



# Understanding The Process of Taoistic-Informed Mindfulness from a Meadian Perspective

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## Abstract

In the recent years, mindfulness-based research has experienced a boom. Yet, the majority of those studies treat mindfulness in a positivistic way, thus solely as a variable. Within such a lens of inquiry, we ignore the theoretical and historical underpinnings of mindfulness that are still important, nowadays. For that purpose, I instance a theoretical and historical framework of mindfulness grounded within Taoism – relying on the notion of the polarity of life and wu wei (the principle of not-forcing) and try to bridge that focus with Mead’s Social Psychology. By means of an autoethnography, I show that mindfulness-based activities such as meditation unfold the power of an individual to experience and own a new I which then acts in a new fashion upon the demands of the (social) environment (Me). In this process, a new personality is born that integrates wholistically the polar sides of life within himself/herself.

**Keywords** Mindfulness · Taoism · I/Me · Personality · Autoethnography

## Mindfulness and its Current Trend

Mindfulness has become a fashion theme during the last decades. Journals and studies have arisen that dwell on the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions for clinical practice, the industrial domain as well as for the development of one’s personality (Koury et al., 2013; McCarney et al., 2012). A large amount of data has been accumulated showing that mindfulness-based techniques are associated with lower rates of depression, anxiety, trauma as well as with higher rates of concentration, peace of mind, life-satisfaction – among many other different criteria (Hofman et al., 2010; Hof, 2021). Hence, mindfulness is on everyone’s lips and a student wanting to study psychology cannot come across a textbook that does not thematize mindfulness in some regard (Campbell & Campbell, 2008).

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There is no doubt that those studies have shown us the benefits and sometimes the disadvantages (Choi et al., 2022) of mindfulness through many different lenses (clinical, industrial, personological). Yet, most of the current mindfulness-based studies treat mindfulness solely as a variable that can be analyzed with statistical instruments.<sup>1</sup> By the positivistic imperative of their studies, these authors create manuscripts that are essentially a-theoretical and ahistorical (Michell, 2003, 2005). However, mindfulness as a scientific topic and imperative does not appear as easy as those studies suggest. There is a multitude of different types of mindfulness being oriented by different philosophical roots and religions (Hesse, 1953; Yamada, 2017) that affect the way how mindfulness is practiced in real life. It was Hermann Hesse who has shown us in his various works that mindfulness can be practiced in many divergent and sometimes contradictory ways which results in a different life-philosophy for the individual doing mindfulness (Hesse, 1953, 2021). This is further supported by Eastern thinkers having made mindfulness their life (Fischer, 2010, 2015).

I argue that mindfulness-based research can be stimulated if we include historical and theoretical features in our academic inquiry. A science can only advance if scientists become aware of their philosophical roots that influence how phenomena are recognized, operationalized, analyzed and written up (Vygotsky, 1985). Within academia it is of essential value that we open our eyes for the scientific facts that penetrate our everyday life and fight for the appropriate language (concepts) how to label them (Vygotsky, 1996). It is in this regard that we can develop a system how different concepts are working together and how they function interdependently (Vygotsky, 1985).

So, for mindfulness-based research, we are interested in the buildup of a system that shows how mindfulness emerges theoretically and historically. This might not seem revolutionary for some readers but the majority of studies focusing on mindfulness interpret the theoretical and historical nature of mindfulness as completed. My manuscript opposes this viewpoint and argues for a theoretical and historical enlargement of mindfulness in psychological research. In a recent article, it was shown how the study of mindfulness can benefit from a synthesis with E. E. Boesch's Symbolic Action theory evidencing that the theoretical and historical nature of mindfulness is far from being completed or concluded (von Fircks, 2023a).

In the present article, I try to show an additional theoretical and historical framework for the study of mindfulness in psychology and how this framework can be

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<sup>1</sup> It is sufficient to browse the leading journal mindfulness and assess the qualitative nature and quantitative nature of the published studies. From the 1st of August to the 25th of August, 13 of 17 published studies were quantitative which makes the proportion of quantitative studies 76% and 14% qualitative. Mostly those studies want to shed light onto how much variance is explained for instance in the depression scores or rumination scores by mindfulness (see Keune et al., 2023 for persons with mild dementia). Other studies focus on the moderating role of mindfulness between loneliness and psychological distress for instance (Coutts-Smith & Phillips, 2023). Kabat-Zinn is one of the exceptions in this regard. The American professor does not get tired of repeating the historical features of mindfulness that has been already practiced over centuries and in many different cultures (2005). Kabat-Zinn underlines that if one wants to study mindfulness, s/he should do so by many different angles including the traditions from the past (2003).

translated in an organic conceptual system that could help people to better practice mindfulness in their daily lives.

Having clarified the goal of the present paper and its potential impact, I want to indicate the theoretical framework that is going to be elaborated on the following pages. I will briefly present some historical milestones of mindfulness such as within Taoism. This will be followed by a cultural-psychological framework of what happens during mindfulness that is influenced by the great social scientist G. H. Mead. In the end, I strive towards a synthesis between some historical concepts and a cultural-psychological framework eventually building up a conceptual system how to analyze mindfulness from an additional academic perspective. This will be consolidated by an autoethnography. The autoethnography will be presented within a given psychographic scheme and, in the end, I try to show the implications of that system for concrete agents in their dynamic environment which I argue is the ultimate goal of research (von Fircks, 2022a).

