



Spiritual Experiences of Long-Term Meditation Practitioners Diagnosed with Breast Cancer: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Pilot Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the spiritual experiences of long-term Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga (a spiritually focused meditation practice) meditators who have been diagnosed with cancer and to understand how their long-term meditation practice influenced their ability to face the physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges of surviving cancer. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to investigate the lived experience of spirituality as described by three cancer survivors. Participants with a history of a cancer diagnosis were sought from the Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga meditation centers across the USA. The participants were interviewed in an in-depth and open-ended manner. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Five super-ordinate themes were identified: *positive state of mind, self-awareness, God's healing power, spiritual support, and spiritual growth*. Among the 20 sub-themes that were generated, *soul consciousness, awareness of eternity, lack of fear, being happy no matter what, and becoming an inspirational model* were new themes that emerged in this study not previously identified in the current literature. Long-term, spiritually focused meditation practice was found to contribute to increased well-being and resilience for these three participants in the face of a cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatment challenges. The powerful awareness of seeing the self as a soul, a metaphysical energy distinct from the body, was a major source of spiritual strength and growth for these cancer survivors. Spiritually focused meditation practices appear to increase the emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of cancer survivors, which could translate into better physiological outcomes (more research is required in this area). Such self-care practices could be integrated into overall treatment plans, which may reduce the emotional and financial cost of health care and thus benefit the nation at large.

Keywords Cancer survivors · Interpretative phenomenological analysis · Meditation · Raja Yoga · Spirituality · Posttraumatic spiritual growth

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Introduction

According to the cancer treatment and survivorship report of 2016–2017 (American Cancer Society 2019), the number of US cancer survivors will rise from the current 15.5 million to nearly 20.3 million by January of 2026, affecting almost 10 million males and 10.3 million females. The National Cancer Institute reports through the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) program that in 2018, approximately 38.4% of men and women will be diagnosed with cancer at some point during their lifetime and about 66.9% people will survive 5 years or more after being diagnosed with cancer (National Cancer Institute 2018). Due to this epidemic-like situation, the National Cancer Institute and cancer care organizations are focusing their continuum of care toward longevity and improving the quality of life (QOL) in cancer survivors. The link between spirituality and its profound effect on the quality of life in those living with cancer has been well researched in the last few decades (Bai and Lazenby 2015).

Successful cancer coping has been shown to have a link with one's spiritual/religious beliefs and practices in several qualitative research studies (Ashing-Giwa et al. 2004; Levine et al. 2007; Maliski et al. 2012; Schulz et al. 2008). These studies have demonstrated that spirituality brings closeness to one's self and strengthens their relationship with a Higher Power along with increasing their hope and resilience. This greatly helps cancer survivors deal with the life-threatening illness. Several proposed spiritual models have been found to be very effective coping strategies in cancer survivors. Among them is Schultz's three-dimensional model, which describes the vertical connection to a Higher Power, the horizontal connection to self, others, and the world as well as a temporal element with connections to the past, present, and future in addition to an individual's place in history/culture (Schulz et al. 2008; Tsang and McCullough 2003). Further, the 12-dimensional Hierarchical Model of Spirituality (Schulz et al. 2008; Tsang and McCullough 2003), based on Tsang's and McCullough's hierarchical model, has been found to be a very effective coping strategy in cancer survivors. This multidimensional model of spirituality has been used to assess the Posttraumatic Spiritual Growth (PTSG) in a phenomenological study of cancer survivors (Denney et al. 2011). This spiritual model is an extension of the Hierarchical Model of Spirituality proposed by Tsang and McCullough (2003), which was comprised of a dispositional level (Level 1) and operational level (Level 2) of organization.

