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VIPASSANĀ AS LIVED RELIGION:
a self-ethnography of a Mahasi insight meditation retreat

VIPASSANĀ COMO RELIGIÃO VIVIDA:
autoetnografia de um retiro de meditação no método Mahasi

VIPASSANĀ COMO RELIGIÓN VIVIDA:
autoetnografía de un retiro de meditación según el método Mahasi

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ABSTRACT
This article examines a 14-day Mahasi *vipassanā* (insight meditation) retreat in Yangon, Myanmar, as a form of lived religion. It aims to analyze how non-self (*anattā*) emerges in meditative practice as an experiential process and to assess the value of self-ethnography for the study of contemplative practice. The analysis is based on self-ethnographic notes and recordings produced during the retreat and later analyzed retrospectively. Although the retreat took place across two centers—Mahasi Sāsana Yeiktha and Panditarama—it is treated as a continuous contemplative process, since both followed the same Mahasi method. Organized in three phases, the analysis traces a movement from initial doubt and adjustment, through pain, equanimity, and concentration, to more explicit experiences of impermanence, attachment, and the destabilization of the self. The results show that non-self emerges not merely as a doctrinal concept, but as an experiential weakening of ownership, control, and fixed identity. The article also argues that self-ethnography is a productive method for examining how contemplative practice is bodily enacted, interpretively shaped, and lived as religion, while requiring reflexive care regarding the relation between experience and interpretation.
Keywords: Lived religion; self-ethnography; Vipassanā; Mahasi; non-self; meditation.

RESUMO
Este artigo analisa um retiro de meditação vipassanā *de 14 dias, realizado segundo o método Mahasi, em Yangon, Mianmar, como uma forma de religião vivida. Seu objetivo é compreender como o não-eu (*anattā*) emerge na prática meditativa como processo experiencial e avaliar a pertinência da autoetnografia para o estudo da prática contemplativa. A análise fundamenta-se em notas e registros autoetnográficos produzidos durante o retiro e posteriormente analisados de modo retrospectivo. Embora o retiro tenha ocorrido em dois centros — Mahasi Sāsana Yeiktha e Panditarama —, ele é abordado como um processo contemplativo contínuo, uma vez que ambos adotaram o mesmo método Mahasi. Organizada em três fases, a análise acompanha um percurso*

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que vai da dúvida inicial e da adaptação à técnica, passando pela dor, pela equanimidade e pela concentração, até experiências mais explícitas de impermanência, apego e desestabilização do eu. Os resultados indicam que o não-eu emerge não apenas como conceito doutrinário, mas como enfraquecimento experiencial das noções de posse, controle e identidade fixa. O artigo sustenta, ainda, que a autoetnografia constitui um caminho fecundo para examinar como a prática contemplativa é corporalmente vivida, interpretativamente moldada e experienciada como religião vivida, embora exija atenção reflexiva constante quanto à relação entre experiência e interpretação.
Palavras-chave: *Religião vivida; autoetnografia; Vipassanā; Mahasi; não-eu; meditação.*

RESUMEN
Este artículo analiza un retiro de meditación vipassanā *de 14 días, realizado según el método Mahasi, en Yangon, Myanmar, como una forma de religión vivida. Su objetivo es comprender cómo el no-yo (*anattā*) emerge en la práctica meditativa como proceso experiencial y evaluar la pertinencia de la autoetnografía para el estudio de la práctica contemplativa. El análisis se basa en notas y registros autoetnográficos producidos durante el retiro y posteriormente analizados de manera retrospectiva. Aunque el retiro tuvo lugar en dos centros —Mahasi Sāsana Yeiktha y Panditarama—, se lo aborda como un proceso contemplativo continuo, ya que ambos siguieron el mismo método Mahasi. Organizado en tres fases, el análisis recorre un itinerario que va desde la duda inicial y la adaptación a la técnica, pasando por el dolor, la ecuanimidad y la concentración, hasta experiencias más explícitas de impermanencia, apego y desestabilización del yo. Los resultados indican que el no-yo emerge no solo como concepto doctrinal, sino como un debilitamiento experiencial de las nociones de posesión, control e identidad fija. El artículo sostiene, además, que la autoetnografía es una vía fecunda para examinar cómo la práctica contemplativa es corporalmente vivida, interpretativamente moldeada y experimentada como religión vivida.*
Palabras clave: *Religión vivida; autoetnografía; Vipassanā; Mahasi; no-yo; meditación.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Within Theravāda Buddhism, meditation is not merely a supplementary practice, but a privileged means of cultivating knowledge through experience. Yet academic scholarship has long privileged textual and doctrinal approaches, often leaving meditative experience at the margins of analysis. First-person accounts of meditative practice remain relatively rare, although works such as Jeon's point in this direction (Jeon, 2018). Ethnographic studies such as Jordt's have illuminated meditation practice in Burma without centering the author's own meditative experience (Jordt, 2017). As Skilton, Crosby and Kyaw observe, "the insider perspective was not seen as a fruitful path for scholarly enquiry, on the one hand, and the scholarly perspective not seen as conducive to enhanced practice, on the other hand" (Skilton, Crosby, Kyaw, 2019, p. 9).

