Meditation Hindrances and Breakthroughs: A Multilevel First-Person Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract: This article explores the topic of meditation hindrances and breakthroughs. In the traditional literature, meditation hindrances are seen as phenomena counteracting meditative activity. However, hindrances are also seen as grounds for meditative growth and breakthroughs. In current meditation research, there is an effort to understand negative effects, sometimes referred to as challenging, adverse, or harmful effects. Little is known about how people experience and deal with meditation hindrances, and especially how they experience the dissolution of hindrances (breakthroughs). The method applied to shed light on this is an innovative and multilevel phenomenological method, which includes biographical exploration, daily notetaking and reflection, and micro-phenomenology. The participants consisted of a group of five people, and the setting was a 6-day meditation retreat. We offer a new perspective on this research not only by developing the concept of meditation hindrances but also by suggesting and showing how negative effects may be part of a process leading up to a breakthrough, where the negative aspect dissolves, potentially giving rise to positive outcomes.

Keywords: meditation; hindrances; breakthroughs; psychological development; first-person methods; micro-phenomenology

1. Background

Meditation research over the last few decades has focused almost exclusively on its beneficial effects on human beings. These effects range from positive influences on human health (Eberth and Sedlmeier 2012), improvements in concentration (Moore et al. 2012), and pro-social behavior (Luberto et al. 2017). Recently, the field has widened to include a critical assessment of potential negative challenges and adverse or harmful effects (Lindahl et al. 2017). Some studies suggest that such effects are not uncommon (Farias et al. 2020), and as many as 25% of regular meditators report having had very unpleasant experiences, such as fear and anxiety (Schlosser et al. 2019). It is also being investigated whether meditation programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction may be physically or psychologically harmful. “Harm” may be defined as outcomes that are worse than what would be expected if no treatment was undertaken. Specific aspects investigated include anxiety, depressive symptoms, paranoid ideation, and others (Hirshberg et al. 2022). One study indicates that 10% of meditators among a population-based sample in the US have experienced functional reduction, although these, in most cases, resolve within a day, while 1.4% of the cases took a month or longer to resolve (Goldberg et al. 2022).
One central issue is the differentiation between meditation effects and experiences that may be fundamentally harmful and those that are initially challenging but still part of a process that eventually leads to positive outcomes. One may refer to the latter as growth-related challenges. For example, becoming more aware of negative thought patterns and related bodily stress may be unsettling, yet it is also part of the process that eventually leads to an overall reduction in negative thoughts (Shapiro et al. 2005). However, to what extent the encounter with aversive or otherwise negative experiences, such as increased awareness of stress, is essential to achieve overall benefit is difficult to ascertain. To use an analogy, a muscle needs to be put under stress for it to grow. This process is likely to involve painful experiences. In relation to muscle growth, pain is a subjective reaction to the stress that the muscle is placed under. The pain itself does not lead to growth. In contrast, some meditative growth may be made possible exactly through a conscious encounter with something painful (Sparby and Sacchet 2024a).

If we look at the spiritual traditions and their view of meditation, there is certainly mention of specific positive effects. For example, the jhanas, which may be defined as an altered state of consciousness characterized by effortlessly stable concentration and absorption into the meditation object, are connected to strong bliss and deep peace (Sparby and Sacchet 2024b; Yang et al. 2024b). Negative effects, such as persisting agitation, can also be found in the traditions, sometimes referred to as “meditation sickness” (Ahn 2019). We also find mention of hindrances, also referred to as obstacles, poisons, or afflicting emotions (Sparby 2022). These hindrances are ambiguous in that they are negative, unpleasant, and hamper meditation, and yet they may be part of moving forward along the path of meditative development. In traditional Buddhist accounts, meditation hindrances include sensory desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. Similar lists can be found in Patanjali (Bryant 2009, p. 118) and the works of the Christian desert fathers (Brakke 2009). Interestingly, hindrances may be viewed, as in Mahamudra, not as something that needs to be removed but rather as something that can be integrated into the process of meditative transformation (Kunga Tenzin 2020). Hence, in some accounts, the hindrances are not necessarily problematic but may also represent a potential for growth.

In traditional narrative accounts of meditative transformations, one may indeed find stories in which the encounter with hindrances forms an integral part. One classic example would be Buddha’s encounter with hindrances in the shape of the demonic figure of Mara during his three days of meditation under the Bodhi tree, a process that represents the final awakening of the Buddha (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995). Such processes are also exemplified in later literature. In Gampopa’s biography (Gampopa was a student of Milarepa, one of Tibetan Buddhism’s most famous yogis), we find a description of the activation of internal energy, sometimes referred to as kundalini awakening (Lindahl 2017), accompanied by strong somatic disturbances and visions (Mackenzie Stuart 1995). Both in the example of Buddha’s awakening and Gampopa’s kundalini activation, the hindrances are challenging experiences that they go through and are associated with certain breakthroughs in their practice. Hence, the traditions paint a complex picture of positive and negative effects and the connection between them: sometimes hindrances are viewed as something that should be removed or which fall away during meditation; sometimes the hindrances themselves can be used as “fuel” for a transformational process; or sometimes unpleasant effects are connected to meditation breakthroughs, either by viewing them as part of an unfolding narrative or by seeing them as part of a cathartic process (Sparby 2022).

Very little research has been conducted on meditation hindrances. Piron’s Meditation Depth Questionnaire includes a generalized account of hindrances that are present initially as meditation deepens (Piron 2001). This conception is inconsistent with traditional approaches and meditation manuals, which identify specific hindrances at further depths of practice (Brasington 2015; Poulain 2016; Yates et al. 2015). Russ et al. showed that the lack of adherence to meditation programs is connected to the presence of hindrances (Russ et al. 2017). Hence, the potential benefit from meditation programs may be reduced by hindrances. The Difficulties During Meditation Involving Immeasurable Attitudes Scale
(DMIAS) was developed by Zeng et al., but only identified the following two hindrances: (i) absence of concentration and (ii) absence of pro-social emotions (Zhang et al. 2019). It is questionable whether it is correct to identify these as hindrances; absence of concentration is itself not a hindrance but may be regarded as a failure to conduct a concentration task, which might be due to a specific hindrance such as ill-will, desire, etc. Katyal and Goldin identified differences in brain waves depending on whether hindrances were present or absent during meditation, indicating that hindrances are objectively measurable and impact meditation practice (Katyal and Goldin 2021).

