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**Inner Landscapes: An Autoethnographic Journey of Meditation and AI-Generated
Digital Artworks from an Yoga Psychology Perspective**

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study explored the subjective aspects of daily meditation through self-interviews, reflective journaling, and text-to-image-based digital artwork using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools. This qualitative methodological exploration aligned with Indian philosophical traditions that form the epistemological and ontological perspectives of Indigenous Indian Psychology (IIP). Using simple breath awareness meditation for two hours daily, I investigated the physical, emotional, energetic, and spiritual dimensions of the subjective meditation experience over a 42-day period. I conducted a Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (TVTA) of the self-interview data and AI-generated digital artworks. The themes were "Expanding Limitations: Embracing Pleasure and Pain," "Flowering Feelings: Blossoms of Awareness," and "Petals of Time: Absorbed in My Garden," which provided subjective meditation insights into the inner dimensions of experience between the body, mind, and perception of time. The use of this methodology highlighted a novel way of understanding the subjective meditation experience in accordance with IIP, particularly by incorporating *yoga* psychology. Overall, this study adopted an introspective approach to understanding the subjective aspects of meditation which lead to growth and transformation.

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Introduction:

The Sprout of Inquiry

My research explored the intricate cultural, spiritual, and psychological foundations that underpin my self-perception and subjective meditation experiences for emotional and psychological well-being. My Indian heritage and upbringing in New Zealand has provided a unique exploration that intersected Eastern traditions with Western scientific perspectives. Eastern practices have been integrated into Western disciplines and have gained prominence in science and therapy (Lutz et al., 2008; Sharma, 2015). However, there are challenges in incorporating them because of the epistemological and ontological differences between these disciplines. The fusion of Eastern and Western philosophies has given rise to new fields such as contemplative neuroscience, psychotherapy, and social justice (Loizzo et al., 2023). Meditation and psychotherapy have comparable mechanisms that help alleviate stress, enhance learning, and promote brain plasticity (Loizzo et al., 2023). Engaging in regular and continuous practice within a supportive environment cultivates self-awareness, self-regulation, and inner tranquillity (Loizzo et al., 2023). However, understanding the introspective essence of meditation is a significant obstacle. Traditional quantitative methods struggle to capture the subjective and personal nature of meditative journeys (Karl et al., 2021).

Traditionally, empirical evidence of scientific research in the pursuit of knowledge has been based on the positivist view, which is a philosophical paradigm (Darke et al., 1998; Paré, 2004; Savickas, 1995). It asserts that only observable and measurable knowledge is valid, thus rejecting subjective interpretations. Positivism fields prioritise empirical and quantitative research methods which challenge the exploration of Eastern philosophies and techniques for health and well-being. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines autobiography and ethnography (Muncey, 2010). Researchers are the participants, as they explore their own experiences and reflections which are their primary

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data. This approach offered a self-reflection tool to observe subjectivity within a qualitative scientific framework. Autoethnography was a welcoming methodology for exploring the subjective realities of meditation in accordance with Indigenous Indian Psychology (IIP) (Wall, 2006). It combined easily available personal narratives, focuses on self-awareness, and offers cultural descriptions to understand how individuals experience and interact with ideas or concepts (Chang, 2016; Park, 2013). Researchers engage in critical self-reflection to identify beliefs, biases, and cultural experiences (Gregersen, 2021; Darmont & Moreira, 2022). The significance of this meditation research stems from the fact that individual experiences are highly subjective and difficult to measure objectively (Chang, 2016).

Worldwide, mindfulness and meditation practices are encouraged for overall health and wellbeing. During my time in India in the past, I immersed myself in traditional *yoga* practices which informed my project. I was mesmerised by observing individuals from around the world who have come to India to learn *yoga*: some to teach *asanas* (physical postures) once they go back home, others to explore the spiritual dimensions which changed their perspective on life, like an *ayahuasca* retreat. Similar to psychotropic drugs, meditation has led to significant transformations in personality and mental states (Wikholm & Farias, 2019). Exploring subjective meditation experiences can help integrate them into psychological and therapeutic practices. This could provide insights into the relationship between consciousness, introspection and brain function (such as the nature of mental content, attention and awareness), influencing psychological theories and assessments. I hope this methodology offers a new perspective for researching subjective experiences and highlights the importance of alternative methodologies in meditation research, where the results are highly variable and often subtle. Additionally, I hope that psychology will incorporate spirituality and philosophy to make its theories more accessible worldwide during this era of globalisation and the threat of a mental health crisis.

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At the heart of my study was the application of an IIP perspective based on yogic psychology, which emphasised the importance of the cultural context in psychological practice and theory. The epistemological (derived from scriptures, the nature of knowledge, and methodology) and ontological (conception of being, focus on the self, integration with philosophy) perspectives, derived from the nature of reality and knowledge (Bhawuk, 2010), are deeply rooted in Indian philosophical traditions and cultural practices. The IIP advocates holistic knowledge, emphasises self-reflection and spiritual growth (Bhawuk, 2010). Individuals are viewed as multifaceted and complex beings with spiritual, social, and biological dimensions (Bhawuk, 2010).

The historical roots of India can be traced to oral traditions during the Vedic period, and the impact of colonisation further motivated indigenous ways of understanding the interconnectedness of all life, fighting for recognition, and challenging concepts of Western psychology (WP). My experience in India not only deepened my understanding of ancient wisdom but also highlighted the need to bridge Indian knowledge with modern psychological practices for cost-effective treatments. India has a rich history and cultural roots in meditative practices aimed at spiritual enlightenment and liberation (Capela Santos et al., 2023), such as *dharana* (concentration) and *dhyana* (meditation). Based on these foundational and philosophical roots, these practices later influenced Buddhism.

Ancient Indian customs passed down through oral traditions have been subject to scrutiny (Levin, 2008). *Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras* and Tibetan Buddhism's Four *Tantras* are examples of medical systems which adopted a holistic approach to well-being, encompassing aspects such as food, physical symptoms, ethics, therapies, and meditation (Levin, 2008). The comparison of these Eastern meditative practices with Western therapeutic techniques offered an avenue for holistic health and highlighted the potential of meditation in psychological resilience and self-regulation. The integration of meditation according to *yoga* psychology has therapeutic benefits and helps understand the mind and emotional health holistically.

'Mindfulness' and 'meditation' are frequently used interchangeably, although understanding their psychological and biological mechanisms poses a challenge (Karl et al., 2021). In the contemporary world, meditation is seen as a solution to mental health issues which are cost-effective, increase resilience, and are validated by scientific trials. Despite numerous studies on the benefits of meditation using various techniques, exploration of the subjective experience of meditation is limited. Subjective experiences are often difficult to express, and art therapy offers a way to facilitate therapeutic dialogue and self-reflection (Van Den Berg, 2024). With an increase in Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, a unique opportunity has been provided to explore the subjective experience of meditation. This study offers a novel platform for exploring subjective experiences.

Autoethnography and AI-generated text-to-image digital art were used to explore transformative and subjective meditation experiences based on Indigenous Indian Psychology (IIP). Art can visually capture what is limited by language and serve as a therapeutic tool to enhance self-understanding and creativity (McNiff, 2019). With the increasing popularity of Eastern techniques in Western frameworks, such as mindfulness-based research on stress reduction and mental resilience (Kabat-Zinn, 1982), a literature review has investigated IIP in detail. The differences between Eastern and Western perspectives, the neuroscientific dimensions of meditation, and the use of art to depict subjective experiences were explored.

The aim of this research was to explore the subjective experience of meditation in stabilising my overall health (mental, emotional, and physical) while navigating through challenges in life. The use of autoethnography and digital art as reflective and analytical tools in my research embodies the innovative convergence between art and science. While art transcends the limitations of verbal communication, this creative methodology highlights the therapeutic and transformative power of regular meditation practice. In summary, my

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research contributed to the global discourse on mental health, resilience, and research on meditation that is culturally appropriate.

Reflective Statement:

My Ground and Growth

I was born into a Hindu Indian family and migrated to New Zealand in 1996 when I was 10 years old. Apart from watching Indian films and enjoying my mother's cooking, I felt disconnected from my extended family and Indian culture. As a result, my sense of self struggled with the influence of American television shows, friends from a small Catholic high school during my teenage years, and Western education. I attempted to integrate into a single culture through an alliance with either Western or Eastern identities. This set the stage for my inner exploration through meditation and psychology, a search for a balance between my heart and mind.

Unexpected life events caused a lot of stress in my early twenties: a painful breakup, falling out with my closest friend, and parents declaring bankruptcy to return to India. During this period, I sought ways to achieve stability through meditation. In 2013, I attended a 10-day silent *Vipassana* meditation retreat, a formal introduction to Buddhist meditation. I learned to meditate without external influences or people, enabling me to observe myself and understand the relationship between my emotions and the body. I discovered constant patterns of negative thoughts, fear of judgment, and self-criticism. Through this technique, I learned how to react to sensations in the body, thoughts, and emotions through craving or aversion (Tapper, 2018). The emphasis on subtle sensations piqued my interest in mind-body practices, such as *yoga*. Additionally, the amount of mental peace I attained inspired me to pursue these connections professionally.

I attended personal therapy sessions to better understand myself, a prerequisite for the bridging psychotherapy course. In the therapy sessions, I had little to communicate, and

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they were repetitive. I felt like I did not progress at the desired pace, maybe unconsciously not prepared to discuss certain topics in the therapy room. Culturally, my family did not place great significance on verbal communication, and my *vipassana* meditation training led me to spend most of my time in therapy, focusing on my inner sensations rather than on communication. Although it could be considered a defense mechanism according to psychotherapy, I experienced disconnection from the therapist when I spoke about energetic events within my body. I felt rejected because my inner experience could not be understood within the Western academic framework. Through psychotherapy, I explored the field of eastern psychology and the origins of truth. To pursue a full-time master's program in psychotherapy and in anticipation of high therapy costs, I decided to attend a 200-hour *yoga* teacher training program in India to work as a *yoga* teacher.

As a participant in the teacher-training program, I faced an unexplainable esoteric experience that profoundly altered my view of life. Despite grappling with the physical and emotional challenges of *yoga* teacher training, I drew upon psychoanalytical theories of containment and learned to embrace discomfort as a means of self-healing (Lombardi, 2018; Vaslamatzis, 1999) in the uncharted territory of this mysterious experience: a tickling sensation in my left foot suddenly changed into an energetic surge within me and unfolded like the opening of flowers. This experience induced fear and concern, as it appeared paranormal.

I was unable to comprehend this inner experience, nor could I convey it to others. In 2018, I spent six months at *Isha Yoga Ashram* to gain a deeper understanding of the inner dimensions of my experience. During this period, I became interested in Indigenous Indian Psychology (IIP) and yogic psychology.

At the beginning of this master's program, I relocated to India after living abroad for almost 30 years to support my husband for a few years, as his father's health started to deteriorate after the Covid pandemic. One year later, I struggled with my emotional

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regulation, cultural expectations, and adaptation. I wanted to use meditation to navigate this phase of my life and find internal balance and stability, which became the basis of my research project.

Literature Review:

Tracing the Cultural Soil of Indigenous Psychology

Indigenous psychology (IP) is a field of research that acknowledges and incorporates cultural differences in psychological research and practice. It examines the scientific aspects of human behaviour and mental processes that are distinctive to a particular region and tailored to its people (Liu & Woodward, 2013). The objective is to establish a scientific knowledge system that accurately reflects, describes, explains, and understands psychological events within native contexts using a culturally appropriate frame of reference (Leong & Pearce, 2011; Liu & Woodward, 2013). IP examines culturally specific terminology, beliefs, practices, and human functioning within their respective cultural contexts, focusing on the significance of the local wisdom that embodies attitudes or behaviours originating from native cultures (Damayanti et al., 2017; Harway et al., 2012; Pankalla & Kośnik, 2018).

To understand IP, Singh (2021) divided the historical progression of European civilisations into three significant periods: ancient, mediaeval, and modern. Although IP is considered a relatively new concept in the modern era, the origins of knowledge in the Indian subcontinent are between 1500 and 500 BCE in oral tradition. In the ancient period, tribes underwent a shift from their traditional “hunter-gatherer” and “migratory” lifestyles due to favourable agricultural conditions known as the Neolithic revolution (Kim, 2000; Thaler, 2016). Collective tribes (settled agricultural communities) emphasised conscientiousness, obedience, and conservatism (Kim, 2000). Many viewpoints and economic structures have influenced the diverse global society that we currently inhabit (Levy & Waitoki, 2016).

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During the mediaeval era of European civilisation, intellectual customs declined due to the Western Church's influence (Singh, 2021). Cultural evolution has resulted in the development of kinship-based institutions that encourage loyalty and compliance within groups (Schulz et al., 2018). The proliferation, dominance, and dissemination of Western Church doctrines, particularly by the Roman Catholic Church, has resulted in the disintegration of kinship-based systems. Ideological battles existed between traditions based on ancestral worship and theological ideas of Western churches (Bae, 2004; Ryu, 2022). The shift in governance and consolidation of power has led to the suppression and breakdown of kinship (Gray, 2016; Townsend, 2023; González et al., 2022; Woodroffe, 2020). Thus, indigenous customs were viewed as uncultured. Western influence also introduced market-based economies that increased labour market activities (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012). This has encouraged people to migrate to metropolitan areas, disrupting the fundamental principles of traditional economies. This weakened kinship bonds within communities. Finally, intentional initiatives were undertaken to reconfigure or demolish established family and social systems to facilitate governance and promote Christian principles (González et al., 2022).

European colonisation has influenced various activities in society, such as economics, politics, culture, and psychology (Singh, 2021). This is driven by the need for power, materialistic goals, and cultural supremacy. Although Western civilisation accounts for 12% of the global population, researchers have found that 80% of participants were from Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic (WEIRD) societies (Azar, 2010) in various academic fields.

The modern era witnessed a resurgence of intellectual activity that was closely associated with European colonisation (Singh, 2021). However, the contemporary biomedical paradigm, which draws inspiration from Hippocrates' ancient theory of humours and Darwinism, has faced criticism due to its ethnocentric and culturally superior tendencies

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(Kim, 2000). Western Cartesian dualism of mind and body, together with the Judaeo-Christian worldview, has influenced a distinct approach to mental health and sickness in the Western world, often marginalising cultural considerations (Kim, 2000). This overrepresentation of individualism, independence, and analytical thinking (Schulz et al., 2018) could have led to misguided understandings of human behaviour, societal norms, and knowledge of the mind—not reflective of the global population. Western-trained psychologists and medical professionals may find it challenging to actively engage with diverse worldviews and misunderstand other global realities (Sundararajan et al., 2013).

Mainstream narratives in science and education encompass the dominant Western global discourse, which emphasises individualism and values personal achievements, autonomy, and self-reliance over one's environment and destiny (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2002; Singelis et al., 1995). The generalisable dichotomy of individualistic and collectivist narratives is often questioned because of the research methods utilised for these conclusions – direct assessment, comparison based on Hofstede's [1980] work (which explores how cultural values influence behaviour), and priming to produce favourable results (Oyserman et al., 2002). There are differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures. Western scientific thought which prioritises rationalism and scientific approaches to knowledge, relies on measurable and empirical evidence as the foundation for truth and reality (Crombie, 1988; Lacey, 1986). There is a strong emphasis on treating symptoms through medical interventions, which has progressed over the decades from purely biomedical health models to biopsychosocial models (Deacon, 2013; Fava & Sonino, 2008; Tamm, 1993). The scientific model of health promotes boundaries that separate aspects of health into different specialties (based on organ systems) with inadequate integration (Fava & Sonino, 2008). Philosophical and psychological disciplines have been separated based on historical, methodological, and conceptual developments. Consequently, important spiritual and religious aspects of health were excluded from the psychological research. European

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dominance in scientific research solidified Western notions of self and mind, which led to a distinct health perspective compared to other cultures (Sundararajan et al., 2013).