This tension is relevant to the study of lived religion. Approaches to lived religion emphasize that religion must be studied not only through institutions and doctrines, but also as embodied, affective, narrative, and everyday practice (Ammerman, 2021, p. 20-22; Mcguire, 2008). Meditation is a particularly challenging case in this regard. Although it is a

highly disciplined religious practice, much of what is at stake in meditation unfolds through bodily sensation, attention, emotion, memory, and changing perceptions of self—dimensions that are difficult to access through external observation alone.

This article approaches *vipassanā* meditation as a form of lived religion. It is based on a 14-day retreat in the Mahasi method undertaken in Yangon, Myanmar, in January 2020: ten days at Mahasi Sāsana Yeiktha and four days at Panditarama Shwe Taung Gone Meditation Center. Although the retreat unfolded across two centers, both belonged to the same Mahasi lineage and followed the same meditative technique, allowing the experience to be analyzed as a continuous contemplative process. Through a self-ethnographic approach, the article examines how meditative practice is lived, narrated, and interpreted from within. At the same time, such experience does not occur in a conceptual vacuum. It is shaped by inherited techniques, doctrinal categories, and interpretive traditions that give meaning to what is perceived in practice.

More specifically, the article investigates how the Buddhist notion of non-self (*anattā*) emerges within retreat practice, not as an abstract doctrinal claim, but as an experiential and interpretive process. This investigation addresses the broader methodological stakes of accessing and interpreting meditative experience within the study of religion, ensuring that first-person accounts are reduced neither to private subjectivity nor to mere doctrinal illustration. Such a balance is especially important in the case of Theravāda meditation, where practice is shaped by canonical and commentarial frameworks that include not only the three characteristics (*tilakkhaṇa*) of conditioned phenomena—impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*)—but also more specific interpretive models such as the Insight Knowledges (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) central both to the Mahasi tradition and to the broader Theravāda commentarial framework (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2014; Buddhaghosa, 2011).

The article argues that self-ethnography offers a productive way of addressing these questions. Meditative experience is never simply immediate or transparent; it is shaped by bodily discipline, ritual setting, pedagogical instructions, prior formation, and doctrinal categories. For this reason, the retreat material analyzed here is treated not as raw inner data, but as lived and retrospectively interpreted experience situated within a specific Theravāda contemplative tradition. The Mahasi method provides both a practical technique and an interpretive horizon through which particular experiences become meaningful. In this sense, the article does not treat retreat experience as self-sufficient evidence, but places it in dialogue with the doctrinal and practical frameworks through which Theravāda

meditation understands mind (*nāma*), body (*rūpa*), and non-self.

2. LIVED RELIGION, MEDITATION, AND THE MAHASI METHOD

This section outlines the two main frameworks that orient the analysis. First, it situates the article within the approach of lived religion, which makes it possible to examine meditation as embodied, affective, and narrated religious practice. Second, it introduces the Mahasi contemplative framework, including *vipassanā*, the practical features of the Mahasi method, the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena (*tilakkhaṇa*), and the Insight Knowledges (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) through which meditative experience becomes intelligible within this tradition.

2.1 Meditation as lived religion

Approaches to lived religion have emphasized dimensions of religious life that often remain secondary in doctrinal, institutional, or text-centered analyses. Rather than treating religion primarily as a system of beliefs or formal teachings, this perspective focuses on how religion is practiced, embodied, narrated, felt, and interpreted in concrete contexts and in the lives of ordinary people (Ammerman, 2021, p. 20-22; Mcguire, 2008). This framework is especially useful for the study of meditation, since meditative practice cannot be understood through doctrine alone. It unfolds through bodily discipline, attention, affective change, and the practitioner's ongoing interpretation of experience.

From this perspective, a meditation retreat may be approached as an intensified form of lived religion. Retreat life is structured not only by beliefs, but by posture, silence, repetitive movement, attention to sensation, teacher guidance, and the disciplined organization of time. Meditation thus appears not merely as a private mental act, but as a lived religious practice in which body, affect, discipline, and narrative are intertwined.

This approach is particularly relevant here because the article does not examine *vipassanā* only as doctrine or institution, but as practice lived from within. The retreat material shows how religious experience takes shape through discomfort, effort, silence, restlessness, concentration, expectation, frustration, and moments of clarity. At the same time, lived religion does not detach experience from tradition. In a Mahasi retreat, experience is shaped by technique, pedagogy, and inherited Buddhist categories. It is also mediated by doctrinal and commentarial frameworks that guide how practitioners identify, interpret, and evaluate what unfolds in meditation.

2.2 Vipassanā, the Mahasi Method, and the Three Characteristics

Within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, *vipassanā* refers to insight meditation, that is, the disciplined observation of experience as it arises and passes away. Etymologically, the term suggests seeing in a special or discerning way, and in practice it is oriented toward the direct observation of mental and bodily phenomena (*nāma-rūpa*) as impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). The aim of *vipassanā* within this framework is therefore not merely calm or concentration (*samādhi*), but the development of direct experiential insight rather than conceptual reflection alone. In this sense, the Mahasi method is often described as a form of "pure insight" (*suddha-vipassanā*) practice, since it does not normally require prior *samatha* or absorptive concentration as a prerequisite to the cultivation of *vipassanā*. Instead, concentration develops together with insight through continuous mindfulness (*sati*) and observation of arising phenomena (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1991).