The effect of meditation interventions depends on engagement with the practice. For example, a recent large study on the potential benefit of mindfulness interventions for adolescents found either no effect or a negative impact on those with previously existing risk for mental health issues (Farias 2022; Montero-Marin et al. 2022). While this may be interpreted as evidence that mindfulness practices are not effective or, in some cases, counterproductive, the study showed that engagement among the participants was low (Kuyken et al. 2023). What needs to be studied is whether engagement can be increased when meditation hindrances are explicitly addressed and strategies of mitigation are integrated into intervention programs. Furthermore, given that meditation benefits may come from states in which hindrances are overcome, such as the jhānas, which may be defined by the absence of hindrances (Sparby and Sacchet 2024b), it is vital to understand the process through which they are overcome and how breakthroughs to new states occur.

To summarize, it is vital to study meditation hindrances since they may be part of what prevents benefits from meditation, both in the sense of preventing people from cultivating beneficial meditation states and preventing them from learning meditative skills. At the same time, it is important to realize that meditative growth and learning may happen exactly through encounters with hindrances, for example, through unlearning unproductive stress responses and developing equanimity. Hence, the process of the dissolution of hindrances is inherently complex. It is not the case that meditation hindrances should be removed or prevented in all instances. To some extent, meditation includes setting people up for failure. A concentration task is initially bound to lead to distraction and mind-wandering. This may be seen as a failure to execute the task of concentration. The realization that one has failed may create more stress rather than reduce it. However, by reacting skillfully to failure, through acceptance, patience, calm, etc., concentration may be built, and in the end, attention may stabilize as the mind enters advanced absorptive concentration states (Sparby and Sacchet 2024b; Yang et al. 2024b). The necessary skills for deepening concentration are built through a skillful encounter with hindrances. Not only is it necessary to understand this process in more detail, but also to create conceptually rigorous and phenomenologically useful taxonomies of meditation hindrances and how people may skillfully navigate when encountering them. Without awareness and understanding of this aspect of meditation practice, encounters with hindrances may result in a lack of adherence and, hence, interventions failing, as well as a failure to realize the potential inherent in advanced meditation states.

2. Method

To comprehensively investigate a range of hindrances, skillful reactions, and processes of growth and transformation, an explorative multilevel first-person phenomenological approach was chosen, which combined different aspects of current first-person approaches (Lumma and Weger 2023) and included biographical reflection, daily note-taking and dialogue, and micro-phenomenology (Sparby 2023). These aspects of the method are described in more depth below. Similar approaches to the study of meditation, where researchers investigate their own experience, have been conducted by Kordes et al. (Kordes et al. 2019) and Sparby (Sparby 2019b). A multilevel approach was chosen to ensure that the experience of meditation hindrances and breakthroughs was understood in context; this is not just understood as a direct moment-to-moment experience but also in a way that involves the participants’ interpretation of them in light of their biographical background,
shifting moods, external circumstances, etc. A retreat setting was chosen to intensively study meditation hindrances and breakthroughs. Meditation retreats are known to have a moderate-to-strong impact on meditation interventions (Khoury et al. 2017), and the increased amount of meditation time that a retreat involves is considered to increase both the likelihood of encountering meditation hindrances and experiencing breakthroughs. This presentation of the method and results follows COREQ guidelines for reporting on qualitative data (Tong et al. 2007).

2.1. Participants and Context

Five male participants (age range 23–40) took part in the retreat. The idea of conducting research on a retreat grew organically through mutual conversations, and hence, no intentional selection of participants was made based on gender. It can be noted that having all male percipients may provide a limited perspective as gender may impact how hindrances, reactions, strategies, and breakthroughs are conceived and experienced. At the same time, it is a fairly traditional approach to separate the sexes during retreats. Future studies may investigate this topic further, examining potential gender differences and how mixed and separate groups potentially influence the meditation process.

All participants had previously taken part in a 6-day retreat together. Some participants had been on other retreats of various lengths previously. At the time the study was conducted, the PI (primary investigator) was an assistant professor, and four were psychology students at the same institution where they had met. All participants had previous experience with micro-phenomenology (MP) and micro-phenomenological self-inquiry (MPSI), and all took part in conducting the research.

The participants shared an interest in meditation, how to study it using first-person methods, and how to integrate this research into contemporary psychological research and daily life. While all participants shared an interest in the whole range of potential effects of meditation, such as well-being, mental health, and personal development, they also shared an interest in the traditional spiritual background of meditation practice. However, none were practicing based on a clearly formulated traditional soteriological goal. Rather, the focus of the interest in meditation practice was on the intersection between conventional psychological perspectives and more traditional spiritual ones. This gives rise, for instance, to the notion that “adverse” or “negative effects” may be approached beneficially by conceiving them in a way that is inspired and informed by traditional ideas of meditation hindrances. However, the intention was to follow a phenomenological method where the whole range of human experience is systematically investigated while also reflecting on how different backgrounds, expectations, and frameworks may influence experience.

The practice itself was not framed explicitly as a practice belonging to a specific tradition. However, all practitioners were familiar with Buddhist ideas and ways of conceiving meditation practice, which may also have informed how the experiences were interpreted. To some extent, this was due to all participants being close to the field of psychology. Meditation and mindfulness practices inspired by Buddhism have, in recent years, had an impact on psychology, in particular in the context of psychotherapy. All participants were actively engaged in this field, either as students or researchers. Furthermore, the participants were influenced by a number of recent meditation handbooks from teachers with Buddhist backgrounds (Sparby and Sacchet 2024a). This explains, for instance, the presence of terms such as jhāna (absorption concentration meditation) in the material. On the whole, however, the phenomenological approach was central, and interpretative or conceptual inspiration could be drawn from several different sources, including religious, philosophical, and psychological traditions.

2.2. Setting and Daily Schedule

The location of the retreat was an old cabin in the mountains of Switzerland. A small space on the second floor was selected as the common meditation space upon arrival. A total of six hours per day were devoted to meditation. The sittings were divided into 40
min of sitting and a 20-min break, which could also be used for continued practice. The participants took turns cooking. The time between sessions was used for research, such as conducting interviews, taking notes, and writing. The retreat was conducted in silence. However, in the evening, the group met for one hour to share experiences and reflect on them. The conversation was recorded and added to the study material.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected from several different sources (the numbers in parentheses indicate the number of interviews conducted):

1. **MP. Micro-phenomenological interviews** (8). The standard micro-phenomenological method consists of one person interviewing another.
2. **MPSI. Micro-phenomenological self-inquiry** (MPSI) (10), where one person investigates their own experience without guidance from another person.
3. **GC. Group conversations** conducted during (8) and after the retreat (1).
4. **HBI. Semi-structured interviews** about how each participant understands hindrances and breakthroughs (4).
5. **BI. Biographical interviews** conducted at the end of the retreat (4).

