Transformation, Catharsis and the Alchemy of Suffering:

How Do Long- Term Practitioners of Eastern Meditative Traditions Experience the Benefits and Challenges of Their Paths, Develop Insight and Integrate Their Learning?

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'I, Phodios Matheou confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.'

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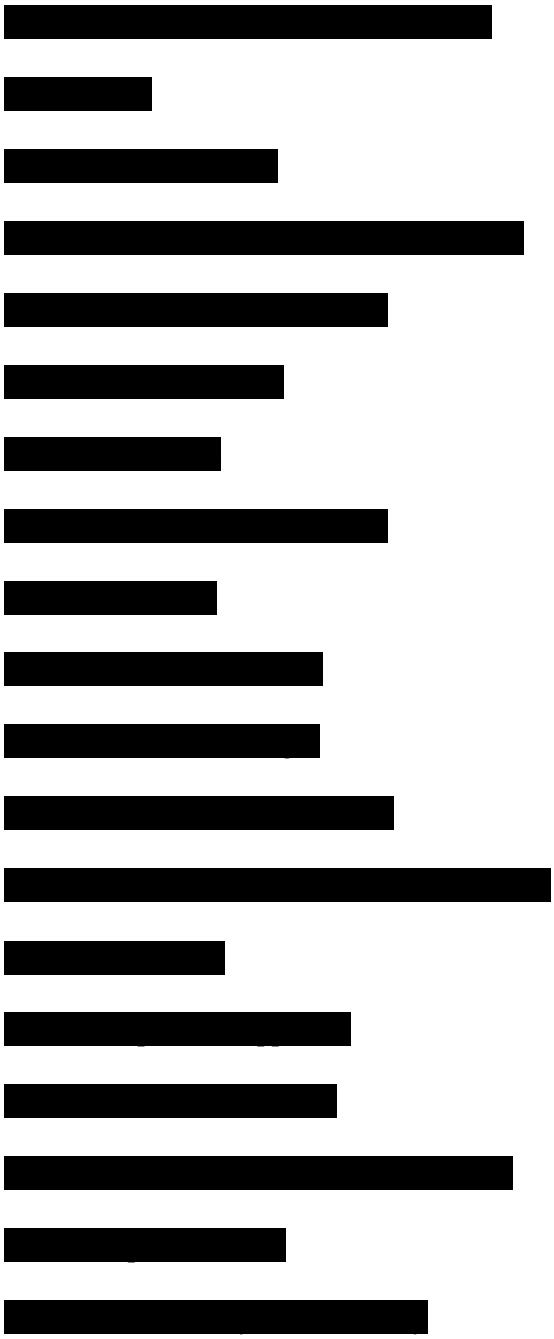

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Glossary

Mindfulness Meditation

Attending to the 'here and now' of experiencing, where one seeks not to alter the contents of consciousness (e.g. thoughts, images, feelings and sensations) but to observe them as they arise. The scope of attention can expand and contract; awareness may rest initially on the tactile, sensations of breathing to magnified interoception and after, external stimuli.

Shamatha Practice

Shamatha practices are designed to stabilise and calm the mind. They may be used to facilitate insight meditations (e.g. Vipashyana) and include practices such as mindfulness of the breath or body scanning (resting attention on each body part sequentially). Although insight into the mind can arise through Shamatha, the rationale is that insight (into impermanence or emptiness, for instance) is better attained through initially developing the capacity for stability and focus.

Vipashyana Meditation

Although there is not a clear distinction between Shamatha and Vipashyana (they are mutually supportive), Vipashyana meditation is aimed at understanding the nature of the mind or the source of suffering.

Dukkha

Dukka refers to both subtle and salient forms of suffering, ranging from disease and grief to subtle craving.

Loving- Kindness Meditation (LKM)

LKM is the practice of engendering a sense of 'loving-kindness' or well-wishing towards oneself, others and all sentiency.

Pure Awareness (PA)

Pure awareness is a state in which the meditator experiences consciousness non-conceptually, yet retains the sense of being aware they are aware.

Non- Dual Awareness (NDA)

One may define their experience through the distinction between subject and object, or inner and outer worlds. Non-duality asserts that our experiencing is 'not two', but a dynamic interplay. Non-dual practices encourage the meditator to develop an understanding of this experientially.

Equanimity

A category of psychological health distinct from hedonic (pleasure) or eudaimonic (meaning) well-being. Rather than being a 'transient mental state' equanimity is an enduring quality of mind where clear awareness and disidentification from the shifting contents of consciousness allows for peace within flux.

Emptiness

Emptiness is related to 'interconnectedness' and relates to the Buddhist understanding of non-self. The human body constitutes the same elements which comprise the universe; it is therefore 'empty' of a self 'which exists inherently or independently'.

Impermanence

Within Buddhist philosophy impermanence describes the ever- shifting state of all things, on both macro- conceptual (e.g. political changes) and micro- experiential levels of analysis (e.g. the flux of both positive and negative emotions on a moment by moment basis).

Sanga

Although Sanga would have historically been used to refer to ordained devotees of Buddhism, it now describes the entire Buddhist community including secular and lay followers.

Six- element Meditation

The six- element practice is a meditation on interconnectedness and can be categorised as a non-self or emptiness practice. The meditator will use their minds eye to engender a sense of the symbiosis between the elements which comprise both the outer world (e.g. air, water, earth) and their inner physicality (e.g. the air in one's lungs).

Mahamudra

Mahamudra is a Buddhist tradition which utilises a set of techniques to develop insight into the nature of mind. Where sounds, sights, emotions and thoughts may appear concrete upon observation their elusiveness may be realised, for instance.

Choiceless awareness

Choiceless awareness refers to an expanded meditative state in which rather than focussing on one stimulus, the meditator expands their awareness and tracks stimuli as they arise, change and fall away from awareness.

On and Off the Cushion

'On the cushion' is a phrase used by meditators to describe formal practice and the symbiotic relationship between this and their broader lives ('Off the Cushion').

Intrinsic/ Extrinsic Goals

Intrinsic goals relate to pursuits which the individual derives personal meaning and pleasure from, which are contrast to extrinsic goals where the aim may be status oriented or socially/ culturally mediated.

The 'Three Jewels' of Buddhism

The 'Three Jewels' of Buddhism include the Buddha (teacher), Sanga (Buddhist community) and Dharma (teaching).

No- Self Meditations

No- self meditations are a multitude of techniques designed to develop an understanding that the concrete sense of self one may have is upon observation fluid, a process or that there is no 'self at the center' of experience.

Second- Generation Mindfulness- Based Interventions (SG- MBI's)

SG- MBI's expanded upon first- generation MBI's by broadening the definition of mindfulness beyond present awareness of the 'here and now' to more fully capture Buddhist ethics; a method through which to 'transform the practitioner for their own betterment and that of others'. They include 'Wisdom- Based' meditative techniques which can engender experiential knowing of emptiness and impermanence.

Preface

The DPsych portfolio in counselling psychology comprises three sections. These are the doctoral research, an article written for publishing within an academic journal and a combined case study and process report. They convey the reciprocal, dual-roles of scientist-practitioner that have characterised this journey.

Section 1: Doctoral Research

Here I present my doctoral research in which the lived-experiences of long-term meditators were explored. The topic was inspired by the benefits I have derived from practice and curiosity about its future potential.

Section 2: Academic Journal Article

After the doctoral research I include a piece written for publication within the academic journal *Mindfulness*, published by *Springer.* Given its broad readership, explicit relevance to the current topic and its inclusion of articles relevant for clinical applications it seemed an intuitive choice.

Section 3: Combined Case Study and Process Report

In the final section, I include a combined case study/ process report which demonstrates my clinical experience and professional development. During this work I apply cognitive- behavioural therapy and 'third- wave' interventions. These included mindfulness techniques, altering the relationship to cognitions and compassion exercises. The processes of change and outcomes reported by participants in the doctoral research were present in the case study.

Reflections on the Path I've Taken

The path to the professional doctorate, and the journey after has been profound and challenging. At every turn, doubt and fear were nearby. Am I able to fulfil the role of psychologist? Can I be with both the patients and my own suffering? It is only now that I feel the weight of anxiety begin to lift. Despite this relief, I observe that already my mind is beginning to whir at the hurdles beyond the doctorates end. I have often wondered how I would feel at its close. Others have described their anticipated euphoria as a mirage; expectations of uniform bliss were met with deflation. This is understandable; what had oriented their lives for the better part of half a decade is now at its end. My anticipation, anxiety and excitement, caused by a willingness to lose contact with the present, were part of a life-long tendency towards future- orientation. Beginning meditative practices 11 years ago helped curtail this pattern, ground me in the here and now, manage the stresses of my training and develop resiliency towards a world in flux. During the inertia of this time these lessons were often dismissed; 'When this section is complete, I'll have time to breathe', 'Once I've managed this case load, I'll have surer footing'. The wise participants of this research without knowing became my

guides, reminding me of the broader picture. To regard stress as training, chaos as grist for the mill and of most importance, to acknowledge the availability and opportunity for kindness and gratitude in every moment. As their practices suggested, both can be cultivated experientially. I asked myself if it were possible, even during aversive experience, to not pine for a future moment but to experience the present difficulty as if it were preferable. In completing this work, the long-term practitioners, their humanness, insight and persistence through difficulty were inspiring, engendering a recommitment to the principles of wisdom its completion had on occasion caused me to forget.

'…if I can remember even in the most painful and difficult circumstances that, this is just what's unfolding, it's just this beautiful cosmic drama, though sometimes it's, and we may be with difficult experiences, I tend to think more of like, I don't know, the oncoming thunderstorm…' (Tilly, 21-24, p.21)

Themes Through the Portfolio

The works of this portfolio are connected through several pertinent themes. The participants of the doctoral research, and the therapy presented with Hannah in the case study had overlap across reported mechanisms of change. Given that the interventions used within therapy were derived from '3rd Wave' Cognitive- Behavioural principles similar processes and outcomes emerged. Hannah was raised in an unsafe household, where her needs were frequently dismissed. The unpredictability of her childhood and the recent, profound betrayal she had discussed meant she experienced her current relationship through this lens. She became concerned that her anxious thinking and vigilance would sabotage the intimacy they shared. Our work then centred on re-negotiating the relationship she had to her thoughts, emotions and behaviours. The unnamed, unconscious core beliefs, grounded in her early life influenced her view of their arising. Implicit to her reactions were full identification with their contents, and therefore self-judgement: 'What does it mean about me that I am having these thoughts?', 'The thoughts *feel* true'. Meditation allowed participants to regard their cognitions as passing phenomena, and not as representative of their identities in totality. This process proved useful to Hannah, who both questioned long-standing, limiting core beliefs and distanced from them; damaging thought patterns which impaired her sense of closeness with her partner were then suspended.

In addition, several participants reported throughout their journeys a reconnecting with their authentic needs and intrinsic values. It seemed meditation facilitated and was part of a broader effort towards self- knowledge. There appeared a positive symbiosis between therapeutic interventions, journalling, group collaboration and meditation. Throughout her journey, Hannah was able to re-connect with her experiencing, through the non-judgement of the therapeutic relationship, embodiment practices and mindfulness. By accepting the truth of her subjectivity and dissolving the guilt she felt for the

outcomes of her previous relationship, she felt more aware of and able to assert her needs in the present. The therapeutic relationship therefore became a conduit through which to learn and apply these skills before their use in her daily life. The 'prizing' offered by the person-centred approach had parallel with the benefits derived by participants from their meditative communities. In many ways, Hannah, and the participants of this study implicitly and explicitly assumed they were alone in their struggles, concerned these challenges may reflect on their inherent worthiness. Spiritual guides and friends validated the difficulty of change, acknowledging that despite the image of the ideal one holds in mind, fear, irritability and a propensity towards 'unskilful' behaviour are all but human. As is frequently discussed in therapy, the trajectory towards one's goals is rarely linear. An apparent worsening can in instances indicate progress, where, for example, there is deeply rooted experiential avoidance. A reconnecting with difficult material can in the short- term be destabilising but lays the necessary foundations for growth. This was learned by Hannah and understood by the long-term meditators; experience taught that residing in chaos can offer its transmutation. Therefore, their paths of transformation, as depicted in the publishable article, involved a relinquishing of prior identities, an increased tolerance for negative emotion and the development of psychological flexibility.

'If someone says to me, what is Buddhism, I refer them to Tolstoy, because he had a great explanation of this, he explains it in terms of this mythical King who had everything but he was bugged by three unanswered questions and so he searched the land for the answer. The first question is, 'What is the most important time of my life?' The second question is, 'Who is the most important person in my life?'. 'What should I do with my life?'. And so, the answer to the first question, from a Buddhist perspective is **NOW**…because the future is a complete illusion, it never actually happens, and the past is gone, you can't do anything about. And the second…the most important person from a Buddhist perspective, is whoever is opposite you at any moment…and finally, 'What should I do with my life?'. Be kind to that person. So, it's very simple, but profound…' (Graham, L32-43, p. 6)

Section 1: Doctoral Research

Abstract

Research exploring contemplative practices and their therapeutic applications has accelerated. Early clinical use included mindfulness- based stress recovery (MBSR), in which mindfulness meditation was concurrent with psychoeducation. Second- generation mindfulness-based interventions (SG-MBIs) have also demonstrated promise. They, however, extend on the earlier generations (e.g. MBSR) by including practices which facilitate the experiential deconstruction of the self, and insight into Buddhist conceptions of 'emptiness'. These techniques are associated with long- term meditation (LTM) and despite their possible psychological benefits, may be destabilizing. Given the increasing interest in the clinical potential of methods pertinent to LTM and the scarcity of qualitative research exploring advanced meditators the current study further explored their lived- experiences. An ancillary aim was to clarify the reported mechanisms of action, outcomes and methods through which practitioners navigated difficulty.

Ten long- term meditators were recruited for participation across several Buddhist, Yogic and secular backgrounds. Semi- structured interviews were conducted. These were then transcribed and analysed using Interpretative- Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The analysis yielded two overarching themes. These were 'Paths of Transformation' and 'Staying the Path; Methods of Containment and Collaboration'. Several sub- themes (group experiential themes) are also illustrated.

The results of the analytic process are then considered in relation to the wider meditative literature. Relevant theoretical constructs are discussed to further illuminate participant accounts. After, the clinical implications of the findings are elaborated.

1.0. Introduction and Literature Review

This chapter aims to provide a foundational overview of the philosophical and psychological literature relevant to the lived-experiences of long- term meditators (LTM's). The necessary meditative terms are defined before discussing the integration of Eastern contemplative traditions into Western psychotherapy. After, the quantitative, psychometric and neurobiological research pertaining to the effects and efficacy of meditation are evaluated. The section concludes by assessing the current qualitative body, before determining its limitations and the present studies rationale in context.

I chose a narrative (including studies by perceived relevancy and by 'telling the story' of the research), rather than systematic review of the literature. A systematic review (comprehensive, ordinarily quantitative, quality or criteria based) did not appear appropriate to the research question (Munn et al., 2018). Not all quantitative data, relating to neurobiological changes for example, were viewed with priority in illuminating the lived- experiences of long-term meditators (LTM's). Although I included some cognitive, neuroscientific, psychometric and neuroimaging research (Berkovich- Ohana et al., 2011; Berkovich- Ohana et al., 2013; Eberth & Sedlemeier, 2012) I emphasised the inclusion of qualitative investigations (Ekici et al., 2020). As the current research is qualitative and seeks to understand the convergence and divergence of participant experiences elaborating these within the literature review seemed relevant.

Luders et al. (2012), for example, conducted a neuroimaging study into alterations of the brain anatomy of long- term meditators. Specifically, they detected that in comparison to the control group LTMs had increased cortical gyrification (the extent and pattern of cortical folds). In addition, the degree of folding was correlated with the number of years meditated. Although research of this kind evidences the physical changes that occur due to long-term practice, their link to the psychological and experiential is less direct. For this reason, several studies such as this were omitted from the literature review and a narrative analysis was selected.

After conducting a literature search using the search terms below, I discovered there was little qualitative research exploring the experiences of LTMs. I then conducted a review of recent investigations (i.e. Ekici et al., 2020). These sources provided leads to additional references appropriate to answering the research question (e.g. Gordon et al., 2018).

When selecting quantitative studies to include I targeted recent meta-analyses to provide a broad overview of the effects of meditation and detailed additional literature on the techniques likely used by participants (e.g. loving- kindness and emptiness meditations) (Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012; Zeng et al., 2015). I selected qualitative research which referred directly to the experiences of long-term or advanced meditators (e.g. dissolution of subject/object boundary etc.). These studies highlighted

weaknesses within the broader corpus such as the limited explorations of the challenges and dangers of the meditative journey; their discovery then informed my research rationale.

The journals I sought references from included ‘Mindfulness’, ‘The Psychologist’, ‘Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy’, ‘Consciousness and Cognition’, ‘Philosophical Psychology’, ‘Frontiers in Psychology’, ‘American Psychologist’, ‘PLOS ONE’ and the ‘Journal of Transpersonal Psychology’.

The academic search engines used included EBSCO, City Library, PubMed Central, Research Gate, Social Sciences Research Network and Directory of Open Access Journals. The search terms overall were ‘experiences of meditators’, ‘qualitative analysis of experiences of long-term/ advanced meditators’, ‘the effects of meditation’, ‘the effects of long- term meditation’.

1.1. Defining Meditation

Travis and Shear (2010) observe meditative approaches can be distinguished by the psychological faculties used, how they are applied, and where they are directed. These include reasoning, visualisation, attention and body-centric awareness. Though not mutually exclusive, they can be employed, for instance, effortfully and consciously or effortlessly and passively; meditators have described an ‘effortless effort’ as their practice deepens (Bodhipaksa, 2023). The object, or direction in which these faculties are trained may constitute thoughts, conceptions, imagistic representations of ethical ideals or internal and external arisings. Defining meditation is necessary when interpreting the research base and in revealing the possible processes and outcomes of the current study. The following section, therefore, outlines the key forms present within the wider corpus.

Mindfulness meditation (MM) traces its origins to Buddhist tradition and encourages attendance to the ‘here and now’ of experiencing. It seeks not to alter the contents of consciousness but to observe these contents as they arise (Kabat- Zinn, 1994; Wynne, 2007). During this state of non-judgemental alertness, an attitude of playful, accepting curiosity is maintained towards the mind. ‘Accepting’, in this context, refers neither to grasping for pleasant stimuli, nor resisting aversive experience, but to ‘being with’ all phenomena (Lutz et al., 2008). Inevitably, one’s attention will wander from the present to engaging with narrativization; when this occurs, the meditator is encouraged to gently return to their current experience without self-reproach. The scope of attention can expand and contract; awareness may rest initially on the tactile, sensations of breathing to magnified interoception and after, external stimuli (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Shamatha practice, or ‘peaceful abiding’, within the Vajrayana lineage of Buddhism, has parallel with MM. Once stability of mind has been achieved Vipashyana (insight) meditations are performed (Owens, 2021).

These meditations are designed to perceive the nature of mind and address the 'four noble truths', considered foundational to Buddhist teaching (Bodhi, 1994). The first noble truth is 'Dukkha' and concerns both subtle and salient forms of suffering, ranging from disease and grief, to pining for dessert after a savoury meal, to then regard it saccharine. The second is Samudaya (cause), and asserts Dukkha arises in the presence of craving, attachment and avoidance (Tanha). Nirodha (cessation) suggests Dukka is resolved through releasing Tanha. The final truth (Magga) refers to the 'Noble Eightfold Path' as a means of transcending suffering (Bodhi, 1994). This describes an ethical framework and the development of mind-states which facilitate insight. The constituents of the eightfold path are interrelated; 'Right Speech' may deepen Samadhi (concentration) through fostering positive interpersonal relationships, thereby mitigating distraction (Bodhi,1994).

The meditative literature has often distinguished between concentrative (focussing attention on a single object e.g. breath, flame etc.) and open-monitoring practices (expansive state in which there is a 'choiceless' awareness of all arising) (Lutz et al., 2008); although the former is associated with Hinduism, and the latter Buddhism, they incorporate both ends of the attentional spectrum. Travis and Shear (2010) extend this dichotomy, proposing a third category: 'Automatic Self-transcending', in which the meditative technique is used to transcend its own activity (e.g. 'Transcendental Meditation', TM). TM involves reciting a mantra (a sound void of meaning) where there is not an attempt to empty the mind or monitor thoughts (Forem, 2012). Whilst TM has been viewed a concentrative practice closer inspection reveals the mantra is 'lightly held', facilitating self-awareness as the mantra dissolves (Raffone & Srinivasan, 2009). With the foundational definitions addressed, the next passage provides a brief history of the convergence between eastern practices and western psychotherapy and the value of this symbiosis, concluding with a summary of third-wave approaches (Hoffman et al., 2012).

1.2. Depth Psychology and Eastern Philosophy; The Integration of Meditation into Third-Wave Psychotherapy

As depth psychology proliferated in the early 20th Century, so did the publicization and widespread consideration of yogic texts; Carl Jung (1956), in 'Transformation and Symbols of the Libido', interpreted the Upanishads and Rig Veda. He, at a memorial for his colleague and friend Richard Willhelm, comments on the West's subjugation of the East politically. He makes parallel between the 'spirit of the East' entering Roman culture despite their military conquest of them, and that the unconscious of the Western world is now 'crammed with Eastern symbolism'. Jung notes the invitation of the Indologist Jakob Hauer to lecture on yoga for German psychotherapists as a striking indication of the shifting zeitgeist (Jung, 1932). Freud commented in 'Civilisation and its Discontents' (1935) and 'Future of an Illusion' (1927) on the mystical experience; the 'oceanic feeling', called as such within a letter to Romain Rolland describes the subject/object dissolution. This sense of being 'at

one' with the external world, Freud argues, is a manifestation of the 'primitive ego-feeling', where the infant views the breast, or other sources of need gratification, as part of itself prior to the development of the ego where awareness of separateness arises. Eastern thought has been with Western psychology since its infancy, and contemporary research has challenged Freuds pathologizing of meditative states (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006).

Since the depth analyst's meditation has become an established psychotherapeutic technique, attracting significant interest from researchers (Juliane Eberth, 2012). Walsh and Shapiro (2006) argue the meeting of Western psychology and Eastern discipline has been sullied by misunderstanding, leading to the dilution of meditative practices and philosophies. Likewise, contemplatives may view Western psychotherapy as a superfluous addition to one's daily, spiritual path. The scope, however, for mutual enrichment is vast, and has become increasingly recognised.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) (Koerner, 2012), Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Woods & Rockman, 2021), Compassion-Focussed Therapy (CFT) (Gilbert, 2010) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Segal et al., 2012) arose from this cross-pollination. The '3rd Wave' of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) drew on MM principles. ACT, for instance, is grounded in Relational Frame Theory, Functional Contextualism and B.F Skinner's Behaviourism (Hayes et al., 2001). From this foundation, ACT utilises acceptance and mindfulness practices to mitigate experiential avoidance which is suggested key in the maintenance of psychological difficulty. Through identifying values, and developing goals in accord with them, the client is encouraged to be present with the discomfort of their pursuit, thereby shielding against the deleterious effects of unskilful avoidance (Hayes & Smith, 2005).

'Cognitive Defusion' in ACT, relates to developing methods of reducing the complete identification with cognitive and emotional phenomena. 'Acceptance' involves allowing these to arise and pass, without battle. 'Mindfulness' is a commitment to contact with the present, with open curiosity. 'The observing self refers to a 'stepping back', of becoming the untarnished screen upon which experience is projected. This is the recognition that the transcendent sense of self is fundamentally unchanging relative to the contents of consciousness. 'Values' involves a process of revealing that which is most important to oneself, and 'Committed Action' is goalsetting in service of a meaningful life. These act as a conduit for the development of 'psychological flexibility' and the reduction of 'cognitive entanglement' (Hayes et al., 2012).

The '3rd Wave' was declared at the turn of the 21st Century (Hoffman et al., 2012). Though 'cognitive distancing' was a feature of Beckian Therapy (Beck, 1979), the assumptions underscoring first, and second waves were extended. Rather than emphasising the content of thought and emotion, contextual re-perceiving was encouraged. Controversy was sparked; 'wave' implied the preceding schools would

be sunk, though they were subsumed, and prior techniques now co-exist with contemporary interventions (Heydari & Masafi, 2018). Hayes and Hofmann (2017) describe the profundity of the '3rd Wave' in highlighting the centrality of ontological and epistemological assumptions when researching and applying therapeutic models. The horizon they look toward, given these shifts, is an emphasis on individualised evidence and process-based therapies (PBT) where interschool rivalry is further diminished.

1.3. The Meditative Literature

The interest in meditation, both preceding and following the '3rd wave', has rapidly expanded; 25 established papers were published in 1990, whilst in 2016 there were 400 (Vietan et al., 2018). In the following, the central quantitative, psychometric, neurobiological and qualitative investigations are discussed. These depict the psychological effects of meditation/ long-term practice before funnelling into the lived- experiences of advanced practitioners.

1.3.1. Quantitative Research: The Psychological Effects of Meditation

Eberth and Sedlmeier (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 39 studies to determine the impact of mindfulness meditation (MM) on several psychological variables in non-clinical population. Many prior studies referred only to medical contexts. Mindfulness based interventions (MBI's) constitute various modes of therapeutic action; expectancy effects, psychoeducation or the therapeutic relationship may be sufficient for change (Anderson et al., 2007). The researchers therefore separated studies involving MBI's from those assessing the effects of only MM as previous meta-analyses were limited in this regard (Baer, 2003).

Their selection criteria dictated that studies should not include measurements taken directly after meditation, selecting for the durable psychological impact, over potentially confounding short-term effects. The overall weighted mean effect size for MBSR (r=0.31) surpassed that of pure meditation (r=0.25) indicating elements beyond MM in MBI's were impactful. Their funnel plot, however, brought to focus a large study left of the mean. After conducting a psychometric statistical analysis without this they found 70% of the population variance was attributable to it, suggesting it drawn from a different population. Without this study, the effect of meditation is r=0.27.

Overall, the researchers found the effects of MM to be small to medium sized. The largest effects were in amelioration of negative personality traits (r=0.40), stress reduction (r=0.37), self-reported mindfulness (r=0.34), intelligence (r=0.34), neuroticism (r=0.32), well-being (r=0.31) and attention (r=0.30). The length of MM practice had a positive correlation with effect sizes and although being predictive, failed to reach statistical significance given low power. To reveal this correlation, it was required that randomization, participant numbers, publication year and treatment type were controlled for.

The difference detected between MBSR and 'pure MM' may have been due to expectancy effects, psychoeducation or methodological variation; studies involving MBSR generally included inexperienced participants with greater room for development. Further, those pursuing stress reduction may differ from meditators pursuing ethical ideals such as wisdom, or advanced meditative states. Individuals that select for MM may already have attained a measure of psychological health, and improvements in the variables measured could be partially capped for this population; experienced meditators, for instance, demonstrate enhanced cognitive control when confronted with provocation (Reis, 2008). Where MBSR held strong effects for reduction in anxiety and stress, MM's effects were centred on variables associated with enhanced mindfulness, such as self-reported attentional scores.

The authors, however, were unable to report the motivations participants held; were they meditating for health, psychological wellness, religiosity or self-actualization? In addition to drop-out rates being unavailable, the specifics of the discussions during group MM meetings were absent, which may have illuminated mechanisms of action. They also note the difficulty in operationalizing mindfulness; those with greater meditative experience may view mindfulness differently. Rather than a specific state it becomes an overarching disposition towards living with which ethical ideals are interwoven (wisdom, right speech etc.).

1.3.2. Relationship Between Hours of Meditative Practice and Mental Health Outcomes

Bowles et al. (2022) sought to further clarify the dose-response relationship between meditation and mental health in a cross-sectional study. They recognise that meditation outside of monastic life is a recent phenomenon; monastic Buddhists may practice with an expected time-frame of perhaps 'multiple' lifetimes (with 'awakening' in mind). Implicit to the 'appification' of meditation is the presumption there is a positive relationship between dose, and aggregation of benefits on outcome measures. Relative to traditional practices mindfulness-based programs (MBPs) are less intensive, and of shorter duration, meaning this assumption requires evaluation; evidence for meditation apps is scant, and limited for MBPs (Crane, et al., 2015). Early studies in support of the benefits of long-term meditative practice on ageing, cognition, attention and pain management, though case-controlled, have selection limitations (Lykins and Baer, 2009) and Eberth and Sedlmeier (2012) despite discovering correlative evidence, failed to reach statistical significance.

The first aim of the study was to determine practice identifiers in a wide cross-section of current meditators. One thousand six hundred and sixty-eight meditators in total responded to their advertisements with a mean of 1095 hours of practice and standard deviation of 2365; 1258 participants provided a rating to all listed practice goals. Their participants mainly included a

combination of naïve and experienced meditators within either a Buddhist (41%) or secular (34%) setting. Practice type included open awareness (35%), yoga (39%), cultivation (e.g. metta; 51%) and concentration on breath (87%). The most common mediums used were online content (68%) and meditation apps (54%). In accord with the modern mindfulness movement, the most important goals of practitioners were related to well-being, mental health, relational enhancement, cognitive performance, physical health and spiritual growth. Of note, the results suggest that as participants accrued more meditative experience the greater their prioritisation of spiritual development. Where participants had at least five-years of consistent practice (n=475) the average growth of subjective spiritual growth increased to 73.5. Further, the correlation coefficient between the amount of hours practiced and the self-reported rating of spiritual growth was r=0.25. For all measured variables practice level predicted positive affect (B= 0.269), greater life satisfaction and affect balance with reduced psychological distress and negative affect (B=0.177); this is congruent with prior studies assessing the relationship between practice years and psychological well-being (Baer et al., 2012).

A key finding was the potentially non-linear relationship between practice hours accrued and beneficial psychological outcomes. Their further analysis suggests the relationship is most prominent during the first 500 hours, before reaching a plateau. In addition, their statistics challenge the findings of prior randomised trials in which 40 hours is sufficient to produce clinically relevant change (Khoury et al., 2013). Supporting this were the results of a recent study in which a brief mindfulness intervention was found to have non-significant effects across several relevant measurements, such as negative affect, mind-wandering and trait mindfulness (Haranath- Somaraju et al, 2021). The researchers determined that it may require between 400-800 hours of independent practice to reach clinically significant alterations; more subtle, positive changes, however, may occur before this which provide motivational sustenance. Therefore the substantial difference in how meditation is practiced beyond standardised protocol, and in isolation, may increase the minimum threshold for change.

In addition, the extent of the relationship between lifetime practice hours and recent practice hours on outcome measures was explored. This helps answer pertinent questions; what effects wane after discontinued practice, and what resides? Total practice experience was found to be a more robust predictor for all outcome variables apart from negative affect. The authors note that recent practice may be of greater relevance to outcomes for those who are inexperienced as time spent in meditation may be comparitively inefficient. The research fails to consider that as meditators garner greater experience, the more likely mindfulness is to permeate daily living in the absence of fromalised practice (Bodhipaksa, 2023; Pagis, 2010).

Their final aim was to clarify the practice determinants which most predicted positive psychological outcomes. Many types of practice were associated with these; most salient are the Goenka- style Vipassana (n=146), yoga (n=650) and cultivating practices i.e. self-love and loving-kindness (n=750).

A further predictive feature of practice was meditating at a consistent time (n=372). Though these elements are relevant here, with cultivating practices having an association with positive affect and life-satisfaction, meta-analyses suggest only modest evidence of them for stress and positive emotion (Zeng et al., 2015), and were absent for negative emotion and life satisfaction (Galante et al., 2014). Pertinently, none but a single meditation app suggested beneficial outcomes; users of the 'Waking Up' app scored favourably on satisfaction with life, affect balance, psychological distress and negative affect.

A key consideration when contextualising these findings, and others evaluating meditation, is the possible presence of 'survivorship bias'; that those who derive most benefit from practice are most likely to continue, and are therefore overrepresented within the sample. In addition, a significant proportion of those practicing Vipassana had attended multi-day silent retreats early in their trajectory, potentially enhancing the development of many meditative faculties, and magnifying survivorship bias.

Furthermore, given the study design (cross-sectional, correlational, retrospective), it is not possible to draw definitive causal inferences between the effects of practice on outcomes. It is possible that although meditation facilitates favourable outcomes, those with higher scores on meaures of mental health tend to seek and sustain meditative practices over the long-term. There are, however, practical difficulties inherent to long-term controlled experimental designs, in which there is random allocation to non-meditative and meditative conditions. Further, the sample within this study is not representative of meditators globally, favouring heavily countries with high-relative wealth, such as the UK, USA and Australia.

1.3.3. The Psychological Effects and Efficacy of Meditation Retreats

Although the efficacy of mindfulness, and MBI's are established, meditative retreats have received less attention. Their impact is relevant given their association with long- term practice (Ekici et al., 2020). These can span days, weeks or years and entail several hours of meditation per day (e.g., 8 hours per day). They also tend not to be recommended for clinical populations, given the potentially destabilising effects of such intensity, with retreat centres often screening against enduring psychological conditions (McClintock et al., 2019). Liberati et al. (2009) published research suggesting they may worsen psychopathology in those predisposed.

McClintock et al. (2019) sought to address the limitations of the only prior meta-analysis evaluating mindfulness retreats (Khoury et al., 2017). Khoury et al. (2017), when assessing individual outcomes, found large beneficial effects on scores of mindfulness, depression, anxiety and stress. Medium effects were suggested for quality of life and compassion, with small effects for emotional regulation

and acceptance. Its limitation lay in its inclusivity; several studies included clinical populations, children/adolescents and prison inmates who also tend towards psychiatric morbidity. McClintock et al. (2019) therefore sought to more fully understand the effects of retreats in the population for which they are generally intended (non-clinical adults seeking to optimise psychological health). Their exclusion criteria therefore specified incarcerated or clinical populations, those below 18 years of age and non-mindfulness forms of meditation such as metta. The studies included (n=19) differed across several domains, including retreat intensity (practice time from 16-567h), duration (2-90 days), psychological outcomes measured, design and sample characteristics with many, however, lacking methodological robustness. Four samples included experienced meditators, and two investigated health care professionals such as psychiatrists and health care managers. The most frequently studied retreat was Vipassana (N=14) with Shamatha and Zen coming afterwards. The assessments following the retreats ranged between one week to six months.

Pre to post-retreat analyses found a large, favourable effect for stress and medium effects for mindfulness and reductions in anxiety. Small effects were reported for improvements in well-being and reductions in depression. The follow-up assesments indicated that effects may endure after retreat, with those attending having favourable measurements relative to inactive controls. The changes in measurements of mindfulness may be signifcant, as alterations here are associated with psychological health (Segal et al., 2012). Hedging these results, however, is the inclusion of studies of poor quality where several did not include control conditions, but pre and post-design where improvements may have been merely due to the passing of time or ‘mindfulness practice as usual’. Further mechanisms of action may include long periods of silence, practice contexts in nature, relationships fostered with other participants and extended consumption of a nutritious diet. Future research may benefit from standardized retreat protocols, increased follow-up time frames and the inclusion of active controls.

1.3.4. Loving- Kindness and Compassion Meditation (Metta)

Since 2009 there has been a sharp uptick of interest in Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) and was viewed a method through which to outmaneuver the ‘hedonic treadmill’ (return to well-being setpoint after a positive event) (Diener et al., 2009). This practice is designed to foster what in Buddhism are called the ‘four immeasurables’. These are unconditional loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Zeng et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis in an attempt to clarify prior investigations of LKM’s effects; of the 25 reviewed studies 17 assessed the effect of LKM on daily positive emotions. Though both randomised-controlled studies including a wait-list control and non-randomised-controlled studies had medium effect sizes on these parameters, the results varied across them all, from no significant difference to large effect sizes. The results gathered at follow-up, however, suggest the positive emotion accrued after intervention were maintained.

The results imply that exercises focussed on fostering compassion (for the suffering of others) showed a lower, relative estimated effect size than loving-kindness practice. Possible reasons are intuitive; generating compassion requires imagining the suffering of others where LKM involves visualising their well-being. During compassion meditation one is asked even when in the centre of their own suffering, to extend compassion to others, adding to the emotional demands (Lutz et al., 2009). The limits of quantitative measurement may be apparent here; although self-reports of positive emotion are reduced, less tangible, life-enriching modes of being may have been experienced.

Again, expectancy effects here are difficult to control. LKM specifically asks participants to engender states of warmth, and well-wishing, which may lead when self-reporting to positive bias. Koopmann-Holm et al. (2013) suggest that rather than increasing the salience of the emotions in question, LKM and MM generate value and meaning around their experiencing, creating a perception of their magnification. There remains limited evidence as to the effects of long-term LKM practice where many participants had received short-term training, and were novices to the exercise, despite Klimecki et al. (2013) failing to detect an association between time practiced and outcomes. They recognised, however, the unreliability of self-report when practice was conducted by participants at home. The result, in which no significant relationship between length of intervention and daily positive emotion was found, may have been partially attributable to the limited number of studies available and low-power. LKM demands a variety of psychological steps; there may be individual differences in receptivity to its effects and practice quality, where improvements experienced differ despite similar practice time (e.g. fostering loving-kindness may be dependent on the capacity to visualise).

Cohn and Fredrickson (2010) added to a previous randomised controlled trial which suggested a causal link between LKM and increases in positive emotion (PE), life satisfaction and improvements in mental and physical health. It was novel where other studies had not gathered daily emotional data. The priority of the follow-up research (1.5 yr) was to explore whether participants had continued to practice LKM after the experimental interventions end, and what the effects of discontinuation or continuation were on outcome measures. They found that 34.7% of participants continued to practice at follow-up, suggesting the practice may remain affirming, useful or enjoyable and reported greater positive emotion in their daily reports. In addition, those who did not continue maintained the psychological resources and positive emotions (PE's) they had developed, providing some evidence LKM may outpace the hedonic treadmill. PE's also correlated with the minutes spent meditating per day and that early positive remotional reactivity to the intervention predicts continued meditation. Though offering potential insight into PE's as a predictive marker of continued practice, this may be indicative of surviviorship bias, in which those predisposed to higher PE's maintain practice.

1.4. Conceptualising the Ineffable; Mystical Experiences and Non-Dual Awareness (NDA)

Here, the psychometric research connecting the quantitative and qualitative reports are charted; they assist in clarifying the states achieved by long-term meditators (LTM's) by establishing a common language through which to interpret their experience. The mystical experience is oft documented throughout human history, where its depiction across varied sources suggests similar themes (Maclean et al., 2012). Despite occuring spontenoeusly, long-term meditation, fasting, dance, yoga and psychedelics may facilitate them (Hood et al., 2009). The 'Mystical Experience Questionnaire', based on Stace's conceptual framework (1960), aims at capturing its qualitative dimensions: 'Ineffibality'/ paradoxicality' (i.e., the difficulty inherent to communicating the experience in language, and the resulting use of seemingly contradictory statements in its attempt), 'Internal Unity' refers to 'undifferentiated awareness' or unitary consciousness, 'external unity' describes dissolution, unification with the external world, 'non-temporal' and 'non-spatial' suggest a sense of transcending time and space, 'inner subjectivity' is the perception of the presence of life in all things, 'objectivity and reality' alludes to the noetic aspect (that the experience suggests a deeper truth, is more real than 'reality'), 'sacredness' (i.e. holy, divine or sublimity deserving of reverence) and 'positive emotion' such as deep grattitude, joy or serenity (Maclean et al., 2012).

'Pure Awareness' and 'Non-dual' awareness (NA) are overlapping concepts, and elements of the mystical experience. Where one may conceptualise the duality of their experience through subject-object distinctions, NA is defined 'a state of consciousness that rests in the background of all conscious experiencing- a background field of awareness that is unified, immutable, and empty of mental content, yet retains a quality of cognizant bliss' (Hanley & Nakamura, 2018). Although free from discursion, emotion and perception NDA retains a meta-cognitive dimension, where there is awareness of awareness without thought.

Although not necessarily determined by the length of meditative experience, allusions to 'pure awareness' or 'pure consciousness' have often been referred to in the literature on contemplative disciplines, and by long-term practitioners (Travis & Pearson, 2000). Gamma and Metzinger (2021) note this state describes the 'meditator's experience of consciousness as such, wherein they are non-conceptually aware of being aware'. This 'contentless' experience has featured heavily in Eastern experiential, religious and philosophical traditions with the associated language (e.g. 'enlightenment','emptiness' or 'awakening') (Suzuki, 1970). They observe that the 'phenomenological taxonomies' of such conditions have therefore been founded in context of these worldviews, despite the historical shift in which millions of Westerners practice and identify secularly (or as 'spiritual, though not religious'). Little psychological research has explored 'pure awareness', tending to be primarily descriptive (Metzinger, 2020). Here, however, the authors sought to bridge the phenomenological aims of prior qualitative literature and quantitiave modalities through their

psychometric ‘Minimal Phenomenal Experience Questionnaire’. The findings of previous research were often congruent with the traditional, eastern corpus where states of pure awareness were defined by ‘unboundedness’, ‘serenity’ and loss of sense of space and time (Hanley & Nakamura, 2018).

