhist monk, these concentration problems would have been cool. Sure it had been weird for a while, but I'd still been able to weed the monastery garden and do my chores. But it's more challenging to cope with these issues when you have a computer-based job in Scandinavia. (M44, one course)

¹⁵⁷ Cooper et al.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

W34, the woman who had an enlightenment experience in Mjölby, also wonders whether Vipassana is suitable for everyone, as it is described by the Goenka movement as a “super, high-level meditation technique”:

Is Vipassana practical? Is it good? Can it take you to a state where you're not able to interact with people in a meaningful way? If this is like a super, high-level technique, high-level practice, is it really sure that everybody can handle it? (W34, one course)

4.4 Interpretations of the Vipassana Experiences

4.4.1 Summary of the Findings

This section addresses the second research question:

How do the respondents interpret their experiences of Vipassana meditation?

Using a phenomenographic approach, six qualitatively distinct categories of interpretation were identified:

- 1) The **Goenka-inspired** interpretation – “It is the sankharas”
- 2) The **therapeutic** interpretation – “It is the traumas”
- 3) The **Kundalini** interpretation – “It is the Kundalini energy”
- 4) The **medical** interpretation – “It is the nervous system”
- 5) The **skeptical** interpretation – “It is the imagination”
- 6) The **pragmatic** interpretation – “I do not know or care; it works”

It is worth noting that many of the respondents expressed a variety of conflicting interpretations in their interviews. For example, a respondent may begin by arguing for a Goenka-inspired interpretation, only to later shift to a pragmatic interpretation when they find that their original reasoning does not hold. This inconsistency is not unusual, as people are often inconsistent in their opinions, and some respondents may not have fully considered their thoughts about their Goenka experiences before being interviewed. However, the aim of the phenomenographic approach is not to determine *who* holds a particular belief but rather to explore the range of possible perspectives on Vipassana experiences.

4.4.2 The Goenka-inspired Interpretation – “It is the *Sankharas*”

The Goenka-inspired interpretation of the Vipassana experiences is based on a particular understanding of the Buddhist scriptures of *Abhidhamma* and the writings of the Theravada philosopher Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923). Goenka’s model is complex and requires a deep understanding of Buddhist cosmology to grasp the meanings of the terms and their relationships fully. However, this study is not the appropriate forum for such an in-depth exploration. Instead, the following will provide a condensed summary of Goenka’s theoretical teachings as they are presented to participants in the ten-day Vipassana course.

Outline of the Goenka Model

The first sentence on the Goenka movement webpage states that “Vipassana means to see things as they really are.”¹⁵⁹ According to Goenka, the fundamental reality of the universe consists of *kalapas*, which are comparable to subatomic particles. The subtle sensations, or vibrations, that one experiences during Vipassana meditation are actually the *kalapas* arising

¹⁵⁹ Dhamma.org., “Vipassana Meditation” *Vipassana Meditation*. (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/vipassana>> accessed December 22, 2022.

and passing away at an extraordinary speed.¹⁶⁰ *Kalapas* are generated partly by matter (such as food and air) and partly by the mind through present and past *sankharas*.

As mentioned above, a *sankhara* is a volition, such as a craving or aversion. Every time we desire or feel an aversion to something, a new *sankhara* is generated, and these *sankharas*, in turn, generate *kalapas*, the building blocks of the universe. Our volition is therefore connected to the very fabric of the world, according to Goenka's cosmology.

Most *sankharas* are weak and only last for a short time, such as wanting a glass of water. However, other *sankharas* are powerful, such as greed, lust, envy, hate, anger, and fear. To avoid generating new *sankharas*, we must avoid these intense volitions and strive for equanimity.

In addition to these newly generated *sankharas*, we also carry a "backpack" of old *sankharas*, that is, the cravings and aversions we have had previously in life. As reincarnation is an essential part of the Goenka worldview, this backpack also includes the *sankharas* we carry from our countless previous incarnations. These *sankharas* – our new, old, and very ancient cravings and aversions – make up our *kamma*.

Carrying this truly enormous *kamma*-backpack of *sankharas* causes us to feel bad, and as long as we carry it with us, we will never reach *nibbana*. So, how can we stop generating new *sankharas* and purify ourselves from the ones we have? The solution, according to Goenka, is Vipassana meditation.

Through Vipassana practice, we can come into contact with the old *sankharas* within us. Going into the subtle interior sensations, we can feel the *sankharas* manifesting as inner pain. By going deeper into the subtle sensations, we can access deeper layers of our *kamma* and uncover ancient, often very painful, *sankharas*.

However, when these painful *sankharas* are discovered, we must not try to eliminate them by reacting with aversion. If we do, we will generate new *sankharas* and make things worse. Instead, we must observe these *sankharas* equanimously, allowing the pain to dissolve and pass away naturally. This attitude of equanimity, which is also applicable in everyday life, is the key to not generating new *sankharas* and keeping our *kamma* backpack light.

According to Goenka, the Vipassana technique has two equally important components: *awareness*, which is necessary for feeling subtle sensations, and *equanimity*, which helps us avoid craving and aversion. Goenka compares these two components to the wings of a bird:

[T]wo important aspects of the technique, both are equally important: awareness and equanimity, they go together like two wings of a bird. They must be equal in size and equal in strength; otherwise, the bird cannot fly.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Hart & Goenka, p. 30–31.

¹⁶¹ Transcription of Goenka's discourses, day 8, from Vipassana Research Institute, "10 day Vipassana Course – Day 7" (no date) *Vipassana Meditation* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us5lq302eNU>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Table 2. How the respondents interpret their experiences

CATEGORIES OF DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTIONS
<p>1) The Goenka-inspired interpretation <i>“It is the sankharas.”</i></p>	<p>Vipassana meditation works because it is Buddha’s untainted technique. The inner pain comes from <i>sankharas</i>, old volitions from this life, and earlier incarnations.</p> <p>To dissolve the <i>sankharas</i>, I have to observe the pain equanimously.</p> <p>When the <i>sankharas</i> dissolve, I feel better, and my life improves.</p> <p>Sensations of flow in Vipassana are experiences of how the <i>kalapas</i> arise and pass away.</p> <p>The extraordinary experiences of dissolution etc., are signs of spiritual advancement.</p>
<p>2) The therapeutical interpretation <i>“It is the traumas.”</i></p>	<p>The inner pain comes from trauma, body memories of traumatic experiences.</p> <p>To dissolve the traumas, I have to accept the pain without reacting.</p> <p>When the traumas dissolve, I feel better, and my life improves.</p> <p>The extraordinary experiences of dissolution etc., are not unique – I have felt similar experiences in other kinds of therapy or by psychedelic drugs.</p>
<p>3) The Kundalini interpretation <i>“It is the Kundalini energy.”</i></p>	<p>The energies and vibrations experienced during Vipassana are the same as within the framework of Kundalini yoga.</p>
<p>4) The medical interpretation <i>“It is the neurons.”</i></p>	<p>Vipassana meditation helps me get in contact with “sleeping” neurons. By focusing on areas of pain, I can affect the neurons, dissolving the pain. Sensations of flow in Vipassana come from the neurons – it is impossible to feel “<i>kalapas</i>” (atomic particles).</p>
<p>5) The skeptical interpretation <i>“It is the imagination.”</i></p>	<p>Maybe I imagine I feel flowing sensations.</p> <p>Maybe I imagine that my stomach pain is a <i>sankhara</i> when it is an allergic reaction to milk.</p>
<p>6) The pragmatic interpretation <i>“I do not know or care; it works.”</i></p>	<p>I do not know how to interpret my experiences.</p> <p>I use Vipassana meditation because it feels good – I do not have to know about or believe in the theory behind the technique.</p> <p>Goenka says you do not have to agree – you just have to practice.</p>

Respondents Applying a Goenka-inspired Interpretation

Many respondents interpret their Vipassana experiences in line with the Goenka model outlined above. However, referring to these interpretations as Goenka-*inspired* is more accurate, as the respondents do not necessarily agree with everything Goenka says.