Indigenous cultures often place a high value on collective well-being and social roles, as well as context and social interdependence (Oyserman et al., 2002). IP emerged as a response to challenge the prevailing influence of Euro-American psychological theories and promote cultural diversity within the field of psychology (Kim, 2000; Sundararajan et al., 2013; Ho, 1998; Yang, 2000). IP examines psychological phenomena in various settings, including family, social structures, politics, philosophy, history, religion, and the environment (Allwood & Berry, 2006; Kim et al., 2006) to understand human behaviour and psychological processes within their natural environments (Kim et al., 2006). Indigenous knowledge may integrate concepts from philosophical and religious literature, but occasionally pursues empirical verification to establish formal theories (Kim et al., 2006) that the scientific community can endorse.

Planting Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives

Rather than focusing only on individual interests, IP offers a broad perspective on human behaviour (Sundararajan et al., 2013). Even in the treatment of biologically based psychological disorders (such as schizophrenia), cultural determinants (values, beliefs, and practices) influence the understanding of causes, symptoms, and treatment outcomes (Sundararajan et al., 2013). A deeper appreciation of an individual's culture and personal context offers many advantages in addressing mental health issues.

Culture is a dynamic phenomenon influenced by interactions between individuals and their environments (Kim, 2000). During the diagnostic process, IP aims to comprehend the significance of symptoms by examining various aspects of an individual's life to achieve harmony and balance (Sundararajan et al., 2013). In indigenous cultures, healing practices originate from cosmology, place-based knowledge, and cultural traditions worldwide, offering ancient holistic healthcare systems (Struthers & Eschiti, 2004; Struthers et al., 2004). Of the

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estimated 370 million indigenous people worldwide, only a portion are recognised in public health discourses which focus on settler colonisation (characterised by permanent settlement of colonisers in foreign land) and the displacement and marginalisation of indigenous peoples in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Paradies, 2016). Research has explored traditional healing spaces, land-based healing, culturally based healing, such as the Medicine Wheel, and incorporating traditional knowledge of the healing power of food (Ambtman-Smith et al., 2024; Redvers et al., 2020; Sasakamoose et al., 2017; Ford-Ellis, 2019; Baglman et al., 2016).

Indigenous knowledge uses personal, oral, experiential, and holistic methods to impart knowledge through storytelling and metaphors (Hart, 2010). There are two forms of IP: analytical knowledge derived from an objective third party and phenomenological knowledge derived from personal subjective experience (Kim, 2000). Instead of justifying the validity of different knowledge systems, IP allows for diverse realities (Hart, 2010). This generates doubt and scepticism across many domains of society, including academics (Allwood & Berry, 2006). Methodological difficulties originate from the subjective or qualitative aspects of the research, raising doubts about the reliability and validity of the findings compared to mainstream psychology (Kim et al., 2006). Questions also arise regarding the applicability of IP findings due to their narrow cultural scope and usefulness in the comprehension of human behaviour universally (Shiraev & Levy, 2017).

The implementation and effectiveness of research methodologies across different cultures are difficult (Gone & Kirmayer, 2010). The allocation of resources poses a challenge for IP, as it is seen as an overly specialised and opposing traditional scientific parameter (González et al., 2022). The basic assumptions of human nature, behaviour, and techniques differ for integration into mainstream psychology (Shiraev & Levy, 2017). Regardless, the cultural significance of IP has been recognised in understanding individuals rather than relying on external frameworks (Allwood & Berry, 2006). While some researchers in the IP

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field have encountered discrimination, others have received governmental support for work that is specific to their own countries (Allwood & Berry, 2006). The continuation of diverse IP research can enrich the discipline of psychology by fostering a deeper understanding of human behaviour and challenging the presumed universality of Western psychological frameworks (Allwood & Berry, 2006).

The Shadows of Colonialism on India's native wisdom

India was known as *Bharata Varsha* until it was later named "India" by the Greeks (Majumdar, 2016). Colonisation has significantly shaped this territory's long-standing civilisation and profound intellectual heritage (Singh, 2021). Colonisation involves the settlement and domination of one group over another which covers a range of primarily historical practices (such as war, massacres, slavery, and ecological destruction), resulting in socio-political and cultural transformations (Paradies, 2016). Following the decline of the Gupta Empire around 550 BCE, a period of political disintegration of smaller kingdoms struggled with power (Singh, 2021). The influx of external influences introduced diverse religious beliefs to a predominantly Hindu community, which resulted in social turbulence that exacerbated the existing challenges (Singh, 2021).

The diverse colonial endeavours in India inflicted deep scars characterised by the transformation of its geography, people, and cultural terrain under British colonialism (Singh, 2021). Despite achieving independence in 1947, colonial views continued to marginalise indigenous knowledge in India. The colonial era resulted in the destruction of Hindu temples, confiscation of ancient manuscripts that underpin Hinduism, and changes in the education system, governance, and social norms (Singh, 2021). The nature of this legacy makes it difficult for contemporary generations to reacquaint themselves with indigenous Indian knowledge systems (Singh, 2021). During the British colonial period, intellectual exchanges often served their interests and resulted in nihilation, a phenomenon in which cultural biases encouraged mutual criticism of diverse practices across many disciplines (Walsh & Shapiro

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2006). Critics, both internal and external to this civilisation, scrutinised individual and religious behaviours detailed in the Vedic literature (Singh, 2021).

Hindu philosophy is based on ancient Vedic scriptures, which are the oldest sacred texts of the world. Before transitioning into the written form between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE, Vedic scriptures were traditionally transmitted orally through rigorous memorisation and recitation practices that persisted for a millennium (Witzel, 2022). There are four classes of *Vedas* that include knowledge of the eternal problems of humankind: *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda* (Witzel, 2022). Each *Veda* has two main texts: *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* (Majumdar, 2016). *Samhitas* contain information on *mantras*, hymns, and prayers, whereas *Brahmanas* provide explanations. *Rigveda* is the most ancient written record, composed around 1500 BCE, and contains hymns dedicated to various deities. The hymns for chanting during rituals were adapted from *Rigveda* to *Samaveda* and composed around 1200 BCE. The prose and *mantras* for rituals are contained in *Yajurveda*, composed around 1200-1000 BCE. *Atharvaveda* is more recent, around 1000 BCE, and focuses on healing and protection.

Later, the *Aranyakas* texts which offer mystical interpretations of the *Samhitas* and *Upanishads* texts and contain secret esoteric teachings, were incorporated into *Vedic* literature (Majumdar, 2016).

The term “*Veda*” originated from the Sanskrit root “*vid*”, which means sacred or spiritual (cf. Greek (*w*)*oida*, English *wit*, *witness*, German *wissen*), and *Upanishad* refers to the act of sitting near a *guru* or spiritual teacher to acquire profound teachings (Majumdar, 2016; Koirala & Ghimire, 2023; Witzel, 2022). Knowledge and guidance on Indian culture, truth, and morality were found in the *Upanishads*. They delve into the concepts of the self and metaphysical aspects of existence (Rao, 2017; Majumdar, 2016; Chandra & Ranjan, 2022). The concept of self in IIP is not limited to the individual (*atman*) but extends to the cosmos (*brahman*, universal consciousness). Similarly, the Māori concept of self is not just about the individual but rooted in cultural and spiritual connections that are intricately linked with the

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environment, mana, and group connectedness (Pere & Ao Ako Learning New Zealand, 1997). Their sense of identity is deeply connected to their genealogy, *whakapapa*, ancestry, and lineage. The concept of *Hauora* is unique to New Zealand, as it encompasses the whole person and their wider connections, including spiritual health (*taha wairua*) (Heaton, 2018). Some scholars have argued that the inclusion of Māori concepts in the Western framework of health is for political and ideological purposes (Meier & Culpan, 2020). Unlike New Zealand, India is an independent country but still struggles to incorporate IIP knowledge.

Returning to the IIP, while the Vedas are core sacred scriptures, the epics are separate literary works (Brockington, 2022). There are two major epics in India: *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a 700-verse scripture, is a component of the *Mahabharata* epic, which explores the four types of *yoga* (*bhakti*, *jhana*, *raja*, and *karma*) and serves as a guide to leading a fulfilling and spiritually rich life. *Raja* and *bhakti yoga* correspond to energetic and devotional practices, *karma yoga* focuses primarily on selfless actions, and *jnana yoga* focuses on knowledge acquisition through scriptures (Bhide et al., 2023). Respected *sages* and poets imparted these epics and *vedas* to society.

These *sages*, also known as *rishis*, transmitted scriptures that were revealed to them. The Sanskrit root '*rsh*' means 'to see' or 'to hear' (*sruthi*), signifying an individual who has discerned the ultimate truth or reality directly from the divine, typically through intense meditation and spiritual practices. Ancient texts emphasise the interconnectedness of the individual soul (*ātman*) and the universal essence or absolute reality (*brahman*) which serves as the basis for comprehending human awareness (Rao, 2017). The connection between philosophy, religion, and medicine was strong in ancient civilisation which provided a thorough understanding of life and existence (Rao, 2017). Spirituality is the main concept of human existence and is deeply connected to the objectives of life (Rao, 2017).

The introduction of the English education system influenced the interpretation and scrutiny of these writings, primarily from a Western perspective (Kumari, 2021). As an immigrant child to

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parents who had also lost touch with these scriptures, I found myself disconnected from sacred knowledge which used symbolic storytelling and poetic narratives to portray the human *psyche* and one's existential significance. In modern times, many younger Indians view scriptures as non-progressive or inferior (Daghamin, 2022). Traditional teachings were marginalised as colonial authorities exerted control over educational content and legal systems, promoting Western ideals (Kumari, 2021). Indian intellectuals and reformers responded to the colonial narrative by reinterpreting and reviving traditional literature, which instilled feelings of national pride and moral obligation (Das, 2018). The concepts of righteous action and self-less service advocated in *Bhagavad Gita* influenced the Indian independence movement (Ryan, 2020). The postcolonial period witnessed a continuous attempt to critically evaluate and spread the knowledge of ancient texts (Das, 2018). The scrutiny of sacred scriptures during and following colonisation underscores the complex interplay between power, culture, and religion (Panikkar, 2003). This highlights the impact of colonisation on Indian society's relationship with its sacred texts, beliefs, and the ideals that these beliefs promote.

The Growth of Indian Psychological Thought

The use of Western psychology in Indian society has proven ineffective owing to its failure to accommodate local realities, resulting in incongruous outcomes and the restricted development of critical thinking (Singh, 2021; Rao, 2017). Indian psychology does not focus on studying Indian individuals' psychologies, but rather on the psychological traditions of the Indian subcontinent (Rao, 2017; Bhide et al., 2023). Indigenous Indian psychology (IIP) is a distinct discipline that focuses on the intellectual heritage of postcolonial India and seeks to address local concerns by drawing on the native Indian value system (Allwood & Berry, 2006; Rao, 2017).

Indian psychology encompasses a diverse array of methodologies, with some approaches integrating traditional knowledge with Western psychology principles, while

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others adapt to Western principles or include them to align better with the unique cultural and contextual factors present in India. In ancient India, around 300 BCE, Sage Caraka, who lived during the same time as Hippocrates, composed the Caraka *Samhita*, a foundational text in *Ayurveda*, which describes personality types based on three body humours (*doshas*), known as *tridosha prakriti* (Arora & Kumar, 2024; Govindaraj et al., 2015). Ayurveda is a classical Indian medical system, and its foundational knowledge is based on five basic elements: *prithvi* (earth), *apas* (water), *agni* (fire), *vayu* (air), and *akasha* (ether or space) (Arora & Kumar, 2024; Dalal & Misra, 2010). They form the humours of wind (*vata*), bile (*pitta*), and phlegm (*kapha*). The elemental composition of these *doshas* is as follows: *vata* is air and space, *pitta* is fire and water, and *kapha* is earth and water.

Sage Caraka identified eight personality types based on *doshas* and elemental knowledge that are important for holistic Ayurvedic understanding of the health of an individual (Singh, 2021). Caraka's version of *the yoga* system, in which *yoga* and liberation are both states in which all sensations (*vedana*) cease, has been less examined (Flood, 2022). For Caraka, *yoga* arises when the mind is concentrated steadily on the self, where contact between the self and sense organs does not exist, and several special powers arise (Flood, 2022). Caraka's eightfold path of *yoga* is different from Patanjali (discussed in later section), it is aimed at developing memory and understanding eight elements: understanding causes, forms, similarities, differences; adherence to purity, practice, *yoga* of knowledge, and repeated listening. The mindfulness of reality produced by these eight practices leads to the identification of the self with the *brahman* (Flood, 2022).

The IIP incorporates ancient wisdom with modern practices to effectively tackle the present psychological challenges in India with contributions from influential people such as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo (Singh, 2021; Allwood & Berry, 2006). Despite its potential, IIP has not gained widespread acceptance in the field of mental health. Academic environments rely heavily on colonial knowledge systems, and decolonising psychology in

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India requires a thorough and critical reassessment of Western psychological theories (Allwood & Berry, 2006). It potentially involves incorporating the perspectives of disadvantaged individuals, reforming the curriculum, and implementing a syllabus that acknowledges and incorporates a wide range of intellectual traditions (Singh, 2021). As Western psychology is predominant in Indian education and worldwide (Singh, 2021), my research is an attempt to incorporate indigenous Indian ways of understanding oneself and how the mind functions to enhance cultural competence (Cowan, 2009; Gulati & Weir, 2022), reflexivity, and personal transformation.

Understanding the Indigenous Indian Mindscapes

Of the six classical schools of thought and worldviews in Indian philosophy, *Samkhya* philosophy is considered *nastika* or non-Vedic (Koirala & Ghimire, 2023; Chandra & Ranjan, 2022; Paranjpe, 2023). It is important to mention that this philosophy is not present in all IIP. *Samkhya* does not accept Vedas as the ultimate source of knowledge; it bases its teachings on the rational and systematic enumeration of the elements of reality, focusing on understanding the universe through dualism. The *Samkhya* system acknowledges the existence of two primary realities: *purusha*, the subject of consciousness, and *prakriti*, the source or nature/primeval matter of the material world – all instruments and objects of cognition (Bhide et al., 2023; Flood, 2022). Knowledge of the two principles and their teachings might be much older than *Samkhya* philosophy (Flood, 2022). It forms the theoretical basis for several philosophical and spiritual practices, such as *yoga*, but does not advocate the existence of a creator, God. Before the defined schools of philosophical speculation, there was a methodological division, such as *Samkhya* methods of enquiry relying on intellectual understanding of basic principles, *yoga* on methods of spiritual practice, and *lokayata* (worldly) on methods of empirical investigation (Flood, 2022). In many interpretations of *yoga* in later *vedantic* thought, there is an emphasis on the realisation of *atman*. *Yoga* philosophy is recognised as one of the orthodox systems alongside *Vedanta*

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and *Samkhya* that adhere to the *vedic* tradition but do not directly incorporate it. While *vedantic* knowledge is characterised as *sastriya* (based on scriptures) thought, *Samkhya* and *Yoga* are characterised as *tarka* (rationalist) thought, where the fundamental resource is reason rather than scripture (Flood, 2022). The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, a foundational text of *yoga* philosophy, closely aligns with *Samkhya* philosophy while focusing on a practical method to achieve spiritual insight.