Yet, we need to contemplate briefly about the issue of previous research tackling the notion of Eastern thinking (spiritual) and personality – for instance. Giordano (2017) as well as Giordano et al. (2018) need to be mentioned in this regard. In both articles, the author(s) argue that the person needs to be understood in its becoming – meaning how the person unfolds in a given situation and in time (historical component). I situate my writings in this scientific context while I come from a different angle, rather Taoistic than Confucian in the example of Giordano (2017). Moreover, Lehmann et al. (2020) advocate that mindfulness “can help to promote the awareness and internalisation of the dialogical nature of the self, and the experience of genuine dialogues with oneself or with others” (p. 186). Yet what I miss in both authors’ research is a general model that unites mindfulness or silence-based interventions with a psychological theory which is the present goal of the paper.

## Understanding the Core Premises of Taoism

Why did I choose Taoism to begin with? The answer might seem trivial. In contrast, to Confucianism, Taoism is much older than its grand figure Laozi and the Tao Te Ching. It mostly originates with the popular Chinese book, the I-Ching which is often translated as the book of change (Wilhelm, 2011). The I-Ching is an interesting work that combines psychological tools how to act upon the environment as well as upon oneself (Jung, 1997). During the ancient times it was mostly used as an oracle that when being asked could present 64 hexagrams guiding the individual from past to future (Hesse, 2021). Importantly, the hexagrams all have a past, present and future component which is today the core of psychotherapy such as in narrative therapy (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2006). The hexagrams consist of solid lines and of broken lines presenting the Taoistic core feature of Yin and Yang forming the unity of life in polarity (Hesse, 2021). The solid lines represent Yang and are described as bright, warm, active giving or masculine whereas the broken lines could be labeled as dark, cold, receiving or feminine (Wilhelm, 2011). Importantly, the different lines must not be judged

**Fig. 1** The 63rd hexagram (after completion)



normatively in the way of the masculine or feminine being superior. On the contrary, Yin and Yang work in conjunction or in harmony (Watts, 2003, 2004).

All 64 hexagrams come with a specific meaning making opportunity that is adaptable to the individual's life circumstances (Jung, 1997; Wilhelm, 2011). The I-Ching can be asked by throwing coins or by using small timbers (Hesse, 2021). Today it is mostly used as a source of wisdom or as an opportunity to come into a dialogue with oneself. However, we should also bear in mind that psychologists in the last century still used the I-Ching in its original way such as the psychoanalyst C.G. Jung (1997). In order to understand the implications of the I-Ching, I want to share with the readers one of the hexagrams that I got for myself when having asked the universe for some kind of advice and what it did to me as a consequence.

I obtained the 63rd hexagram (see Fig. 1) that is called *after completion* consisting of the upper trigram Kan (water) and the lower trigram of Li (flame). After the great sinologist Richard Wilhelm (2011), the sign strives for inner and outer harmony by means of the combination of opposite trigrams. This is further evidenced by the smooth transition of solid and broken lines that present a fragile equilibrium. The judgement could be denoted as the following: After completion, there is success in small matters, endurance furthers. At the beginning there will be good fortune while at the end there will be disorder. Moreover, this is supported by the symbolic qualities of the hexagram as water is over fire and the noble man takes into account thoughts of misfortune and prepares himself in advance against it (Wilhelm, 2011). Thus, the sign suggests that the individual has realized the true nature of change and adopted it into his way of life while experiencing that this equilibrium is only temporary (Hesse, 2021). Because it is temporary, the individual needs to be cautious and anticipate problems that endanger the inner harmony of his cosmos. Knowing that the equilibrium is only temporary and that a time will come where the equilibrium dissolves, the individual can prepare himself for this condition.

The hexagram shows illustratively some core premises of Taoism. The unity of opposites which is the unity of Yin and Yang (Fischer, 2010, 2015). The cosmos works in a manner of uniting polar opposites into an adaptive whole. Importantly, Yin or Yang is not prioritized but they always work together. The individual is appealed to experience that the cosmos is created in a way of uniting the opposites for the growth of different species (Dyer, 2016). As the individual is part of the cosmos, the cosmos itself (Tolle, 2013), this means that the polarity of life applies to itself, too. This means that Yin and Yang are dynamic, and that the individual cannot get a hold of them. They are never static: Yin flows into Yang, and Yang flows into Yin permanently. This means, that the cosmos and ultimately the individual is always in flux. There is only constant development, and the individual cannot stop this development to take place. Even the perfect harmony is a temporary state that can be enjoyed for a moment while a time will come where it dissolves and confronts the individual with different developmental tasks (see also Boesch, 2021). Again, it is important to flow with the polarity of life as this is the principle for the growth of life. Water and fire work together, for example if one wants to cook something or if one wants to forge something. In those domains, it is important to make use of the different qualities of the elements and to let them work together in order to unfold their true power.