The above codes in bold will be used when referencing the sources below (we first indicate the participant number and then the source of the quote, e.g., “P5MP” refers to participant 5, micro-phenomenological interview). The material from sources 1–4 was gathered using audio recording. The interviews were primarily conducted in German; the material quoted in this manuscript was translated into English during the final preparation of the manuscript. Data saturation was not considered, as the retreat had a set time limit. However, an advantage of involving all participants in the analysis and written presentation of the material was that they could always add further essential aspects and correct descriptions of experiences. If participants described past experiences of hindrances or other related topics, this material was included in the analysis. All participants were presented with an initial draft of the presentation of the results.

The **MP and MPSI interviews** followed the guidelines established by the MP-method (Petitmengin 2006; Sparby 2023). The MP-method consists of investigating a single experience as it unfolds pre-reflectively in great detail. Different techniques are involved, such as evoking experience using concrete memories, asking processual questions, and repeating descriptions to deepen them. The interviews can be conducted in a way where one person interviews another about their experience or in a way where one person investigates their own experience (self-inquiry). There are several advantages and disadvantages to both these approaches (Sparby 2023), but one is especially relevant here: self-inquiry is less resource-intensive in the sense that one does not need to request another person (who is involved in their own process of investigation) to take time to interview oneself. At the same time, self-inquiry may be cognitively demanding, and when a person is going through a challenging experience, offloading some of the research tasks may enable more detailed descriptions of one’s experience.

*Group conversations* were conducted each evening and lasted for about one hour. Everyone shared in turn, and topics of interest were reflected upon. One final conversation was conducted about two weeks after the retreat had ended.

*Hindrance and breakthrough interviews* were conducted by one participant. The questions asked were about how each participant defines “meditation hindrance” and “breakthrough”.

*Biographical interviews* were conducted by the PI with the four other participants at the end of the retreat. This made it possible for the participants to reflect on how the retreat fitted into their overall biographical trajectory. The biographical interview was semi-structured and consisted of these questions:

1. What was your way into meditation?
2. What have you done and experienced in meditation so far?
3. Can you summarize the main aspects of your experience during the current retreat?
4. What are the next steps for you in meditation?
5. What will you work on?
6. How will your experience during this retreat relate to your everyday life?

2.4. Data Processing

The audio recordings were transcribed using a set of transcription rules to ensure consistency. Transcriptions were analyzed in German. Only quotes used in this article were translated into English. Also, note that when excerpts are quoted, pause sounds (eh, uhm, etc.) and repetitions have been removed.

2.5. Data Coding

The data were coded by the PI and one of the participants. The themes were identified inductively. The identification of hindrances and other categories was anchored either directly in the participants’ own identification or was made based on a contextual assessment. The names used for the themes were anchored in the words used by the participants. When selecting quotes from the material, the aim was to have all the voices of the participants present. However, some voices were more prominent, specifically in relation to specific themes. This is a reflection of several factors, such as the fact that some participants had a narrower range of experience and focused on a few hindrances lasting for a long time, while others had a broader range of experience. The ability to articulate experiences clearly may also have had an influence on which quotes were selected.

The characteristics of each theme and potential sub-themes were identified. One example for each theme was also identified. MAXQDA was used to create the coding tree. All participants checked the final coding tree, characterizations, and examples. As the discussion of hindrances, definitions, and so on was itself part of the retreat, the process of analysis after the retreat was a systematic extension of the analysis that was taking place daily at the retreat. We return to this aspect of the present study in the Discussion.

3. Results

In this section, we consider the participants’ definition of “meditation hindrance” (Section 3.1), different forms of hindrances (Section 3.2), the participants’ descriptions of their reactions and strategies in relation to hindrances (Section 3.3), and the definition of a breakthrough (Section 3.4).

3.1. Universal Definition of “Meditation Hindrance”

While responding to the question about what a meditation hindrance is, P5 (participant 5) gave an answer that contained many aspects of what may define a meditation hindrance:

I’ve also thought a lot about it. I still find it difficult to define. But I believe that a hindrance, if I can put it very roughly, is something that keeps me from my meditation experience, that prevents me from getting into my focus, that takes me away from my meditation object. Something that prevents me from being solely in the meditation process. For me, this is very roughly what a hindrance is. And it can appear in a variety of forms, either as a recurring thought or as a physical sensation, such as pain or discomfort. [...] It can be a topic that concerns me. Something that I don’t really want to have in the meditation process and from which I want to distance myself as much as possible. Something that I would wish away if I could. PSHB1

A hindrance is defined by the participant as that which takes one away from or stops one from being completely engaged in one’s meditation process or experience or one’s meditation object. For example, a meditation hindrance is that which makes focusing difficult. There are many forms of meditation hindrances, but a commonality is that they are unwanted and persistent.

A similar view is expressed by P4, commenting on the metaphor of “hindrance”:
So, in general, precisely like something is standing in the way. I think this metaphor simply is good. You want to go somewhere and then there’s something in the way that prevents you from getting there. And, yes, in meditation, you’re trying to do something, and something is in the way, making it difficult or blocking it completely. Yes, the absolute obstacle would be . . . [that meditation is] not possible [at all]. An obstacle makes it more difficult, you can’t get any further, it goes slower, for example. So, like the path is simply difficult [to traverse] when you’re walking. Exactly. And then there are the concrete obstacles, so that . . . you can then list: feelings, anger, desire and how they specifically hinder meditation. P4HBI

The metaphor of a physical hindrance adequately describes what a meditation hindrance is: it prevents you, either partially or fully, from moving in the direction that you want. Furthermore, specific meditation hindrances may hinder meditation in specific ways. P5 also suggested that insofar as meditation is understood as an activity, a hindrance is implicitly defined as that which hinders the activity of meditation (P5GC). Similarly, a hindrance was described as a “disturbance” by P1 (P1HBI). P4 added that a meditation hindrance may be defined both in relation to the aim of meditation and an ideal of what meditation should be like; a meditation hindrance is that which keeps one from realizing the aim of meditation or acting in accordance with the norm set up by the ideal (P4HBI).