In the Mahasi method, *vipassanā* is practiced through continuous mindfulness supported by mental noting or labeling—the silent naming or registering of what one is experiencing. In broader canonical terms, this practice is situated within the framework of the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*): body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas* (experienced here as mental objects, hindrances, or aggregates), since Mahasi-style observation extends across all these experiential contents as they arise (Anālayo, 2003, p. 31). This approach directly enacts the injunction of the foundational *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) for the practitioner to remain "contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful". In the Mahasi lineage, this contemplative discipline is anchored primarily in the movement of the abdomen, observed as "rising" and "falling" during breathing (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1991). When secondary phenomena—such as bodily sensations, sounds, thoughts, emotions, or intentions arising through the six sense doors—become more prominent than the abdominal movement, they temporarily become the primary objects of observation and notation.

In this framework, the mind is also treated as one of the sense doors, so that whatever appears in the mind—memories, images, plans, doubts, or reflections—may itself become an object of meditation. The purpose of noting is not to analyze these phenomena discursively, but to register them clearly and return attention to experience as it is occurring. Mahasi's larger presentations of the method, especially Manual of Insight, make explicit the close

relation between practical technique, meditative discipline, and interpretive knowledge within this tradition (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2016, p. 263-301).

A distinctive feature of the Mahasi technique is the alternation of sitting and walking meditation. Sitting usually centers on the movement of the abdomen, while walking extends the same continuity of mindfulness to bodily movement through observation of the successive phases of each step. More broadly, mindfulness is expected to continue throughout the day, not only during formal meditation periods but also in ordinary activities. This continuity across postures and actions reinforces the retreat as a disciplined and embodied form of practice.

The experiential horizon of this practice is shaped by the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena (*tilakkhaṇa*): impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). In Mahasi-style *vipassanā*, these are not treated merely as doctrines to be affirmed intellectually, but as characteristics to be discerned in direct observation. Impermanence refers to the changing nature of phenomena, suffering to the unsatisfactory character of conditioned existence, and non-self to the absence of a permanent controller behind bodily and mental processes. The canonical background of non-self is classically expressed in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59; Bodhi, 2000), where bodily and mental phenomena are presented as not to be regarded as *mine*, *I*, or *myself*, a formulation especially relevant to the retreat experiences analyzed here. These three characteristics are central to the present article, especially non-self, since the retreat narrative repeatedly returns to experiences in which ownership, control, and fixed identity become less stable through practice.

The broader doctrinal background of this contemplative framework is also closely related to the Theravāda commentarial tradition, especially the *Visuddhimagga*, which provides one of the major classical syntheses of meditation, insight, and the progressive clarification of mind-matter (*nāma-rūpa*) processes (Buddhaghosa, 2011, cap. XXI). It is within this practical and doctrinal horizon that the Mahasi tradition interprets meditative development through the framework of the Insight Knowledges. As the following subsection shows, this framework offers an important interpretive horizon for reading retreat experience without determining it exhaustively.

2.3 Insight Knowledges as interpretive framework

Within the Mahasi tradition, meditative development is interpreted through the

framework of the Sixteen Insight Knowledges (*vipassanā-ñāṇa* or simply *ñāṇa*), a progressive sequence of meditative cognitions or insights oriented toward the realization of *nibbāna* (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2014). In Mahasi's presentation, these knowledges are closely related to the four stages of awakening. In Theravāda Buddhism, the four stages of awakening are *sotāpanna* (stream-enterer), *sakadāgāmī* (once-returner), *anāgāmī* (non-returner), and *arahant* (the fully awakened one). The meditator is understood to pass repeatedly through the sixteen insight knowledges, each full round culminating in a deeper level of realization. In this sense, the stages of awakening are not separate from the Insight Knowledges, but are achieved through their maturation, especially in relation to the final knowledge.

For the purposes of this article, however, it is neither necessary nor desirable to present all sixteen knowledges in detail. A more useful approach is to group them into four broader phases. First, the initial knowledges concern the arising and passing away of phenomena, that is, the gradual recognition that mental and bodily phenomena are conditioned, unstable, and impermanent. Second, the following knowledges involve disenchantment toward phenomena, as the meditator increasingly realizes that conditioned experience cannot provide lasting satisfaction. Third comes equanimity toward phenomena, in which the meditator, no longer seeking permanent fulfillment in conditioned events, deepens an even and sustained contemplation of mind-matter (*nāma-rūpa*) processes. Finally, the last knowledges are associated, within this tradition, with experiential approaches to *nibbāna*, understood as moments related to the cessation of conditioned phenomena and the supramundane path of realization.