Chinese thinking and feeling roots in the principle of polarity. People who grew up in the Christian and Hebrew tradition of the entelechy, find this principle rather confusing because it would seemingly deny any form of progress – an ideal that is rooted in their linear perception of time and history. Evidently, Western technology is constituted to improve the world, to feel joy without suffering, to attain wealth without poverty; to gain health without disease (...). We have disturbed a complex network of relationships that we do not fully understand and the more we try to understand it, the more it fades away. While we try to understand the world and to control it, it runs away. Instead of complaining about that, a Taoist would inquire about the meaning of such a situation (...). Our attention on the mere notion of consciousness and on the linear way of thinking has led us into the process of forgetting the principles and rhythms of our world whose most important point is the polarity of life. (...) Yin and Yang are two different but not to be separated parts of one coin, the poles of a magnet or a pulse and interval of a timbre. In the end, no single polarity will have the overhand because both do act like two loving people who are complementary. (Watts, 2003, pp. 44–48, author's translation)

However, the polarity of life is not the only principle within Taoism. There is also the principle of *wu wei* which is often mis-translated as the art of non-doing. However, several authors (Dyer, 2016; Fischer, 2015; Watts, 2003, 2004) agree that a more appropriate translation would be the art of not-forcing. In a recent article *wu wei* was applied to the domain of leadership (von Fircks, 2023b). Today, workers often try to suppress their emotions at the workplace because expressing one's emotions seem to be associated with weakness and vulnerability. As the worker tries to suppress his emotions and with that, obsessive thoughts and certain beliefs, those emotions tend to become more powerful. Dramatization

of those emotions is often a consequence of such a suppression and as a consequence the emotions control the individual all day long. Hence, the individual cannot separate himself from those emotions and they penetrate his mind all the time (Mead, 2015). Rumination takes place, and the individual describes a feeling of being incarcerated in his own thoughts and emotions. This shows a huge issue in our present society. The individual tries to mask his thoughts and emotions and suppresses them while in this process the thoughts become catastrophized and the emotions more powerful. People often describe a feeling of unfinished business when hiding their true thoughts and emotions because of adopting a more socially accepted behavior (Perls et al., 2000; von Fircks, 2023b), for example at the workplace. Living in accordance with Taoism, our individual would freely express his emotions at the workplace (von Fircks, 2023b). This means that he verbalizes his anger in a socially appropriate way letting go of the emotion during that process. Different therapeutic schools describe the liberating effects of verbalizing one's true thoughts and emotions in daily interactions as this leads to a more authentic and genuine life of a respective individual (Perls et al., 2000).

However, Taoism goes beyond those simple therapeutic effects and shows that when the human being embraces his changing thoughts and emotions and does not act against them, the individual can live a self-centered life making himself a safe harbor from which he can enter the world in manifold ways (Watts, 2003, 2004). In such a lifestyle it is about building trust in oneself. But this trust should not be labeled with the premise of anything goes. On the contrary, it is a trust in the natural flow of life. Thoughts and emotions come and go. They do have their validity in certain moments or periods. For instance, there is a time of waking up, a time of preparing breakfast, a time of working, a time of relaxation, a time for sleep, a time for exercising. But importantly, all these different times are experienced as having their righteous place in one's life.

What happens nowadays – especially in the working domain – is that people think that there is no time for relaxation and that while consuming coffee or energy drinks, they can trick their bodies in order to work harder or to do sports when the body actually needs time to relax or digest stressful events (Fischer, 2015). The notion of progress is one-sided and brackets the notion of de-acceleration (Watts, 2003, 2004). But de-acceleration is necessary for progress because it is only in and through relaxation that the individual can re-gain his strength in order to do justice to the responsibilities in his life. So, the principles of *wu wei* and the principle of the polarity of life are symbiotically intertwined. The individual that follows the way of Taoism, is not only recognizing and experiencing that life is confronting itself with some polar opposites that do have their place in its life but importantly, he does not resist one side of the polarity equation.

The who one suffers  
Becomes free from suffering.  
The one who recognizes is free from suffering  
Because he suffers from his suffering  
He is free from suffering. (Laozi, 2010, p. 89)

Different Taoistic thinkers argue in this regard that an individual can obtain piece of mind if he follows the two major principles of Taoism not rigidly but on a flexible basis. This means that the respective person does not force to become thoughtless or without any emotions as suggested by some other mindfulness-oriented schools or thinkers (Yamada, 2017) such as the Zen-school. Importantly, the Taoistic oriented person knows that the human being cannot function without thinking nor without feeling. The person is and remains a meaning making creature whose cognitive correlates are always linked to certain states of emotions (Vygotsky, 1985, 1996).

Within Taoism it is not about denying those thoughts or emotions nor to liberate oneself from them – which is simply not possible – but to flow with them naturally (Watts, 2003, 2004). Only while flowing with them as naturally as possible and only while accepting them as they come, the thoughts and emotions come and go such as ebb and flow. If this inner harmony is achieved which also includes the acceptance of non-harmony, then the individual cultivates and manifests the way in and through which s/he goes or in other words the eternal, timeless and spaceless Tao (Dyer, 2016). In short, our individual cultivates the virtue of the Tao daily (Te) and lets others to feel into his/her inner harmony. It is here that I want to differentiate Taoism from Confucianism which tries to regulate human conduct through a hierarchy of rules and orders. These rules and orders – Taoistic thinkers argue – would make the individual estranged from the natural forces of the cosmos (Laozi, 2010).

Therefore all things respect the Way and honor power.

The Way is respected, and power is honored  
without anyone's order and always naturally.