Of 3627 responses from participants, 1403 answers fit criteria. Participants ages ranged from 17-88, with a median of 52 and were split evenly between men and women. The population was non-clinical, practicing mainly within Vipassana and Zen traditions, originating majoritively from England and Germany. With every increase in meditative practice by 10 years, there was an increase in likelihood of an experience of pure awareness by 2-5%, and being male reduced the likelihood by 4%. A 92-item online questionnaire was used to capture the phenomenological characterization of the experience among participants through factor analysis, where 12 factors accounted for 44% of total variance.

The researchers coin, in Factor 1 (‘Time, effort and desire’), the term ‘dual mindfulness’ (DA), which refers to the phenomenology of identifying as a meditator and seeking a goal state where a sense of agentic effort (physical/mental) gives rise to the subjective experience of time. This may be characterized, for instance, during focussed-attention meditation, as becoming distracted, noticing, re-remembering the desired state and re-focussing. Where narrativisation has occurred the sense of passing time remains. Their factor correlations found F1 negatively correlated with Factor 2 (Peace, Bliss and Silence) and Factor 8 (Emptiness and non-egoic self-awareness). F2 describes the sense of ‘pure being’ in which there is generally a sense of peace or serenity and silencing of the discursive mind or goal orientation. Factor 8 is of particular relevance from a philosophical view and describes the experience of ‘pure knowing’, devoid of a sense of self and without an object. ‘Emptiness’ (Sunnata), retains a significant position in Buddhist philosophy (Thrangu & Tashi, 2011). Metaphysically ‘emptiness’ refers to the insubstantiality of phenomena, and their lack of intrinsicity. Subjectively, this may involve the experiencing of the here and now ‘without the slightest trace of conceptual overlay, namely to the distinct and crystal-clear phenomenology of seeing and perceiving out of timeless silence’ (Gamma & Metzinger, 2021, pg. 33). This may also include states of full-absorption in which only pure awareness remains. It is therefore intuitive that a reduction in dual-midnfulness is associated with increases in F2 and F8, where absorption increases, and agentic effort decreases.

1.5. Theories of Mindfulness, Meditation and Psychopathology

The proceeding models provide a framework for understanding the mechanisms of action with which mindfulness and meditative techniques/ interventions operate. This further situates the results of the current study, where possible participant processes and outcomes are explored.

Whilst Ontological Addiction Theory (OAT) is a construct of psychopathology, it represents a recent movement towards integrating advanced Buddhist insight into current therapeutic paradigms (Van Gordon et al., 2018). OAT hypothesizes that ontological addiction (i.e. 'The unwillingness to relinquish an erroneous and deep-rooted belief in an inherently existing 'self' or 'I' as well as the impaired functionality that arises from such a belief') is caustic propulsion, motivating individuals to butress their ego-identity through status acquisition or compulsive aversion. Given the impermanence inherent to mortality and arising phenomena, attachment to them results in suffering; non-attachment removes the self-centre upon which this 'addiction' develops (Shonin et al., 2016). Wisdom- based practices derived from Buddhist teaching seek to address this; where concentrative techniques or mindfulness may help ground the mind, they may not elicit insight into ultimate reality like insight meditation, and therefore the true source of suffering (Van Gordon et al., 2019).

Vago and Silbersweig (2012) developed the S-ART (Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation and Self-Transcendence) to clarify the underlying mechanisms of MM practice. Adding to Holzel et al.'s (2011) neurobiological investigations and deriving their foundational principles from Western and Buddhist psychological theory it proposes psychopathology stems partially from biases in self-perception (Chiesa et al., 2013); mindfulness functions through ameliorating these biases and is defined not as a single state, but a skill, operating in tandem with other beneficial cognitive qualities. Here, for instance, alterations in meta-awareness may lead to deviations from automatic responses (self-regulation) and therefore improvements in prosocial behaviour (self-transcendence).

The S-ART model (2012) assumes the effects of MM occur due to six mechanisms. 'Intention and Motivation' are the underlying agentic aims to maintain meditative awareness. 'Decentering and non-attachment' describe the distancing from cognitive process, and willingness to neither attach, nor avoid, arising phenomena. Thirdly, by regulating attentional networks one becomes more effective at processing information related to self. The fourth process refers to an attenuation of emotional experience, where changes in their experiencing and processing alter their evaluation. Through memory consolidation more adaptive patterns of responding occur via increased awareness, exposure and therefore extinction. Finally, positive social behaviour is facilitated through increased empathy and mentalisation. This model focusses on how mindfulness induces hedonic well-being (increases positive emotion) through a reduction in psychopathology (Huta & Waterman, 2014), though the mindfulness-to-meaning theory (MMT) refers both to hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (the ability to generate meaning throughout life) (Garlandet al., 2015). MMT proposes that mindfulness exerts change through decentering. When confronting challenging life events mindfulness expands awareness and mitigates full identification with negative thoughts or emotions. This broadening permits the processing of non-negative factors and a re-evaluation of the narrative associated with the

negative event. As such, and with continued re-appraisal, greater meaning may be derived from life with enhanced eudaimonic capacity and appreciation for positive life-experiences.

Though both models provide persuasive hypotheses, the evidence from which they are drawn is limited (Ekici et al., 2020). The S-ART framework references neurobiological research which compares experienced practitioners to non-meditators; although changes in neuroanatomy, cognition and affect are observed the effects of Buddhist ethics, the context of practice, community or tradition are comparatively unexplored (Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015; McCown, 2013). MMT also fails to acknowledge the relevance of context, despite hypothesizing as to the long-term effects of MM whilst referring often to research with meditation-naïve participants (Garland et al., 2011). Further, S-ART has included Buddhist concepts in theory, such as perceptual clarity, without drawing on the experiences of practitioners as evidence. These weaknesses are frequently present in the wider literature, highlighting the necessity for specifying technique, capturing experience, and exploring context (Vieten et al., 2018).

1.6. Qualitative Investigations of Long-Term Meditation and the Potential Adverse/ Challenging Experiences

Despite recent, growing acknowledgement of the utility of further qualitative study, it remains limited relative to the quantitative literature. In addition, previous qualitative research has tended to explore short-term mindfulness- based interventions (MBI's), studies involving several traditions and long-term practices which did not specify meditative technique (Ekici et al., 2020). Holzel et al. (2006) attempted to address these limitations through the grounded analysis of experienced Vipassana Goenka (VG) meditators. Where VG uses focussed attention towards the sensations of breathing, and systematic body-scans towards this end (Hart, 1987), Vipassana Mahasi (VM) involves flexible, open-monitoring towards all arising phenomena beginning with the physicality of breathing (Mahasi, 2016). Practitioners described increased compassion and acceptance towards self, enhanced psychological functioning and prosocial effects. Ekici et al. (2020), referencing that only a brief of Holzel et al's (2006) were available, sought to capture a fuller account of participant developmental journeys, and mechanisms of action through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). In addition, the prior reviews of Vipassana meditation centred generally on VG, and an analysis of only those practicing VM may illuminate factors underpinning change in long-term mindfulness practice.

To this end, the authors interviewed four Dutch meditators (white, two female and male, all having completed higher education to bachelor's or above) accruing between 2220-12,418h of VM experience, ranging between 5-40 years of practice. To participate, practitioners were required to be above 18 years of age and to have at least five years of daily VM practice (either formally, or when engaged in daily activities). It was also required they attended at minimum two 10-day long VM

retreats and maintained formalised practice at least three times per week whilst having performed an integration of VM into their work, relationships or daily engagements. Though VM constituted their fundamental practice, all participants also practiced loving-kindness meditation.

The emergent themes were categorised as **'perceived outcomes'** and **'perceived processes'**. The former describes the perceived effects of VM, and the latter refers to participant descriptions and author interpretations of key mechanisms of action.

Perceived processes: Participants reported journeying 'from imbalance to hedonic and eudaimonic well-being', where states of imbalance ranged from spiritual unfulfillment, to existential crisis, in which life was not seen worth living. After, all participants referred to an intuitive connection to VM leading to positive changes in work, relationships and sense of meaning. Where prior qualitative and quantitative research has tended only to explore hedonic well-being, the findings here are congruent with prior phenomenological research suggesting MM enhances meaning making (Machado & Costa, 2015).

Machado and Costa's (2015) results suggest participants attributed the benefits they experienced primarily to meditative practice. Ekici et al. (2020), however, reported their participants contextualised the benefits they experienced within Buddhist ethical code (the noble eightfold path). Participants who identified both as secular and Buddhist observed the importance of an ethical framework. The former explained the precepts provided 'protection' from unskilful, or maladaptive behaviours; practice informs values, and vice versa. A value hierarchy becomes relevant when selecting alternate, 'skilful' responses.

Participants also deepened their mind-body connection (early indications of a conditioned/ habitual, or unskilful response) and increased their awareness of the mental states of others. The insights practitioners reported had parallel with the spontaneous 'aha' moments that may accompany insight oriented problem-solving, where open-monitoring facilitates creativity (Dahl et al., 2015; Lebuda et al., 2016). These insights often occurred during meditation; Peter developed renewed empathy and compassion towards his father, who tended towards isolation after experiencing war. He described a softening and warmth around his heart, and a greater attitude of forgiveness.

Practitioners who were considered 'advanced' desribed greater 'insight into the nature of reality'. Vipassana, being insight oriented, would be aimed at realizing all things are 'unsatisfactory, impermanent and devoid of intrinsic existence'. Anna explained, for instance, that without Vipassana she would not have been able to understand or experience 'no self'. Tim describes during practice a ceasing of all conceptual overlay; 'you can sit but don't know who are are…that you're sitting…the difference between an arm and foot. You just feel sensations that are changing all the time…'. These experiences, from a Western perspective, may be viewed pathological; a dissolving of sense of

boundary between self and other, or loss of appraising autobigraphical self-reference may be superficially interpreted dysfunctional (Feise- Mahnkopp, 2020). This view, however was absent in participant accounts. These experiences were contextualised within Buddhist teaching and viewed a sign of spiritual progress.

Participants also observed the development of 'equanimity', which appears to transcend both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being as categories of psychological health. Tim notes the term can be misunderstood, where beyond being a 'transient mental state' equanimity is an enduring quality of mind in which insight allows for stable residing through potentially chaotic, shifting phenomenology. Equanimity appears to arise in conjunction with advanced practice, perhaps reflecting conceptions of Buddhist flourishing (Sukha) in which insight into reality permeates daily living and facilitates mental balance (Mahasi, 1994).

The final 'perceived outcome' was of 'physical and interpersonal challenges'. Where the trend of prior research leans toward the benefits of meditation, both challenging experiences and deliterious effects have been comparitively unexplored (Van Gordon et al., 2017). For some, the pain of sitting and walking meditation was almost unbearable; this then became 'grist for the mill' with Peter remaining present with the pain, whilst appearing to decenter and non-attach.

There is little research on the association between meditative practice and interpersonal relationships (Creswell, 2017). Where this has been explored, it has been generally positive though participants here described feeling misunderstood, and alienated from others in pursuit of spirtual development. Where 'others didn't see' him anymore, Peter also did not accept the way that others lived. The interpersonal difficulty described here has also been reported in previous research assessing long-term Vipassana meditators (Shapiro, 1992).

The **'Perceived Processes'** by which these outcomes occurred include 'cleansing' the mind and 'Decentering and non-attachment'. This 'cleansing', Peter explained, was like the peeling of an onion, in which gradually, with greater awareness of the body, feelings, mind and dhammas, the 'defilements are taken away'. The Satipatthana Sutta is a key Buddhist text which provides instruction on developing mindfulness making reference to the categories which require contemplation (body, feelings, mind and dhamas) (Goenka, 1998). This suggests Peter's view of process/mechanism has been informed by these works.

'Decentering and Nonattachment' relates to VM altering the participants relationship with the contents of consciousness. They describe an observing mind, in which thoughts and emotions were given space to be experienced then pass. Tim describes 'non- attachment'; he explains wanting and not wanting 'creates pain…unrest… anxiety' and can be unlearnt, as it has been learnt. By being

present with passing phenomena his unreactivity to wanting and not wanting disarms it, thereby reducing suffering.

Although informative, the process through which VM leads to insight remains opaque. Within a Buddhist context, acquiring insight into impermanence, for instance, may require alternate conditions to an experiential understanding of 'emptiness' or 'no-self'. IPA studies exploring Meditation Awareness Training (MAT) suggest that through developing mindful awareness, and attempting to locate the 'self' in relation to experience, or arising phenomena, no residing self can be found (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015; Van Gordon et al., 2016). Further study is needed to more clearly capture how insight into the nature of mind, or minds of others occurs. What occurred during practice, or over the course of acquiring experience within a meditative context, for example, that allowed for the arising of spontaneous empathy, compassion and forgiveness?

A further limitation of the current study, despite its idiographic focus, is that the findings may not generalise to the experiences of advanced practitioners in other traditions, given they were only of Dutch origin, practicing VM. In addition, the degree of influence on 'perceived outcomes' of Buddhist philosophy, Sanga (community) and LKM remains unclear.

Full et al. (2013) interviewed expert Theravedan meditators (Sotapannas) within the Burmese tradition, and analysed their reports through Mayring's Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2007). Their aim was to determine the changes induced by insight (vipassana) practices on perception. They observed the limited research here may be because perceptual change generally occurs in the advanced practitioner (Ledi, 2007). In addition, previous research has tended to explore meditors only within a Western context (Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012); 16 of the 18 participants were monastics, providing greater insight into the possible effect of an immersive environment. The perceptual changes experienced overlapped with prior reports (Ekici et al., 2020; Gamma & Metzinger, 2021)- these were in 'quality of perception', 'comprehension of interdependences in perception processing', 'cessation of subject/object-based perception' and 'non-conceptual perception'. The first category was by participants expressed as an increase in 'clarity' whereby emotions, thoughts, sense perceptions and their interrelation could be observed and de-identified from. The second denotes experiences in which the perception of an object is based less on the intrinsicity of the object, but by the mentality of the perceiver. UJ said in his report 'The world you see depends much on your mood, your personality, and your outlook…when you are fearful it becomes an unforgiving world.'. The collapsing of subject/object based perception was viewed as a cessation of the illusion of dualism, that subject and object are not 'separate, independent, entities'. Finally, the key change described was perception without abstraction or conception. When Jhana (absorption, concentration) and attentional parami (capacities) are developed categories of objects dissolve into what Theravada Buddhism calls Kalapas (atomic experiential components) (Ledi, 1999). Under further phenomenological investigaton these

reveal ‘ultimate reality’, and are preceived as ‘motion, space and at times, consciouness’ in which the possessive ‘I’ resolves into the experiencing of mere process. As DD expl ‘There is no-one who investigates…it is all in a process and this process has not any essence of its own’.

Previous research into perceptual changes caused by mindfulness is limited, differing in methodology and sampling, tending towards quantitative measurement and recrtuiment of relatively inexperienced practitioners. The sugested perceptual changes included greater perceptual discrimination (MacLean et al., 2010) and visual sensitivity (Brown et al., 1984). Suzuki (1964) notes, congruent with Buddhist teaching (e.g Soto Zen), that generally for deep change to occur experience, alongside conscientious practice is key. Pagis (2010) found that only one of his 60 participants (an advanced meditation teacher) reported experiencing Buddhist insights directly such as nonself, in a sample of upto 30 day (Vipassana) retreat attendees. A risk scientifically, is that those who are primed by Buddhist concepts may be more likely to generate certain experiences on their basis. Although Buddhist literature makes clear that insight requires not belief, but empirical exploration and direct experiencing, the relationship between priming, expectancy effects and experience remains unclear. Despite this, the power of these peak experiences can have profound and long-lasting effects, and require greater exploration (Mahasi, 1994; Vieten, et al., 2018).

Kjellgren and Taylor (2008), in an IPA investigation of four experienced (mean: 26.5 years practice) and four inexperienced Zen practitioners (one year practice), aimed to rectify the dearth of literature on the trancendent experience. In addition, by comparing inexperienced and experienced practioners the authors sought to determine if stable trait stages are part of long-term zazen practice whilst further delineating the possible stages of meditative development, as evidenced in prior research (Walsh, 1995). Zen meditators were selected as Zen practice in particular may help develop and fix emergent traits (Wilber, 1999). In addition, although there is overlap between Zen sitting and Vipassana open-monitoring, participants did not practice LKM, thus removing this potential confound and allowing for the discovery of universal mechanisms of action. Each of the thirteen super-ordinate themes found in the resulting analyses were then categorised by experience level (experienced v inexperienced).

The super-ordinate themes ‘Zazen’ and ‘Meditative States’ for instance, were chacterized by inexperienced meditators as struggle, effort and a need to attain concentration. Although there was curiosity and a desire to understand, the aim was to achieve a particular meditative state in accord with the agentic effort described by Gamma and Metzinger (2021). Experienced meditators, however, accessed an ‘unlimited, silent and bright state’ where the duality between mind and body dissolved. With this, sense of temporality and agentic effort ceased and ‘the relaxed attention continued into normal everyday life’. Prior quantitative evidence provides support for these experiential markers; experienced meditators perceive less difference between their ‘normal’ state than inexperienced meditators (Cahn & Polich, 2006). While the initial effects include the ‘development of inner

strength' and 'fewer thoughts followed by a calmer state of mind' experienced practioners may confront previously innaccesible unconscious feelings during meditaton, synonymous with the upending and salutationary effects reported by Ekici et al. (2020). Overall, six of the thirteen themes indicated permanent, stable change had occurred in advanced practioners with the meditative state imbuing daily life beyond external to formal sitting. The generalisability of these findings are limited, however, as the impact of the personalities of practitioners, their mystical experiences during highly concentrated meditation and the consistency of their practice remain unclarified (Holzel & Ott, 2006).

Van Gordon et al. (2019), aware of the centrality of Sunyata (emptiness) in Buddhist-derived practices, observed it had received little empirical attention; a mixed method design was used in which 25 advanced meditators were provided psychometric questionnaires and 12 of these underwent semi-structured interview after being stratified and randomly selected from affiliation (i.e. Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana). Emptiness can be interpreted in several ways metaphysically, though 'interconnectedness' is central to its comprehension (Van Gordon et al., 2016). Given, for instance, that the human body is composed of the same elements comprising the universe, and is dependent upon them it is 'full of all things but empty of a self that exists inherently or independently'. Emptiness is therefore related to non-self as if a subject is deemed empty of a residing self, then so must the object given the mutual dependency of the constructs. The control condition was asked to perform only mindfulness meditation for 45 minutes without contemplation or analysis of emptiness or emptiness-related themes. The data derived from interview were analysed using grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967); participants were asked to contact researchers as soon as possible after completing a meditation on emptiness and were asked questions on cultivation (e.g., 'After having given rise to the experience of emptiness, what steps did you take to maintain it?') and meaning (e.g., 'How did the practice help in terms of your spiritual development?').

The advanced practitioners stated that meditating on emptiness is a staple of spiritual nourishment, and as more vital than other contemplative forms where its effects permeated daily life. The participants, to produce experiences of emptiness, prepared through concentrative, contracted meditation; this helped stabilise the mind. The investigative phase involved, phenomenologically, the search for the self and after, residing in the flux of immediate experience: 'When I look I see all things, but I don't see a self.'. Here, participants observed time and space as relativistic: 'The self is the reference point from where people conduct their lives. But if you take it away, then all other points of reference -including time and space- fade away…Time no longer exists. How can it? So where is this present moment that I keep hearing about?'. After this experience, participants described 'Compassion farsightedness' where whilst dwelling in emptiness their perspective becomes expansive: 'A sense of responsibility and love springs up. It requires no effort. It's love for all things…' and 'Existence is happening. It's unfolding in front of you and you're watching it. But you're also part of it…All things and life forms are included in your view. And the sense of love and

compassion is overwhelming…'. Perhaps counterintuitively, given the absence of a sense of self, participants maintained volition over the length and and content of meditation. Quantitatively, emptiness meditation outperformed MM on measures of negative affect, positive affect, compassion, mystical experiences and non-attachment. It is posited that where there is no central self as a referent, attachment towards the 'other' wanes, thus allowing the practitioner to transcend their perception of duality. The reduction in negative affect may be due to reductions in self-oriented thinking (Shonin et al., 2014). The length of the meditation on emptiness did not necessarily predict the depth of the experience, suggesting a non-linear dose-response.

It should be noted, the psychometric assessments have not been designed with consideration of the advanced practitioner, and that participant perceptions of emptiness may have been influenced by a Buddhist religious framework. In addition, though the authors acknowledge the difficulty in operationalising an 'advanced' practitioner, and in acquiring a large sample with insight into emptiness, specific information of practice length is unavailable. They note that 'being advanced in terms of meditation experience is not simply a function of years spent in training, self-professed proficiency and/or titles awarded by a given Buddhist tradition.'; there is evidence that LTM's are inclined to conceal abilities, enlightenment experiences and insights due to ethical considerations and Buddhist cultural norms (Van Gordon et al., 2019).

Van Gordon et al. (2018), as no prior study existed exploring meditation-induced near-death experiences (MI-NDE's), recruited 12 Buddhist meditators with sufficient experience to induce them. The effects were studied longitudinally over three years and as compared to control conditions produced significant increases in non-attachment. The grounded analysis of participant experiences provided credence for this, whilst suggesting participants had volition over duration of the MI-NDE and had multi-layered, spiritual 'non-world' encounters. This provides further evidence for the seperation that exists in novice and advanced practioners, whilst highlighting the significance of non-attachment in generating beneficial outcomes.

Ataria (2015) sought to further examine the sense of subject/object boundary in advanced, senior meditators. The fundamental question the author posed was, as a matter of experience, 'where do we end and the world begin?'. Given meditation may facilitate accurate introspection and the fine discrimination of subtle sensory experience twenty-seven experienced practitioners were interviewed (participants were between 24-67 years of age and comprised 17 males and 10 females) (Ataria, 2015). Research suggests the capacity for introspection and the length of meditative experience is positively correlated (Fox et al., 2012). The authors note that the analytic methodologies geared toward accessing pre-reflective experience are derived from the mindfulness corpus and that guiding their participants in bodily awareness would be unnecessary (Depraz et al., 2003; Petitmengin, 2006). Although the schools of Buddhism to which they belonged varied (Theravada, Zen etc.) all

participants practiced a mindfulness in which an open, choiceless awareness of the present moment was maintained. All participants had over 10,000 practice hours; three had more than 20,000 and two more than 25,000 and interviews were analysed in accord with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Participants, before being interviewed, were asked to meditate for 30 minutes before having a short break. They then entered mindfulness for five minutes and were questioned about this experience; prior pilots suggested that reflecting on practice beyond five minutes reduced introspective accuracy.

The relationship between the senses and sense of boundary was explored, with sight seemingly sharpening our seperateness from objects more than any other: 'When I close my eyes, the boundaries are less tangible; there is no visual situation that defines them'. Ordinarily external stimuli produce a sense of boundary, where if one perceives an object there is a subject. M.K, however, describes during meditation an instance in which this boundary disolves; 'It was an ice-cream truck or something like that…this sound was no longer coming from an object that was over there, an icecream truck or whatever. It was pure sound that was happening in my mind.'. M.K notes that with the collapsing of subject/object, and as the sound is held entirely within awareness the perception of the sounds distinct location or distance also evaporated.

Participants also reported 'diffused boundaries' during mindfulness in which 'The body is not in contrast to the space that is seemingly outside of it. It feels more like a flow' (I.L). I.L found that as mindfulness progressed, so did the experience of fluidity and flexibility. The advanced practitioners described their subjective experience 'leaking out' or 'as if they contain the whole world within their minds'. A further theme were variations in the sense of ownership, and therefore boundary; 'ME Versus MINE'. A.T explains that 'the sensation in my leg does not feel as it is in me…. It is not 'me'-this sensation. The foot is mine. But it is not me'. Here, A.T, during the meditative state reports that although the body is one's own, it is not HIM in totality. This has relation non-dual teachings; the experience of not identifying with the body-mind, but being the awareness in which the body-mind is contained (Spira, 2017). Beyond variation, the results imply a 'Loss of the Sense of Ownership'. Phenomenologically, participant reports suggest a variation of an out of body experience in which the 'egocentric- bodily perspective' discontinues (Ataria Y. , Where do we end and where does the world begin? The case of insight meditation, 2015); 'I see myself sitting, I hear myself speaking, but I am observing myself from the outside' (A.N).

The sample from which these data are derived are small and homogenous, perhaps affecting their generalisability. In addition the verbal accounts are limited; the interviews emphasised the experience of diffuse boundaries during meditation, focussing less on their impact in daily life (work, relationships etc.). The data also fails it illuminate the effect of this on participant narrativisation; how do they view their life circumstances in response to these changes? How have these experiences

informed their ethical views? What influence does meditative community (Sanga) have on the phenomenologies perception?

Ataria et al. (2015) aimed to further explore the research aims of the above study, as analyses of variations in sense of boundary (SB) are few. In addition, where Ataria and Gallagher (2015) assessed the involuntary change in SB from 'normal' to closed and rigid through trauma this study made the voluntarily flexible and open SB its focus (Ataria et al., 2015). The question it therefore poses is 'how does it feel, phenomenologically, to exist without an SB?. To answer would require a practitioner capable of moving volitionally between the spectra and inhabiting them with sufficient stability to reflect in real-time with sensitive accuracy. The single participant of this case-study, S, (the most advanced practitioner of the prior study) had over the course of 40 years accumulated 20,000 hours of experience within the Satipathana and Theravada Vipassana schools.

S has also participated in cognitive, neuroscientific and and neuro-imaging studies in addition to fMRI and MRI research (Berkovich- Ohana et al., 2011; Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2013). These evidenced that S's resting-state neural activity significantly differed from controls and credenced his ability to shift his state of consciousness. This 'resting state' is characterized by the activation of brain regions termed the 'Default Mode Network' which includes the medial temporal lobe, prefrontal cortex, anterior and posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus (Raichle et al., 2001). These areas rest when engaged in tasks requiring attention and activate during mind-wandering and autobiographic processing such as past or future oriented cognition (Buckner et al., 2008). fMRI research has indicated generally that several types of meditation, including mindfulness and Vipassana reduce activity in the DMN (Pagnoni, 2012). These findings were butressed through EEG oscillatory findings; advanced Vipassana practice and task oriented focus reduced Gamma (25-45 Hz) in the frontal-midline cortical areas (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2012).

During pilot the researchers determined three distinct and stable levels of SB. The first was the 'default state', the second was termed the 'dissolving of the SB' and the final was the 'dissaperance of the SB'. The interview with S was analysed in accord with grounded theory, in which there are no apriori hypotheses and the researcher retains strict proximity to the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). S' default state differed from non and novice practitioners: '…after years of meditation, to be honest, my normal consciousness of no longer automatic about boundaries.'. In this state, however, there remains a separation from 'inside to outside', though he describes lacking a distinct physical body-sense/ proprioception. In the latter stages SB becomes more flexible the distinction between 'inside and outside' becomes lower resolution. In accord with prior reports, the sense of temporality also weakens and dissolves, with sense of time described as a 'mirror reflection' of the sense of boundary. Expressed differently, the experience of time passing is closely linked to the sense of self (Zahavi, 2006). Congruent with these descriptions S explained the sense of angency, location and self

disintegrated as the SB entered the final stage. However, the SB's dissolution allows for the experience of bodily feeling, and the retention of the touching/touched perceptual interrelation. S states, that when distinction disappears, 'I become absorbed into the background, meaning the whole world without any separate entity…dropping distinctions, dropping interest in any boundaries or limits, dropping habit and automatic sensor-reality'. The discontinuation of an egocentric perspective is exemplified: 'there's no personal point of view, it's the world point of view, it's like the world looking, not ME looking, the world is looking…I am part of the world, so there is no need for protection.'.

This study, however, has several limitations. This is a case-study and despite S' unique introspective capacities, the experiences of one individual are not generalisable, despite the convergence of several fields. This is further affected by the ability of the analysts in interpreting the reports of an advanced meditator within a Buddhist context, who may use language uninterpretable or untranslatable through a Western lense. In addition, given their unique experience and introspective abilities, replicability of results through the general population may be difficult.

Shaner et al. (2016) conducted an IPA investigation of six women who had been meditating for over ten years (criteria dictated this should be for a minimum of 20 minutes per day where in any given year only five days were missed), where prior investigations had not homogenised sex and had emphasised an Eastern context. In addition to considering the lived experience of long-term meditation and the meaning held by the practitioner, the authors also queeried motivation and adherance to practice. The themes found were 'Consistent and Mindful Adherence to Ritual and Technique' (this highlighted the importance of formalised consistency as a conduit for spiritual development), 'Role of Teacher/Mentor' (for participants mentors provided a normalising role for when experiencing challenge, acted as a guide and indirectly held them accountable to practice), 'Cultivation of Self-Awareness' (through increasing self awareness participants reported 'a greater sense of what's going on inside…which things trigger me…I'm not driven as much to behaviours that are harmful to myself or to the people around me'), 'Increased Equanimity, Compassion, Acceptance of Self and Others', 'Transcendent, Peak Experiences', 'Cultivation and Deepening of Personal Spirituality', 'Life Purpose and Meaning' (reports of practice informing career choices, sense of meaning and depth of relationships) and 'Challenges and Barriers to Meditation' (a wandering mind, the pressures of day-to-day threatening consistency). Despite its superordinate category, all six participants experienced an increase in equanimity, compassion and acceptance of self and others. Through the reduction in reactivity afforded by deepening self-awareness Janine noted 'interior calm, the ability to stay present, deep listening' and the ability to communicate more effectively, with more kindness. The peak experiences were characterised by self- dissolution, an awakening of senses, oneness with the world and spiritual connection to something greater. Although the findings of this research are in accord with empirical, quantitative and qualitative investigations there is limited data

as to the influence of practice context and management of difficult psychological experiences (e.g. dissociation) (Ekici et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2019; Bowles et al., 2022).

Schlosser et al. (2019) aware the expanding research base has focussed primarily on the benefits of meditation, observed psychologically unpleasant experiences are increasingly reported in the literature. Prior research investigating meditation related difficulties has consisted majoritively of case reports and incedences of extremis (e.g. mania, psychosis, depersonalisation, panic and clinical deterioration) (Castillo, 1990; Chan-Ob & Boonyanaruthee, 1999; Epstein & Lieff, 1981). Shapiro (1992) found that of the 27 participants who attended a vipassana meditation retreat 7.2% discontinued due to adverse effects (the only current prospective study assessing adverse effects).

Of the 1232 regular meditators surveyed (the largest cross-sectional study on adverse experiences to date) 315 stated they had experienced negative, unpleasant mental effects due to practice. The results suggest they were less likely in female and religious participants. Those more likely tended to regularly practice 'deconstructive' forms of meditation such as Vipassana, and had attended at least one retreat. The participants described an altered sense of self or the world, anxiety, fear, dread, terror and distorted emotio-cognitive phenomonology. This highlights the importance of continuing to expand the lexicon of psychometric assessments when assessing negative meditative experiences, hedging the view of mindfulness as a panacea and establishing appropriate, clinically relevant methods of addressing difficulty. In addition, the participants were defined as regular meditators if having been consistent for only two months; future investigations may be required for LTM's to determine how challenges were navigated.

Pritchard (2016) observed MBI's have derived inspiration from the Burmese Mahasi slant of vipassana meditation (Mahasi, 2016; McMahon, 2008). Although MBI's have demonstrated efficacy in treating a wide range of disorders they are designed generally for the novice in mind (Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012). Noting the general trend in meditation research has been neurobiological and psychometric, the author used qualitative narrative techniques and thematic analysis to explore the lived experiences of 11 individuals (6 male, 5 female, ranging between 41-74 years of age) deemed advanced by qualified Mahasi instructors (Josselson, 2011). They were required to have achieved at leats the 11th stage of higher equanimity, termed sankharupekkha- nana in Pali (Mahasi, 2016). Seven primary themes emerged from the data, which were categorised into processes and insights; 'Meditative Experience', 'Transformation', 'Mental/cognitive processes', 'Disturbing emotions', 'Relationships', 'Morality' and 'Living Life'.

The 'disturbing emotions' and accompanying emotional distress could occur, for instance, during a long-term retreat in which the practioner acquires insight into suffering (dukkha-nanas). Calvin and Doug described, as their insight into impermancence deepened, a profound and persistent sense of fear, anxiety, misery and disgust comparable to the 'dark night of the soul'. Calvin added that in

ameliorating this suffering, continued 'training of the mind and heart' are paramount; our cultural choices are drug like and therefore palliative (work, opiates, relationships etc.). This theme also relates to the importance of meeting emotions such as anger, fear, shame with sharp presence, for example, to resolve anger before it blossoms into further corrosive mental phenomena and destructive behaviour. 'Living Life' describes the embededness of meditation in routine, where rather than pining for circumstances to be other than they are in either a past or future moment, present-centred awareness imbues personal relationships and work, serving as a safegaurd against the conditioned automaticity of 'unskillful' responses.

Congruent with the limited qualitative research assessing the impact of long-term meditation on relationships, a throughline was drawn in participant accounts; via non-judgemental awareness, tolerance and acceptance of difference arose, 'allowing people to be…and not convince them or change them' (Ekici et al., 2020). In friendships, greater acceptance of oneself fostered forgiveness for the unskillful behaviour in others. Participants also described changes in the meaning of relationship, where isolation was not commensurate with loneliness; idle chatter with others which may be rooted in 'self-serving attachment' could more quickly lead to loneliness and seperation than being alone. Although this research sought to address the lack of qualitative investigation in advanced practitioners there are limitations; the study provided little detail as to the motivations for transitioning between less, and more intense meditation practices, is dissertational and provides insight only into Mahasi practitioners.

1.7. Study Rationale

The quantitative, psychometric and neurobiological investigations of long-term meditative practice though proving informative, are greater in number relative to the qualitative literature (Ekici et al., 2020). The current study, therefore, aims to step towards remedying this discrepancy and in addressing the limitations of prior qualitative investigations (Ekici et al., 2020). In addition, neuroscientific enquiry benefits from a mutually supportive bi-directional relationship with phenomenological methodology (Varela, 1996; Vietan, et al., 2018); the introspections or experiences of LTM's can converge or diverge with existing psychometric data or neuroimagining. For instance, increased activation of the pre-frontal cortex is associated with greater attentional control over time and this is reflected in the experiences of long-term practitioners (Berkovich- Ohana et al., 2011; Ekici et al., 2020).

Third-Wave therapeutic approaches such as Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) utilise meditative principles to facilitate self-awareness, mitigate experiential avoidance and reduce anxiety (Hayes & Smith, 2005; Segal et al., 2012). While early research tends towards stress reduction and short-term MBI's ACT encourages insight into the nature of the mind partially consistent with Buddhist insight meditation (e.g. Vipassana, Zen etc.)

(Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Hayes et al., 2012). Where secular MM may focus on the alleviation of negative symptoms (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression), Vipassana aims at 'liberation' from the self or 'enlightenment' through long-term practice contextualised within Buddhist philosophy and community.

The aims and experiences of the long-term, advanced meditator likely lay in contrast to those pursuing practice through third-wave approaches, westernised meditation apps and MBI's (Bowles et al., 2022). Buddhist philosophy and practice continues to inform our therapeutic paradigms and meditative techniques have been increasingly suggested by clinicians to clients. Second generation MBI's (SG- MBI's), Meditation Awareness Training (MAT) and Wisdom- based Interventions (WBI's) represent a theoretical, psychological and clinical bridge between the aims of early MBI's and advanced Buddhist insight into the nature of self and phenomenological reality (Van Gordon et al., 2019; Shonin et al., 2014;). Meditation, however, is neither benign nor a panacea and rather than being regarded a mere tool, necessitates vigilance when applied therapeutically (Shapiro, 1992). SG-MBI's include practices beyond mindfulness such as meditations on emptiness and deconstruction of the self; these are associated with long- term practice and may be destabilizing (Van Gordon et al., 2019; Pritchard, 2016;). The paucity of research investigating the experiences of long-term practitioners in Western contexts therefore requires addressing; as interest in meditation grows, so may the experiences and challenges associated with long-term practice such as a modified sense of self (Ataria, 2015). Further exploration may allow clinicians and clients scope to derive greater benefit from meditative practices, navigate challenges and mitigate the risks associated with pathologizing contemplative development.

In sum, prior qualitative investigations convey that participants developed greater insight into the nature of self and reality (Ekici et al., 2020). This includes both a conceptual, and experiential understanding of impermanence, interdependence and emptiness (Van Gordon et al., 2019). Across the corpus, there were repeated references to mystical states, 'non-dual' experiences and the discontinuation of 'subject/object' perception (Full et al., 2013; Kjellgren & Taylor, 2008). Further, findings suggest that advanced meditators cultivated equanimity in tandem with hedonic and eudaimonic well-being and that meditations on emptiness (associated with long-term practice) improved positive affect more significantly than MM (Gordon et al., 2019). Several processes were associated with these effects including deconstruction of the self, decentering and open-monitoring (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015; Van Gordon et al., 2016).

This research base, however, remains limited in clarifying the processes and outcomes of attaining insight (mechanisms of action) and the synchronous effects of Buddhist ethical code (the noble eightfold path). Relatedly, the experience of integrating a voluntarily flexible sense of subject/object boundary into daily living, and the impact of LTM on personal relationships has been comparatively

unexplored and may help develop WBI's (Ataria, 2015). Further, samples were often small and homogenous reflecting only a subset of Buddhist traditions, techniques and nationalities (Ekici et al., 2020). Additionally, the role of Sanga/ meditative community, 'transmission experiences' and 'spiritual guides, teachers or mentors' in long-term meditative development has been neglected (Vietan et al., 2018). Although the scarcity of literature investigating challenging experiences has been increasingly addressed, their overcoming in the context of dedicated practice requires attention, where for instance, commitment can place strain on interpersonal relationships (Creswell, 2017; Shapiro, 1992). The dearth of research exploring the phenomenology of transcendent, prosocial or psychologically beneficial states has also been highlighted (e.g. samadhi, sukkah, equanimity, open-heartedness etc.). Their differentiation may offer 'new insights into cognition and perception that can only be reached through expanding contemplative science' (Kjellgren & Taylor, 2008; Vietan, et al., 2018, p. 14).

This study endeavours, therefore, to add to the current, limited qualitative research base by addressing the following question: How do long- term practitioners of Eastern meditative traditions experience the benefits and challenges of their paths, develop insight and integrate learnings into their daily lives? The aim is to understand the reported processes, outcomes and phenomenology of their practice, in context of their personal narratives.

2.0. Methodology Chapter

2.1. Introduction

The central, orienting research question is: '*How do long- term practitioners of Eastern meditative traditions experience the benefits and challenges of their paths, develop insight and integrate their learning*?'. This chapter explores the philosophical underpinnings of my methodological choices. To make visceral my understanding, I trace IPA's lineage and provide a summary of its phenomenological history. It offers a rationale for IPA's use, modes for assessing its quality and a balanced critique of alternate qualitative approaches. Intrinsic to IPA is the assertion that the researcher is not uncoupled from the researched. When reflecting I speak in the first- person, conveying that my subjectivity is woven throughout.

2.2. Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

The 'philosophy of science' seeks to clarify the theoretical foundations of scientific procedure. Ontology refers to the study of reality and 'being', asking foundationally 'what is knowable? and 'what is the structure of reality?'. These 'realities' span several layers of analysis including the psychological, cultural and political. Epistemology contends with how we know, developing theories of understanding (Fletcher, 2016). Willig (2022) observes these subsume our methodological assertions regarding the validity and reliability of truth claims; one's epistemological position should be congruent with their research questions and remain mindful of epistemic limitation. Idiographic and nomothetic are terms used to define research foci. With Greek semantic origin, the former describes the individual, and the latter refers to the general, where detecting trends, or universal 'truths' underscore intent. Idiographic research, however, captures individual complexity, deemphasising causal inference through operationalising and controlling variables (Smith et al., 2009).

An ontological 'realist' posits a cause-and-effect relationship between the reducible elements and variables that comprise reality. Relativism, however, may hold a realist, materialist view as myopic, questioning the premise of objectivity, suggesting instead perspectival multiplicity (Willig, 2022). The 'naïve realist' assumes that through research objective reality is measurable and knowable, whilst the 'radical relativist' disavows 'truth' claims, stating this a non-singular, dynamic, linguistic, socio-cultural construct (Sciarra, 1999). Critical theorists argue that truth is embedded in socio-political and historical contexts where power is at centre (Ponterotto, 2004).

Epistemologically, positivism is associated with realism, developing through the reactionary intellectualism of the enlightenment period in the 18th and 19th centuries. Descartes (1644) and Locke (1688) helped found the view of the individual as sovereign and of an objective, knowable world

(Larrain, 1979). This spawned the hypothetico-deductive method, in which there is an iterative process of theory development, hypothesis generation, quantitative testing, statistical/empirical interpretation and theory amendment. Interpretivism is associated with relativism and states that reality is undivorceable from the subjectivity the perceiver. This shows that the investigator co-creates the investigated. The constructivist goals are therefore idiographic, and hermeneutical in which meaning is intersubjective, and discovered through reflection (Ponterotto, 2004). A double-hermeneutic, for instance, occurs where the researcher is interpreting the participants interpretations of their experiencing.