This fourfold grouping is especially useful in the present article because it allows the retreat narrative to be read in terms of broader experiential dynamics rather than as an attempt to match each episode to a precise doctrinal stage. The aim, therefore, is not to prove that particular moments of the retreat correspond exactly to one or another of the sixteen knowledges, but to use this framework as a hermeneutic aid. It helps clarify how the retreat moved from the observation of conditioned processes, through dissatisfaction and increasing equanimity, toward more explicit experiences of instability, non-ownership, and the weakening of fixed identity.

3 METHODOLOGY: SELF-ETHNOGRAPHY AND LIVED RELIGION

This article adopts self-ethnography as its primary methodological approach in order

to examine meditative practice as a form of lived religion. The method is especially useful for the study of intensive contemplative practice because it provides access to dimensions of religious life that are difficult to observe externally, such as bodily sensations, affective fluctuations, attentional shifts, and changes in the sense of self (Eriksson, 2010; Ammerman, 2021; Mcguire, 2008). In this case, self-ethnography makes it possible to approach *vipassanā* not only as doctrine or technique, but as a lived religious process unfolding through body, perception, discipline, and interpretation.

The term self-ethnography is preferred here to emphasize that personal experience is treated not as an exercise in autobiographical self-exploration, but as a situated, analytical point of access to broader questions concerning mind-matter (*nāma-rūpa*) processes within the Mahasi method (Eriksson, 2010; Cluxton-Corley, 2017). Epistemologically, the empirical material is treated neither as raw, unmediated inner data nor as a mere illustration of dogma, but as lived experience interpreted hermeneutically through a specific cultural and doctrinal horizon (Negru, 2007; Eriksson, 2010). The Mahasi tradition provides the pedagogical and interpretive categories through which these experiences are named, allowing the analysis to maintain a reflexive balance between the immediacy of practice and analytical distance.

Accordingly, some of the retreat material is analyzed in dialogue with the Sixteen Insight Knowledges (vipassanā-ñāṇa), a central commentarial framework in the Theravāda tradition (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2014; Buddhaghosa, 2011). These knowledges are deployed here not as proof of personal attainment, but as a traditional heuristic to clarify recurring patterns in the unfolding of practice.

The empirical material consists of field notes and audio recordings produced during a single fourteen-day retreat conducted across two centers within the same lineage: the first ten days at Mahasi Sāsana Yeiktha and the final four days at Panditarama Shwe Taung Gone Meditation Center. Although the institutional setting changed, the continuity of the technical method allows the retreat to be treated as a single experiential sequence. The materials were recorded while the retreat was unfolding and later revisited in a second stage of retrospective interpretation, combining the proximity of lived practice with the critical distance of secondary analysis.

4 RETREAT NARRATIVE AND ANALYSIS BY PHASES

The 14-day retreat is analyzed here in three phases that reflect shifts in practice rather

than a strict stage-by-stage doctrinal sequence. Phase One covers entry into the retreat, initial doubt, and the first changes in attention and observation. Phase Two traces intensification through pain, equanimity, and concentration. Phase Three begins with the transition from Mahasi Sāsana Yeiktha to Panditarama Meditation Center and follows the deepening of practice toward more explicit experiences of impermanence, non-attachment, and the destabilization of self.

4.1 Phase One: Entering the Retreat, Doubt, and the First Shifts in Practice

I arrived at Mahasi Sāsana Yeiktha Meditation Center in Yangon at 6 a.m. on 5 January 2020, intending to undertake a ten-day retreat. My arrival and formal registration inserted me into retreat life through embodied discipline, ritualized speech, and institutional routine rather than conceptual explanation. From the perspective of lived religion, the retreat did not begin as a purely interior exercise, but as an embodied and institutional form of religious life structured by ritual, space, hierarchy, and discipline.

During the first days, the relative absence of direct guidance became especially important. Although the schedule indicated English interviews and a *dhamma* talk, that is, a formal talk on Buddhist teachings and meditation practice, the teacher did not appear for the initial interviews or for the Sunday talk. This sharpened a tension already present in the retreat: meditation practice was central, but explicit instruction was minimal, generating uncertainty for a foreign meditator trying to orient himself within an unfamiliar setting.

In response, I turned to resources already familiar to me. Instead of recording detailed meditative experience during the first four days, I wrote comparative notes on Goenka's and Mahasi's methods and read *The Progress of Insight* (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2014), summarizing the sixteen insight knowledges. Only later did I understand more clearly that such reading is generally discouraged in retreat contexts, since conceptual knowledge may create expectation or premature interpretation. Even so, at that stage it offered support and continuity. Practice did not begin from a neutral starting point, but from a mind already shaped by previous training and doctrinal expectation. Therefore meditative experience was never simply immediate: it was already being filtered through prior formation, comparison between traditions, and the interpretive language of Buddhist doctrine.