3.1.1. Particular and Individual Aspects of Meditation Hindrances

A few particular and individual aspects of meditation hindrances were identified beyond the general definition of negatively affecting the activity of meditation. Particular dimensions concern those aspects that are always present but must be specified (e.g., how intense a hindrance is), while the individual ones concern aspects that may or may not be present.

One particular aspect has already been mentioned. Meditation hindrances have different levels of persistence, which may also be understood as duration. Some are short, and some may last for a whole day, a week, or longer (P2HBI). Another particular aspect relates to intensity. Meditation hindrances have different intensities, which may be indicated by words such as minor, major, strong, or weak (P2HBI). P1 noted a phenomenon, namely that a hindrance may become a mood that one carries around outside of meditation (P1HBI). Some hindrances may become “leitmotifs”, understood as “[Themes] that last for a while. In other words, issues that you currently have, that you are either processing or dealing with. And these can be hindrances.” (P1HBI). P4 notes that some hindrances reappear, in the sense that they come back even though they may have been dissolved completely for a while, while other hindrances appear to be resolved once and for all (P4GC). Whether or not a hindrance becomes a leitmotif for a person and the history of appearance and disappearance of a hindrance are individual aspects of that hindrance.

3.1.2. Positive Aspects of Meditation Hindrances

P4 points to a certain aspect in relation to meditation hindrances that may be called “meaningfulness”:

But on the other hand, I want to give it [the hindrance] space and want to be open-minded and also want to be able to look at specific experiences, at the hindrances, if they really are such, or if any exist at all, and see what is conveyed to me through them, or what kind of meaningfulness is there, in them, yes. I mean, why, why I encounter them, why they come up at this moment. Yes, it’s, it’s kind of both [. . .] that’s a, yes, it’s kind of an ambivalence. P4HBI

The participant reflects on whether a hindrance is ever really a hindrance, as there may always be a kind of meaningfulness in them. P5 commented on something related
when explaining what it was like sitting in a new position during this retreat because of a leg injury:

Certainly, so then I’m confronted again [...] with a different state that I wasn’t in before, right? A situation that I have to deal with, right? And there’s certainly a lot to be learned from that. So, I . . . yes, I’m convinced that a lot can be drawn from it. That’s certainly a very positive thing, yes. P5GC

The new situation involves a confrontation, which leads to adjustment and learning, which is something positive. P5 had a similar comment: “And that’s what I experienced in this retreat, it was not related to anger, but rather to physical pain, that’s where I can learn the most now.” P4HBI. Whether or not a hindrance has a positive aspect is something that may be revealed. In other words, we do not understand the positive aspect as inherent in the hindrance itself, and hence not part of its definition, but rather something that concerns the relationship between the hindrance and the person experiencing it.

3.2. Forms of Hindrances

All forms of meditation hindrances are fundamentally related to human psychology, as meditation is a mental or psychological activity, and a hindrance is that which negatively impacts that activity. However, the way one speaks of hindrances may refer to non-psychological phenomena, such as external sounds or sensations of pain in the body. A sound may be objectively present, and still, participants may react differently (subjectively) to it. For one participant, there may simply be a sound present; for another, there may be a disturbance. To balance the analysis of the objective aspect of a hindrance and how participants report them, we operated with two main categories of hindrances: internal and external (understanding all external hindrances as essentially tied to internal reactions). At the same time, external hindrances may have external solutions, offering different methods of mitigation than internal hindrances (for example, the source of an external noise may simply be removed).

Furthermore, hindrances often involve many experiential dimensions simultaneously. For example, a feeling of sadness may, in addition to an emotional quality, involve thoughts about what one is sad about, a feeling of heaviness in the body that makes one unmotivated, and so on. The categorization is based on an assessment of what is the main phenomenological mode of appearance both contextually in the interviews and conceptually (what phenomenological dimension may not be removed without the phenomena ceasing to be what it is, e.g., one may be sad while having no specific thoughts; one may be sad but still motivated; but one may not experience sadness without feeling sad). See Table 1 below for an overview of the different types of hindrances, including specific themes and example quotes.

**Table 1.** Forms of hindrance. Overview of the forms of hindrance as well as subthemes and example quotes. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of mentions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Characteristics and Subthemes</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological. Hindrances with an internal cause. Cannot be mitigated by changing something outside the mind. (99)</td>
<td>Motivation (20)</td>
<td>Hindrances related to the motivation for practice. May consist of a lack of energy, aversive motivation (resistance to practice), or too much incentive motivation (striving).</td>
<td>“A strong unwillingness and really . . . unwillingness. I was not in the mood [to meditate] at all.” P3GC.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Characteristics and Subthemes.</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive (18)</td>
<td>Hindrances are related to different aspects of human cognition, such as thoughts (evaluations, comments, rumination), attention (distractions and mind-wandering), and doubt (uncertainty, despair).</td>
<td>“Am I trapped here forever or what is going on?” P4GC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective (58)</td>
<td>Hindrances related to a range of human effects, such as desire (longing, want, attachment), anger, sadness, fear (anxiety, panic), and restlessness (frustration).</td>
<td>“[. . .] now it’s almost over and I become impatient, and I want to speak and I am a bit jittery” P4GC.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technique-related, internal (3)</td>
<td>Hindrances related to internal aspects of a meditation technique, such as not being able to enter practice or wishing for a more effective technique.</td>
<td>“I wasn’t able to get into the practice at all today, yeah. I also tried counting. Went a bit longer once, like five minutes [laughter] and then I was completely out of it again. Yes. I couldn’t get into it at all.” P1GC.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>External. Hindrances with an external cause. Can be mitigated by changing something outside the mind. (44)</td>
<td>Somatic (34)</td>
<td>Hindrances related to different aspects of human physiology, such as bodily pains, circulation, involuntary movements, tiredness, itching, and nausea.</td>
<td>“My knees hurt, nothing beyond that.” P3GC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual (7)</td>
<td>Hindrances related to phenomena in the environment of the practitioners, such as noises, the social setting (comparison, loneliness, social anxiety), and the research being conducted.</td>
<td>“There were so many different noises. All like ppfppp and then so chhrrrrr and so many things at once.” P3GC.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technique-related, external (3)</td>
<td>Hindrances related to external aspects of a meditation technique, such as not experiencing specific bodily sensations.</td>
<td>“I always have the problem with . . . when I breathe in, I feel something and when I breathe out there’s somehow not much there.” P5GC.</td>
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3.2.1. Psychological Hindrances