Studies have shown that cancer survivors often have questions related to spirituality and that they want their spiritual needs to be met by their oncology providers (Astrow et al. 2007; Surbone and Baider 2010). However, most physicians do not engage patients on spiritual matters (Astrow et al. 2007; Surbone and Baider 2010). Therefore, this framework should be reconsidered with the introduction of integrative care such as mind–body healing practices in oncology. In recent years, studies have shown that life-threatening illnesses have caused positive psychological changes in cancer survivors (Hefferon et al. 2009). These changes have been reported in 60–90% of cancer survivors and have been named as Posttraumatic

Growth (PTG) (Stanton et al. 2006). PTG has been shown to have a strong spiritual component in those with history of cancer (Denney et al. 2011; Fallah et al. 2012; Heidarzadeh et al. 2014, 2018). The spiritual struggle faced by patients might be addressed by providing them with a meditation tool that specifically focuses on enhancing the spiritual well-being of individuals. Spiritually focused meditation has been found to be effective in enhancing physical and psychological well-being in terminally ill cancer patients (Cole 2005; Cole et al. 2012).

Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Meditation (BK-RYM) is a form of spiritually focused meditation with the aim of achieving self-mastery over the mind by connecting the practitioner with the positive, nurturing, and loving part of the self (Jayanti 2010). This form of meditation has been shown to increase self-satisfaction and happiness in life by enhancing positive thinking in both short-term and long-term meditators (Ramesh et al. 2013). Further, changes in the autonomic nervous system of regular practitioners positively impact physiological as well as psychological functions of the body (Gupta et al. 2011; Kiran et al. 2014; Vyas et al. 2008; Maini et al. 2011; Sukhshale et al. 2012). As BK-RYM has a strong spiritual foundation, the experiences of cancer survivors who have been practicing this form of meditation can provide healthcare providers with an insight into the potential of spiritual practice to ease the emotional and physical health challenges that accompany this life-threatening illness.

Although qualitative research on cancer survivors suggests the need for spiritual care and the benefit of spiritual well-being in coping with cancer-related health issues (Ashing-Giwa et al. 2004; Holt et al. 2012), there is limited research about the lived experience of cancer survivors who have practiced a spiritually based meditation practice, such as BK-RYM, for an extended period of time before their cancer diagnosis. This particular meditation practice was chosen as the researcher herself was a long-term BK-RYM practitioner and had seen a tremendous change in her life over the course of almost 20 years. Furthermore, BK-RYM not only brings about relaxation of the body and the mind, but aims to bring about a change in consciousness in order to gain self-mastery, (O'Donnell 2016) which is in contrast to cognitively based practices that are more frequently researched, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs (Ledesma and Kumano 2009). Hence, this qualitative study was undertaken using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to get an in-depth and subjective understanding of the role of a spiritually based meditation practice (e.g., BK-RYM) in the experience of individuals diagnosed with cancer. The research question that guided this study was, “What is the lived spiritual experience of long-term Raja Yoga meditation practitioners diagnosed with cancer?”

Methods

This study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate and describe the experiences of three cancer survivors. IPA is a phenomenological research method that is idiographic in nature and employs a double-hermeneutic approach to garner an in-depth understanding of the meaning of a lived experience.

In double-hermeneutic analysis, the participants first make meaning of their own experiences, and this narrative is then interpreted by the researcher (Smith et al. 2009), who maintains an attitude of self-awareness and self-conscious reflection (Smith and Osborn 2008) throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Study Design

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants in order to obtain a rich and detailed insight of participants' experiences. As IPA typically targets a small sample due to its idiographic approach, three participants were recruited for this pilot study (Smith et al. 2009). Inclusion criteria for selecting these participants were: English speaking, regular BK-RYM practice (defined as a commitment to practice this form of meditation daily for at least one hour; and attending online or in person daily spiritual lectures lasting 45 min to one hour at the Brahma Kumaris meditation center), and being between 18 to 80 years old with at least 10 years of regular meditation practice at the time of the cancer diagnosis. Exclusion criteria were: Cancer survivors who were non-English speaking, cognitively impaired, or still receiving active medical treatment in the form of chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

Recruitment

After securing permission from the Director of the Brahma Kumaris Spiritual Organization in the USA, a recruitment letter was sent to all the Brahma Kumaris centers across the country via email. The coordinator of each center then passed this information on to regular meditation students. Interested candidates were instructed to contact the researcher via email. Prospective candidates were then asked five pre-interview screening questions via phone (Table 1) to check for their eligibility to be included in the study according to the predetermined criterion.