The common goal in Indian philosophies is *moksha* (liberation), while *Vedanta* approaches the realisation of non-duality through knowledge from scriptures and *yoga* through practice (Flood, 2022). Examining ancient texts, such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Bhagavad Gita*, is a complex task, and the recent use of sophisticated language models to understand diverse perspectives gives hope for the interpretation of the original texts (Chandra & Ranjan, 2022).

Different philosophical schools have discussed the concepts of *dharma*, *maya*, and *karma* to varying extents. *Dharma* is the principle of virtuous conduct, fulfilment of moral obligations, and compassion towards others (Inbadas, 2018), and is a central theme in *Vedanta*. Indian social rituals specifically aim to uphold *dharma*, moral duty, and communal ethos (Inbadas, 2018). People commonly understand *maya* as the concept of 'illusion', which refers to our tendency to cling to the fleeting aspects of life that bind us to the material world (Inbadas, 2018). According to *Vedanta*, *maya* causes individuals to experience the world in terms of multiplicity and duality. Although not explicitly stated in *yoga* philosophy, *maya* could be the ignorance that leads to a perception of duality. The truth is uncovered through yogic practices to establish the union between *atman* and *brahman*. Realising one's true self involves transcending these attachments, leading to a divine union in enlightenment (Inbadas, 2018; Saraswathi, 2005). The path of *Dharma* ensures this (Inbadas, 2018) and necessitates surrendering worldly aspirations and recognising the impermanence of life (Inbadas, 2018). According to Sri Aurobindo, the development of awareness is key to human

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existence and the resolution of suffering (Sundararajan et al., 2013). By ascending to greater levels of awareness and capacity, we can transcend ignorance and limitations to discover innate tranquillity and bliss (Sundararajan et al., 2013).

Karma indicates that actions have consequences which determine the future (Inbadas, 2018). It is not inherently dependent on beliefs in deities and operates autonomously without divine intervention (White & Norenzayan, 2022). Therefore, it is integral to *Samkhya's* explanation of the cycle of rebirth and the evolution of *prakriti*. According to *Samkhya's* philosophy, actions and their latent impressions contribute to an individual's life and experiences. *Vedanta* extensively discusses *karma*, emphasising liberation from the cycle of *karma* through the realisation of one's unity with the *brahman* (Flood, 2022). According to *yoga* philosophy, disciplined spiritual practice burns away accumulated *karma* to purify the mind and prepare for liberation.

The concepts of *dharma*, *maya*, and *karma* are not just beliefs for individual moral codes, but instead emphasise their position in a broader cognitive framework (White & Norenzayan, 2022). Parallel concepts can also be observed in Buddhism and Taoism (Saraswathi, 2005). Indian philosophy is complex, and understanding it requires expertise in Sanskrit language, theology, and religious studies which are beyond the scope of this research.

Exploring the Self through Yoga Psychology

India's cultural heritage revolves around self-discovery and spirituality, which has led to the emergence of IIP and *yoga* psychology. These fields provide insights into the human mind, awareness, and journey towards enlightenment. Between 1500 and 600 BCE, the *vedantic* period, six schools of Indian philosophy introduced the idea of three fundamental mental attributes (*triguna*): *sattva* (representing goodness, harmony, and purity), *rajas* (representing passion and activity), and *tamas* (representing dullness and inertia)

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(Salagame, 2011). While the *tridosha prakriti* in *Ayurveda* refers to one's constitutional type (unique characteristics) in which one or more of the *dosha* (*vata*, *pitta*, *kapha*) is dominant and remains constant throughout an individual's life (Khatua et al., 2023), the *triguna* concept from *Samkhya* philosophy (discussed in various Indian philosophical texts) refers to three fundamental qualities of nature: human behaviour, temperament, and interpersonal relationships (Singh, 2021). In current *Ayurvedic* practice, the practitioner assesses the physical constitution (according to *tridosha prakriti*) and mental constitution (according to *triguna*) of a person (Singh, 2021).

It is interesting to note that there is no counterpart similar to the *triguna* concept in the Hippocratic typology which has historically predicted disease susceptibility and treatment. The incorporation of *the triguna* concept in *Ayurvedic* practice allows it to be more holistic, addressing physical, mental, and spiritual well-being (Elendu, 2024; Sundararajan et al., 2013). While the Western medical system developed, recognised, and transmitted the Hippocratic typology, *Ayurvedic's* medical system and its validity remain unrecognised or perceived as an alternative holistic practice around the globe (Arora & Kumar, 2024; Hankey, 2005). I am not advocating one over another, but just noticing that while Western medicine is excellent for quick and emergency treatments and disease control, it might require the knowledge of other medical systems such as *Ayurveda* for mental health and chronic disease prevention strategies in the era of globalisation (Sundararajan et al., 2013).

Vedas and *Upanishads* serve as fundamental writings for comprehending the principles of health and well-being in society. Individuals are characterised as *jiva* (a complex multilayered being), *purusha* (individualised consciousness), *atman* (the authentic self), *ksetra* (the physical body), and *ksetrajna* (the knowing self or consciousness) (Singh, 2021). Detailed descriptions of a person consisting of five *koshas* (sheaths): *annamaya* (physical body), *pranamaya* (life energy body), *manomaya* (mental body), *vijnanamaya* (intellectual body), and *anandamaya* (bliss body), as explained in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* (Rao, 2017;

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Rao & Paranjpe, 2016; Singh, 2021; Bhide et al., 2023). This description is considered one of the earliest holistic representations of a person. Each human (*atman*) is a component of this cosmic arrangement (*Brahman*) (Inbadas, 2018). The body and soul are interrelated, and at times, the body is perceived as a hindrance to spiritual development (Inbadas, 2018). The body is considered distinct from *atman*, which is characterised by pure consciousness (formless); therefore, self-discipline and introspection are crucial for both psychological and spiritual growth (Bhide et al., 2023).

Sri Aurobindo's model of self consists of three concentric layers: outer, inner, and innermost (Sundararajan et al., 2013). An individual consists of mental, vital (energy), and physical parts that together establish the foundation of the ego (Sundararajan et al., 2013). However, it is within the deepest core of oneself where the *atman* resides, characterised by serenity, harmony, and bliss. Desire distorts the ego and causes a skewed perception of self-awareness, causing illnesses and exposing underlying vulnerabilities that must be addressed (Sundararajan et al., 2013). *Ayurveda* harmonises the body, mind, and intellect to provide real happiness for the individual, while *dharma* and *karma* allow individuals to transcend their restricted ego and adopt a broad sense of self (Sundararajan et al., 2013). From an Indian perspective, worldly existence is seen as a journey from an animalistic condition to a human and ultimately to a divine state, often guided by *Guru* (Sundararajan et al., 2013). *Ayurveda* views health as a mutually beneficial process between individuals and their external habitats (Sundararajan et al., 2013).

Opening the Petals of Mind and Spirit

Predominantly in the 1960s and the 1970s, Western scholars and psychologists were captivated by Indian spirituality and began integrating Indian psychological concepts into the Western framework (Paranjpe, 2023; Bhide et al., 2023). These included extensive studies on transcendental meditation (using *mantra*) of *yoga* origin. Many facets of *yoga* and mental processes have not been explored, whereas others have been integrated into contemporary

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theoretical frameworks (Bhide et al., 2023). While the IIP offers a theoretical framework, *yoga* psychology provides a practical and systematic approach to attain mastery of the mind (Iyengar, 2012; Bhide et al., 2023).

Here are examples of two studies based on *yoga* interventions which have been published in accordance with the Western scientific framework. First, Brown and Gerbarg (2005) investigated *Sudarshan Kriya Yoga* (SKY) courses which included *asanas*, meditation, group processes, and basic yogic knowledge over six years, where more than 400 patients have shown significant reductions in stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005). SKY has proven effective in reducing depression scores and managing insomnia, anxiety, phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic pain, fibromyalgia, and asthma. However, careful modification under expert guidance is required to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005).

The second study by Rao et al., (2017) explored how *pranayama* and relaxation techniques significantly reduced the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and fatigue in cancer patients. Yoga interventions restore homeostasis and reduce the allostatic load (cumulative burden of chronic stress) through psychoneuroendocrine and psychoneuroimmune modulation (Rao et al., 2017). Quality of life was enhanced by the reduction in cortisol levels, inflammatory cytokines, and enhanced natural killer cell counts.

Similarly, there are numerous studies on *yoga* striving to be published and recognised as evidence-based according to the Western scientific framework. I believe that these current research methodologies fail to encompass the indigenous concept of self and subjective experiences, thereby disregarding the deep understanding of human nature, inner harmony, and spiritual dimensions offered by ancient teachings. The studies lack individualisation in the implementation of yogic principles (Bhide et al., 2023). Yogic practices are very personal and subjective, and researchers desire to publish and *acknowledge yoga programs*, as evidence-based is creating a disharmony in yogic research and understanding.

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Yoga is a multifaceted practice that integrates physical, mental, and spiritual elements to promote well-being and personal transformation. It is considered a spiritual science that enhances the health of an individual through practice, leading to the union of *atman* and *brahman* (Kumar & Kumar, 2023). The term “*yoga*” comes from the Sanskrit root “*yuj*” which means to join or unite. The four types of *yoga* (*raja*, *bhakti*, *karma*, and *jnana*) lead to a state of heightened consciousness known as *turiya*, which transcends emotions and thoughts (Bhide et al., 2023).

The teacher training of *yoga* deviated from the traditional *Gurukul* system of training and became more commercialised (Bhide et al., 2023). Following the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), Sri Krishnamacharya, BKS Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and Desikachar established *yoga* as physical training. Despite its holistic benefits, *yoga* has not been acknowledged beyond famous physical postures (Rao, 2017; Paranjpe, 2023; Bhide et al., 2023). *Hatha yoga* (a type of *raja yoga*) focuses on physical postures and breathing exercises, which are only a fraction of the broader discipline of *yoga* (Paranjpe, 2021).

Patanjali described an eight-fold path to *yoga*, including *yama* (ethical principles), *niyama* (self-discipline), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breath control), *pratyahara* (sensory withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), and *samadhi* (enlightenment) (Paranjpe, 2021). They form a detailed guide for internal exploration and do not follow a sequential order (Paranjpe, 2021). Ethical rules (known as *yama* and *niyama*) are often overlooked in favour of the more prominent *practice of asana* (Paranjpe, 2021). The first four serve as the basis for the latter four, which are internal cognitive practices (Paranjpe, 2021).

The *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* provides guidance for both the practical and philosophical aspects of the path, serving as a valuable resource for seekers (Iyengar, 2012). Seekers in the Indian tradition are individuals who focus on self-realisation and discovering the truth of human existence (Paranjpe, 1996). Seekers use *yoga* to achieve an altered state of

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consciousness and overcome physical and mental suffering (Paranjpe, 1996). Patanjali does not explicitly mention a specific physical *asana* but emphasises the importance of maintaining stability (*sthira*) and ease (*sukha*) during practice (Paranjpe, 2021).

Misunderstanding knowledge leads to the development of strong emotional attachments and aversions, disrupting one's life as a manifestation of desires, anger, and greed (Iyengar, 2012).

By utilising ancient wisdom to reduce suffering and promote self-realisation, *yoga* offers an integrated holistic practice of mind, body, and spirit to redirect mental energy, improve perception, and achieve balance (Bhide et al., 2023). The challenges of *yogic* research in the academic framework are its complex understanding of the self, language comprehension difficulties, and its relation to texts viewed as religious. Although contemporary research has illustrated the benefits of *yoga* practices such as *pranayama* and *dhyana* in reducing psychological distress and enhancing well-being (Khalsa et al., 2015), there is a need to understand *culturally appropriate yogic concepts*.

The Flow of Meditation in the Indian Terrain

Although there are many meditation techniques, there is no standard definition of the term "meditation". A recent definition has been proposed as "consistent self-care practice, congruent with one's beliefs, is practiced consistently under the guidance of a well-trained teacher that allows for developing loving awareness of current thoughts and feelings and creates a space to respond differently with self-compassion, thus leading to peace in mind and body" (Valluri et al., 2024).

Western psychiatry has historically focused on reducing psychological discomfort, with less emphasis on cultivating positive emotions (Vaillant, 2008). In Western philosophy, Descartes, Hume, and Kant advocated the importance of understanding oneself as crucial to all knowledge and science but disagreed on the concept of "self" (Shear, 2014). The

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featureless “self” or “pure consciousness” is difficult to comprehend through western medical approaches to meditation, therefore emotional self-regulation, focus and attention are highlighted (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006) (Lutz et al., 2008; Sharma, 2015). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and cognitive therapy can alleviate stress, pain, and depression (Valluri et al., 2024). Other techniques, such as Loving-Kindness Meditation, focus on developing empathy, whereas Transcendental Meditation employs a *mantra* to achieve a state of tranquillity. Meditation techniques have been adopted from Eastern cultures; however, the mind and body are treated as distinct but interconnected entities that can be effectively managed (Martin, 2018; Rathore et al., 2022).

In Eastern traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, meditation is considered more than a mere mental health practice (Singh et al., 2021). Meditation diminishes unpleasant emotions and increases mental clarity, self-awareness, tranquillity, concentration, and mindfulness activities (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Singh et al., 2021). Based on the concept of interconnectedness, the goal is enlightenment and inner self-awareness, moving beyond the illusion of division between oneself and the universe. There are various traditions such as ‘*vipassana*’ from Buddhism and ‘Sufi’ meditation techniques where meditation transcends physical stillness to be free from the influence of ego or societal conditioning (Zeng et al., 2014; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Mindfulness originated in Buddhism; it is a state of being fully aware of the present moment without being attached to or judging it (Bodhi, 2011). This aspect of mental functioning can be practiced during everyday tasks, making it more versatile and adaptable (Gethin, 2011). However, meditation is more than mindfulness and can be practiced through various processes.

In India, meditation is known as *dhyana* which is connected to *moksha* (liberation from the continuous cycle of birth and death). Meditative practices are preparations for a good death, striving to surpass the mundane, and attain a heightened state of awareness (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). *Dhyana* is a deep mental absorption and universal phenomenon

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across cultures and religious practices, with various methods and goals (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras* defines *dhyana* as a focused contemplation that leads to *samadhi* (Iyengar, 2012). The progressive meditation journey starts with the practice of ethical conduct, mastery of physical postures, and basic breath control through self-control which leads to focused concentration, introspection, and ultimately understanding *samadhi* by surrendering to the divine (Paranjpe, 2021). Within Indigenous Indian communities, meditation encompasses the betterment of the group, establishment of a connection with ancestral wisdom, and influences the future of society (Narvaez, 2020), challenging our understanding of human behaviour and mainstream narratives (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Breath of Life: *Prana*

The concept of *prana* is a fundamental idea emphasised throughout the yogic, Ayurvedic, and Vedic literature. *Prana* is the basic life energy transported by breath to allow physical and mental functioning (Srinivasan, 2014) that exists in all living organisms and the universe (Belal et al., 2023; Rosch, 2009; Bharath & Shreevathsa, 2020), connecting all matter and life. Inside the body, *pranas* regulate various functions (Srinivasan, 2020). In *yoga*, *pranayama* refers to breath control techniques that effectively regulate and enhance both physical and mental health. *Prana* is an essential component in understanding the concept of *chakras* and subtle energy centres in the body (Ghosh et al., 2020).

