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# Musical Creativity and Mindfulness Meditation: Can the Practice of Mindfulness Meditation Enhance Perceived Musical Creativity?

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The relationship between musical creativity and mindfulness meditation is explored through a qualitative study of three composers' individual experiences of musical creativity and participation in eight guided mindfulness meditation sessions. Through qualitative interviews conducted before and after completion of a mindfulness course, data was analyzed and categorized into themes in order to identify whether the practice of mindfulness meditation had enhanced participants' perceived musical creativity. Themes from the first set of interviews (Expression, Harmony, Intuition) represent the participants' subjective experience of musical creativity, while themes from the second set (Enhanced focus and awareness, Non-striving) outline subjective changes reported by each participant. The study re-acknowledges the importance of the subjective experience in musical creativity research, which frequently includes transpersonal and spiritual components.

**Keywords:** *music, mindfulness, meditation, creativity, psychology, transpersonal, spiritual*

**M**indfulness meditation (MM) involves bringing and maintaining one's awareness in the present moment, typically through utilizing the breath as a mode of concentration. When attention is distracted by thoughts or sensations, it is returned to the present through nonjudgmental recognition. Mindfulness is a now a well-known concept and practice in contemporary Western culture and society, as exemplified by "Time" magazine's February 2014 publication, which donned the front-cover headline, "The Mindful Revolution" (Pickert, 2014). Although mindfulness has been promoted as a unique and independent form of meditation in order to maintain a secular label (Purser, 2013), it is an intrinsic part of all Buddhist meditation (Cohen, 2010). In this article, the terms "mindfulness" and "meditation" will therefore, be used interchangeably and referred to synonymously.

Since its introduction by Kabat-Zinn (1996) and perhaps in part due to its endorsement by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1975), mindfulness has rapidly become a popular research subject in Western psychology. Most such psychological research has been concerned with the effectiveness of mindfulness as a clinical intervention for stress, depression, anxiety, or some other diagnosis, and has resulted in the development

of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1996) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Williams, Teasdale, Segal & Kabat-Zinn, 2007). The success of mindfulness in these contexts has been attributed to its ability to facilitate wellbeing (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Comparatively little research has focused on its relationship with creativity in music or the arts in general.

Given the positive influence of creative practice on wellbeing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), developing creativity should arguably be of considerable importance to psychologists. However, traditional approaches in psychology have been more focused on the treatment of pathology and illness, with somewhat less attention dedicated to human potential for greater wellbeing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). This evident both in the paucity of research concerning the experience of musical creativity (Webster, 2002), and also in the limiting categorization of MM as primarily a clinical intervention. In addition to the efficacy of MM in treating stress and depression, in a Buddhist context it is a transformative practice designed with the aim of permanent liberation from suffering, rather than simply providing a temporary reduction from stress. In the words of Ken Wilber, "meditation itself is, and always has been, a spiritual practice" (1998, p. 5).

However, a not inconsiderable segment of psychology might still associate the concept of spirituality with superstition and pre-scientific religious dogma. Artistic disciplines are often considered similarly outside of science; in some Eastern spiritual traditions both meditation and creativity are considered paths to enlightenment (Chu, 1970, cited in Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). Perhaps due in part to its common association with spirituality and mysticism (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999), and certainly on account of its status as non-scientific, research on artistic creativity has been limited. Mindfulness could be said to span both domains; while clearly a spiritual discipline, it has also been suggested that as mindfulness practice evolves, “it proceeds in both external and internal dimensions along lines that are increasingly intuitive” (Austin, 1998, p. 127). As such, MM may open up the domains of artistic creativity even as it fosters spiritual transformation.

Transpersonal psychology examines knowledge from spiritual traditions as well as intuitive capacities, as part of its mission to “delve deeply into the most profound aspects of human experience” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. xi) by studying the psychology of spiritual and peak experiences, among other things. The experiential qualities of both meditation and musical creativity are also of interest to transpersonal psychology, as they often involve similar transformations of consciousness (Crowe, 2004) such as temporary transcendence of ego and a sense of connection to a larger reality.

The current study explored the effects of MM practice on the musical creativity of three MM-naïve composers in order to answer the question “Can the practice of mindfulness meditation enhance perceived musical creativity?” The primary research objectives were: (a) to gain an understanding of the participants' experience of musical creativity; (b) to gain an understanding of an individual's experience of and reflections on mindfulness meditation; and (c) to identify whether and how participants felt the practice of mindfulness may have affected their musical creativity. An increase in psychological research concerning musical creativity and spiritually-informed MM may provide insights into methods of developing creativity, thus resulting in important implications for areas of study such as wellbeing, creativity, music education, and music therapy.

## Musical Creativity and Mindfulness Meditation

### The Researcher's Experience

A study such as this will inevitably be shaped by my background as a composer and a psychological researcher. With a topic such as musical creativity, which is highly subjective, one is dealing with an experience that will also be significantly shaped by past experiences, beliefs, and motivations. Rather than striving for an elusive objectivity, subjectivity was utilized as an important, informative research tool. In such a case it might be said that “to draw upon one's own subjectivity in the research process does not mean one is not being ‘objective’, but that one actually comes closer to a truer account” (Parker, 2005, p. 117).

Webster (2002) explained musical creativity as an interaction between convergent and divergent thinking in music. *Convergent thinking* is linear and methodological, while *divergent thinking* is explorative, expressive, and unstructured musical thinking. This is somewhat resonant with Maslow's (1971) concepts of *primary creativeness* (the flash of inspiration or insight from the unconscious), and *secondary creativeness* (the hard work involved in manifesting inspiration into a final product). In my own experience, thinking divergently is how I am able to flourish creatively and experiment with musical ideas, while convergent thinking is the approach I take to integrating and structuring the musical ideas into a whole piece of music or song, which usually takes more practice and self-discipline.