Table 1 Interviews

Pre-interview Screening Questions to recruit the participants
Can you understand and speak English language?
What is your current age?
How long have you been practicing Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga meditation?
When were you diagnosed with cancer?
Are you in remission?
Interview Questions
How did your practice of BK-RYM help you in accepting the diagnosis of cancer?
Can you tell me about the spiritual beliefs that you have in your practice of BK-RYM?
What aspect of spirituality influenced your ability to cope with cancer?
How did your spiritual beliefs affect your state of mind during the initial phase of your cancer journey?
What spiritual support do you think you can attribute to in dealing with cancer?
Can you describe the spiritual practices that you follow in your everyday life?

Data Collection

Between January and March 2016, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted over the phone or Skype to elicit in-depth information about each participant's experiences (Smith and Osborn 2008). The in-depth interview lasted for 60–90 min for each participant. A short 15–30 min follow-up interview was conducted in order to verify the findings obtained from the in-depth interview. The in-depth interview was guided by seven open-ended questions, designed by the researcher, to initiate the interview process that encouraged the participants to describe their spiritual experiences throughout their cancer journey (Table 1).

The researcher actively listened to participants' words in response to each interview question with the aim of understanding the meaning of the experience for the participant. The researcher bracketed her own spiritual experiences including her long-time experience with BK-RYM, as well as her memories and experience with her sister who died of cancer. After each interview session, the researcher documented her own reflections about the participant's insights and perceptions of the phenomenon.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the steps described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (Smith et al. 2009). Recorded data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The participant's transcript was read and reread at least three times by the researcher to gain access to the participant's inner world. Three types of comments—descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual were noted for each participant, after which emergent themes and super-ordinate themes were created.

Ethics

After participants agreed to enroll in the study, the details of the study were explained to them, and informed consent was obtained. Throughout the research process from the participant selection to the data analysis phase of the study, the researcher ensured that the ethical principles of a qualitative research study were well addressed (Sanjari et al. 2014). The participant's confidentiality and anonymity were given prime importance in this study. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts in order to protect their identities.

Results

The demographics of the participants are displayed in Table 2. Although participant selection was not restricted by any specific type of cancer, all participants who contacted the researcher were breast cancer survivors in different stages of

Table 2 Participant demographics

Criteria	Love angel	Happy angel	Peace angel
Age	53	70	63
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Ethnicity	Asian	African-American	White
Age at cancer diagnosis	44	60	62
Type of cancer	Breast	Breast	Breast
Stage of cancer at the time of diagnosis	II	III	IV
Treatment received	Chemo, surgery, radiation	Chemo, surgery, radiation	Alternative Treatment (Diet Therapy)

the illness. All participants were BK-RYM meditation practitioners at the time of the cancer diagnosis with a history of regular meditation practice ranging from 20 to 32 years.

To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were given. Their first name was determined according to the most predominant quality that was observed by the researcher in them at the time of interview. The three participants were named *Love*, *Happy*, and *Peace*. All of them had a deep desire to serve mankind and therefore, the last name given for each was “*Angel*.”

After reflecting upon participants’ experiences in this study, emergent themes were identified, which were grouped together and arranged within five primary, super-ordinate themes along with 20 sub-themes (Table 3). These five super-ordinate themes were:

1. Positive state of mind (happy no matter what)
2. Self-awareness (identification with soul not body)
3. God’s healing power (openness to divine healing)
4. Spiritual support (experience of support from God and spiritual community)
5. Spiritual growth (increased wisdom and insight)

Discussion

The findings from this study corroborate the three-dimensional spiritual model developed by Schulz et al. (2008) in that all three participants shared that they each felt a strong connection with their spiritual self, God, and others. In addition to aligning with Schulz’s model, many of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this study are congruent with Hill’s expanded version of Tsang and McCullough’s (2003) Hierarchical Model of Spirituality, which comprised of the two levels—dispositional and operational. Hill (2005) incorporated the 12 domains of religiousness