McGrath and Johnsons (2003) observe the prevalence of positivist methodology in the psychological sciences, noting the natural sciences from which these have been derived are increasingly abandoning 'in favour of other perspectives that better deal with time, causality and other issues' (pg. 31). They hold that although each epistemic position harbours limitation, there remains great scope for mutual enrichment and caution against methodological dogmatism. Beyond the fallibility of our individual sense perceptions, critics of positivism argue that values, beliefs and attitudinal quality both filter and alter reality. As post-positivist, post-modernist and constructivist views have evolved, so have the recognition of the complimentary, empirical advantages of qualitative study. Although outcome measures have clear utility, psychometrics remain an abstraction of textured subjectivity. Participant accounts in this research highlighted the value of illuminating the idiographic; whilst improvements in 'hedonic well-being' may have been suggested by the quantitative literature (nomothetic) the multi-layered, lived- experience of one's practice impacting the felt-sense of grief, for example, would have been missed.

2.2.1. Critical- Realism and the Current Research

Critical-realism (CR), emerging from the paradigmatic tension of the 1980's (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), is consistent with post-positivism, sitting between constructivist and positivist ontologies (Bhaskar, 1989; Bhaskar, 2011). Epistemological and ontological, CR posits the reality that exists beyond consciousness though present, is not entirely accessible given the fallibility of measurement and human comprehension (Bhaskar, 1975). Further, perception of reality is shaped by one's value structures, heritable cultural views and historical context (Finlay, 2006). Bhaskar's (1998) criticism of positivism for its expounding of the 'epistemic fallacy', is also applicable to constructionism, given both 'reduce reality to human knowledge, whether that knowledge acts as a lens or container for reality' (Fletcher, 2016, p. 182).

Fletcher (2016) explains CR stratifies reality into three categories. The 'real' refers to causality; the linked, causal chain of events occurring at the structural and objective level. These are then partially observed, or experienced at the 'empirical', through one's perceptual apparatus. The 'empirical' subsumes the interrelated causality of meaning making, decision making and action; it is therefore

viewed a transitive level of reality. The 'actual' describes explicitly the world of occurrences; whether they have been perceived is immaterial, as they exist outside perception. Beyond the physical CR also holds the qualia associated with subjective experiencing as real; Willig (2013) notes that although experience is shaped by interpretation or attitudinal quality and therefore possesses a constructionist dynamism, it retains its reality to the individual.

The current research and my personal philosophy are aligned with the critical realist position. The experiences of long-term meditators are viewed as 'real' and the reviewed quantitative and qualitative findings are perceived as possible approximations of the 'true' effects or experiences of meditative practice. In addition, despite IPA's idiographic emphasis, the individual can inform the general, therefore addressing both the reality of one's lived experience, and the possible universal mechanisms of action of long-term practice. Willig (2019) states CR 'takes the view that the data we collect can provide us with information about the underlying structures that generate the phenomena we are interested in, but that data never simply and directly reflect what is going on at a deeper level' and that therefore the researcher is tasked with navigating the complex, multi-faceted tension between the observable and unobservable (Willig, 2019). I therefore remain cognizant of the insufficiency of language in relaying subtle states and meanings, and of my fallibility in interpretation. Although Schleiemacher (1998) states that one's interpretations can lead to a greater understanding of the participant than they have of themselves, this remains an imperfect capturing of their subjectivity.

Fletcher (2016) suggests 'retroduction' as an analytic strategy consistent with critical realism which involves deductively searching for 'demi-regularities' within the data. These are comprised of scattered, broken patterns or trends and are found inferentially. Given my commitment to induction, and the limited research assessing long-term meditators, data-led analysis may encourage original findings and as a result the retroductive strategy was discarded. I therefore selected IPA as I view its procedure as concordant with critical-realism (an imperfect attempt at communicating the 'truth' of subjectivity) and a conduit through which to generate novel research.

2.2.2. Qualitative Research and Counselling Psychology

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described qualitative research as a broad category of empirical processes which emphasise and interpret the experience of participants in specific contexts, settings or environments. Willig (2022) states the intention lay generally in representing both the subtle and salient textures of participant subjectivity. She describes, however, the inadequacy of language in doing so where symbols are mere abstractions of one's rich, inner world. Although all qualitative approaches converge on this aim, their philosophical premises and research goals vary. The investigations of long-term meditators have included, though are not limited to, grounded theory, narrative analysis, thematic analysis and IPA (Ekici et al., 2020; Full et al., 2013). Replicability,

despite not necessarily being the aim, remains challenging in qualitative domains given variations in researcher reflexivity, philosophical orientation and analytic procedure.

Qualitative research contributes to psychological knowledge in several ways, and its methods are in close alignment with the counselling psychology ethos. The BPS professional practice guidelines for counselling psychologist's (2005) states all practitioners must consider, 'the context in which they work and the impact such a context is likely to have on the client's therapeutic experience', to 'make themselves knowledgeable about the diverse life experiences of the clients they work with' and to 'challenge the views of people who pathologize on the basis of sexual orientation, disability, class origin or racial identity and religious and spiritual views' (p. 5). The commitment to exploring individual experience gives voice to minorities and marginalised groups or those suffering from conditions which are unjustly stigmatised. During interview, for instance, matters of race, sexual orientation and identity were often explored in relation to Buddhist practice. These injunctions informed my adoption of IPA, and the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, which emphasise the lived experiences of participants in context of their unique spiritual paths and backgrounds.

In addition, qualitative study helps challenge dominant preconceptions regarding human psychology and behaviour, whilst acknowledging the influence of power, culture and context. Grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), for instance, points toward inductive, theory building and may help develop alternate theories to dominant narratives. Further, metasyntheses involve the combining of qualitative results from different studies thereby buttressing the conclusions that can be drawn. The recent, growing interest in conducting metasyntheses is encouraging, highlighting novel avenues for research (Willig, 2019). I read from this the possibility of making tentative, nomothetic claims from several idiographic papers.

2.2.3. Phenomenology and the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analaysis (IPA)

The current study applies a phenomenological methodological approach (Husserl, 1954). Philosophically, phenomenology has several schools. Husserl (1970) is associated with positivism, Merleau-Ponty (1945) with post-positivism, Heidegger (1927) with Interpretivism and Gadamer (1960) Constructivism (Racher & Robinson, 2003). Beginning shortly before World War 1 it challenged prevailing truth assumptions, declaring its central tenet: 'to the thing's themselves' (Van Mannen, 1990, p. 184). Husserl, drawing from Franz Brentano (1874) believed 'intentionality' the key concept through which to categorise and comprehend mental phenomena or acts (Moutsakis, 1994). For Husserl epistemology is primary and his phenomenology is centred on the 'rigorous and unbiased study of things *as they appear* in order to arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience' (Dowling, 2007, p.132; Valle et al., 1989).

Husserl (1970) defines Lebenswelt (life-world) as the pre-reflective experience, before interpretation. This consciousness of the immediacy of the present, without cultural, interpretative or conceptual

overlay, has parallel with mindful awareness: ‘It is experience as it is before we have thought about it’ (Crotty, 1996, p. 95). Husserlian (1970) eidetic reduction aims to concentrate a mental object or act, reducing it to its primary element. Only after bare experience does reflection and interpretation ensue. In accord with the current research, LTM’s are closely intimate with their pre-reflective experience, perhaps positioning them well to both relay and reflect upon it (Ekici et al., 2020). In addition, the ‘Kalapas’ (bare phenomenological components which constitute experienced reality) they may have accessed, potentially mirror part of eidetic reduction. ‘Bracketing’, derived from the Greek word ‘Epoche’, refers to refraining from presupposition, through clarifying one’s a priori notions, in this pursuit (Willig, 2001).

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), however, questions the primacy of description, suggesting instead the application of hermeneutics in which lived experience involves an interpretative process. Heidegger (1927), when using the phrase ‘Being-in-the-world’ (Dasein), refers to the connectedness of meaning and appearances in consciousness, given that consciousness is inseparable from the layers of analysis which comprise human existence. Deriving influence from Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Heidegger drew from existentialist philosophy, observing that ‘being-in-the-world’ is also to reside in a world where societal values and motivational structures affect our phenomenology (Valle et al., 1989). Where Husserl encouraged epoche, Heidegger departs, highlighting the impossibility of divorcing the researcher from the researched. In addition, both are embedded in socio-political/ historical contexts when generating, relaying or interpreting meaning and not immune, therefore, to their influence.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960), a pharmaceutical chemist and philosopher, through studying historical literature, highlighted the influence of culturual convention and historical context on interpretation. He stresses that when interpreting the meaning of a text, refraining from projection, therefore, is not possible. A priori ‘bracketing’ is ambitious at best; our preconceptions of a text may only become clear upon engagement with it. Although the ‘voice’ of the interpreted text may be distorted by projection, one should expect this as inevitable and with continued open-minded consideration, make higher resolution one’s position, to better contrast it against their fore-meanings.

IPA follows a methodical hermeneutic protocol. Given my limited experience in its application, this structure provides a safeguard against the anxiety of misimplementation and provides possible scope for researcher replication. Here, the researcher is interpreting the participants attempt at interpreting their experiencing and the double-hermeneutic can be applied to both verbal and non-verbal expression. Given its commitment to idiographicism, participant data sets are analysed individually, before considering broader, trans- individual themes. First within, then between. Despite this idiographic focus, deep understaning of the particular can illuminate the universal (Warnock, 1987). Giorgi (1992), draws from Mohanty (1989, p. 19) when distinguishing between ‘description’ and

‘interpretation’. He states ‘descprition is the use of language to articulate the intentional objects of experience within the constraints of intuitive or presentational evidence’ (p. 121). The descriptive attitude, therefore, is one of describing precisely that which presents itself ‘neither adding nor subtracting from it’ (p. 121). Giorgi holds, however, holds that interpretation would be the ‘clarification of the meaning of experienced objects in terms of a plausible but contingently adopted theoretical perspective, assumption, hypothesis and so on.’ (p. 122). Inherent to a true interpretative stance, therefore, is acknowledgement of interpretative inexclusivity and fallibility.

Smith et al. (2022) describe a ‘hierarchy’ in which there is the smallest ‘unit’ of experience, followed by connected ‘units’, before becoming imbued with a tapestry of personal meaning. A swim, for instance, may be characterised initially by unconscious experience, conscious awareness of water temperature and then associated meanings, such as the revival of a forgotten identity. Although it is possible to conduct IPA analysis on Dilthey’s (1976) ‘smallest unit’, IPA is more regularly applied to the ‘comprehensive unit’ in which the experiencings greater narrative significance is considered (i.e. how one’s immediate experience relates to the autobiographical self, socio-cultural landscape etc.). Congruent with my research aims, I intend to capture both small, and comprehensive units to illuminate both the viscera of participant experiences, and the meanings they attach to them in context of perceived processes, outcomes, practice culture and communities; ‘Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen.’ (Smith et al, 2022, p. 31). Although IPA has been criticised for relying heavily on interpreting language, it is both experiential and discursive. It holds there is a chain of experience, and that our emobodied emotio-cognitive responses are altered through expression of them, which in turn alters our experience. The aim, therefore, is in determining how individuals make sense of their experience, as opposed to how their narratives are constructed linguistically (Smith, 2011).

The ‘hermeneutic circle’ is instantiated in IPA, and draws from the writings of Sartre (1956) which refer to the interpersonal aspect of experience. It describes the changing relationship between the parts of a whole and the whole itself at several layers of analysis (Smith et al., 2022). The part, for instance, may comprise an individual word, whilst the whole describes the sentence in which this word is contained. In ascending order, the meaning of a word is derived in relation to the sentence, which is understood in context of a paragraph. In this way, IPA emphasises an iterative rather than linear processing of the data. With each iteration, the meaning of the part in relation to the whole and vice-versa remains dynamic and develops further coherence. There is an injunction, however, for interpretations to be closely allied with the data and that when bracketing a ‘cyclical approach’ is required, to view one’s preconceptions with greater clarity (Smith et al., 2020).

2.3. IPA Criticisms

Despite my convictions in its use, criticism has been levied against IPA for insufficiently drawing from phenomenological philosophy (Giorgi, 2010). Giorgi (2017) has long assessed the purported bases of qualitative investigative frameworks, arguing IPA is not truly phenomenological, and its relation to the hermeneutic tradition is tenuous. Arguing that phenomenology is not inductive, but descriptive, Giorgi (2017) developed the 'Descriptive Phenomenological Method'. This involves a careful detailing of a lived experience and after a psychological, phenomenological reduction. All preconceptions are then epoched, and the presenting phenomena (intuitions) are verbalised and assessed. When analysising participant accounts, this would involve a 3rd person condensation of their verbalising into meaning units, which are then processed sensitively, into their intuited psychological meaning. Stapleton explains, 'The entire force of Husserl's phenomenology lies in the demand that one see what is meant. Phenomenological speech is descriptive speech, whose purpose is not to generate an accurate image of the original, but rather make the original itself evidence to clear intuition.' (1983, pg. 9). This method was considered given the clarity of its protocol, alliance with philosophical phenomenology and capacity to illuminate lived experience though was discarded given its primarily descriptive emphasis. By allowing for creative, yet grounded interpretation IPA provides scope for accessing the lived- experience beyond that which is explicitly expressed. Nero, for example, conveyed the difficulty of living in accord with the Buddhist ideal. The significance of this, however, was only seen fully in context of the entire transcript; interpretations drawn from the data and the hermeneutic circle therefore addressed the research question.

2.4. Rejected Methodologies

2.4.1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), like Thematic Analysis (TA), requires the identification of themes across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2020). RTA, however, allows for interpretation beyond the manifest meaning expressed by participants. In addition, further emphasis is placed on the researcher's subjectivity including their process, reactions and potential biases in relation to the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Given these features it was considered for the current research, as it would have permitted the use of my experiences as an LTM in interpreting the subtlety of participant accounts beyond a descriptive analysis. IPA was selected, however, given its idiographic focus; each case is analysed in- depth individually before considering the whole in order to uncover their unique features (Smith et al., 2009). If I were to focus only on themes across the data set as in RTA, then the individuality in participant journey's relevant to the research question may have been missed (e.g. intersection between practice and national/ sexual identities, idiosyncracies within personal narratives such as the use of meditation as avoidance or physical/ health challenges which were not discussed across all participants, the personal meaning of loss/bereavement etc.).

As discussed, this research is aligned with the critical realist epistemological and ontological position, where the lived- experiences of participants are viewed a layer of 'reality' (Bhaskar, 1989). It also holds that our methodologies will only ever capture this 'truth' imperfectly. By encouraging both the idiographic and the interpretative IPA can inform the nomethetic, and therefore the wider 'truth' (Smith et al., 2009). This research, in converying the connection between meditation and national/ sexual identity or the meaning of bereavement/ loss for example, points towards the capacity of practice to alter one's self- concept more generally. In addition, by regarding the individual with the idiographic depth facilitated by IPA and applying the hermeneutic circle, one may be able to better represent the 'reality' of a particular participants experiencing or narrative arch.

2.4.1. Grounded Theory

Grounded theory (1967) has evolved since conception (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2017), and is now a family of methods (Bryant, 2017). Glaser's positivist, quantitative intellectual history provided an objectivist slant, where Strauss' pragmatism emphasised meaning, agency and linguisticism. This coalescing of constructionism and positivism created a method originally designed by its authors to inspect processes (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2017). From these processes, grounded theory aims toward theory generation (Charmaz & Henwood, 2017). Accordingly, Glaser (1978) emphasises a background theoretical and empirical understanding to enhance theoretic sensitivity. Through induction, the researcher aims to create theoretical categories grounded in the data via an iterative process and to produce hypotheses tested by others. It does not create categories presupositionally or deducitvely by prior empirical understanding; 'Empirical checks' encourage exhausting all potential theoretical explanations for the empirical data, and grounded theory has thus been described as 'abductive'. Although prior meditative research has selected GT, I opted against it due to its theory generative foci; my aims are not to develop new theoretical models of meditative development, but to capture the idiographic, lived-experience of long-term meditators given the dearth of research in this area. Meditative states are subtle and complex; where GT may emphasise context, I aim to explore both context and viscera.

2.4.2. Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analsysis focuses on evaluating the layers of language within discourse, arguing that discourse is the pinnacle of linguistic desription. By revealing the patterns beyond the sentence, for example, the greatest unit of description can be gleaned, therein discovering a global structure (Drid, 2010). This has parallel with IPA in understanding the small, in context of the whole and vice versa. Discourse has since the 1970's, however, refered to a large set of research approaches concerned primarily with language and symbols; though its definition varies across social scientific schools it relates to the 'institutionalised patterns of knowledge that govern the formation of subjectivity'

(Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, p.110). Although the current research has discussed how Buddhist concepts may 'prime' certain experiences, the assumption that institutionalised linguistic constructions impact one's subjectivity is not at centre, given the phenomenological view that pre-reflective experience occurs, and is followed by reflective or interpretative expression. As participant lived experiences are accentuated, I endeavoured to discuss them and their ascribed meanings.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and many deriving from it have avoided formalisation, and difinitive protocol (Foucault, 2000). This lack of structure is unsettling; as a novice researcher clear procedure provides safe passage. Foucault was concerned with how meaning is constructed in interactional environments, such as the 'truth games' of political contexts. Although this scope has been broadened FA requires historical sensitivity, partly contradicting the current goals of accessing lived experience (Foucault, 2010). FA and DA after consideration of their constructionist leanings, were viewed sub-optimal.

2.5. IPA Quality Control

In conducting this research I referred to the guidelines suggested by Smith (2011) and Yardley (2020). Smith (2011) produced the IPA Quality Evaluation Guide, to evaluate the trustworthiness of IPA research, where the scoring categories are 'good', 'acceptable' or 'unnacceptable'. An 'Acceptable' paper has the following criteria:

- There is clear commitment to the fundamental theoretic foundations of IPA. Namely, it is idiographic, hermeneutic and phenomenological.
- The steps of analysis are clear, and therefore apprehendable to the reader.
- The analysis is 'coherent, plausible and interesting'.
- There is sufficient evidence from the text to support the formation of a theme. If there are above 8 participants, then there should extracts from at least three participants for each theme.

A paper is deemed unnaceptable if:

- It contradicts the theoretical principles of IPA, is insufficiently transparent and is poorly evidenced.
- Poor evidence may involve a high amount of descriptive themes from many participants.
- Low- resolution analysis.
- Each theme is associated with a short summation, with one/ two extracts lacking in depth of interpretation.
- No transparency concering method of determining prevalence of themes.

A good IPA investigation:

- Offers focussed, detailed, depth of analysis of a defined topic.
- Interpretation is appropriate.
- The reader finds the analysis engaging and illuminating.

It has been recommended researchers not pursue participants on the basis of a predetermined sample size, and select individuals who have the capacity to richly describe the topic of study (participants were selected accordingly) where analysis of their experiences features both descriptive and interpretative components. It is also emphasised rapport is developed, and an attitude of respect held at interview. To facilitate this, and the above, it is advised pilot interviews are held to develop appropriate technique in preparation.

Yardley (2000) suggests four principles to assess the validity of qualitative research in general. These are 'Sensitivity to context', 'Commitment and rigour', 'Transparency and coherence' and 'Impact and importance'. Sensitivity to context describes awareness of previous literature relating to the topic of interest, in addition to cultural, linguistic and social factors in addition to IPA procedure (Smith et al., 2022). My experience as a meditator, interest in contemplative traditions and assessment of the research literature have enabled this.

Commitment refers to a prolonged engagement with the topic, not only temporaly, but through further immersion. This also applies to the learning of the analytic procedure. My extended engagement in the process of learning to apply IPA, alongside careful consideration if its congruence with my epistemological and ontological views are evidence of this. In addition, my experiences on meditation retreat and continued interest in developing my practice indicate 'immersion'.

'Rigour' is thorough adherence to the analytic procedure, from data collection to analysis or using methods such as 'triangulation' (sourcing intersecting evidence i.e., meditation instructor comments, participant accounts etc.). I spoke frequently to my supervisor to ensure analytic integrity, and adopt technical 'triangulation'.

'Transparency and coherence' refers to the persuasiveness of one's results, and the clear exposition of procedure, ensuring the results align with the research question, and the methodology with philosophical orientation. Here, I explicitly described the steps of my analysis and justifications for specific decisions during hermeneutical interpretation.

'Impact and Importance' relates to the utility of the findings either scientifically, politically or socio-culturally. Through illuminating the lived experiences of long-term meditators clinicians and practioners may be able to better navigate difficulty, and derive therapuetic utlity from the clarified processes and outcomes of meditation. In addition, the research highlighted the intersection of

meditation and identity, which remains a pertinent issue. I intend to highlight these themes by publishing the current research.

2.6. Summary

Relative to other available qualitative methodologies, IPA was considered optimal for illuminating the lived-experiences of LTM's, where it has been successfully used in previous investigations (e.g. Ekici et al., 2020; Shaner et al., 2017).

2.7. Research Design

The following section spans sampling, ethics, analytic procedure and reflexivity. The rationale underscoring each is elaborated. The first stage of this research involved semi-structured training interviews which provided opportunity to improve technique. After, ten interviews were held with LTM's as defined by participant selection criteria.

2.7.1. Data Collection

2.7.2. Sampling Plan and Size

Smith et al. (2009) suggest sample size is dependent on context, and that in certain instances, given IPA's idiographic focus, concentrated samples may be preferable. For doctoral research, however, in accord with Clark's (2010) recommendations (between 4-10 participants), they suggest a minimum of 8 participants. I opted to recruit 10 participants for sufficient depth of analysis, whilst allowing for the detection of novel, emergent themes. In addition, a greater number of participants facilitates the contrast and comparison of experience, where tradition or context vary and differing meditative techniques are used.

Purposive sampling, as opposed to random sampling, is a non-probabilistic method. As I wish to explicate the lived experiences of LTM's purposive sampling was utilised. As explained in the introduction, defining an experienced, LTM practitioner is multi-faceted. Congruent with Ekici et al's. (2020) criteria I opted to operationalise the term through length and consistency of practice.

2.7. 3. Inclusion/ Exclusion Criteria

Eligibility required participants be over 18 years of age, have long-term meditative experience and be fluent in English and be residents of the UK as if issues of risk arose, they could be more adeptly handled with both the participant and researcher here. Fluency was required to facilitate the communication between the participants and the researcher of the complex experiences associated with LTM. As practice develops, the meditative state permeates life beyond formalised practice. To account for this, participants necessitated at minimum five years of daily meditation (either during

formal sitting, or when engaging in life activities such as work, socialising or walking) in addition to continuing to have maintained a formal practice at least three times per week. Those who were suffering from serious or enduring physical or mental health issues such as dependent drug use, personality disorders and schizophrenia were excluded from the study. The pursuit of contemplative practice may be precipitated by suffering, and interviews involved a close examination of participant experiences. These, however, are often connected to a broader, personal narrative and enduring or severe health/mental health concerns may be aggravated by this process.

When determining the inclusion criteria several factors were considered. Although advanced meditative states or insights are associated with long- term practice (e.g. non- dual awareness), long-term practice does not guarantee their arrival. Prior research often highlighted the difficulty of operationalising an advanced meditator given the impossibility of their objective measurement, reliance on tradition specific language and subjective/ teacher reports (Ekici et al., 2020); the use of the number of years meditated in this research allowed for a clear operational definition. In addition, a continued practice of at minimum five years permitted sufficient time for participants to develop proficiency and obtain insight associated with advanced contemplative development.

The current research question, beyond seeking to explore how advanced insight was developed, was open to exploring possible impediments and difficulties of the path. It provided a range of time practiced (between 5y- 40y). By including variance in the length of time, the current study can inform the difficulties/ insights that may arise at different levels of development, alongside that which sustains motivation to practice over the years. Further, by defining an LTM as those with a minimum of five years it expanded the potential pool of participants, where there may have been difficulty recruiting only those with 20 or more years of experience.

When beginning the literature review, a question considered in supervision was whether to homogenise the styles of meditation the participants were involved. Homogenisation may have helped clarify the mechanisms of action, outcomes and experiences associated with a particular tradition (e.g. Soto Zen) where the techniques, traditions and ritual are generally uniform. It was decided that variety within the sample may allow for detecting themes across techniques, illuminate possible universal mechanisms of action and provide a larger recruitment pool. It may be, for instance that separate traditions develop insight into ‘emptiness’ or ‘impermanence’ in different ways. Though the outcomes may be similar, variance in the means could inform and provide optionality if developing a psychotherapeutic protocol derived from them.

In addition, it was viewed that across meditative traditions there is sufficient similarity for long- term practitioners to have parallel experiences. Within the current research, for example, it was found that all traditions before progressing towards more complex visualisation or insight meditations tended to engage in a form of grounding (e.g. Samatha, body scans, grounding visualisation etc.). LTM’s may

have also faced similar challenges in maintaining the consistency of their practices through self-doubt, ill health and the flux of life. Further, across techniques within Buddhist and Yogic traditions a general trend is of concentrated or contracted and expanded forms of attention, the contemplation of scripture or of themes such as impermanence and of obtaining support from the meditative community (Chodron, 2017; Forem, 2012).

I selected for participants who maintained a formal practice of three times a week and had previously brought meditation into their daily lives. This was to ensure they had maintained sufficient commitment to their disciplines for the research question to be answered (outcomes/ benefits/ challenges of practice) whilst accounting for some LTM's tendency to reduce formal practice as the meditative state organically imbues their daily lives. Given that a goal of the current research was to explore how LTM affected participants relationships, work and overarching life-narrative this criterion seemed relevant.

2.7. 4. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the current study was obtained from the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at City, University of London (Appendix D). Despite the reduced risk associated with contraction of COVID-19, the current university regulations and protocol were followed. The research abided by the regulations and guidelines of the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) and the Ethics Guidelines for Internet- Mediated Research (BPS, 2013). It has been conducted according to GDPR and City, University of London's data protection policies.

Participants were not offered financial incentive; my experience in meditative communities suggested practitioners would be eager to discuss their unique journeys in service of aiding others. In addition, participants frequently reported after interview the usefulness of being provided a space in which to clarify, structure and make sense of their experiences. Financial incentive may have also cemented a power differential, in which I was the 'expert' researcher, and they the 'subject'.

2.8. Procedure

2.8.1 Interview and Interview Schedule

Given the research aims, semi-structured, one-one interviews were conducted with general themes orienting exploration (e.g. challenges, difficult experiences, practice in context of community, altered sense of self). A semi-structured 'conversation with a purpose' permitted flexibility for further elaboration of participant experiences and explication of their narratives through additional clarifying or probing questions. As IPA requires 'rich' data, a semi-structure lasting between 60-90 minutes 'granted participants an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 53). Although the creation of an effective interview schedule is useful, effective interview technique holds the largest sway in

generating textured accounts (i.e. probing experience, exploring feelings, thoughts, sensations and emotions, active/ attentive listening, openness to being participant led to foster novel, unexpected insights) (Smith et al., 2022).

It is acknowledged interviews are not an untarnished reflection of participant experiences, but a co-creation, influenced by possible power dynamics, socio-cultural factors and individual preconceptions.

2.8.2. Training Interviews

To improve my interview technique, reduce anxiety and improve the interview questions I chose to conduct training interviews before meeting with participants. I interviewed first a family member, and a *professional colleague* who is also undergoing therapeutic training. I applied the same ethical protocol during these interviews as when undergoing the research interviews. This training allowed for greater fluidity when navigating technical issues, sequencing questions, debriefing, timing appropriately, developing rapport and transitioning from a therapeutic role to a curious interviewer *(e.g. adopting more concrete rather than interpretative summary of participant responses).*

As the research interviews held were semi- structured the preparatory interviews held allowed me to practice and refine probing questions if participants did not elaborate their responses. In addition, they re-enforced the importance of beginning with less complex, technical questions to provide participants the time to 'warm- up' before deeper, narrative driven or experiential questions. For example, I initially had the question 'How has meditation affected your sense of self/ sense of boundary between self and other?' early in the interview schedule. After the training interviews I positioned this later as participants appeared to have reduced fluency in their responses. This sense, and the value of allowing space for participants to develop familiarity and build fluency was confirmed by my professional colleague. In addition, the follow-up question 'How did these insights arise?' after the central question 'What have you learnt as a result of your meditation practice?' arose through the training interview. I observed that unless this was asked, the methods through which their learning occurred may have been omitted, as only the results of their insight were expressed.

2.8.3. Interview Schedule

To create my original interview schedule, I referred to previous IPA investigations (Ekici et al., 2020) and followed the guidelines suggested by Smith et al. (2022). During interview I found that participants who taught meditation would occasionally seek to educate rather than describe their experiences. In response, I asked questions regarding their experiences teaching, as a part of their identity as a long-term meditator.

In accord with the suggestions of Smith et al. (2022) I developed 10 questions for interviews of 60-90 minutes in length. Despite standardisation for uniformities sake, I remained open to possible deviation

or re-ordering depending on the conversational journey. When structuring I avoided closed, leading and excessively empathetic queries, beginning with more descriptive or technical questions and ending with more complex evaluative and contrast oriented questions. This allowed the participants time to 'warm up' before elaborating responses for involved questions which required greater reflection. My first interview schedule was amended after the preparatory sessions. Given the time allowance within interview, I added a final question: 'Is there anything I haven't asked which you think might be relevant to your experience as a long-term meditator?'. Though some participants had nothing further to say, this question elicited on occasion rich exploration.

All interviews were conducted online, through the Zoom conferencing platform. One participant offered to conduct the interview at their residence, though I declined this kind gesture as other online interviews this day would have made travelling the long-distance problematic.

Prior to beginning the interview, I made clear to participants their freedom to discontinue at any time, without explanation, alongside the limits of confidentiality. To provide a trusting space for discussion, I explained there were no right or wrong answers to the questions posed and that I am approaching their experience from the perspective of a novice. Further, I was inspired by a retreat experience in which I observed attendees in conversation; rather than rushing to fill silence, I noticed an ebb and flow in which a covered topic was revisited after as much as thirty seconds of quiet. I therefore encouraged participants to allow themselves, if desired, space and silence for consideration when responding. Rather than viewing silence as conversational breakdown, I offered it as opportunity for processing and exploration; several participants during debrief expressed a liking for this suggestion. I did not propose a preparatory reading of the interview schedule, though would have obliged if asked. On reflection, an explicit option here may have been appropriate. Although I wished to capture their spontaneous responses and was concerned their awareness of future questions may distort current answers, an overview of interview structure may have facilitated further coherence.

When interviews were completed, I ceased recording on both my external device and Zoom. The video recordings of participants were then deleted. I then thanked participants for their time and offered a verbal debrief, and after a written debrief with relevant additional resources if relevant. Participants offered useful feedback on their experiences. A participant with an academic history suggested that, although I had probed for specific instances of participant experiences, that I do this more frequently and explicitly.

2.8.4. Recruitment Process

To recruit participants, I contacted Tibetan Buddhist centres, Zen Buddhist Centres, secular meditation or mindfulness groups, transcendental meditation groups and yoga centres. Using the contact details on their websites I both called and emailed; after receiving a response I described the study aims and requirements for participation. I then provided the research poster (Appendix F) to clarify criteria and

confirm my identity as a City, University of London student and doctoral researcher. The poster was then sent to prospective participants or circulated on organisational newsletters. Either I was provided the contact details of those interested, or my details were provided to them. After, I sent the participant information sheet (Appendix G) and organised a date and time a week following (to provide sufficient space for consideration) for a screening call to discuss any possible questions. During this, the screening questionnaire (Appendix A) and consent forms (Appendix C) were also completed, and risk was assessed (Appendix B). I also described the aims of the research and the possible benefits to meditative practitioners and clinicians, whilst re-iterating right to withdraw. The screening calls proved useful in establishing familiarity and developing initial rapport. Interviews were then scheduled at an appropriate date and time, and participants were informed they would receive a zoom link in due course.

This method provided eighteen prospective participants. One was unavailable due to familial problems, two were excluded *after a discussion with my research supervisor* as they did not meet inclusion criteria (due to enduring mental health concerns and history of self-harm; both had received or were currently in therapy) and five discontinued contact either after receiving the PIS, after the arrangement of a screening call or after the organisation of interview.

During the screening call mental health status was determined through asking participants if they have had any serious or enduring mental or physical health issues within recent years such as psychosis, dependent drug use, personality disorders or schizophrenia. Where these were present, I explained that participation in the study may not be possible, assessed risk, determined whether they were receiving current support to determine the appropriateness of signposting and stated that I would consult with my supervisor to confirm. In addition, participants were asked if they experienced suicidal ideation or the intent to act on these thoughts. Although some participants had described previous suicidal ideation we explored whether these were still present both currently, and within the last years to ascertain their current risk (here they had discontinued for several years or were transient and without suicidal intent).

I also raised publicity through social media, where it was made explicit I was unable to recruit those I know personally given researcher bias. Despite this, one acquaintance asked to participate, was thanked and the reasons for this impossibility explained. This provided one possible participant, who after signing appraising the PIS and signing the consent form did not return contact to an email specifying a time and date for interview.

Recruitment occurred between March 2023 and August 2023, lasting in total five months; interest spiked quickly initially and tapered after the first month.

2.8.5. Participants

Four female and six male participants were interviewed in the current study. Amongst the participants were ordained Buddhists and those who held teaching roles. The following table includes further details as to their practice lengths and types.

Table 1:

Name (Pseudonym) Gender Interview Length	Age	Years meditated	Practice Type	Additional information
Millwall Male 57m	56	9	Mindfulness of breathing Investigation of 'I' Compassion training Loving-kindness meditation Visualisation practices Reflections on mortality Lamrim practice Open- awareness practice Heruka meditation	Did not consider mindfulness of breathing as part of the length of his practice time. Buddhism
Henry Male 67m	50	5	Mindfulness of breathing Loving-Kindness meditation Just-sitting/open-awareness Silent retreats	Cycles through these practices every three days. .
Karen Female 77m	42	11	Contemplation of prayers Placement (sitting with feeling of insight from prayers) Compassion training Visualisation practice Mindfulness of breathing Tantric practice	Buddhism
Eleanour Female 72m	66	40	Raja Yoga meditation 'Thoughts are the gateways to experience' Grounding visualisations	Yogic Meditation
Graham Male 79m	77	30	Shamatha (Stabilisation) Vipassana (Insight) Visualisation Practices (i.e. 'Palace of Patience') Mahamudra Meditation	Tibetan/ Vajrayana Buddhism

			Extended retreat	
Nero Male 77m	64	28	Mindfulness Loving-kindness meditation Visualisation Six element practice Spontaneously cycles between practices	Buddhism Focus on these over insight practices.
Richard Male 62m	50	18	Shamatha and Vipassana Short retreats often	Tibetan Buddhism
Julia Female 54m	69	10	Body Scans Mindfulness/ mindfulness of breathing	Buddhism
Tilly Female 90m	44	12	Visualisation of Buddha figure Six element practice Insight practice Mindfulness Loving-kindness meditation Shamanic practice Retreats	Western Buddhism
Fred Male 73m	63	40	Completed solo retreat of 4 years Mahamudra Dzogchen Mindfulness 'Silent practice' Choiceless awareness Shamatha Vipassana Chenrezi meditation	Tibetan Buddhism

2.8.6. Ethics

Throughout recruitment, screening, interview, transcription and analysis measures have been taken to ensure the safety of participants, informed consent and their anonymity. Confidentiality, data

protection and the health of participants have been prioritised when considering best ethical practices and internet- mediated research (BPS, 2013).

Qualitative research introduces several ethical issues given its intent to illuminate lived experience. I therefore abided by the protocol and procedure of the Data Protection Act (2022), GDPR (2018), BPS (2014), City, University of London guidance and BPS injunctions (2021).

Given all interviews were held online (Zoom), there were confidentiality risks unique to this. Third parties present may overhear the interviews or there may be technical issues during sensitive or activating moments. To account for this, participation was contingent on access to a suitably private environment and methods of navigating technical difficulty (i.e. resume interview through other means, phone etc.). After receiving ethical approval, I amended the application to include the possibility of recording through Zoom to obtain higher fidelity audio, and as insurance via an additional copy; I originally sought to conduct interview on Zoom and record using the Sony ICD-PX370 Voice recorder. As only doing this felt unsettling, I did both. Prior to amending my application, I attempted to determine if only recording audio through Zoom was possible, and after discovering the untenability decided upon deleting the video recording immediately after interview.

The encrypted audio device used to record sessions is password-protected. After the session was recorded I labelled the file using the date and client code. Both the Zoom and audio device audio recordings were then transferred onto a USB external encrypted hard drive and locked in a cabinet at my residence. As the recorded voice interviews were not shared with others, voice recognition did not present a confidentiality risk. Transcriptions, consent forms, screening questionnaires and research data have been stored and analysed on a password-protected laptop. The recordings will be kept until graduation, after which they will be deleted. Information that may identify the participant during interview has been omitted from transcription and pseudonyms have been allocated to participants.

In accord with Smith et al's (2009) suggestions, participants were offered a deadline for withdrawal of data. After consideration, I decided upon two months after transcription; the LTM's eagerly shared their experiences and recognised the importance of research in this domain.

As noted, individuals may be drawn to contemplative development for existential reasons, associated with prior suffering, trauma or distress. Although deemed unlikely a recounting of meditative experiences given their connection to a broader, personal narrative may become destabilising. In addition, given the exploration of challenge, meditative experiences may have been sufficiently difficult to cause distress during recall. It was made explicit to participants that they were able to discontinue process at any time, and not answer any questions posed either during screening or interview without explanation. Both preceding and during interview I endeavoured to build a supportive and trusting relationship with participants, providing sufficient time before interview for rapport.

Smith et al. (2022) suggest ethical caution when conducting online interviews given the possibility of missing how the interview has impacted the interviewee. This was discussed with my supervisor and attendees, and appropriate preventative measures implemented. There were, however, advantages in doing so where I had greater access to more experienced meditators who were understandably unwilling to travel. In addition, two participants had issues with mobility, and online interviews encouraged inclusivity. Where participants expressed emotionality, I paid close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues to assess their distress and suitability to continue. Where relevant I provided additional resources alongside a verbal debrief.

An early interview highlighted the risks outlined and the importance of prioritising participant welfare. During interview, difficult familial material was covered; I became concerned it may be too distressing within a research context. Although participants were notified prior to interview they were at liberty to take breaks when necessary or discontinue I at times offered this explicitly where there were verbal and non-verbal indications of unease. Despite this being anticipated, the rapidity at which it occurred was surprising, and acted as a significant reminder of the sensitivity and tenderness of participant stories. Where this occurred, participants were offered a verbal debrief, further communication with either my supervisor or myself and additional, relevant resources.

Another participant explained after interview, during a debriefing stage, that although they found the discussion useful, we had only just met, which meant a fully elaborated recounting of the impact of meditation on relationships felt too private to share. I expressed my appreciation for this reflection and acknowledged their concerns.

2.9 Reflexivity

2.9.1 Procedural Reflexivity

In accord with IPA principles, I made explicit to participants before interviewing the analytic focus would centre on their experiences as a long-term meditator. As outlined, there were instances in which these experiences were associated with difficult life circumstances and to protect participant welfare, and in ethical discussions during supervision, I considered carefully which extracts to use. My aim was to retain and respect the voice of the participant, whilst guarding against undue exposure. Although one's preconceptions are likely to colour an interpretative analysis, decisions regarding extract usage were also brought to supervision to enhance the effective bracketing of researcher biases (Smith et al., 2022).

2.9.2. Personal Reflexivity

My initial research proposal aimed to explore the effect of a virtual reality intervention for social anxiety in an undergraduate population. This, however, was untenable as after ethical approval Covid-19 restrictions were enforced and face to face research was disavowed. Though the process of

developing a new proposal was challenging, it provided opportunity to pursue a topic of longstanding interest. I have engaged in meditative practice for 11 years and am drawn to Eastern contemplative philosophy. The possibility of experiencing the 'here and now' without abstraction or conceptual overlay was a revelation. When beginning, I believed meditation may have been creating additional anxiety to realise that through greater mindfulness I had become more aware of my minds active resting state. As effort became routine, the sediment settled and I obtained a freedom, and new found relationship with the contents of consciousness. This porousness, however, was not without difficulty.

After reading 'Three Pillars of Zen' (Kapleau, 1969) I was inspired to attend extended retreat. I noticed that after intensive meditation I experienced moments, whilst walking in nature, for instance, of great serenity and connectedness. There were also unanticipated effects, however. At times I observed when in the company of others that increased self-awareness led to uncomfortable self-consciousness. I became more acutely attuned to my emotional and physiological reactions in any given moment, and it remains difficult to conclude if they were magnified, or if my awareness of them gave the impression of magnification. During miscommunication, or subtle social error I observed in higher resolution the contraction of my stomach, or a warm swirling prickle across my neck and cheeks. This attunement also caused an increased sensitivity to incongruence. I therefore behaved more fully in embodied alignment where obscured emotional reactions and intuitions were made clear. This demonstrated that although I derived great benefit, challenging experiences were possible, and that practice should be regarded with appropriate caution and respect.

As I grow a deeper interest in non-dual practices, frequently glimpsing the dropping of subject/object distinction, I begin to wonder about the path that lay ahead. The benefits of my practice, the challenges I have faced, and curiosity for the future are sustenance for my continued interest in the advanced meditator.