Divergent thinking, or primary creativeness, is my favorite part of the creative process, as most music I create starts unconsciously—that is, I do not begin with a specific idea but instead let my intuition guide me. I have commonly pondered, how can I enter divergent thinking more frequently in order to arouse unconscious creativity? The relaxed and lucid yet alert and responsive state of consciousness that I have regularly experienced in MM has proved to be highly compatible with the creative act. In a sense, this is paradoxical, for it seems that calming the mind of associative and playful thoughts might be detrimental to creativity. Yet this implies another question: “Does creative expression spring from passion or a deep inner stillness?” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 113). Once I reach a state of deep inner stillness and achieve a level of nonjudgmental awareness through mindfulness practice, I find it easier to enter divergent thinking and explore and utilize inspiration and imagination. I began to notice this when my mindfulness practice would lapse.

When unmindful, my creative thinking in music is poor. My reduced concentration results in a lack of motivation and effort, which also means I am unable to recognize an opportunity for inspiration, or utilize imaginative musical thought to full effect.

Mindfulness practice has also helped me cultivate awareness of bodily sensations such as visceral reactions when playing music and discovering a new musical idea. Often when I am on the brink of a new creative idea during “jamming” (either on my own or with others), my body is tense with excitement, as if relaxing my grip would result in losing the idea. Becoming more attuned to my body through mindful awareness has also helped me recognize when a new musical idea is worth pursuing—if my body reacts with excitement, I often interpret this as a sign to keep pursuing the idea, as if my body is responding to the creative intuition. As Vaughan observed, “Learning to trust your bodily responses is part of learning to trust your intuition” (Palmer, 1998, p. 186). The importance of intuition in my experience of musical creativity was one of the main factors in my decision to conduct an experiential study. Furthermore, rather than measuring the quality of my own creativity by the end product, I place greater emphasis on the feelings of personal enjoyment and excitement experienced during the creative process.

Kemp (1981) found that of various groups of musicians, it was the composers who appeared to show most introversion. Based on my own experiences of writing music independently and collaboratively, I believe the creativity of a musician who composes in solitude is unique in that it arises from an intimate relationship with their unconscious imagination. It is for this reason that the participants selected for this study were musicians who mainly compose music independently. From the recognition of the influence MM has had on my own creativity, I became more interested and motivated to discover whether the meditative state of mind can have a positive influence on creativity. To the best of my knowledge, no academic research has explored the effect of MM on musical creativity, prompting me to explore the subject myself through research.

### **Mindfulness and Musical Creativity:**

#### **An Overview**

The multidimensional and ambiguous nature of musical creativity renders the experience of it difficult to research or even understand. As Webster (2002) stated, “the sheer nature of the music experience

seems to defy analysis. ... It is further complicated by our inability to clarify from where the inspiration for creative ideas comes” (p. 6). In the dominant Western cognitivist paradigm, creativity is primarily viewed as intellectual problem solving (Deliege & Wiggins, 2006), and is mainly researched through scientific discoveries that are regarded as creative. The Western cognocentric view of creativity therefore solely values convergent thinking (Webster, 2002), the methodical, goal-orientated creative thinking in music that Maslow (1971) called secondary creativeness. This view ignores the intuitive, unconscious aspect of musical creativity that appears to play an equal, often more important role in the creative process (Deliege & Harvey, 2006).

Some research investigating the relationship between creativity as a broad concept and MM has recently emerged (e.g., Capurso, Crescentini, & Fabbro, 2013; Colzato, Ozturk, & Hommel, 2012; Ostafin & Kassmann, 2012). However, this is actually problematic to the field of musical creativity, as it perpetuates the assumption that creativity is the same across all mediums and disciplines, and can be characterized simply by problem-solving intelligence. This assumption has dominated creativity research in psychology and is deeply embedded in the psychological discourse, as evident in the current psychology dictionary definition of creativity: “The production of ideas and objects that are both novel or original and worthwhile or appropriate” (Colman, 2009, p. 179). While it is valid, this definition is problematic as it suggests that convergent creative thinking is the sole cause of creativity, and that creativity can only be identified through an end product. This generalization means that creativity “has been trivialized to a point where many researchers profess to find it in the behavior of virtually anything human or artificial” (Pachet, 2006, p. 347). Ultimately, the applicability of this definition is limited to creativity in science, which, as Maslow humorously stated, is “a technique whereby non-creative people can create” (1971, p. 62). Hence, most psychological research that claims to study creativity merely studies one aspect, and only really serves to further the understanding of creativity in science.

Whereas the Western view of creativity is mostly concerned with creative products, some Eastern views place more value on the process (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999). Furthermore, in contrast to the dominant Western academic view of musical creativity, Buddhism, for example, places value on spontaneity, and recognizes

the potential for transcending samsaric existence (illusory suffering) through creating music (Yonnetti, 2011). This perspective is sympathetic to the transpersonal experience of creating music, and might therefore help inform researchers seeking a more comprehensive understanding of musical creativity. Multidisciplinary inquiry may lead to what Fox called an “international postcolonial psychology” (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997, p. 51), which would be a particularly positive development in the field of musical creativity.

Intellect is an important element of musical creativity as it aids convergent thinking, a necessary component of musical creativity (Webster, 2002). However, too much emphasis on intellect can diminish a composer’s ability for intuitive spontaneity and novelty. This notion is supported by Schooler, Ohlsson, and Brooks (1993), who studied the relationship between insight problem-solving (solutions to problems that require non-habitual novel creations) and verbalization. In an experiment, participants were interrupted during problem-solving and asked to verbalize their strategies, while a separate control group were interrupted and asked to participate in an unrelated activity. After replications, Schooler et al. (1993) found that participants were considerably less successful in finding solutions to insight problems than the control group, suggesting that analytical verbalization—a primary element of intellectual thinking—can impede the search for creative solutions.