One of the central difficulties of this opening phase was doubt. In Buddhist terms, doubt (*vicikicchā*) is one of the five hindrances *(pañcanīvaraṇa*) that obstruct concentration and clarity, a set explicitly included in the contemplation of *dhammas* in the *Satipaṭṭhāna*

Sutta (MN 10; Anālayo, 2003, p. 202-203). The first phase of the retreat is therefore best understood not as a period of immediate meditative depth, but as one of entry, adjustment, and uncertainty. A more distinct experiential shift began on the fifth day, when I moved from comparative reflection to recording what was happening more directly in practice. The turning point came through repetitive thoughts and images related to sensual desire (*kāmacchanda*), another of the five hindrances. What had initially appeared merely as distraction gradually became an object of observation, in keeping with the Mahasi method itself. I noticed that when such thoughts arose, they were accompanied by clear bodily changes: accelerated heartbeat, intensified circulation, and marked agitation. This became one of the first moments in which I perceived more clearly the relation between mental and bodily processes.

Later, I interpreted this experience in relation to the early insight knowledges, especially Analytical Knowledge of Body and Mind and Knowledge by Discerning Conditionality, which in Mahasi's presentation concern the distinction between bodily and mental processes and the observation of their conditional relations (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2014, p. 8-12). What mattered experientially, however, was simpler: what arose in the mind manifested itself in the body, and attending carefully to these processes altered their force. Through noting, or by redirecting attention to the breath or another sensory object, the intensity of the experience diminished. The same phenomena that had previously generated agitation now became occasions for clearer observation. In this sense, the experience is less important as evidence of a precise doctrinal stage than as an example of how the Mahasi method reclassifies distraction as observable process. What had previously been lived as disturbance became, through technique, a field of insight. This is consistent with Mahasi's account of practice, in which secondary objects are noted as they arise and wandering or "hindering" thoughts begin to subside as concentration becomes stronger (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2014, p. 5-6).

This shift also changed the quality of practice. It became easier to return to the movement of the abdomen as the primary object of meditation, and the distinction between bodily movement and the act of noting it acquired a more immediate meaning. At the same time, direct observation was accompanied by doctrinal reflection. I began interpreting desire (*lobha*) and doubt in terms of non-self: if such phenomena could be observed as conditioned processes, then they need not be identified as *I* or *mine*. This framing helped loosen identification and reduce distress, but it also introduced a tension that would recur throughout the retreat: the tension between insight as directly experienced and insight as

conceptually interpreted. That tension runs through the article. Doctrinal language did not simply explain experience from outside, but helped shape how experience became intelligible in the first place.

The same pattern appeared when I turned my attention to doubt itself. What had initially been generalized uncertainty about the method could now be observed as a process involving bodily agitation, mental unease, and interpretive fixation. Seeing doubt in this way made it easier to stop pursuing immediate resolution and to return to practice with greater calm. The reduction of suffering (*dukkha*) seemed to depend less on solving the content of thought than on changing one's relation to it.

By the sixth and seventh days, practice had become more precise. I became increasingly attentive to the earliest onset of distraction, and grosser attachments began to lose force while subtler patterns emerged. A decisive moment came through an encounter with a monk named Jotipala, who emphasized the movement of the abdomen as the primary object of meditation, the importance of concentration, and the need to note even subtle phenomena such as intention (*cetanā*), thought, and bodily impulse. One correction proved especially important: when I said that I changed posture only once or twice in an hour, he pointed out that I was moving far more often than I realized, since even very small adjustments counted as movement. This changed the way I understood bodily restlessness and pain. This correction indicates that technique is transmitted not only through doctrine, but through pedagogical recalibration of perception. What counted as *movement* had to be relearned within the discipline of the method itself.

After this conversation, I attempted a full sitting without movement. The result was unexpectedly powerful. By noting the intention to move before acting on it, many impulses lost their force, and concentration on the movement of the abdomen became markedly more stable. This also resonates with Mahasi's description of practice in which intention becomes increasingly clear and can be noted prior to bodily action itself (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2016, p. 277). Moreover, pain did not disappear, but it became more analyzable: instead of appearing as a single obstacle, it shifted, intensified, weakened, and disappeared. The same sitting also altered the perception of breathing. What mattered here was not the confirmation of a fixed meditative map, but the growing refinement of concentration and bodily perception. Here again, the experience can be placed in dialogue with Mahasi's account of insight practice, in which bodily and mental processes are discerned in their arising, ceasing, and succession rather than grasped as stable wholes (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2014, p. 13-14).

Alongside these experiential shifts, doctrinal reflection also intensified. I began

thinking more insistently about impermanence, suffering, and non-self: if mind and body are constantly changing, what exactly could be designated as *I*? Such reflections were intertwined with practice, showing once again that the retreat was mediated by remembered teachings, conceptual frames, and the need to make sense of what was happening.

By the end of the seventh day, the first phase of the retreat had reached a point of relative consolidation. The uncertainty and comparison that marked the opening days had not disappeared entirely, but they were no longer dominant. In their place, a more stable relation to the method had begun to emerge: attention was more disciplined, distraction was detected earlier, bodily discomfort was more carefully observed, and the distinction between movement, intention, and sensation (*vedanā*) had become more precise. The first week thus closed not with resolution, but with a more workable intimacy with the method and with experience itself. In terms of the article's fourfold grouping of the Insight Knowledges, this first phase is best understood as being dominated by the initial clarification of conditioned processes rather than by the later movements of disenchantment, equanimity, or cessation.