Table 3 Master table with super-ordinate themes and sub-themes

	Love angel	Happy angel	Peace angel
<i>Positive state of mind</i> Stable mind	The mind was never caught there. The mind was always above...to what was happening to the body.	He (doctor) said, people ask, why me? I swear, I said there is no "why me" in my mind...Let me remember God while I go through this. My state of mind was very stable and peaceful. There were no questions.	My thumb accidentally touched the side of my breast...I felt something hard... oh... But that did not affect me.
Strong will power	If I can use my body...if soul can use body...why not...soul can use it... But if I tell myself that I can't use this body because in this body, XYZ is happening...then I will not be able to use it...	When I came back (from India), I was lot more energized...ready to finish the radiation treatment.	I have such a determined mind...I will do whatever it takes to do anything... Pain hurts but it does not bother me mentally...not at all...
Being happy no matter what	It (day of surgery) was in fact my sister's birthday...therefore I will never forget that...because (laughing), I was in the hospital and they were celebrating. They brought a cup cake (laughing)... they brought it up in the room and we were celebrating.	Laughter is very, very good in healing... laugh as much as you can...I stayed happy...	I took small steps to maintain my happiness no matter what happens in the face of everything going on...
Lack of fear	The surgery happened and I remember there was no fear. It was just Baba (God)...just being with Baba...absolutely no thought of worry, or fear... so happy...	God is the One who enabled me to go through it that easily...without fear...	I have no fear, no concern whatsoever, no sorrow...
Positive attitude	It was the most profound experience in my whole life of going through the cancer because that's where I see the richness of what Baba (God) teaches us...	I say Oh God! ... I am so grateful to be alive to this day.	If I think... the only thing that can happen...I lose this body... so I will get much better body than this one, which is full with pain...

Table 3 (continued)

	Love angel	Happy angel	Peace angel
<i>Self-awareness</i>			
Self-identity	When everybody would come to see me, they would think... they were coming to see a patient, but I would never want them to see me as a patient because I didn't feel that I was a patient. I just feel that the body was very, very weak...it was very weak...sometimes I can't get out of the bed...	I realized ...I am not my hair...I am not my breast... breast and hair...I am not this body...	If somebody ask me how are you... I will say...I am fine, I am not lying. If they ask how is my health, then I would say not good...but I am fine... There is a huge difference between the two... huge... I am not my body and I know that...
Soul consciousness	The body is so sick, but I am not sick and so this distinction was so profound for me...the sickness of the body and the sickness of the soul...soul cannot get sick by the disease of the body, by the medicine of the body...	Well... I am a soul...I am pure ...the fact that my natural nature is that of well-being...is that of love, peace, purity.	I know that I am not the body... I am not human doing, but a human being...a soul...
Self-teaching	When this body was getting very very sick, I was teaching my body the lesson...giving the drugs the lesson... giving my mind the lesson...its like teaching myself all these things what is happening and how to work with it	I have learnt to laugh more...(laughing). I have learnt to laugh a lot more... I laugh, laugh a lot more	A subtle thought that I might like to cry but the feeling started to come...it was just for one second...I right away said... what? ...no way...and I said, I wouldn't allow myself to do that...
Awareness of eternity		I am eternal...and I am good and I never die...I never die (change in voice)... and so I became very aware that there is some emotional degree in all of us.	If I wake up tomorrow, nothing will be different...I will be in the same body... if I wake up having left this body and take in a new body, I will still be me... only in a different body...in a different family...

Table 3 (continued)

	Love angel	Happy angel	Peace angel
<i>God's healing power</i>			
Experiencing God's power	Remembering Baba (God), staying with God, taking power from God every day and giving the light and power to the body, I felt that, that was the healing process by itself.	When medicine was put into my vein, I imagined God's energy... healing energy enter into my system. So, it was quite comfortable.	I just stay with Baba (God)...when you are connected...you are plugged in...
Relationship with God	I belong to God. I stay with God.	I feel that God has adopted me...who is wealthy with knowledge... and the inheritance that He gives is amazing.	My relationship with Baba (God) gets closer and stronger...every single time it (any sickness) happens...so...this, I know is good...
God's company	If I can stay in God's company, that is healing by itself' because the mind is not caught in the disease to create disease. So, disease creates dis-ease.	I would also keep myself in that stage of being in the company with this Being...that helped space and time quite a bit.	Just stay with Baba (God)...stay with Baba...stay with Baba...stay with Baba...stay under the canopy of Baba' virtues...
God as a Being of love and happiness	When the mind is clear and you feel happy and contented inside, that's what it is...like I don't have to do anything more because it's like God's power is at work...feeling God's power at that time...feeling God's love...	This Being only bestows happiness or a path to happiness. Love that I felt from this Being and the feeling that I experienced...I felt tied to this Being...this Divine Light.	
<i>Spiritual support</i>			
Support from God	Even though there were situations around but nothing, nothing influenced me...this is why, this soul's experience was so profound...because I came out of it as though God carried me out through.	I would converse a lot with God...talk to Him a lot...	You can't reach out and help me at all... you have to come a long distance to get to my house...Baba (God) just does everything...done...