Psychological hindrances can be divided into those that are motivational, cognitive, and emotional. Motivational hindrances include a lack of energy, which is simply the lack of inspiration and drive to do the meditation. This is a hindrance in the sense of not starting the meditation at all or not having the power to go into and continue the practice. Furthermore, too much incentive motivation, sometimes called “striving”, is also a hindrance in the sense that wanting to achieve something interferes with the meditative process. Conversely, one may also have aversive motivation, which means that one has an active dislike of the practice. Note that, in experience, it may be difficult to differentiate between these different kinds of motivational hindrances. This may become clear by considering this quote:

[It] started last night, and it built up this morning. A strong unwillingness and really . . . unwillingness. I was not in the mood [to meditate] at all. Especially this morning. I was like “wow, woooow”, anger. This morning, I was really angry. P3GC.
If we consider that the anger mentioned relates to unwillingness, this is an example of an aversive motivation. If no anger was present, it may have been interpreted as a lack of energy.

**Cognitive hindrances** include those that relate to thoughts, attention, overload, and doubt. In this study, thoughts were seen to distract from the meditative activity and consisted of evaluations of whether the meditation was good or bad, commenting internally on the process, and rumination. Attentional hindrances ranged from distractions to permanent mind-wandering. Doubts may involve some feeling of uncertainty and fear but are expressed as unknowing, a deep sense of uncertainty that leads to questioning and catastrophizing (e.g., “am I trapped here forever or what is going on?”, P4GC).

**Emotional hindrances** consist of feelings that interfere with meditation. Such emotions ranged from desire to anger, fear, sadness, and restlessness. The desire could consist of a desire for distraction or fantasies of being in a different place with someone one loves. Emotions could also be conflicting, such as both wanting and not wanting to be here (at the retreat). Fear was experienced as a sense of anxiety without any clear explanation. Sadness could relate to specific people. Restlessness could be felt in the body and could increase towards the end of a meditation session; it could be related to emotions such as anger and also the desire to speak. As one participant stated: “[...] now it’s almost over and I become impatient and I want to speak and I am a bit jittery”, P4GC.

### 3.2.2. External Hindrances

External hindrances are those that are somatic or relate to the technique and the context. Somatic hindrances are by far the most common and include hindrances relating to bodily pains, circulation, involuntary movements, tiredness, itching, and nausea. One example quote for bodily pains is: “My knees hurt, nothing beyond that”, P3GC. For the sake of brevity, none of these will be described further. Note that some of these hindrances may have an internal cause, although the form of appearance is external; finding the internal source is part of the strategy one takes in relation to the hindrance, which is discussed below.

The external hindrances related to the technique consist of instances where it is difficult or impossible for the participant to do the technique as instructed. For example, one participant found it difficult to focus on the sensations of the breath simply because he could not experience any sensations. Again, this may or may not have a psychological component, but insofar as it does not, a solution is likely to be non-psychological as well (modifying the technique or finding a different one).

**Contextual hindrances** include those relating to environment, social setting, and research. **Environmental hindrances** consist of hindrances that have a physical cause and, hence, can be stopped physically (such as noises). One participant described the loud noises made by lawnmowers outside the cabin: “There were so many different noises. All like pfpfpfpf and then so chhhrrrrrr and so many things at once”, P3GC. The hindrances relating to the social setting consist of a comparison between participants, loneliness, and social anxiety; these hindrances are constituted by the relationship between two or more human beings (understanding loneliness to consist of a felt absence of others). As these hindrances are social, they may have a social solution.

**Research hindrances** are those that consist of the research context becoming intrusive. Either the research itself may be intrusive (investigating the mind includes observation and questioning, which may make the mind less still and focused, or the tasks outside of the meditation itself (taking notes, recording material, etc.) reduce meditation time and fill the mind with thoughts relating to the research. The test of whether a hindrance relates to the research project is to consider whether the removal of the research method would improve the conditions for meditation.

### 3.3. Reactions and Strategies: Between Aggravation and Mitigation

Reactions to meditation hindrances range from spontaneous or immediate reactions, such as resistance, to conscious strategies that are intended to remove the hindrance. Here,
we treat both, giving an overview of typical spontaneous reactions, which may aggravate the hindrance, to conscious strategies that may lead to breakthroughs or at least mitigation.

3.3.1. Spontaneous or Automatic Reactions

Spontaneous or automatic reactions to hindrances may be understood as existing on a scale ranging from resistance to overload. See Figure 1 for an overview of this scale. Resistance, in general, consists of not accepting, pushing away, or wanting to move away from the hindrance. One example of resistance in the reports was the simple thought that a specific hindrance is bad and should cease (a case of not accepting the hindrance). One may also seek to distract oneself, which may dampen the hindrance and, in effect, move oneself away from it. Resistance could also consist of feelings of aversion and dislike, a sense of restlessness in the body, but also nausea or tensing of the muscles in the body. All these were ways of resisting the presence of a hindrance or attempts at moving away from it. As the intensity of the process increased, there were cathartic expressions like crying or, in one case, screaming, occurred. Overload consists of a hindrance being experienced as so strong that the practice is discontinued (“then I simply stood up […] even though there were 10 min [of the session] left” P1MPSI).

![Spontaneous/Automatic Reactions to Hindrances](image)

**Figure 1. Spontaneous/automatic reactions to hindrances.** This figure gives an overview of different typical reactions to meditation hindrances, ranging from light inner resistance (non-acceptance) to stronger reactions ending with overload (stopping the practice).

3.3.2. Conscious Strategies

Numerous strategies to counter the hindrances were implemented by the participants. See Table 2 for an overview and description of different aspects of conscious strategies.