The idea that the world consists of tiny particles or waves, as proposed by Goenka, is consistent with modern physics, and many respondents report having a sense that they can feel this subatomic dimension of reality when they practice Vipassana:

So now I can observe and understand that this is not my heart beating; it's just particles rising and passing away, and everything is changing, and my consciousness feels this. (M22, four courses).

I think it can be the kalapas that one feels. (57b, two courses)

The video discourses are scheduled late in the evenings, starting at around 8 PM. Many respondents say they look forward to these lectures, “the evening entertainment,” as some call it.

Goenka developed the content of these lectures through hundreds of courses before recording them, and respondents often express surprise at the accuracy with which he describes their experiences. “He was able to describe really well what I was going through.” (W34, one course).

For many respondents, the ability to physically experience the subtle sensations and the free flow of the *kalapas*, as well as the pain of the *sankharas* during Vipassana meditation, makes the Goenka model highly believable:

So for me, the theory behind what is happening is really helpful. You can rely on it; it's true. It's not something someone wants to plant in your head. You listen to it, experience it, and it helps you understand the whole meditation and what's happening within you. (M43b, six courses)

“And what do you think about sankharas?”

“It makes sense to me.”

“Do you think they can manifest as pain in the body?”

“Well, I say yes because I have experienced that. I have experienced the pain in the body, and I have experienced it going away. (W23, one course)

However, the respondents tend to differ from Goenka's model on a couple of essential points.

1) Many respondents believe that they can *actively* dissolve the *sankharas*, while Goenka's view is that you should just *passively* and equanimously observe how the *sankharas* dissolve.

This is a technique, something that dissolves the sankharas. I have experienced this, and it has affected my way of being. (W40b, five courses)

By dissolving your sankharas, you have a better life; you have like a more fulfilled life, yeah. (M43b, six courses)

2) Almost all respondents appear disinterested in the ultimate goal of *nibbana*.

I don't feel I can relate to that. (W40b, five courses)

It feels unreachable. What's important is what happens in one's daily life. (M57b, two courses)

For me, it would have been better if he hadn't spoken about nibbana because I don't think anybody came to the course to become enlightened. (W23, one course)

3) During the interviews, almost all respondents initially agreed with Goenka's goal of always remaining equanimous. Still, when asked to compare equanimity to passion, many changed their minds and also wanted to live a life of passion.

Without passion, all the color goes out of life. (W46, one course)

I feel that taking the idea of equanimity to extremes could lead to a state where nothing matters anymore. Like you kind of become a vegetable. (W34, one course)

4.4.3 The Therapeutical Interpretation – “It is the Traumas”

The concept of “body memories” is an important element in modern therapy. It suggests that traumatic experiences can become stored in the body and manifest as pain. This idea has roots in the works of Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957) and has been influential in various schools of psychology, including Gestalt therapy, Primal therapy, and Peter Levine's Somatic experiencing.

Goenka's Vipassana and Western body psychotherapy have several interesting parallels. Both prioritize stillness and awareness in order to tap into inner sensations. They also recognize that mental issues or *sankharas* can manifest in the body and be connected to past events. These body memories or *sankharas* can be deeply stored in consciousness and can only be accessed in states of deep relaxation. Both Vipassana and body psychotherapy acknowledges the need to accept and endure pain in order to rid ourselves of these painful body memories or *sankharas*. However, in body psychotherapy, it is considered important to process what has come up by talking about it, while Goenka's Vipassana is a practice of quiet equanimity. (See Table 3)

Table 3. Similarities between Goenka’s Vipassana and body psychotherapy

GOENKA’S VIPASSANA	BODY PSYCHOTHERAPY
Sitting still, meditation	Sitting still, therapy/hypnosis
Sharpened awareness on subtle sensations	Sharpened awareness on inner sensations
Pain = <i>sankharas</i> , old volitions	Pain = trauma, body memories
Deeper meditation to reach deeper <i>sankharas</i>	Deeper relaxation to reach deeper traumas
Equanimity → <i>sankharas</i> dissolve	Acceptance → traumatic memories dissolve
No need to talk, no cognitive aspect	Talking is important, emphasis on cognitive aspect

The concept of body memories is well-known among the respondents. Given that many have a high level of education and that two out of three have undergone therapy, it is not surprising that many equate *sankharas* with traumas. According to this therapeutical interpretation, Vipassana meditation becomes a way to access and release memories of negative and traumatic experiences.

We probably got some memory of an experience that makes us feel unpleasant in part of our body. And yeah, you see many post-traumatic people who have had horrific experiences and struggle to function as easily as others. So for me, that’s what it means when I try to understand how sankharas work within our bodies. (M43a, two courses)

In my work as a psychologist, I have experienced that memories get stored in our bodies. And I have also experienced how hard it is to reach them because of our heads. We have to reach the pain through our bodies, and Vipassana is helpful for that. (W40b, five courses)

The sankharas are emotional blockages. All negative actions we have done in life, all adverse events we have been a part of, gather in our unconscious. (M51, 16 courses)

The therapeutic interpretation, which is the most common perspective among this group of respondents, may seem like a minor deviation from the Goenka-inspired interpretation previously discussed. However, interpreting the areas of inner pain as traumas rather than as old volitions seems to affect two crucial aspects of the Goenka course:

1) Equanimity loses its central role:

According to the traumatic memory model of the therapeutic interpretation, equanimity is not deemed necessary for effective functioning in everyday life. This view contrasts with the belief held by Goenka, who asserts that the ability to handle *sankharas* in meditation is closely related to the ability to manage cravings and aversions in everyday life. While equanimity may still be useful in certain situations, from the perspective of the therapeutical model, it no longer holds a central role. This model also does not view passion as a problem, a perspective shared by many of the respondents in this study, who value passion as a positive trait.

2) *The rule of complete silence seems detrimental to the participants:*

The rule of noble silence during the course might be seen as detrimental to some of the participants if inner pain revealed during meditation is understood as connected to traumatic memories. The three respondents with professional psychological backgrounds all complain that the Vipassana course lacks a cognitive component and that talking is essential for dealing with traumatic experiences. From the perspective of a therapeutic interpretation, it may seem cruel to induce the pain of resurfacing trauma without allowing participants to discuss the issues that have come up.

4.4.4 The Kundalini Interpretation – “It is the Kundalini Energy”

As described in depth above, in the case of M42c’s adverse experiences, one interpretation of Vipassana is that it is connected to so-called “Kundalini energies.”