Pranayama enhances the flow of *prana*, with significant effects on cognitive function, respiratory efficiency, and emotional stability (Saoji et al., 2019). The subjective nature and immeasurable aspects of understanding *prana* pose challenges, leading to scepticism by the scientific community. However, in the Chinese medical system the life energy is referred to as 'chi', 'ki' or 'qi' circulating along the *meridians* (similar to *nadis* in the Indian system).

While mediating, directing attention to *prana* can lead to profound spiritual states through Kundalini's activation. The concepts of *kundalini* and *prana* are deeply

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interconnected; *kundalini* energy is described as an untapped source at the base of the spine (Corneille & Luke, 2021; Ghosh et al., 2020). Traditionally depicted as a coiled serpent at the base of the spine, it is believed to rise upward to the top of the head. Various yogic practices facilitate this process for a deeper spiritual experience. It is a specific form of *prana* which requires guidance from a knowledgeable teacher (Valanciute & Thampy, 2011; de Castro, 2015). Improper awakening can lead to physical, mental, and emotional disturbances, sometimes informally referred to as “*Kundalini syndrome*” (Valanciute & Thampy, 2011; Suchandra et al., 2021).

Neuroscience Meets the Meditative Brain

There is a worldwide recommendation of meditation practices for health and well-being despite the limited comprehension of its processes (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). It is believed in Eastern traditions and philosophies that deep meditation practices increase the capabilities of the human mind beyond the norm, with advanced mental states and abilities (levitation, telekinesis, and alterations in body temperature and metabolic functions) (Jones, 2019). This challenges Western notions of identity, interconnectedness, and the transcendence of time due to its subjective nature and limitations in research methodologies (Jones, 2019). Recent technological advancements have enabled neuroscientific research to explore meditation.

Neuroscience is the scientific study of the nervous system (brain, spinal cord, and networks of nerve cells) throughout the body. Significant progress has been made in researching meditation using neuroimaging techniques to understand neural mechanisms. Research has shown that regular practice changes brain structure and function related to stress, memory, and mental activity. Meditation reduced activity in the Posterior Cingulate Cortex (PCC) and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), which are crucial for self-related processing and decision-making (Brewer et al., 2011). It impacted heart rate, cognitive and emotional processing, brain density, and enhanced neural efficiency which was consistently

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replicated through research (Jones, 2019). It improved focus, attention, and cognitive flexibility, and reduced blood pressure, mind-wandering, stress, anxiety, and depression (Jones, 2019; Jastrzebski, 2018; Lazar et al., 2005; Brewer et al., 2011), thus fostering empathy, immunity, social understanding, and happiness (Brewer et al., 2011; Jones, 2019). Meditation training reduced the tendency towards negative self-focused thoughts and enhanced the state of present-centred awareness (Brewer et al., 2011). Mindfulness research has shown increased neural activity in the hippocampus and anterior cingulate cortex, which is associated with self-control, emotion management, memory, attention, and stress regulation (Hölzel et al., 2011).

Long-term meditation changed cognitive functions and mental processes that begin with perception by receiving information, processing, and interpreting it for interaction with the world (Kiely, 2014). Long-term meditators have distinct neural patterns, with baseline variations in electroencephalogram (EEG) activity (electrical activity in the brain) (Bhik-Ghanie, 2009) and greater attentional neural activity (Baron Short et al., 2010; Luo, et al., 2024; Manna et al., 2010), highlighting enhanced cognitive control and attentional regulation than novice meditators. The attention network (through different brain structures) has an important role in regulating awareness, volition, emotional processing, and social behaviour (Deshmukh, 2006; Brewer et al., 2011; Kaul et al., 2010). Through the neural interplay between cognitive and emotional processing, the sense of self is constructed by integrating personal experiences and self-awareness (Deshmukh, 2006). Meditation practice allowed individuals to shift the interpretation of sensory inputs from a personal and emotional lens to a more objective and detached analysis (Raffone & Srinivasan, 2010).

Different meditation types caused different neural activations. Focused Attention (FA) fostered an internal 'witnessing observer' that enhanced attentional stability and reduced cognitive effort, while Open Monitoring (OM) promoted non-judgmental awareness which increased brain regions associated with vigilance, monitoring, and metacognitive skills (the

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ability to reflect and make judgements based on memory, perception, and mental processes) (Metcalfe, 2024; Raffone & Srinivasan, 2010). Meditation allowed relaxation and positive emotional states to enhance overall mental well-being (Deshmukh, 2006). It can potentially facilitate a self-less mental state that aligns with Eastern philosophies (Raffone & Srinivasan, 2010) and highlighted the transformative effects of long-term meditation on neural function, brain structure, and sense of self.

The differences observed between various meditation techniques may suggest that neuroscience has begun to understand the processes of meditation (Jones, 2019). However, the field is relatively new and has limitations in comprehending a wide range of experiences (Burton-Edwards, 2013; Jastrzebski, 2018; Jones, 2019) and the essence of meditation from a biological perspective (Jastrzebski, 2018; Kenispaev et al., 2020; Nungsari et al., 2017). In *yoga*, the self is viewed as an experiencing subject (Paranjpe, 1996); therefore, research methodologies which disregard this are unable to comprehend the deeper aspects attributed to personal transformation. This provides a strong basis for the subjective exploration of meditation in this study.

Subjective Experience of Meditation

Subjective experiences enhance a deeper understanding of meditative practices but pose a challenge for empirical science because of their variability among individuals (Jastrzebski, 2018; Herfeld & Ivanova, 2021; Delgado, 2005; Culham & Lin, 2020). Meditation is an aspect of the yogic process and is therefore seen as a spiritual practice. Despite the global interest in spirituality, there is no agreed-upon definition because of its subjective and personal nature (Tanyi, 2002). Spirituality is the idea of an individual's inherent connection to oneself, others, and the natural world. It differs from religion (involving social rituals), which is inconsistent across cultures (Delgado, 2005; Moss & Dobson, 2006; Schwartz, 2012). The term '*spiritus*' in Latin, '*psyche*' in Greek, '*atman*' in Sanskrit and '*ruach*' in Hebrew serves as the fundamental basis for understanding life (Moss & Dobson,

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2006). Spirituality weaves life's meaning, quality, and connections with the divine, environment, and community (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020). It is defined as a subjective, intangible, and multidimensional concept that involves searching for meaning in life (Tanyi, 2002). The variations in individual understanding of spirituality, cultural and contextual influences, reliance on self-reports, and personal expectations hinder a standardised approach in psychology, neurology, sociology, and philosophical disciplines (Jastrzebski, 2018; Herfeld & Ivanova, 2021; Delgado, 2005; Culham & Lin, 2020). Yoga and meditation are spiritual practices that embody inner experiences beyond the physical body, emotions, thoughts, and sensations. There are individual variations in the practice of meditation and mindfulness between sessions and individuals (Kiken et al., 2015). In addition, certain aspects of these practices are inaccessible to external observations, such as subtle energies.

Art as a Window to the Indescribable

Art has consistently served as a means of connecting the internal and intangible aspects of human experience with exterior and tangible worlds. In Indian culture, art serves as a medium to convey the spiritual realm. For instance, the intricate carvings found in the Ajanta-Ellora caves, the symbolic significance of Tanjore paintings, and the heartfelt verses of *bhakti* and Sufi saints all serve as evidence of art's capacity to express spiritual yearning, understanding, and moments of revelation (Martins, 2021; Keating, 2008). Hindu temples are artistic and cultural representations which embody science, architecture, and symbolism, illustrating connections to religious beliefs and spirituality (Mahajan, 2024; Handriyotopo, 2022). Sufi poets used poetry to express divine love and longing. Similarly, the *mandalas* seen in Hindu-Buddhist traditions serve as representations of the universe and self which help with meditation and support spiritual insight, as noted by Jung in 1955 (Dellios, 2003). The philosophical thinking of the East embraces metaphysics, the science of first principles, and the true nature of reality (Keating, 2008). Art provided a method to verify the shared

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vision of reality through actual experience. Visual arts are interwoven with spiritual and philosophical teachings to understand divine and selfless services and facilitate access to deeper states of awareness. The concept of *chakras* in *yoga* philosophy is depicted symbolically and artistically; they are known as wheels or centres along the spine (Jaenke, 2019) that spin, open, or become activated as *kundalini* energy rises (Kaur & Rani, 2023; Sadi, 2022). Art allows this unexplainable concept to be tangible in the physical world.

Art stimulates cognitive and emotional faculties by externalising inner states and aiding the healing process (Moon, 2015; Potash et al., 2015). An individual's unique perspectives, beliefs, memories, and feelings were captured. Over time, these personal artworks develop into a more extensive mosaic that mirrors the artist's evolving relationship with the surroundings, the inner world, and shifting perspectives. Art engages the artist and viewer, providing an opportunity for self-reflection, self-discovery, and deeper understanding of the self (Betts, 2006). This fosters a reaction from viewers to identify with the depicted experience. The process of creating art provides an opportunity for catharsis (the process of emotional release and insight) (Pliske et al., 2021). Unexplainable feelings, thoughts, and trauma are transferred to a tangible external medium. It allows detached and unbiased examination (Malchiodi, 1998) and serves as a gentle non-verbal coping mechanism with psychological disturbances and trauma (van Westrhenen et al., 2017). In therapeutic settings, clients are encouraged to explore artistic activities and address deeper levels of healing (Kapitan, 2015).

Technology has facilitated the emergence of digital art (artistic expression using digital technology for creation and/or presentation). The flexibility and breadth of its capabilities enable individuals to creatively express and depict their inner worlds in new ways without experience in artmaking (Du et al., 2024). Although there is limited research on digital art, it offered a secure and regulated space for individuals to explore and express challenging emotions, as noted by Du et al., (2024). The interactive elements of digital media

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can enhance the engagement and therapeutic advantages of the creative process (Du et al., 2024). Using advanced artificial intelligence (AI) models, visual images can be created through textual descriptions, often referred to as AI-generated text-to-image art (Pierce, 2024). This technology bridges the gap between language and art at low cost and high speed.

Summary of the Academic Exploration

The literature review started by examining the incorporation of Eastern traditions into Western disciplines, highlighting the difficulties arising from philosophical disparities and offering autoethnography as a method to explore subjective experiences. The IP was developed to understand the psychological processes within their own cultural frameworks and to integrate cultural differences into research. The adverse impacts of colonisation on India's cultural and intellectual heritage led to a disconnection from traditional Indian wisdom. The unique characteristics of IIP are distinct from those of Western approaches, highlighting the importance of psychology firmly grounded in local cultures and traditions. The philosophical and spiritual customs of India were explored, with *yoga* philosophy and meditation providing valuable insights into personal transformation, self-awareness, and increase in overall well-being. Through meditation, mental clarity, psychological stability, and insight into one's sense of self are achieved. Neuroscientific studies have explored the ability of meditation to change brain structures and processes to decrease stress and anxiety. However, current studies do not explore the subjective experience of meditation that led to these positive changes.

Research Objectives

Aligning with IIP, autoethnography and digital art provide a tangible expression of the unexplored subjectivity of the meditative experience in psychological research. My research

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focused on personalised meditation practice and explored subjective experiences through autoethnographic research and AI-generated text-to-image digital artworks.

Methodology:

Cultivating My Research Approach

The IP qualitative research paradigm has a commitment to resist oppression and has four core components: ontology (beliefs about the world), epistemology (perceptions of the world), methodology (ways of knowing), and axiology (ethical and moral frameworks) (Allwood & Berry, 2006; Hart, 2010). Context-specific indigenous psychology is the investigation and appreciation of psychological phenomena within the distinct cultural, social, and historical contexts of indigenous populations (Tindle et al., 2022). The realism (experiential) theoretical orientation is appropriate for this research, as reality is not something that can be found outside (Terry et al., 2017; Terry & Hayfield, 2020).

Autoethnography is a method that weaves personal narrative (autobiography) with cultural analysis (ethnography) to examine individual experiences against the backdrop of their cultural, social, and political environment (Wall, 2006). This aligns with IIP understanding of self, knowledge acquisition, and spiritual goals (Ellis et al., 2010). Autoethnography uses narrative and personal experience to explore the hidden aspects of culture and context compared to traditional controlled research settings (Chang, 2016; Holt, 2003). Self-interviews and reflexive journaling add depth to the research process by delving into the researcher's experiences, thoughts, and beliefs through ongoing self-reflection during the research journey (Anderson, 2006). These techniques have encouraged researchers to question their assumptions and interpretation.

As an introspective investigation of the self, I explored the impact of meditation on my overall health and psychological well-being through an autoethnographic research approach.

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When combined with AI-generated digital art, it offers a novel way to explore subjective experiences of meditation by adding a visual dimension.

Method

As a 36-year-old woman of Indian descent, I immigrated to New Zealand at the age of nine years. Although I am generally healthy, I have struggled with emotional management issues since my early twenties. My experiences with the *vipassana* retreat, psychotherapy bridging program, and *yoga* teacher training inspired me to delve into my cultural heritage, *yoga*, and meditation. During my stay in India (January 2022–September 2024), my struggle with emotional and cultural adaptation to a new environment led me to seek meditation for inner stability.

Mandala is a phase of austerity that aims to develop disciplined practices. Sadhguru mentioned that it takes approximately 40 days for human physiology to adapt to a new practice; this period is referred to as the *mandala* (Isha Yoga, 2013). For 42 days, which holds symbolic significance (Dellios, 2003), I engaged in consistent meditation practice, conducted self-interviews, participated in reflective journaling, and created AI-generated artworks to visually represent my meditative experiences.

Contemplative practices are inherently challenging to articulate or conceptualise (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012; Wittman et al., 2015). In this autoethnographic exploration, I assumed both the roles of researcher and participant, which enabled me to fully immerse myself in every aspect of the study, from practising meditation, creation, and exploration of AI-generated digital artwork in aiding communication of subjective experiences, analysing self-interviews, and discussion of its findings.

Figure 1

Sitting in Ardhasiddhasana (Half-Accomplished Pose)

**Regular Meditation Practice**

Between April 20th and 31 June 2023 I engaged in a daily breath awareness meditation practice for 2 hours. During this time, I maintained a static (non-moving) meditation posture and wore a white attire from 5 am to 7 am. *Siddhasana*, an accomplished meditation pose, is mentioned in the yogic texts *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and *Gherandha Samhita* (Muktibodhananda, 2012; Saraswati, 2012). Swami Rama stated that when an advanced student can maintain this pose for more than three hours without experiencing any

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discomfort, they have achieved *asana siddhi* (perfection of posture) (Rama, 2007).

Siddhasana is achieved by positioning the left heel at the perineum, area between the anus and genitals, and right heel at the pubic bone.