Therefore the Way produces all things,  
and power nourishes them,  
caring for them and developing them,  
sheltering them and comforting them,  
nurturing them and protecting them,  
producing them but not possessing them,  
helping them but not obligating them,  
guiding them but not controlling them.

This is mystical power. (Laozi in Beck, 1996, n.p.)

So far, we have elaborated on the theoretical and historical roots of Taoism that are important for mindfulness. Within such a philosophical lens of scientific inquiry, we become aware of two major core principles of Taoism such as the polarity of life as well as *wu wei* (the art of not-forcing). While the polarity of life denotes that all things can only be thought and made sense of when accounting for their opposites and that organic growth is only possible if both polar opposites are recognized and welcomed, the principle of *wu wei* suggests us to not superimpose our willpower upon those polarities for artificial one-sided growth. Moreover, the polarity of life and *wu wei* – which work in conjunction – have shown us that a person should not resist thoughts and emotions that if suppressed become dramatized and catastrophized within the mind of our individual. If those thoughts and emotions are welcomed and appreciated for what they are and how they relate to our needs



(unfinished business), the person can make use of them which helps him/her to let go of it, naturally.

In the beginning paragraphs, we have stated that we want to gain a new theoretical and methodological perspective onto the historical notion of mindfulness, within a cultural-psychological framework. For this purpose, I want to have a closer look at the psychology of G.H. Mead. Before we are examining explicitly the links between Mead's psychology and mindfulness from a Taoistic viewpoint, I want to briefly introduce the psychology of Mead.

## Understanding Some Meadian Premises of Social Psychology

It is in this regard that I'd like to start with Mead's notion of the Self. In contrast to idealist psychologists, Mead argues that the Self arises out of the social context (Mead, 2015). In other words, the individual is the higher function of the social conversation of gestures (Toomela, 2021). Thus, the individual internalizes socially appropriated conversations of gestures that unfold in daily interactions with various communities and is able to reflect them, personally (Mead, 2015; Valsiner, 2014). Thus, the social conversation of gestures that usually helps one to communicate and reach a goal on the basis of co-operative activity, is the fundament for auto-dialogue through which the Self arises (Mead, 2015). To make it less abstract, let's envisage two people coming together (a couple) discussing what they want to have for dinner. Within their interaction, they share some verbal gestures such as I'd like to have X or Y for lunch whereas the other might argue *but for that we need to go grocery shopping*. Now, our individual might say *No problem, then let's go to the supermarket* and by verbalizing this sort of gesture he is not only acting upon his social environment (you can set the table while I go grocery shopping) but importantly, he uses the social gesture of negotiation in order to get going himself. The verbal gesture of his partner: *We need to go grocery shopping* is now internalized and functions as a sign to take one's keys and to leave for going to the supermarket and get the ingredients for preparing the food. It is only through the co-operative endeavor and internalizing the demands of that process that our individual was able to act upon himself as well as on his relationship in order to decide what to eat and how to attain that goal. In Mead's words:

The self to which we have been referring arises when the conversation of gestures is taken over into the conduct of the individual form. When this conversation of gestures can be taken over into the individual's conduct so that the attitude of the other forms can affect the organism, and the organism can reply with its corresponding gesture and thus arouse the attitude of the other in its own process, then a self arises. (...) If I can take the attitude of a friend with whom I am going to carry on a discussion, in taking that attitude I can apply it to myself and reply as he replies, and I can have things in very much better shape than if I had not employed that conversation of gestures in my own conduct. (Mead, 2015, p. 167)



Internalizing the social conversation of gestures and developing a specific personal stance towards it is for Mead an important feature of social psychology, in general (Mead, 2015). This means that the individual generalizes the social other as well as his/her demands upon him/her. As a consequence, the generalized social other has certain expectations in regards to the conduct of our human organism. He tries to verbalize those by means of verbal and non-verbal signs showing the human organism what he wishes to accomplish in and through interaction (Mead, 2015). Only when actively internalizing those demands within the organism itself, the human being can act out the demand upon himself. This means that the social interaction is a necessary pre-requisite for individual conduct because only when actively deciding that certain gestures are important – which become visible during the interaction – the individual is able to act upon himself as he is able to act upon the social other (Toomela, 2021; von Fircks, 2022b). This means that the social sign becomes a personal sign which means that the individual is now able to relate to himself as well as to his psychic environment. This is pure semiosis as the individual cannot exist without the social other while the social cannot be present solely as social entity but only if it becomes personally appropriated (see Valsiner, 2014, 2019, 2021).

[O]ne is continuously affecting society by his own attitude because he does bring up the attitude of the group toward himself, responds to it, and through that response changes the attitude of the group. This is of course what we are constantly doing in our imagination, in our thought; we are utilizing our own attitude to bring about a different situation in the community of which we are a part; (...) we only have ideas insofar as we are able to take the attitude of the community and then respond to it. (Mead, 2015, p. 180)

In Cassirer's words (2015), action becomes symbolic because it shows a what-is condition that is mediated socially (my teachers have ignored me) but is linked to a what-should-be condition that becomes a personally meaningful goal (I want to be recognized and appreciated in my performance at school). This shows that action is always an interaction of personal < > social meaning, so that we cannot speak of sole personal nor social meaning (see also Boesch, 1991).