After a couple of weeks, I found Bonnie Greenwell, a researcher of Kundalini forces, and that was when I understood that I had been through a Kundalini rising. (M42c, three courses)

As mentioned in chapter three, the similarities between the somatic sensations generated by Vipassana and Kundalini have been noted by researchers of the ELSE experiences.¹⁶²

4.4.5 The Medical Interpretation – “It is the Nervous System”

Despite the powerful sensations of pleasure and pain that Vipassana evokes, few respondents have a strictly medical interpretation of their experiences or refer to the nervous system. Most seem content with a vague description of an inner world of vibrations and energies, with no connection to modern biological understandings of human anatomy.

One exception is a 62-year-old Danish woman, W62, who attended a Vipassana course at her son’s suggestion. She was pleasantly surprised by the intense sensations of Vipassana, and her interpretation was that she was able to manipulate her nervous system by focusing intensely on different parts of her body. Having struggled with shoulder pain for years, she felt she could dissolve it by using her attention.

As this pro-active use of Vipassana does not align with Goenka’s ideas of simply observing *sankharas*, she was reprimanded by the assistant teacher:

I could walk around the pain in my shoulder and through the different steps in my spine, and I had a vivid feeling that I could dissolve the pain. And therefore, it was quite frustrating for me that our teacher did not acknowledge that that was happening.¹⁶³ (W62, one course)

¹⁶² Cooper et al., p. 1.

¹⁶³ The shoulder pain had not returned when I talked to her, about a month after the course.

According to W62's interpretation, Vipassana meditation is a biological phenomenon where heightened activity in parts of the nervous system leads to the experience of vibrations and heat. This strikes her as interesting and odd:

I mean, we have neurons going from the brain and all over the body. Most of them, in my case, have been sleeping for many years, and with this meditation, they suddenly woke up some of them and started to make signals. (W62, one course)

In light of the medical interpretation, most of Goenka's ideas appear to lose traction. A random neurological phenomenon has no impact on the structure of the universe or how we should deal with craving and aversion.

The assistant teacher said: "All these small vibrations are because of quantum physics and the superstrings, and so on." And I have studied quantum physics, and I said to her: "Yes, I know all about that, but I believe that what I feel is on another level. It's on the neuron level; it's the biology that I feel." (W62, one course)

4.4.6 The Skeptical Interpretation – "It is the Imagination."

Only a few respondents questioned the reality of their Vipassana experiences; almost all took them at face value. Most believed that the subtle interior energies, intense flows of vibrations, or sudden dissolution they experienced were actually happening to them and that their subjective feelings were sufficient evidence. Only a couple of respondents entertained the idea that the entire Vipassana experience of vibrations and energies might be a product of their imagination:

"How did you experience the sensations of doing Vipassana meditation?"

"That's a good question because I think I'm still not really sure if I am feeling or imagining the experiences." (W25, six courses)

From the perspective that all Vipassana experiences are purely imaginative, there would be little point in doing another Goenka course or continuing to practice Vipassana meditation. It may also seem unimportant to discuss these imagined experiences with a researcher, which could explain the low number of skeptical interpretations in the interview material.

4.4.7 The Pragmatic Interpretation – "I Do Not Know or Care – It Works"

The pragmatic interpretation is the second most common perspective among this group of respondents, after the therapeutic interpretation. It involves seeing Vipassana's value in terms of its practical benefits rather than trying to understand its mechanisms or underlying philosophy. This view can be summarized as follows: "the exciting thing about Vipassana is that it is a meditation technique that makes you feel good, and there is no point in trying to understand how it works."

Goenka has no issue with this pragmatic perspective. In his discourses, he repeatedly emphasizes that the importance of the course lies in the Vipassana practice, not the theories surrounding it:

Whatever you heard during these ten days, if anyone of you finds a certain aspect of the theory is not acceptable, it doesn't matter; leave it aside. Accept whatever is acceptable. [...] Even if you don't accept it during your whole life, it doesn't matter; you have not lost anything. Practice is more important.¹⁶⁴

This offer to completely disregard the theory and focus on the practice is met with approval by the respondents:

I feel that I believe in this technique and that it gives me something. I don't have to know everything, and I don't have to agree with everything. I can take this technique, practice it, and learn more about the theory later. (W41, one course)

And I think Goenka said a lot of good things, things that I agree with, and then he also said some things that I do not agree with, but then he said that it doesn't matter if you do not agree; it's the practice that is the most important and then I was happy about that. (W62, one course)

"Do you want to get out of reincarnation?"

"I don't know. Does heaven or hell exist? Well, I don't know. That's my feelings."

"So you don't Vipassana-meditate to get enlightened?"

"No, and not to get out of reincarnation, either. I didn't want to get answers to the hard questions of life. That wasn't the point of going to the Vipassana course for me." (M42b, one course)

One respondent, who has spent many months serving at multiple Goenka centers, notes that this "pick-and-choose" rhetoric is a clever way for Goenka to appeal to a Western audience that may have difficulty accepting concepts like reincarnation and *sankharas*:

At the start, you are made to believe that it's okay to take out things. Like, if you don't believe in gods that have been reincarnated, yes, you can take this out, and if you don't believe in reincarnation, yes, you can take this out. So I think the way it is presented is quite clever. I mean, to me, it makes absolutely no sense to do Vipassana if you don't believe in reincarnation, but Goenka presents it in a way that makes you feel you can. It's very westernized, I think, in this sense, and very made for people who might not be willing to believe certain things. (M22, four courses)

¹⁶⁴ Transcription of Goenka discourses, day 10, from Vipassana Research Institute, "10 day Vipassana Course – Day 10" (no date) *Vipassana Meditation* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzrQ2HMF0uo>> accessed December 22, 2022.

4.4.8 Summary of the Findings: Need for Contrastive Sampling?

In this section, the second research question was addressed:

How do the respondents interpret their experiences of Vipassana meditation?

Using phenomenographic analysis, six categories of interpretation were identified in the interview material:

- 1) The **Goenka-inspired** interpretation – “It is the sankharas.”
- 2) The **therapeutic** interpretation – “It is the traumas.”
- 3) The **Kundalini** interpretation – “It is the Kundalini energy.”
- 4) The **medical** interpretation – “It is the nervous system.”
- 5) The **skeptical** interpretation – “It is the imagination.”
- 6) The **pragmatic** interpretation – “I do not know or care; it works.”

It is possible that these six interpretations do not represent the full range of common interpretations (the phenomenographical outcome space), as the respondents in this study are pretty similar in terms of, for example, age and religious outlook. Using contrastive sampling, other qualitatively distinct categories of interpretations could potentially be identified, though it is difficult to determine how many more there might be.

As this is not a quantitative study, there can be nothing said about the prevalence of these interpretations among Goenka participants in general. However, the most common interpretations in this group of respondents were the therapeutic interpretation, the pragmatic interpretation, and the Goenka-inspired interpretation.

5. Summary of the Findings

In this study, 28 individuals were interviewed about their experiences and interpretations of S. N. Goenka's ten-day Vipassana meditation course. About one-third of the respondents were beginners, one-third were returners, and one-third were experienced or very experienced Goenka participants. Most respondents were recruited in connection to a ten-day course at the Nordic Vipassana center, Dhamma Sobhana.