Additionally, when a musician’s action and awareness merge they may enter *flow*, a state of absorption that allows for heightened creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). However, often this only lasts a short time, as it is typically interrupted by thoughts such as “am I doing well?” (Palmer, 1998, p. 152). This is directly related to mindfulness because one of the defining characteristics of the practice is nonjudgmental awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), that is, observation without becoming attached to reactions or thoughts associated with what is being observed. Judgments often take the form of verbalized thoughts, which, as research by Schooler et al. (1993) suggests, may impede insight problem-solving and also disrupt the flow state. Thus, through cultivating nonjudgmental awareness in MM, it may be possible to maintain states of creative insight and flow for longer periods of time. This notion is expressed by singer Martha Elliott (2010), who described how nonjudgmental present awareness allows the singer to immerse in creative musical expression, as there is “no room

for their ego to get in the way with thoughts or doubts or judgment or even effort” (Elliott, 2010, p. 7).

One of the fundamental aims of meditation in Zen Buddhism has been described as transcending the limitations of dualistic intellectual thinking in order to access the intuitive self (Humphreys, 1949). In the Rinzai school, this is attempted through the teaching of *koans*: short, seemingly nonsensical riddles or questions posed to the meditation student in order to arouse intuition and transcend conceptual thought structures. Once the student learns that they must abandon intellectual thought and instead follow the intuitive self, the koan is resolved—not through words, but through spontaneous, creative action and behavior (Austin, 1998).

One genre of music that clearly values intuition over intellectual thinking is improvisational jazz, as due to its spontaneous nature, it “provides direct and instant access to the creative process” (Tafari, 2006, p. 139). In his interview study with seventeen music creators, Holtz (2009) explored the creative process of classical, jazz, electronic, and film-score composers. In a preliminary study, Holtz (2009) reported:

Two jazz musicians described themselves as a medium for a kind of spiritual external force, which gains a material reality through their improvisational work. When creating music, they try to “turn off” their consciousness and to empty themselves in a meditation-like process of all thoughts or feelings. After emptying themselves this way, the music can flow freely through them and materialize itself as sounds. (p. 214)

Abandoning intellectual, convergent thinking in favor of unconscious, intuitive expression is an important factor in a jazz composer’s ability to create aesthetically pleasing music. This highly creative style of music is in an odd way aligned with Zen Buddhism, in the sense that both see spontaneity as resulting from following intuition, not intellect. MM might serve as a practical method for cultivating greater creativity, as it may enable some composers to remain present and thus perhaps transcend concepts and judgments that disrupt flow states (cf. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

### Research Design and Methodology

This study consisted of qualitative interviews and a 4-week mindfulness course involving two 40-minute MM sessions per week. The qualitative interviews included one semi-structured group interview and six individual

unstructured interviews, with each participant interviewed before the mindfulness course and again after its completion. Whilst the group interview involved a general discussion of musical creativity, the individual interviews explored the participants' experiences in greater depth. All interviews were recorded on a digital Dictaphone, and transcribed verbatim onto a PC document.<sup>1</sup> The interview transcripts were then printed and carefully analyzed for key information by highlighting information that occurred frequently. Highlighted information was then condensed into main themes.

Methodological triangulation of qualitative interviews helped develop a greater understanding of each participant's experience of musical creativity. By using a group interview, the social aspect of creativity apparent in performing and collaborating was acknowledged, as participants creatively collaborated by helping one another express the experience of musical creativity. Conversely, individual interviews recognize that musical creativity and the creative process is also a subjective and personal experience. This interpretivist approach differs from mainstream positivist creativity research in psychology, which typically reduces creativity to a mental process and ignores its social nature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Beginning with a group interview also gave participants the opportunity to co-develop their ability to talk about creativity and reflect on their experiences in preparation for the individual interviews. The transpersonal and ineffable nature of the experience of musical creativity (Crowe, 2004) meant that qualitative interviews were the only suitable methodology, as this approach provides the freedom needed for participants to creatively talk about creativity. Conversely, prior to the development of substantive qualitative research, quantitative interviews would disempower the participant by confining their responses to what are essentially "yes" or "no" questions—even when expanded into Likert-type responses—that are based on the researcher's own beliefs regarding musical creativity, resulting in data that potentially might represent more of the researcher's understanding than that of the participants'.

The interview questions were written after an extensive multidisciplinary literature review into the topics of musical creativity and experiences of musicians. General questions regarding creativity were selected for the group interview, while more introspective questions were selected for use in individual interviews. Using

literature to inform the interview carries a risk of contaminating the researcher with assumptions that narrow their view (Seidman, 1998). However, due to the analysis-defying nature of the creative experience, multidisciplinary literature reading provides maps necessary for understanding an individual's experience. Therefore, literature was also reviewed with regard to the analysis and discussion of the data. Additionally, pre-planned questions were mixed with ad lib exploration in the individual interviews. This ensured exploration of the participant's own experience, rather than their interpretations of questions that could have little relevance to them. In order to avoid priming participants, the exploration into the relationship between MM and musical creativity was emphasized more than the research question.

Upon completion of the course, each participant's experience of MM and musical creativity was explored through individual unstructured interviews. The difficulty in maintaining an equal dynamic in a group interview rendered such an approach inappropriate, as the most outspoken interviewee can generate group conformity (Babbie, 2010). Furthermore, individual unstructured interviews allowed the participants to choose what to discuss in regards to the MM classes and their musical experiences over the duration of the study. This reflects an interpretivist "New Paradigm" approach, as the interviewee becomes a co-researcher in the study by helping determine what will be asked (Parker, 2005).