Table 2. Overview of conscious strategies. This table presents different forms of strategies employed to counter meditation hindrances. Example quotes are given for each form of strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Strategy</th>
<th>Definition and Forms</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regulate intensity (4)</td>
<td>This strategy consists of various ways of increasing and decreasing the meditation intensity. It includes meditating less and doing short sessions.</td>
<td>“Fundamentally, one can simply continue, do more or do less.” P4GC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude regulation (20)</td>
<td>This strategy consists of cultivating a (i) positive mindset (hope, trust, non-dual attitude), (ii) acceptance (softness, patience, waiting, tolerance), and (iii) openness to ambivalence.</td>
<td>“To accept what is there right now, and to let it be as it is.” P5GC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention regulation (6)</td>
<td>This strategy consists of directing attention either towards or away from the hindrance in an attempt to make it more likely that it is resolved or to dampen the negative impact it has on the meditative activity.</td>
<td>“To “go there”, go on that direction, go there. Be soft, go there.” P4GC</td>
</tr>
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### Table 2. Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Strategy</th>
<th>Definition and Forms</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technique implementation (8)</strong></td>
<td>This strategy consists of using a specific mental technique, such as self-compassion, noting, loving-kindness, or prayer, to counter the hindrance.</td>
<td>“I also had my breakthrough after I had introduced the labeling technique.” P3GC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Release (14)</strong></td>
<td>This strategy consists of different ways of decreasing the tension or energy behind the inherent in the hindrance, and includes activities such as letting go or loosening (e.g., muscle tension or other forms of resistance).</td>
<td>“This letting go of something, letting go very strongly, freeing myself somehow, freeing myself.” P1MPSI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Redirect energy (2)</strong></td>
<td>This strategy consists of moving or a cathartic expression of the energy behind or inherent hindrance.</td>
<td>“I went for a run too, just to burn off the energy.” P2GC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posture change (5)</strong></td>
<td>This strategy consists of changing the physical posture of the body (the meditation position), which includes laying down or slowly moving (e.g., a hurting leg).</td>
<td>“I actually had to move constantly to endure it.” P4GC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social (4)</strong></td>
<td>This strategy consists of different ways of entering into relation with another being. It can include speaking to someone, being encouraged, and treating the hindrance as a being.</td>
<td>“But I would see it as an antidote [. . .] talking about it, sharing the experience.” P4GC</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Regulating the intensity** consists of increasing or decreasing the time one spends meditating. Meditating less can reduce the intensity of the hindrances. It can, however, also be beneficial to meditate more, as that may bring about a resolution. Doing many short sessions with short breaks was also discussed as an option, as this may limit aversive reactions while maintaining the momentum of the practice.

**Regulating one’s attitude** involves three different aspects as follows: (1) The cultivation of a positive mindset, such as hope and trust, but also developing a non-dual attitude in the sense that one sees the hindrances themselves as representing the way forward, feeling deeply that one really cannot go wrong. (2) Cultivation of acceptance, which may come in different forms, such as patience and tolerance. One participant describes becoming soft, inwardly tender, almost like giving up (P4GC). Openness toward or tolerating ambivalence was also mentioned as a strategy to enable breakthroughs (P2GC), which is understood as the ability to endure not knowing the significance of a hindrance (i.e., whether it is a hindrance leading up to a breakthrough or not) or having conflicting feelings about the same matter. This kind of tolerance was seen as positive since it enables things to flow and change and does not lead to repression or enforcing the presence of an idealized self that does not contain conflicting views and feelings.

**Regulating one’s attention** concerns either moving towards or away from the hindrances. Moving towards them may be combined with releasing, for instance, tension. One example of how to work with an external hindrance, in this case, a very loud lawn mower, was to go towards the sound, stay there with one’s attention, and differentiate the different parts of the sound (note that this could be understood as a deconstructive technique) (P4GC). Another strategy was to move one’s attention away from the hindrance by distracting oneself, although such an approach may lead to another hindrance.

Different techniques were implemented as strategies: one participant described needing much self-compassion and self-care in connection with a breakthrough (P2HBI); loving-kindness was undertaken in relation to the pain itself, that is, with the pain as an object (P4GC); internally formulating wishes like (“may a breakthrough happen”) was also employed (P4GC), in addition to noting, a technique where specific issues were given a label and vocalized internally whenever it arose (P3GC).

Releasing was also a common strategy. This strategy was also described as “letting go” and “loosening” and consisted of releasing everything from evaluations to tensions in the body. One participant connected it directly to breakthroughs themselves: “And then comes
the releasing. The releasing is the breakthrough”, (P2HBI). As the hindrance itself is the opposite of releasing, as some form of contraction blocks the meditative activity, releasing may be viewed as a kind of “master strategy” or inseparable from the breakthrough itself.

A further strategy was to move or redirect the energy behind the hindrance by exercising (this may be seen as a variation in the “move away from” or “distract” strategy). The intention was to shift the energy behind the hindrance and the automatic reactions into a form of embodied activity so that the intensity of the hindrance was reduced P2BI. Another form of moving the energy around could be termed a cathartic strategy, such as expressing the emotion strongly (P4HBI).

Pain and tension in the body were dealt with through a series of different postural strategies, like checking from time to time whether tensions had arisen, lying down, and moving. Moving slowly around while sitting, almost like dancing (P4GC).

A series of strategies that involve a social relation was also described. One version was simply to talk about the experience and to give or receive encouragement. Undertaking loving-kindness for other participants was also described. One strategy also described entering a relationship with the pain experienced through a hindrance, including following the pain where it takes oneself, listening to it, or even asking it to speak (P2GC, P4GC).

### 3.4. Definition of “Meditation Breakthrough”

Breakthroughs can be defined simply as the moment when a hindrance ceases to be a hindrance. One participant stated the following:

So, because there is a duality, so to speak, a polarity, therefore without a hindrance there’s no breakthrough, without a breakthrough there’s no hindrance. […] So, they belong together, I’ve somehow realized that again. Therefore, these breakthroughs are somehow always a resolution—right?—of these hindrances. P2HBI

This view was also expressed by P4: “That’s an understanding of “breakthrough”; that now hindrances aren’t hindrances anymore” (P4HBI). The same participant added that breakthroughs may happen in different experiential dimensions:

“[…] one can understand that specifically, every emotion […] there are breakthroughs on the physical level, cognitive level; for every hindrance, there is a corresponding breakthrough, I think. […] And one has to consider specifically, based on experiences, how people deal with them.” P4HBI

See Table 3 for an overview of the experiential dimensions connected to breakthroughs.