There were two research questions:

1) *What meditation experiences have the respondents had during the ten-day Vipassana course, and how do these experiences compare to the Energy-Like Somatic Experiences (ELSE) described by Cooper et al.?*¹⁶⁵

2) *How do the respondents interpret their experiences of Vipassana meditation?*

5.1 Question One – The Experiences

Using a phenomenographic approach, six categories of descriptions of Vipassana experiences were identified in the interview material.

- 1) Descriptions of **increased focus and sensitivity**
- 2) Descriptions of **gross shallow** sensations (ordinary body scanning experiences)
- 3) Descriptions of **subtle shallow** sensations (experiences of vibrations and tinglings at the skin level)
- 4) Descriptions of **subtle interior** sensations (experiences of vibrations, tinglings, and energies in the interior of the body)
- 5) Descriptions of **subtle interior flowing** sensations (experiences of flows of energy and vibrations in the interior of the body)
- 6) Descriptions of **anomalous experiences** (extraordinary experiences such as dissolution of body boundaries, energy flowing out of the body, visions etcetera)

Category five (subtle interior flowing sensations) match the ELSE experiences defined by Cooper et al. as “a type of sensation moving throughout the body described with the language of vibration, energy, current, or other related metaphors.”¹⁶⁶

While this is not a quantitative study, the fact that Goenka gives detailed descriptions of these kinds of sensations in his instructions and discourses, and 22 out of 28 respondents report having them, ELSEs seem to be a widespread phenomenon among Vipassana meditators rather than an exception.

The respondents described their Vipassana experiences as extremely painful in some cases, with a rating of ten on a scale of one to ten. Pain was a prominent theme in almost all recol-

¹⁶⁵ Cooper et al.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

lections of the course. However, many respondents also reported feeling immense pleasure, also at the highest level on the scale.

The respondents often struggled to find words to describe their internal sensations of Vipassana, some making comparisons to mind-altering drugs. Another common analogy was to the “pins-and-needles” sensations of temporary paresthesia, a medical condition usually resulting from a nerve placed under sustained pressure.¹⁶⁷

Some respondents had negative experiences during the Goenka course, including sleeplessness, panic attacks, and fear of losing control. Two participants reported that their Vipassana experiences had such a profound impact that they developed long-term mental health issues, resulting in extended periods of sick leave.

5.2 Question Two – The Interpretations

There were six different interpretations of the Vipassana experiences among the respondents.

As expected, one of the views was *the Goenka-inspired interpretation*, in which the pain areas that arise during Vipassana are identified as *sankharas* (old cravings and aversions). The purpose of the meditation is to observe these *sankharas* equanimously to lead a more balanced life and come closer to *nibbana*. However, among the meditators who accepted this Goenka-inspired interpretation, many still preferred an active rather than a passive role in the dissolution of *sankharas*, wanted to remain passionate rather than equanimous, and almost none expressed any interest in reaching *nibbana*.

The most common view was *the therapeutic interpretation*, which suggests that the pain areas of Vipassana are related to traumas – body memories of distressing experiences. There are many striking similarities between Western body psychotherapy and Goenka’s Vipassana, such as the importance of stillness, deep relaxation, and observing and accepting rather than reacting to pain. However, the therapeutic interpretation significantly transforms the meaning of doing Vipassana. From this trauma perspective, there seems to be no need for equanimity, and the rule of complete silence in Goenka courses seems unhelpful.

The third view was *the Kundalini interpretation*, which posits that the “Kundalini force” causes the subtle interior sensations of energy and vibrations, understood in the framework of Indian mysticism, tantra, and yoga. Cooper et al. have noted the similarities between the experiences of Kundalini and Vipassana.¹⁶⁸

The fourth view was *the medical interpretation*, which suggests that the workings of the nervous system could explain the sensations of Vipassana. The fifth was *the skeptical interpretation*, which holds that the subtle sensations might all be products of the imagination. The sixth was *the pragmatic interpretation*, which asserts that there is no real point in trying to understand Vipassana as long as the technique produces good results.

¹⁶⁷ National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. “Paresthesia” *All Disorders* <<https://www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/paresthesia>> accessed December 22, 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Cooper et al., p. 1.

6. Discussion

6.1 The Outsider: No Dhamma and No Equanimity

As previously discussed in chapter three, the core of the Goenka movement consists of insiders. To attend the longer courses, participants must commit to Goenka as a teacher and the Vipassana technique and demonstrate an understanding of the key *dhamma* concepts of *anicca*, *anatta*, and *dukkha*.¹⁶⁹ During the longer courses, the Buddhist ideology of the movement is emphasized, and Buddhist cosmological and prophetic notions are presented, according to Plank.¹⁷⁰

From the insider perspective, the Goenka tradition is centered on *dhamma* and equanimity. However, as this thesis demonstrates, the outsider perspective seems quite different.

Almost all the respondents in this study come from the most secular part of the world, Sweden and Northern Europe. Even though two-thirds are returners or experienced practitioners, only two maintain the recommended amount of daily Vipassana meditation. 17 out of 28 do not keep a regular meditation practice, even though all claim Vipassana to be a very beneficial technique.

Most of them seem fascinated by the somatic experiences of Vipassana, and although being equanimous is viewed as a good trait and an important goal, being passionate is also highly valued. The respondents do not see themselves as religious, and many disdain organized religion, perceiving it as dogmatic, hierarchical, and narrow-minded. However, being spiritual is important to them. The Vipassana course is often presented as part of a personal spiritual quest. The term “secular spirituality” was tentatively used to describe the participants thinking of themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.”

Examining some of the significant trends in contemporary spirituality – self-spirituality, peak experiences, and the search for transformational spiritual techniques, evaluated based on their speed and efficiency – it is not surprising that the solo experiences of vibrational ELSE sensations of the ten-day courses might seem more appealing to many of the respondents than the mundane routine of daily meditation.

It's worth noting that it's possible to take multiple Goenka courses without becoming a fully-fledged insider of the movement, in the sense of becoming one of Plank's “tradition-bearers,”¹⁷¹ or, to use Pagis' term, to become a “career meditator.”¹⁷² In this study, many respondents had taken four or five courses and also volunteered as servers at various courses. However, except for maybe one or two, these respondents can still be considered outsiders as they prioritize contemporary spiritual values over the values of the *dhamma* and place a great

¹⁶⁹ According to respondent M58.

¹⁷⁰ Plank, *Insikt och närvaro*, p. 75–80.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁷² Pagis, p.138–139.

ter emphasis on peak experiences in the courses rather than improving equanimity and balance through daily meditation.

Many participants tend to attend a variety of other classes and courses in addition to Goenka's. According to Rahmani's research, the ten-day Vipassana course is often part of a personal "bricolage" of various practices, including courses on personal growth, mind control, massage therapy, and psychic healing.¹⁷³ This eclecticism is typical in the contemporary spirituality milieu, as noted by Frisk and Nynäs.¹⁷⁴ In this study, some respondents practiced yoga, others did TM meditation, and some were involved in the AA movement.

This individualistic approach of jumping from tradition to tradition and technique to technique may lead one to believe that the Vipassana course has little influence on outsider participants and that the outsiders have no impact on the Goenka movement. However, this may not be the whole truth, as will be discussed below.