During interview, given my interests, awareness of the general literature and prior meditative experiences, I occasionally noticed an impulse to interpret participant accounts through these matrices. When, for example, asking about challenging experiences, my curiosity regarding them and how they were overcome required constraining as in several instances there seemed none to report. In addition, curtailing conditioned therapeutic reactions and maintaining my role as an interviewer required vigilance; when paraphrasing participant answers my summaries on occasion veered from reflecting their precise wording. Further, my interest in the subject/object boundary and 'enlightenment experiences' required bracketing, as there was temptation to linger with these topics. To manage this, I reflected after each interview in my research journal and re-visited audio recordings at relevant junctures to determine the appropriateness of my probing questions or responses.

In retrospect, I question the impact of holding all interviews online, what was omitted and how this has affected the data collected. Face to face interaction may have allowed greater trust and therefore

more elaborated, vulnerable responses. Despite this, participants touched on difficult experiences in their narratives with courage and warmth. In addition, having met and spoken to long-term Buddhists, there can exist a palpable sense of the difference in their consciousness and the transference, atmosphere and subtle, non-verbal cues may have been missed. On two occasions there were technical issues which delayed the interview beginning, and during another, after three quarters of an hour, contact was severed before resuming. The participant here was towards the end of an anecdote relaying his view of the impact of LTM on sense of self. Although these issues were circumvented quickly, and the relevant topic returned to, the disruptions impeded conversational flow, perhaps altering the trajectory of the original explanation.

2.9. 3 Analytic Procedure

As discussed, IPA offers to novice researcher's a structured approach to analysis. Prescription is not compulsory, however, if the phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic principles underscore procedure. In addition to principle are the processes derived from them such as 'moving from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative' (Smith at al., 2022, p. 75). Given my level of experience, however, I opted for a structured approach.

Step 1: Starting with the First Case- Reading and Re-reading

This step involves becoming immersed with the data and ensuring the participant becomes the nucleus of analysis. Although there was option of using transcription software, I dispensed with this as it may have interfered with depth of immersion. Further, I opted to include non-verbal detail in transcription, despite its de-emphasis in IPA, thus facilitating further interpretation. Pauses were indicated through ellipses and additional information was added to exploratory notes. After transcribing, I read and re-read the data. Whilst re-reading, I also re-listened to the original recording to engender the 'voice' of the participant. Throughout the interview, transcription and re-reading process I recorded in either a journal diary or word document my reactions or observations to reduce overwhelm as they arose, to re-centre, enter the participants world and prepare for future steps of analysis.

Step 2: Exploratory noting

This involves 'examining semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level' where, with an open mind, one 'notes anything of interest in the transcript' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 79). Over the course of several readings, I added increasingly layered notings as familiarity grew where emphasis was placed on 'convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance' (Smith et al., 2022, p. 75).

Descriptive noting (black) was allied closely to the participants manifest meaning and were phenomenologically oriented. These included matters which were of explicit importance to

participants such as relationships, events, principles, work, outcomes or processes. Beyond describing the objects of relevance to participants, I also noted the meaning or experience of these objects (i.e. of their meditative experience, of being in a meditative community, impact of meditation on personal relationships). My personal reactions were written in brackets; these included 'foregroundings', where I observed how prior analyses influenced the reading of transcripts after.

Interpretative/ conceptual noting (italics) investigated the why and how in participant accounts. These included the language the participant used (in addition to pauses, or changes in tone), their lived world and the context surrounding the objects of concern, and whilst identifying patterns of meaning beginning to ascribe an abstracted, throughline term. Linguistic noting (underlined) was used to point to that which is of subjective importance to the participant, and included fluency, such as hesitation during emotive material (See Appendix H).

During this noting, a hermeneutic stance was taken in which I engaged with speculative interpretation and allowed space for err through future discards, marking the beginning of the 'double hermeneutic' and the 'hermeneutic circle'. A linguistic comment, for instance, may imply the emotional tone of a prior descriptive comment and inform its interpretation. This process necessitated greater reflexivity, and I therefore included comments relating to personal reactions to the text. These notes were therefore occasionally interrogative, querying at potential meanings, in which 'questions are asked of the data' and provided elaboration in context of wider meanings. In accord with Smith et al.'s (2020) recommendations, I allowed myself provisional 'stretch interpretations' to add depth to analysis. I reminded myself of IPA's commitment to interpretation, providing it inspired from the data; Gadamerian dialogue assisted with reflexivity, where I noted interpretations that were possibly based on my preconceptions. The emphasis was on using oneself to better understand the participant, not vice-versa.

To facilitate immersion, I read through the text and underlined that which seemed important. I then attempted to explain why this was underlined, and what it says about the participants lifeworld. I also wrote what arose after reading specific words or sentences, in addition to the emotional reaction they invoked. After, I used this to inform the participants experiencing. I shared these with my supervisor to ensure analytic integrity and that I refrain from psychoanalytic formulations.

Step 3: Constructing experiential statements

This stage involves the cementation of previous ideas, after having expanded the data set through involved noting. I transitioned here from prioritising the transcript to further consideration of the exploratory notes and this therefore necessitated the skilful completion of the previous stage. The statements are 'experiential' as they relate directly to participant experiences, as well as the expanded conception of 'experience' which includes the ways in which participants interpret/make sense of these experiences. The aim was to maintain the complexity of the exploratory notes through effective

condensation and proved a challenging process for fear of omitting relevant meanings. The 'hermeneutic circle' applied here, as the parts were understood in context of the whole and vice versa; the additional decomposition of exploratory notes into experiential statements required amending throughout this understanding, and the former were occasionally transferred to the latter category (See Appendix H).

Step 4: Searching for connections across experiential statements

Once the experiential statements were drawn in the order in which they occurred during interview, I then began mapping the way these fit together. It was not required all experiential statements be subsumed during analysis. I emphasised statements relating to the experiences of long-term meditators, outcomes and processes. During this stage I initially printed two copies of the transcript, one which was used as a reference and another I cut all experiential statements into separate pieces of paper, which were labelled with transcript page and line number. These were placed on the floor and re-arranged to enable conceptual ordering. After completing this process with two participants, I then organised experiential statements across several word documents and screens instead; I found this more efficient and was still able to hold all in view. During this search I attempted to regard each statement with the same importance. Different clustering's were experimented with, with commitment to their representation of the participants lifeworld. The clusters were organised according to specific meanings, then ordered in relation to connected meanings (See Appendix I).

Step 5: Naming the personal experiential themes (PETS) and consolidating and organizing them in a table

Each cluster of experiential statements were then given a title which encapsulated their essence. They are personal because they relate to the individual, experiential as they refer to participant experiences, or process of sense-making and thematic as they are analytic labels which are abstracted representations of the whole. I then represented each PET in bold uppercase to represent its organisational importance. The sub-themes under each PET were in lower case bold. The key word, phrase or sentence which prompted the experiential statement were included in the tabling.

Given the large number of experiential statements produced, I in certain instances stacked those with similar meaning for simplicity.

'Polarisation' involves clustering opposing or contrasting statements to illustrate the complexity of experience.

'Narrative Organisation' was also used as a referent, when noting the sequalae of either a specific experience or life structure or biography.

‘Functional Analysis’ involved interpreting the way presentational and sense-making strategies were used by participants when relaying experience.

Step 6: Continuing the individual analysis of other cases

The previous stages were then applied to each data set individually, to honour the idiographic underpinnings of IPA. To achieve this, I endeavoured to mitigate the influence of prior findings on subsequent analyses through reflexive, dynamic bracketing. Complete bracketing, however, is likely untenable, and I therefore noted my altered ‘fore-structures’.

Step 7: Working with personal experiential themes to develop group experiential themes across cases

Group experiential theme’s (GET’s) were developed through contrasting and comparing PET’s. The aim is not in finding mean experiences, but points of similarity and divergence via idiographic analysis. I first assessed individual tables of PET’s across several documents and screens, considering broadly parallels and differences to facilitate connection-making. After colour coding each participant there was a repeated process of re- organisation, experimentation and play, where consideration of GET’s further changed during the writing of the results. When a PET did not fit into a GET, I set this aside and determined its location by further analysis. On several occasions, it was required I inhibit the impulse to view the PET’s through the lens of my literature review, whilst imagining the corresponding conclusions drawn in discussion. I referred to PETS and experiential statements for each participant, with notes from each case to provide further detail whilst referring to exploratory notes and participant transcripts. I developed labels for these GET’s and the relevant sub-themes with the intention to appropriately reflect the participants experiencing.

Smith et al. (2022) state the defining feature of a high quality IPA investigtion is the creation of a table which presents GET’s effectively. I intended to capture convergence at group-level experience with clarity, and derive reflective instances individually. Although the GET may represent convergence, its experiential expression at the individual level is idiosyncratic. The table is an ‘interpretative synthesis of my interpretative analysis’ (pg. 101).

It is noted that in larger samples there is difficulty in capturing high-resolution idiographic detail, and divergence across transcripts. To refrain from reflecting only convergence I carefully noted divergence at the individual level; participants under the same experiential theme differed in expression, thereby reflecting the complexity of their accounts. I acknowledge my status as a novice researcher and the advanced skill required to retain the individual voice, whilst reflecting the group.

Levels of Interpretation

A commony observed error amongst novices lies in remaining excessively descriptive, whilst being overly tentative during interpretation. After transitioning from the particular to the whole (group level analysis), the hermeneutic circle was re-instantiated, where specific texts were re-evaluated in light of higher order syntheses.

Langdridge (2007) encourages two mindsets during analysis. The first is descriptive, empathic, asking 'what is it like?' for participants during events or processes, acknowledging the partiality of discourse capturing qualia. The second is of positioning these descriptions in the 'wider social, cultural and perhaps even theoretical context…this aim is to provide critical and conceptual commentary upon the participants' personal 'sense-making' activities' (pg. 104). Further, an interrogative approach necessitates a functional suspicion during application; a 'balancing act' is therefore performed to place as precedent the participants lifeworld and self-expression.

Smith et al. (2022) provide an example of advanced textual analysis. The referenced participant states, 'And I thought well I'm the fittest and I used to work like a horse, and I thought I was the strongest'. A novice may interpret this statement only in relation to social comparisons. Beyond this, the metaphor she uses and after a micro-textual view. Saying 'I'm the fittest' is present tense, perhaps reflecting her conflicted view of self, and difficulty in adjusting to her reduced strength when compared to her siblings. Although not 'expected' from novice researchers, I made attempt to interpret with this level in mind.

3.0. Findings Chapter

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter two superordinate themes and eight group experiential themes are presented. The outcome of this interpretative- phenomenological analysis seeks to illuminate the lived- experience of long-term meditators.

The two superordinate and group-experiential themes are as follows:

1. **Paths of Transformation**

a) From suffering to constructive change; greater serenity, contentment and continuity of meaning
b) Seeing beyond the rigid 'I'; the trials and jubilations
c) Overcoming entrenched patterns and dynamics
d) Residing in chaos; the only way out is in
e) Death, grief and impermanence; renegotiating the relationship with mortality

2. **Staying the Path; methods of containment and collaboration**

a) The deep significance of meditative community; guidance, support and connection
b) Maintaining consistency; momentum, faith and the personalisation of practice
c) Retreats and the facilitation of insight

The superordinate themes are present amongst all participants. The distribution of the sub-themes, however, are not equal (See appendix J).

Overview

In exploring the lived-experiences of LTM's I saw two overarching, interconnected themes. 'Paths of transformation' reflected their journeys of change and insight. The salutary effects of meditation were a part of a larger picture in which the definition, methods, aims and experiences of practice converged and diverged. The full meaning of meditation to participants was as idiosyncratic as the varied narratives expressed. 'Transformation' captures the degree of change. These ranged from increases in psychological well-being to complete alterations in self-concept and perspectives on bereavement/ mortality. Participants explained meditation did not exact these changes in isolation; Buddhist/ spiritual teachings, psychological therapy, journalling and contemplation of life experiences were also conduits. Insight into 'impermanence' and 'emptiness' were attained both 'on and off the cushion' and 'in the head and heart' (i.e. in and outside of formalised sitting; intellectually and experientially).

The themes within, and between superordinate themes are symbiotic (see figure above). By being better able to 'reside in chaos' or contend with aversive experience, participants were more able 'overcome entrenched patterns' through, for example, being willing to attend to their own needs by sitting in the discomfort of conflict with others. Both superordinate themes highlighted the difficulty of long-term practice. 'Staying the path', however, explores in greater detail the methods through which participants maintained their resolve, despite these challenges. The support and validation of meditative community/ teachers was necessary for many LTM's. Retreats were a further tool of practice which appeared to help practitioners 'stay the path' through engendering insight or by developing further faith in the potential of the mind.

3.1.1. Table of Themes:

Superordinate Themes	**Group Experiential Themes**
1) Paths of Transformation	a) From suffering to constructive change; greater serenity, contentment and continuity of meaning *'…to convince me at 25 that somehow spiritual practice was going to be the thing that really would be…the best refuge for me long- term, yeah, no chance. I would have completely blown that off.' (Henry, L28-35, pg.25)*
	b) Seeing beyond the rigid 'I'; the trials and jubilations *'…I've had moments of that actually a much stronger and secure sense of myself emerges, not too much precious funnily enough, it's kind of paradoxical, there's less, less of a egoic self present, but just more…erm, or maybe it's less fragile, it's a surer sense of self, that know's it's liable to change and will change, and moves with that.' (Tilly, L3-10, p.7)*
	c) Overcoming entrenched patterns and dynamics *'…it's still about being compassionate and kind, but just in my own time isn't it rather than an obligation. It was a, a considered offer rather than just an automatic offer.' (Julia, L26-28, p. 17)*

	d) Residing in chaos; the only way out is in *'…it happened gradually, but I can't really see a change in the meditation itself, other than just being more accepting and this, more comfortable with whatever arise without feeling disturbed…' (Richard, L40-43, p.5)*
	e) Death, grief and impermanence; renegotiating the relationship with mortality *'…I guess at the point of when he did pass away, my mind was totally at peace, I'd sort of spent time during the night… doing some mantras and err meditating and things like that and… my mind was completely at peace…' (Millwall, L5-20, p.6)*
2) Staying the Path: Methods of Containment and Collaboration	a) The deep significance of meditative community; guidance, support and connection *'…I don't know exactly how to describe it, but there's definitely a, an energy or something that happens when you know, there's another person erm kind of meditating around you…' (Henry, L16-19, p. 17)*
	b) Maintaining consistency; momentum, faith and the personalisation of practice *'I would add one more thing actually to that answer, just the ermm the discipline of having…meditation time in my day I think I'd, I'd say that it's, my meditation involves having timetabled time whereby I put aside seven times in a day to do this work, and sometimes it's not erm, deep meditation at all but it's there as a part of my day, my discipline…' (Eleanour, L8-14, p. 2)*
	c) Retreats and the facilitation of insight *'…you just start to just get a real intuitive sense by watching and paying attention versus being able to talk to people…you know when you're sitting at breakfast, you kind of sense like, who needs the butter?...Your Metta practice gets really highlighted in being in those types of conditions with other people practicing.' (Henry, L2-11, p. 21)*

3.2. Paths of Transformation

3.2.1. From Suffering to Constructive Change; Greater Serenity, Contentment and Continuity of Meaning

Suffering was for all participants impetus to pursue or maintain meditative practice. 'Constructive' change thereafter included perspectival shifts in life priorities and that which brings lasting well-being. All participants referred to pursuits of 'intrinsic' 'meaning' (eudaimonia) beyond temporary, hedonic pleasure or 'extrinsic' goals. This theme draws attention to participant experiences of both subtle and salient forms of discontentedness, whilst illustrating their general converging, or diverging journeys of insight and development (i.e. greater peacefulness, purposefulness and well-being).

In this passage, Nero conveys the depth and severity of suffering that preceded his arrival at the Buddhist Centre:

'…so… what's the best way of saying this, so we call come to the say, the meditation practice, or a spiritual practice from a certain point, erm, my point, I, I can tell you about it if you want, but, it, it's part of my life story, so, by the time I got the, to the Buddhist centre, I was in, in a bad place, *bad*, *severe distress,* so I come a long way in them years… 28 years, I've come a long way, but a lot *had* to change, and I'm still changing or trying to…' (Nero, L6-13, p.2)

Nero appeared to highlight the necessity and scope of change required, given the intensity of his suffering; 'but a lot *had* to change'. He communicated explicitly the significant progress he has made over 28 years, emphasising this by repeating how far he has come. He later said he had developed a greater sense of peace, and there was no higher path he could have taken. Whilst acknowledging his continued evolution, he points towards its difficulty; shortly after this excerpt, Nero expressed contending with continued feelings of 'ill- will'.

Nero initially speaks hesitantly, and I experienced a growing, anxious tension as he continued. I wondered if this reflected the magnitude of the pain he experienced, self-judgement for persisting feelings of ill-will or possible reticence in revealing them and his life story.

Tilly also reflects on the suffering that led eventually to Buddhism, meditation and the Dharma:

'…so I used to have recurrent depression up until I first came to the Buddhist centre and started learning to meditate…that was kinda the reason I came to the Dharma actually, I came to an MBCT course that was running at the secular mindfulness project… and that's where my journey into Buddhism started.' (Tilly, L40-6, p. 9-10)

Henry, however, explains his mother's death led to his path of practice:

‘… I mean, I kind of came to practice in Buddhism originally when my mom died in 2017 and that, that’s really kind of what set me on the path towards all this…’ (Henry, L16-19, p.13)

Several participants also commented on the futility of anticipating residing contentment in status, wealth, relationships and temporary pleasures. This insight was arrived at through several processes, including observing the mind during craving. In the following extracts I intend to highlight the general transition from these to pursuits of meaning, eudaimonia and contentment.

Henry explained that despite reaching the lauded, conventional, cultural milestones existential ennui remained:

‘As great as those things are, they’re not necessarily going to, get rid of that, I guess spiritual angst of like… is this what life is all about? What’s my purpose in life? And having explored lots of those different things that most people tell us is the thing, you know, if you just find the relationship, you just find love or just find career success…then you’re good. I have love. I have career success. Erm and…that hasn’t prevented me from, from still wondering what’s life about…’ (Henry, L17-32, pg.14)

While Henry appreciates the significance of love and career success, he conveys that meeting the societal criteria for happiness have raised questions of meaning, fulfilment and purpose. He implies that the message culture communicates (‘people tell us’) is that contentment is on the other side of attainment, though for him remained elusive. His three-fold repetition of ‘just find’ conjured images of hands grasping at mist, yearning for form, inspiring comparison between this account and the ‘hedonic treadmill’. He reflected their pursuit does not provide enduring satisfaction and ‘refuge’, but merely temporary happiness:

‘…those things can provide certain… elements of temporary satisfaction and happiness…but nothing seems to provide an enduring… I guess in Buddhist terminology, refuge and so from that perspective…it’s my practice reenforces…my faith in erm Buddhist principle of the Three Jewels…or what our goals in life should be oriented around, erm, certainly that, that’s new in the last five years’ (Henry, L44-49, p. 13)

The ‘Three Jewels’ of Buddhism refer to the Buddha (teacher), Sanga (Buddhist community) and Dharma (teachings); he suggests Buddhist practice and community are now providing an orienting purpose. Shortly after the above, Henry said his process of insight was aided by contemplating Buddhist teachings both ‘on and off the cushion’ (i.e. during and after formalised practice). Throughout the interview Henry pointed towards the importance of awareness in helping unravel the ‘delusion’ of expecting fulfilment from external success and curtailing the ‘unskilful’ action that may arise from it. In addition, he said that he:

‘…kind of ticked a lot the boxes quite young…’ (L14, p.14)

By doing this early in life, he explained this provided time and space in his forties and fifties to reflect on their insufficiency. Later in the interview Henry speaks strongly to his likely unreceptivity to spiritual practice in his twenties:

'…to convince me at 25 that somehow spiritual practice was going to be the thing that really would be…the best refuge for me long term, yeah, no chance. I would have completely blown that off.' (Henry, L28-35, pg.25)

During this passage Henry smiled, appearing to reconnect with his younger self, perhaps reflecting his incredulity; how is it that what he would have ardently dismissed in his 20's has now become a source of lasting purpose and refuge?

Richard echoed that despite external achievement he did not realize contentment, hinting that these cultural criteria were insufficient. He expressed more overtly the contrast between his transformation from unhappiness to wellbeing:

'Yeah, I mean, in general, my life has been transformed. I'm not sure if you can say by meditation…in my experience meditation is just part of a path because…I'm not just doing mindfulness meditation …I'm err following a Buddhist tradition with all the teachings, so all that together, it's clearly changed my life. I was err very unhappy, kind of ahh, sort of miserable kind of person (laughter), not externally but internally because I always had a nice job…erm I got my degree so, but internally I was very miserable, and unhappy, erm, and pessimistic, er but…after that I could see my life change, now I'm more relaxed…I'm happier, I'm more optimistic, and also I allowed nice things to happen… I started a very nice relationship that I'm still with, so, yesterday…we celebrated my 15 years in a, my relationship' (Richard, L21-31, p.6)

Richard's use of 'transformed' (i.e. to change completely) speaks to the scale of positive change (from 'very unhappy' to 'more relaxed', 'happier' and 'optimistic'); he said that despite external success ('nice job' and 'degree') he remained internally wanting. Like Henry, though more explicitly, he conveyed it was not only meditation or 'mindfulness meditation' that were useful, but all aspects of Buddhist tradition including the teachings or Dharma. When Richard laughed whilst describing his past self as 'sort of miserable' I felt warmth towards him, sensing perhaps both resolve and reticence in expressing this to a researcher he had little familiarity with. After seemingly hedging his prior unhappiness, he proceeds to describe its full extent ('I was very miserable'). Further credence was given to this interpretation when after interview he explained topics relating to relationships were difficult to expand on given this unfamiliarity. 'I allowed nice things to happen' implies an acting against his interests previously, which is evidenced later in interview where he comments that his negative view of self interfered with developing romantic relationships, prefacing the satisfaction with his 15-year anniversary.

Similarly, Millwall described a prior urge to pursue happiness in acquisition, reflecting that this impetus had disappeared. He shared he now requires very little to be contented:

‘I sort of say to my wife, I could easily just go and live in a caravan or a shed somewhere and, you know, just basic foods, and I'd be absolutely fine.’ (Millwall, L18-19, p.11)

Shortly after, he speaks to the absurdity, given the brevity of life, and his viscerally felt insight (at the heart), of expecting lasting happiness in money, work and cars:

‘I said the bit about understanding it, not intellectually, but at the heart, it, it can't not make a, a shift, you know, because, knowing that life’s *short*, you're not going to go chasing it, do you know what I mean? You’re going to think that's just *completely crazy*, you know…and it's just the little things I remember somebody said it once…you're never going to hear somebody lying on their deathbed thinking erm, ‘oh, I wish I would have worked harder’. You know, wish I would have worked more and saved up more money, or do you know what I mean? Had a flashier car. They're, they’re not going to say that…so it's ermm I suppose…that wisdom knowin’ that…you're not, you’re not going to get happiness there…’ (Millwall, L43-13, p.11)

Here Millwall appeared animated, highlighting ‘short’ by softening his speech, and ‘completely crazy’ by increasing his volume; this seemed to emphasize his view of the senselessness of pursuing external achievement for lasting well-being. Several participants referred to the distinction between experiential insight and intellectual understanding. Where Millwall draws sharper contrast between them, Henry described a symbiotic relationship. Millwall refers almost to the impossibility of one’s perspective and therefore behavior not shifting, if they acquire understanding through the ‘heart’, rather than ‘head’. This insight appears to arise through evidence of his own experience in which peace of mind has led to a more stable sense of happiness:

‘…the foundation actually is a concept that without a peaceful mind, you'll only have rare moments of happiness where just the stars aligned for some reason…the more, the more my mind's been at peace, the more…the more stable happiness comes…’ (Millwall, L16-21 p. 10)

Although Henry refers to an experience of spiritual yearning, the process of contemplating the evidence in his own experience has parallel:

‘…I have had these things and I still kind of have that sense of existential questioning and… spiritual longing, so, you know, clearly that’s not it. You know, based on the evidence of my own experience.’ (Henry, L37- 42, p. 14)

In this extract, Richard applies a comparable, investigative attitude towards his mind, seemingly holding the stance of a curious, empirical observer. Earlier, he described a sense of ‘play’, in examining his sense of self, and in higher resolution conveys the subtle constant, flux in his

phenomenology, whilst anticipating lasting happiness in temporary experience. He uses the experience of eating to illustrate his view:

'…I might think that having this food will bring me so much happiness, but then when the food is really there, is there really happiness? Because the food is there, the nice tastes last for a very short time…and after that they will not be, so will I be having more, I will be wanting to have more… I will have something even better than that…' (Richard, L10-16, p. 17)

Richard begins inquisitively, questioning the assumption that having food after desiring it leads to 'happiness', when in his experience, the pleasurable tastes are impermanent and are followed by further want. He further clarifies this picture of craving:

'…so I realize…the idea of the food bringing me happiness was a little bit delusional, and the immediate reaction is I want more of that food, I want even better food, I had the best prosecco so to speak,(laughter) but it's not really as good as I thought it would be I need something better with champagne…' (Richard, L16-20, p.20)

He saw, during this experiential analysis, through the 'delusion', seemingly describing with comic exaggeration the futility of acquiring permanent satisfaction in ever escalating pleasures; 'I thought it would be better with champagne'. Whilst Henry and Millwall discuss acquisition more broadly, Richard brings his insight into concrete, familiar experience. The sentiment iterated through all their accounts, however, is that rooted within seeking is the kernel of dissatisfaction.

Fred impressed the importance of living in accord with the reality of flux, speaking to the vacuousness and temporality of living from gratification to gratification. He described as antidote the long-view and a life of meaning:

'…so living in harmony with the fact that everything is changing all the time, and nothing is permanent, is a very powerful erm, tool…for increasing…one's own wisdom…and then erm, knowing that…living from…from gratification to gratification, is not the way, the best way forward we need to have a longer perspective and err live in order to, to make life really meaningful. That's important.' (Fred, L37-44, p. 15)

All participants referred implicitly and explicitly to the pursuit of a life of meaning, beyond temporary pleasure. Several participants taught meditation, deriving satisfaction from passing on their wisdom. Graham shared the sense of encouragement he derived from assisting his students to develop freedom from their emotions:

'…I do get some… encouragement from err seeing the progress of people that I'm teaching meditation to because ermm it's about encouraging people to let go, and not hang on, and ermm not be a victim of your emotions…' (Graham, L3-8, p.6)

Earlier in interview Tilly, like Millwall and Henry, conveys a distinction between the spiritual path and the pursuit of career and affluence.

'…but yeah, I suppose, a spiritual path for me feels, it's a different.. goal, family is an end in itself, career is an end in itself and money and affluence as an end in itself doesn't particularly interest me anymore, like awakening does (laughter), enlightenment inspires me far more and whether I get there or not is another story but that's I suppose the, the myth I find more inspiring…' (Tilly, L20-26, p. 17)

'An end in itself' is a phrase used usually to denote a pursuit that provides intrinsic rather than extrinsic reward; one may expect this to be applied to the 'spiritual path', and a 'means to an end', for example, to the acquisition of wealth for status. Perhaps Tilly is referring here to the 'continuity of purpose' afforded by practice, and the inspired 'end' of enlightenment. She said the above, however, in context of experiencing a tension between the spiritual path she has taken, and a mourning for the path not taken; the traditional route characterized by long-term monogamous relationships and children, which she remains open to. The three-fold repetition of an 'end in itself', despite her commitment to awakening, may further represent this conflict. Tilly, however, views being of service generally, rather than only to her potential children, as a catalyzing meaning:

'…I'm more inspired by being of service to the many, or as many beings as possible, than devoting that attention to a few of my own offspring…the Bodhisattva myth has been a guiding myth throughout my life…' (Tilly, L15-20, p.18)

3.2.2. Seeing Beyond the Rigid 'I'; The Trials and Jubilations

All participants referred to changes in their sense of self. These ranged from reductions in the subject/ object boundary, to alterations in their identification with thought or emotion. This theme expresses the processes (i.e. techniques) through which these ends were attained, their benefits and the challenges/ tensions associated with the pursuit of these outcomes.

Many participants described a process of calming or grounding the mind before engaging in insight meditations (Vipassana/ investigation of 'I'). Insight practices were more frequently performed with greater experience. Millwall made this distinction to such degree, he did not include calming meditations as part of the length he practiced. Fred began by illustrating with vivid metaphor the importance of this sequencing:

'…the meditative process is about…getting some stability, so that there is stability in the mind, so it's not that the mind doesn't…go like a mad monkey in a cage, from one thing to the other…it's a long process but it's what, what is, we are all existing but how do we do existing? That is an experiential thing, what is the nature of existence… so that is my relationship with my emotions but also erm, erm

my relationship with myself, because I mean, how many selves are there as well…' (Fred, L40-49, p.7)

Fred refers to the destabilised mind as a 'mad monkey in a cage', conveying immediately prior in interview, to the persistent, swirling cocktail of thoughts and emotions that draw attention in all directions. This image provokes a sense of the ungrounded mind as uncontrolled, irrational and unable to see beyond its confines. In this extract, he expresses a procedure of sifting this sediment before experientially exploring his relationship to himself, and reality, hinting at its difficulty ('It's a long process'). Fred alternates between using 'I' and referring to his emotions/ 'selves' as if they were distinct from his sense of self, suggesting a distance/ independence from them.

Here Fred speaks to disidentification from thinking; he describes this as a necessary, initial insight, and shortly before highlights the necessity of stabilising the mind to achieve this:

'…I think is the, for meditators it's a big first, first erm, erm breakthrough really, is when people, when meditator realises that he or she are not their thoughts…' (Fred, L34-36, p.7)

Participants frequently described an altered, distanced relationship to thought and emotion, and this was often reflected in their language, where they stated their thoughts or emotions 'occur' or 'arise', rather than referring to a separate, individual self that produced them. Here, however, Eleanour, despite having extensive practice, describes the pleasure of having greater agency over her thinking:

'E: Urm, but in terms of my mental state and my and me and my relationship with thinking erm I rec, I feel myself to be higher than my thoughts and erm functioning or returning to a level if it feels like I've gone back, returned, reverted to a level of experience where erm, I can choose if I want and if I make a bit off effort, I can choose to create a thought but I'd rather not you know…

I: Mmm

E: Because I'm free from that, it's very erm, it's very sweet feeling, very sweet…' (Eleanour, L2-9, p.6)

Previously, she described a tendency to 'overthink', and implied these thoughts had a sudden, gravitational pull which led to her meditation being derailed. The 'sweetness' Eleanour emphasises in the above, may refer to a potent relief in the contrast between experiencing potentially anxious, uncontrollable thoughts and increased control over their creation, or absence. She opts, however, to rest in their absence. Her use of 'higher' implies both distance from and observation of the contents of consciousness. A common thread throughout Eleanour's interview was of discovering her own 'voice', through a personalising of practice, attendance to her needs, altered familial dynamics and the reconciliation of her current spiritual path with earlier religious beliefs. In context of this developing agency, her newfound relationship with thought may further represent this self-determination.

Here Tilly touches on the 'Six Element Practice', and begins by describing the facilitation of a retreat setting on the ability to explore, with almost greater granularity ('molecular level'), the sense of boundary between herself and the environment:

'…who is this being, I think of as me, and like I think when you're on retreat you're much more able to go into that, like to pick it apart on a molecular level almost, like, erm, you know, really where does my skin end and out there begin? Ermm.. and we do it quite a bit in the 'Six Element' practice you know imagining the element earth present in one's physical experience, like feeling that is akin to the Earth in the world out there and we're, we're in constant interchange so really where does me end and the world begin…' (Tilly, L13-22, p.18)

She begins by questioning what may be assumed ('…who is this being, I think of as me'). Rather than answering conceptually, she enquires experientially. The Earth element stage within the 'Six Element' practice involves, using the minds eye, reflecting on matter both within (kidneys, heart etc.) and outside the body (soil, mountains etc.). This may inspire a sense of both inner and outer being the 'same' element. Though this process is not explicit in Tilly's account, she speaks to its intended effects; a symbiotic inter-connectedness to the environment ('interchange'), a sense of self in flux and an experienced change in boundary.

Graham, however, expressed that he did not ever have a firm distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds:

'G: Well, I don't recognise that I ever had that distinction.

I: Hmm..

G: And so, in a way discovering Buddhism was a bit like coming home…' (Graham, L5-8, p. 11)

By saying, 'A bit like coming home', Graham implies this view was already with him, and was then warmly affirmed by the Buddhist tradition.

Tilly described in interview the process, and benefits of sitting with all her experiencing, whether positive or negative, linking this to the apparent paradox between moments of a more labile, less egoic sense of self and a self that is surer:

'…I've had moments of that actually a much stronger and secure sense of myself emerges, not too much precious funnily enough, it's kind of paradoxical, there's less, less of a egoic self present, but just more…erm, or maybe it's less fragile, it's a surer sense of self, that know's it's liable to change and will change, and moves with that.' (Tilly, L3-10, p.7).

Throughout this extract, Tilly does not refer to her altered sense of self in the possessive. This may both reflect a separateness of the observing consciousness described earlier in chapter, and the presence of a less 'egoic' self, which transcends identity bourn by concepts and is thereby less 'fragile'. By saying 'that knows it's liable to change and will' Tilly suggests an awareness or acceptance of a self in perpetual flux. 'Not too much precious', implies a reduction in defensiveness given this acceptance. Millwall seems to describe this reduction in the sense of 'I' as more than momentary, echoing Tilly's intimations at a reduction in defensiveness:

'…it reduces that, and reduces the sense of 'I', it reduces the sense of ego that, you know, things can be hot and run. You don't take them as personally. You're… I guess almost… you're feeling that you're just there as consciousness, seeing things going on around you rather than, you know, this precious 'I' that I have to look after and, you know, protect from people doing or saying things to it…'(Millwall, L85-91, p. 2)

Both Tilly and Millwall use the word 'precious' in relation to the 'I' that may require defending. Millwall's tone seemed mocking with this adjective. This brought to my mind's eye an image of a court jester taunting a brittle, suspicious king. His tone may suggest that despite the felt sense of the egoic 'I's importance, Millwall has found firmer footing as a witnessing consciousness that does not require anxious protection from the actions, and comments of others. ('You're just there as consciousness').

Millwall, Karen and Tilly used the metaphor of a rainbow to describe the nature of their experience. Millwall, however, appeared to employ it in his view of 'I'. I questioned if the thread between these, was that both experience and the 'I', despite appearing real in their vibrancy, are like plays of light and color, which when decomposed, understood and moved through are less seemingly substantive.

Like Tilly in her description of the ever-changing self, Millwall seems to link an increased awareness of impermanence to a reduced attachment to the 'precious I'. He more directly, however, links it to ageing, and the inevitable dissolution of our physical form:

'…I suppose the other bit is just understanding impermanence as well, really. You know that, you know, we're aging moment by moment. And yeah, ultimately we do. We will disappear in the form we're in…' (Millwall, L19-23)

Millwall, like several other participants, would calm his mind before investigating the 'I', whilst moving towards an understanding of its 'emptiness':

'…Millwall's a label, you know, as you've got a label, so then you start to go, you know, well, then it's a *label* for a collection of parts so are any individual, one of those parts, John… well they're *not*.

So then you get to the point of goin err so if none of the individual *parts* are John, how can a collection of *non- parts* of Millwall suddenly become *Millwall*?' (Millwall, L58-63, p.2)

Before this extract, Millwall describes an interrogative, stepwise process in which he explores the sense of self, for example, by asking if he were to remove a limb, would he still be 'Millwall'. This process of elimination seems to imply, that if he is in no single internal, or external object, then the conception held of what defines 'him' is challenged. Millwall later described a sense of 'peace', in relation to this. In extract, Millwall speaks to the fallacy of defining the self through abstraction ('label').

Though not clear, I wondered if at the end of this investigation, once the 'I' is not definitively 'found', all that remains is clear awareness of phenomena in flux, and thereby an ever changing 'I'.

Before the following passage, Henry clarified he had not experienced any extreme 'ego-death' states. He said his view of no-self, is not that he 'doesn't exist', but that he is not as 'fixed' as his mind, or historical experiences may indicate. Further, he considered the tightness with which people may hold their identities (racial, sexual orientation etc.), seeming to link this to the difficult, burdensome effects of being defined by characteristics or attributes he views as associated with them. He conveyed a relief, therefore, in reducing the fixedness with which he sees himself, seemingly speaking to a lessening of the consequences of these preconceptions. He also discussed these insights in relation to reconciling his African- American, homosexual and Buddhist identities, in context of the aftermath of the George Floyd incident and increased societal tension:

'…I think my Buddhism helped me, you know, a lot of societal tension was kind of then all of a sudden on the experiences of African-Americans and certainly African-American men, and erm to a certain degree, that was welcome because obviously it was long overdue, on the other hand, I felt that erm, some of the problem that we as a society face is that we kind of, we hold all these, these identities so strongly that that we've rooted these entire systems on this idea that somehow someone's skin colour represents all this other, all these other truths …' (Henry, L8-18, p. 12)

Henry begins by using the possessive pronoun ('my Buddhism'), where only 'Buddhism' was used throughout the transcript. Whilst expressing the importance of increased awareness of racial issues ('long overdue'), he also seems to connect this sudden 'societal tension' to the dangers of defining self and other through group- identities based in skin-colour, which denies his individual complexity ('somehow someone's skin colour represents…all these other truths'). In accordance, Henry's use of 'my Buddhism' may represent his endeavour to develop a personal relationship to a group identity ('Buddhism'). In context of the issues he sees in being defined by group identities, 'my' may represent a warm acknowledgement of belonging to a group that does not deny his complexity as an individual ('Buddhism'). Shortly after, Henry described a process of interrogative self-dialogue around the meaning and experience of his identities:

'…that clarity really came from moments on the cushion, erm really thinking through…what is my experience as an African-American man really been? And what is it actually? What is it? What does it really mean? Erm is this, is this, is how I'm defined because I'm a black man…true? Like, is all of it true? Like, can I, can I be lumped together based on who I am with all these other groups and then factor in the gay thing and it's like, well, then there's an intersection there and how do those things conflict or, or kind of interact?' (Henry, L48-5, p.12)

'On the cushion' refers usually to formalized meditation, and previously in interview Henry had described his central practices as Metta, open-awareness and mindfulness of breathing. Here, however, during sitting, he seems to go beyond this, asking reflective questions about his experiencing. There is a sense of fervency in his repeated examination. This may suggest a powerful desire to understand both the experiential and conceptual meanings of these identities and a frustration at these categories minimizing his wholeness and complexity ('Can I be lumped together…'). He ends by touching on intersectionality, further illustrating his layered view of self. Throughout the interview, Henry appeared to consider his experience analytically with non-attachment, rather than detachment. This relates to an increasing non-attachment to inflexible identity structures and may be a function of enhanced decentering (observing the contents of consciousness). He then summarized his view, initially emphasizing its developing clarity:

'…it was very obvious in those moments, you can just never boil someone down to a single identity ermm there's just too many other factors that combine to kind of drive someone's actual experience ermm but yeah, some, a lot of that just came up because of my practice.' (Henry, L5-10, p.13)

From this foundation, he then suggested dispensing with this tendency society- wide, and develop improved, almost first principles methods of organization:

'…what we really should be doing is discarding these, these limitations or these concepts across the board…and that means really across the board, not just you know race in the sense of what it means for non-white people, but race in a sense (laughter) of what it means for all people, erm to kind of see it as it actually works and then and then agree that we need to come up with a better way to organize ourselves…' (Henry, L33-46, p.12)

In the following extracts Nero and Karen, like most participants, described their difficulties in seeing beyond the 'I'. They also highlighted the tensions that can arise in the pursuit of an idealised self informed by Buddhism, before discussing their process of overcoming (e.g. Metta practice, use of spiritual guidance). I related to these experiences, on occasion harbouring self-judgement where feelings of irritation may arise, for example.