But this is not the full story of Meadian psychology. We still lack an important ingredient within his theory of psychology. For Mead, the Self consists of a cleavage than can be best described as the I/Me cleavage (Mead, 2015). The generalized social other reaches out to a person wanting him/her to do certain things. For example, my partner wants me to be tender; she wants me to be generous; she wants me to be social – among many other demands. This means that the social other comes close to us verbalizing specific needs within a specific role that we have taken in a given interaction. Thus, during our daily life we are flooded and confronted with a multitude of demands within very divergent roles we are taking up such as in our partnerships, during work, in leisure team and so forth. Thus, the demands of the generalized social other wants us to perform certain actions or in other words to internalize their needs and goals in order to act accordingly upon ourselves and our environment so that we could co-operate in their respective need fulfilment strategies. This is the Me which becomes a conventional

thing. But and this is crucial in Meadian psychology, the Me encounters the I. In Meads' words:

The I reacts to the self which arises through the taking of attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the me and we react to it as an I. (...). The I is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the me is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized me, and then one reacts toward that as an I. (...) The I then, in this relation of the I and the me, is something that, so to speak, responding to a social situation which is within the experience of the individual. It is the answer which the individual makes to the attitude which others take toward him when he assumes an attitude toward them. Now, the attitudes he is taking toward them are present in his own experience, but this response to them will contain a novel element. The I gives the sense of freedom, of initiative. (Mead, 2015, pp. 174-177)

Now, it is quite obvious why the personal is the higher order of the social for Mead. And importantly, the I possess a certain degree of freedom (Mead, 2015; Toomela, 2021). If my partner wants me to give her more attention, her demand will not work in a deterministic way. It depends fully upon my stance towards that demand. Thus, the I has the freedom to resist and negotiate the demands of the Me as well as to decide how it wants to transform and shape the demands of the Me (von Fircks, 2023e). If my partner demands more attention, I can decide how I want to provide her with the respective attention. This means I can think of many different ways how to fulfill this demand – if I want to fulfill it after all. I can give her more attention by means of writing her poetry, I can buy her flowers, I can make her dinner, I can visit her during her work – among many other things to imagine. Let's imagine that I want to write her some poetry rather to give her some material things. I do that because poetry is for me the highest form of showing one's attention and appreciation and because it is a creative activity that does not wither, easily. It is an active process rather than a passive one and it creates something preservable in contrast to flowers that get into the bin once they have withered. It is within the reaction or stance of the I towards the Me that the individual realizes his/her personality, fully (Mead, 2015). Thus, not only the self arises out of the social conversation of gestures, but the human personality is the final point within that process.

The me and the I lie in the process of thinking and they indicate the give-and-take which characterizes it. There would not be an I in the sense in which we use that term if there were not a me; there would not be a me without response in the form of the I. These two, as they appear in our experience, constitute our personality. We are individuals born into a certain nationality, located at a certain spot geographically, with such and such family relations, and such and such political relations. All of these represent a certain situation which constitutes the me; but this necessarily involves a continued action of the organism towards the me in the process within which that lies. The [personality] is not something that exists first and then enters into relationship with others, but it

is, so to speak, an eddy in the social current and so still a part of the current. (Mead, 2015, p. 182)

We can now bring together what we have stated in the different paragraphs in regards to Mead. The individual self arises within the social conversation of gestures that become internalized, personally (Mead, 2015; Valsiner, 2014). By these means, the individual can now act upon himself (his psyche) as well as his nearer social environment. The co-operative activities the individual is engaged in turn inwards and function as a sign to start and complete actions, accordingly (Gillespie & Zitoun, 2010). It is here that the individual is constantly using actions and interactions and symbolizes them (Boesch, 1991). If we refer to Cassirer, we are able to witness that the sign mediates between a what-is-condition that is socially framed and a personally appropriated what-should-be condition linking the present with the future (Cassirer, 2015). Thus, the individual transforms a social sign in very personal ways in order to achieve personally meaningful goals and to reach a specific I-world-balance (Boesch, 1998, 2005). Importantly, the socially framed what-is-condition is linked to the specific demands of the Me the individual is confronted with. This means that the generalized social other verbalizes specific needs and demands that it wishes the other individual to fulfill. However, “the I prevents the Me to become purely conventional” (Hermans, 1999, p. 70) and the person can realize itself in very personal ways how to meet and or transform those social demands. In this process, the personality of the individual is born and shaped, accordingly (Mead, 2015).

## **Synthesizing Taoism with Meadian Psychology: An Autoethnography to Begin with**

Before we try to synthesize our historical and theoretical frameworks of Taoism and Meadian Social Psychology for shedding light onto what happens during mindfulness, I want to add a practical example of meditation (mindfulness-based technique) within an autoethnography. I am using autoethnography in a Boeschian kind of way (von Fircks, 2023c, 2023d) that is in accordance with Ellis et al., (2010) writings about autoethnography: I want to report a specific situation and focus on my thoughts and feelings within this situation. Importantly, I want to show the past, present and future elements of this autoethnography that are intertwined with each other and result in the clarification of a specific personal goal that can be achieved by several means. Thus, Boeschian autoethnography works in a reflexive way showing the emergence of a specific need and goal within a historical context with some future-like features as well as the trajectories that help to achieve those goals. This is further complemented by describing the emotions that follow from this experience and result in a change of attitudes or behavior (see Boesch, 2021).