6.2 The Experiences: How Vipassana Changes the Participant

When the respondents describe their first real Vipassana experience of suddenly being able to plunge into the inside of the body, becoming aware of the hitherto unknown sensations of interior tinglings, the fizzling currents of energy, and the buzzing vibrations that Goenka calls *kalapas*, they often talk about it as a moment of astonishment and mesmerization: "(...) from that point, I was no longer irritated and just amazed for the rest of the course." (W62, first course) "It was like, you know, Matrix... like I had taken some pill and suddenly realized that there was another dimension of my body and being." (M42c, three courses)

These subtle interior flowing sensations are often described as highly pleasant: "Ten, fifteen, twenty" on a scale to ten, as NB35 states. Moreover, many participants report that these experiences are so transformative that they can be compared to taking psychedelic drugs.

According to Michal Pagis, the first Vipassana course is often described as a moment of seminal self-change, and the sensations of Vipassana often lead to a shift in participants' relationships with their bodies.¹⁷⁵ They discover that they suddenly have access to an inner source of pleasant vibrations, which can serve as a haven for rest and recovery. This is often described as a great revelation that has had a lasting impact.¹⁷⁶

But there are also other experiences of significant impact to some participants, negative experiences of sleeplessness, panic attacks, and the feeling of losing control over the subtle energies. The feeling of having "a vibration cascading through the body," as described in the ELSE studies of Cooper et al., is not always found desirable.¹⁷⁷ Some respondents have

¹⁷³ Rahmani, *Drifting through Samsara*, p. 46.

¹⁷⁴ Liselotte Frisk, Peter Nynäs, "Characteristics of Contemporary Religious Change: Globalization, Neoliberalism, and Interpretative Tendencies" in Peter Nynäs, et al. (eds.), *Post-Secular Society* (New York: Routledge, 2012) p. 47–70, p.51.

¹⁷⁵ Pagis, p. 129.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁷⁷ Cooper et al., p. 1.

struggled to stop these energy-like experiences after completing the meditation course, while others have reported being so affected that they have had to take extended leave from work.

As discussed in chapter three, the adverse experiences of meditation is a largely unexplored area of research. Before *The Varieties of contemplative experience project* (VCE), only a few minor studies, such as those by Kornfield (1979) and Shapiro (1992), had focused on this topic. However, given the rapidly rising popularity of meditation and the number of people attending intensive retreats like Goenka's ten-day course, which sees 150,000 participants annually, it is critical to prioritize research on this issue.

In Rahmani's study, four out of twenty-six respondents had negative meditative experiences such as disorientation, depression, and suicidal states, which often lingered for months.¹⁷⁸ In this study, many of the twenty-eight respondents reported challenging experiences, and two reported mental health issues allegedly linked to the Vipassana course. Andreas Frank also found in his Master's thesis on adverse meditation experiences that several interviewees reported difficult experiences connected to Goenka's ten-day course.¹⁷⁹ Finally, in the VCE study, about sixty different adverse experiences of meditation were identified, some impacting the meditators' social relations and ability to uphold a job.¹⁸⁰

It is worth considering whether recent studies on the potential for adverse experiences during intense meditation exaggerate the issue. It is possible that these studies may be the beginning of a moral panic fueled by a backlash to the numerous studies that have previously highlighted the many benefits of meditation. However, it must be noted that the number of studies on the adverse effects of meditation is still relatively limited, making it difficult to assess the extent of the problem accurately.

And what about the responsibility of the participants? To attend a Goenka course, you must be over eighteen and mentally stable. As adults, we are generally allowed to take risks that we feel comfortable with, whether it be horseback riding, driving a motorcycle, or mountain climbing. According to the Goenka movement, problems arise only if you do not understand the technique or apply it properly:

*Vipassana teaches you to be aware and equanimous, that is, balanced, despite all the ups and downs of life. But if someone comes to a course concealing serious emotional problems, that person may be unable to understand the technique or to apply it properly to achieve the desired results.*¹⁸¹

It appears that the topic of mental health is a significant concern within the Goenka movement, as four out of the eighteen questions featured on the movement's Q&A webpage pertain to this issue. Furthermore, the webpage advises individuals suffering from psychiatric or

¹⁷⁸ Rahmani, *Drifting through Samsara*, p. 19.

¹⁷⁹ Frank, p. 50.

¹⁸⁰ Lindahl et al. in Farias et al., p. 842.

¹⁸¹ Dhamma.org, "Questions & Answers About the Technique of Vipassana Meditation" *Vipassana Meditation* (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/qanda>> accessed December 22, 2022.

emotional issues to refrain from attending the course and explicitly states that “*Vipassana teachers are meditation experts, not psychotherapists.*”¹⁸²

Intense meditation practices in Buddhist traditions have been known to come with particular challenges, including the possibility of “meditation sickness” manifested in symptoms such as hallucinations, terror, depression, dizziness, and pain.¹⁸³ While some may consider these challenges a necessary aspect of the quest for *nibbana*, many of the respondents of this study might have been deterred from participating in a Goenka course if informed beforehand of the potential adverse side effects.

As discussed in chapter four, some respondents who experienced adverse effects during meditation were dissatisfied with the reactions of the assistant teachers. They felt that the responses they received were scripted and impersonal, simply repeating the same advice: to remain equanimous in the face of all sensations.

Within Buddhism, it is considered necessary to have an experienced teacher who can guide the meditator through the various stages and recognize when one is ready to develop further. This teaching has to be personalized, according to the Buddhist scholar Sarah Shaw: “What suits one person at one stage may be different for another person or for the same person at a different time. It is a graduated path requiring care, ‘maps,’ and an experienced guide”.¹⁸⁴ However, in Goenka’s ten-day courses, with a standardized curriculum and script-bound assistant teachers, there is hardly any opportunity for meditators to receive personalized help.

Cooper et al. have identified several remedies for individuals having energy-like somatic experiences during meditation. The most important is acquiring an interpretive framework, that is, to have an expert explain and provide context to the experiences. If a meditator understands that ELSEs are considered normal and benign within the meditative tradition, they may be less likely to feel anxiety or fear. Other strategies suggested by Cooper et al. for managing ELSE experiences include grounding activities, for example by establishing a physical connection with the earth, acupuncture, taking sleeping pills, or considering dietary changes such as increasing meat intake and avoiding caffeine and sugar.¹⁸⁵

Extraordinary sensations are not considered noteworthy within the Goenka framework, and meditators are discouraged from discussing their experiences with others. As a result, participants may feel isolated with their challenges and lack knowledge of others experiencing similar difficulties. Many of the respondents in this study had not shared their Vipassana experiences with family and friends after the course because they believed that others would not understand. In Andreas Frank’s study, many respondents found it helpful to discuss their

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ahn in Farias et al., p. 888.

¹⁸⁴ Shaw, Sarah, “Theravada Buddhism and meditation” in Miguel Farias et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 213–236, p. 218.

¹⁸⁵ Cooper et al., p. 19.

adverse experiences during the research interview, as they had not previously discussed it with anyone.¹⁸⁶

According to the Goenka movement, the Vipassana technique is an ancient meditation practice that dates back to one of the most famous renouncers in history, the Buddha, having been used by monks for 2,500 years before being transferred to the first lay teacher Saya Thet, and his lay student U Ba Khin. Viewing Vipassana as an advanced and ancient monk practice might explain some of the peculiarities of the technique, which does not seem helpful for laymen, that, as pointed out by M42c, might “have a computer-based job in Scandinavia” rather than work in a monastery garden.