Siddhasana cleanses and stabilises subtle energy pathways (*nadis*) in the body via which *prana* flows in the subtle body (Saraswati & Saraswati, 2013). Unobstructed circulation of *prana* promotes optimal physical and mental health. When *prana* becomes obstructed or stagnant, it gives rise to various physical and mental problems (Saraswati, 2012; Mukitbodhananda, 2012). The *siddhasana* promotes the release of physical tension and improves flexibility, leading to a reduction in stress and anxiety. This allows the mind to concentrate on the present moment (Saraswati, 2012; Mukitbodhananda, 2012). In females, *siddhasana* is known as *siddhayoni asana*. *Ardhasiddhasana* (half-accomplished pose), however, is an easier version where the right heel is placed on the ground, as seen in Figure 1. I have experience sitting comfortably for an extended period (1.5 h) in this easier version where I positioned my hands in a relaxed manner. Therefore, I have challenged myself to sit for two hours.

Adopting a meditative *asana* for a prolonged period can effectively soothe the mind and alleviate feelings of stress and anxiety (Saraswati, 2012; Mukitbodhananda, 2012). By directing attention to breathing, one can diminish the occurrence of racing thoughts and simultaneously promote self-awareness and self-regulation to enhance cognitive performance (Saraswati & Saraswati, 2013). It nurtures feelings of connectedness beyond oneself which decreases isolation (Mukitbodhananda, 2012). The optimal time for meditation is early morning and late evening, when there is minimal noise. The attire for meditation practice should consist of loose and comfortable clothing made from natural fibres, as synthetic material is not conducive for the flow of *prana* (Saraswati & Saraswati, 2013; Tiwari et al., 2024). My *yoga* mat and clothing are made of pure cotton fabric, which makes them appropriate. During practice, I chose to wear white clothing as it provides a sensation of

lightness and has a cooling effect on the body, reducing discomfort caused by heat (Tiwari et al., 2024).

I recorded my meditation sessions to capture any visual observations. However, the central objective of my meditation practice was breath awareness. I observed inhalation and exhalation without altering it. This allowed me to silently examine the internal processes (mental and physical) that occurred within me.

Daily Self-Interviews

Before starting my daily meditation practice, I recorded my responses to the pre-meditation self-interview questions detailed in Appendix A. This allowed me to contemplate my mental and emotional state, along with my expectations for the session and any physical sensations or concerns that I may have. Immediately after completing my meditation, I recorded my answers to the post-meditation self-interview questions outlined in Table 1. I carefully recalled my mental, emotional, or physical states during practice. While it would be ideal to document my experiences during meditation, doing so would interfere with my meditation practice. Meditation is not an independent event; the state of the body and the contents of my mind would permeate my practice. The post-meditation self-interview questions served to capture my subjective experience while it is still fresh in my mind.

Table 1

Self-Interview Questions After Meditation Practice

Post Practice Questions
1. How am I feeling after the practice today?
2. How does my breathing seem? Surface/Nasal, Chest, Abdomen/Deep? Did I notice any changes in my breath or breathing patterns during/after meditation practice? How is my experience of focusing on natural breath during practice?
3. How did I experience my physical body? Am I feeling relaxed in the body?

Tightness anywhere? Do I feel connected to or disconnected from this body? Are there any physical sensations or experiences that I find particularly pleasurable or uncomfortable? How was it to sit in *ardhasiddhasana* for two hours today?

4. What is going on in my mind? Are my thoughts calm? Do ordinary or extraordinary thought processes occur?
 5. How do I feel emotionally? Can I feel this in my body? What emotions are related to them?
 6. Are there any particular emotions or states of mind that I associate with the experience of *prana* in my body?
 7. How does the energy body feel like? Can I feel any blockages/flow of energy? Describe it? Why do you think it feels this way?
 8. How does the experience of *prana* feel during and after practice? Did I notice any shifts in my awareness of or relationship with the body during practice?
 9. How did I experience time and space? Does time seem to move quickly or slowly for me? How does space feel like?
 10. What do I feel connected to or disconnected from? How did I manage my discomfort or distractions?
-

Creating Digital Art to Describe the Inner Experience

Following each meditation session, I created AI-generated digital artworks using MidJourney Bot (version 5.0), which were inspired by practice experience (www.midjourney.com). I utilised art as a means of expression, as it provided a secure environment to communicate thoughts, emotions, and experiences that are difficult to articulate verbally, like inner subjective states (Reavey & Johnson, 2017). Visuals add meaning and background, and multimodal communication (audio, text, and visuals) allowed more information to be expressed (Reavey & Johnson, 2017).

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Advances in technology have given rise to generative AI (produces content) and large language models (algorithms that use deep learning techniques) which provide tools such as transforming text into high-quality images (Xie et al., 2023). Mid-journey is an AI program that utilised type-based generative art software application (Buraga, 2022). A documentation guide can be found on their website (<https://docs.midjourney.com/>). The text description or input is called a *prompt* which is given to a generative model to produce an image that aligned with the given text (Xie et al., 2023). The MidJourney bot deconstructed the words and phrases of the prompt into smaller units called tokens which were compared to its training data to produce an image. The prompts differ from web search queries, as they are more descriptive and vary in length, style, and structure (Xie et al., 2023). AI generative art is created in seconds based on the prompt description provided using the *commands* (instructions).

In this study, I used MidJourney to visually capture my subjective experience of meditation. The descriptions were refined until I was satisfied that the image captured my experience of meditation, implying continuous experimentation and improvement of the creative process (Xie et al., 2023). The images were created by a novice user with no training in prompt generation.







Image Generation Process

Before starting the creation process, I briefly reflected on my meditation experience and reviewed the post-meditation self-interview data. I provided a descriptive prompt to MidJourney using the */image* command. This returned four image variations in an *image grid*, and the *prompts* were modified until I was satisfied with the image. The application provided options such as U1, U2, U3, and U4 located beneath the *image grid* to enlarge (*upscale*) an image that closely resembled my desired outcome (refer to Table 2).

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After I selected the *upscaled* images that captured my experience of the meditation session, I used the *blend* command (see Table 3) which allowed 2-5 images to be merged to create a new image. The merging provided a *blended image grid* (with four variations), and the images were selected from this grid. This process was repeated until one image captured my overall meditation experience. These digital artworks offer a visual representation of feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations during meditation.

Table 2*Creating Images using MidJourney version 5*

Prompt	Image Grid	Upscaled Images
<p><i>/imagine</i> a mushroom cloud exploding inside my stomach cavity. red and orange hues. HD, HQ, 16K. --ar 16:9</p>		
<p><i>/imagine</i> silhouette of a meditating woman, with fluttering eyes</p>		
<p><i>/imagine</i> meditating woman, with fluttering eyelids. abstract, creative. HD, HQ, 16K. --ar 16:9</p>		

/imagine tiny water droplets were floating from the top of my head.
 abstract. HD,
 HQ, 16K. --ar
 16:9



Table 3

Creating Final Image using Images generated in Table 3

<p>Selected images from table 3 were combined using blend command which allows me to upload 2-5 images. The concepts and aesthetics of each image are used and merged to form a novel new image</p>	
<p>I chose the final image by combining the selected images in various ways until one that 'fits' my meditative experience for that particular day. On day four, I found this image captures my experience.</p>	

Analysing the Gathered Insights

The data (pre-meditation and post-meditation audio files, transcripts and digital

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artworks) were analysed qualitatively. Reflective thematic analysis (TA), as described by Braun and Clarke (Terry et al., 2017; Terry & Hayfield, 2020), was used in combination with Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (TVTA) to analyse the images artworks (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). Reflective TA has six phases and does not use customisable coding processes to build high-quality themes (Terry & Hayfield, 2020). Phase 1-2 is about familiarisation and coding (Terry et al., 2017), and the ATLAS.ti software was useful during this process. The semantic level of coding which focuses on simple and obvious ideas, is conducted rather than latent coding (interpretation) (Terry et al., 2017) for its feasibility. The initial codes were organised into groups. For phase 3, theme development, the themes were developed by printing the quotations and organising them into code groups (Terry et al., 2017). In phase 4-5, the themes were reviewed and defined further (Terry et al., 2017) to ensure that they address the research question and reflect the meaning found in the coded data. The subthemes are related to the main theme but look at different aspects of it (Terry et al., 2017). In phase 6, report production (Terry et al., 2017), I have taken an illustrative approach using data as examples to support my conclusions.

Merged Art with Analysis

Visual studies gather information using photographs, drawings, and videos, thereby helping people capture events that are challenging to express in words (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). TVTA was created during a study of adolescent depression and social skills, where photographs were examined with interview data to guarantee a balanced approach; the interviews were the main source of data, and photos offered other perspectives and comparisons (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). There are three phases in TVTA to compare visual and textual data, where the analysis of participants' images was integrated with interviews. The method revealed trends and conflicts between the two kinds of data by helping to visualise how participants expressed themselves differently using words and visuals (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). Phase 1 was the analysis of textual data using the TA described

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above. Phase 2 analysed the images alongside the interview data using the following questions (Trombeta & Cox, 2022):

1. What is in the images that supports or reinforces what was learned from the interview data?
2. What is in the images that contradicts what was learned from the interview data?
3. What is in the images that is not in the interviews?
4. What is in the interviews that is not in the images?

The questions helped compare what was learned from the interview transcripts with what was seen in the images. In phase 3, this was reported (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). It involved the investigation of patterns between the text and visual data, insights into digital artwork, contradictions, and complementary quotations during the analysis. During this phase, 15 out of 42 digital artworks were selected to describe and explain the themes found in the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

A low-risk application for ethical approval was submitted for an autoethnographic study. As a researcher, I followed ethical guidelines to protect my well-being by checking for any adverse reactions from this prolonged meditation practice.

By nature, the study entailed disclosing personal information about oneself in the narrative and others who may not have provided their consent to be included. To ensure privacy and decrease any potential harm, I altered the identifying characteristics of the individuals used in my narrative. I used generalised descriptions and sought permission when necessary.

Results

Three main themes were derived from self-interviews and digital artworks. Two themes had subthemes, while the last was a standalone theme. They were "Expanding Limitations: Embracing Pleasure and Pain," "Flowering Feelings: Blossoms of Awareness," and "Petals of Time: Absorbed in My Garden." The themes describe the complexity of dynamics between body, mind, and emotions in my meditation practice.

Expanding Limitations: Embracing Pleasure and Pain

Many layers of human experience revolve around pleasure and pain. This theme "Expanding Limitations: Embracing Pleasure and Pain" portrayed how body sensations, mental distractions, and inner peace influenced my practice. The digital artworks were a visual journal of my daily meditation experience. They provided new insights into the transformational power of regular meditation.

Shadows and Lights: Distractions amidst Growth

The 'shadows' represent the discomfort and challenges I faced during meditation, while 'lights' symbolise the insights and growth that emerged despite the challenges. During the first week of the *mandala*, my prompt descriptions were limited and focused on the visual images and/or concepts that I thought about during practice. I felt uncomfortable sitting in front of the camera as if someone had entered my private space. An example of the 'shadows' is the physical discomfort I felt in various parts of the body such as stiffness, pain, and tightness in my chest, shoulders, and legs. The digital art for day 1 titled "Beginning is Never the Beginning", perfectly captured the red hue of discomfort I generally felt in my chest and shoulders.

Another example of 'shadows' is mental distraction. To alleviate the discomfort, my mind formed ideas, such as "it was really nice to have a stream or a string coming on top of my head" and redirected my attention to desirable activities than to focus on the pain. I

Figure 2

Day 1 - Beginning is never the beginning



thought about helping others, deepening connections, teaching about the truths of *yoga*, and even starting the Instagram business. This demonstrated how cleverly my mind shifted my focus from discomfort and a less appealing task (focus on my breath) to more attractive distractions.

'Lights' are the insights I gained about myself, personal identity and artistic expression. After the meditation practice, I attempted to understand the deeper meaning of the concepts that stimulated my thoughts throughout the day. For example, my experience on Day 1 illustrated a slow yearning for nourishment. There were two mental images that

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appeared in my mind (possibly from relaxation or subconscious processing) and were inspired by my desire to artistically capture my meditation experience: a "dehydrated sapling" and "froth slowly flowing and bubbling from a tipped coffee cup." I have described a cord-like flow of energy ascending into the sky from the top of my head. They were depicted in the artwork as a dehydrated tree, reaching its branches towards the sky and roots into the ground of my body. Bubbles or blobs of fluid in the artwork suggested slow, dispersed, and directionless movement.

Another example of 'lights' is the connection to universal energies. The uncomfortable physical sensations shifted my focus away from breath awareness to "pins and needles" sensation I felt "near the perineum". The bodily sensations acted as my perception of energy rather than fear or doubt about a neurological condition. This was attributed to my belief that subtle sensory experiences provided an understanding of universal energies and their flow through the body. I felt unanchored upward and downward flow in the centre of my body. I wondered what the sensations meant as I reflected on my internal dialogue: "I didn't want to focus on [the sensations] too much, maybe I'm scared of what the experience is or where it might [lead] to...because its new and I'm uncomfortable with it" (Day 2). 'Lights' are also the insights I have gained about myself. I discovered a reflective and philosophical mindset within me that searched for truth with the urgency of finding meaning. I sought answers to existential aspects of life, such as who I am, who is the observer, what happens during the final exhalation of breath, what happens during death, wondered if there is a respite from life, how to achieve inner silence, and what constituted reality. Would I exist after the body is nonfunctional? I experienced inner turmoil, and the questions helped me delve deeper into myself for solutions rather than searching outside of me - my philosophical viewpoint for exploration of truth and personal development.

The "shadows" and "lights" are not just my personal struggles but illustrate a universal human experience of growth through discomfort. The *mandala* period coincided with the first anniversary of a young friend who died by suicide in the first week and ended

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with my observations of a loved one's declining health due to cancer in the last week. The artwork titled "Inner focus of life" on Day 3 unconsciously captured the traumatic head injury sustained by my young friend.

I think about [him], [his] body lying on the ground, and I think that the person that I know, that I have interacted with when [he] was alive, was not the body that I saw on the ground. And it wasn't just because of the lack of blood in [the] body, but it just wasn't [his] body. That person was something else, that wasn't the body....whenever this question comes up [about connection or disconnection], I don't know how to answer [it] because I'm not just the physical body, and maybe I'm disconnected from it, but I'm not disconnected from it because I feel all these sensations, I have all these thoughts...emotions and they would not be...possible if it wasn't for the body. So, I feel connected in some ways, but also, I know I'm not connected to this...I feel connected and also disconnected [to this body]. (Day 1)

As I meditated, I found myself reflecting not only on death by suicide but its impact on society and culture which brought forth feelings of loneliness, anger, and distress. I helplessly struggled to understand suicide and was reminded of the support available to youth in New Zealand compared with India. This psychological discomfort was represented visually in the digital art for Day 3 as an explosion at the back of my head that symbolised the heaviness and pressure I frequently felt. I imagined "an arrow shooting from the middle of my head, but it wasn't painful, it was tension...before the arrow [was] launched. It was relaxed, not relaxed, it was tense but not tense, I don't know how to explain it" (Day 3). I observed my breath while I thought about suicide.

Figure 3*Day 3 – Inner Force of Life*

...I wanted to give it some attention, some love, some compassion and some encouragement and some motivation. And as I was doing this, I'm like, who is it that's experiencing this? There's me that's telling my breath and wanting to be there for my breath and at the same time, there's me that's observing the breath, no observing the situation that I'm having with the breath. And I'm like, who is it, who is me in here? What is me that is wanting to capture, whatever it is that I want to capture, maybe the experience, maybe the life... (Day 3)

Meditation acted as a space to grieve and process the "shadows". It symbolised a journey to connect more with the 'shadows', which are usually not given any space to reflect in a busy lifestyle. Focus on natural breath felt like an inner battle (or training). The mind became more attentive to subtle sensations in the body. The artworks for Days 1 and 3

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depicted a calmness contradictory to the inner battle. I noticed my belief: the longer I sit with discomfort, the more aware I will be of life within and around me. It portrayed a willingness to engage with discomfort as a pathway towards growth. The digital art for Day 1 captured this longing for growth (a strong tree patiently waiting for seasonal change and the melting of pressure from the base of the skull), while Day 3 artwork captured a journey through self-awareness (by smooth piercing of light along the spine and out the top of my head). I was sensitive to social disparities and felt privileged, sorrowful, and guilty which fuelled a desire towards charitable work.