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of three MM-naïve composers—participant A; a male singer/songwriter, participant B; a female singer/songwriter, and participant C; a male songwriter. Using an opportunity sample meant that I did not have to search extensively, as I knew participants A and C well, while participant B was recruited after responding to an Internet advertisement of the study. Participant A was a singer-songwriter who focused on recording and writing music both alone and with others, while participant B's creative life focused more on performing and touring as a singer-songwriter. Participant C's creative activity consisted of composing instrumental music with an emphasis on beat-making. Participants continued their creative activity as normal over the duration of the study. Despite the small sample size, selected participants were broad in both their methods and styles. The sample size also allowed a thorough exploration of each participant's experience

of musical creativity, and to attend to each participant's feedback and methods of learning MM. The extent to which I could do this if I employed more participants would inevitably suffer, as each interview would have to be shortened. Although the small sample size risks that the categories might not be saturated, delimitation was necessary for the scope of the research project.

Informed consent was obtained from participants, and ethical approval was granted representing compliance with Leeds Beckett University research ethics policy (2013). All MM sessions were followed by a group discussion of the experience, and unless stated otherwise, conducted in a semi-soundproof studio in the Leeds Beckett Music department. The elimination of external sounds meant that participants could ease into the meditation without auditory distraction. Additionally, by setting the mindfulness classes in the music department, participants were subtly encouraged to apply mindfulness to musical activities. After each session, participants were sent emails that included an audio attachment of Kabat-Zinn's (2002) guided mindfulness meditations and were encouraged to practice daily.

### **Procedure**

Beginning with a group interview, the following procedures were carried out over the course of four weeks, and involved two meditation sessions a week.

**Session 1.** The first exercise involved combining "mindfulness of hearing and thinking" (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 166) with a musical adaption of Kabat-Zinn's (2007) raisin exercise; a guide to very slowly and mindfully hold, see, touch, smell, place, taste, swallow, and follow a raisin. This is regularly used by Kabat-Zinn as an introduction to mindfulness to highlight how it can enhance sensations and perceptions. I adapted this exercise so that instead of a raisin, participants selected a musical instrument of their choice provided by the Leeds Beckett music department. Participants A and B both selected an acoustic guitar, while participant C selected a bongo drum. I then instructed participants to close their eyes, draw attention to sound, and play one note while focusing on the sonic sensations that arose.<sup>2</sup>

**Session 2.** "Breathscape" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002). Unforeseen technical difficulties with audio equipment forced me to guide this meditation. My experience of mindfulness, along with the workshops run by Dr. Elliot Cohen enabled me to efficiently guide a meditation using a transcript of Kabat-Zinn's audio guided meditation.

### **Musical Creativity and Mindfulness Meditation**

**Session 3.** "Breathscape and Bodyscape" (Kabat Zinn, 2002). This guided meditation was played through a sound system while participants and I sat in a group circle. The meditation expanded on the previous by including mindfulness of the body as well as the breath. Afterwards participants all reported a difficulty in relaxing into the meditation and a preference for my guided meditation over Kabat-Zinn's, due to disliking listening to generic instructions from an external voice.<sup>3</sup> After much reflection, I decided to change the structure of the classes by beginning with a short relaxation exercise and also by guiding the mindfulness classes myself.

**Session 4.** "Bodyscan" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002). I began this session with Nhat Hanh's (1991) single-pointed mindfulness meditation involving six pairs of two words—an exercise that is used in healthcare at The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine to induce the relaxation response (Benson, 1975). I guided participants by repeating words such as "deeply, slowly," and "calm, ease," with each inhalation and exhalation. I then proceeded to guide a meditation using a transcript of Kabat-Zinn's "Bodyscan" (2002) that was adapted to the setting of the group sessions.

**Session 5.** "Soundscape" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002). To relax participants, I used Dr. Elliot Cohen's holding and release exercise by guiding participants to bend forward in their seats and focus on the movement of the breath while very slowly straightening their posture. I was introduced to this by Dr. Cohen, and found that it triggered a deep relaxation that reverberated throughout the following meditation. Considering this, the guided meditation immediately followed the holding and release exercise, thus ensuring the meditative flow was not disrupted. When asked how their personal mindfulness practice was developing, participants expressed confidence in their ability to maintain a gentle awareness of the breath and the body; therefore I decided that they were ready to include the Soundscape. Furthermore, due to positive feedback I decided to begin all remaining sessions with the holding and release exercise.

**Session 6.** "Mindscape" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002). This meditation involved noticing thoughts as they appear in the mind, and practicing to focus on the process of thinking rather than the content. As with the previous sessions, I transcribed the audio guided meditation and customized it to suit the present environment.

**Session 7.** "Sitting meditation" (Kabat-Zinn, 2002). This meditation involved cultivating awareness

of the breath, body, sounds, and arising of thoughts. I conducted the meditation by following a transcript and adapting it to the current environment. Participants were directed to focus on the breath, and then to expand to include the body, sounds, and thoughts within awareness. Once all phenomena had been attended to, participants were instructed to release and let all sensations rise and fall in awareness without resistance. Whereas the previous sessions mainly emphasized cultivating concentration, this session focused more on developing insight into the mind through open awareness.

**Session 8.** Open awareness. This insight meditation aimed to develop participants' ability to rest in a calm yet responsive state of awareness, "where everything is allowed to emerge on the inner screen of consciousness" (Palmer, 1998, p. 134). Participants were progressively guided to release attachment from their breath, body, sounds, and thoughts, so they could become a witness of all phenomena. After around forty minutes, participants were instructed to open their eyes, but when they do so, to try to remain with the awareness, rather than return to attachment.