We need to say something about the method employed regarding autoethnography. Here, we are in line with William Stern arguing that every psychographic (or ethnographic) vignette needs to incorporate a specific scheme (Stern, 1911). In Table 1, I present the scheme whose contents follow from the autoethnography. As above-mentioned, I am focusing on an overlaying goal of a person

or group (in this example a person) wanting to investigate by which actions this goal is pursued framed in a given past and future horizon which triggers particular feelings. Afterwards, the given extracts are analyzed or interpreted which is for Stern in an important milestone for every kind of psychographic inquiry (Stern, 1911). But let us shift the gaze to the autoethnography as of now. In Table 1, I present the autoethnographic scheme.

I was doing meditation quite regularly when I felt haunted by performance pressure. I felt the urge to do something valuable and to be seen. Deep down, I wanted to feel recognition and appreciation for what I was doing. And I saw the opportunity that work could do that for me. I was seeking approval from my peers. But once, I have gotten this approval, it did not unfold the positive effects I wanted it to unfold. On the contrary, it made me feel emptier and more estranged from myself. It made me feel hollow. So, I decided to meditate because I felt that I could not continue to live a life like that – being solely driven by performance pressure that could not fulfill my deeply inner needs of recognition and appreciation. I did a guided breathing meditation and I concentrated fully upon my breath. I tried to focus on my surroundings, birds, the wind in the woods, the feeling of the sun on my skin, the feeling of the grass that was underneath me, the clear and fresh air that was in and outside of me and suddenly I felt a shift in my attitudes. I felt that laying down in the grass was enough. I felt that I was part of this beautiful world and its daily wonders and that I am a wonder myself. By feeling the sun on my skin, the wind in my hair, the clear and fresh air in my lungs, the birds singing in the trees, the noises of the forest, I felt connected to nature and I felt that laying here and being part of this world is enough and that no external approval or any kind of external recognition could provide me with the feeling of being connected to this beautiful scenery and to the miracle of the present moment. And I realized the emptiness of external approval, I realized its false promise and that it could not substitute what I was feeling in this moment. And right there, I decided actively to let go of that performance pressure because I have felt ultimate love and appreciation by just being a part of this world – something that work could not provide me with.

**Table 1** Autoethnographic Scheme

Overlying goal or need	Actions	Myth-like structure of the environment	Past Horizon	Future Horizon	Feelings
Recognition and Approval	Working	You should perform and accomplish something	Seeking the approval from the external environment	Wanting to change something	Hollow, empty, exhausted

## Interpreting the Autoethnography between Taoism and Meadian Social Psychology

If we remain within our initial Meadian framework, we can see that I used external approval and turned it inwards in order to fulfill important personal needs (over-reaching goal). Thus, I used some social conversation of gestures (recognition and appreciation) in order to act upon myself and my respective needs. As a consequence, I could get some temporary closure regarding some needs that were in the very foreground of my respective life-space. However, we see that turning the external approval inwards in order to act upon myself turns out to be highly symbolic. Its symbolism is shown in me wanting to get ahead of a given situation and to create a valuable future for myself – a future where my deep desire of being seen and validated is fulfilled and not at stake. Thus, the very act of turning external approval inwards in order to fulfill a personal goal mediates a what-is to a what-should-be condition (future horizon column) catalyzing the jump from an undesired present or past (past horizon column) to a desired present state (Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2014).

In this process, we see that a very achievement-oriented personality is born that is overly pre-occupied with accomplishments and success which turned out to be exhausting and depressing to some extent (see the feeling column). However, what our Meadian framework is not able to capture is the alteration of the personality. Thus, the change in the symbol, the change in the appropriation of a social situation, the alteration of the I towards the Me and thus the change in the personality cannot be followed by these theoretical underpinnings. I argue that this research gap can be easily closed with the insights of Taoism that I tried to elaborate in the beginning of my writings, here.

In my autoethnography it appears that I was only heavily concentrated on one side of the unity of opposites, Yin and Yang. Thus, I was only focused upon the notion of progress and acceleration while I tried to shut down artificially the other side, de-acceleration and temporary decline. Thus, I wanted to reach ever new high spheres of success and accomplishments eliminating the minus pole of the Taoistic equation. Hence, I was only using a specific conversation of gestures of my social environment in order to use them as a sign to act upon myself. I completely bracketed the other feature that is part and parcel of life – in general. As a consequence, I tried to reduce specific social situations with given persons (Me) that would show me the minus pole of life in its fullest form. As a consequence, I could not use those social conversation of gestures in order to reach a specific equilibrium. So, in the end I could not reach a specific equilibrium because I was bracketing one side of the phenomena that life is confronting us with day in and day out.