### Table 3. Forms of breakthroughs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakthroughs</th>
<th>Definition and Forms</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increased concentration (11)</strong></td>
<td>Being able to stay completely with the meditation object. [Minor versions include the following]: Being able to focus when previously unable to. Finding it easier to stay with the object. Increased presence.</td>
<td>“So that I no longer have any problems keeping my focus, it’s just there. And a very nice, warm feeling spreads through my whole body. A feeling of happiness.” P2MP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State (5)</strong></td>
<td>An advanced altered state, such as jhāna.</td>
<td>And then it drops, waves. There are two major phases of waves, sort of building and flowing through the body and then going down a bit again and then rising again. […] as it comes, it’s the usual thing of feeling like I’m being pulled up, very present. Happy. Peaceful. Strong clarity. P4MPSI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Cont.

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Insight (3)</strong></td>
<td>Insight into the nature of a hindrance. Insight into future potential. Self-knowledge.</td>
<td>“I had a tendency to just have positive thoughts. […] I imagined things spontaneously: That I bowed down to you all […] and I had the feeling that I could connect myself to what is above, to heaven, and somehow get something from there and then it comes down like inspirations about the future.” P4GC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual (2)</strong></td>
<td>Flashes of light. Inner images.</td>
<td>“Yes, flashes like that. Brighter flashes. Starting from the right and left of the eye towards the temple.” P2MP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Energetic (11)</strong></td>
<td>Energetic waves and tingling sensations.</td>
<td>“So, there were really these waves of happiness, but they didn’t stop. It went on for 40 min. I’ve never experienced it like that before. […] P4GC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dissolution (6)</strong></td>
<td>Dissolution of opposites (effort/non-effort); dissolution of somatic ailments and pain.</td>
<td>“I noticed last night during my last meditation that my back pain was suddenly gone.” P5GC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4.1. Differentiation between Small and Big Breakthroughs

Participants also suggest that there are different kinds of breakthroughs. Some are small, and some are big, as follows:

Yes, and the breakthroughs are of different kinds, sometimes they are very, very small. And sometimes they are quite strong. I definitely experienced both in this retreat. The small ones, just try breathing in and out again, and now the tension is gone, right. […] Breathe out, relaxation, calm, peace, love. Small, but a breakthrough. Sometimes feelings of happiness in, out, like fountains from the abdomen, I’ve experienced that too, right. Bigger breakthroughs, like that. Yes, and I think that can also be seen as a category. Smaller, larger breakthroughs, you know. Hindrances too, smaller, bigger ones perhaps, or stronger, weaker ones. P2HBI

P5 shares a similar view below:

“[A breakthrough] can consist of that I find a good way of dealing with a hindrance, in the way that I am no longer so preoccupied with it or am suddenly freer to devote myself entirely to meditation. And on the other hand, a breakthrough can also be a special realization [Erkenntnis], a special, fulfilling, powerful and profound experience that I have in meditation.” P5HBI

“Fulfilling, powerful, and profound” may be understood to refer to an experience that is both rich, intense, and meaningful to the practitioner. Hindrances and breakthroughs can be viewed in light of their duration:

You can also consider it [the development of breakthroughs and hindrances] throughout one meditation session. But you can also consider it throughout the day. How does the day shape up in terms of breakthroughs and hindrances? How does one feel outside of the meditation and throughout the retreat? P2HBI

Hence, breakthroughs may be seen as either small or big. Whether it is small or big relates to how intense it is in the moment, how many experiential dimensions are involved, how long it lasts, and whether it affects what happens outside of the meditation session.

3.4.2. The Aspect of Novelty and Narrative Structure

A final aspect of breakthroughs is that they are connected to the uncovering or establishing of something new, for example, that a new state of consciousness is reached, that a painful chronic issue is resolved, that a new understanding arises, or that there simply is
some significant change in one or more connected, experiential dimensions. Following the analogy of a hindrance being like a roadblock, one could say that once the block is gone, new ground is reached. Examples of such experiences include the following:

1. A series of images relating to a relative appearing together with strong positive emotions after a period of difficult emotions. P2MP.
2. An embodied cognitive reappraisal of the meaning of hindrances as something that should not be avoided but rather lived through as part of a developmental process. P4HBI.
3. Achieving the altered state of jhāna after a long period of struggling with striving P4MPSI.
4. An ecstatic explosion of bliss and energetic waves throughout the body after days of struggling with difficult emotions and nausea. P3MPSI.

These events are also examples of major breakthroughs. The experiences were intense, several experiential dimensions were involved, and they lasted for longer than a short while, impacting what happened outside the meditation session and representing something novel. For such breakthroughs, it is clear that they were also a part of an overarching narrative structure, with a build-up, a turning point (the moment of the breakthrough), and an aftermath. The breakthrough moment may be seen as being essential for constituting the narrative structure, as it represents the anchor point for a story with a before and after that are negative and positive, respectively, in ways that are significant to the practitioner and include the dissolution of a hindrance.

4. Discussion

The investigation of meditation hindrances and breakthroughs in a small-group retreat setting resulted in definitions of meditation hindrances and breakthroughs, an overview of different types of hindrances/breakthroughs, as well as an overview of reactions and consciousness strategies for removing or reducing hindrances. This study investigates the lived experience of meditation hindrances and breakthroughs in contemporary practitioners and, hence, expands upon traditional accounts (Brakke 2009; Bryant 2009; Kunga Tenzin 2020; Sparby 2022). While meditation challenges and negative effects are increasingly being investigated in current research (Goldberg et al. 2022; Hirshberg et al. 2022; Lindahl et al. 2020), the research on meditation hindrances is just beginning (Katyal and Goldin 2021; Piron 2001; Zhang et al. 2019) and may help shed light on the processes that meditation involves, especially with regard to issues such as uncovering the conditions that lead to growth and increasing engagement with and adherence to practice.

“Meditation hindrance” may be defined as an obstacle to a meditation activity, which may be seen as a fundamental component of what meditation consists of (Sparby and Sacchet 2022). Meditation hindrances come in different degrees of intensity. Some may become “leitmotifs”, and while hindrances can be reduced and removed through different strategies, they may also reappear later. While meditation hindrances are generally unwanted, persistent, and unpleasant, they may also be connected to overall positive effects, such as learning.