#### **Analysis and Discussion**

Significant findings from both sets of interviews were categorized into themes. These themes were identified through collectively analyzing all data, rather than analyzing each interview separately. Comments are identified as coming from the group interview (GI) or from individual interviews (II).

#### **Before**

**Expression.** This theme refers to how the participants create music to express something, consciously or unconsciously. It includes the following sub-themes: music as communication, jamming, improvisation, spontaneity, meaning, inspiration, and barriers to expression. "Musical creativity ... is about ... moving the expression of human spirit from the internal to the external realm" (Crowe, 2004, p. 300).

Participant C defined musical creativity as "Expressing yourself through music" (GI, p. 2), while participant B viewed it as a medium to "say something you would really like to say and to put it into some music instead" (GI, p. 2). Participant A agreed and also described how meaning is unconsciously expressed through lyrics:

Sometimes I don't try to think, "Oh what am I trying to say" ... I just put words that sound cool together

... And more often than not I've found out what I was saying after I've even done it and recorded. (II, p. 3)

This statement supports Harvey's notion that an essential part of the creative process in music is becoming conscious of the unconscious (Deliège & Harvey, 2006). When attention is directed inwards during MM, the contents of the unconscious mind are unveiled through introspection and self-analysis (Austin, 1998). Therefore, becoming more attuned with the unconscious through MM can reveal inner sources of inspiration that can be expressed through creating music. Additionally, both participant A and B frequently described using external sources as inspiration:

I've been writing some MC lyrics— that's when I tend to write about what I'm seeing in the world at the moment ... Across the road from me there's like a home for people with proper bad mental disorders ... and one time I was looking out the window from my bedroom and I just thought, "god I'm so lucky"... and just there and then I wrote a whole song—it just came from there. (Participant A, II, p. 3)

If you read autobiographies of somebody and you get to know how they think, you can kind of imagine how it would be like. So you can write from that viewpoint even if you've not experienced it. (Participant B, II, p. 3)

The ability to express through creating music is determined by awareness of both the inner and outer world. Being more mindful of both naturally enriches this (Dhiman, 2012). Overall, participants frequently indicated that creativity is an expression of inspiration.

**Harmony.** This theme refers to the harmonious feeling of creative experience, and how feeling harmonious fosters creativity. It includes the following sub-themes: pleasure, effortlessness, wellbeing, clarity, naturalness, being in the moment, and connecting to something "other." It also includes references to frustration, and emotions that block creativity. "Our creative moments... are moments ... when we experience our unique presence in the world. But, paradoxically, the experience of a unique presence is also often coupled with a sensation of ourselves as indivisible from the whole" (Briggs & Peat, 1999, p. 18).

Speaking about the experience of creating music, participant A stated "It feels healthy ... It stops the chatter



in my head” (GI, p. 2). Similarly, participant B stated, “It makes you feel good” (GI, p. 2), while participant C described the effect of distracting thoughts on creativity: “It constricts your ideas” (GI, p. 6), “It’s not as fluid the work, its more jerky” (GI, p. 7). Participant A reported feeling calm and excited when writing a particularly creative song, and described how, when jamming, “you just smile uncontrollably [laughs]... it’s great to see someone else latched on to the same thing you are.” (II, p. 2)

These statements reflect the harmonious quality of creative experience through reference to pleasure and mental clarity. Pleasure is directly related to harmony because it is a state that reduces imbalance and psychic entropy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This is reflected in participant C’s attitude towards negative thoughts when in a creative state: “it’s easier for me to ignore those thoughts on a day when I feel more creative” (II, p. 1). “When I feel creative I won’t care about something that feels trivial” (II, p. 7). Creating music brings pleasure and a sense of harmony by reducing constant thought-chatter and providing “a vision of an existence untouched by the banality and ugliness of everyday life” (Harvey, 1999, p. 127).

All participants stated that their compositions usually begin with an idea and are then formed into a whole song through a process, supporting Maslow’s (1971) theory of creativity as a combination of primary (the flash of inspiration) and secondary creativeness (the hard work involved in realizing an idea). As participant C stated:

I’ve had single hits of inspiration some days but I think you’ve got to work on something, you’ve got to make the idea grow—it’s like a process. I mean somedays I’ll be sat and a beat will just come into my head and I’ll just want to play it. But then as soon as you play it it’s never perfect the exact first time—I mean some days it is but that’s real rare—it wants tweaking here and there until you get the right sound you want. (II, p. 8)

In the creative process, both the music and composer become what Stanislav Grof (2000) called *holotropic*, that is, they navigate towards wholeness. As a song transforms from an abstract idea into a complete whole, the composer simultaneously experiences the same transformation from fragmentation to harmony due to their intense immersion in the creative process. Indeed, the favorite part of the creative process for

participant A was the “satisfaction at the end. I love listening back on a song I’ve finally done if it’s taken a while” (II, p. 6). Similarly, participant B stated, “the best part is when it comes together” (II, p. 5), highlighting the sense of harmony that is experienced once an idea blossoms into a harmonious composition. The holotropic nature of the creative experience is also evident in the theme of expression, as participant A described how he often becomes conscious of a song’s meaning only once it was complete. Participant A further expressed what might be called the holotropic nature of creativity when discussing how following intuition leads to musical serendipity:

If something sounds good to you, that’s your instinct telling you to go towards it. ... It’s like an external source this creative force that we get in tune with ... you let it take you... . You can tell with some of my first songs— they’re just crazy weird stuff, but like it’s just completely what I did, I didn’t judge it ... (II, p. 2) I’ve had an example of where a riff has been wrote [sic] on the spot. I’m just playing and then all of a sudden it just forms. It just happened. Like I say, you just welcome it. (II, p. 3)

When a musical idea appears, it may seem to naturally navigate towards wholeness and harmony. One might invoke as metaphor the Buddhist symbol of the lotus flower that “grows up from the water and raises its face to the shining sun” (Surya Das, 1997, p. 100). For participant A, following intuition allows this process to unfold.