Table 3 (continued)

	Love angel	Happy angel	Peace angel
Support from spiritual family	I used to create...as if Dadi Janki (Chief of Brahma Kumaris world spiritual organization, 103 years old woman) is around me...my guardian angels were around me with God, with Baba (God)...so I used to feel safe and protected...	I could feel the vibrations being sent to me from Dadi Janki (Chief of Brahma Kumaris world spiritual organization, 103 years old woman) ...When I felt the vibrations, I would feel like I was engulfed into light...very, very light... thanks to good company ...and this spiritual community has been very, very... very helpful...	
Support from daily spiritual commitment		I was in hospital...it was time for class and I said where is my <i>Murlis</i> (spiritual study material) ...and he (the doctor) said...you are in hospital and when you are in hospital...it is not the time to study...I was so bent upon doing my Amritvela (early morning meditation), my study. It changed my life of what it used to be (laughter)... To get better (laughter)...	
<i>Spiritual growth</i>			Pick up specialties from them (people). But don't take happiness from them... otherwise you will also take sadness from them.
Gaining new Insights	When I knew that I had to go for surgery, I thought I might need more strength...that is, when I used to do lots of soul consciousness practice...I am a soul...this is a body...	The directions that we have taken were totally different...elevate yourself with pure thoughts, good feelings...don't give sorrow to anyone...don't take sorrow...still I am learning...the Intellect of the Wise is God...	

Table 3 (continued)

	Love angel	Happy angel	Peace angel
Experiencing a more virtuous life	I became very, very detached... and not attached to the organs of my body... because you can yet be attached to your organs... but I was able to let everything go with absolutely no fear...	The experience that I had was that you need nothing... you are so contented... so at ease with yourself... my quest is to feel those things... feel those qualities... a lot more often and feeling of fulfillment...	For the past 2-3 years, I have been trying to imbibe humility because humility is greatness (laughing)...
Increased ability to make wise decisions	I did that hysterectomy as prevention... I did that complete whole thing and so it was like setting myself to be more free... nothing should disturb... come again and again	Now, I lead a life I have decided to live... everything in life changes... nothing remains the same... The only thing that does not change is the change itself... but everything in life changes... So, the Raja Yoga teaches us about the cycle of time...	My method for success to have constant yoga is not to just sit and do meditation for sometime, but it's about remembering what Baba (God) said to do at this time... that time... and implementing the points of knowledge. So, that's what I was doing.
Becoming an inspirational model	You became a model at that moment with a bald head wearing all these different things (hats, scarfs) and so treating it very lightly and happily.	I felt so beautiful with my bald head... because I realized... I am not my hair... I am not my breast... breast and hair... I am not this body... I am a soul... so that inspired many people...	Some of the other guests were asking me questions that required spiritual answer. They would continue, so I would continue... then words spread around that campus like wild fire... People were seeking me out....

and spirituality into these two levels. The dispositional level assesses broad differences in religious tendencies or traits and describes the personal characteristics of individuals more likely to be religious. This level includes the domains of general religiousness or spirituality, religious or spiritual commitment, religious or spiritual development, and religious or spiritual history. The operational level describes how spirituality can be experienced, expressed, and applied in real life situations. Domains conceptualized under this level comprise of religious or spiritual social participation, religious or spiritual private practices, religious or spiritual support, religious or spiritual coping, religious or spiritual beliefs and values, religion or spirituality as motivating forces, religious or spiritual techniques for regulating and reconciling relationships, and religious or spiritual experiences.