From an etic-perspective, the Vipassana technique might seem more or less designed to physically demonstrate the truth of the Theravada cosmology by making the meditator experience the pleasant vibrations of the *kalapas* and the pain of the *sankharas* to understand the importance of equanimity in the face of craving and aversion. From this point of view, Vipassana meditation could be described as a sort of rhetorical device to convey the truth of the Buddhist worldview convincingly, particularly in a monastery setting or in the 1950s meditation movement in Burma, where the state supported the establishment of Vipassana schools as it was seen as a way to educate the Burmese people about fundamental Buddhist concepts. However, for the contemporary secular participants of this study who attend Vipassana courses primarily to learn a meditation technique for improving mental and physical health, this might not be what they bargained for when applying to the Goenka course. As one of Frank’s respondents noted in chapter three, it may “feel like being on a train that doesn’t go where [one] intended.”¹⁸⁷

6.3 The Interpretations: How the Participant Changes Vipassana

The primary objective of the Goenka movement goes back to U Ba Khin, who supposedly told his disciple S. N. Goenka that Goenka’s unique purpose in life was “to give seeds of dhamma to a very large number of people.”¹⁸⁸ However, as noted in Melnikova’s study, the results seem to be mixed, with a higher level of success among Indian participants but less so among Europeans, who often struggle to comprehend and relate to the theoretical aspects of the *dhamma*.¹⁸⁹ The practical meditation technique appears more appealing to Westerners than the theoretical teachings of *anicca*, *anatta*, and *dukkha*, which may conflict with contemporary spiritual values such as self-spirituality, personal growth, and the sacralization of life.

While some of the respondents in this study attempted to interpret their Vipassana experiences through a Goenka-inspired understanding of *dhamma*, even this interpretation was so-

¹⁸⁶ Frank, p. 13.

¹⁸⁷ Frank, p. 12.

¹⁸⁸ Stuart, p. 127.

¹⁸⁹ Melnikova, p. 67.

mewhat distorted. Rather than passively *observing*, these respondents often imagined themselves actively *causing* the dissolution of *sankharas*. Furthermore, there was little interest in the ultimate goal of *nibbana*, with many respondents seeking a balance between equanimity and passion, viewing an un-passionate life as unappealing. These values of activity, this-worldliness and passion are more compatible with contemporary spirituality than those espoused in Goenka's *dhamma*.

While the shift mentioned above in the interpretation of *dhamma* may be minor, the therapeutic interpretation of Vipassana experiences presents a potentially more significant issue for the Goenka movement.

There has been much debate over Western psychology's appropriation of Buddhist terms and concepts, particularly the concept of mindfulness.¹⁹⁰ In traditional Buddhist teachings, mindfulness (*sati*) means developing a deeper existential understanding and awareness of the present moment. However, in Western psychology, mindfulness has become a practical tool, often utilized in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and other therapeutic approaches to assist individuals in managing mental health issues and dealing with work-related stress.

It is interesting to consider that, given the history of Buddhist terms being appropriated and transformed by Western psychology, many respondents in this study interpreted *sankharas* as body memories of past traumas rather than old volitions of craving and aversion. This non-*dhamma* interpretation appears to shift the purpose of Vipassana meditation from a method of karma purification to a method of trauma release. Rather than being viewed as teachers of equanimity, *sankharas* are seen as psychological wounds that can only be healed through emotional acceptance, with Vipassana being perceived as an effective relaxation technique for accessing and addressing these old traumas. There are evident parallels between the ideas behind modern somatic therapies, influenced by Wilhelm Reich, and S. N. Goenka's *dhamma* teachings, as earlier noted by, for example, Kahn¹⁹¹ and Freese.¹⁹² It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which an entrepreneurial psychologist takes advantage of the highly effective body scan technique of Vipassana meditation and incorporates it into modern trauma therapy.¹⁹³

This study is based on a small sample of participants from Sweden and Northern Europe and cannot say anything about the prevalence of the therapeutic interpretation among Goenka

¹⁹⁰ This debate gained momentum with Purser & Loy coining of the term "McMindfulness" (Ronald Purser, David Loy "Beyond McMindfulness" in *Huffington Post*. July 1, 2013 <https://www.academia.edu/8103152/Beyond_McMindfulness> (2013) p. 1–4, and is further discussed in for example Ronald Purser, et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement* (Cham: Springer, 2016).

¹⁹¹ Michael Kahn, "Vipassana Meditation and the Psychobiology of Wilhelm Reich" *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 25(3) DOI: 10.1177/0022167885253010, (1985): p. 117–128.

¹⁹² John Freese, "Two Maps of the Same Territory? Functional Correlations Between Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S. N. Goenka and Somatic Experiencing®" Conference paper, *LA County Conference on Mental Health and Spirituality* (2021) p. 1–23.

¹⁹³ In the MBSR technique developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn there are some body-scanning exercises reminding of Goenka's Vipassana.

participants in general. However, among the 28 respondents in this study, it was one of the most widespread interpretations.

While it is possible that Western psychology may eventually appropriate the Vipassana technique, it is more unlikely that the interpretations of outsider participants, as exemplified in this study, will ever impact the core of the Goenka movement. To become a true insider, a tradition bearer, one must align with the Goenka cosmology, which is deeply entrenched in Goenka's articles and books, and, most importantly, in the video discourses used in the ten-day course. According to one of Rahmani's informants, the contents of these videotapes will not be edited in the foreseeable future: "According to a Vipassana teacher I interviewed in New Zealand, these tapes will be used until the English language has changed to such an extent that people are no longer able to comprehend Goenka's language."¹⁹⁴

6.4 Reflections on the Study

The data collected in this study offers a wealth of material that has yet to be fully explored. While this study analyzed the experiences and interpretations of the Vipassana course among the 28 respondents, the interviews also touched on several other themes, such as the respondents' background, motivation for attending the course, and the methods used to handle pain during Vipassana meditation.

This study employed a phenomenographical analysis of the data to provide a broad overview of how respondents experienced and interpreted Vipassana meditation and the Goenka course. Further investigation using narrative or discourse analysis methods could provide a deeper understanding of individual cases and identified experiences and interpretations. It would also be interesting to examine potential differences between groups of respondents based on factors such as age, gender, and the number of courses taken.

6.5 Suggestions for Further Research

One of the most intriguing findings of this study is the widespread occurrence of ELSE experiences among ordinary Vipassana participants and the range of emotions they elicit, from extreme pleasure to overwhelming, frightening, and debilitating sensations. It is surprising that a ten-day course can generate such strong effects on a regular basis, and considering the global reach of the Goenka movement, it is likely that a significant number of people around the world have been taught to induce or observe these energy-like somatic experiences of energy pulses and buzzing inner vibrations.

Several areas merit further investigation in order to better understand the nature and implications of ELSE experiences. This includes exploring what ELSE experiences are, how they can be medically explained, and how they have been historically understood and are currently understood within different traditions such as Theravada, Kundalini, and Tibetan meditation.

¹⁹⁴ Masoumeh Rahmani, "Goenka's Vipassana movement. From Conversion to Disaffiliation" in Miguel Farias et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 629–650, p. 632.