**Intuition.** This theme refers to how following intuition leads to musical creativity. It includes the following sub-themes: ideas having a link to the unconscious, creativity having an external source, inspiration, spontaneity, ineffability, discovery, flow, and the creative process beginning with a “spark”:

You just can’t stop it really... you don’t think what you’re doing whilst you are doing it.... You’re in the moment (p. 2). “It’s like an instinctual thing like breathing or eating. You know when you’re hungry and when something sounds wrong—it’s the same thing (Participant C, II, p. 7). Sometimes you realize that you weren’t even thinking anything, it was just happening (Participant A, GI, p. 2).

These descriptions are representative of states much like flow, states of absorption in which an

activity becomes effortless and self-consciousness is lost (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For the participants, being creative is effortless if they follow their intuition. To do this, it is important to be in the moment without judgement. As participant C stated:

If you're more accepting to what's coming in, you let it flow" (p. 6). Additionally, participant A stated "when you feel really good and are having a good day that's when it happens. ... [It] blocks it up ... if something's bothering you. (II, p. 6)

This relates to the previous theme in the sense that wellbeing fosters creativity, as negative moods or thoughts disrupt the harmony of creative experience and the ability to express. As participant B stated, "I do find that (if I'm) living quite healthily and not getting drunk every night then I'm more productive. ... I just think you're more together and focused on something aren't you if you feel good" (GI, p. 7).

#### **After**

This section outlines the themes from the follow-up interviews and compares them with the findings from the first set of interviews. The follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant individually, and initiated by asking the participants to talk about their experience of practicing MM. The following themes were identified from these interviews:

**Enhanced focus and awareness.** This theme refers to an enhanced ability to focus and express when creating music or performing live. It includes the following sub-themes: clarity, flow, introspection, and increased openness.

I feel more in touch with myself from doing the body scan ones. I just feel like I've made advancements in a lot of areas, just with being ... feeling more myself. (II 2, p. 1) I've ... opened doors that I'd shut off through hiding from fears. In regards to music I think it's helped to be more in touch with what's going on within me and how I'm communicating with my environment. I think it's helped me ... be more open with my influences and judge myself less because I've felt a bit freer. (Participant C, II 2, p. 1)

This indicates a newfound harmony of self, and as previously identified, the experience of harmony is synonymous with the experience of creativity. Additionally, from practicing the body scan meditation, participant C perceived an improvement in his ability

to express his internal state externally through playing music. Harvey stated, "The composer has to live in such a way that his or her emotional life becomes very sensitive, able to detect the finest nuances of feeling" (Deliège & Harvey, 2006, p. 404). Participant C previously stated, "Depression was the one that made me not able to fully express" (II, p. 5). Contrary to the popular stereotype that romanticizes depression as the source of a composer's creativity, depression inhibited participant C's creativity by restricting his ability to express. Practicing MM has enabled him to face fears through introspection and develop a more open and expressive relationship with his emotions, which is necessary to his ability to be creative.

In their investigation into flow and compositional creativity, Macdonald, Byrne, and Carlton (2006) found that increased levels of flow are directly related to increased levels of musical creativity. An increase of flow is suggested by Participant C when describing a recent musical jam:

I haven't got lost in music like that for a long time (II 2, p. 3)... All I was aware of was what was the sounds that were in that room, to the point where you could pick up any noise when you listen so intently to the sounds that are coming. But it's not like listening from an analyzing point of view; it's just listening from a feeling point of view. ... Just being aware of what's happening, ... to the point where it was just—there was nothing else, you forget that there's a world, you just ... it's good. (II 2, p. 4)

In the Soundscape meditation, participants were first guided to focus on one sound and then to let all sounds naturally enter awareness without resistance or force. Deliège and Wiggins (2006) cited a number of composers who emphasized the importance of silence for creativity, and described how, when the composer develops an inner stillness, a space develops for the flourishing of creativity. Participant C's statement supported this notion.

I honestly think it's helped me so much... Especially for singing— I think it just like makes you...try and be a bit more focused. ... I didn't like that bit before a gig because my mind was like—too many thoughts coming at once, but I really think now I'm just like "Oh I want to go sing this song and I want to sing it like this." (Participant B, II, p. 1)

Since practicing MM, participant B described feeling an enhanced sense of clarity and focus, which enriched her experience of singing and increased her confidence. Again, MM practice has resulted in an increase of inner-harmony, which contributed towards an effortless singing performance. Enhanced awareness also helped capitalize on sources of inspiration:

Yesterday there were two guys on the bus saying about nicotine patches, this guy was like “I’m on nicotine patches and I don’t think they’re working,” and his friend was like “Oh you must have got a bad batch of patches.” I was like, that would work—“bad batch of patches” (laughs) (II 2, p. 4). ... Any thought that comes into my head I’ll think, “Could that be something to do in a song?” (II 2, p. 5)

This example illustrates how, for participant B, creativity was not just related to making music but also a way of experiencing the inner and outer world. Being more aware of both domains enhances creativity by illuminating the potential for new musical ideas within every facet of life. This ability to perceive the mundane in an imaginative, playful manner is a distinct trait of creativity (Danvers, 2010). Similarly, participant A indicated that becoming more mindful and observant in life inspired a collection of MC lyrics: “I think my observations have manifested in my lyrics ... and I think the depth they’ve attained is because of this spiritual practice” (II 2, p. 3).