The stable, positive, and happy state of mind with easy acceptance of the diagnosis without any fear that was observed in all the participants was in contrast to the negative feelings of sadness, fear, anger and depression, which are the usual emotions in those diagnosed with cancer (Ashing-Giwa and Lim 2011). All three participants attributed their profound positive state of mind to their regular spiritual practice of BK-RYM meditation. A link between spiritual practice and optimism and euphoria has been demonstrated in the literature (Chan et al. 2006). The inner stability observed in these participants represented a high degree of “general spirituality” and reflects “spiritual development”, which are two of the components of the dispositional domain in Hill’s Hierarchical Model of Spirituality (Hill 2005). Their positive feelings in the form of fearlessness and happiness along with their positive attitude toward cancer also demonstrate the positive emotional impact that long-term spiritual practice (or “spiritual history” as identified in the dispositional domain of Hill’s model) can have on practitioners (Hill 2005).

All participants perceived their identity to be something more than what others would think and feel about them. The identification of the self as a spiritual being rather than with the physical body was a powerful spiritual tool that all participants practiced for self-healing. This spiritual awareness seemed to assist them in embodying positive qualities such as love, peace, happiness, power, purity, wisdom, and bliss. In BK-RYM, detachment from the physical body and staying in soul consciousness, which refers to identifying the self as a soul, a point of light rather than a body is the basic step that an individual learns to practice (Whaling 2012). The themes of *soul consciousness* as well as *awareness of eternity* stood out as the most profound “spiritual beliefs” (a component of Hill’s operational domain) (Hill 2005) that enabled the participants to face their health challenges with ease.

According to all three participants, their spiritual relationship with God allowed them to experience His healing presence in the form of love, peace, compassion, and courage, which empowered them to manage their cancer-related health issues with hope and equanimity. As the practice of BK-RYM involves forging a strong relationship with the Divine (Panjabi 2008), these cancer survivors used their meditation practice to consciously cultivate an even stronger connection during the course of their illness. Connection with a Higher Power has been included as one of the components of Schultz’s spiritual model (Schulz et al. 2008). Simon, Crowther, and Higerson’s qualitative study on African-American Christian woman diagnosed with breast cancer also found that the cancer survivors felt a close relationship with God

(Simon et al. 2007), which was similar to the experience shared by the participants in this study.

All participants in the study felt a strong spiritual support primarily from God and also from being a member of a spiritual community. Research studies on cancer have shown that cancer survivors often seek and experience spiritual support (Astrow et al. 2007; Surbone and Baider 2010). A number of qualitative inquiries on cancer survivors have also reported God as a major spiritual support during cancer treatment (Schulz et al. 2008; Simon et al. 2007). The spiritual *support from God*, *support from spiritual knowledge*, and *support from a spiritual family* provided these three participants with a motivating force (Hill's operational domain) (Hill 2005) to deal with their health challenges. The sub-theme of *support from daily spiritual knowledge* reflects their "spiritual commitment" (a component of Hill's dispositional domain) (Hill 2005) to study every single day irrespective of the condition of their body.

The participants in this study shared that they received ample spiritual support from God, spiritual family as well as their daily spiritual study; perhaps, this could have facilitated the spiritual growth they all experienced. Studies of cancer survivors have shown increased growth in the spiritual dimension of health following the diagnosis of cancer, known as Posttraumatic Spiritual Growth (Denney et al. 2011; Fallah et al. 2012; Heidarzadeh et al. 2014). However, none of the participants in this study perceived the cancer diagnosis as "trauma"; instead, they received it as a blessing from God. Therefore, spiritual growth identified in this study is more clearly described as "post-cancer spiritual growth." This finding of spiritual growth was consistent with a study by Denney et al., where cancer survivors attributed their spiritual growth to the spiritual support they had received during the cancer treatment (Denney et al. 2011).

Another unique aspect common to all participants was the creation of a positive and light atmosphere, which they perceived made others who came close to them feel uplifted and inspired. Because of their spiritual meditation practice, they were able to take great care of themselves by being stable, peaceful, loving, kind, humble, and patient throughout the course of their illness. The theme of *becoming an inspirational model*, identified in this study, can very well be compared to Hill's operational domain of increased "spiritual social participation" (Hill 2005), where cancer survivors served as a source of inspiration to others.