4.2 Phase Two: Intensification, Destabilization, and Deepening Practice

The second phase of the retreat began with a more forceful confrontation with physical pain. If the first week had established a more workable relation to the method, the eighth day made clear that increasing concentration also intensified the encounter with discomfort. During one sitting, pain arose strongly after about forty minutes in the same position. Rather than moving immediately, I remained still and observed it. The experience showed both the power of pain to gather attention and the difficulty of sustaining equanimity in relation to it.

At one level, the experience confirmed that pain can become a sharp object of observation. By remaining still, the mind entered a more concentrated relation with the sensation, and doctrinal reflection became a support. I tried to understand the pain as bodily process rather than personal possession: pain was in the body, while the mind was aware of it. Suffering depended at least partly on identification and resistance. When the sitting ended and movement resumed, the pain disappeared, making impermanence evident. At another level, however, the experience exposed the limits of doctrinal framing. The intensity of pain made *dukkha* appear with an immediacy that resisted easy conceptual resolution. Impermanence and non-self did not erase the sensation; they offered a way of relating to it that had to be repeatedly reestablished. Therefore doctrinal categories did not function as

ready-made explanations imposed after the fact; rather, they operated as practical lenses whose adequacy was tested against the resistance of experience itself. Within this tradition, conceptual knowledge is understood not as a final dogma, but as a practical guide that must be verified through direct observation of arising phenomena (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2016).

While sitting with sharp knee pain, the memory of a concentration camp I had visited the previous year suddenly came to mind. The association between my pain and the suffering endured by others produced a movement of compassion. Pain thus opened onto a wider moral and affective horizon. The eighth day marked an intensification of practice through both concentration and destabilization: pain could be observed, endured, and reinterpreted, but not simply denied. By the ninth day, pain was still present, but it no longer demanded the same degree of active confrontation. During one sitting, discomfort arose and was noted until it receded; when it later returned, I found that I did not need to make it the center of attention again. The movement of the abdomen remained primary, and the pain, though still present, no longer captured the whole field of awareness. This was one of the clearest moments so far in which equanimity became experientially intelligible—not as indifference, but as the capacity to let a sensation remain without reorganizing attention around it.

Mahasi's description of equanimity toward phenomena is useful here, since he characterizes this stage as one in which practice proceeds more smoothly and objects are observed with much less effort, without the earlier fear or dissatisfaction (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2016, p. 397). The point is not to claim that a specific stage had been definitively reached, but to indicate a broader experiential movement in a direction described by the Insight Knowledges.

This also clarified the meaning of a term used by Jotipala: to *ignore*. In this context, ignoring did not mean repression, but non-reactivity. Pain remained part of the body, but it no longer had to be translated into mental suffering. Recurring images and thoughts had also begun to lose some of their force. Here again, the Mahasi method did not eliminate the object; it altered the relation to it. The key distinction was between sensation and appropriation, a distinction that would later become important for the emergence of non-self.

The first formal interview of the retreat also took place on this day, and its impact was immediate. The instructions were simple: if a thought becomes long, note it; if it is very brief, let it go; practice more walking meditation; if the movement of the abdomen becomes too subtle, simply feel it. Direct contact with the monks once again sharpened practice, resolving uncertainty and reminding me that the retreat was not merely a solitary psychological

exercise, but participation in a living pedagogical and religious environment.

The sitting that followed was one of the most concentrated of the retreat up to that point. I remained with the movement of the abdomen without changing posture and without shifting attention toward short-lived thoughts. As concentration deepened, the movement of the abdomen became increasingly subtle, and the usual verbal labels *rising* and *falling* no longer seemed fully adequate. Observation shifted from verbal noting toward a more direct felt perception. This resonates with Mahasi's account of practice in which mindfulness becomes increasingly effortless and the mind seems to move toward the object of observation by itself (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2016, p. 375-376).

At the same time, bodily and mental processes appeared to function without a central commander. Breathing continued, the diaphragm worked, and awareness unfolded without any clear sense of an internal agent directing them. Practice was thus revealing not only impermanence, but also a loosening of the intuition of central authorship.

The tenth day brought a further consolidation of concentration while also making visible the continued influence of previous meditative training. By this point, the recurring images of sensual desire that had dominated earlier days had largely ceased. In their place, thoughts became centered on one person, taking on a more emotional and relational character. This suggests that as grosser forms of distraction weakened, subtler attachments emerged more clearly.

As on the previous day, concentration required a period of settling before deepening. After twenty or thirty minutes, the movement of the abdomen became very subtle, and the distinction between mental and material processes grew clearer. What stood out most strongly was the sense that bodily and mental functions were operating in conjunction without a central commander, making *anattā* more experientially plausible.

The day also showed that practice remained shaped by reading, doctrinal reflection, and familiarity with other techniques. Reading a Mahasi discourse on *kammaṭṭhāna* meditation relieved some of the guilt I had felt when using attention to breathing as a preliminary means of calming the mind. Earlier in the retreat, such moments of *samatha* had seemed like a deviation from the technique; now they appeared as a possible support. More broadly, breath concentration and body-scanning could settle the mind more quickly, but Mahasi-style noting seemed to make the distinction between mind and body more analytically precise.