**Non-striving.** Using similar language as the third noble truth of Buddhism, this theme refers to not trying to force inspiration or the completion of a composition, but instead allowing it to naturally unfold. It includes the following sub-themes: patience, frustration, calmness, effortlessness, thought-attachment, decreased brooding, and facing fears.

If you really try to make something ... and you are really forcing—it won’t work like that. (II, p. 3) ... You are not in control of it ... you can really want to do something awesomely creative and it just doesn’t happen, ... and then like one day it just happens out of the blue. (Participant A, II, p. 7)

Thus, creative limitations often resulted from frustration with making mistakes and a desire to complete a composition:

When [I’m] trying and then I go “for crying out loud,” then I start again and I do it and I’m really

tense, and I’m really determined to get it done ... that’s when I think you lose ... I was trying to force it ... rather than just letting me do it so I just stopped. (II, p. 7) I just let my anger and determination overcome that and I was really forceful with it ... I was physically forceful as well ... it’s obviously not the right circumstances to get the right take. (II, p. 8)

In Buddhism, non-striving is practiced as part the eight-fold path to end suffering and become enlightened (Surya Das, 1997). Non-striving was taught in every guided MM through instructing participants to simply watch thoughts or sensations rise and fall from awareness, without reaction. In his study of creative individuals, Maslow (1971) proposed that non-striving or “taoistic receptivity” (p. 68) was necessary for creative success, especially in the primary phase of the creative process. In the follow-up interview, participant A described the development of a new attitudinal approach:

I just wait for something to come along ... One song for example, the D7 song; I’ve had a vocal pattern for that for God knows how many weeks ... I try to sit down and write lyrics sometimes because I want to get the song finished, but ... nothing would come, and I used to just sit until I got it done, but now I don’t—I just let it happen now, and like the other weekend ... I started meditating in the morning again ... after that morning ... I was sat down and a line came into my head—the first line. And then I jotted it down the rest came ... it was like waiting for a bus or something [laughs]. (II 2, p. 2)

Participant A’s non-interference with the holotropic nature of musical ideas represented a new approach to song-writing that led to the completion of a composition. The statement also suggests an increased awareness of inspiration as a result of meditating. Participant C previously stated:

I’m not very patient. I’m not very good at sticking at something if it’s not going right ... So I’ll just give up ‘cause I know it’s not going to go right, but some people can play until they get it right but I don’t think I could. (II, p. 8)

Impatience leads to an apathetic attitude that impedes motivation to complete a composition and inner harmony. In the follow-up interview, participant C described what he learned by developing reflection through meditating:

A feeling I've always had, and I wasn't sure until literally the past few weeks with doing the meditations—that when I've been annoyed at myself for doing something wrong in a song ... I feel like I've messed up what I've been given ... It's all been given to me by another source, so ... I feel like I'm messing it up and slowing it down ... I'm not allowing it to get out. So like, smoothing that transition from where it's coming from to where it's going—that's my job ... So being more aware of just being helps you to be less judgmental and helps you to lube up the transition [laughs]. (II 2, p. 3)

Musician Oyan (2006) stated, "Creativity comes out of the struggle with encounter. Mindfulness practice teaches us to agree to accept the encounter and work with reality as it exists" (pp. 59-60). Developing a nonjudgmental attitude through practicing MM has provided a new perspective in creating music for participant C. This has evidently opened up a wellspring of creativity by revealing how judgements led to impatience, which ultimately inhibited his creative potential. Participant B expressed the theme of non-striving in her attitude to learning an instrument:

I think I'm getting better at guitar from [meditation] as well. That's another thing with "don't get attached to thoughts," because every time I used to pick up the guitar—I've wanted to learn for so long ... but I've always been like "I'll obviously be shit to start with." But now I'm just like "Well, so what?" [laughs]. You will be shit but that's the only way to get a bit better. (II 2, p. 3)

Simply attending to the stream of thoughts in MM decreases one's attachment (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). By learning to accept her ability and give up the desire to attain a level of skill at guitar, participant B relieved herself of judgements and brooding, thus providing the basis for creative realization by letting it naturally act out its holotropic nature. As Ram Dass (1990) stated, "nothing in and of itself is an obstacle; it's your attachment to or your motive for doing it that is the obstacle" (p. 107).

### Conclusion

The primary aim of this research was to discover if the practice of MM could enhance perceived musical creativity through understanding the experiences of three composers. In the group interview, participants defined musical creativity as expression and exploring through the medium of music. The findings suggest that practicing

MM enhanced perceived creativity by affecting two variables that are the foundations of their own definitions of musical creativity. Firstly, an enhanced awareness and focus enabled participants B and C to express through music with greater ease and clarity, while for participant A, inspiration for song lyrics increased as a result of developing a more mindful lifestyle. Secondly, cultivating a non-striving attitude to creating music reduced all participants' attachments to negative thoughts, emotions and judgements, which allowed for a more intuitive and open expression in music.

Although I expected to find enhanced awareness and focus, I was surprised to find a decrease in attachment and striving after only a four-week course. The effect of these on creativity was unanticipated, but from the data it is clear that they can become obstacles to creative realization and distractions from the present moment. Additionally, harmony was a dominant theme throughout the entire data set. This theme in particular has reconstructed my understanding of musical creativity and the psychology of the creative process. While the themes identified are unique to this sample, I believe the theme of harmony may be a central aspect of the creative process of many composers, and would like to investigate this further through a large sample of interviews.

Another aim of this study was for participants to be reflective. As highlighted in the data analysis, all participants expressed a transformation in their relationship to particular thoughts through introspection. For example, being mindful of thoughts when they arose enabled participant B to create a mental space to reflect on self-judging: "You can sometimes catch a thought and it's like really bad—you talk really nasty to yourself sometimes don't you?" (II 2, p. 3).