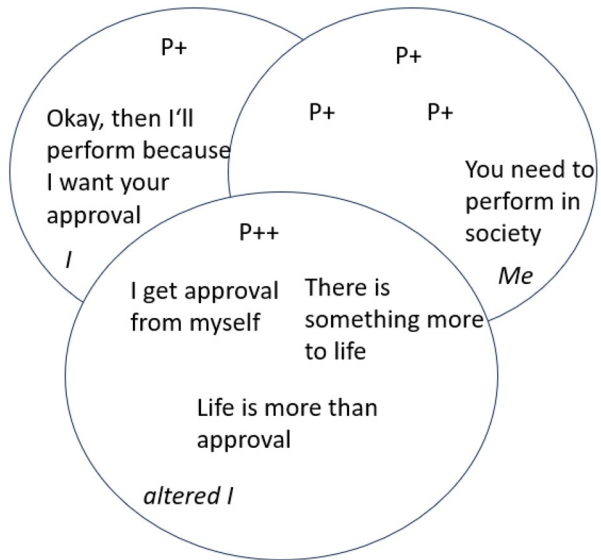
Within our hexagram after completion, we have seen that life only comes into being if polar opposites are integrated in the cosmos and ultimately in oneself. Within our Meadian framework, we can see that I could not reach a specific equilibrium because I was distancing myself from all negative experiences, failures, setbacks, conflicts and so forth that are part of the unity of life. Hence, I could not use those situations in order to develop a specific stance towards them and to integrate

them into my personality. As a consequence, I developed a one-sided personality that was overly pre-occupied with the notion of progress and accomplishments. This is no wonder because I tried to not expose myself to the minus pole of life. But, and this is important, this one-sided personality confronted me with some issues as I realized that I was missing something in my life and everyday occurrence. I experienced a lack of experiences; I experienced a lack of depth, and I could see that my needs were only fulfilled superficially, thus for a short amount of time. It is during meditation that I realized that there is something more to this life and thus to my person. Importantly, what happened during meditation is that I did not counter-act or force those experiences to disappear. I welcomed them whole-heartedly. This is the principle of wu wei. I accepted them and allowed them to penetrate my mind and I felt what they did with my body (emotions).

### What happens during Mindfulness from a Meadian Perspective

Hence, by meditation, I experienced that there are other social conversations of gestures that mirror the totality of life such as relaxing, listening to the noises of the forest, to the singing of the birds, to the smell of the summer and so forth. And I realized that these conversation of gestures (that are social) can be used in order to act upon myself (my psyche) and while using those signs upon myself in an open state of mind, I could feel what they did to my needs and my emotions. And in this open-minded process, I realized that they fulfilled my deeply personal needs of recognition and appreciation more than any work could do for me. Thus, I turned my conversation of gestures with nature inwards and used that experience as a need-fulfillment strategy. Hence, I used nature to act upon myself and realized that I am deeply connected with nature and its beauty and meaningfulness. And because, I made nature a part of myself and because I felt the meaningfulness of being connected with nature and all its elements, a new personality was born. Hence, I developed a new personal stance towards a given situation (Me = external approval) and circumvented that demand with an actualized I. However, this actualized I did not develop in a vacuum but was grounded within a deeply affective experience mediated by mindfulness meditation. Thus, mindfulness helped me to actualize my I, thus to develop a new need fulfillment strategy how to deal with the goal of getting recognition and appreciation. *From a Meadian perspective, mindfulness helps to give birth to a new I.* The demands of the social environment might be similar or more static (you need to perform in society) but mindfulness helps to bear an actualized stance that fulfills deeply personal needs and not external needs. *Thus, meditation helps not only to give birth to a new I but an I that is overlapping with the personal need hierarchy of the human organism.* Now, the I does not respond in a way how an external environment wants to force the I to respond but in a way how the individual imagines his/her own meaningful future. Thus, meditation helps to own one's future I and thus to construct a meaningful personality in time and with that a highly valuable future for the organism.

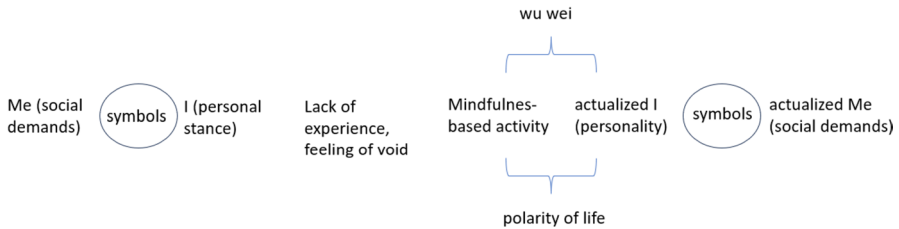
**Fig. 2** What happens during meditation from a Meadian perspective (p = person, + = goal, ++ = potential goal)



What happened during my meditation was that the actualized I was embracing the polarity of life being mirrored by experiencing the basic elements of nature as well as not forcing those experiences to go away or to interpret them as not meaningful for one's life (wuwei). The Taoistic premises within our Meadian framework (respecting the polarity of life and wu wei) helped me to give birth to a new personality that is using altered signs in order to act upon oneself as well as on one's environment. *In short, mindfulness understood from a Meadian framework helps to let go of an old dying I that had become rigid and inflexible and thus unsatisfactory for the fulfilments of specific needs. With an actualized I, a new personality is born that is doing more justice to the deeply personal needs of the individual.* This new personality uses then altered signs (symbols) in order to act upon his/her psyche and environment in order to construct the next present moment (new actions upon the demands of the Me). After my mindfulness-based intervention (meditation), a more balanced I emerged that did not bracket one side of the phenomena occurring in life as well as shutting oneself off from one specific pole in life (often the minus pole). But, and this remains important to repeat, the new I is not an artificial train of thoughts developed on a flip-chart but is grounded within some deep experience of the insufficiencies of a current I and a potential new I.