Nero, throughout his account, frequently spoke to his difficulty with feelings of 'ill-will' (anger, irritation, 'hateful thoughts'). He seemed to hold self-judgement towards them, and I wondered if these were accompanied by feelings of guilt, embarrassment and shame. The two core situations he described early in interview involved close family members and caused him great distress. After hearing the nature of these events, I felt compassion for Nero, and considered his 'ill-will' a natural, and understandable reaction. My feelings of tension as the conversation unfolded may have reflected his continued feelings of distress and my concerns around their intensity given a research context. In the following passage Nero conveyed the expectations he has of himself given his commitment to Buddhism, and implied he had failed the perceived 'ideal':

'…being Buddhist, I really shouldn't be bothered anyway, I should have no self, doesn't matter, let everything go, but actually my experience is I don't like that, so my wife…go to the back of the bus, I sit down in the middle, two girls have got their feet on their seats, right by me, so I am **trying** not to react, and how do I do that, well hopefully it comes through my practice, I don't like what I'm seeing, I don't like what I'm experiencing, and I find that really difficult not to say, get your feet off that seat…' (Nero, L13-25, p.10)

Here Nero describes a battle with his impulses. He seems incensed at the disrespect displayed by the 'two girls' with their feet on the seats of a bus, highlighting the tension between his identity as a Buddhist practitioner and this emotional reaction. Although later in transcript Nero amends the suggestion there is 'no-self' to a 'not-unchanging self' (in accord with the Buddhist principle of impermanence), he here conveys a magnified self-expectation ('I should have no-self', 'Really shouldn't be bothered'). As the interview progressed, he recalled instances in which his meditative community acknowledged, normalised and offered compassion towards his 'ill-will'. It may be that by re-connecting with the compassion of others, he re-connected to self-acceptance thereby reducing self-expectation ('not- unchanging self'). The following passage further captures Nero's difficulty and the value of his 'spiritual friend' in its overcoming:

'…you call yourself a Buddhist and you, you're having thoughts like that, no, what she said to me was, 'Be kind to yourself Nero, wish, you know, Metta, use Metta'. I think what she was saying a hateful thought…if you then beat yourself afterwards or, was it if you have a Metta for that person, that is having that hateful thought, and obviously the hateful thought is there because I'm suffering, or you know, in this case it's me, I'm not liking something because I'm suffering, for whatever reason…' (Nero, L26-32, p.12)

Nero starts by relaying the judgemental reaction he anticipated from his friend in response to his expression of thoughts and feelings of ill-will. Her suggestion to extend Metta to himself, however, appeared to find him off- guard; he draws from her counsel the harm that comes from continued self-reproach and the importance of acknowledging his suffering, regardless of the apparent ethics of the

cause. It seemed for Nero, that with this recommendation, the weight of self-judgement was lifted. The depth of gratitude he expressed for this normalizing conversation was conveyed through an apparent relaxing of his body language, a broad smile, and softening of his tone. This was also highlighted in the following passage, where Nero found great meaning that despite his view of history he is considered a Buddhist practitioner, and belongs:

'…at the end of the retreat, he said to them, this is what an order member is, me! (warm smile). Erm, it's just the most loveliest thing to be said about you, that, I've practices, I really do practice, but I am full of faults you know!...' (Nero, L25-29, p. 6)

Similarly, Karen initially in her practice experienced a mismatch between the ideal she viewed the teachings represented:

'… I remember going to the first Buddhist festival ermm when I was 19 or something and then being filled with guilt and ermm because of like, hearing the teachings and thinking I'm, I can't, it's like the mismatch between myself and what all the teachings are saying. So the, so the, the mistake I was making there is, I wasn't actually connecting to my err my peace that, my but, you know, our ability to transcend limitations, so I wasn't connected to that. I was connecting to… I'm holding on to, I'm an anxious person or something like that, do you know what I mean? A limited identity. Then you're hearing about all these Buddhists that, these amazing people who are compassionate and you're like oh, they're just a better person, I can't do that…' (Karen, L30-38, p.14)

Here Karen speaks directly to her significant feelings of guilt when first attending the Buddhist festival when younger ('filled with guilt'). When perceiving the positive qualities in other Buddhists ('Amazing people who are compassionate') Karen implies by contrast their lack in her ('…they're just a better person, I can't do that'). Whilst her apparent holding onto of an anxious identity does not explicitly refer to her perceived lack of compassionate qualities, it may be associated with a prior negative image of her abilities or potential more generally ('I can't to that'). Sharing the sentiments of Tilly, Henry and Millwall in addition to several other participants, Karen also communicates the dangers of a 'limited identity', where she described the releasing of her anxious view of self. In interview, despite commenting on patterns she wishes to change, she also expressed, like Nero, a reduction in these tensions through speaking to spiritual guides, and a deepening of her meditative practice. She emphasized in her account the centrality of Buddhist practices in changing one's sense of self, where all practices lead to the same, transformative end. Like previous participants she became free from the limited self that required defending, or fighting for:

'K: There's nothing there to grasp onto, nothing there to fight for, there's nothing there to defend. It's all just this expansive mind of union, you know? Ermm…

I: It's an expansive mind of union?

K: Yeah, like yes, non-duality, if you want to call it that. Ermm, so if you if I previously had like a tight mind or some ne, negativity, that all kind of goes like in that moment, that's all, it's… profoundly changed. Ermm so I would say it's like a space of, like I don't want to say bliss, yeah…incredible peace…' (Karen, L5-10, p.7)

Karen in interview described Buddha Heruka meditation (the Buddha of 'bliss and compassion'). The practice involves inviting (part visualization) all 'enlightened beings' and deities of Heruka's mandala into one's embodied experience. She then described a process of 'tuning in to' universal compassion or love, which when unencumbered by the 'ego' is experienced fully. She related this to tantric practices which encouraged her to see her potential for enlightenment, and that 'there is no difference between her and Buddha'. Where there was distance from the ideal, she had during practice merged with it, thereby enhancing her view of her potential. Due to her practice she would experience, like several participants had described, feelings of expansiveness, peace and serenity. In the above extract, Karen conveys these experiences; 'expansive mind of union' and 'non-dual' (Sanskrit: Advaita; not two and not-separation) are associated with wholeness, interconnectedness or the resolution of separateness. As with Karen, many participants spoke about similar experiences with increased hesitation, demonstrated though filler words ('like') and pauses, suggesting their ineffability. The 'incredible peace' and dissolving of a negative, constricted mind point strongly towards the expansive, non-attached consciousness that is neither grasping, seeking nor protecting.

3.2.3 Residing in Chaos; The Only Way Out Is In

All participants described a continuous process of turning towards, accepting and 'being' with aversive/ chaotic experience (i.e. mitigating experiential avoidance). Although an increased ability to attend to the 'here and now' was thread through all accounts, remaining present with suffering offered the promise of its transmutation and dissolution (turning towards aversive experience led to a greater sense of calm, joy and confidence). 'Seeing beyond the rigid 'I'…', 'Residing in chaos…' and 'Overcoming entrenched patterns…' have overlap; there is, for example, a change in the sense of self that occurs through developing new 'patterns' of relating to others. They are distinct, however, in that experiential changes in the 'I' are not necessarily related to changes in entrenched relational dynamics.

Here Graham describes a process of being with, rather than resisting the minds natural activity, touching on the humanness of this tendency. Although this extract has overlap with altering the relationship to cognitive phenomena and therefore the sense of self, it highlights the process/ outcome of 'residing in chaos'; '…comfort and safety' arose through turning towards the unruly mind:

‘Yeah, I mean, we all are very similar in a way, because our mind is naturally active, that’s the state of being human, and so instead of trying to control this, we just say okay, bring it on. Because acting as you want, I don’t care, and eventually the thoughts diminish and if you do it sufficiently frequently, the thoughts literally burst like bubbles, and what you’re left with is a very harmonious space, a feeling of spaciousness, of warmth, of comfort and safety…’ (Graham, L20-25, p. 12)

Graham almost conveys a defiance in accepting the chaos of the mind (‘bring it on’), speaking to a general proclivity to attempt to control its activity. Perhaps implicit is that these attempts at control often fan its flames (e.g. additional thinking, avoidance strategies). By saying ‘sufficiently frequently’ he suggests a continuous process of being drawn to controlling thought, noticing this, and returning to an acceptance of their arising. By doing this they ‘burst like bubbles’. This metaphor can be interpreted in several ways. As discussed, it may illustrate a disidentification and distance from thought. In addition, it suggests that when accepted and observed, thoughts dematerialise leaving the clear space of consciousness (‘a feeling of spaciousness’). It appears, when mind activity diminishes there remains a sense of warm, expansive security (‘warmth, of comfort and safety…’). During this account, despite seemingly referring to his own experience he frequently says ‘we’. This may reflect his experience as a teacher where he is oriented towards educating. It could also communicate his experience as a long-term meditator, who has surpassed this level of insight.

In the following passage, Graham goes beyond thought, to a more complex constellation of aversive experience; confusion. He describes a relaxing around the experience, which allows for positive forward movement:

‘…to overcome confusion erm in the same way as meditation but it, I’m not saying that Grounded Theory is meditation, I’m not saying that all, I’m just saying both the intellectual tradition of Grounded Theory and the, the experiential err theory of Buddhism is that if you take the view that nothing is solid and everything is impermanent, it doesn’t matter what happens, it will, it will change. And so you relax in the confusion, and then at a certain moment your mind says, ahh, yes, maybe it’s this, maybe it’s that..’ (Graham, L1-6, p. 9)

Graham here appears to connect the understanding of impermanence to a softening of the tension that may usually accompany confusion; ‘Relax in’, implies the unknotting of this constriction. In comparing the ‘intellectual theory’ and ‘experiential theory’ of Grounded Theory and Buddhism he points toward an understanding he shares before the extract: ‘The deeper your confusion, the greater your potential for understanding’. He then seems to convey that by recognising confusion as only a pattern of experience (Associations: Mindful noticing, ‘relaxing around’), one more readily attains insight in meditation, and creative movement when applying Grounded Theory.

Like Graham, Richard also describes the natural, chaotic nature of his mind though expresses this more explicitly:

‘...So initially it's very overwhelming because the first time you are really facing the noise of your mind with awareness, but after you've done that a few times at the very beginning ermm I don't think it changed a lot in that my mind is always busy, it’s not like…because I…meditated for 18 years, when I now meditate my minds extremely calm…’ (Richard, L19-24, p. 5)

He begins by describing the overwhelm of initially confronting the activity of the mind. Then he points to the expectation one may have of a calm mind (‘it’s not like…when I now meditate my minds extremely calm’) after extended practice (’18 years’). When I asked earlier in interview if he had experienced a change within meditation over time, he said the impact was more seen, and felt in his daily life. He followed by conveying that despite the continued activity of his mind, he has a more equanimous relationship to it, in which he can ‘be’ more fully with his experience:

‘…it happened gradually, but I can't really see a change in the meditation itself, other than just being more accepting and this, more comfortable with whatever arise without feeling disturbed…’ (Richard, L40-43, p.5)

Antonyms of ‘disturbed’ include calm, peaceful or tranquil. This suggests he has found stability within what may have ordinarily been distressing. In context of his responses throughout interview, the cause may be less negative self-judgement or reactivity to the arising of aversive phenomena, a ‘choiceless awareness’ which facilitates this non-reactivity and a disidentification from the contents of consciousness.

In accord with Graham and Richard’s accounts, Tilly speaks to an increased acceptance of, and equanimity towards difficult experience. She suggests the cycle of recurrent depression beginning early in her life led initially to mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, perhaps acting as a secular gateway to more deeply committing to Buddhism. She proceeds to describe since an altered relationship to her depression:

‘And I won’t say, it’s not that I’ve not had depression since, but maybe I don’t pathologize it in the same way, I think I have, I, periods of low, but that I guess that’s how I describe it now, that, I go into periods of low mood and sadness and grief, every couple of years, kind of see a cycle where it emerges and I don’t fight it, I suppose in the same way, and I think as a result I don’t ermm it’s never lasted for quite as long or felt quite as acute…’ (Tilly, L7-14, p.10)

Here Tilly conveys a redefinition (periods of low mood…sadness and grief’), and reduction in length and intensity (‘quite as long…quite as acute’) of what she described as cyclical depression. Later in interview, she mockingly described her prior, seemingly cemented, negative view of self as

‘wretchedly unhappy, wretched human being and will always be so’. By seeing that all things, including her mental states and self-concept were impermanent, she felt freer and more able to see her potential to transform. The previous pathologizing of these cycles may imply self-criticality for their arising, fuelled by this unchanging view of self; when they occurred therefore, accompanying negative self-judgement (cognitions) may have been a maintaining factor. In addition, ‘not fighting it’, may suggest now a meditative, experiential acceptance despite her continued struggle against avoidance:

‘…I’m aware of how I block difficult experience, or I block ermm, intimacy in different levels, intimacy with other people, intimacy with parts of myself I’m not comfortable with, that actually the only way to that longing that, connection to something greater is to come to contact with what I find difficult, and I mean, gosh, I spose I learnt that on day one of my MBCT course, you know, turn towards, turn towards the painful, but maybe the realizing it more and more fully, it’s not like you get to a place and you’ve turned towards it all, done it now, great…’ (Tilly, L16-25, p. 15)

Tilly demonstrates she is aware of her tendency to turn away and block intimacy towards herself and others. This, however, suggests an enhanced capacity for mindfulness i.e. noticing avoidance, and turning towards. She speaks to the difficulty and importance of this continued endeavour throughout the interview, richly describing the challenges of her increased ‘porousness’. Though there is a sense of exasperation at the perpetuity of this process she emphasises that by being in touch with all experience, she can connect ‘to this life in all its spectrum of fullness’. Like most participants, there seems for her a challenge in staying with the present moment. When succeeding to, it reportedly results in calm, equanimity and an ability to ‘be with’ life despite its vicissitudes. Later in interview she described her escape from a life-threatening storm, though was able to see beauty in terror:

‘…if I can remember even in the most painful and difficult circumstances that, this is just what’s unfolding, it’s just this beautiful cosmic drama, though sometimes it’s, and we may be with difficult experiences, I tend to think more of like, I don’t know, the oncoming thunder storm…’ (Tilly, 21-24, p.21)

Like Tilly, Fred, despite his extensive meditative experience noticed in his morning meditation a temptation to avoid his thoughts or emotions. ‘Shy away from’ implies a retreating from feared experience. He conveys that open, choiceless awareness is antithetical to this; in interview he stated this permitted freedom from attachment and aversion:

‘…so I’m actually the, noticing now that err there are sort of thoughts or emotions that I’ve shied away from…I noticed that this morning, that there ermm, and then erm..and then the, the, the choice,

awareness is cultivating, this kind of aware, open awareness is erm, actually not, shying away from anything, so being, and this, what's interesting is the that also the relationship between that and love or compassion…' (Fred, L23-32, p. 5)

Although Fred did not explicitly explain the relationship between this and 'love or compassion' I wonder if there is convergence between the lack of intimacy described by Tilly in relationship to herself, and the compassion he refers to. A possible view is that by totally 'being' with all experience, you are also extending unconditional, non-judgemental acceptance of it. This is associated with intimacy and may engender further closeness towards oneself and within relationships. Fred later explored an extreme example of the power of choiceless awareness in being with aversive experience:

'…cultivating choiceless awareness, erm, cultivating this open awareness err the allowing of all of experience as it is… I think it was Tinga Rinpoche who err was a very highly realised teacher who… he had some kind of operation on the operation table and he said no, I don't want any err, I don't need any erm, anaesthetics thank you very much and he, and the entire err operation was done without any anaesthetics at all…' (Fred, L11-17, p.6)

3.2.4. Overcoming Entrenched Patterns and Dynamics

All participants described positive changes in psycho-emotional/ behavioural patterns or entrenched social and familial dynamics. These included habits such as smoking, tendencies toward catastrophising/ habitual negative thoughts and negative self-appraisal which impaired intimate relationships. Several participants said they were able to behave more skilfully through becoming aware of habitual ways of responding, and by 'pausing' before reacting.

Here Julia refers to the continued application of 'pause' and 'don't take the hook' derived from her meditative education. Whilst she periodically forgets to implement these techniques, she observes improvement:

'…talking about the pause so that instead of reacting to something in your old habitual way, you kind of take your pause and hopefully take a different path with your reaction to it. And in other writing, she talks about, you know, don't take the hook, it might be dangling there but don't take the hook. So, I don't always remember to pause by all means but I'm getting better at it…' (Julia, L30-34, p.15)

Throughout her interview, she described a process of becoming more aware of her physiological and psychological responses. She then told a story of a passenger on a plane asking for her seat. Previously she explained that before beginning these practices she would have given it unquestioningly, with regret. By pausing, she acted against this pattern, and suggested an alternative which accounted for her needs in context of the needs of others:

‘…we’re all adults, we all know what we're doing, we all have a choice about things and if they couldn't choose their seats, there must be a reason, you know, maybe they were late booking or whatever. So I was very pleased with myself that I'd managed not to say, ooh I'll swap.’ (Julia, L30-33, p.15)

Julia appeared to be satisfied with this growing ability, smiling as she spoke. Later, Julia suggested she would have been angry at herself if she had given the seat. I wondered if her satisfaction represented a positive change more generally in boundary setting and assertiveness:

‘…it's still about being compassionate and kind, but just in my own time isn’t it rather than an obligation. It was a, a considered offer rather than just an automatic offer.’ (Julia, L26-28, p. 17)

Here Julia explains the framework within which this decision was made; kind, compassionate and considered. Several participants expressed an increased awareness and care for their own needs, ranging from the above to a reduction in self-neglect and ‘martyring’. Henry, however, spoke to the effects of practicing mindfulness and LKM. He described an increased ability to listen, concentrate, and hold several intentions and streams of information in mind simultaneously. In addition, he recounted a story in which whilst on the tube he offered his seat freely to a stressed passenger, whilst considering closely the positive social consequences of doing so. In the following extracts, Henry demonstrates these abilities. He explained in interview that he held a senior role in his work, and increasingly engendered compassion for colleagues who may experience fear when relaying information to him, given the power differential:

‘I’m not just thinking, yeah, let me give the appropriate response here, but let me also have some compassion for the fear that they’ve been going through in trying to give this news to me, ermm so I think that’s also different. I wouldn’t have ever factored that into the consideration, ermm before this.’ (Henry, L48- 2, p. 23)

Here he discusses these enhanced capacities:

‘…I think it definitely, my ability to absorb challenging information and then respond well is certainly and I noticed it a lot more like you know err to not just respond like clearly and thoughtfully and without getting too overexcited…’ (Henry, L40-44, p. 23)

Both Julia and Henry speak to a reduction in reactivity, enhanced equanimity and optionality of response, whilst compassionately attending to the needs of others.

Millwall spoke to the ‘preciousness’ of the few seconds between pause and response, conveying previously this is a natural consequence of the peace and spaciousness his mind has developed through practice:

‘…another big bit of it is that through meditation your mind calms, it, it almost helps create a space between something happens and you respond. And, and you know, those seconds are are so precious really…’ (Millwall, L34-37, p. 5)

The ‘preciousness’ he refers to may suggest that despite the scarce seconds between stimulus and response, the consequences of not behaving in reactivity are powerfully significant, as demonstrated by his reduced irritability, and defensiveness in relationships.

Eleanour spoke directly to her use of practice to positively alter her dynamic with her older sibling:

‘…so you could kind of cut the atmosphere with a knife at that moment you know and I went, I thought to myself Barbara (Pseudonym) it’s not fair you know you’ve arrived late and you know I need my nap really and yeah I thought that and then I thought it’s okay E let it go, and erm I said nothing and I spent the next hour with her erm just enjoying her company and erm what’s the word celebrating her lovely side…’ (Eleanour, L21-28, p.13)

‘…that broke a big pattern that has not been how it’s been before in the games of erm us meeting and parting you know so the tension was not here I, I feel like I handled it well and kept my love for her flowing…’ (Eleanour, L1- 5, p. 13)

Here Eleanour recounts a fraught moment; she said her sister would often react obtusely to her time boundaries during their meetings. ‘Cut the atmosphere with a knife’ alludes to her felt sense of the tension upon setting this boundary. By recalling her reflective visualisation and experiential practice of ‘soul before role’, she was able to see the ‘loveliness’ of her sister, choose an alternate response and improve the relational pattern. Despite Eleanour thinking she would have to re-assert her boundary her sister spontaneously reminded her of her time to leave, without conflict. Eleanour viewed this as occurring through an attitude of non-judgement which kept her ‘love for her flowing’.

As mentioned, interwoven through Eleanour’s interview was the discovery of her ‘voice’. She explained when younger, she did not have a sense of herself as a ‘unique’ individual, feeling like a ‘shadow’ in relation to other family members with ‘strong senses of selves’. Although her spiritual practices were useful in many respects, she in retrospect, observed many avoidant, and self-neglectful patterns. Eleanour questioned after experiencing depression post-retirement the ardency with which she chose the spiritual path in her 20s, reflecting it provided a sense of much needed belonging:

‘E: I suddenly belonged erm and that’s been great but…

I: Mmm..

E: It's stopped me, I allowed it to stop me meeting myself really.' (Eleanour, L38- 1, p. 15)

She traced her depression to 'hiding behind' her roles within the NHS (occupational therapist) and as 'a meditator and meditation teacher' all of which re-enforced her patterns. In the above extract, Eleanour's increased sense of control may be represented by her editing of 'It's stopped me' to 'I allowed it to stop me'; the former conveys an external locus of control, whilst the latter communicates her agency. At the interviews end, Eleanour highlighted the importance of journalling and counselling in overcoming her tendencies, given the enormity of confronting them. The following passage powerfully echoes the prior extracts though captures her progress, and continued struggle:

' E:…there was some deep rooted erm patterns of sense of self-based on being there for others and not really erm acknowledging my own needs and my own existence almost my own existence in the world or my right to exist you know.

I: Mmm not acknowledging your right to exist…

E: Yeah, that deep, it was that deep, yeah erm and it's changed a lot that erm sometimes I will still, I'm still in a bit of a journey of making sure I've got time ermm to cut my nails and iron my clothes, you know…

I: Sure…

E: I'll still go into neglect a bit but week by, month by month I would say it's starting to erm all fall into place that me caring for me can go along with me being in the world with other people.' (Eleanour, L20-31, p. 19)

During interview with Eleanour, I frequently noticed a balanced conviction in her tone, where during miscommunication she would attentively, warmly and assertively ask for clarification. During her reflections on hiding behind her role, I was reminded of the challenges of my training, and the temptation to neglect self-care in aid of achievement, and the needs of patients within stretched NHS services. I twinged at this recognition, perhaps reflecting Eleanour's difficulty, and requirement for counselling beyond meditation in its gradual unravelling.

Tilly also worked as an occupational therapist in the NHS, and is now in a managerial position. Throughout her interview there were intimations of similar self-sacrificing patterns which had improved through practice. She spoke to the pressures of her role and the 'near constant need to respond' to suffering, and its fundamental impossibility. To manage this, and gauge her needs she recalled the resourced, playful Boddhisatva image:

‘…I suppose that’s a figure I bring to mind with work is the sort of archetypal Boddhisatva who means work is play, I think the Boddhisatva can give and give but is itself resourced to give and find the light in play and the ways they respond to suffering and not in a kind of labored martyred way, so it becomes a good gauge for me to know erm yeah where I’m giving out of a place of resourced, where I’m feeling resourced and engaged or where I’m just a bit frazzled and burnt out and actually need to take a rest.

I: Mhm…

T: So yeah no, it’s a big, big help with work…’ (Tilly, L42-4, p. 7)

3.2.5 Death, Grief and Impermanence; Re-Negotiating the Relationship with Mortality

Most participants explained both meditative practice and teachings altered their relationship to impermanence (i.e. the perpetuity of change in circumstances, moods, identities etc.) and mortality. Several participants gave vivid, touching accounts of how their practices, families, friends and spiritual communities assisted with their journeys of loss.

Julia explained she had a significant bereavement recently and several in the past, stating ‘she didn’t know how to grieve then’. I wondered if Julia was pointing to an avoidance of grief throughout her life, leading to its recent, overwhelming intensity. She conveyed shock at the depth of her grief, speaking to its suddenness, and her awareness of its cause of her panic attacks:

‘…I've been quite yeah, I supposed shocked, surprised by the depth of my grief, ermm, and that's given me panic attacks quite a lot.

I: Mhm…

J: Ermm…and I understand it’s because of the grief, and that's good I can understand that, and I've done quite a lot reading about grief, I’ve listened to quite a lot of stuff about grief, some of which is ermm meditation based and some isn’t. But always comes from people with compassion.’ (Julia, L30-2, p. 10)

Julia relays the helpfulness of grief resources, beyond those that are meditation based, whilst speaking to the usefulness of her self-understanding (‘that’s good I can understand that’). Before the above

passage, Julia described the significance of 'body scans' (developing granular awareness of her body) in 'discovering herself', and of her heart 'melting' in 'joy and delight'. During group practice, she was also given instruction to draw attention to her heart which preceded this. Julia then said she had 'turned a grief corner', suggesting a step towards its processing, feeling certain of its connection to her heart 'melting':

'…I did actually feel in the last 3 and a bit weeks, that I had turned a grief corner, which was good, erm, I can't remember whether I felt like it before or after my heart melted. But I'm sure they were connected in some way, somewhere along the line there.'

It's possible, that through 'body scans', meditation, the compassionate support of her group, and an understanding of grief, she became more attuned to it, leading to a felt sense of its overwhelming intensity, before 'turning a grief corner'. Julia also said she frequently practiced mindfulness of breathing, and conveyed its usefulness when feeling panicked:

'I'm more able to cope with it now ermm and I, yeah so now when I feel it coming, I can think, okay here comes the panic. It's not really a panic. You know you're okay, you know you can do this ermm and you'll breathe through it. And I'm still aware it's around here somewhere, but it's not overwhelming. And it's not ermm it's not taking me over now.'

She depicts an increased awareness of its onset ('I feel it coming'). She also alters its labelling (It's not really panic'). This may suggest an increased familiarity, and confidence with the pattern of experience arising and passing ('You'll breath through it'), or perhaps implies a reframing of its felt meaning. Panic, and its associated physiological consequences, can lead to catastrophic thinking; her self-assurance ('You know you're okay') could reflect her challenging of automatic thoughts that she is unsafe, or in danger, thereby curtailing emotional reasoning. In addition, by attending to her breath ('breathing through it'), she appears to anchor herself against overwhelm, and the experience recedes from the foreground ('it's around here somewhere').

'…I thought, I don't actually know where my heart is in any sense, you know, realistically or spiritually. So Shambala has been very, very significant to me, finding my heart, which is rather lovely.' (Julia, L21-24, p.8)

Millwall and Karen gave rich descriptions of how their Buddhist practices, learnings and faiths affected their experiences of loss. Millwall explained that where others were in grief and shock, his mind remained at peace; after this passage, Millwall suggested that practicing a mind of compassion

and stillness, Lamrim meditations and performing experiential contemplations on the reality of mortality aided this process:

'…I guess at the point of when he did *pass away*, my mind was totally at peace, I'd sort of spent time during the night… doing some mantras and err meditating and things like that and… *my mind was completely at peace,* what was going to happen and almost…because of the pain he was going through…err for me, it was a relief ermm you know, so it's a, a major benefit from that perspective where as before, well…people around me were maybe a bit more in grief and shock and that I just… it seemed quite natural, it seemed, yeah, my mind wasn't, wasn't disturbed really, and then obviously it's not because I didn't love my brother (laughter), it was because…just understanding the nature of things a bit better and my mind being at peace…' (Millwall, L5-20, p. 6)

Following this extract, Millwall spoke to 'his mind of compassion'; by acknowledging the suffering of his brother whilst he was in pain, and of the suffering of all patients at the hospital, he said he became 'less self-absorbed', seemingly organically opting against, and releasing a narrative in which it was only 'his loss'. The 'naturalness' he describes above, illustrates his acceptance of death and dissolution. Echoing Millwall, Karen explained how her practices affected her experience of her mother's death:
'So…you hear it all the time, you teach it…it's nothing like when you're sitting with your mom dying and like, oh my gosh… then my mind was just sort of absorbed in a meditative state, I was doing lots of prayers and mantras and things. Ermm an **incredibly** peaceful felt like I was channelling the Buddhas were there and so on, and when she passed it was pretty amazing…' (Karen, L2-7, p. 19)

'…it's a weird thing to say, don't tell many people, but ermm felt really, really elated and happy, you know, like not happy in a like very peaceful. Ermm and there was no sorrow, there was no sadness, there was none of that, really. Just felt this incredible confidence that she is transitioned into a very positive state, you know whatever that might be…' (Karen, L21-27, p. 19)

Both her meditative practices and beliefs seem to have engendered the sense of elation, peace and joy during her mother's passing. Karen and Millwall seem to pre-empt the possible cultural judgement that may occur when reacting to the death of close family in this way ('I don't tell many people' and 'it's not because I didn't love my brother'). Henry explained that his practice reduced his fear of death more generally, and the fear of the unknown death represents. He said this was partially overcome through mindful gratitude of the life he has lived:

'…whatever happens from this point onwards is kind of the bonus, the bonus round, and that's fine erm so yeah, I would say my, my view on death has definitely changed…' (Henry, L36-39, p. 13)

3.3. Staying the path; Methods of Containment and Collaboration

Although the superordinate themes have overlap, 'Staying the path' highlights that which spiritual traditions have often re-iterated. Maintaining practice through challenge and the vicissitudes of life requires a community of support, and assistive tools. Momentum, consistency and faith in those who have trailed ahead appears to inspire participants to 'stay the path'.

3.3.1. The Deep Significance of Meditative Community; Guidance, Support and Connection

All participants spoke to the value of their meditative communities and teachers. This arose across several dimensions, including guidance from community/ teachers, group meditative experiences, inspiration and validation of the difficulty of practice.

Several participants highlighted the value of their relationships with teachers in providing meditative instruction (e.g. no-self practices) and general counsel (e.g. overcoming of personal issues). In addition to describing the importance of a personal resonance with one's teacher, Karen also described the life-altering experiencing of her spiritual guide's mind:

'In that moment I had like a like a flash into his mind and that was like a really life changing experience. Err it was very profound…it's very hard to even conceptualize and put it into words. It's ermm I think, I felt re-, very emotional at that time and I had to hold it together because I was stewarding, sitting on the corner of a, of a row, you know? It, I think the thing that I, it hit me was that the power of the unconditional love, which is very hard to like I say those words, it's very hard to communicate, because it's very profound like incredibly you know, divine, unconditional love.' (Karen, L38-46, p. 23)

Karen explained before the above that her form of Buddhism places 'emphasis on guru yoga'. She chose and was receptive to ('He had a profound mind') a spiritual guide and practiced seeing beyond his 'ordinary' appearance to his 'Buddha nature'. She stated that although one's experiences with a spiritual guide is subjective, and consciously trained, she may have been predisposed to this connection through their shared past lives. In the above extract, Karen conveys the suddenness of seemingly experiencing his mind; 'like a flash'. The indescribable experience of 'divine, unconditional love' deeply moved her. I wondered if it's profound meaning also reflected unmet childhood needs; she in interview described an upbringing of parental anger, where she contended with anxiety and self-criticality. Although she uses 'we', the following extract may suggest this in her experience:

'…because we carry with us a lot of shame and guilt and all of that kind of stuff that's all kind of washed away there's no, it's like a profoundly healing, transformative ermm experience of love…' (Karen, L33-35, p. 24)

Some participants described the contrast between individual and group meditative experiences. Both Henry and Millwall referred to the palpable, though ineffable difference:

'…I don't know exactly how to describe it, but there's definitely a, an energy or something that happens when you know, there's another person erm kind of meditating around you…' (Henry, L16-19, p. 17)

Afterwards, Henry explained this effect was heightened by meditating with advanced practitioners. Going beyond a small group, Millwall richly conveyed the profound power of meditating with approximately 1000 people:

'…you're in a, a room or the temple with maybe a thousand other people, you know the idea that when you're meditating together with people that there's there is, there is an, there's an energy there that it is difficult to explain that, that you know, people might go ah that's just cause all people together, but it's not, there's, do you know, you can almost sort of sense that there's the power of all those combined minds…' (Millwall, L24-32, p. 18)

Throughout this extract Millwall frequently hesitates and uses filler phrases ('do you know'). This may represent the inarticulable aspects of this experience. Further, Millwall seems to respond to a hypothetical, reductionistic questioning of its profound intensity ('People might go'). Throughout his interview he described an initial skepticism towards meditation and Buddhism, given its religious connotations. I wondered if there were concerns that this 'spiritual' experience would be similarly critiqued.

Henry also explained that group practice enhanced LKM, by experiencing the immediacy of their humanness:

'…when they're sitting right next to you and you can, you know, hear them breathing or just, you know, notice the sounds in the room of other folks, all that helps you recognize that you're one of those lots of people…' (Henry, L31-35, p. 17)

Several participants suggested their communities helped contextualise, validate and normalise the difficulties of their meditative paths. Henry, for instance, described early in his practice strong, concerning involuntary 'vibrations' which ran through his head and body. He questioned why they occurred when he does not have epilepsy. More advanced practitioners were able to provide an explanatory framework:

'…I'm vibrating like, what's going on? And erm when you spend more time around experienced you know practitioners, they're like, yeah, okay, yeah, that's interesting, like, that's, erm that could be an energy release, that can be you approaching what th, we call dyonic states…' (Henry, L5-10, p. 18)

Though initially uncomfortable, Henry in interview described an accompanying excitement, hopeful they may represent his becoming 'enlightened'. He later explained when viewed through the lens of energy release, he allowed the vibrations to resolve into 'more of a calm, blissful or relaxed state'. It seems this guidance tempered his anxieties, provided practice direction and hedged his expectations of enlightenment. Several participants conveyed a sense of misunderstanding from non-Buddhists and meditative practitioners. Given the difficulty of practice, and of abiding by associated Buddhist ethical frameworks, Henry strongly expressed the necessity of Sanga as support, inspiration and validation. The following extract is representative of their thoughts, and echoes Nero's sentiments:

'…to pursue a spiritual path like Buddhism isn't easy, like it's, it's not, this is not the easiest thing to attempt, you know, meditation every day of your life and all this stuff from practicing ethics isn't easy…which is why you kind of need people around you that are also trying to do it ermm to, to varying degrees of success, and erm because otherwise you would you would give up like you wouldn't, you wouldn't pursue this on your own…' (Henry, L19-27, p. 24)

'…you can learn a lot of these practices online and stuff, but have you really got somebody you can discuss things with when things get difficult. I've got lots of, luckily enough, lots of friends erm, that I can discuss meditation or difficulties with, challenges.' (Nero, L9-14, p. 15)

In the following extract, which conveys several participant experiences, Fred speaks directly to the support and inspiration evoked through his community:

'…it's amazing so err yeah the Sanga is very important, very, very supportive erm, erm, very nice to have such a bunch of really intelligent people on the same journey for looking at the nature of reality…it's really very inspiring' (Fred, L33-42, p. 13)

Further, Julia reflected on the deep importance of a zoom group she frequently attended, in managing the disconnectedness of COVID, and in receiving support for the bereavement of her husband:

'J: And certainly meditation has and, and what meditation has brought me over the years has helped me with all of that.

I: Right

J: And the support I've had from the groups I'm I meditate with on Zoom you know, the the love and warmth and compassion I've had from Zoom from those people has been brilliant, really brilliant.' (Julia, L6-11, p. 12)

For several participants meditative community appeared to have a symbiotic relationship with their formalized practice, and their lives beyond them. It seemed to provide a base in which to refine their

ethics, and the application of technique. Participants challenged the possible preconception that Sanga's would be non-conflictual. Tilly, for instance, lived in a Buddhist residential community, and conveyed the opportunity that fraught conflicts provided for ethical, mindful practice and resolution. In the following extract, she recalled her amazement when two members of her community, despite their strongly contrasting philosophies on managing COVID risk, were able to have civil discussion:

T: Yeah, gosh it was, but then I remember being really struck on one occasion here two people, were very err to begin with very differing, and still probably very differing views about what was more important. Security, safety, versus, freedom, autonomy and being able to have a conversation without getting into a blazing row.. (Tilly, L2-7, p. 14)

3.3.2. Retreats and the Facilitation of Insight

Most participants referred to the value of meditative retreats (e.g. greater stillness, calmness etc.), frequently becoming open to extended retreats as their practice deepened. Retreats seemed to be yet another useful tool on the journey of long-term meditation. Often expressed was their facilitation of insight practices:

'…on retreat when you're kind of in conditions where it's easier to go deeper into insight practices, sort of seeing the true nature of things …' (Tilly, L20-23, p. 2)

Tilly proceeded to explain that the usual distractions inherent to daily living interfered less with her stability of mind, allowing for receptivity, stillness and presence:

'…on retreat I can be very steady, very still, very present with the elements of practice, and I'm very, my body feels very responsive to it…' (Tilly, L34-36, p. 4)

Graham echoed Tilly's reflections, suggesting their length permits time to complete a series of intensive insight practices:

'…and in our tradition, one key text is called 'Pointing out the Dhamma Kaya' and this is when one looks at the nature of one's mind through doing a series of intensive meditation practices until you understand what's going on. And that's why retreats are important in this tradition because it's not something you can do in five minutes normally.' (Graham, L32-36, p. 1)

He went on to say:

'…I have about two months a year, in two blocks, a month at a time when I, I go to a err retreat in err remote place where I can really start trying to understand things…' (Graham, L17-18, p. 6)

Henry described in more detail the effects of 'silent retreat' conditions:

'…there are certain things that only open up in those conditions, erm which are always interesting, er where your mind goes when it doesn't have access to phones and internet and other stimulus, the things that kind of open up for you. So, you know, certain stages, on a, particularly in silent retreats or… periods of silence it's like, your, your awareness of your physical environment, particularly if you're in kind of, you know, areas with lots of nature almost goes technicolour, like you just start, you know, flowers and, and insects and everything just takes on a much brighter hue…' (Henry, L34-44, p. 20)

He points to the contrast between our usual, high-stimulus environments ('phones and internet and other stimulus') and the silent, low-stimulus of retreat. He conveys the necessity of these conditions for his 'opening up', highlighting their importance to him. Depicted in his account, is that this removal of stimulus heightens the awareness of his environment (including 'nature') and increases its vibrancy ('almost goes technicolour'). When considering his transcript, I speculated on the relationship between his experience of vibrational 'energy release' whilst on retreat, and the 'opening' he describes. It may be the space and silence afforded, facilitated the release of stored, otherwise obscured, emotio-physiological phenomena. Although not explicitly referred to by Henry, some participants described their liking of natural, lush retreat settings.

Henry continued by describing an enhanced intuitive sense of the needs of others, where verbal communication was limited, given the silent retreat setting:

'…you just start to just get a real intuitive sense by watching and paying attention versus being able to talk to people…you know when you're sitting at breakfast, you kind of sense like, who needs the butter?...Your Metta practice gets really highlighted in being in those types of conditions with other people practicing.' (Henry, L2-11, p. 21)

Henry earlier in interview partially defined Metta as accounting for his 'universe' and the 'universes' of others equally. After this extract, he explained that he prioritised creating a harmonious environment when in proximity with others on retreat. The above passage reflects this intention, and therefore the 'highlighting' of his Metta practice.

Richard, however, conveyed the difficulties of his retreat experience. He explained in interview that although he has practiced for 18 years, he has tended towards shorter retreats more frequently, and is now open to exploring longer time frames. While some participants referred to the necessity of retreat conditions to quieten the mind, Richard experienced an intensification of mental activity:

'…a silent, intense retreat of only meditation, it was for three days, that was very intense. I would, I would like to have the opportunity to do more because, in these three days I really felt…I had, I was in the most peaceful environment with nothing to do, everything was prepared for that, didn't have

any worries…instead of creating a deeply relaxed space in the mind, it actually created a very busy mind…' (Richard, L51-58, p. 18)

He later said his mind went 'to places that you won't want to go'. There is a sense of distress, and shock in this account, given the stark contrast between his expectations and the 'very intense' busyness of his mind. Although he did not clarify the nature of his thoughts, it seems this was an overwhelming experience. During his recounting, I was reminded of a similar experience when on retreat, of the despondency of my unmet expectations, and felt a heaviness in my limbs. I wondered if this alluded to an implied dejectedness.

3.3.3. Maintaining Consistency: Momentum, Faith and the Personalisation of Practice

All participants referred to the importance of maintaining consistency of practice. For some, physical health issues threatened their ability to remain consistent, and this was navigated through online meetings. Several participants explained that family/ work lives often interfered with commitment. Generally, faith in the benefits of practice, tailoring meditation to one's unique requirements and the momentum of habit all appeared to generate consistency. Eleanour, for instance, alluded to the 'discipline' of her practice, describing the importance of consistency, and deprioritised depth:

'I would add one more thing actually to that answer, just the ermm the discipline of having…meditation time in my day I think I'd, I'd say that it's, my meditation involves having timetabled time whereby I put aside seven times in a day to do this work, and sometimes it's not erm, deep meditation at all but it's there as a part of my day, my discipline…' (Eleanour, L8-14, p. 2)

It seems that by defining her practice as discipline, momentum is maintained; 'work' implies dedication, or duty which regardless of one's fluctuating mood is completed. Millwall referred to the automaticity of his practice, perhaps referring obliquely to its psychologically 'purifying' effects:

'I, just do it a kind of a bit, it's automatic. It's a bit like, as they say, you know erm, we get up in the morning and we wash our bodies.. meditating is almost like a shower for the mind' (Millwall, L22-27, p. 8)

Graham, however, despite recognising the importance of consistency, emphasised depth and profundity of experience. He continued by stating very advanced practitioners eventually dispense with, unnecessary formalized practice. Graham exemplified his view through conveying his experience meeting the Dalai Lama, admiring his compassionate, mindful behaviour and presence:

'…people like the Dalai Lama that I've had the privilege to be in the same room with him, with a one to one conversation, twice before, ermm this amazing presence of radiating compassion comes from the fact that he ermm is is in his every word he says and every movement he makes, it's done with

great consideration for those around him and ermm so really, the mark of a good meditator is he who doesn't meditate very much, because if you're still meditating like me, thirty years afterwards, well that's not (laugh), not a good indicator in many ways (laughter)…' (Graham, L11-18, p. 5)

Some participants predicted and observed the deleterious effects of becoming inconsistent. Millwall described a likely developing agitation:

'If I didn't meditate for a week, my mind would still be at peace at some level. But I, I think it's really the bit about going, and I expect it probably would be maybe I'd start err to get a bit more agitated over time…' (Millwall, L3-7, p. 15)

Henry throughout interview also observed that when his practice was inconsistent, he would be quicker to anger, more impatient, less able to manage multiple stressors and had less perspective:

'…you are aware of because you're more mindful…you can notice that you're erm you've got less patience with people, erm you're errm quicker to annoyance or anger. You're erm you feel less able to manage all the details of your life that are going on in a way that isn't kind of creating a huge amount of stress for you. Ermm You can you don't see through problems as clearly, you don't erm have as much erm perspective on stresses…' (Henry, L36-43, p. 16)

A pertinent observation conveyed here, and implied through other accounts, is that increased mindfulness re-enforces consistency, by making conscious the consequences of inconsistency. Both Karen and Henry referred to the sacrifices of consistency, and the strain on their familial lives.