With regard to the methodology, the participants' dislike of the pre-recorded guided meditation was unanticipated, yet their feedback allowed me to make an early intervention and guide the remaining meditations myself. Due to taking a "New Paradigm" approach (Parker, 2005) by allowing the participants to play an active role in the construction of the study, I feel confident that these participants enjoyed and benefited from the MM course more than they would have if I continued to use pre-recorded guided meditations in the group sessions. Including participants who were known to the researcher, while the researcher guided the sessions, carried with it the risk of response bias; however, employing a separate instructor could have been

detrimental to the richness of data, as the researcher's connection with the participants, and being with them throughout the course facilitated an open and relaxed relationship between the researcher and participants, and also alerted the researcher to the need to adjust the procedures as discussed above.

This research provides a snapshot of how MM practice can affect the creativity of composers, but due to the methodology, these findings are not generalizable to any wider community. Furthermore, because participants' definitions of musical creativity are based on their own unique experiences, it cannot be claimed that MM can enhance creativity outside of the sample. As the results of the study are relative to the context of each participant's life, follow-up research would be helpful to determine whether the practice of MM had a long-term effect, or whether the enhanced creativity was only temporary. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the participants' definitions of musical creativity may change, which would change how they perceive the influence of MM. A richer understanding of the relationship between musical creativity and MM would be gained from a follow-up study using a longer MM course and a larger sample size, as four weeks is not long enough for the full effects and aims of MM to be realized. As participant B rightly expressed, "it's really gradual changes I think" (II 2, p. 3).

Another weakness of the study is the potential risk of confirmatory bias. Although measures were implemented to minimize this, such as avoiding priming participants in the interviews, it is impossible to entirely eliminate the risk of the researcher's own beliefs and prejudices, both a researcher and a composer from contaminating the data, especially considering the difficulty in understanding the experience of creativity. Higgs (2008) stated that "psychology, as a discipline, has always struggled with this dilemma: how to unleash the creative potential in human nature and, at the same time, name and treat the pathologically deviant to guard the heart of the social norm" (p. 554). Perhaps the reason why psychology has learned so little about the experience of musical creativity is because the spiritual and transpersonal aspects that this research highlights have been neglected. To advance understanding, psychologists must perhaps re-acknowledge the spiritual within both MM and musical creativity by (a) exploring the subjective experience of musical creativity, and (b) teaching and utilizing spiritually-informed MM.

## **Musical Creativity and Mindfulness Meditation**

Psychology should always serve to increase wellbeing, and it is my hope that through studying the experience of musical creativity, more psychologists will recognize the benefits of creativity in facilitating greater wellbeing. Further research could increase interest in music therapy, as the transformative potential of creative experience can be utilized as an effective psychotherapeutic tool. Although more research in this area could have beneficial implications for many disciplines, MM must not be commodified as another self-improvement technique for creative musicians, which is unfortunately evident in the popularity of books such as "Mindful Parenting" and "Mindful Politics" (Purser, 2013). The danger is that this could lead to creative greed. Not only would this go against the original purpose of mindfulness to transcend greed and ignorance (Cohen, 2010), but also encourage narcissistic motivation for enhancing creativity that promotes the individual rather than the music they create. During the study I continually reminded participants that mindfulness is not simply an experience-enhancing tool, and that a dedicated practice is needed for true awakening. The data shows that participant's MM practice led to changes that are in harmony with the original purpose of mindfulness, such as ending suffering through non-striving.

### **Reflexive Statement**

The experiences of the composers outlined in this study led me to realize that my musical desires of manifesting the sounds in my mind and recording as much music as possible often impeded my creativity, as it encouraged a forceful attitude to creating music. Taking a non-forceful approach to creativity by letting a song manifest naturally adds freshness to the music that can be easily heard. I learned this when meditating one morning over the duration of the study. As I sat in meditation, I attended to the sound of heavy rain against the windows. After attending to this for a while, I became very still and quiet, to the point where the rain ceased to be rain and instead became simply another event in awareness. This state was eventually disrupted by a brief thought which contained a whole idea for a composition. Once I finished meditating, I recorded the rain hitting the windows on two separate audio tracks, adding a "lo-fi" tape hiss on one and a heavy reverb on another, making it difficult to identify as rain in order to recreate how I experienced it during meditation. I then layered this with a subtle acoustic guitar track and added ambient overdubs. The Tibetan word "Thodol"<sup>4</sup> meaning liberation through healing (Rinpoche, 2008) seemed an appropriate name.

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## Notes

1. Contact johnn\_06@hotmail.co.uk for transcriptions of interviews and/or interview recording
2. Contact johnn\_06@hotmail.co.uk for transcription of instructions
3. Contact johnn\_06@hotmail.co.uk for transcriptions of guided meditation and interview questions.

4. Visit <https://soundcloud.com/johnnewton-1/thodol> and <https://soundcloud.com/john-newton-14> for music created during the study.

### **About the Author**

*John Zachariah Newton* originally wrote this paper as an undergraduate thesis for the course *Psychology and Society* at Leeds Beckett University. His theoretical and clinical work explores a range of transpersonal phenomena, including creativity, altered states of consciousness and mindfulness, whilst maintaining an active creative life as part of the music project *Mandorla*. Previously, John co-founded the charity British Specialists for Autism (BSA) that aims to improve the wellbeing of individuals on the autism spectrum and their families and caregivers. His current work concerns the application of mindfulness techniques for children with autism. John is also the host of his own transpersonal-themed podcast, *The Cognitive Ether Café*. He can be contacted at [johnn\\_06@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:johnn_06@hotmail.co.uk) and <https://soundcloud.com/sam-mcmahon-john-newton>

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