In Fig. 2, I present what happens during mindfulness-based activities such as meditation from a Meadian framework paired with Taoistic insights. *What happens during mindfulness from a Meadian perspective is not the potential experience of a new I but within mindfulness a new I is actually born and then experienced.* In other words, a new personality is not only imagined but deeply experienced and owned. With the birth of the new personality, the I gets actualized and experiences life more in its depth and adds new personal need fulfillment strategies that go beyond the previous superficial need fulfillment





**Fig. 3** Conceptual network of mindfulness-informed Meadian theory

strategies that were only vaguely fulfilling the needs of the individual. However, the newly born personality is now more integrated than beforehand because it includes the experience and appropriation of an I that recognizes and uses positive and negative experience in order to act upon oneself and his/her social and material environment. Moreover, this I does not resist those experiences and embraces the natural flow of experiences (*wu wei*) and does not want to shut itself off from potential negative experiences and brackets thus artificially the totality of life. Hence, discovering the beauty of life is a consequence of the integrative experience of an I that embraces the polarity of life and uses positive and negative experience in order to construct the next present moment. Moments of acceleration and de-acceleration are part and parcel of this process, and one must not try to get rid of one side of the polarity equation. The newly born personality uses consequently experiences of both polar sides in order to act upon himself/herself and experiences a natural phenomenon of integration which leads also into an actualization of the I's construction of the future.

### **Conclusion: Towards a new System of Interrelated Concepts between Meadian Psychology and Taoism**

The goal of the paper was not only bridging Meadian theory with mindfulness-based insights but also to develop a new syntax how mindfulness and Meadian theory can become a joint framework to analyze how the person grasps new concepts of himself/herself. I think that this framework needs to incorporate the following terms that are interrelated. First, this framework makes use of the concept of the personality that is the individual or personal stance towards a given social situation with its respective demands. Moreover, this personal stance is mediated by the use of symbols (signs) that show the cleavage between a what-is and-what-should-be condition, thus the cleavage between an undesired and desired state of affairs. But importantly, our inquiry about the theoretical and historical concepts of mindfulness have shown us that this personality should not be judged or interpreted as a static entity. On the contrary, the personality needs to go through a process of death and re-birth. Hence, during mindfulness-based activities, the human organism experiences a new I, an actualized I that shows the human organism that other need fulfillment strategies might give better closure to a need

than previous ones. However, this new I is not a sole edifice of ideas but is experienced in an altered state of consciousness. Furthermore, this I embraces these new experiences naturally and fully while not trying to shut them down artificially or to ignore them (*wu wei*). Yet, our chain of interrelated concepts does not end, here. By the actualization of the I, the I now encounters the Me in an altered state of consciousness. And within this altered response towards a social situation (e.g. how motivated one is going into an examination), one will also affect the social situation accordingly and thus transform the outer world in a very peculiar and personal way (Me situation). Thus, our conceptual network of interrelated terms shows us the following in regards to Fig. 3 which presents us not only with a synthesis of Meadian and mindfulness-based theory but comes also with a specific conceptual system how future research in this area can be entangled and attacked. In the end, we have also shown that our conceptual network treats mindfulness not as a sole variable but as an interrelated framework with the power to alter the personality of a given person in irreversible time – something that classical mindfulness studies are not able to show, dynamically.

### **Outlook: The new Framework Could Help to Develop Future Mindfulness-based Interventions**

The implications of the above-mentioned are vast and we could imagine a multitude of applications. We could now have understood how the system of mindfulness works from a Meadian perspective which could lead into the construction of additional mindfulness-informed methods that are built upon the system. The practical insights that have helped us to revise Meadian theory with mindfulness can reflow into the construction of new instruments (meditations, for instance) that help the individual to experience a new I and use altered symbols and encounter his/her social and material environment in new ways. That in mind, we could imagine new mindfulness-based techniques in therapy, in the industrial setting, for the development of one's personality whenever a person feels stuck in its life- a normal phenomenon occurring to everyone.

In regards to the autoethnography, we have seen that a new I has come into being that frees oneself from old life-patterns towards the adoption of a new way of relating to oneself as well as to one's environment. The possibilities of such transformation are diverse. We can apply such a perspective onto persons that have vast responsibilities in diverse settings. A father being performance-oriented might realize that he framed his interactions solely in competitive ways showing his children only recognition and appreciation in case of accomplishments. During meditation, he might realize that he can alter his stance towards his children (demand of recognition and appreciation) and show them love independent from (scholar) accomplishments. We see that the birth of a new I has severe consequences from a systemic perspective. This can be even extended onto the domain of politics in the public sphere or the industrial setting. If a politician becomes aware of other forms of relatedness and the consequences of this altered semiotic mediation, he will interact differently with his community than beforehand. This is especially important for the political domain

because the demands of life confront us with ever-new changing challenges that we need to adapt to. This adaption can happen organically via the mechanisms of meditation from a Meadian perspective. *In short, meditation alters powerfully semiotic mediation and thus the ways how we interact with our social system.*

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**Consent to Participate** Not applicable.

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**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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