By the end of the tenth day, Phase Two had established a new level of meditative continuity. Concentration was stronger, attachments had become subtler, and observation

of bodily and mental processes had grown more refined. Yet this refinement was not simple or linear. It remained shaped by doctrinal reading, method comparison, and experimentation at the edges of formal instruction. If the first phase had been dominated by entry, doubt, and correction, the second phase closed with a more stable but also more complex practice—one in which concentration, interpretation, and subtle attachment were increasingly intertwined. In terms of the article's fourfold grouping of the Insight Knowledges, this second phase is best understood as moving from the painful recognition of the instability and unsatisfactoriness of conditioned experience toward the first more sustained forms of equanimity.

4.3 Phase Three: Transition, Intensification, and the Destabilization of Self

The third phase of the retreat began with a physical transition that also functioned as an experiential threshold. On the eleventh day, after the final morning meditation and breakfast at Mahasi Sāsana Yeiktha, I left for Panditarama Meditation Center, where I had originally arranged to stay only one day. This departure marked the transition not only between centers, but between two distinct stages of the retreat.

The walk from one center to the other became part of the meditative process itself. Upon stepping onto the street, the sensory and social intensity of the outside world appeared highly amplified. This transition shows that retreat experience did not unfold in isolation from the surrounding world. Concentration was not simply interrupted by ordinary life; rather, ordinary life itself became newly charged and perceptible through the altered attentional state produced by retreat discipline.

When I arrived at Panditarama, the expected one-day stay changed. The abbot informed me that the minimum stay was three to five days, and although I was initially unprepared for this extension, the retreat ultimately continued for four days, pushing practice beyond the limit I had originally set.

Although the technique remained the same, the atmosphere of the new center was noticeably different. Panditarama was smaller, denser, and more immediate in its discipline. The hall was more communal, walking practice more visible, and the schedule more tightly structured, with chanting, recorded *dhamma* talks for foreigners, and a clock signaling the end of sessions. Structure itself became a stronger support for practice. It also changed my relation to time and writing: I stopped repeatedly checking the hour and reduced my notes to brief recordings before sleep. Practice became less mediated by retrospective

textualization and closer to an immediate rhythm of observation and endurance.

Despite these changes, the mind remained strongly attached, though no longer to the same objects as before. The sensual desire that had dominated earlier in the retreat had largely disappeared. In its place, attachment became concentrated around one relationship, taking on a subtler and more emotional form. Walking meditation, which I had not practiced as rigorously in the previous center, now became more central.

The first interview at Panditarama, on the twelfth day, clarified the direction of practice decisively. When I described my experience—not by recounting the content of thoughts, but by explaining how I was observing them—the instruction was direct: do not reflect on the *dhamma*; simply note mind and body. What was required was not more conceptual interpretation, but greater speed and agility in noticing the earliest onset of thoughts and images. This instruction also helped reframe the discouragement of the previous day: what had initially felt like regression could now be understood as a new phase in which grosser distractions had receded and subtler attachments had become more visible. The twelfth day also repeated a familiar bodily pattern: strong pain arose in the lower back during sitting meditation and then disappeared under sustained observation. This makes explicit the article's central distinction between the content of experience and the mode of attending to it. The teacher's correction did not deny the reality of thought; it redirected attention from narrative content toward process. Within the Mahasi framework, insight develops not by analyzing conceptual stories, but by tracking the bare, moment-to-moment arising and ceasing of phenomena (*nāma-rūpa*) (Anālayo, 2003; Mahasi Sayadaw, 2016).

The thirteenth day brought the most intense experiences of the retreat. Although I still found myself reflecting on *dhamma* despite repeated instructions not to do so, practice had become strong enough that such reflections were now intertwined with concentration rather than simply displacing it. When I once again asked the teacher a conceptual question, his reply remained consistent with the method: do not think about it.

One of the day's most striking developments emerged from the recurring attachment that had dominated the final phase of the retreat. I noticed how strongly I had been projecting myself into the image of my partner, which led to a sudden inversion of the question: instead of continuing to project myself outward, could I look directly at myself? When I asked inwardly, "Who is Otávio?", the initial answers were biographical, but this autobiographical process did not remain stable. It seemed to move backward through layers of memory and image, from adulthood into childhood and eventually toward preverbal and prenatal states. At some point, the imagery extended beyond ordinary autobiographical

recall into vivid scenes that I interpreted, within the meditative and Buddhist framework of the retreat, as possible past-life material.

Whether taken as symbolic, imaginal, mnemonic, or religiously meaningful in a stronger sense, these sequences are significant because they show how the retreat was destabilizing the ordinary temporal boundaries of self-experience. The question of who one is no longer yielded a fixed answer, but opened onto a shifting chain of memories, images, identifications, and narrative possibilities. This can also be placed in dialogue with Mahasi's description of meditative insight into mind and body, in which the ordinarily assumed person comes to be understood as a configuration of changing mental and physical phenomena (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2016, p. 277).