It would also be valuable to examine the prevalence of ELSE experiences among practitioners of these traditions.

In addition, the potential use of Vipassana as a therapeutic tool and the presence of ELSE experiences in somatic therapy are areas worth investigating. It would also be worth exploring the parallels and potential historical connections between the development of Wilhelm Reich's traumatic memory model and Goenka's Vipassana.

Finally, another suggestion for further research is to compare the experiences and interpretations of Indian and European participants in Goenka courses. This study seems to corroborate Melnikova's notion that experiences are central to European participants, while the theoretical aspects of the Goenka course are of little importance. A comparative study of Indian and European respondents could provide more insights into how the Goenka tradition is understood and experienced in these two cultural contexts.

References

Ahn, Juhn Y., “Meditation Sickness” in Miguel Farias et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 887–906.

Alvesson, Mats, Sköldbäck, Kaj, *Tolkning och Reflektion: Vetenskapsfilosofi och Kvalitativ Metod* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2017).

Aspers, Peter, *Etnografiska metoder: att förstå och förklara samtiden* (Malmö: Liber, 2011).

Baminiwatta, A., Solangaarachchi, I., ”Trends and Developments in Mindfulness Research over 55 Years: A Bibliometric Analysis of Publications Indexed in Web of Science” *Mindfulness* 12 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-021-01681-x>, p. 2099-2116, p. 2099.

Cardeña, Etzel, et al., “Introduction: Anomalous Experiences in Perspective” in Etzel Cardeña, et al. (eds.), *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2014) p. 3–20.

Cooper, David, et al. “‘Like a Vibration Cascading through the Body’: Energy-Like Somatic Experiences Reported by Western Buddhist Meditators”, *Religions*, 12. 1042. DOI: 10.3390/rel12121042 (2021) p. 1–27.

Frank, Daniel, et al, “Investigating Culturally-Contextualized Making with the Navajo Nation: Broadening the Normative Making Mentality”, *Engineering Studies*, 12:3, DOI: 10.1080/19378629.2020.1821694 (2020) p. 177–194.

Freese, John, “Two Maps of the Same Territory? Functional Correlations Between Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S. N. Goenka and Somatic Experiencing®” Conference paper, *LA County Conference on Mental Health and Spirituality* (2021) p. 1–23.

Frisk, Liselotte, Nynäs, Peter, “Characteristics of Contemporary Religious Change: Globalization, Neoliberalism, and Interpretative Tendencies” in Peter Nynäs, et al. (eds.), *Post-Secular Society* (New York: Routledge, 2012) p. 47–70.

Frisk, Liselotte, Åkerbäck, Peter, *Den mediterande dalahästen: religion på nya arenor i samtidens Sverige* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2013).

Fuller, Robert, “Secular Spirituality” in Phil Zuckerman and John Shook (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) p. 1–19.

Glaser, Barney, Strauss, Anselm, *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).

Hart, William, Goenka, S. N., *The Discourse Summaries: Talks From a Ten-day Course in Vipassana Meditation* (Dhamma Giri, Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1987).

Heelas, Paul, *The New Age Movement: the Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

Heelas, Paul, “The Spiritual Revolution: From ‘Religion’ to ‘Spirituality,’” in Linda Woodhead (ed.), *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 412–436.

Hornborg, Anne-Christine, *Coaching och lekmannaterapi: en modern väckelse?* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2012).

Kahn, Michael, “Vipassana Meditation and the Psychobiology of Wilhelm Reich” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 25(3) DOI: 10.1177/0022167885253010, (1985): p. 117–128.

Kornfield, Jack, “Intensive Insight Meditation: A Phenomenological Study” *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 77 (1979): p. 41–58.

Kuhn, Thomas S., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Lambert, D., et al. “Adverse effects of meditation: A review of observational, experimental, and case studies” *Current Psychology*, February, DOI: 10.1007/s12144-021-01503-2 (2021) p. 1–14.

Larsson, Staffan, *Kvalitativ analys: exemplet fenomenografi* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1986).

Lincoln, Yvonna, Guba, Egon, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1985).

Lindahl, Jared, et al. “Challenging and Adverse Meditation Experiences: Toward a Person-Centered Approach” in Miguel Farias et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 841–864.

Lindahl, Jared, et al., “The Varieties of Contemplative Experience: A Mixed-Methods Study of Meditation-Related Challenges in Western Buddhists”, *PLoS ONE*, 12(5) e0176239. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0176239> (2017) p. 1–38.

Marton, Ference. “Phenomenography – A Research Approach to Investigating Different Understandings of Reality” *Journal of Thought* 21, no. 3, (1986): p. 28–49.

Marton, Ference, “Phenomenography – Describing Conceptions of the World Around Us” *Instructional Science* 10, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00132516> (1981) p. 177–200.

Marton, Ference, Svensson, Lennart, *Att studera omvärldsuppfattning. Två bidrag till metodologin* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, Rapporter från Pedagogiska institutionen, no. 158, 1978).

Maslow, Abraham H., *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1964).

Melnikova, Nora, *The Modern School of Vipassana – a Buddhist Tradition?* Dissertation. (Prague: Masaryk University, 2014).

Pagis, Michal, *Inward: Vipassana Meditation and the Embodiment of the Self* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Plank, Katarina, *Insikt och närvaro: akademiska kontemplationer kring buddhism, meditation och mindfulness* (Göteborg: Makadam, 2011).

Plank, Katarina, “Mindfulness i svenska kontexter” *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift*, 61, (2014) p. 35–54.

Purser, Ronald, et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context, and Social Engagement* (Cham: Springer, 2016).

Purser, Ronald, Loy, David, “Beyond McMindfulness” in *Huffington Post*. July 1, 2013 <https://www.academia.edu/8103152/Beyond_McMindfulness> (2013) p. 1–4.

Rahmani, Masoumeh, “Goenka’s Vipassana movement. From Conversion to Disaffiliation” in Miguel Farias et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 629–650.

Rahmani, Masoumeh, *Drifting Through Samsara: Tacit Conversion and Disengagement in Goenka's Vipassana Movement*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Shapiro Deane H. Jr. "Adverse Effects of Meditation: a Preliminary Investigation of Long-Term Meditators" *International Journal of Psychosomatics*, 39, (1992) p. 62–67.

Shaw, Sarah, "Theravada Buddhism and meditation" in Miguel Farias et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Meditation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) p. 213–236.

Stuart, Daniel M., *S. N. Goenka: Emissary of Insight* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2020).

Szekeres, Roberta A., Wertheim, Eleanor H., "Evaluation of Vipassana Meditation Course Effects on Subjective Stress, Well-being, Self-kindness, and Mindfulness in a Community Sample: Post-course and 6-month Outcomes", *Stress Health* 5 (2015) p. 373–381.

Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Thurfjell, David, *Det gudlösa folket: de postkristna svenskarna och religionen* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2015).

Tight, Malcolm, "Phenomenography: the development and application of an innovative research design in higher education research" *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19:3, DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2015.1010284, (2016) p. 319–338.

Wong, Mun, Chinese preschool children's understanding of death, *Early Years*, 42:2, DOI: 10.1080/09575146.2019.1686466, (2022) p. 247–262.