These aspects of meditation hindrances point to a complex process. Since hindrances appear unwanted and yet contain the potential for learning; as such, they are ambiguous. A hindrance may initially involve pain and strong aversive reactions that can only be dealt with through acceptance and patience; if a breakthrough happens, the hindrance may be given a positive significance retrospectively. However, when a hindrance appears, a practitioner may have no awareness at all of a particular positive potential inherent in it. A practitioner does not have an awareness of the overall developmental trajectory they are going through. For instance, they do not know whether a reduction in well-being is momentary, will continue for a long time or indefinitely, or will switch to a positive trajectory at some point (Galante et al. 2023; Sparby 2019a). Hence, meditative processes, especially the ones that unfold in relation to meditation hindrances, involve a dynamic interaction between aversive experiences, detrimental and beneficial reactions, emotions, cognition, attitudes, and meaning-making. While patterns of development may be discerned, along-
side potentially helpful strategies, a practitioner is always confronted with some degree of unknowing when navigating the encounter with meditation hindrances. This unknown seems, however, fundamental to the development of beneficial meditation skills, such as acceptance, equanimity, patience, and persistence. If failure was not possible and all aversive experiences were avoided, nothing could be learned from the direct experience of what leads to failure, and no deep skills and attitudes could develop. Not taking such perspectives into account risks creating superficial interpretations of meditative processes that lack depth in relation to the connection between positive and negative experiences and effects.

A better understanding of such developmental processes may be helpful for engagement with meditation practices. An understanding and familiarity with the potential for a breakthrough, even with very persistent hindrances, may motivate participants to continue practice when faced with adversity (Baden 2019; Güler and Ünal 2023; Quinn et al. 2021). An area where much research is needed is the effect of different strategies when encountering meditation hindrances. While a range of hindrances was described in the present study, the effectiveness of different strategies for countering particular hindrances was not systematically tested. To some extent, these strategies only serve to mitigate difficulties to the extent that practice may be continued. Knowledge of what strategies are effective for whom and which circumstances could help support the initial adoption of meditation practice as well as continued engagement is unknown. Furthermore, the achievement of advanced meditation states, such as advanced concentration absorption states or jhāna (Yang et al. 2024a; Sparby and Sacchet 2024b), may, in some cases, require a deep engagement with specific hindrances. The present study exemplifies this through one case of an encounter with striving. This is a further example of the complexity of the issue of meditation hindrance. While an understanding of the concepts of hindrances and breakthroughs may support meditative development, the idea of a breakthrough may itself become a hindrance. A strong wish to achieve a breakthrough may itself be detrimental to it taking place. At the same time, the use of conscious intention and the attitude of prayer (simply formulating a wish or request that something may happen without necessarily petitioning a divine being) may support the potential for advanced states to arise (Sparby 2019b). Again, understanding the process of meditation entails understanding the whole human being and its potentially conflicting motivations, emotions, and cognitions.

Figure 2 synthesizes Tables 1–3, Graph 1, and gives an overview of different relations between hindrances, breakthroughs, unconscious reactions, and strategies. Hindrances are intensified by automatic resistance reactions and ultimately lead to overload and breaking off the practice. The meditative activity tends toward a breakthrough, which is supported by the use of certain strategies. Some strategies work directly on supporting the meditative activity (e.g., intensity regulation), while others counteract hindrances and resistance (e.g., release). This is indicated by the dashed lines. However, there is also the potential for redirecting hindrance energy and using it to support the breakthrough (Sparby 2022), which is indicated by the dashed line that crosses the hindrance line in the model.

The experience of meditation hindrances may be detrimental to engagement with meditation practices and, hence, may represent a central problem for the effectiveness of meditation interventions (Kuyken et al. 2023; Strohmaier 2020). The quality of the meditation session may be an important factor that determines adherence (Ribeiro et al. 2018). What is central is that the quality of a meditation session is not necessarily connected to the absence of hindrances; a “difficult” meditation session may indeed be exactly what is necessary for growth. This may be seen as parallel to approaching difficult or unpleasant issues as part of a therapeutic process, and it can be argued that this idea of growth is found both in contemporary psychotherapy as well as in spiritual traditions (Sparby and Sacchet 2024a). Willing the absence of hindrances can hardly be separated from willing an encounter with the hindrances, at least in a minimal sense of becoming aware of them. Furthermore, investigating meditation hindrances may itself become motivation for practice, and it may be hypothesized that a way to increase engagement is to include
the topic of meditation hindrances in programs and empower practitioners to investigate their own minds and ways of functioning. In any case, it seems vital that hindrances are presented as integral to the process, that it is made clear that numerous strategies of mitigation exist, and that each and everyone may contribute to the advancement of meditation practice through investigating the hindrances individuals encounter, their reactions to them, and what strategies may lead to breakthroughs, including reflecting on how the idea of a breakthrough may itself represent a hindrance.

![Figure 2](image_url)

Figure 2. Overview of the relationships between the meditation activity, the hindrance, and reactions. “X” indicates the hindrance blocking the activity. Strategies that support potential breakthroughs and resistance move the participant towards overload and breaking off the meditation.

The specific form of first-person research that the present study is based on is especially suitable for involving the whole human being in the investigation of meditative processes. Not only in the sense of involving data from multiple aspects of human experience but also in the sense of being thoroughly self-reflective (Kordes et al. 2019; Sparby 2019b). The process of research itself cannot ultimately be separated from the human being. The research process is itself an expression of the human being and will end up impacting it. The present study demonstrates an approach to contemplative science (Sparby 2017) that is thoroughly self-reflective and does not separate between the systematic, academic search for truth from meditation practice itself. The former is, in this case, an extension of the latter, and the latter impacts the former; hence, both constitute a dynamic whole that mirrors and reflects the human being back to itself. A condition for this is not only an interest in the advancement of science but also an interest in and active engagement with the practice of meditation and its traditional background.

5. Conclusions

This article presents a multilevel phenomenological analysis of meditation hindrances and breakthroughs. Different definitional aspects of hindrances and breakthroughs have been uncovered and discussed. An overview of specific meditation hindrances, breakthroughs, and reactions/strategies are presented. Certain aspects have been discussed,
such as the complexities involved in defining a meditation hindrance and problems of engagement with the practice. It has been suggested that a better understanding of how people deal with meditation hindrances and breakthroughs is essential for understanding meditative processes. It has also been suggested that it is vital to understand the whole human being when researching such processes. Finally, the present article exemplifies a way that first-person research may be conducted in a way that is thoroughly reflective and connects academic research and contemplative practice in a manner that makes both more rigorous.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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