Several participants expressed skepticism and doubt about their paths, often, however, depicting journeys of developing, restorative faith. Millwall suggested that his Catholic upbringing, the conflicts he had seen borne by religion, and the concerning deference to authority, had led to initial resistance towards Buddhist religiosity. He conveyed his faith grew through understanding and evidence of his own salutary experiences (peace of mind etc.); he therefore viewed Buddhism a philosophy and methodology of happiness:

'…I understand why it gets ehh *branded* as such. But for me it's, it's almost like the more looking at it, it's a philosophy on how to be happy, you know what I mean? It's a, it's a technique err and I guess actually ss, you know, part of it, it's like a scientific approach because it's scientific in the sense that if you do it, you will and do it properly and, and consistently, you will get the results, you know what I mean? And I see that.' (Millwall, L48-4, p. 13)

'Branded' suggests a stigmatic label, which may point to the degree of Millwall's initial skepticism.

Graham echoed Millwall's initial concerns, saying in interview he viewed his Christian upbringing as 'fundamentalist' and 'simplistic'. Graham, however, seemingly described a potent, partially unconscious degree of skepticism:

'…one has to be very sceptical about anybody who's a teacher, and errr although I didn't realise it at the time when I first came into Tibetan Buddhism I was highly sceptical indeed, extremely sceptical…' (Graham, L21-24, p. 3)

Like Graham and Millwall, Fred emphasized the importance of testing what is learnt against experience, highlighting the importance of taking nothing as gospel:

'…so it's all about, it's all about, erm testing, testing erm concepts against your own experience.

I: Mmm…

F: Err it's, it's, never different from that. And that's why I call myself a fundamentalist non-believer…' (Fred, L27-32, p. 14)

All described a personalizing of practice over time, according to their own experiences, tendencies and preferences. Tilly, for example, explained that her natural creativity and ability to visualize was of benefit. She also said this was a hindrance, however, where she may become distracted with creating the 'perfect' image. By becoming aware of and curtailing this tendency, she could then make use of her visionary abilities. Participants became more aware of what most benefitted them and of how their practices combined with their idiosyncratic strengths and weaknesses, which in turn helped maintain consistency:

'…I suppose I try to do that bit more because I am a visual meditator and I think it can be a bit of a hindrance (laughter), I end up building the perfect (laughter) visual of said Buddhas I've seen at, or you know, the images I like, and you may not, your heads in but not necessarily the whole of your being…' (Tilly, L46-51, p. 3)

4.0. DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

This chapter will begin by distilling the analysis in accord with the research aims and objectives. The findings will then be explored through the relevant psychological research, and philosophical literature. The second section will include an evaluation of the strengths and limitations of the methodology, analysis and design. After, consideration will be given to clinical implications, and inroads for future research.

4.2. Paths of transformation

From Suffering to Constructive Change

As discussed in the analysis, 'From Suffering to Constructive Change…' is a theme which falls under 'Paths of transformation'. Participants described journeying from suffering to greater serenity, contentment and lives of meaning. Difficulty often precipitated and maintained meditative practice. In this sub-section I place this theme amongst the literature cited in the first chapter, exploring both consonants and divergence. In the following sections, I then refer to sub- themes (group experiential themes) across both superordinate themes in relation to the previous literature. Further to how the results of the current study add to prior research, I introduce theoretical constructs and empirical data to contextualise the findings (Hedonic Treadmill- Luhmann & Intelisano, 2018; Intrinsic Goals- Carmody et al., 2006). This provides a lens through which to view the reported processes by which participants mitigated suffering and gained insight into that which provides lasting well- being (e.g. pursuits of meaning).

Ekici et al. (2020), as cited in the literature review, conducted an IPA investigation of four LTM's with between 5- 40 years Vipassana Mahasi experience. They observed a transition within their participants from 'Imbalance to Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being'; hedonic well-being refers to enjoyment and pleasure, whilst eudaimonia conveys a sense of meaning and purpose. This journey was strongly reflected within the current study, in the theme 'From suffering to constructive change: Greater Serenity, Contentment and Continuity of Meaning'. Graham, for instance, like Tim from Ekici et al.'s (2020) investigations, both described a sense of 'coming home' in relation to Buddhist practice, which depicts its eudaimonic value. In addition, beyond the serenity and contentment derived from practice, participants appeared to more often pursue meaning based activities which aligned with their values (i.e. teaching, activism, deeper relationships, further meditative practice). The pursuit of these eudaimonic 'intrinsic goals' may have improved their well- being. This is further evaluated later in the section.

The current study adds to Ekici et al.'s (2020) investigations through a larger, more diverse sample size of 10 and by including a greater variety of meditative practices. Although generalisability is not

the central aim, this may convey a general outcome across techniques. In addition, Bowles et al.'s (2022) results indicated that after five years of meditation, practitioners experienced greater levels of subjective 'spiritual growth', and prioritised this end above other goals (i.e. cognitive enhancement). This tendency was apparent across many participants who after experiencing the potential of practice increasingly held 'enlightenment' and 'truth' as paramount, which represent eudaimonic pursuits.

The end of constructive change was reportedly attained through several processes. Before and during practice participants became more accutely aware of the futility of anticipating residing contentment in external achievement, and temporary experiences. Early, classical theories of hedonic adaptation posit that our subjective well-being (SWB) returns to a genetically determined 'set-point' in response to either positive or negative life-circumstances. The 'hedonic treadmill' is informed by automatic habituation models, where desensitisation to repeated stimulus is viewed an adaptive response which allows the allocation of scarce psychological resources to survival relevant novelty (Fredrick & Loewenstein, 1999). In accordance, weak correlations have been found between physical attractiveness, income and in instances, health on measures of well-being (Diener et al., 1993; Diener et al., 1995; Okun & George, 1984). Despite the findings of Brickman et al. (1978), which provided support for the inevitability of the hedonic treadmill, empirical evidence has since been mixed. Revisions have included the understanding that well-being is not unitary (i.e. multiple set-points; hedonia may be inversly correlated with eudaimonia), consideration of individual differences and the long-term amenability of set-points (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Luhmann & Intelisano, 2018).

Both mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation (LKM) have demonstrated the capacity to undo the 'hedonic treadmill effect' (Fredrickson et al., 2008). Elster (1988) explored the 'marginal utility' of different activities; learning an instrument may provide increasing return as skill improves, whilst others may have diminishing returns when performed repetetively. Ericson et al. (2014), referencing Elster (1988) connected mindfulness and LKM with the former, in which measures of well-being tripled over nine weeks (Fredrickson et al., 2008). It seemed as the current participants experienced greater internal serenity and contentment, there remained less incentive to pursue well-being from temporary sources. In addition, through deeper awareness of their psychological processes, participants appeared more able to explore the mechanics of well-being, and act to improve it. Their insights arose through symbiosis between macro and micro levels of analysis; by seeing the reality of impermanence, craving and aversion both in their immediate experience, and across their lives they found, for instance, that '…living from gratification to gratification is not the way' (Fred, L38-39, p. 15).

It has been suggested that mindfulness and meditative practices foster the clarification of 'intrinsic goals', in greater accord with personal values (Ericson et al., 2014). Aims which are simultaneously congruent and viewed an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end are more able to enhance

personal well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Carmody et al. (2006) demonstrated that mindfulness and effective intrinsic goal clarification had a bi-directional, mutually enriching relationship. As participants grew in their practices, their seemed an increasing orientation towards authentic pursuits of meaning.

Ericson et al. (2014) collated evidence across the meditative corpus suggesting that mindfulness, by increasing subjective well-being, compassion and non-materialistic values, acts to encourage environmentally conscious behaviour. In addition, pro-social behavior may be self-reinforcing; studies demonstrate other-oriented action facilitates well-being and therefore encourages further pro-sociability (Markowitz and Shariff, 2012). Graham, Tilly, Henry and Julia all referred to an increased appreciation of nature, and all participants to enhancements in well-being, compassion and non-materialistic values. Tilly, however, referred explicitly to how her practice was an essential part of her environmental activism, saying: 'I can't, really act in a way to sort of protect the Earth, and protect all beings on it, if I don't have a sense of it's, aliveness and its erm yeah, it's, it's own unique aliveness…' (L19-24, p. 24). She stated 'I'm more inspired by being of service to the many, or as many beings as possible, than devoting that attention to a few of my own offspring…the Bodhisattva myth has been a guiding myth throughout my life…' (L15-20, p.18). Tilly suggested her practice engendered a child-like sense of the palpable, life-force of nature and sentiency, thereby cultivating her protective instincts. Although being certain of a cause-and-effect relationship between their practices and increases in non- materialistic values is not possible (these very values may have led them to spiritual/ Buddhist practices), these extracts provide a rich, experiential, narrative expression to Ericson et al.'s (2014) quantitative research. In addition, the connection between sensing the 'aliveness of nature' through practice, and increased impetus for prosocial, environmental activism was not explored. These participant passages convey the 'continuity of meaning' element in theme (1a).

Monteiro et al. (2018), in their pilot study, explored the cultivation of ethical action in second-generation mindfulness based interventions (SG-MBI's). These expanded the definition of mindfulness beyond present awareness of the 'here and now' to more fully capture Buddhist intent; a medium through which to 'transform the practitioner for their own betterment and that of others'. They also include 'wisdom- based' meditative techniques designed to foster experiential understanding of concepts such as 'emptiness' and 'impermanence' (Gordon et al., 2019). Therefore, mindfulness beyond its salutory effects, becomes a conduit for discernment between 'skillful' and 'unskillful' ethical behaviour. Their results indicated that the decreases in reactivity and increases in somatic awareness associated with enhanced mindfulness were predictive of enhanced value congruence. They postulated that greater equanimity and somatic awareness created a wider window of tolerance for negative emotions, including those associated with self-judgement, such as guilt. This is consistent with the findings across 'Paths of Transformation', in which participants developed

greater equanimity towards trying life circumstances (i.e. mortality/ loss) and developed an increased capacity to be present with aversive experience (i.e. 'Residing in chaos'). Tilly, for example, described the difficulty and promise of greater sensitivity to the suffering of herself and others; despite her seeming desire to turn away, she continued to turn towards, reflecting perhaps this widened window. The trend across participants of more frequently pursuing intrinsic aims may have been precipitated by greater somatic awareness; by becoming more accutely conscious of one's authentic emotional responses (i.e. dislike/ liking, one's own needs, symptoms of burnout at work etc.), then more congruous behaviour organically emerges. Millwall, for example, referred to the felt sense ('at the heart') of the futility of anticipating lasting happiness in extrinsic goals.

By clarifying and revisiting the following (e.g. SG- MBI's, psychometric data, study goals), I aim to situate the results of the current study amongst the progression of research described in the literature review, and demonstrate how it adds to our current understanding of LTM's. I include the core models previously referenced as they assist in conceptualising the reported experiences of LTM's across several themes, including 'Overcoming entrenched patterns and dynamics' and 'Death, Grief and Impermanence'. These are Ontological Addiction Theory (OAT) (Gordon et al., 2018), Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory (MMT) (Garland et al., 2015) and S-ART (Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation and Self-Transcendence) (Vago and Silbersweig, 2012).

SG-MBI's represent the culmination of contemplative study beginning in the 1980's. Initially research centred on constructs of mindfulness, attentional processes and its applications. This developed in 2005 to further exploration of ethical practices, and compassion meditations. More recently research has explored the Buddhist concepts of emptiness, non-self, impermanence and non-attachment, integrating these into wisdom-based interventions (Van Gordon et al., 2019). Meditation awareness training (MAT) and wisdom- based interventions (WBT's) are both defined as SG- MBI's, and include the experiential deconsctruction of the self. These practices have demonstrated psychological and clinical utility for workaholism and fibromyalgia (Van Gordon et al., 2017; Van Gordon et al., 2016). As referenced, emptiness meditations outperformed mindfulness meditation on measures of positive affect and non- attachment in advanced practitioners, and participants regarded these practices as 'staple to their spiritual nourishment' (Van Gordon et al., 2019). These 'insight' meditations are associated with long- term practice and are being increasingly introduced into clinical research; they may have more possible adverse psychological effects than mindfulness practices (Ekici et al., 2020; Schlosser et al., 2019). Although the central aim of this research was to illuminate the lived- experiences of LTM's, an ancillary goal was to determine the reported mechanims and outcomes of these practices, and to determine how challenging experiences were navigated. As these practices are increasingly explored clinically, I believed additional qualitative research may aid in furthering the safety and effectiveness of their use.

Van Gordon et al. (2018), in 'Ontological addiction theory (OAT): Attachment to me, mine, and I' address the limitations of the biopsychosocial model of mental illness, in remedying reductionistic biological perspectives. OAT, as referred to in the literature review, is a metaphysical model of mental illness. It suggests that the innacuracy of our beliefs regarding reality, being, and the self, are 'addictive', and lead to psychological/ behavioural maladjustment. OAT draws on Buddhist terminology and metaphor in describing the apparent self that lacks intrinsicity; 'The tree is "empty" of an inherently or independently existing self but is "full" of the universe.' 'Addiction', as all negative or positive emotion associated with buttressing the self-concept re-enforce the preceding, 'unskilful', psycho-behavioural patterning. By attaching to constructs and outcomes that are 'impermanent', suffering arises (wealth, fame, fortune etc.).

OAT provides an explanatory framework for participant accounts across several themes, including 'From Suffering to Constructive Change…', 'Seeing beyond the rigid 'I'…', 'Overcoming entrenched patterns…' and 'Death, grief and impermanence…'. Participants described the centrality of no-self practices in their journeys; Henry reduced the 'fixedness' with which he viewed himself, and Tilly, Millwall and Karen, expressed less/ no defensiveness of the apparent 'I'. In accord with OAT, participants, by viewing, and experiencing the self as impermanent, were able to regard seemingly entrenched, negative habits as changeable. OAT may assert, that their 'addiction' to both superficial ends, and emotion, to secure a 'false', changeable self-concept weakened upon insight into impermanence, emptiness and Dukkha.

Relatedly, 'emptiness' became experiential in 'Seeing beyond the rigid 'I'…'; participant reports had overlap with the 'non-dual', 'contentless' and 'pure awareness' states discussed in chapter 1 (Gamma & Metzinger, 2021). Their findings suggested that F1 (sense of agentic effort, passing of time, self), negatively correlated with F2 (peace, bliss and silence) and F8 (Emptiness and non-egoic self-awareness). In addition, participant accounts often related to the phenomenological taxonomies within the 'Mystical Experience Questionnaire' (Maclean et al., 2012), derived from Stace's conceptual framework (1960). Several participants conveyed both implicitly, and explicitly, the 'ineffability' of their experiences, using apparent 'paradoxicality' to express them:

'…it's a feeling of, it's banal to put this into language, but what other device have we got, but it's it's rather like ermm…feeling confident but not arrogant, calm but err modest, and a feeling of ermm a connection with your environment, whatever it happens to be and it's a, it's a feeling of profound happiness actually…' (Graham, L14-17, p. 9)

'Internal Unity', 'External Unity', 'non-temporality', 'non-spatiality', 'inner subjectivity' and 'sacredness' are dimensions that parallel a reduction in F1 and increases in F8. Karen, like Graham and others, referred to an 'expansive mind of union' and 'non-duality', accompanied by 'incredible'

peace, which reflects these criteria. Participants, despite drawing on varying techniques and means had parallel across experiential ends.

As discussed, Ataria (2015) explored the voluntary, changeable sense of subject/ object boundary amongst advanced meditators. Like his participants, those partaking in the current study suggested changes in the sense of 'ownership'/ identification with their bodies, 'diffused boundaries' and alterations in the 'egocentric- bodily perspective'. Tilly, in complete congruence with the title of Ataria's (2015) research, through the 'Six Element Practice' queried whilst on retreat 'really, where does my skin end out there begin?'. Millwall's comments exemplify the loss of the 'ego-centric bodily perspective'; '…you're just there as consciousness, seeing things going on around you' (Millwall, L85-91, p. 2), and are consonant with prior findings (Gordon et al., 2019). Beyond a temporary experience, this view seemed to have suffused Millwall's life.

The findings within 'Seeing Beyond the Rigid 'I'…' added to the previous research by highlighting lesser researched practices such as the 'Six Element' performed by Tilly, which perforated the boundary between self and the environment. This allowed for an experiential understanding of interdependence. Given its possible therapeutic utility, further research investigating this may be beneficial. This study also shed light on the interconnected processes reported by participants which appeared underreported within the research base. Where, for instance, participants described 'The Deep Significance of Meditative Community', group meditation appeared to add a dimension to practice (ineffable depth, facilitates loving-kindness meditation and concentration etc.) which is absent when by oneself. Sanga also provided the opportunity to test meditative techniques and apply ethical principles during conflict resolution, or when attenuating a negative view of self. This research gave voice to the difficulties associated with altering one's identity/ view of self where participants experienced profound self- judgement for not meeting a perceived spiritual 'ideal'. This was mitigated by loving-kindness practices, consistency and warm guidance from the meditative community, and demonstrates the multi-faceted path of the LTM more fully.

4.2.1. Mindfulness to Meaning and Death, Grief and Impermanence

The Mindfulness-to- Meaning Theory (MMT) (Garland et al., 2015) and S-ART model's (2012) also held explanatory power across several themes, including 'eudaimonic meaning-making' in response to adverse life events (i.e. grief, betrayal, loss). Garland and Fredrickson (2019) sought to extend their model. 'Savouring' ('experiences of 'oneness' between subject and object') was viewed a key element in mindfulness' therapeutic mechanism of action. The authors extended their theory by demonstrating evidence of the usefulness of non-dual awareness, and 'self-transcendent positive emotions', for chronic pain and addiction (i.e. opioid abuse), which aligns with OAT's assertions.

Although not all participants defined their practices as 'mindfulness', mindful outcomes seemingly remained. Eleanour, for instance, suggested a 'decentering' in relation to her cognitive/ affective

processes, despite her yogic practice where ‘thoughts are the gateway to experience’. Periods of ‘being above’ and ‘without thought’, however, were phenomenologically represented, reflecting a possible universal mechanism of action across techniques.

The further novel and unanticipated findings of this study included the passages relating to ‘Death, grief and impermanence; re-negotiating the relationship to mortality’. Though the literature review provided examples of explorations of impermanence, there is little qualitative and quantitative research investigating the impact of contemplative traditions/ practices on bereavement, grief or perceptions of mortality (Cacciatore et al., 2014). Cacciatore et al.’s (2014) research, however, conveyed participant insight into impermanence hastened the restorative processing of grief. Williams et al. (2020), given this lack, sought to test the Mindfulness-to-Meaning theory and post-traumatic growth (PTG) in the context of grief. Given the clear relation of MTM to ‘Journey’s of transformation’, the frequency of cognitive reframing across participants (e.g. overcoming entrenched cognitive habits) and of its relation to their journey’s of loss, I opted to present their research here. It may be more relevant to the experiences of Henry and Julia, who spoke to the difficulty to their experiences of grief, rather than Millwall and Karen, who described serenity at point of their family’s passing. They defined PTG as ‘positive psychological changes experienced as a result of a traumatising or highly challanging events’; the criteria comprising positive psychological change are a greater vision of one’s potential, a profound realisation of one’s strength/ resilence, a greater appreciation for life, connections to others and spiritual/ existential change (Tadeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The researchers hypothesized that dispositional mindfulness and the capacity for positive ‘meaning making’ were positively correlated, and that in the wake of bereavement would predict PTG. The results indicated that mindfulness most strongly predicted PTG in low-moderate levels of traumatic grief, but served a less prominent role in more traumatized individuals. Still, dispositional mindfulness scores predicted ‘meaning making’.

Williams et al. (2020) posited that those who are experiencing high levels of traumatic grief and the associated intensity of emotion are inhibited in their capacity for cognitive ‘meaning making’. The findings, however, suggested that mindfulness retained a key component for highly traumatized individuals in facilitating PTG through ‘non-cognitive’ means. In accord with ‘The only way out is in’, it was suggested that where cognitive processes were ineffectual, somatic processing occurred, in accord with body-focused trauma modalities (Levine, 2010). Further, Garland et al. (2015) suggested that defining mindfulness as a ‘strictly non-evaluative process’ fails to capture its facilicitation of eudaimonic wellbeing and the development of alternate narratives where meaning is derived from challenging circumstances (e.g. grief, loss, change etc., as was denoted by the current participants across themes). Perhaps Julia’s ‘heart melting’ represented a necessary form of somatic processing; before this her grief may have been highly traumatising, which meant that ‘meaning making’

remained difficult. After the further development of 'dispositional mindfulness' a 'grief corner' was turned.

Millwall 'was completely at peace', at the time of his brother's passing. Although Millwall does not refer directly to his experience of grief beyond this acute experience, his transcript implies a generalised equanimity towards his death. Congruent with this research, Millwall's 'meaning making' seemed catalysed by his 'dispositional mindfulness', in addition to his compassion exercises. Mindfulness appeared to allow Millwall to implement techniques which caused him to be, in his words, 'less self-absorbed' in which the loss was not only 'his loss'. By selecting against this narrative, deriving comfort from the ceasing of his brother's suffering, understanding the naturalness and reality of mortality and becoming 'other-focused' through compassionate awareness Millwall appeared able to navigate his loss with equability. Beyond this, Karen's experience of her mother's death seemed influenced by Tibetan conceptions of 'transference of consciousness' and an 'incredible confidence that she transitioned into a very positive state' (L21-27, p. 19). These extracts add to the research base by providing qualitative richness to the quantitative/ theoretical markers.

I was particularly struck by Karen and Millwall's reports. Both appeared to recognise how their reactions to loss may be viewed culturally ('I don't tell many people' and '…it's not because I didn't love my brother'). Reflective of this, I noticed an impulse to view their accounts through my previous experiences as a bereavement volunteer, wondering if they had missed necessary stages of grieving. I remained in two minds; part of me, given the profound benefits I have received from practice considered their experiences a healthy and viable possibility. The other part, which doubted, I then questioned. Has my therapeutic training, and western perspective led to a disposition to pathologize spiritual potential?

Park & Pyszcynski (2019) explored across three studies the impact of meditation, and Buddhist philosophy on the salience of 'defensive responses' to reminders of mortality. The first study suggested that those who had only meditated prior to data collection and mortality stimulus, had long-term experience or were 'lay Buddhists' did not exhibit the 'typical increase in worldview defense' characteristic of non-practitioners. Their results implied that these differences in 'defensive reactions' were mediated by 'dispositional mindfulness' and Buddhist belief structures (which were not explicitly referred to). Of note, the self-reported 'death anxiety' did not differ between groups. In light of the current studies findings, perhaps an acceptance of the reality of mortality mitigated dysfunctional, reactionary behaviour/ emotional responses created by experiential avoidance. Millwall explained that by meditating on impermanence, he was able to prioritise meaning in his life and appreciate his relationships more fully. Mortality was therefore motivating; though the anxiety may have remained, prosocial, rather than defensive behaviours and attitudes emerged. Where Henry

feared death or 'the fear of the unknown death represents' he expressed a greater accetpance of flux given his practice, and a grattitude for the life he has lived.

4.2.2. Overcoming Entrenched Patterns/ Dynamics

Meditation has been demonstrated to reduce cognitive, 'habitual' responding (Wenk- Sormaz, 2005). Mindful states, such as non-reactivity, non-judgement, and open-awareness assist in the mitigation of dysfunctional social impulsivity (Corcoran, 2015). In 'Overcoming entrenched patterns…', participants drew on these skills to alter the trajectory of their reactivity. Julia, for instance, referenced Pema Chodron's 'Pause' technique in altering her habitual ways of responding. It involves 'pausing' during stuckness and simply, taking three conscious breaths, to depattern and re-centre (Chodron, 2017). Consistent with the S-ART model (2012), participants exhibited an enhanced capacity to remain with aversive experience ('Residing in chaos…'), through a process of 'Decentering and non-attachment'. Further accord was displayed where enhanced empathy and improved mentalisation permitted positive change within their relationships (Reis, 2008).

Pradhan (2014) observed that both mindfulness and mentalisation are 'metacognitive' in nature, where the former may involve non-conceptual 'knowing' (e.g. when one is aware they are aware, without thought), and the latter 'reflective cognition about cognition' (i.e. thinking about thinking). Increases in these abilities and greater self-awareness across participants appeared a mechanism of change in 'Overcoming Entrenched Patterns'. Several participants, through greater self-knowledge (awareness of patterns of responding, acknowledgement of their suffering and therefore the suffering of others, higher resolution awareness of their needs, in context of the needs of others etc.) appeared to more effectively change habits, intuit, and respond, to the mental states of others. Henry, for example, suggested an increased capacity to pause, remain equanimous, and reply compassionately to the requirements of a junior colleague in context of acknowledging a power differential. He explained this consideration of their fear with compassion would not have occurred before disciplined practice (L48- 2, p. 23). Evidence suggests the reading of micro-expressions can be trained (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2011). It is possible that magnified, moment-to-moment awareness increases their accurate recognition, thereby aiding mentalisation. In addition to the pro-social behaviours encouraged through practice, Henry in his example alluded to the value of LKM in fostering this compassionate regard; this is congruent with a prior meta-analysis investigating in part its impact on empathic concern (Luberto et al., 2017).

Both Yoga including meditative/mindful elements and MBSR have been studied in relation to social anxiety and assertiveness (Goli et al., 2020; Karthika, 2019). Social assertiveness has been defined as expressing one's perspective, boundaries and needs directly, and congruently whilst accounting for the 'non-public rights of others'. This would be contrast against dysfunctional defences such as

passive, or overt aggression (Ellis and Hartley, 2005). Several participants expressed an enhanced capacity to recognise and develop their own 'voices' and boundaries whilst accounting for the 'universes' of others. This effect spanned several domains (work, relationships etc.); participants described improved work/non-work boundaries corresponding with the findings of a randomized trial in the workplace where mindfulness improved managers resiliency and resourcefulness (Mellner et al., 2020). Eleanour explained that in context of her cancer journey the 'presence of mind' derived from practice performed a significant role in allowing her to openly express her emotional state and needs to medical professionals (L32- 39, p. 8). She also called upon help from friends before her appointments as rehearsal for their difficulty, demonstrating this increased ability (L26- 28, p. 8). Numerous processes associated with meditative development appeared to facilitate this across participants including greater self-awareness, meta-cognition, emotional control during conflict and reduced reactivity (e.g. Millwall in 'Overcoming Entrenched Habits…'; practice allowed space before reaction and reduced his defensiveness/ irritability in relationships; L34-37, p. 5).

4.2.3. Residing in Chaos: The Only Way Out is In

In 'Residing in chaos: the only way out is in' several related meditative processes and outcomes are highlighted. Across all participant accounts, aversion remained, despite their long-term experience. Hayes and Eustis (2020, p. 128) explain '…the unwillingness to remain in contact with distressing internal experiences along with the attempts to control or avoid distressing internal experiences, has been associated with a range of psychopathological symptoms…'. They proceed to state that experiential avoidance can be adaptive in certain contexts; 'habituality, rigidity and automaticity' are the criteria for possible impairment. Consistent with prior research current participants demonstrated reductions in experiential avoidance however, and increases in equanimity, beyond hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Ekici et al., 2020). Where participants had hidden from their grief, suffering and experiencing, they more frequently turned towards it, and selected for skilful responses. This, in accord with ACT principles, led to transmutation; it seemed that clear, choiceless awareness of 'aversive' embodied experiences drew energy from cognitions which would both interpret, and sustain them. Henry, for instance, explained that by experiencing the raw data of his back pain, without narrative, he was able to still the inertia of his catastrophising mind. It seemed that increasing one's capacity to be with aversive experience also appeared to refine one's sensitivity to positive experience (and to see either, in each) which Tilly poetically expressed:

'…if I can remember even in the most painful and difficult circumstances that, this is just what's unfolding, it's just this beautiful cosmic drama, though sometimes it's, and we may be with difficult experiences, I tend to think more of like, I don't know, the oncoming thunderstorm…' (Tilly, 21-24, p.21).

The ‘choiceless awareness’ described by Fred, which neither grasps, nor avoids, appears synonymous with ‘being with’ oneself and experience, which then cultivates equanimity. In harmony with these findings, researchers found self-compassion, meaning in life and the mitigation of experiential avoidance accounted for 58% of variance in positive mental health scores amongst regular meditators (Yela et al., 2020).

4.2.4. The Potential Perils of Practice

Britton (2019) asked in her investigations, ‘Can mindfulness be too much of a good thing?’, asserting the ‘value of the middle way’ is likely at the center of the bell-curve. She observed that prior research has found few, if any, psychological or physiological processes or states that are adaptive, or desirable in all situations. Instead ‘positive phenomena tend to follow a non-monotonic or inverted U-shaped trajectory’ where their positive effects eventually falter. The relevant dimensions of mindfulness explored pertained to excesses in ‘Mindful emotion regulation’. By increasing pre-frontal control over the limbic system and amygdala mindfulness improves emotional control and reactivity. This in surplus, however, has been associated with emotional blunting (reduction in bandwidth or global loss of positive/ negative affect) and dissociation. Additionally, ‘decentering and psychological distance’ has been suggested key in mindfulness’ therapeutic effects, specifically as it relates to emotion and thought. There is evidence, however, that the neurobiological correlates of dissociation are partially overlapping, including activation of the inferior parietal lobe, high parasympathetic tone and prefrontal mediation of the amygdala. Where participants have demonstrated tendencies towards avoidance (In ‘Residing in Chaos’; Tilly observing an impulse to turn away, Eleanour by using the path to avoid confronting herself etc.) it becomes appropriate to hold the above research in consideration, where avoidance strategies within a long-term spiritual journey may occur. Adding further complexity, Britton (2019) observed that excesses in attending to difficult or aversive experience can worsen outcomes. Where exposure therapies are helpful for those demonstrating high avoidance, those with low-avoidance orientations may develop dissociative/ anxiety disorders as they magnify ‘attentional bias towards threat’ (Deane et al., 2020).

Deane et al. (2020) observed that ‘enlightenment’ experiences, and states of depersonalisation had in common alterations in the sense of self. Whilst the former brings serenity and joy, the latter is often accompanied by fear, dysphoria and estrangement. Shinzen Young deemed depersonalisation the ‘evil twin’ of Buddhist enlightenment (Lofthouse, 2014). The researchers applied the ACM (Allostatic Control Model) (Deane, 2020); ACM proposes affect and emotional responses assist in predictive capacity through ‘precision weighting’ whilst tracking for growth opportunities. In light of their proposed frameworks ‘these two varieties of selfless experience are characterised by stark differences in the systems degree of control: whereas depersonalisation is expressely characterised as resulting from a critical loss of inferred control, selflessness in the context of meditative practice is marked by a

significant gain in control'. Overlapping with OAT, there remains the experience of 'frustration and joy' though 'there is no longer the sense of being an essential subject to appropriate these states as *me* or *mine*'. This is consistent with participants seemingly paradoxical reports where both a more labile, and surer self emerges; rather than reducing volition, as is with depersonalization, they often expressed a greater sense of agency, and stability in their acknowledgement that we are a 'dynamic, self-organizing process' (Deane et al., 2020). The advantages found of meditative community and spiritual guidance may be relevant here; if Henry, for instance, was not provided a framework with which to understand the 'vibrations' he experienced, the anxiety may have led to depersonalisation.

Aligned with the findings of Ekici et al., (2020) (Outcome: Physical and Interpersonal Challenges) and Shapiro (1992) several participants referred to gradients of alienation from others who were not committed to practice. Henry and Karen conveyed the difficulty of spending time away from family when practicing. Henry explained his increasing commitment to meditative retreats introduced stresses into his romantic partnership, which were then seen between them as a positive cost- benefit: 'the net benefit of it I think makes that worth it for both of us…' (L37-38, p. 15). Nero, Henry and Millwall spoke to the unlikelihood of those outside the path truly grasping the challenges of abiding by Buddhist ethical frameworks; their 'old' friendships (before deeply comitting) were altered, and some fell away as lifestyles strongly diverged (i.e. drinking, non-vegan etc.). In addition, concern around Covid-19 risk, and physical ailments presented challenges for participants. Julia experienced uncomfortable self-consciousnsess when lying down in class, and found Zoom sessions useful for her continued attendance. Shaner et al., (2017) and Ekici et al., (2020) touched on the significance of meditative community, suggesting teachers/mentors provided a normalising, guiding role and indirectly held practitioners accountable to their commitments. These same functions were salient in the current study. These results, however, demonstrate more explicitly Sanga's relevance in moderating the internal conflicts of LTM's, that inevitable conflicts arise in meditative communities and they provide opportunity for practicing mindful resolution, the normalisation of difficulty/ unusual states and the potential profundity of teacher/student relationships. Graham and Karen, in particular, conveyed the importance of their relationships to spiritual guides and the necessity of regarding 'guru's' with healthy skepticism. Power differentials can lead to the abuse of authority and dysfunctional dynamics/ boundary violations (McLeod, 2006). Graham highlighted the sobering significance of 'due diligence' when deciding upon the authenticity of one's teacher:

'…I mean it's what lawyers call due diligence, and you have to do this because, people who mess with your mind can do far more damage than someone with a knife.' (Graham, L27- 28, p. 3)

In-line with the quantitative findings of McClintock et al. (2019) participants derived benefit from retreat settings, noting increases in psychological stillness and reductions in mental disturbances. Adding to their meta- analysis the current qualitative data highlighted the reported usefulness of lower

stimulus settings, and prolonged practice on insight practices. Challenging experiences were shared, however. When considering the abrupt, disturbing busyness of Richard's mind when on extended retreat I was reminded of Walter Odajnyk (1998) work in which he explored 'Zen meditation as a way of individuation and healing'. He suggests that whilst meditating 'psychic energy' is directed from its 'habitual flow' through ego defenses, complexes, fantasies, persona's, thoughts, feelings and drives. He notes in Western meditators, when psychic energy is drawn from drives and instincts, that these sub-structures become 'autonomous protesters'; their existence is seemingly threatened, so the Western practitioner may experience rebound fear, anxiety, aggression etc. as the drives struggle against apparent dissolution. Odajnyk (1998) compares these arisings to the 'Jungian shadow' and the alchemical *nigredo* in which the unconscious becomes conscious. When confronted with these supressed forces those beginning their meditative journeys may suspend their pursuit. Despite his extended experience, the space afforded by retreat conditions may have made otherwise unconscious psychic material conscious, thereby causing his disturbance.

4.3. Complimentary Paths of Transformation

When crystalising the themes for this research, it would have been possible to use the above title for a group experiential theme under 'Paths of Transformation'. I decided against this as I intended to draw more direct attention to the meditative aspect of participant journeys given the focus of the research question (i.e. long- term meditators). Several participants referred to the usefulness of conventional psychotherapeutic interventions in their lives. Tilly expressed her acquired love of therapeutic process and congruent communication, Julia spoke to their value in her grief journey, and Eleanour explained that counselling was necessary in confronting the enormity of her self-neglecting patterns. She considered the reasons she pursued the spiritual path as vehemently at 26, reflecting she had hidden behind her roles, and therefore from herself whilst acknowledging her desire to belong. It is possible her joining of meditative community represented movement towards 'seperation' from family, where she felt unable to individuate, feeling like a 'shadow', amongst their 'strong senses of selves'. Her developing sense of a 'right to exist', may have occurred by addressing this (counselling/journalling). Additionally, Eleanour observed that despite having used her practice as an avoidance strategy, upon awareness of this pattern, meditation then became a tool to mitigate avoidance, and streamline theraeputic process. After 'seperating', Eleanour then 're-integrated' by personalising her practice, re-negotiating her relationship with her sister, and reconnecting with her family's religion, which she felt she had reactively dismissed in her 20's. These profound experiences demonstrate the importance of therapeutic practices beyond meditation in her path of transformation. I believe it valuable to highlight these narratives now, to provide truthful context and to illustrate the value of counselling techniques as complimentary to meditative practices. These narratives also demonstrate the difficulty of long-term development as is depicted in Buddhist texts (Bodhi, 2023). In order to mitigate the challenges

and possible harms of the meditative path, the therapuetic tools participants reported using may be of benefit.

4.4. Evaluating the Study

4.4.1. Quality and Research Rigour

In the methodology chapter I referred to Yardley's (2000) criteria by which to evaluate qualitative investigations. These were 'sensitivity to context', 'commitment and rigour', 'transparency and coherence' and 'impact and importance'. Rather than repeating these, I intend to re-visit them, given the results have now been outlined and discussed in context of the wider corpus.

'Sensitivity to context' has been demonstrated by situating my research question within a comprehensive literature review which spanned quantitative/qualitative study alongside relevant philosophical and religious works. Additionally, the discussion chapter has where necessary introduced further source material to place novel, unexpected findings within the larger research base. As expressed, the imperfect capturing of another's subjectivity is inevitable and the double-hermeneutic is influenced by my position as researcher and niche interests as an LTM. Throughout the research process this has been acknowledged, and my prior fascination with contemplative practices and eastern ethical philosophies have provided passionate motivation during analysis. By having foundationally accessed some of the mental states described by researchers and participants I felt better equipped to interpret their life-worlds and distinguish my projections from their experiencing.

'Rigour' was ensured via frequent supervisory input throughout this systematic process. At each key juncture I sought advice within supervision to inform my choices and maintain analytic integrity (i.e. Have I fully understood the distinction between exploratory and interpretative noting? When do 'stretch interpretations' snap? Is my foregrounding appropriate?).

'Transparency and coherence' were shown by outlining in detail the steps of my analysis and by evidencing these in appendix, with clear examples of how the resultant table of themes emerged. Throughout the research I have continually added to my research journal, for personal processing and reflexivity.

The aims of this research were to aid and inform the development of therapeutic meditative interventions, to better understand the processes and outcomes of LTM and to glean the idiosyncratic, lived experience and narrative journey's of participants. Though the clinical implications are further explored later in chapter, this research highlighted the potential socio-cultural consequences of meditative practice and community. Religiosity, sexuality, race and socio-economic status were confluent in participant accounts and have been to my knowledge comparitively unexplored in relation to LTM. Given the rich and vulnerable accounts provided by participants I intend to publish

this work in meditative, psychological or philosophical journals. (Mortality, giving interventions, clinical implications and grief)

4.4.2. Study Limitations

As Willig (2008) notes, language is limited; inherent to qualitative research and IPA in particular is a reliance upon interpetations of symbolic representations of phenomenological reality. These are, however, the acknowledged bounds of language as a communication technology. The results, therefore, claim only to represent a proximal interchange between the researcher and participant. I observed that Fred and Graham, who both had extensive experience, frequently used metaphor to capture the 'ineffable', and appeared consciously oblique in their responses. This felt to such degree, I began to worriedly question if this research served an end the zen parable warned against; of what use is sharpening the image of the finger pointing to the moon? What is gained by encouraging participants to describe that which is fundamentally experienced? Fred referenced the 'Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' to illustrate this issue: 'And he said, well please tell me, and the computer said are you sure you want to know? He said, yes, yes, yeah absolutely and…the computer said you're not gna like it! He said please tell me! It's, it's 43..' (Fred, L8-10, p. 9). He continued by stating that though scripture guides, the truth one seeks is ultimately experiential, and cannot be represented abstractly; '43' has as much relation to the meaning of life, as the word air has to the dancing sensations of breeze against skin. Though participants often impressed the importance of testing the teachings against experience, teaching remained necessary. Perhaps then, this research further represents this necessary symbiosis.

Although the central aim of the study was to explore the lived-experiences of LTM's, an ancillary objective was to shed light on the possible processes and outcomes of meditative practices for participants. Making definitive generalisable, cause and effect truth claims based on participant reports is not possible given researcher fallibility, the nature of qualitative methodologies and the small sample size (Willig, 2001).

In addition, though there was a near even gender split between participants, with some variation in religious and national backgrounds, all participants were white aside from two. Further, information about sexual orientation was not collected during demographics and Henry was the only participant who spoke explicitly to the impact of practice on his view of minority identities. As compared to other participants Henry appeared to more frequently use his meditations to reflect on the meaning and definition of them (L48-5, p. 12). This seemed a part of a larger trend in which participants viewed themselves with more flexibility (e.g. letting go of an anxious identity etc.; 'Seeing Beyond the Rigid 'I'). The relationship between meditative practice and insight into/ alterations of the view of self and experiences of sexuality, national identity, racism and religiosity have not been explicitly addressed

within the literature; greater inclusion within the sample may have shed further light on this pertinent issue.