Zygmunt, Conrad, Naidoo, Anthony, "Phenomenography—An avant-garde approach to extend the psychology methodological repertoire" *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 19(1), DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2018.1545061, (2022) p. 1–19.

Åkerlind, Gerlese, "What Future for Phenomenographic Research? On Continuity and Development in the Phenomenography and Variation Theory Research Tradition", *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 62:6, DOI: 10.1080/00313831.2017.1324899 (2018) p. 949–958.

Online

Britton, Willoughby, et al., “The Varieties of Contemplative Experience” *Brown University – The Britton Lab* (no date) <<https://www.brown.edu/research/labs/britton/research/varieties-contemplative-experience>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Dhamma.org, “Questions & Answers About the Technique of Vipassana Meditation” *Vipassana Meditation* (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/qanda>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Dhamma.org, “Vipassana Meditation” *Vipassana Meditation*. (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/vipassana>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Dhamma.org, “Introduction to the Technique” *Vipassana Meditation*. (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/code>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Dhamma Sobhana, “New Dhamma Hall at the centre” *Vipassana Meditation Centre Dhamma Sobhana* (no date) <<https://sobhana.dhamma.org/en/new-meditation-hall>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Dhamma Sobhana, “The Centre in Sweden” *Vipassana Meditation Centre Dhamma Sobhana* (no date) <<https://sobhana.dhamma.org/en/the-centre-in-sweden>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Frank, Andreas, *Meditation är inte bara en dans på rosor*, Master’s thesis, <<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/59801>> (Göteborgs universitet, Psykologiska institutionen, 2019).

Greenwell, Bonnie, “The Kundalini Guide” *Kundalini Guide* (no date) <<http://www.kundaliniguide.com>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Kundalini Collective, “Home” *Kundalini Collective* (no date) <<https://www.kundalinicollective.org>> accessed December 22, 2022.

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. “Paresthesia” *All Disorders* <<https://www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/paresthesia>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Pagis, Michal, Rahmani, Masoumeh, “Vipassana Meditation as Taught by SN Goenka” in D. G. Bromley (ed.), *World Religions and Spirituality Project* (2015) <<https://wrldrels.org/2016/10/08/vipassana-meditation>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Vipassana meditation South Africa, “S.N. Goenka – The foremost teacher of Vipassana Meditation of our time” *About Vipassana* <<https://pataka.dhamma.africa/about-vipassana-meditation/teacher-s-n-goenka/>> accessed October 13, 2022.

Vipassana Research Institute, “10 day Vipassana Course – Day 3” (no date) *Vipassana Meditation* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXXnSK2a47w>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Vipassana Research Institute, “10 day Vipassana Course – Day 7” (no date) *Vipassana Meditation* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us5Iq302eNU>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Vipassana Research Institute, “10 day Vipassana Course – Day 8” (no date) *Vipassana Meditation* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4twJT1RfiM>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Vipassana Research Institute, “10 day Vipassana Course – Day 10” (no date) *Vipassana Meditation* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzrQ2HMF0uo>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Vipassana Research Institute, “S. N. Goenka” *Vipassana Research Institute*. (no date) <<https://www.vridhamma.org/S.N.-Goenka>> accessed December 22, 2022.

About the figures

Figure 1 is my graphical depiction of the phenomenographical method. The image of the seated S. N. Goenka is frequently used within the Goenka movement, and I haven’t been able to find its origin. The picture used is a screenshot from the Goenka movement webpage Vipassana meditation South Africa “S.N. Goenka – The foremost teacher of Vipassana Meditation of our time” *About Vipassana* <<https://pataka.dhamma.africa/about-vipassana-meditation/teacher-s-n-goenka/>> accessed October 13, 2022.

Figure 2 is a screenshot of the daily schedule for the ten-day course as depicted at the Goenka movement webpage Dhamma.org, “Introduction to the Technique” *Vipassana Meditation*. (no date) <<https://www.dhamma.org/en/about/code>> accessed December 22, 2022.

Appendix 1 – Interview-request

Hello!

My name is Jan Wallentin. I worked at the course as a server and have previously attended a 10-day course at Dhamma Sobhana.

I study religious history at the University of Lund and am currently writing a Master's thesis about Vipassana meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka. The study aims to learn more about how participants experience and interpret the 10-day course.

Would you consider being interviewed? The interview will be done online via Zoom and will take about an hour.

The interview will be conducted in a couple of weeks after you have had time to digest the impressions peacefully. You do not have to participate in the thesis under your name if you do not want to, and you are welcome to read the study when it is finished.

NOTE: The Master's study is an independent work at Lund University and has no connection to Dhamma Sobhana. No outsiders will have access to the interview material.

NAME (first name is enough)

MOBILE NUMBER

Appendix 2 – Interview-guide

- **Can you give a brief description of yourself?**
Nationality, living place, age, gender, civil status/children, level of education/what field, occupation, religious background, number of courses/serve
- **Why did you become interested in attending a vipassana course? (first time)**
Why did you want to go to another class/serve?
 - * *How did you get to know about the course?*
 - * *What did you want to get out of the course? What did you expect?*
 - * *What did you know about Buddhism? About meditation?*
 - * *Have you participated in any similar course/treatment?*
 - * *Do you have any earlier experience with meditation? Of therapeutical treatments?*
- **When you reflect on the (first) course, what do you remember about it?**
Is there something you remember especially?
Can you remember any particular sequences or images?
What made the most impression?
- **How did you experience the rules of the course?**
silence – no body contact – not leaving the center – no food after lunch – no other spiritual techniques – segregation of women/men – no reading/writing/music – no digital media – no religious symbols
- **How did you experience learning anapana-meditation?**
How did you experience learning vipassana meditation?
What do you think of the way Goenka teaches meditation?
 - * *How did you experience being still for such a long time?*
 - * *What did you think about when you meditated?*
 - * *How did you experience the chanting?*
- **Could you describe in detail what you experienced doing vipassana meditation?**
How do you interpret these experiences?
 - * *Have you experienced anything similar to vipassana meditation?*
 - * *What experiences of pain have you had? (sankharas?) Any unusual, surprising experiences?*
 - * *How pleasant would you rate the pleasant sensations? Painful? 1–10*
 - * *What do you get out of vipassana meditation? What is the point? How does the meditation affect you?*
- **What was your experience of the evening discourses? What do you remember? What stuck?**
.... What do you think of Goenka? What do you think about the worldview that's presented?
 - * *karma, reincarnation*
 - * *shankaras / defilements*
 - * *kalapas*
 - * *nibbana / upplysning*
 - * *anatta – there is no self, no I*
 - * *to always remain equanimous? vs. passion?*
- **If you think about the course in general: what do you think of it? Why?**
 - * *Would you consider taking another Goenka course? Why? Why not?*
 - * *Would you recommend the course to others? Why? Why not?*
 - * *Do you think the course could be harmful to certain people? How?*
 - * *The course is presented as non-religious and non-sectarian – what are your views?*
- **What use do you have of the lessons of the course and vipassana meditation in everyday life?**
How often do you meditate? How has the course affected you? What do others say about how you have been affected by the course?
 - * *Regular practice? Keeping sila?*
 - * *If one course only: What do you think you will take into the future from this course?*
- **Is there anything you like to add? Do you feel understood?**