Navigating through these shadows and lights, I have learned about my own resilience and gained a deeper appreciation for the distractions (thoughts, sensations, emotions) in meditation which often form the precursors for insights and growth. However, the search for truth may require deeper exploration.

Energy's Dance: Unblock, Flow and Feel

The dance of energy manifested as both blockages and pleasurable sensations, revealing the interconnectedness between them. During the meditation sessions, I was aware of the blockages and flows of energy within my body which were described as a "pleasure stream of energy" on top of my head and "energy knots". On some days, I observed both uncomfortable and pleasant experiences with a more determined focus on my breath. I found a link between physical sensations, energetic sensations, and breath awareness.

Physical discomfort manifested as easily identifiable tangible sensations - tightness, tension, stiffness, or pain—and is often correlated with subtle energetic blockages. This suggested a connection between the physical body and subtle energy. An energetic blockage is a subtle flow of energy within the body, such as "pins and needles", "tightness", "buzzing", "pain", and "[heat]" that seemed obstructed. I intuitively differentiated between

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physical discomfort and energetic blockages during the self-interviews, although they could be closely linked. The energetic blockages were difficult to describe.

These blockages or discomforts were sometimes unbearable; I had to move or slightly adjust my body. At other times, the newness of the sensation made it uncomfortable. I found that these discomforts were not present after meditation and disappeared after some movement. Digital artwork created on Day 2, "Energetic Sensations", perfectly captured my discomfort and sensitivity to the energy flow through my body.

I started to feel quite uncomfortable with my body, my left foot started to be hot and uncomfortable right at the front, and I thought maybe it's because it's touching the mat area, a little too tightly, but it went away and then it came back again. (Day 2)

The uncomfortable heat in the artwork is characterised by the concentration of energy and light. The pain is represented by the colour red, as it was hot to the touch. I found myself eagerly waiting to finish the practice, as my mind was restless and rebellious during this uncomfortable session. As I attempted to accept the discomfort, I felt disconnected from my emotions and experienced agitation, panic, and impatience. Over time, the discomfort dissipated, and I recognised them as blockages to the natural flow of energy. The discomfort and increased awareness of negative emotions were central to a deeper exploration of unresolved issues. Interestingly, the digital artwork depicted an aspect of sensation that I was hesitant to talk about in the self-interview: the energetic sensation in the perineum area.

As I worked through physical discomfort, I began to experience pleasurable sensations. This illustrated how to mentally work through discomfort which can lead to more free energetic flow. The pleasurable sensations were "tingling", "prickling", "tickling", "warm", "vibratory", and "soft". For instance, rhythmic pulsations in my sternum and gentle tingling in my left foot that were vivid and uplifting experiences. I was joyful and curious to accept and

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explore the discomfort, as it led to pleasurable sensations after some time. The following is an example of a pleasurable energetic sensation that subsequently disappears:

...the pleasurable part was the left leg, the tingling sensation, the lightness of the left leg. At one point, I think the energy was moving a little upwards. So, it was flowing, that was quite nice, pleasurable, not painful at all. There's another sensation that was, ...I wouldn't say unpleasurable either, it was in my stomach area, it was warm, it was breathing. Trying to describe the sensation, it's not pulsating, it's not heavy pressure but there is a pressure, it's like it was filling up. And the sensation in the middle of the chest, for a brief period, that was nice, that was quite soothing, like someone was gently tapping, ... very light tap, not as hard,...to a constant beat, and it wasn't my heartbeat, ...but it was right in the middle of my chest, and I could feel it like on my sternum area. (Day 2)

Figure 4

Day 2 – Energetic Sensations



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The digital artwork for Day 2 captured pleasurable sensations as radiant light and golden energetic streams emanating from the central light, uncomfortable pain/heat. As I continued my practice, I noticed a shift to a pleasurable tingling sensation which demonstrated how to address the discomfort and facilitate energetic flow. The artwork supported to visually show this movement of energy which I found difficult to describe in words alone.

I have found that as I focused on the breath, my perception shifted from thoughts to sensory awareness and subtle energetic flows. Focus on my breath grounded me and provided comfort, which decreased my thoughts and allowed me to shift my perception to sensations unconsciously. On day 24, the digital artwork titled "Coolness of throat", showed restorative effects of meditation. I reflected on how I craved and anticipated this type of experience, but rarely experienced it during the *mandala*. In the artwork, I was unable to capture the "sparkles" as I had imagined. However, the blue hue and cool sensation in my throat illustrated the experience I felt - "like I had taken a mint". There was a reduction in body tension, visually represented by spaciousness and surrounding lightness in the artwork. Although the sensations were fleeting and surreal, the experience was magical.

I recalled something, the sensations, and the body, what I was feeling other than just the chest relaxing and the body relaxing and focusing on the breath, I noticed this coolness in my throat, very gentle coolness. It was really nice, very nice, soft cool, sometimes it's like the breath, that I'm breathing in, was cool in the throat, and sometimes it had nothing to do with the breath...nothing to do with the outside breath...it was really nice and cool. And I was able to ... just release it [tension] through the breath, into the coolness... and the throat was very soothing, very relaxing, and pleasurable, very calming, and very grounding, and it allowed me to come back to the breath, [quickly] from the mind, because...it felt so concrete. (Day 25)

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My physical body served as a sensory canvas. Increased thoughts (about family, friends, and social circle) and emotions contributed to decreased awareness of energetic movements. The effort required to endure both physical and mental discomfort and re-establish my focus on the breath felt immense. However, I was unable to capture this cognitive effort in the digital artworks; I desired to convey the invisible pleasure of meditation. Enduring the discomfort, relaxed me and shifted my awareness of breath from the chest to the abdomen. My thoughts and emotions faded, and my awareness of breath and bodily sensations increased. My meditation practice revealed that the physical body and energetic sensations were interconnected, but it was difficult to describe this connection.

Figure 5

Day 25 – Coolness of Throat



Embracing the Thorn: Finding Comfort in the Discomfort

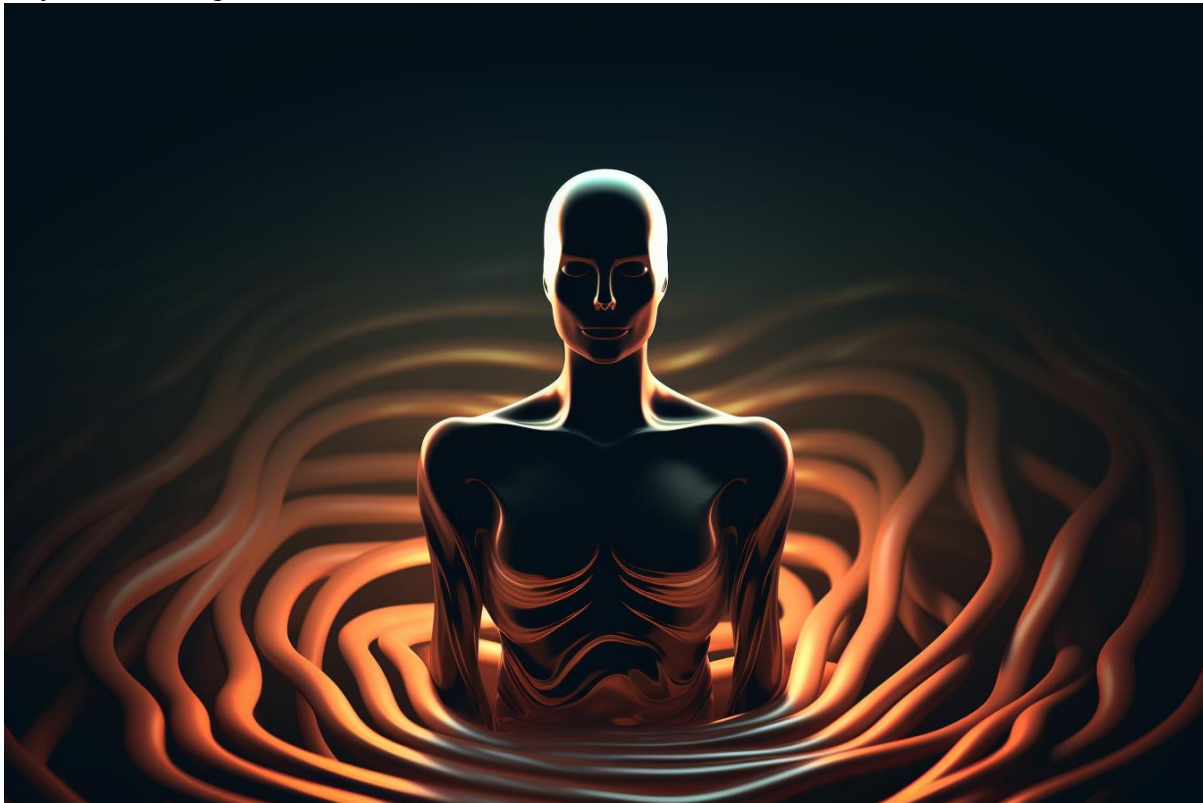
Meditation increased relaxation which consequently reduced physical discomfort and contributed to the awareness of smooth energetic flow. This highlighted the strong connection between breath awareness and bodily sensations. I have committed to the complete acceptance of pleasant or uncomfortable sensations without avoidance or distraction for as long as possible. When the discomfort was intense, I observed my thoughts wonder and found myself in problem-solving mode. By practising acceptance, I relaxed physically and mentally without any judgment. I adjusted myself slightly to satisfy the urge to move when the discomfort was too much.

Throughout the *mandala* practice, my legs remained in *ardhasiddhasana*, but I moved my shoulders and/or neck to ease discomfort. For instance, on Day 39, I raised my shoulders to release tension. With mental acknowledgement, the transition from reaction to observation allowed me to experience myself fully.

Another way I managed discomfort is through "letting go". I practiced this consciously from Day 6. I was able to relieve any discomfort by letting go of tightness, thoughts, knots, and energetic sensations. For instance, when pleasant song lyrics came into my mind, I would let them go instead of mentally singing along. I linked the thought to a physical action, such as the exhalation of breath - allowed everything to leave my body during the natural exhalation and relaxed. I found that while I experienced tension during inhalation, my body relaxed, and breath awareness and concentration deepened during exhalation. I reflected on the end of my life and aimed to gently let go of the last breath, including mind, body, and emotions. Therefore, I learned to accept painful sensations without resentment and allowed them to dissipate them naturally.

Figure 6

Day 6 – Learning to Let Go



On Day 13, I expanded this practice to "psychological letting go", consciously releasing tension throughout my entire body which relaxed my shoulders. By Day 22, I associated this release with fishing: I imagined a thought or feeling was "[caught]" on the fishing line, I held it calmly for a moment, and released it gently through the exhalation of breath without any manipulation. I visualised letting go of sensations as if they were a water fountain on top of my head. The digital artwork on day 6, titled "Learning to Let Go" illustrated an unwinding: "numbness all over [my] body, down in the lower [extremities] ..., then in my left [and right side] ...it was like vibrating kind of feelings" was released and then my "mind was completely blank [and] shut down from everything". The various sensations and energetic movements, both pleasurable and uncomfortable, uncoiled.

I learned that all aspects of life experience were transient: I believed they were not the eternal truth. Although the artwork appeared dramatic, the process of letting go was

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gradual and subtle. Sudden quietness was indicated by darkness. The exhalation process connected me to my body and disconnected me from emotions, sensations, and thoughts. I endeavoured to uncover truth beyond the experience of life as I know it.

I was concerned about the space around me, and the space within me wasn't managed either, it wanted to escape, fly, move...not sit still. But it [felt] good, you know, [felt] the space in the heart, the unwinding, I didn't know that was there [the knot] and then it just unwound itself... pulsating, going, and undoing. But I didn't feel the flow of energy I just, felt the unknotting. (Day 22)

Throughout the practice, I consistently reminded myself to "bring my awareness back to the breath", "focus on the breath", and "only the breath was important" when I experienced discomfort and distractions. It supported me to separate myself from them and allowed the breath to deepen, improved my focus, and increased my awareness and concentration of the mind. By Day 8, the focus on breath became automatic. When my thoughts drifted, I returned my attention to the breath to quieten the mind. By Day 30, I concentrated on the vulnerability of my breath when I was lost in thought. As a result, my thoughts, sensations, and emotions seemed insignificant. The breath stabilised me into the present moment. I mentally sought guidance from spiritual leaders I trusted and "mother earth" to increase my awareness of life and gratitude.

By Day 38, I had developed the ability to quickly redirect my attention back to my breath before it drifted to my thoughts. This caused "all the colour in my life to disappear, not in a sad way, but maybe more focused...the stimulation stopped." The artwork "Devoid of Sensations" portrayed this transition from surface chaos to inner peace from less stimulated monochromatic tones, increased spaciousness, and provided comfort. It was weird, the energy body suddenly disappeared: "there was more space, but a different kind of space", and the subtle yellow illustrated residual warmth, energy, or colourful sensations.

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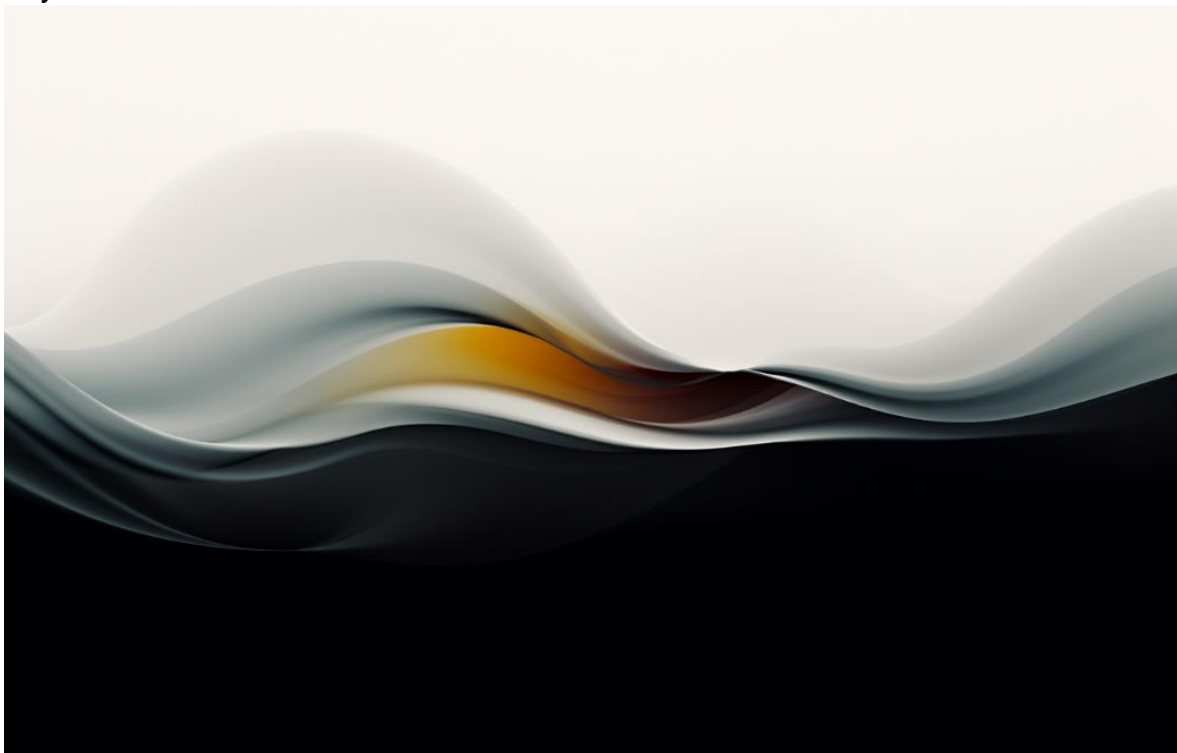
I found that embracing discomfort deepened my awareness of the present moment and fostered new unusual and unfamiliar experiences in my mind. This indicated growth through discomfort in meditation practice, a pathway to understanding the mind and acceptance of its experiential complexity.