Participants performed a variety of meditative techniques which had not been given attention in the qualitative and quantitative corpus. It was therefore difficult to situate some 'perceived processes and outcomes' amongst the literature, and to speculate as to their effects in isolation. By not placing stringent criteria on practice types, however, this study may aid in informing theoretical models that hypothesize underlying, universal meditative mechanisms. In addition, my meditative experience centres on LKM, open-monitoring, non-dual practices and MM. My intellectual, and experiential understanding of the intricacies of Buddhist philosophy/ lexicon is limited. Whilst interpreting transcripts and during interview this paucity of knowledge may have interfered with immersion; what probing questions would I have asked with 25 years of experience? How would I have arranged the themes with a deeper view of the underlying tectonics of participant journeys?

As discussed in the methodology chapter, all interviews were conducted online. Although this allowed participants with physical ailments to participate in the study, relevant data may have been lost.

In addition, after attending a retreat in the Zen Buddhist tradition, I came to understand that for some practitioners there remains resistance against expressing 'enlightenment', or 'insight' experiences. Though those with this orientation may have been selected against by virtue of their decision to participate in the study, I considered the possibility that participants held reservation in fully relating their experiences given this convention. In tandem, and as considered in prior investigations of LTM's, defining an 'advanced' practitioner by their length of practice invites issue, where depth of experience may be more relevant.

As discussed in the methods chapter, the possible value of heterogeneity within the lengths of time participants practiced (between 5- 40 years) included illuminating the possible patterns of challenges, difficulties and insights that emerge at differing stages of development. The limitations inherent to this variance within the sample, however, are that the benefits and challenges experienced and expressed by those with 5 years of experience are likely to differ from those with 40 years of experience. The language used to relay insight, in addition to their depth and the nuance with which they are described is likely to alter over time. This may then reduce the salience of the themes captured where the group- experiential labels fail to reflect the fine-grained distinctions between long-term initial benefits/ challenges from those with 25 or more years of practice time. Challenges may also arise in the analytic interpretative process where heterogeneity exists across the sample, when determining whether a mechanism of change or specific outcome has arisen due to practice duration or other factors. In addition, although generalisability was not the central aim, variation in the techniques and lengths of time practiced mean the outcome of the results are less applicable to defined groups of long-term practitioners.

In the methods chapter I briefly discuss the potential negative implications of holding all interviews online. These included face to face interaction allowing for deeper rapport and therefore more vulnerable responses, technical issues altering conversational flow and the missing of the potential transference within the room. Given the aim of this research was to explore the experiences of LTM's, and to determine the impact of their practices on their lives being in person with participants may have further facilitated analytic interpretation.

Those with greater experience of loving-kindness meditations, for instance, may have felt more vividly differently to others who meditated primarily on non-duality. Although my process was able to be used during analysis, subtle non-verbal communication which could have increased the intensity of my felt sense may have been missed online.

In addition, participants who had meditated for greater lengths of time, or reached advanced insight may have been able to more readily transmit aspects of their experiencing in face-to-face interview. Dharmic transmissions, or the spontaneous transfer of knowledge of teacher to student are frequently referred to in Buddhist traditions (Kapleau, 1969). Shattering insight is unlikely to have occurred for the researcher in this way. In the research context, however, smaller aspects of this may have translated within a face-to-face interview allowing for a fuller capturing of participant subjectivity.

Whilst using the Zoom conferencing platform, it may have also been more difficult given the reduced resolution of the image and its latency time to detect participant micro-expressions and therefore the full emotional range associated with their life narratives. Bekes et al. (2021) conducted research into the experiences of psychotherapists conducting therapy online. The therapists reported difficulty with distraction during session (for both clinician and client), lower perceived quality of the therapeutic relationship and reduced connection (perceiving the emotions of patients, a feeling of connectedness, the organic expression and sense of empathy). During the current studies interviews, distraction did occur, where for example living room phones rang, or there were knocks on the front door. In addition, although connection was felt with participants it may have been impeded by the virtual medium.

4.5. Avenues for Future Research

The current study highlighted several possible avenues for novel and necessary research. Participants described a breadth of meditative techniques beyond MM, open-monitoring and LKM. These included chanting, dialogical/ experiential insight practices, merging with imagistic representations of ethical ideals, 'shamanic medicine walks' and 'guru yoga'. There may be processes underlying the beneficial outcomes of these practices which further study can uncover. Tilly, for example, reported recalling an image of the resourced, Boddhisatva image to imbue her work with play and determine if

she required rest (L42- 4, p. 7). She exclaimed the value of these meditations for developing resiliency. To my knowledge there are no established quantitative or qualitative papers examining the imaginal meditations reported here. Further investigation may illuminate the potential beneficial therapeutic effects of this technique and aid clinicians in their practice. If it also provides scope to improve resiliency and burnout, it may be helpful for therapists when managing stress at work.

Despite my efforts, I had difficulty finding qualitative research exploring 'transmission experiences' associated with 'Guru Yoga'. Guru Yoga is part of Vajrayana practice and is defined a tantric devotional process in which the meditator fuses aspects of their consciousness or 'mindstream' with that of their Guru's (Rinpoche, 1994, p. 416). It appears to have parallel with the spontaneous, non-conceptual, transmissions of insight between teacher and student described within the Zen tradition (Blofield, 2006). Karen's reports, in which she depicted 'experiencing' her teacher's mind are to my knowledge absent in the contemporary, established qualitative and quantitative corpus. This was for her 'life changing' and ineffable, and despite her description of process and outcome, leaves several questions unanswered which further research may address.

As previously discussed this research showed that the relationship between meditative practice, alterations in the view of self and experiences of minority identities has not been explicitly addressed. A tenet of counselling psychology is a holistic understanding of the client as embedded within a socio-cultural environment and of an emphasis on subjectivity beyond diagnosis (Cooper, 2009). If further research explored the experiences of ethnic, sexual or racially minoritized groups during their long-term meditative journey's a better understanding of the challenges they face, and of how they are overcome could be attained. This would give voice to their under representation in the literature, and assist in highlighting possible differences in their journeys.

4.6. Research Strengths

The themes generated through this research both converged and diverged/ added to the quantitative, qualitative and theoretical literature. Although they point towards potential mechanisms of change, the central aim of my investigations was to provide voice to the experiences of LTM's where this has been underrepresented. When conducting interviews, I made clear to participants to treat our conversations as such, and that at base, I am approaching their life-worlds as a novice.

The methodological approach, philosophical orientation and results are consonant with the counselling psychology ethos which emphasises beyond diagnosis and wrote prescription a holistic view which prizes the subjectivity of the individual (Walsh & Frankland, 2009; Woolfe, 1996). Cooper (2009) after distilling several seminal texts, produced CP's six key principles:

1) Emphasis on subjectivity/ intersubjectivity beyond 'objective measures' and therapist observations.
2) The facilitation of 'growth and the actualisation of potential (versus a focus on treating pathology'.
3) 'Empowerment' as defined by the above, rather than the 'absence of mental illness'.
4) A continuous process of establishing a collaborative, 'non-hierarchical client-therapist' relationship versus 'therapist-as-expert'.
5) A view of the client's uniqueness, as opposed to a dogmatic universalism.
6) 'An understanding of the client as a socially- and relationally-embedded being, including an awareness that the client may be experiencing discrimination and prejudice (versus a wholly intrapsychic focus)' (Cooper, 2009, p. 120).

The rich and layered narratives participants expressed dispelled any temptations toward reductionism. Their accounts and experiences are a confluence of variables with opportunity for ever increasing levels of analysis. In attempting to quantitatively operationalise variables, and measure the impact on the dependent, this depth would be lost. The significance of Cooper's (2009) sixth principle was evident throughout their accounts; participant's chequered, meandering journeys into meditation were punctuated by oppressive cultural forces, strained familial dynamics, religious guilt and scepticism. As Henry expressed: '…it was very obvious in those moments, you can just never boil someone down to a single identity ermm there's just too many other factors that combine to kind of drive someone's actual experience ermm but yeah, some, a lot of that just came up because of my practice.' (Henry, L5-10, p.13). Henry's warnings against rigidity in identification given the impossibility of reducing individual complexity has parallel with the potential dehumanization that occurs where a client is viewed only through the lens of a diagnostic category. This re-enforces the injunction to prioritize the client's subjectivity and remain person-centered in the therapeutic relationship.

Relatedly, some participants conveyed a skepticism towards Buddhist practice due to negative religious connotations, and the abuse that has arisen due to power differentials. Millwall, for example, given his Irish background, was raised in an environment where religion was consummate with conflict. Although WBI's, MBSR, ACT and MBCT have secularized the language of Buddhist philosophy and technique, SG-MBI's are in their vernacular more overtly 'spiritual'. In my clinical experience, clients have experienced resistance to meditative/ mindfulness practices for a variety of reasons. These included concerns they did not align with their religious beliefs and associations between meditative techniques and 'new age self-help'. A potential risk, therefore, is that despite their conscious secularization, these barriers persist and are magnified by SG-MBI's with language such as 'emptiness'. To add further complexity, researchers have explored their appropriateness in the Chinese population where elements of Confucianism are viewed as at odds with Buddhist philosophy

(Zhou et al., 2021). This again illustrates the importance of a collaborative, person-centered approach when suggesting these approaches with clients.

4.7. Clinical Implications

A key clinical implication is the overlap between the current results and the findings of Van Gordon et al., (2019) which are discussed in detail in the first chapter. To summarize, Van Gordon (2019) explained that although mindfulness and compassion practices are foundational, meditations on emptiness of the self and phenomena are consonant with deeper Buddhist teachings. In addition, preliminary results suggest emptiness meditations are more effective than mindfulness in enhancing measures of well-being and wisdom. These practices are usually performed by meditators with more extensive experience; additional research is therefore necessary to determine their effectiveness in novices. The data from this study are concordant with the pre-existing literature on SG-MBI's which demonstrate a reduction in workaholism, work related stress and maladaptive ego-attachments (Shonin et al., 2014; Shonin et al., 2013) (e.g. 'Seeing Beyond the Rigid 'I'). Where the current studies participants have derived benefit from practices associated with emptiness, or that have led to insights relating to it, it has been in context of embeddedness within meditative communities where guidance is provided by trusted teachers/ guides. Perhaps, therefore, caution should be encouraged before suggesting individual, non-supervised emptiness practices within clinical contexts. Although these practices have demonstrated benefit, the possible adverse effects and challenges associated with them (e.g. the trials of seeing beyond the rigid 'I') may be navigated by open, group training, or ensuring the clinician has sufficient meditative experiences/ training (e.g. conducts grounding exercises/ calming exercises before insight practices).

In accordance with the above the current study raises questions relating to the length of therapeutic interventions associated with meditation. Both in clinical practice and research intervention protocols are frequently of eight weeks in duration (e.g. Shonin et al., 2004). Although the evidence suggests benefit has still been derived by these participants the results of the current research provide credence to extending this. Participants frequently referred to the difficulty of the meditative journey, the importance of consistency and that the skillful application of technique in one's daily life is an iterative process, requiring reflection and feedback from both the meditative community and trusted guides. Interventions of increased length may allow for greater group cohesion, instantiate consistency and allow time for the benefits of longer-term practice to be realized (Bowles et al., 2020; Pritchard, 2016). Participants may therefore be more likely to maintain relationships beyond their therapy that facilitates continued development. In addition, extension would implicitly communicate to the interventions participants what was reflected in this research; the process of learning and applying spiritual practices are a journey. Within the therapeutic protocol the importance of using

technique beyond formalized practice can also be explicitly emphasized. These ideas were reflected in both the quantitative and qualitative literature reviewed, suggesting greater benefit is derived from practice over time (Full et al., 2013; Van Gordon et al., 2019; Bowles at al., 2022).

Furthermore, all meditative interventions (e.g. non-dual practices, no- self techniques, mindfulness meditation) have the potential to elicit a variety of experiences in participants regardless of practice length (Ekici et al., 2020). These may be profound, subtle, distressing and destabilizing (Schlosser et al., 2019). This raises concern where facilitators of current interventions may not have sufficient meditative experience or training to interpret them. Issues here may range from participants feeling unvalidated to challenging experiences being mishandled and leading to more severe mental health problems such as dissociation (Castillo, 1990). If, for example, an instructor is unaware of the proclivity of some meditators to use their practices as an avoidance strategy they would be unequipped to rectify this (Britton, 2019). Additionally, if facilitators were steeped in firsthand experience of the states participants were likely to have they could better translate them, where language is often limited (Gamma & Metzinger, 2021).

In sum, encouraging depth of experience across facilitators of groups ranging from ACT and MBCT to Meditation Awareness Training (Non-dual practices) (MAT) (Shonin et al., 2014), emphasizing the importance of practice beyond the interventions end and increasing the length of the intervention may assist in navigating these issues. Zeng et al. (2017), for example, found that many eight- week protocol had low, or no effect sizes where those with long- term experience accrued greater benefit. It may be warranted, therefore that participants of short-term interventions receive hedged expectations and view them only as preparatory learning rather than an immediate, long- term panacea.

Relatedly, the participants of the current research frequently distinguished between formalized practice (on the cushion) and of the application of meditative techniques outside of their scheduled sitting (off the cushion). Their aims, implicitly and explicitly expressed were to ensure the helpful, symbiotic movement between both. This appeared to occur consciously and automatically as their practices developed over time, where mindfulness, compassion and ethical values imbued their daily lives. Graham, when describing his meeting with the Dalai Lama, conveyed how his practice had infused his being and behavior:

'…every word he says and every movement he makes, it's done with great consideration for those around him and ermm so really, the mark of a good meditator is he who doesn't meditate very much, because if you're still meditating like me, thirty years afterwards, well that's not (laugh), not a good indicator in many ways (laughter)…'

(Graham, L14-18, p.5)

Graham here speaks to the embodiment the Dalai Lama has achieved in his practice, and therefore of the reduced requirement for formalized sitting. Buddhist traditions tend to emphasize this transition (Kapleau, 1969); with humor Graham quips that his continued and regular sitting after thirty years may reflect limitations in his learnings full realization throughout his daily life, despite attaining embodiment in several ways. This also highlights the importance of extending therapeutic protocol based in meditative techniques where doing so may encourage this process.

In 'Seeing Beyond the Rigid 'I'…' participants experienced negative self-judgement for missing a perceived ethical, or performative ideal. Although discernment is not inherently maladaptive, as SG-MBI's are more ethically oriented there may be greater risk of this occurring in those pursuing them. In accordance, I observed this both in my own trajectory, and the experiences of clients who were beginning their mindfulness practices. They defined themselves harshly as incompetent meditators if they were unable to still their minds, feeling guilt for continued experiences of irritability as their skills progressed. I've often asked from myself an inhuman stoicism, only to realize the unreality of my expectations. Richard's observations are part of the antidote here, in which his expectations of a permanently calm mind were replaced with a greater acceptance and equanimity towards its vicissitudes. In addition, where participants overcame shame for experiences of 'ill-will', for example, LKM or self-compassion exercises, and a validating meditative community were assistive; these may be necessary components within future therapeutic interventions that center on insight practices, where self- expectation requires overcoming.

This research also highlights the idiosyncratic aims, responses and meaning of meditation to participants. The meaning of practice to Henry, and the investigation of his relationship to minority identities is unique to him. These experiences show that when applying meditation in therapy a myopic, prescriptive approach is not possible and is antithetical to counselling psychology principles. The clients life-world, narrative and perspective should be held at center.

4.8. Personal Reflexivity

As discussed in the connecting piece, the participants of this study have unwittingly been my guides throughout, teaching wisdom anew. When pursuing a completed section, transcript or chapter their interviews played in mind, reminding me of the fundamental precepts I had learnt over a decade ago but in my impatience had neglected. Early in the research, my meditative routine had faltered. My aims were to complete the task that lay ahead without delay, and in doing so I lost touch with the present. This fanned the anxiety inherent to this training and research, where I began to catastrophise about the future and ruminate on the past. What if my research question is insufficient? I wonder if

my interpretations lack depth- what will I do if the results need to be entirely re-written? With this anxiety, I lost sight of the beauty of this journey. The vulnerable, articulate and authentic participant accounts reminded me of that which mattered. I was provided the opportunity to listen to and share the insights of those beyond me on the spiritual path. Reconnecting with the now, my practice and the wisdom in their lived- experiences was then done so with gratitude and optimism.

In their narratives, and despite their advanced insights participants also made human their journey's. It may be presumed that after 40 years of meditative experience one would be impervious to daily irritations. I have held of myself similar expectations. Instead, participants reported that their minds, despite becoming more peaceful, retained a chaos which required vigilance. Rather than the surgical removal of anxiety, fear, anger and frustration participants developed alternate relationships to their psyches, in which there was greater optionality in response to the inertia of these powerful emotions. It seems in my experience these run parallel; my mind has generally quietened, whilst becoming habituated to activity. As intimated by several practitioners, there is always more chaos to turn towards.

Developing the capacity to sit with discomfort has characterised my training. Sitting with the uncertainty of a client's desire to end their life, sitting with the fear that my interventions may not be enough, sitting with the activating material they bring and learning to accept one's limitations through discernment of what is controllable. Meditation has been central throughout this process, widening my window of tolerance and therefore the likely willingness of clients to explore beyond theirs.

4.9. Conclusion

This section aimed to situate the results of the current study within the research base referenced in the literature review, with particular emphasis on previous qualitative investigations. The works cited in the initial chapter, by providing a broad overview, served to contextualise the rationale for the research question (i.e. 'How do long- term practitioners of Eastern meditative traditions experience the benefits and challenges of their paths, develop insight and integrate their learning?'). In light of the novel findings, which were underrepresented within the corpus (e.g. meditation and grief/ mortality, transmission experiences, necessity of meditative community etc.) I sought additional literature to explore them further.

Despite the limitations inherent to qualitative research, and of this thesis in particular, the findings may illuminate the possible processes and outcomes of long- term meditative practice, highlight avenues for future research and provide insight into the life-worlds of those who contend with the spiritual path.

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4.9.2. Appendix A (Screening Questionnaire):

Date of contact:

Date of screening:

Participant name:

Title:

First Name:

Surname:

Preferred name:

Preferred pronoun:

Tel:

Home:

Work:

Mobile:

E-mail:

Name and contact details of GP:

Age:

Have you had any serious or enduring mental or physical ill health within the last few years, such as psychosis, dependent drug use, personality disorder or schizophrenia? If yes, please provide further details.

Signature:

Date:

Appendix B (Risk Assessment):

YES	NO	SUICIDE THREATS	ACTION (if any YES ticked)
1☐	☐	Expresses wanting to be dead	1-3 DISCUSS IN SUPERVISION CONTINUE TO ASSESS SEE 4-6 below
2☐	☐	Discloses suicide ideation	FOLLOW PLAN AGREED WITH CLIENT IN ASSESSMENT /RECORD / ASSESS
3☐	☐	Suicide ideation is realistic/ Has researched means of suicide with intention to employ means	ASSESS RISK RECORD ASSESEMENT AND DISCUSS IN SUPERVISION **3 /4**EXPLAIN TO CLIENT THAT YOU NEED TO TELL THE APPROPRIATE PERSON (E.G. GP AND IF CAPACITY IS AN ISSUE AT TIME OF DISCLOSURE SIGNIFICANT OTHER /AND /OR EMERGENCY SERVICES) **5/TRAINEES:** **CONSULT WITH QUALIFIED THERAPIST BEFORE CLIENT LEAVES CLINIC AND CALL SUPERVISOR AFTER SESSION**
4☐	☐	Has made suicide plan but denies immediate plan to carry it out	
5☐	☐	Has the means (tablets, rope etc.) assess -was this recently acquired? What are protective factors -e.g. fulfilling work, family/ children	
6☐	☐	Makes credible threats of suicide (expressing intention)	6-10 CALL GP / **BEFORE** CLIENT LEAVES IF REFERRED THROUGH RU COUNSELLING SERVICE, ALERT THEM. DISCUSS IMMEDIATE ACTION PLAN WITH GP, RU COUNSELLING SERVICE AND/ QUALIFIED THERAPIST/SUPERVISOR BEFORE ALLOWING CLIENT TO LEAVE CLINIC MAKE DECISIONS IN CONSULTATION WITH EVERYONE INVOLVED. IF IN DOUBT, ARRANGE TRANSPORT TO A&E IF A&E, ASK IF CLIENT AGREES FOR NEXT OF KIN TO BE CALLED.WHAT IS DOCUMENTED IN THE SAFETY PLAN IF CLIENT EXPRESSES INTENTION OF IMMEDIATE SUICIDE AND TRIES TO LEAVE, CALL AMBULANCE/POLICE
7☐	☐	Has had a 'dry run' (e.g. visited location; tried out rope)	
8☐	☐	Is preparing for death (giving away things, settling debts, writing suicide note)	
9☐	☐	Makes constant indirect references to own death and is preoccupied with death	
10☐	☐	Has made precautions against discovery	

Appendix C (Consent Form):

City University, University of London

REC reference number: ETH2223-1192

Title of study: What are the experiences of long-term meditators?

		Please tick or initial box
1	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information dated 00/00/00 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily. I understand this will involve: -Participating in interviews regarding my experience as a long-term meditator. -Being audio recorded during the interview. - Direct quotations from interview potentially being included in the research (no identifying information will be included).	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving a reason without being penalised or disadvantaged.	
3.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to two months after transcription.	
4.	I agree to City recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information and my consent is conditional on City complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	
5.	I would like to be informed of the results of this study once it has been completed and understand that my contact details will be retained for this purpose.	
6.	I consent to my GP and emergency services possibly being contacted in the event of risk, to myself or a 3rd party.	
7.	Are you aware your anonymised data may be used in the published research. I consent to the use of sections of audiotapes to be used in publications.	
8.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____ _____ _____

Name of Participant Signature Date

_____ _____ _____

Name of Researcher Signature Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

Appendix D (Ethical Approval):

Dear Phodios

Reference: ETH2223-1192

Project title: What are the experiences of long-term meditators?

Start date: 12 Feb 2023

End date: 31 Dec 2023

I am writing to you to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted formal approval from the Psychology low risk review. The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation. Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly. You are now free to start recruitment.

The approval was given with the following conditions:

- ...
- ...
- ...

Please ensure that you are familiar with City's Framework for Good Practice in Research and any appropriate Departmental/School guidelines, as well as applicable external relevant policies.
Please note the following:

Project amendments/extension

You will need to submit an amendment or request an extension if you wish to make any of the following changes to your research project:

- Change or add a new category of participants;
- Change or add researchers involved in the project, including PI and supervisor;
- Change to the sponsorship/collaboration;

- Add a new or change a territory for international projects;
- Change the procedures undertaken by participants, including any change relating to the safety or physical or mental integrity of research participants, or to the risk/benefit assessment for the project or collecting additional types of data from research participants;
- Change the design and/or methodology of the study, including changing or adding a new research method and/or research instrument;
- Change project documentation such as protocol, participant information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, letters of invitation, information sheets for relatives or carers;
- Change to the insurance or indemnity arrangements for the project;
- Change the end date of the project.

Adverse events or untoward incidents

You will need to submit an Adverse Events or Untoward Incidents report in the event of any of the following:

a) Adverse events

b) Breaches of confidentiality

c) Safeguarding issues relating to children or vulnerable adults

d) Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues a) and b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than five days after the event. Issues c) and d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate, the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions, such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries relating to this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me. On behalf of the Psychology low risk review, I do hope that the project meets with success.

Kind regards

Mehdi Keramati

Psychology low risk review

City, University of London

Appendix E (Interview Schedule):

Interview Questions:

Please answer these questions in as much detail as you can.

Have you had any challenging experiences due to your meditation practice?

If so, how have these been navigated?

What are your meditative practices, and what do they involve?

How have these practices affected your daily life? (work, relationships etc.)

Would you be able to describe the positive and negative effects of your practice.

How has meditation affected your sense of self/ sense of boundary between self and other?

If it has affected this, what is the experience of living with this modified sense of self?

How has your experience of meditating changed as you progressed through your practice?

What have you learnt as a result of your meditation practice (nature of mind etc.)?

How did these insights arise?

What has been the experience of practicing in context of your tradition?

What has been the experience of practicing in context of your meditative community?

Altered questions after reflection:

What are your meditative practices, and what do they involve?

How have these practices affected your daily life? (work, relationships etc.)

Would you be able to describe possible positive and negative effects of your practice.

How has your experience of meditating changed throughout your practice?

What have you learnt as a result of your meditation practice?

How did these insights arise?

What has been the experience of practice in context of your meditative community?

What has been the experience of practice in context of your tradition?

How has meditation affected your sense of self/ sense of boundary between self and other?

If it has affected this, what is the experience of living with this modified sense of self?

Have you had any challenging experiences due to your meditation practice?

If so, how have these been navigated?

Is there anything I haven't asked, which you think may be relevant to your experience as a long-term meditator?

Appendix F (Poster):

Department of *Psychology*
City, University of London

Do you have long-term experience practicing meditation?

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study to explore the experiences of long-term meditators.

To take part in the study you should:

- Be at least 18 years of age.

- Have fluency in English.

- - At least five years of daily meditative practice (either during formal sitting, or when engaging in life activities, such as work, socialising or walking).
-
- You have continued to maintain a formal practice at least three times per week.

Participation in the study will not be possible for:

- Those who suffer from serious and enduring health/mental health issues such as dependent drug use, personality disorders and schizophrenia.

Your participation would involve a 60-90 minute interview in which you will be asked about your meditative experiences. There will also be a brief screening call in which any questions can be asked, and the criteria discussed.

The study will take place either on-line via a video conferencing platform or in-person at an appropriate location for both the researcher and interviewee.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,
please contact:

Phodios Matheou, Department of Psychology
Email: Phodios.Matheou.1@city.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and has received ethics clearance through the department of Psychology, City, University of London.

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk
City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for th research project. If you have any data protection concerns about this research project, please contact City's Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk

Appendix G (Participant Information Sheet):

Participant Information Sheet

REC ref: ETH2223-1192

Title of Study: What are the experiences of long-term meditators?

Phodios Matheou

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with your GP if appropriate. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep.

What is the purpose of the study?

Meditation has been studied extensively by researchers and there is a groundswell of evidence for its benefits. Much of this research, however, has investigated the effects or reported benefits of meditation using outcome measures and less attention has been given to the experiences reported by long-term meditators. The aim of this study is therefore to further shed light on these experiences to help us better understand how these experiences

arise, and of how they affect daily living. There may also be difficulties associated with long-term practice and a fuller understanding of how challenges are navigated may help mental health professionals in their use of meditative techniques with clients.

The research conducted is part of a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University, of London and may be published in an academic journal.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part as you have long-term experience in meditation.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Over 18 years of age.
- Long-term experience in meditation; defined as at least five years of daily meditative practice (either during formal meditation, or when engaging in life activities such as work or walking).
- Those who have maintained formal sitting for at least three times per week.

Exclusion criteria:

- Those who are currently suffering from serious or enduring health/mental health issues such as dependent drug use, personality disorders and schizophrenia.

The screening process will occur after you have expressed interest in the study and considered the PIF. It will involve a brief phone call in which your inclusion and exclusion criteria are discussed, along-side the meditative tradition you have been a part. This will also be an opportunity for you to discuss any questions you may have about the study and psychological history.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary. You can withdraw your data for up to two months after it is collected without giving explanation. It is your choice whether to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What will happen if I take part?

During this research you will be interviewed for between 60-90 minutes regarding your experiences as a long-term meditator. The research method is seeking to understand your

personal journey as a practitioner, and although questions would have been prepared for you, space will be provided for an unstructured exploration of this.

Expenses and Payments

You will not be required to pay for attending interview, nor will you be paid for your participation.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Meditation can engender in some difficult experiences, or be associated with trying life circumstances; these may be challenging to discuss and if you wish to discontinue at any stage during interview you are free to express this immediately. You are at liberty to deny answering any question as you see appropriate, without explanation.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

By taking part you may have an opportunity to further explore and clarify your journey as a long-term meditator and by doing so, assist others in their development. It may also help mental health professionals manage obstacles patients face during practice whilst highlighting avenues for future research.

How is the project being funded?

The project is being self-funded.

Data privacy statement

City, University of London is the sponsor and the data controller of this study based in the United Kingdom This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The legal basis under which your data will be processed is City's public task.

Your right to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in a specific way in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal-identifiable information possible (for further information please see https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/public-task/).

City will use your name and contact details to contact you about the research study as necessary. City will keep identifiable information about you from this study for 5 years after the study has finished.

You can find out more about how City handles data by visiting https://www.city.ac.uk/about/governance/legal. If you are concerned about how we have processed your personal data, you can contact the Information Commissioner's Office (IOC) https://ico.org.uk/.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Any identifying information will be treated as confidential to the researcher. Recordings of interviews will be kept on a password protected device and laptop and will be deleted once they are no longer useful to the research process. You will have the option to withdraw your data for up to two months after data is collected. Only the researcher will have access to your information prior to it being anonymized after transcription. Restrictions on confidentiality include report of harm either to yourself or a 3rd party. Your GP details will be held on record by the research team. Your GP or emergency services if appropriate will only be contacted only if a member of the research team becomes concerned about issues of risk to you or others.

Any paper copies of anonymized data will be stored in a secure cabinet at the researchers home. Personal data such as demographic information or signed consent forms will also be stored here and separated. Any encrypted text data that is transferred to City University computers will be stored in an external hard drive (in an encrypted section) and securely locked in a cabinet.

The data will be held for a minimum of ten years according to GDPR regulations.

What will happen to the results?

If the current results are published in a journal, then your anonymity will be maintained. The study may require two years to complete, after which it will be marked by an assessment board and held on an online database. All data here will also be anonymised.

What will happen when the research study stops?

If the research study end before completion than all data will be destroyed.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the Study?

You will have the option to withdraw your data for up to two months after it is collected in interview.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City, University of London Research Ethics Committee.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them of the name of the project.

You can also write to the Secretary at:

Anna Ramberg
Research Integrity Manager

City, University of London, Northampton Square
London, EC1V 0HB

Email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

Insurance

City holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Further information and contact details

Researcher:

Phodios.matheou.1@city.ac.uk

Research Supervisor:

Jeeda Alhakim

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix H:

Very powerful, involuntary shaking and vibration, mainly in head, neck, hip area and lower half sometimes 19	25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50	H: Yeah, early stages, there was a lot of erm vibration, so like you know uncontrollable, not to say it was like an epileptic fit, but it was, it would be like very, very strong, erm like head shakes, body kind of vibrations ermm mostly, in the head, neck ermm sometimes in kind of the hips erm and lower half of the body, yeah, weird, b, stra, you know, unco, not uncomfortable in the sense of, it was initially uncomfortable but like, surprisingly, like weird because I've never had that experience, I don't have epilepsy, so it wasn't so, to having my body do something that uncontrollable ermm for sustained periods of time was, you know, very strange. Erm and then once you get your head around and then you start to kind of seek it out, so there was a period in early stages where I was like, if I wasn't vibrating, I felt like I wasn't, you know, getting anywhere, and then I recognized that, you know, that you, you, you shouldn't be kind of chasing after those things ermm when they happen, you can, you can recognize them, but you shouldn't kind of try to hold on to them. Ermm, so yeah, I think now and then, you know, in the last two years, tha that's that's kind of dissipated, I've occasionally had those moments, but I I kind of see them now as it's just ermm a sense so what they call an energy release, and for me, it's just something that's just trying to shake its way out of me erm to to let me kind of get into a little bit more of a calm, blissful or relaxed state.	Energy release during early experiences (assuaged and normalized through group input)
Powerful, sustained shaking during practice initially uncomfortable and bizarre 19			Involuntary shakes and vibration *this must have been initially concerning to experience* These energy releases often occurred in the head, and sometimes lower body. Initially uncomfortable, because of alienness of experience and experience it's self- what is going on? *(These experiences may be pathologized, seen as seizures, or dissociative)* These would occur for sustained periods of time.
Once accustomed to, the absence of powerful shaking indicated lack of progress 19			Once these states were accustomed to, he felt their lack of presence may have signaled halted progress- he sought them in experience.
Seeking a particular state in meditation; potential pitfall 19			*Experience should not be held onto, perhaps the seeking for contents in consciousness becomes a distraction- attachment and aversion?* *Only fairly recently dissipated (2 years).*
Able now to contextualize vibrations; energy release that leads to calm, bliss and relaxation 19			Can now see them as an energy release *conceptual framing around experience, influences emotion-cognitive reaction to it* Shake its way out of me (stored emotions?) Once out, a more serene/blissful state.

A) From scepticism to faith and desire to share wisdom in meditative practice, and Buddhism

Religious upbringing, and resultant negative view of religion a challenge to Buddhist practice (pg.12)

'One of the big draws from getting away from…was the whole religious troubles, you know, the Protestant, Catholic, and and so I think I'd probably a very negative view on religion'

Fath previously viewed as disowning agency/autonomy (pg.13)

'I would never, ever thought of myself as being somebody of faith, you know, that seemed like you've given your power over to somebody. But the more I sort of understand it, it's erm it, it kind of makes sense, you know what I mean?'

Faith in potential of practice (peace developed) and map of others who overcame (pg.13)

'Well, well it's, It's faith and it's the faith in the the peace that it's like anything. If I'm kind of lost, I suppose er er knowledge is coming to me as if, if I'm lost in the middle of a, middle of a jungle ehh and you're saying that and I'm going, I'm stuffed, I've no idea which way to go to get out, and I've sort of go, I know that, that you've managed to get out and you did daily and you've got that experience and wisdom. Then either I, you know, it's a bit about having faith to know that you're going to be able to help me and get me out really.'

Buddha, a normal struggling person who overcame suffering (pg.13)

'Buddha was that, you know, Buddha was a normal lost person like the rest of us, but managed to work out how to free his mind of the normal *delusions*'

Sceptical Journey from head to heart centred, and realization of distinctions significance (pg.3)

Appendix I:

Negotiating relationship with death, and the fear of unknown it represents diminished/enabled through practice 13
Practice has allowed him to appreciate the time he has lived 13
Greater awareness of the inevitability of change and age; perspective shift of death 13

Meditation enabled presence of mind during cancer overwhelm and confrontation with mortality 9 L33-38
Right

E: And I put that down to my meditation practice that kind of presence of mind and erm it's such an overwhelming thing to have a a big cancer.

I: Very overwhelming, yeah…

E: And you face your mortality you face all sorts of things…

Turning a grief corner; meditation, psychoeducation and community helps navigate her extraordinary grief

12
Experience of grief sudden and shocking new world; meditation has helped- avoidance? L4-7
J: Whole new world for me.

I: Mhmm

J: And certainly meditation has and what meditation has brought me over the years has helped me with all of that.

Appendix J:

1) **Paths of transformation (All Participants)**

d) From suffering to constructive change; greater serenity, contentment and continuity of meaning. (All participants)
e) Seeing beyond the rigid 'I'; the trials and jubilations (All participants)
f) Overcoming entrenched patterns and dynamics (All participants)
g) Residing in chaos; the only way out is in (All participants)
h) Death, grief and impermanence; renegotiating the relationship with mortality (8/10)

2) **Staying the path; methods of containment and collaboration (All Participants)**

i) The deep significance of meditative community; guidance, support and connection (10/10)
j) Maintaining consistency; momentum, faith and the personalisation of practice (10/10)
k) Retreats and the facilitation of insight (6/10)

Appendix K:

Title Page

The title page should include:

- The name(s) of the author(s)
- A concise and informative title
- The affiliation(s) and address(es) of the author(s)
- The e-mail address, and telephone number(s) of the corresponding author
- If available, the 16-digit ORCID of the author(s)

Abstract

Please provide of structured abstract of up to 250 words

Keywords

Please provide 4 to 6 keywords which can be used for indexing purposes.

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Structured Abstract

The structured abstract of up to 250 words with four labeled sections should containing the following, with sub-section headers in bold:

- a. Objectives: Problem being addressed in the study
- b. Methods: The participants, essential features of the study method
- c. Results: The basic findings, including effect sizes and confidence intervals and/or statistical significance levels
- d. Conclusions: What the authors conclude from study results

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Text

Text Formatting

Manuscripts should be submitted in Word.

Use a normal, plain font (e.g., 12-point Times Roman) for text.

Use italics for emphasis.

Use the automatic page numbering function to number the pages.

Do not use field functions.

Use tab stops or other commands for indents, not the space bar.

Use the table function, not spreadsheets, to make tables.

Use the equation editor or MathType for equations.

Save your file in docx format (Word 2007 or higher) or doc format (older Word versions).

Headings

Please use no more than three levels of displayed headings.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations should be defined at first mention and used consistently thereafter.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments of people, grants, funds, etc. should be placed in a separate section on the title page. The names of funding organizations should be written in full.

Footnotes

This journal does not allow the use of footnotes, except in reprinted papers.

Article length

Papers accepted for publication in this journal are 45 double-spaced pages, in 12-point font, inclusive of text, references, tables and figures. For manuscripts exceeding this length, authors should contact the Editors-in-Chief, Christian U. Krägeloh (chris.mind@outlook.co.nz) or Oleg N. Medvedev (oleg.mind@outlook.co.nz).

Section B

5.0. Publishable Piece

Transformation, Catharsis and the Alchemy of Suffering: How do long- term practitioners of Eastern meditative traditions experience the benefits and challenges of their paths, develop insight and integrate their learnings?

5.1. Abstract

Objectives: Research exploring contemplative practices and their therapeutic applications has accelerated. Early clinical use included mindfulness- based stress recovery (MBSR), in which mindfulness meditation was concurrent with psychoeducation. Second- generation mindfulness-based interventions (SG- MBIs) have also demonstrated promise. They, however, extend on the earlier generations (e.g. MBSR) by including practices which facilitate the experiential deconstruction of the self, and insight into Buddhist conceptions of 'emptiness'. These techniques are associated with long-term meditation (LTM) and despite their possible psychological benefits, may be destabilizing. Given the increasing interest in the clinical potential of methods pertinent to LTM and the scarcity of qualitative research exploring advanced meditators the current study further explored their lived-experiences. An ancillary aim was to clarify the reported mechanisms of action, outcomes and methods through which practitioners navigated difficulty.

Methods: Ten long- term meditators were recruited for participation across several Buddhist, Yogic and secular backgrounds. Semi- structured interviews were conducted. These were then transcribed and analysed using Interpretative- Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Results: The analysis yielded two overarching themes. These were 'Paths of Transformation' and 'Staying the Path; Methods of Containment and Collaboration'. Several sub- themes (group experiential themes) are also illustrated.

Conclusions: The results of the analytic process are then considered in relation to the wider meditative literature. Relevant theoretical constructs are discussed to further illuminate participant accounts. After, the clinical implications of the findings are elaborated.

5.2. Introduction

5.2.1. Defining Meditation

Travis & Shear (2010) observe meditative approaches can be distinguished by the psychological faculties used, how they are applied, and where they are directed. These include reasoning, visualisation, attentional foci, or body-centric awareness. Though not mutually exclusive, they can be applied, for example, effortfully and consciously or effortlessly and passively; meditators have described an 'effortless effort' as their practice deepens (Bodhipaksa, 2023). The object, or direction in which these faculties are trained may constitute thoughts, conceptions, imagistic representations of ethical ideals or internal and external arisings.

MM encourages attendance to the 'here and now' of experiencing, seeking not to alter the contents of consciousness but to observe these contents as they arise (Kabat- Zinn, 1994). During this state of non-judgemental alertness, an attitude of playful, accepting curiosity is maintained towards the mind. 'Acceptance', in this context, refers neither to grasping for pleasant stimuli, or resisting aversive experience, but to 'be with' all phenomena (Lutz, 2008). The scope of attention can expand and contract; awareness may rest initially on the tactile, sensations of breathing to expanded interoception and after, external stimuli (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Loving-Kindness Meditation (Metta) unlike MM, involves the conscious generation of emotion and is defined a concentrative practice. The intention is to evoke good will, compassion (a desire for the alleviation of another's suffering) and well-wishing for self and others. Since 2009 there has been a sharp uptick of interest in Loving Kindness Meditation and has been viewed a method through which to outmaneuver the 'hedonic treadmill' (return to well-being setpoint after a positive event) (Diener et al., 2009).

5.2.2. Defining Meditative States

'Pure Awareness' and 'Nondual' awareness (NA) are overlapping concepts, and elements of the mystical experience (Maclean et al., 2012). Where one may conceptualise the duality of their experience through subject-object distinctions, NA is defined 'a state of consciousness that rests in the background of all conscious experiencing- a background field of awareness that is unified, immutable, and empty of mental content, yet retains a quality of cognizant bliss' (Hanley & Nakamura, 2018). Although free from discursion, emotion and perception NDA retains a meta-cognitive dimension, where there is awareness of awareness without thought.