All themes generated in this study represent the rich "spiritual experiences" (Hill's operational domain) (Hill 2005) that participants attributed to their long-term spiritual practice with cancer being a triggering agent. Their spiritually focused meditation practiced by the participants enabled them to approach this health challenge with unusual ease and equanimity.

The current study provides increased understanding of how spirituality, specifically in the form of BK-RYM, can play an integral role in coping with the challenge of cancer. Themes demonstrating transcendent awareness and reflecting positive coping skills not identified in previous spiritual models related to cancer were *soul consciousness*, *awareness of eternity*, *lack of fear*, *being happy no matter what* and *becoming an inspirational model*.

Limitations

The rich spiritual experiences gathered from this study may not be representative of the entire population. IPA researchers do not expect findings to be replicated exactly by others; yet, the insights gained from a study in some specific context could be beneficial in other, similar contexts (Yardley 2008). Therefore, generalizability in qualitative research is considered to be “potentially wide-ranging and flexible” (Yardley 2008). Additionally, as this study focused on the experiences of cancer patients who have been long-term practitioners of a specific type of meditation practice, the findings of this study may not be comparable to findings based on other meditative practices. Recall bias is another possible limitation of this study as the participants may not have been able to recall every experience during the interview session. Another limitation of this study is related to participants’ self-reflective reports concerning how they made others feel uplifted due to their own positive attitude and behavior. The lack of cross-checking these recollections with those to whom the participants referred might be a limitation. Furthermore, the researcher holds similar spiritual beliefs and practices the same form of meditation as the participants in this study, which might have introduced potential bias related to the interpretation of the study results.

Although research studies have been conducted seeking to better understand the lived experiences of breast cancer survivors, there have been no published studies that examined the spiritual experiences of long-term meditators who were diagnosed with cancer following several years of meditation practice. This study may serve as a guiding resource for healthcare professionals, especially oncology personnel, to consider the profound role spirituality can play in the well-being of cancer patients and survivors. Although the participants in this study had a history of long-term meditation practice pre-diagnosis and were spiritually mature at the time of diagnosis, spiritually focused meditation practices, if started post-diagnosis might also have the potential to benefit this population. Therefore, such spiritual practices if started early at the time of diagnosis as part of the treatment plan might reduce cancer-related stress and suffering, which in turn may improve overall health outcomes.

Conclusions

The spiritual experiences of the cancer survivors in this study unveiled the spiritual beliefs, values, and spiritual identity of these practitioners of BK-RYM and assisted them in maintaining a positive state of mind. The practitioners’ spiritual connection with their spiritual self, God, and others enabled them to live through the challenges of cancer with relative ease and equanimity. The experience of cancer provided the survivors an opportunity to grow spiritually and to act as an inspirational role model for others to lead a more virtuous life.

More studies are needed to explore how a prior meditation practice and spiritual lifestyle such as BK-RYM can impact one’s ability to withstand health challenges that almost everyone has to face at some point of time. As this study included only breast cancer survivors, similar studies involving participants with other types of

cancer, as well as male participants, should be conducted in the future to understand and explore more deeply the lived spiritual experiences of long-term meditators.

Although many studies have reported a link between meditation and well-being of cancer survivors, the role of spiritually focused meditation would benefit from additional research. With the emergence of new themes in this study, further research is needed to unravel the mystery of the relationship between soul consciousness and awareness of eternity in maintaining a positive state of mind when faced with health-related adversity. Due to the rich spiritual experiences of the cancer survivors in this study, future research could target replicating this study by focusing on the impact of spiritually focused meditation techniques such as BK-RYM, spiritual transformation meditation (Cole et al. 2012) and transcendental meditation (Wachholtz and Pargament 2005) to name a few, on other chronic diseases as well other types of cancer.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest There are no conflicts of interest by any of the authors of this study. The authors have full control of all primary data and agree to allow the journal to review their data if requested.

Ethical Approval This pilot study obtained ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Saybrook University, Oakland, CA.

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