Summary

“Expanding Limitations: Embracing Pleasure and Pain” explored growth beyond pleasure and discomfort in meditation. “Shadows and Lights: Distraction amidst growth” delved into the interplay of challenges and insights of my meditation experience. I attempted to understand myself, my philosophical viewpoint, and the existential exploration of life. The

Figure 7

Day 38 – Devoid of Sensations



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digital artworks captured a longing for inner growth. “Energy’s Dance: Unblock, Flow and Feel” explored differences between tangible physical sensations from subtle energetic sensations in the body. The unpleasurable sensations dissipated over time with acceptance, and the natural energy flow was pleasurable. The digital artwork illustrated this experience which was difficult to describe in words. “Embracing the Thorn: Finding comfort in the Discomfort” emphasised the importance of embracing the discomfort for personal growth. Acceptance, letting go, and focus on the breath supported this process. The discomfort was transient and transformed into insight. Digital artwork illustrated an unfamiliar state of mind that showcased the journey from chaos to inner peace through meditation. Overall, meditation is a transformative journey through the pleasure and pain of experience.

Flowering Feelings: Blossoms of Awareness

Through meditation, I gained significant insights into the emotional aspects of myself and healing. I explored past hurts and present-day fears. The digital art helped me track these emotional states and understand how they manifested during meditation.

Echoes of Old Roots: Facing Past in the Present

I faced emotional challenges throughout my meditation journey that led to emotional maturity. On Day 1, I felt powerless while I started recording my meditation journey. The feeling went into my fears of being judged, which impacted my thought process and appeared inauthentic to myself. On Day 3, I experienced loneliness and disconnection while living in a new country. This worsened my anxiety, and I felt resentful and disappointed with myself for the unmet expectations of living in India. My emotional instability was based on unresolved personal issues that contributed to emotionally fuelled days on Day 31 and 39. I was disappointed, angry, and unhappy with my progress in meditation.

For example, Day 11 was a significant day with reflections on family expectations, societal pressure, and gender roles. There were deeply ingrained beliefs that I refused to

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comply with, which highlighted how past emotional patterns and present anxieties were re-experienced. My everyday interactions in society and the prevalent gender roles in India seeped into my meditation practice. I felt disconnected from the society I was living in and was irritable and repulsed by food.

I was so angry yesterday; it's like there's nothing beyond food in people's minds, what did you eat, what did you eat, what did you eat...always, what did you eat? The first thing they ask is, what did you eat? Or did you eat anything? (Day 11)

[I] don't even cook, I mean, the effort it takes to make food, to think about it...this is what I want to eat today, this is what I feel like, I'm fine if I do it just for myself but then...would [anyone else] eat this, can I make it more nutritious or can I make it healthy? And how [others are] doing this 24/7, all the time... food! (Day 11)

Figure 8

Day 11 – Repulsion of Food



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The negative feelings of anger, sadness, and repulsion revealed deep tensions within me. I do not like to be mothered and continuously reminded of the qualities of a woman I do not possess. I hate being in the kitchen and cooking, but I felt like society in India really encouraged those qualities and dependence on traditional family structures. I struggled to set firm boundaries and reflected on the past hurts that led me to this mindset. Although I am an adult, culturally I was taught to be quiet, listen to elders, and obey instructions. The expression of my boundaries or disagreements felt like I was evil, selfish, and inconsiderate. The digital art "Repulsion of Food" showed my emotional distress and mixed feelings about society's constant emphasis on food and nourishment: eat three times a day, meal is incomplete without rice, eat together, and avoid unhealthy fast foods. I did not know how to make myself feel heard or set boundaries around myself. During meditation, thoughts were uncontrollable, daydreaming of potential conversations in which I explained myself and my viewpoint. I could not focus on my breath continuously, and my focus quickly shifted to my thoughts.

The artwork showed a peculiar defiance and the intention to strive towards deeper truths to alleviate suffering. There were moments of peace and pleasurable subtle sensations during the meditation session such as "tingling on my left side" that were not captured in the artwork. Furthermore, the important environmental sounds and specific sensory experiences like the continuous pain in my chest, back, and knee were not represented. However, artwork symbolically raised bigger questions about my perception of gender roles through elements such as the hole in the eye and mouth. I reflected on how people often wear tinted glasses and make assumptions, particularly about food habits, rituals around dining together, and sharing similar tastes. I often failed to meet their expectations with food and dining etiquette, which led to critical remarks.

In the artwork, although the colour pink symbolised love and affection, I felt my experience of care was distorted and unappealing. The joyful colours, orange and yellow, were used to represent food, which I kept at a distance. The artwork showed that food was

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an important element in my life, and my inability to establish firm boundaries caused distortions in my perception of others and their expression of care. I lacked assertive communication skills and resorted to avoidance and emotional outbursts. With a focus on breath, I controlled the underlying hostility and tension during meditation. The artwork served as a visual tool for deeper exploration of emotions, its meaning, and thought patterns.

Another example of past hurts that contributed to emotional instability in the present situation is my avoidance of negative emotions. Despite attending therapy, I have disconnected myself from experiencing negative emotions for the past 15 years. I was not ready to explore them and avoided recognising them within me. My new environment and circumstances have challenged me to explore these hidden aspects. On Day 4, I allowed myself to experience emotions without any avoidance strategies. I experienced feelings of betrayal, hurt, and rage that were uncomfortable and unfamiliar as though I felt them for the first time. I was triggered by jealousy and sensed something rise within me, as I was overwhelmed with tears.

...I felt heat around the front part of my body, ... like a shield type of heat. Sometimes it [rose], ... through the feet and the legs. It wasn't localised to one area; it was spread out... [like an] volcano was exploding, a cloud of smoke. Inside, I felt quite connected, and I wanted to disconnect. I wanted to remove myself from the experience so much because it was so uncomfortable...especially around the negative emotions that come up, jealousy, anger, hatred, irritation. [The thoughts were] so fast, ...and I wanted to react so quickly... through my actions, it [was] hard to focus on my breath [to stay] balanced and calm. And the more I meditated, the more of these things seem to happen...and it [took] a long time to disappear, and [the thoughts] didn't just go away, they escalated...one after another...and I [felt] a sense that I've [been] betrayed [again]...and I'm hurt(crying). (Day 4)

Figure 9

Day 4 – Inner Volcanic Bomb



This experience was illustrated in an artwork titled “Inner Volcanic Bomb”. The bright orange and red colours, usual symbols of passion and energy, showed an instinctual emotional feeling that emerged and overwhelmed me. I found myself revisiting the social interactions which brought back old memories, emotions of distrust, suspicion, and jealousy. I suppressed these emotions within me, as I have dealt with them unhealthily in the past. Reflexive journaling and observation of social interactions forced me to confront them. Although I appear calm and quiet on the outside, I struggle internally with emotional storms and actively avoid situations which trigger me.

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My thoughts spiralled out of control when I was emotional during meditation and unable to focus on my breath. The emotions were too overwhelming and “it was quite a hard experience...it’s hard to trust, I think more than trust, it’s really hard to (crying) feel [this inner] experience, like something exploding inside, I could feel it rising up.” Although the artwork captured the explosive nature of my emotions, it did not capture the depth of distress. I could not articulate this in words. The artwork appeared calm and beautiful, in contrast to the chaotic and painful meditation session. The physical sensations (tightness) felt like tangible aspects of the inner psychological struggle that prevented me from fully living.

On Day 41, I returned to the same feelings of distrust, jealousy, and insecurity. Despite my determination to heal them, my thoughts drifted to potential negative scenarios. The fear of betrayal and pain lingered. I protected myself by distancing myself from social connections. I reflected on the transience of belonging and relationships and questioned my reactions and feelings. I wondered whether my anxiety and fear were justified.

Through my reflections, I discovered that I need to be upskilled in assertiveness and setting boundaries for my emotional well-being. Through the practice, I found that I can safely revisit personal hurts and feel the emotions within my body at my own pace. Although this was a gentle process, I needed to cultivate self-compassion. The creation of digital artwork provided an excellent method to express my feelings and bodily sensations which felt safer and more tangible.

Guarded Blossoms: Shields from Storm

I had high expectations and hoped to recreate a powerful energetic experience that I could document and explain to others. On Day 2, although I had just started the *mandala*, I felt frustrated and impatient. I was disappointed in myself for failing to delve deeper into the

Figure 10*Day 31 – Protecting My Heart*

energetic experience. Although emotional experience highlighted an ongoing struggle, I disregarded its value.

Day 31 was tough: it started with dread and emotional instability. I was deeply disappointed with myself and others which led to anger, sadness, and rebellious thoughts. This shifted my perception of personal relationships and approach towards emotional vulnerability. I was physically uncomfortable during meditation, my breath was shallow, and I experienced pain in my chest and right leg. Although I attempted to focus on my breath, I felt stuck in my emotional and existential ideas: I felt pressurised without any outlet. Physical sensations reflected my mental state. I was disappointed with many aspects of my life, including my personal relationships and financial situation. I desired to escape from everything, imagined myself in complete isolation from society: I fled from my obligations as

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a wife and a woman, and re-evaluated my personal decisions about parenthood. This suggested a personal struggle with significant life changes, and I wanted to expand my boundaries to delve deeper. Here is an example of my thought process.

...thinking that everything is an illusion, it's an illusion, illusion, illusion. And there's no reality, can't see the reality, everything is just fake. And I think that helped it go deeper within myself....it's just me pushing my boundaries,...pushing the mental boundaries, going more deeper away from the illusion,...sitting with the discomfort [for] as long as I can, not running away from it, the depression, the angry state, trying to think more deeply, [telling myself] don't act on it, sit [with] it. (Day 31)

The day ended with a disconnected feeling, yet paradoxically, I was more connected to the illusion of my life. This made it difficult to differentiate between reality and illusion. The digital artwork "Protecting My Heart" portrayed grief, depression, and loneliness. It also depicted a protection mechanism from sadness. The artwork did not capture the emotional or sensory changes in the body, such as "it started to get uncomfortable, but it was pleasurable that the whole right leg relaxed." The artwork facilitated my understanding and communication of my sorrow with my loved ones.

On Day 41, I felt like I dug my own grave. The focus on my breath provided a short relief, while the physical discomfort and emotions were heightened as I was triggered, "I can't deal with this insecurity, jealousy, envy...these emotions are so hard to deal with." I detested the slow progress of healing to remain undisturbed in social contexts:

...I think I will never get close to someone. And I will never let anyone close enough to hurt me. If they hurt me, I will keep them [at] an arms distance and I think I need to keep myself at an arms distance with these negative emotions too. (Day 41)

I questioned my myself: "why am I not happy when [they are] happy...do I really [appreciate them]? I should share [their] joy and happiness, so why am I not sharing? Does it mean I don't love [them]?"

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The artwork "Breaking Walls" illustrated the experience of tension and turmoil. It showed gloomy colours and the image of a broken heart which reflected emotional chaos. Despite being calm, I often felt overwhelmed, insignificant, and unworthy. I felt "really disconnected to home within myself, the reality, the peaceful nature that I am...very gentle, very loving, very tender, very sensitive...that's me. There's nothing wrong with it." The artwork focused on the physical outcomes of emotional conflicts, specifically the discomfort in areas like the left foot and right leg. This highlighted how somatic sensations were also linked to psychological states. The recurring physical discomforts such as chest pain, knee pain, and environmental sensitivities demonstrated the psychosomatic relationship between my emotional, physical, and psychological landscape. Here is an example of my difficulty and desire for self-improvement.

I am very emotional, (crying) I'm missing home, I'm angry at myself, really missing home. I'm trying, I'm trying really hard today, I just wanted to find a solution, ... I don't think its outside of me, it's definitely inside, but it's just so hard...(crying)...sometimes I just feel like I need to put on a show, cry more and see how ridiculous it is that I'm crying. (Day 41)

It exhibited how I was motivated to improve myself through meditation which was simultaneously a source of relief and daunting exercise. The meditation activity involved confronting and embracing one's inner self's complexity and vulnerability.

...why do I feel like something is lacking, deep inside of me. That I can't compete, that I have such low self-esteem, it's really not about the [other person], it's not about [them] either, it's about my relationship with myself. (crying)...I couldn't catch where [the feelings are] coming from, but they just swelled up and then I started to cry...things are bothering me still from ages ago. (Day 41)

Figure 11*Day 41 – Breaking Walls*

The meditation sessions were important for reflexivity, healing, and personal growth. I understood how I struggled more with emotional management and maturity than with any difficulty with my physical body.

The emotional meditation sessions illustrated the depth of my inner struggle with self-image, self-worth, and relationships. Although the sessions were difficult, they showed insights into my inner healing and development. This practice guided me through my experience of negative emotions toward a stable and self-aware life. I believed that the physical discomfort in my body, chest, and shoulders embodied deeper emotional issues. Despite the emotional challenges, my meditation practice increased my self-awareness and introspection. Although more emotional healing was required for me to be balanced, by Day

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41, there was a noticeable shift in my emotional maturity. Prior to the *mandala*, I reacted instinctively to emotional insecurities but, through the practice I learned to sit with the emotional discomfort to understand myself better. This indicated progress and reflection; I felt my inner growth had just begun at the end of the *mandala*. The journey towards emotional stability was still far, but I fostered a sense of resilience and self-acceptance of my negative emotions.

Detached Dew: From Struggle to Joyous Gratitude

As I reflected on the meditation, I felt grateful for the experiences, sensations, and emotional rollercoaster journey. I was thankful for the intermingling of teachings that guided me from various spiritual practices (Buddhist *vipassana*, *hatha yoga* teacher training, and volunteering at an *ashram*). The musical alarm at the end of 2-hour practice has guidance from Sadhguru (spiritual *Guru*), “if you sit here all inclusive, you’ll not know suffering...if you’re in touch with truth then there can be no suffering in you.” This motivated me on difficult days and guided me to seek light in an unknown terrain throughout the *mandala* practice. It taught me to embrace negative emotions and appreciate mundane aspects without avoidance. My challenging reality (physical and emotional pain) meant that I was not in touch with the truth, which motivated me to strive deeply.

