

Vipassana for Hackers

The Proposal

Version 0.1

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Vipassana meditation (as taught by S.N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin) is unlike other meditation techniques insofar as its claims to completeness and outcomes are concerned. Vipassana claims to ultimately explore the entire field of mind and matter, with the goals of total liberation and full enlightenment. Implicit within these claims is a complete understanding of human consciousness. These are difficult claims to prove because the time commitment required to research the technique orders on multiple decades — if not multiple generations. This is complicated by the fact that the time commitment is demanded of both the researcher *and the subject*. Until now, research on meditation of all kinds has covered only one of two fields: (1) controlled experiments which must inherently rely on superficial data gathered from beginners and (2) observational exploratory research of monks — expert meditators who have dedicated their lives to the practice. I propose bridging this gap by submitting myself to the middle ground. While remaining a layperson, I will commit to a high ratio of waking meditation hours for the rest of my life. Individually and internally, I will conduct qualitative research into the consequences of Vipassana meditation and the nature of consciousness while collectively and externally pledging myself as a subject for long-term quantitative studies with a broader community of researchers.

Keywords: neuroscience, psychology, vipassana, meditation

TODO LIST

■ add references to (1) and (2) 1

I. INTRODUCTION

Research into the effects of meditation has been conducted in earnest for half a century but the quality of research in this field varies wildly. Randomized controlled trials were missing from much research conducted during the first few decades of meditation study. The importance of active controls was often missed even when randomized controlled trials were attempted. Double-blind studies are inherently impossible with meditation research; a subject will always know if she is receiving meditation instruction or an active control instruction. [2]

Add to these difficulties the very nature of meditation research itself. There are many techniques of meditation and it is very important to capture the specific technique under study to make meaningful assertions about its effects. [2] However, even within the definition of a single meditation technique there exist variations in instruction between teachers and each student's comprehension of the instructions received. [1] Even if researchers could cement (or at least accurately record) semantics and terminology, the subject of study is often unclear: Are we

looking for health benefits? Increases in productivity? Increases in intelligence? How long these effects persist? How much do we want to explore concrete hypotheses versus exploratory analysis of long-term effects? How much can be learned about the nature of consciousness? Can these learnings be measured objectively or even communicated meaningfully?

Because Vipassana is globally standardized, it affords researchers with definitive solutions to the difficulties presented by varying teaching methodologies. In exchange for this, the difficulty of long-term study is compounded by the intrinsic seriousness demanded of a Vipassana practitioner: the concept of "continuous piercing awareness of constantly changing bodily sensation" is not only a requirement of serious Vipassana practice but could very well act as a surrogate description of the practice itself. This seriousness poses obvious difficulties and it is the intention of my study to begin breaking ground in solutions to those difficulties.

This study will prove significant in three fields of research:

First, and most accessible, is the continued quantitative research of meditation in the broader neuroscience and psychology disciplines, where my participation will be more as subject than researcher.

Second is the qualitative research into the long-term consequences of Vipassana meditation, what it reveals about the nature of human consciousness, and reusable techniques for its exploration — a field currently consisting of a bridge between psychology, philosophy, linguistics, and contemplative studies.

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Third is the exploratory research intended to objectively define consciousness. As such research must pertain to all forms of consciousness it therefore includes all non-human forms of consciousness. Findings will inform our understanding of the Mind-Body Problem of psychology and philosophy, the entire field of bioethics, and — perhaps most importantly — the nascent field of Artificial Consciousness as a subfield of Artificial Intelligence. [3] As of this writing, this overarching integral field of study has yet to emerge and has no name as a discipline.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

A large scale controlled study of beginner-to-intermediate students of Vipassana, each practicing a minimum of two hours daily, is possible. Randomization will not be possible in such a study as the students self-select this

- middle ground: me
- (vs. monks)

A. Overview (?)

B. Hypothesis

III. OBJECTIVES AND AIMS

A. Overall Objective

B. Specific Aims

IV. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

A. Preliminary Research Review

- summary of related research - strengths and weaknesses - justification — what hasn't been done by others?
- why is this research necessary?

B. Why Vipassana?

1. “complete”, standardized, global, multilingual, 100% free
2. mundane (sleep) vs. supramundane (total eradication of suffering)
3. who is steven deobald

C. Why now?

V. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

A. OVERVIEW

B. Study Design / Research Method

- case study type?

C. POPULATION AND STUDY SAMPLE

D. SAMPLE SIZE AND SELECTION OF SAMPLE

E. SOURCES OF DATA

F. COLLECTION OF DATA

G. EXPOSURE ASSESSMENT

H. DATA MANAGEMENT

I. DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

J. Participants

- people and roles

K. ETHICS AND HUMAN SUBJECTS ISSUES

L. TIMEFRAMES

VI. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDY

VII. PUBLIC HEALTH SIGNIFICANCE

VIII. BUDGET AND MOTIVATION

- resources required

IX. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT?

X. REFERENCES

XI. APPENDICES

A. Appendix 1: Proposed Daily Schedule

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REFERENCES

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