This experience can also be read in light of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, in which the aggregates are not to be regarded as "mine," "I," or "myself," reinforcing the retreat's destabilization of autobiographical identity (SN 22.59; Bodhi, 2000).

A decisive practical breakthrough occurred later that day in relation to thought itself. I realized that the problem did not lie only in the persistence of recurring thoughts, but in the way I had been noting them. I had often been observing them with aversion rather than equanimity. The mental note had at times carried the force of rejection rather than simple acknowledgment. If the object was met with aversion, then craving and clinging were being reproduced even in the attempt to eliminate them.

This insight transformed the practice. During a long evening sitting that lasted about three hours, I first used a brief period of attention to the breath to settle the mind and then shifted into *vipassanā* more fully. After recognizing the aversive quality in my previous noting, I waited for the next recurring thought to arise. When it did, I met it calmly and simply with the note "thinking, thinking," without suppression or resistance. According to the description, no further thought of that kind arose during the remainder of the sitting. What mattered here was not the total disappearance of all mental activity, but the practical realization that understanding the affective quality of one's observation could change the process immediately. The same insight was then extended to bodily pain: the central issue was not only endurance, but the quality of mind that encountered the sensation. This shift can be placed in dialogue with Mahasi's description of Saṅkhārupekkhā-ñāṇa (Knowledge of Equanimity Toward Formations), in which observation becomes more even and less reactive (Mahasi Sayadaw, 2014, p. 28-32).

The day also brought a further refinement in observation of breathing. As the movement of the abdomen became too subtle to track in the usual way, I began investigating

the breath process more carefully and perceived a more differentiated rhythm than the familiar *rising* and *falling*. This mattered less as a technical discovery than as evidence of increasingly subtle perception. The body, once again, was no longer experienced as a compact whole but as a field of changing, partially autonomous processes.

If the thirteenth day marked the experiential climax of the retreat, the fourteenth day immediately placed that climax under the sign of impermanence. The clear shift in mental pattern that had occurred during the long sitting did not remain in place. On the following day, repetitive thoughts reappeared. Yet this return was not experienced merely as failure. Instead, it made impermanence unmistakable at the level of meditative attainment itself. Pleasant and concentrated states, no matter how powerful, also arise and pass away. The lesson of the final day was therefore not that insight had been lost, but that attachment to pleasant meditative states would itself become a source of suffering. In this sense, impermanence was no longer merely a doctrinal principle applied to external objects; it became evident in relation to the most valued states produced by practice itself.

In this sense, the end of the retreat is significant precisely because it does not culminate in permanent transformation or stable resolution. What it offers instead is a more sober insight: concentrated states are possible, patterns can change, attachment can weaken, and moments of profound clarity can occur—but none of these can be possessed. The final phase of the retreat thus brought the experience of non-self into sharper relief not only through the observation of body and mind working without a central controller, but also through the inability to own or stabilize even the most valued meditative states. In terms of the article's fourfold grouping of the Insight Knowledges, this final phase is best understood as one in which equanimity, destabilization of self-reference, and the impermanence of meditative attainment become especially salient, without requiring a definitive claim about higher stages of realization.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined *vipassanā* meditation, in the context of a 14-day Mahasi retreat, as a form of lived religion, using self-ethnography to analyze how contemplative practice is embodied, narrated, and interpreted from within. Rather than approaching meditation only as doctrine or technique, it has treated it as a lived religious process unfolding through body, discipline, pain, concentration, and changing perceptions of self.

The retreat did not unfold as a linear progression toward stable attainment, but as an

uneven process of adjustment, intensification, and partial clarification. The first phase was marked by uncertainty, comparison, and correction; the second deepened through pain, equanimity, and increasingly refined concentration; and the final phase, shaped by the transition to Panditarama, brought more explicit experiences of instability, attachment, and the weakening of autobiographical self-reference. Across these phases, non-self emerged not primarily as an abstract philosophical doctrine, but as a weakening of ownership, control, and fixed identity.

This destabilization appeared in several ways: in the perception that bodily and mental processes unfolded without a central commander; in the changing relation to pain, desire, and aversion; in the difficulty of sustaining pleasant concentrated states; and in the reopening of memory and self-narrative during the final days of retreat. The retreat thus made visible how impermanence, suffering, and non-self are not merely doctrinal propositions to be affirmed, but dimensions of experience that become intelligible through disciplined practice. Such experience is never simply immediate or transparent, but shaped by technique, prior formation, expectation, interpretive language, and retrospective narration.

From the perspective of the academic study of religion, the article shows that self-ethnography can illuminate dimensions of contemplative practice that are difficult to access through external observation alone. In the present case, it made it possible to trace how bodily pain, attentional training, doctrinal reflection, and changing perceptions of self were woven together through retreat practice. Seen in this way, vipassanā appears not only as a contemplative technique, but as a lived religious discipline in which body, mind, suffering, memory, attention, and narrative are reconfigured through practice. To study such processes expands the methodological resources through which the academic study of religion can approach disciplined forms of interiority and self-transformation.

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