Gamma and Metzinger (2021) observe that the 'phenomenological taxonomies' of such conditions have therefore been founded in context of these worldviews, despite the historical shift in which millions of Westerners practice and identify secularly (or as 'spiritual, though not religious'). Little

psychological research has explored ‘pure awareness’, tending to be primarily descriptive (Metzinger, 2020). Here, however, the authors sought to bridge the phenomenological aims of prior qualitative literature and quantitiave modalities through their psychometric ‘Minimal Phenomenal Experience Questionnaire’. The findings of previous research were often congruent with the traditional, Eastern corpus where states of pure awareness were defined by ‘unboundedness’, ‘serenity’ and loss of sense of space and time (Hanley & Nakamura, 2018).

The researchers coin, in Factor 1 (‘Time, effort and desire’), the term ‘dual mindfulness’ (DA), which refers to the phenomenology of identifying as a meditator and seeking a goal state where a sense of agentic effort (physical/mental) gives rise to the subjective experience of time. This may be characterized, for instance, during focussed-attention meditation, as becoming distracted, noticing, re-remembering the desired state and re-focussing. Where narrativisation has occurred the sense of passing time remains. Their factor correlations found F1 negatively correlated with Factor 2 (Peace, Bliss and Silence) and Factor 8 (Emptiness and non-egoic self-awareness). Given the latter two states are associated with ‘Jhanic’ states and loss of self as referent, this relationship is intuitive.

5.2.3. Theoretical Models of Psychopahtology, Mindfulness Meditation and Wisdom Interventions

Ontological Addiction Theory (OAT) hypothesizes that ontological addiction (i.e. ‘The unwillingness to relinquish an erroneous and deep-rooted belief in an inherently existing ‘self’ or ‘I’ as well as the impaired functionality that arises from such a belief’) is caustic propulsion, motivating individuals to butress their ego-identity through status acquisition or compulsive aversion. Given the impermanence inherent to mortality and arising phenomena, attachment to them results in suffering; non-attachment removes the self-centre upon which this ‘addiction’ develops (Shonin et al., 2016). Wisdom- based practiced derived from Buddhist teaching seek to address this; where concentrative techniques or mindfulness may help ground the mind, they may not elicit insight into ultimate reality, and therefore the true source of suffering (Van Gordon et al., 2019).

Vago and Silberweig (2012) developed the S-ART (Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation and Self-Transcendence) model as an explanatory framework for the mechanisms of action underlying mindfulness practice and propose six key mechanisms. Adding to Holzel et al.’s (2011) neurobiological investigations and deriving their foundational principles from Western and Buddhist psychological theory it proposes psychopathology stems partially from biases in self-perception (Chiesa et al., 2013); mindfulness functions through ameliorating these biases and is defined not as a single state, but a skill, operating in tandem with other beneficial cognitive qualities. Here, for instance, alterations in meta-awareness may lead to deviations from automatic responses (self-regulation) and therefore improvements in prosocial behaviour (self-transcendence). As an

explanatory framework, this model focusses on how mindfulness induces hedonic well-being (increases positive emotion) through a reduction in psychopathology (Huta & Waterman, 2014), though the mindfulness-to-meaning theory (MMT) refers both to hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (the ability to generate meaning throughout life) (Garland et al., 2015). MMT proposes that mindfulness exerts change through decentering. When confronting challenging or stressful life events mindfulness expands awareness and mitigates full identification with negative thoughts or emotions. This broadening permits the processing of nonnegative factors and a re-evaluation of the narrative associated with the negative event. As such, and with continued re-appraisal, greater meaning may be derived from life with enhanced eudaimonic capacity and appreciation for positive life-experiences.

5.2.4. Qualitative Investigations of Long- Term Meditators

Despite recent, growing acknowledgement of the utility of further qualitative study, it remains limited relative to the quantitative literature. In addition, previous qualitative research has tended to explore short-term mindfulness- based interventions (MBI's), studies involving several traditions and long-term practices which did not specify meditative technique (Ekici et al., 2020). Holzel et al.(2006) attempted to address these limitations through the grounded analysis of experienced Vipassana Goenka meditators . Where Vipassana Goenka (VG) utilises focussed attention towards the sensations of breathing, and systematic body-scans towards this end (Hart, 1987), Vipassana Mahasi (VM) involves flexible, open-monitoring towards all arising phenomena beginning with the physicality of breathing (Mahasi, 2016). Practitioners described increased compassion and acceptance towards self, enhanced psychological functioning and prosocial effects. Ekici et al. (2020), referencing that only a brief of Holzel et al's (2006) were available, sought to capture a fuller account of participant developmental journeys, and mechanisms of action through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). In addition, the prior reviews of Vipassana meditation centred generally on VG, and an analysis of only those practicing VM may illuminate factors underpinning change in long-term mindfulness practice.

To this end, the authors recruited four Dutch meditators with between 5- 40 years of practice experience, attended at minimum two 10-day long VM retreats and had maintained formalised practice at least three times per week.

Participants reported journeying 'from imbalance to Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being', where states of imbalance ranged from spiritual unfulfillment, to existential crisis, in which life was not seen worth living. After, all participants referred to an intuitive connection to VM leading to positive changes in work, relationships and sense of meaning. Where prior qualitative and quantitative research has tended only to explore hedonic well-being, the findings here are congruent with prior phenomenological research suggesting MM enhances meaning making (Machado & Costa, 2015). Machado and Costa's (2015) results suggest participants attributed the benefits they experienced

primarily to meditative practice. Ekici et al. (2020), however, reported their participants also derived benefit from Buddhist ethical code (the noble eightfold path).

Participants also deepened their mind-body connection (early indications of a conditioned/ habitual, or unskilful response) and increased their awareness of the mental states of others. Practitioners who were considered 'advanced' desribed greater 'insight into the nature of reality'. Vipassana, being insight oriented, would be aimed at realizing all things are 'unsatisfactory, impermanent and devoid of intrinsic existence'. They further developed 'Equanimity', which appears to transcend both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being as categories of psychological health. The final 'perceived outcome' was of 'physical and interpersonal challenges'. Where the trend of prior research leans toward the benefits of meditation, both challenging experiences and deliterious effects have been comparitively unexplored (Van Gordon et al., 2017). The 'Perceived Processes' by which these outcomes occurred include 'cleansing' the mind and 'Decentering and non-attachment' (development of 'distance' from thoughts and emotions). This study highlighted the requirement to further explore the process of insight and is limited given its small sample size.

Full et al. (2013) interviewed expert Theravedan meditators (Sotapannas) within the Burmese tradition. Prior research has tended to explore meditors within a Western context (Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012); 16 of the 18 participants were monastics, providing greater insight into the possible effect of an immersive environment. The perceptual changes experienced overlapped with prior reports (Ekici et al., 2020; Gamma & Metzinger, 2021)- these were in 'quality of perception', 'comprehension of interdependences in perception processing', 'cessation of subject/object-based perception' and 'non-conceptual perception'. The first category was by participants expressed as an increase in 'clarity' whereby emotions, thoughts, sense perceptions and their interrelation could be observed and de-identified from. The second denotes experiences in which the perception of an object is based less on the intrinsicity of the object, but by the mentality of the perceiver.

Kjellgren and Taylor (2008), in an IPA investigation of four experienced (mean: 26.5 years practice) and four inexperienced Zen practitioners (one year practice), aimed to rectify the dearth of literature on the trancendent experience. Although there is overlap between Zen sitting and Vipassana open-monitoring, participants did not practice LKM, thus removing this potential confound. Experienced meditators, however, accessed an 'unlimited, silent and bright state' where the duality between mind and body dissolved. With this, sense of temporality and agentic effort ceased and 'the relaxed attention continued into normal everyday life'.

Van Gordon et al. (2019), aware of the centrality of Sunyata (emptiness) in Buddhist-derived practices, observed they had received little empirical attention. Twenty- five advanced meditators were provided psychometric questionnaires and 12 of these underwent semi-structured interview. To

produce experiences of emptiness participants first stablised the mind with focused meditations before searching for the self and residing in the flux of immediate experience: 'When I look I see all things, but I don't see a self'. Quantitatively, emptiness meditation outperformed MM on measures of negative affect, positive affect, compassion, mystical experiences and non-attachment.

Ataria (2015) sought to further examine the sense of subject/object boundary in advanced, senior meditators. All participants had over 10,000 practice hours and interviews were analysed in accord with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Participants reported 'diffused boundaries' during mindfulness in which 'The body is not in contrast to the space that is seemingly outside of it. It feels more like a flow' (I.L). I.L found that as mindfulness progressed, so did the experience of fluidity and flexibility. The results imply a 'Loss of the Sense of Ownership'. Phenomenologically, participant reports suggest a variation of an out of body experience in which the 'egocentric- bodily perspective' discontinues (Ataria, 2015); 'I see myself sitting, I hear myself speaking, but I am observing myself from the outside' (A.N).

Shaner et al. (2017) conducted an IPA investigation of six women who had been meditating for over ten years. The findings highlighted the importance of consistency for spiritual development and the value of mentors/ teachers (provision of guidance during challenge, indirect accountability). Participants cultivated greater self-awareness, equanimity, eudaimonia, compassion, self/other acceptance and the experiencing of 'transcendent peak experiences' ('self-dissolution', 'oneness with the world' etc.). 'Challenges and barriers' such as a wandering mind.

Although the findings of this research are in accord with empirical, quantitative and qualitative investigations there is limited data as to the influence of practice context and management of difficult psychological experiences (e.g. dissociation) (Ekici et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2019; Bowles et al., 2022).

Schlosser et al. (2019) aware the expanding research base has focussed primarily on the benefits of meditation, observed psychologically unpleasant experiences are increasingly reported in the literature. Of the 1232 regular meditators surveyed (the largest cross-sectional study on adverse experiences to date) 315 stated they had experienced negative, unpleasant mental effects due to practice. Those more likely regularly practiced 'deconstructive' forms of meditation such as Vipassana, and had attended at least one retreat. Participants reported an altered sense of self, anxiety, dread, terror and distorted emotio-cognitive phenomonology. This highlights the importance of continuing to expand the lexicon of psychometric assessments when assessing negative meditative experiences, hedging the view of mindfulness as a panacea and establishing appropriate, clinically relevant methods of addressing difficulty. In addition, the participants were defined as regular meditators if having been consistent for only two months; future investigations may be required for long-term practitioners to determine how challenges were navigated or avoided.

5.2.5. Study Rationale

The quantitative, psychometric and neurobiological investigations of long-term meditative practice though proving informative, are greater in number relative to the qualitative literature (Ekici et al., 2020). The current study, therefore, aims to step towards remedying this discrepancy and in addressing the limitations of prior qualitative investigations (Ekici et al., 2020). In addition, neuroscientific enquiry benefits from a mutually supportive bi-directional relationship with phenomenological methodology (Varela, 1996; Vietan, et al., 2018); the introspections or experiences of LTM's can converge or diverge with existing psychometric data or neuroimagining. For instance, increased activation of the pre-frontal cortex is associated with greater attentional control over time and this is reflected in the experiences of long-term practitioners (Berkovich- Ohana et al., 2011; Ekici et al., 2020).

Third-Wave therapeutic approaches such as Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) utilise meditative principles to facilitate self-awareness, mitigate experiential avoidance and reduce anxiety (Hayes & Smith, 2005; Segal et al., 2012). While early research tends towards stress reduction and short-term MBI's ACT encourages insight into the nature of the mind partially consistent with Buddhist insight meditation (e.g. Vipassana, Zen etc.) (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Hayes et al., 2012). Where secular MM may focus on the alleviation of negative symptoms (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression), Vipassana aims at 'liberation' from the self or 'enlightenment' through long-term practice contextualised within Buddhist philosophy and community.

The aims and experiences of the long-term, advanced meditator likely lay in contrast to those pursuing practice through third-wave approaches, westernised meditation apps and MBI's (Bowles et al., 2022). Buddhist philosophy and practice continues to inform our therapeutic paradigms and meditative techniques have been increasingly suggested by clinicians to clients. Second generation MBI's, Meditation Awareness Training (MAT) and Wisdom- based Interventions (WBI's) represent a theoretical, psychological and clinical bridge between the aims of early MBI's and advanced Buddhist insight into the nature of self and phenomenological reality (Shonin et al., 2014; Van Gordon et al., 2019). Meditation, however, is neither benign nor a panacea and rather than being regarded a mere tool, necessitates vigilance when applied therapeutically (Shapiro, 1992). The paucity of research investigating the experiences of long-term practitioners in Western contexts requires addressing; as interest in meditation grows, so may the experiences associated with long-term practice such as a modified sense of self (Ataria, 2015). Further exploration may allow clinicians and clients scope to derive greater benefit from meditative practices, navigate challenges and mitigate the risks associated with pathologizing contemplative development.

In sum, prior qualitative investigations convey that participants developed greater insight into the nature of self and reality (Ekici et al., 2020). This includes both a conceptual, and experiential understanding of impermanence, interdependence and emptiness (Van Gordon et al., 2019). Across the corpus, there were repeated references to mystical states, 'non-dual' experiences and the discontinuation of 'subject/object' perception (Full et al., 2013; Gamma & Metzinger, 2021; Kjellgren & Taylor, 2008). Further, findings suggest that advanced meditators cultivated equanimity in tandem with hedonic and eudaimonic well-being and that meditations on emptiness (associated with long-term practice) improved positive affect more significantly than MM (Van Gordon et al., 2019). Several processes were associated with these effects including deconstruction of the self, decentering and open-monitoring (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015; Van Gordon et al., 2016).

This research base, however, remains limited in clarifying the processes and outcomes of attaining insight (mechanisms of action) and the synchronous effects of Buddhist ethical code (the noble eightfold path). Relatedly, the experience of integrating a voluntarily flexible sense of subject/object boundary into daily living, and the impact of LTM on personal relationships has been comparatively unexplored and may help develop WBI's (Ataria, 2015). Further, samples were often small and homogenous reflecting only a subset of Buddhist traditions, techniques and nationalities (Ekici et al., 2020). Additionally, the role of Sanga/ meditative community, 'transmission experiences' and 'spiritual guides, teachers or mentors' in long-term meditative development has been neglected (Vietan, et al., 2018). Although the scarcity of literature investigating challenging experiences has been increasingly addressed, their overcoming in the context of dedicated practice requires attention, where for instance, commitment can place strain on interpersonal relationships (Shapiro, 1992; Creswell, 2017). The dearth of research exploring the phenomenology of transcendent, prosocial or psychologically beneficial states has also been highlighted (e.g. samadhi, sukkah, equanimity, open-heartedness etc.). Their differentiation may offer 'new insights into cognition and perception that can only be reached through expanding contemplative science' (Vietan et al., 2018, p. 14; Kjellgren & Taylor, 2008).

This study endeavours, therefore, to add to the current, limited qualitative research base by addressing the following question: How do long- term practitioners of Eastern meditative traditions experience the benefits and challenges of their paths, develop insight and integrate learnings into their daily lives? The aim is to understand the reported processes, outcomes and phenomenology of their practice, in context of their personal narratives.

5.3. Method

Participants

Four female and six male participants were interviewed in the current study. Amongst the participants were ordained Buddhists and those who held teaching roles. The following table includes further details as to their practice lengths and types.

Table 1:

Name (Pseudonym) Gender Interview Length	Age	Years meditated	Practice Type	Additional information
Millwall Male 57m	56	9	Mindfulness of breathing Investigation of 'I' Compassion training Loving-kindness meditation Visualisation practices Reflections on mortality Lamrim practice Open- awareness practice Heruka meditation	Did not consider mindfulness of breathing as part of the length of his practice time. Buddhism.
Henry Male 67m	50	5	Mindfulness of breathing Loving-Kindness meditation Just-sitting/ppen-awareness Silent retreats	Cycles through these practices every three days. Tibetan Buddhist.
Karen Female 77m	42	11	Contemplation of prayers Placement (sitting with feeling of insight from prayers) Compassion training Visualisation practice Mindfulness of breathing Tantric practice	Teacher Buddhism
Eleanour Female 72m	66	40	Raja Yoga meditation 'Thoughts are the gateways to experience' Grounding visualisations	Yogic Meditation

Graham Male 79m	77	30	Shamatha (Stabilisation) and Vipassana (Insight) Visualisation Practices (i.e. 'Palace of Patience') Mahamudra Meditation Extended retreat	Tibetan/ Vajrayana Buddhism
Nero Male 77m	64	28	Mindfulness Loving-kindness meditation Visualisation Six element practice Spontaneously cycles between practices	Buddhism Focus on these over insight practices.
Richard Male 62m	50	18	Shamatha and Vipassana Short retreats often	Tibetan Buddhism
Julia Female 54m	69	10	Body Scans Mindfulness/ mindfulness of breathing	Buddhism
Tilly Female 90m	44	12	Visualisation of Buddha figure Six element practice Insight practice Mindfulness Loving-kindness meditation Shamanic practice Retreats	Western Buddhism
Fred Male 73m	63	40	Completed solo retreat of 4 years Mahamudra Dzogchen Mindfulness 'Silent practice'	Tibetan Buddhism

			Choiceless awareness Shamatha Vipassana Chenrezi meditation	

Inclusion/ Exclusion Criteria

Eligibility required participants be over 18 years of age, have long-term meditative experience and be fluent in English. As practice develops, the meditative state permeates life beyond formalised practice. To account for this, participants necessitated at minimum five years of daily meditation (either during formal sitting, or when engaging in life activities such as work, socialising or walking) in addition to continuing to have maintained a formal practice at least three times per week. Those who were suffering from serious or enduring physical or mental health issues such as dependent drug use, personality disorders and schizophrenia were excluded from the study.

Procedure

To recruit participants, I contacted Buddhist centres, secular meditation groups, transcendental meditation groups and yoga centres. After receiving a response I described the study aims and requirements for participation. I then provided the research poster to clarify criteria and confirm my identity as a City, University of London doctoral researcher. The poster was then sent to prospective participants or circulated on organisational newsletters. After, I sent the participant information sheet and organised a date and time a week following (to provide sufficient space for consideration) for a screening call to discuss any possible questions. During this, the screening questionnaire and consent forms were also completed, and risk was assessed. I also described the aims of the research whilst re-iterating right to withdraw. The screening calls proved useful in establishing familiarity and developing initial rapport. Interviews were then scheduled at an appropriate date and time.

Training interviews were held to test the semi-structured interview format with two individuals known to the researcher to ensure the comprehensibility of the questions. After, ten separate interviews were conducted with participants who fulfilled the criteria for participation. These were recorded on Zoom and with a digital recording device, transcribed and then analysed. All interviews were conducted online, through the Zoom conferencing platform. Prior to interview, I made clear to participants their freedom to discontinue at any time, without explanation, alongside the limits of confidentiality. I explained there were no right or wrong answers to the questions posed and that I am approaching their experience from the perspective of a novice. When interviews were completed, I ceased recording on both my external device and Zoom. The video recordings of participants were then deleted. I thanked

participants for their time and offered a verbal debrief, and after a written debrief with relevant additional resources if relevant.

Interview and Interview Schedule

Given the research aims, semi-structured, one-one interviews were conducted with general themes orienting exploration (e.g. challenges, difficult experiences, practice in context of community, altered sense of self). Questions included: 'What have you learnt as a result of your meditation practice? How did these insights arise? What has been the experience of practice in context of your meditative community?'. A semi-structured 'conversation with a purpose' permitted flexibility for further elaboration of participant experiences and explication of their narratives through additional clarifying or probing questions. As IPA requires 'rich' data, a semi-structure lasting between 60-90 minutes 'granted participants an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022, pg. 53). Each participant was provided a pseudonym and identifying information was removed to ensure confidentiality.

5.4. Data Analysis

As discussed, IPA offers a structured approach to analysis and was applied to transcripts given its congruence with the methodological aims. Prescription is not compulsory, however, if the phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic principles underscore procedure. In addition to principle are the processes derived from them such as 'moving from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative' (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022, pg. 75).

The analytic process began with verbatim transcription of interviews. In accord with the iterative, seven step procedure suggested by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2022) each transcript was considered individually before group-level consideration. The first step involves becoming immersed in the data, through reading and re-reading, ensuring the participant remains the nucleus of analysis. Then 'experiential statements' were developed after exploratory, descriptive and interpretative noting. The statements are 'experiential' as they relate directly to participant experiences, as well as the expanded conception of 'experience' which includes the ways in which participants interpret/make sense of these experiences. The aim was to maintain the complexity of the exploratory notes through effective condensation and proved challenging for fear of omitting relevant meaning. The 'hermeneutic circle' applied here, as the parts were understood in context of the whole and vice versa; the additional decomposition of exploratory notes into experiential statements required amending throughout this understanding, and the former were occasionally transferred to the latter category. After, a process of searching for connections across experiential statements began. Once the experiential statements were

drawn in the order in which they occurred during interview, I then began mapping the way these fit together. Step 5 involved naming the personal experiential themes (PET's) and consolidating and organizing them in a table. Each cluster of experiential statements were then given a title which encapsulated their essence. This was repeated for each participant, until PET's were used to develop group experiential themes (GET's) across cases.

5.5. Findings

Two superordinate themes and eight group experiential themes are presented. The outcome of this interpretative- phenomenological analysis seeks to illuminate the lived- experience of long-term meditators. From 'Paths of transformation' (A), (C) and (E) are represented. Within 'Staying the Path' only (A) is shown. These themes convey both the novel findings of this research, whilst maintaining alignment with the current journals prior research (Appendix K- further journal criteria).

The two superordinate and group-experiential themes are as follows:

1. **Paths of transformation**

    a) From suffering to constructive change; greater serenity, contentment and continuity of meaning

    b) Seeing beyond the rigid 'I'; the trials and jubilations

    c) Overcoming entrenched patterns and dynamics

    d) Residing in chaos; the only way out is in

    e) Death, grief and impermanence; renegotiating the relationship with mortality

2. **Staying the path; methods of containment and collaboration**

    a) The deep significance of meditative community; guidance, support and connection

    b) Maintaining consistency; momentum, faith and the personalisation of practice

    c) Retreats and the facilitation of insight

5.5.1. Overview

In exploring the lived-experiences of LTM's there were two overarching, interconnected themes. 'Paths of transformation' reflected their journeys of change. The salutary effects of meditation were a

part of a larger picture in which the definition, methods, aims and experiences of practice converged and diverged. The full meaning of meditation to participants was as idiosyncratic as the varied narratives expressed. 'Transformation' captures the degree of change. These ranged from increases in psychological well-being to complete alterations in self-concept and perspectives on bereavement/ mortality. Participants explained meditation did not exact these changes in isolation; Buddhist/ spiritual teachings, psychological therapy, journalling and contemplation of life experiences all provided avenues for change. Concepts such as 'impermanence' and 'emptiness' were understood both 'on and off the cushion' and 'in the head and heart' (i.e. in and outside of formalised sitting; intellectually and experientially).

The themes within, and between superordinate themes are symbiotic (see figure above). By being better able to 'reside in chaos' or contend with aversive experience, participants were more able 'overcome entrenched patterns' through, for example, being willing to attend to their own needs by sitting in the discomfort of conflict with others. Both superordinate themes highlighted the difficulty of long-term practice. 'Staying the path', however, explores in greater detail the methods through which participants maintained their resolve, despite these challenges. The support and validation of meditative community/ teachers was necessary for many LTM's. Retreats were a further tool of practice which appeared to help practitioners 'stay the path' through engendering insight or by developing further faith in the potential of the mind.

5.5.2. Paths of transformation

5.5.3. From suffering to constructive change; greater serenity, contentment and continuity of meaning

Suffering was for all participants impetus to pursue or maintain meditative practice. 'Constructive' change thereafter included perspectival shifts in life priorities and that which brings lasting well-being. All participants referred to pursuits of 'intrinsic' 'meaning' (eudaimonia) beyond temporary, hedonic pleasure or 'extrinsic' goals. This theme draws attention to participant experiences of both subtle and salient forms of discontentedness, whilst illustrating their general converging, or diverging journeys of insight and development (i.e. greater peacefulness, purposefulness and well-being).

In this passage, Nero conveys the depth and severity of suffering that preceded his arrival at the Buddhist Centre:

'…so… what's the best way of saying this, so we call come to the say, the meditation practice, or a spiritual practice from a certain point, erm, my point, I, I can tell you about it if you want, but, it, it's part of my life story, so, by the time I got the, to the Buddhist centre, I was in, in a bad place, *bad*,

severe distress, so I come a long way in them years… 28 years, I've come a long way, but a lot *had* to change, and I'm still changing or trying to…' (Nero, L6-13, p.2)

Nero appeared to highlight the necessity and scope of change required, given the intensity of his suffering; 'but a lot *had* to change'. He communicated explicitly the significant progress he has made over 28 years, emphasising this by repeating how far he has come. He later said he had developed a greater sense of peace, and there was no higher path he could have taken.

'…people tell us is the thing, you know, if you just find the relationship, you just find love or just find career success, then, then you're good. I have love. I have career success. Erm and that's, you know, that that hasn't prevented me from, from still wondering what's life about…' (Henry, L17-32, pg.14)

While Henry appreciates the significance of love and career success, he conveys that meeting the societal criteria for happiness have raised questions of meaning, fulfilment and purpose. He implies that the message culture communicates ('people tell us') is that contentment is on the other side of attainment, though for him remained elusive. His three-fold repetition of 'just find' conjured images of hands grasping at mist, yearning for form, inspiring comparison between this account and the 'hedonic treadmill'. He reflected their pursuit does not provide enduring satisfaction and 'refuge', but merely temporary happiness:

'…those things can provide certain, certainly elements of temporary satisfaction and happiness, but, but nothing seems to provide an enduring… I guess in Buddhist terminology, refuge and, and so from that perspective, it's, it's my practice reenforces my, I guess, my faith in erm Buddhist principle of the Three Jewels…or what our goals in life should be oriented around, erm, certainly that, that's new in the last five years' (Henry, L44-49, p. 13)

A sentiment iterated through these extracts is that rooted within seeking is the kernel of dissatisfaction. Participant processes of change included greater awareness of the mechanics of well-being and using meditation/ teachings as a conduit through which to reflect on life-experiences.

5.5.4. Overcoming entrenched patterns and dynamics

All participants described positive changes in psycho-emotional/ behavioural patterns or entrenched social and familial dynamics. These included habits such as smoking, tendencies toward catastrophising/ habitual negative thoughts and negative self-appraisal which impaired intimate relationships. Several participants said they were able to behave more skilfully through becoming aware of habitual ways of responding, and by 'pausing' before reacting.

Throughout her interview, Julia described a process of becoming more aware of her physiological and psychological responses. She then told a story of a passenger on a plane asking for her seat. Previously she explained that before beginning these practices she would have given it

unquestioningly, with regret. By pausing, she acted against this pattern, and suggested an alternative which accounted for her needs in context of the needs of others:

'…we're all adults, we all know what we're doing, we all have a choice about things and if they couldn't choose their seats, there must be a reason, you know, maybe they were late booking or whatever. So I was very pleased with myself that I'd managed not to say, ooh I'll swap.' (Julia, L30-33, p.15)

Perhaps her satisfaction represented a positive change more generally in boundary setting and assertiveness. Here Julia explains the framework within which this decision was made; kind, compassionate and considered. Several participants expressed an increased awareness and care for their own needs, ranging from the above to a reduction in self-neglect and 'martyring':

'…it's still about being compassionate and kind, but just in my own time isn't it rather than an obligation. It was a, a considered offer rather than just an automatic offer.' (Julia, L26-28, p. 17)

5.5.5. Death, grief and impermanence; renegotiating the relationship with mortality

Most participants explained both meditative practice and teachings altered their relationship to impermanence (i.e. the perpetuity of change in circumstances, moods, identities etc.) and mortality. Several participants gave vivid, touching accounts of how their practices, families, friends and spiritual communities assisted with their journeys of loss.

Julia described the significance of 'body scans' (developing granular awareness of her body) in 'discovering herself', and of her heart 'melting' in 'joy and delight'. During group practice, she was also given instruction to draw attention to her heart, which preceded this. Julia then said she had 'turned a grief corner', suggesting a step towards its processing, feeling certain of its connection to her heart 'melting':

'…I did actually feel in the last 3 and a bit weeks, that I had turned a grief corner, which was good, erm, I can't remember whether I felt like it before or after my heart melted. But I'm sure they were connected in some way, somewhere along the line there.'

It's possible, that through 'body scans', meditation, the compassionate support of her group, and an understanding of grief, she became more attuned to it, leading to a felt sense of its overwhelming intensity, before 'turning a grief corner'.

Millwall and Karen gave rich descriptions of how their Buddhist practices, learnings and faiths affected their experiences of loss. Millwall explained that where others were in grief and shock, his

mind remained at peace; after this passage, Millwall suggested that practicing a mind of compassion and stillness, Lamrim meditations and performing experiential contemplations on the reality of mortality aided this process:

'…I guess at the point of when he did *pass away*, my mind was totally at peace, you know, I'd sort of spent time during the night sort of doing some mantras and err meditating and things like that and, and so, you know, *my mind was completely at peace,* what was going to happen… people around me were maybe a bit more in grief and shock and that I just…it seemed quite natural…my mind wasn't, wasn't disturbed really, and then obviously it's not because I didn't love my brother (laughter), it was because, you know, err just understanding the nature of things a bit better and my mind being at peace…' (Millwall, L5-20, p. 6)

Following this extract, Millwall spoke to 'his mind of compassion'; by acknowledging the suffering of his brother whilst he was in pain, and of the suffering of all patients at the hospital, he said he became 'less self-absorbed', seemingly organically opting against, and releasing a narrative in which it was only 'his loss'. The 'naturalness' he describes above, illustrates his acceptance of death and dissolution. Echoing Millwall, Karen explained how her practices, faith and community impact her experiencing of her mother's passing:

'…How can I describe it? Ermm, like an unusual feeling of peace in the room. And I felt very, like, ver- it's a weird thing to say, don't tell many people, but ermm felt really really elated and happy, you know, like like not happy in a like very peaceful. Ermm and there was no sorrow, there was no sadness, there was none of that, really. Just felt this incredible confidence that she is transitioned into a very positive state, you know whatever that might be…' (Karen, L21-27, p. 19)

As referred to in 'The deep value of meditative community…' both Karen and Millwall expressed a possible reticence in expressing their reactions to death. This may be due to cultural norms around 'expected' responses, and concerns about judgement. Meditative community may provide a normalising purpose.

5.5.6. The deep significance of meditative community; guidance, support and connection

All participants spoke to the value of their meditative communities and teachers. This arose across several dimensions, including guidance from community/ teachers, group meditative experiences, inspiration and validation of the difficulty of practice.

Several participants suggested their communities helped contextualise, validate and normalise the difficulties of their meditative paths. Henry, for instance, described early in his practice strong,

concerning involuntary ‘vibrations’ which ran through his head and body. He questioned why they occurred when he does not have epilepsy. More advanced practitioners were able to provide an explanatory framework:

‘…I’m vibrating like, what’s going on? And erm when you spend more time around experienced you know practitioners, they’re like, yeah, okay, yeah, that’s interesting, like, that’s, erm that could be an energy release, that can be you approaching what th, we call dyonic states…’ (Henry, L5-10, p. 18)

Though initially uncomfortable, Henry in interview described an accompanying excitement, hopeful they may represent his becoming ‘enlightened’. He later explained when viewed through the lens of energy release, he allowed the vibrations to resolve into ‘more of a calm, blissful or relaxed state’. It seems this guidance tempered his anxieties, provided practice guidance and hedged his expectations of enlightenment. Several participants conveyed a sense of misunderstanding from non-Buddhists and meditative practitioners. Given the difficulty of practice, and of abiding by associated Buddhist ethical frameworks, Henry strongly expressed the necessity of Sanga as support, inspiration and validation. The following extract is represents some participants, and echoes Nero’s sentiments:

‘…to pursue a spiritual path like Buddhism isn’t easy, like it’s, it’s not, this is not the easiest thing to attempt, you know, meditation every day of your life and all this stuff from practicing ethics isn’t easy…which is why you kind of need people around you that are also trying to do it ermm to, to varying degrees of success, and erm because otherwise you would you would give up like you wouldn’t, you wouldn’t pursue this on your own…’ (Henry, L19-27, p. 24)

‘…you can learn a lot of these practices online and stuff, but have you really got somebody you can discuss things with when things get difficult. I’ve got lots of, luckily enough, lots of friends erm, that I can discuss meditation or difficulties with, challenges.’ (Nero, L9-14, p. 15)

Several participants highlighted the value of their relationships with teachers in providing meditative instruction (e.g. no-self practices) and general counsel (e.g. overcoming of personal issues). In addition to describing the importance of a personal resonance with one’s teacher, Karen also described the life-altering experiencing of her spiritual guide’s mind through ‘guru yoga’:

‘In that moment I had like a like a flash into his mind and that was like a really life changing experience. Err it was very profound…it's very hard to even conceptualize and put it into words…it’s very hard to communicate, because it’s very profound like incredibly you know, divine, unconditional love.’’ (Karen, L38-46, p. 23)

5.6. Discussion

The themes generated through this research both converged and diverged with the quantitative, qualitative and theoretical literature. Although they point towards potential mechanisms of change, the central aim of the investigations were to provide voice to the experiences of LTM's where this has been underrepresented.

5.6.1. Paths of transformation

Ekici et al. (2020) observed a transition within their participants from 'Imbalance to Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being'; this journey was reflected and thread idiosyncratically across all current participant accounts where their practices were catalysed by discontent and existential yearning. Hedonic well-being refers to enjoyment and pleasure, whilst eudaimonia conveys a sense of meaning and purpose. Graham, for instance, like Tim from Ekici et al.'s (2020) investigations, both described a sense of 'coming home' in relation to Buddhist practice, which depicts its eudaimonic value. In addition, Bowles et al.'s (2022) results indicated that after five years of meditation, practitioners experienced greater levels of subjective 'spiritual growth', and prioritised this end above other goals (i.e. cognitive enhancement). This tendency was apparent across many participants who after experiencing the potential of practice held 'enlightenment' and 'truth' as paramount.

It seemed as participants experienced greater internal serenity and contentment (Shonin et al., 2014), there remained less incentive to pursue well-being from temporary sources. In addition, through deeper awareness of their psychological processes, participants appeared more able to explore the mechanics of well-being, and act to improve it. Their insights arose through symbiosis between macro and micro levels of analysis; by seeing the reality of impermanence, craving and aversion both in their immediate experience, and across their lives they found, for instance, that '…living from gratification to gratification is not the way'.

Some participants conveyed a skepticism towards Buddhist practice due to negative religious connotations, and the abuse that has arisen due to power differentials. Millwall, for example, given his Irish background, was raised in an environment where religion was consummate with conflict. Although WBI's, MBSR, ACT and MBCT have secularized the language of Buddhist philosophy and technique, SG-MBI's are in their vernacular more overtly 'spiritual'. A potential risk, therefore, is that despite their conscious secularization, these barriers persist and are magnified by SG- MBI's with language such as 'emptiness'. To add further complexity, researchers have explored their appropriateness in the Chinese population where elements of Confucianism are viewed as at odds with Buddhist philosophy (Zhou et al., 2021). This again illustrates the importance of a collaborative, person-centered approach when suggesting these approaches with clients.

Ontological Addiction Theory (OAT) (Van Gordon et al., 2018) provides an explanatory framework for participant accounts across several themes, including 'From Suffering to Constructive Change…', 'Seeing beyond the rigid 'I'…', 'Overcoming entrenched patterns…' and 'Death, grief and impermanence…'. Participants described the centrality of no-self practices in their journeys; Henry reduced the 'fixedness' with which he viewed himself, and Tilly, Millwall and Karen, expressed less/ no defensiveness of the apparent 'I'. In accord with OAT, participants, by viewing, and experiencing the self as impermanent, were able to regard seemingly entrenched, negative habits as changeable. OAT may assert, that their 'addiction' to both superficial ends, and emotion, to secure a 'false', changeable self-concept weakened upon insight into impermanence, emptiness and Dukkha.

Unexpected findings included the passages relating to 'Death, grief and impermanence; re-negotiating the relationship to mortality'. Though the literature review provided examples of explorations of impermanence, there is little qualitative and quantitative research exploring the impact of contemplative traditions/ practices on bereavement, grief or perceptions of mortality. Williams, Skalisky, Erickson, & Thoburn (2020), relevant to the experiences of participants, sought to test the Mindfulness-to-Meaning theory as pertainting to post-traumatic growth (PTG) in the conext of grief. They defined PTG as 'positive psychological changes experienced as a result of a traumatising or highly challanging events'; the criteria comprising positive psychological change are a greater vision of one's potential, a profound realisation of one's strength/ resilence, a greater appreciation for life, connections to others and spiritual/ existential change (Tadeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The researchers hypothesized that dispositional mindfulness and the capacity for positive 'meaning making' were positively correlated, and that in the wake of bereavement would predict PTG. The results indicated that mindfulness most strongly predicted PTG in low-moderate levels of traumatic grief, but served a less prominent role in more traumatized individuals. Still, dispositional mindfulness scores predicted 'meaning making'.

Williams et al. (2020) posited that those who are experiencing high levels of traumatic grief and the associated intensity of emotion are inhibited in their capacity for cognitive 'meaning making'. The findings, however, suggested that mindfulness retained a key component for highly traumatized individuals in facilitating PTG through 'non-cognitive' means. In accord with 'The only way out is in', it was suggested that where cognitive processes were ineffectual, somatic processing occurred, in accord with body-focused trauma modalities (Levine, 2010). Further, Garland et al. (2015) suggested that defining mindfulness as a 'strictly non-evaluative process' fails to capture its facilicitation of eudaimonic wellbeing and the development of alternate narratives where meaning is derived from challenging circumstances (e.g. grief, loss, change etc.). Perhaps Julia's 'heart melting' represented a necessary form of somatic processing; before this her grief may have been highly traumatising, which meant that 'meaning making' remained difficult.

Park and Pyszcynski (2019) explored across three studies the impact of meditation, and Buddhist philosophy on the salience of 'defensive responses' to reminders of mortality. The first study suggested that those who had only meditated prior to data collection and mortality stimulus, had long-term experience or were 'lay Buddhists' did not exhibit the 'typical increase in worldview defense' characteristic of non-practitioners. Their results implied that these differences in 'defensive reactions' were mediated by 'dispositional mindfulness' and Buddhist belief structures (which were not explicitly referred to). Of note, the self-reported 'death anxiety' did not differ between groups. In light of the current studies findings, perhaps an acceptance of the reality of mortality mitigated dysfunctional, reactionary behaviour/ emotional responses created by experiential avoidance. Millwall explained that by meditating on impermanence, he was able to prioritise meaning in his life and appreciate his relationships more fully. Mortality was therefore motivating; though the anxiety may have remained, prosocial, rather than defensive behaviours and attitudes emerged. Where Henry feared death or 'the fear of the unknown death represents' he expressed a greater accetpance of flux given his practice, and a grattitude for the life he has lived. All these processes therefore have application for grief therapy.

5.7. Study Limitations

Although the central aim of the study was to explore the lived-experiences of LTM's, an ancillary objective was to shed light on the possible processes and outcomes of meditative practices for participants. Making generalisable, cause and effect truth claims based on participant reports is not possible given researcher fallibility, the nature of qualitative methodologies and the small sample size. In addition, though there was a near even gender split between participants, with some variation in religious and national backgrounds, all participants were white aside from two. Further, information about sexual orientation was not collected during demographics and Henry was the only participant who spoke explicitly to the impact of practice on his view of minority identities. The relationship between meditative practice and insight into/ alterations of the view of self and experiences of sexuality, national identity, racism and religiosity have not been explicitly addressed within the literature; greater inclusion within the sample may have shed further light on this pertinent issue. In addition, there was heterogeneity in the sample (length of time meditated varied between 5-40 years, varying techniques/ traditions). The benefits derived by a practitioner of five years may vary significantly from one of forty and the language used to relay these distinctions may differ.

Whilst using the Zoom conferencing platform, it may have also been more difficult given the reduced resolution of the image and its latency time to detect participant micro-expressions and therefore the full emotional range associated with their life narratives. Bekes et al. (2021) conducted research into

the experiences of psychotherapists conducting therapy online. The therapists reported difficulty with distraction during session (for both clinician and client), lower perceived quality of the therapeutic relationship and reduced connection (perceiving the emotions of patients, a feeling of connectedness, the organic expression and sense of empathy). During the current studies interviews, distraction did occur, where for example living room phones rang, or there were knocks on the front door. In addition, although connection was felt with participants it may have been impeded by the virtual medium.

5.8. Avenues for future research

The current study highlighted several possible avenues for novel and necessary research. Participants described a breadth of meditative techniques beyond MM, open-monitoring and LKM. These included chanting, dialogical/ experiential insight practices, merging with imagistic representations of ethical ideals, 'shamanic medicine walks' and 'guru yoga'. There may be processes underlying the beneficial outcomes of these practices which further study can uncover. To my knowledge there are no established quantitative or qualitative papers examining the imaginal meditations reported by Karen, Julia and Eleanour, for example. In addition, the importance of meditative community across several dimensions was reported by participants. Further research here may increase the efficacy of meditative groups within a clinical setting.

5.9. References

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6.0. Section C: Combined Process Report and Client Study

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