On Day 21, the increased feelings of gratitude I had experienced in the previous sessions subsided; however, I felt calm and authentic momentarily. This demonstrated that the noiseless sessions were also special. On Days 31 and 41, I felt drawn away from social relationships and desired a space to deal with gloomy overwhelming feelings. I craved to create a distance within myself from painful emotions. It felt like my journey towards emotional maturity and resilience had just started at the end of the *mandala*.

Although the final artwork on Day 42 appeared transformational, it was incomplete. I was disappointed that there were no magical moments. I approached discomfort and physical

Figure 12

Day 42 – Gratitude with Butterflies



challenges with a curious non-judgmental attitude. Upon reflection the transformation image of the artwork subtly shielded me from unresolved emotional wounds. I resonated more authentically with a feeling of dissociation and acceptance of the ordinary experiences of my life. Here's an example of Day 42:

...today was quite mellow and unexpected, like I said nothing was going on.... it's just a normal day and so I was surprised when the alarm rang, I thought somethings gonna happen towards the end of the practice, you know, I was expecting that there would be a lot of pain somewhere or anything like that. So, [I'm] surprised that...even [pain in my] left foot wasn't there, I did feel a little bit of heat, but not too much.

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[I felt] grateful I was able to do it [complete the *mandala*], a little disappointed but not too much... whatever I have, I have. This is it; this is all right. It doesn't have to be super out their kind of experience that I want people to know and understand...yes they [magical meditative experiences] happen, they are very memorable... [my experience] is a day-to-day experience as well, and [I] need to accept this experience just as much and not crave for that experience. (Day 42)

The acknowledgement of the mundane aspects represented an emotional shift towards calmness and contentment which portrayed my emotional growth. The digital artwork for Day 42 is titled "Gratitude with Butterflies", a beautiful display of transformational butterflies against a lovely sunset backdrop. Despite my physical discomfort during the session, the image illustrated freedom and dissociation. During the artwork creation I was more focused on the happiness, "just [felt] really happy that its [ended]...like I [needed] a break from recording more than anything" else. I have also overlooked reflections on my future aspirations. This artwork displayed a strong contrast to what I felt. There were different perspectives in the artwork compared to self-interviews; while the artwork captured the overall essence, the self-interviews provided a detailed account of my physical, mental, and emotional experiences.

There was emotional growth from challenging emotions to experiencing gratitude which illustrated the blossoming awareness of my feelings. This mirrored the unfolding of emotional insights for a deeper understanding of the self. In addition, there was recognition that even mundane days held value which suggested that emotional growth was about appreciating ordinary moments, not just peak experiences.

Summary

The *mandala* journey revealed that meditation is more than a mental discipline; it was an embodied experience that touched on all aspects of my life. Subtle shifts in my mental and physical state have provided a new perspective on emotional management and

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resilience. Through meditation, I embraced negative emotions from the past and learned about skills for future growth. Meditation functioned as an emotional purging technique that allowed me to confront unresolved issues and the importance of assertive skills to establish boundaries for my inner well-being. Acceptance of emotional discomfort was essential for resilience and emotional stability. Overall, my meditation journey provided insights into my emotional patterns and social dynamics. It offered a space for reflexivity that allowed me to appreciate ordinary moments of life.

Petals of Time: Absorbed in My Garden

The impact of meditation on my sense of time was examined, and it illustrated that meditation altered my experience of time.

On Day 1, I found time to be fleeting as I adjusted my posture and focused on the sensation of breathing near my nose. The session felt short, as though I had just started 'meditating' towards the end. The mental activity and desire to relax my posture contributed to this perception. Interestingly, I found that time slowed down when I was focused on uncomfortable bodily sensations. On an emotionally challenging day like Day 4, I felt that the first 1.5 hours was exceptionally long. As the session neared its end, the increase in disturbing thoughts and emotional turmoil further slowed my experience of time.

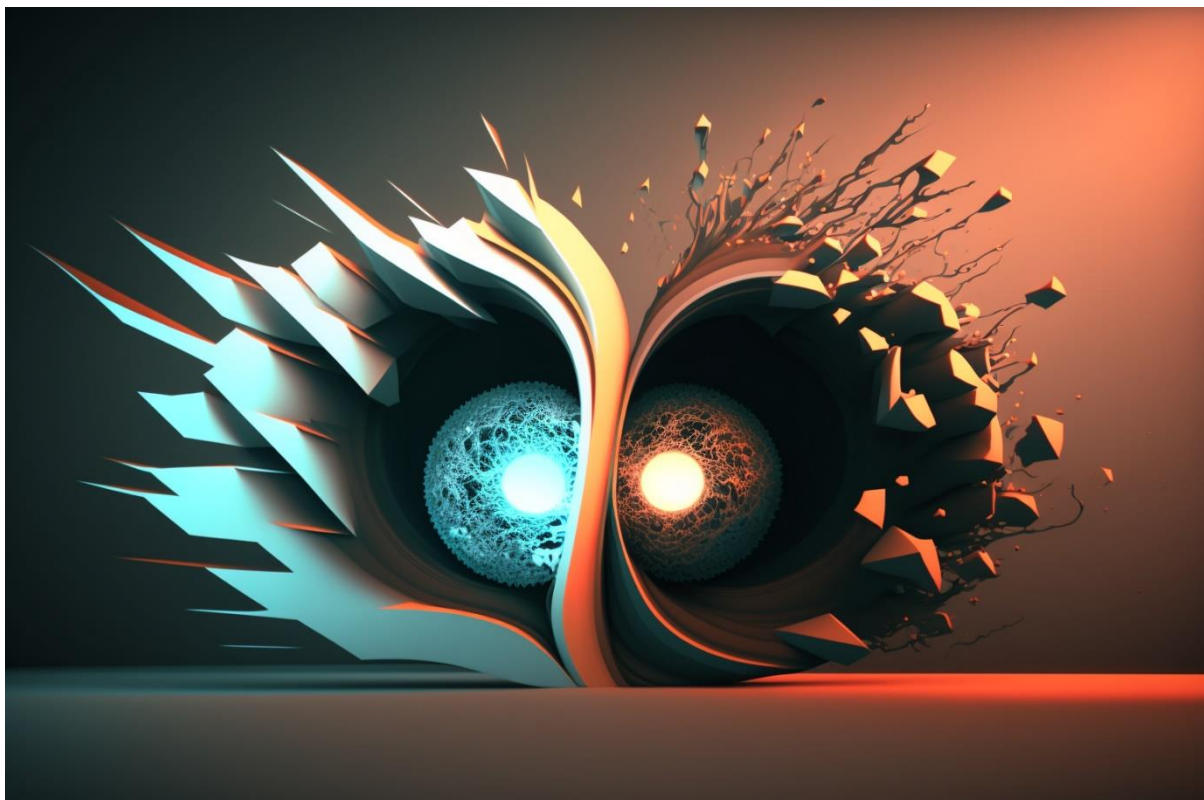
On Day 14, unintentionally, my session lasted for almost three hours. I experienced a range of emotions, from neutrality to irritation, interlaced with various sensations. Despite the extended length of the practice, I noticed that time passed quicker at the start, while I focused on discomforts and breath which brought joy. The digital art titled "Exploding Book" is predominantly in blue and red. The red colour could be seen as anger; however, it represented my emotional fluctuations and fast sense of time. Despite a racing mind, I remained mentally composed and focused on breath when discomfort intensified near the session's end. The artwork did not capture physical discomfort, but it captured a balanced state of mind I experienced.

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I found the tightness unpleasurable... [even the] psychological focus ... so I was more focused on trying to relax... letting go of the body, the mind, just focus on the breath and that's what I was doing, just focusing on the breath. It was only uncomfortable towards the end, and I did not expect it to be 7:45 am. I was actually [expected] it to be a little less than 7:00 am, but I waited [for the alarm to ring] ... my body [was] ... little uncomfortable than usual... so you know, took a sneak peek [at the time]. Therefore, the two hours went by faster without feeling much pain or discomfort. (Day 14)

Figure 13

Day 14 – Exploding Book



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By Day 21, sitting for two hours felt effortless and enjoyable. I noticed that as my thoughts increased, time was experienced as fast. When I concentrated on my breath, time slowed. The mental state contributed to the experience of time fluctuations. Minutes felt like seconds when the mind was restless with numerous thoughts during happy and anxious mental states. On the other hand, fewer thoughts and a focused mental state contributed to the experience of time as slow. This slowness allowed me to perceive each second with greater depth and clarity. I understood that the perception of time is not a fixed concept, but a fluid experience influenced by mental states. The following is an example of the beauty of a quiet mind.

Figure 14

Day 21 – Soothing and Joyful Play of Light



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That it [felt] really good to focus on that [breath] and sometimes it's a coolness in the throat...relaxation of the muscles...tension, shoulders, chest. It [felt] really good...calm, quiet. A quietness that I haven't felt...the thoughts [were] really calm as well, ... focusing on the breath and the in-breath and the smoothness of the flow, the gentleness, the relaxation...nothing [is] in its way...its very beautiful. (Day 21)

The perception of time was highly personal and subjective. Emotions altered perception. The digital art titled "Soothing and Joyful Play of Light" on Day 21 captured the peaceful colours, fluidity, and enjoyment I felt. The blend of hues symbolised an expansive state within me, while the soft colours and compositions soothed. Overall, the artwork embraced a slow life with gentleness rather than striving for constant productivity in the fast-paced societal culture of the modern era.

My practice varied between anxieties, discomforts, pleasures, and motivations. Over time, I learned to cope with the differences by establishing a focus on the breath. This reduced my stress, increased my self-control, and shifted my attention from the external stimuli into myself. This heightened my awareness of my physical sensations and emotions. As the mind became calm and focused, it contributed to mindfulness of the present moment and increased sensitivity to internal experiences of pain and stress.

The artwork on Day 39 is titled "Turbulence" which represented emotional and physical sensations. It was an uncomfortable and unpredictable session depicted by shifting warm and cool tones. The face in the artwork reflected the emotional discomfort I experienced throughout the session, and it demonstrated emotional resilience. It was the only session where I consciously moved my upper body to manage discomfort.

... towards the end, [I felt] a little bit [of] discomfort in the left leg. I [felt] my hands were really hot, my soles of feet were getting hot, but not too hot...and it wasn't painful, painful. But suddenly the temperature seemed to have changed...I was [felt] cold air... (Day 39)

Figure 15*Day 39 - Turbulence*

Time went by really really slowly...I [waited] for [the session] to finish. It was extremely slowly from 6:30 am onwards... [felt] really tired, really sleepy. I couldn't sit for those two hours, at 6:30...I thought it was just 10 minutes left, but I wanted to check... I opened my eyes, since then, I kinda haven't been able to sit down properly. I moved [upper body], I rocked, stretched...it was only 6:37am... [I repeated] ... it was 6:50...then ... at exactly 7:00am, I stopped even before [the alarm] ...as it rings at 7:03am. So, it's been hard, hard practice. [Then I stretched my legs]. (Day 39)

At the end of practice, when the alarm settings failed and I sat for more than the intended timeframe, I felt a sense of accomplishment. On Days 14, 21, and 36, my session

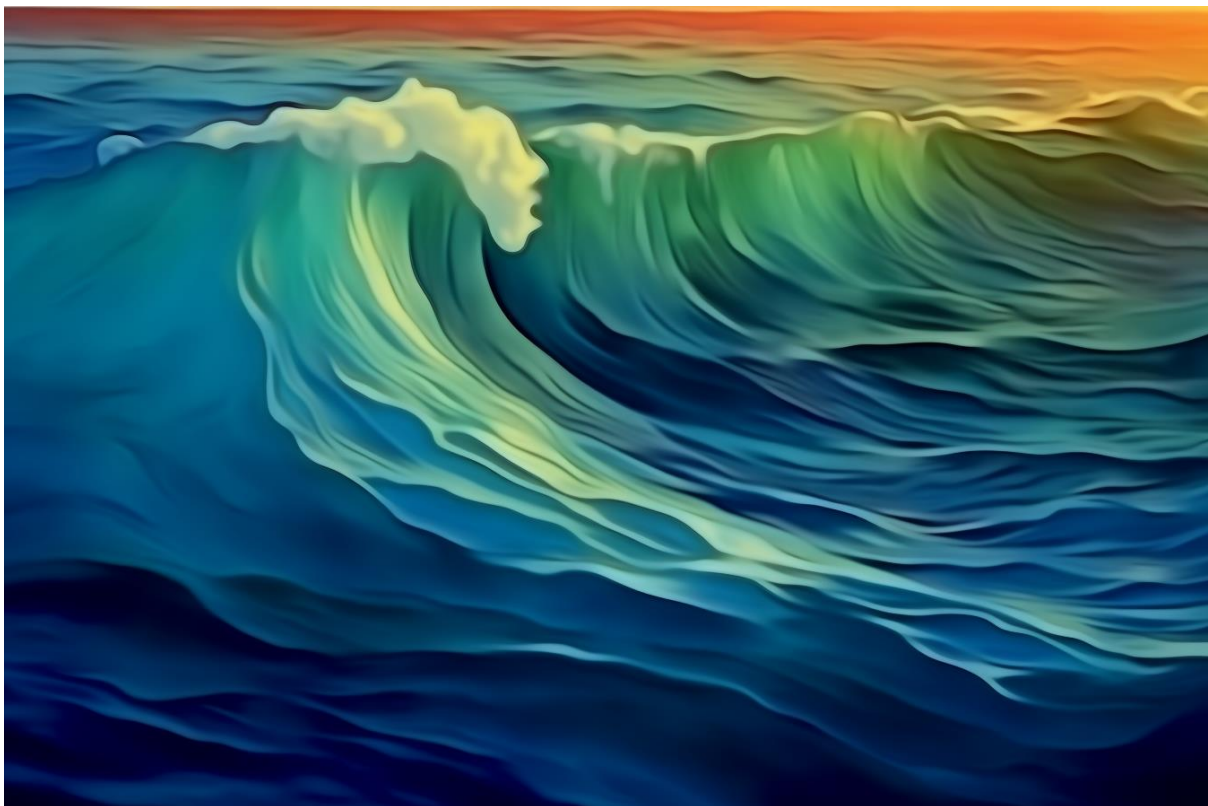
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extended for more than two hours, and the digital art demonstrated a pleasant and balanced stance. There was joy in breaking the time constraints. I experienced contentment and happiness as I believed it to be progress in meditation. It displayed my ability to concentrate and manage discomfort, surpassing my mental and physical limitations. The passage of time was not painful either emotionally, mentally, or physically. I was joyful as the meditation session transcended my expectations, and I appreciated the achievement of focus, calm, and deep rest I desired.

I meditated for 3 hours on Day 36 which illustrated growth and surpassed limitations. I felt emotionally flat during this session, neither happy nor sad, which contrasted with the

Figure 16

Day 36 – A Wave in the Ocean



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vibrant colours and activity depicted in the digital artwork “A Wave in the Ocean”. Despite a sense of movement and emotional serenity, it failed to capture the mechanisms of the body and mind to achieve this state. Here is an example of an experience that is hidden underneath and difficult to express.

I went back to the breath; it was much easier to bring the thoughts back to the breath and the sensation just by the nose... I felt something like a wave, you know, from the spine upwards, there were some pain points... back of the chest ... back of the stomach area, and the lower back area... but the rising [physical sensation] ... the wave type of rising on the surface, ... that felt really nice. Afterwards the wave [moved] from the back of the spine area, I just felt the warmth, gentle, warm.... multiple waves in the abdomen area. Very very gentle, it wasn't like the body was moving, it wasn't physical.... but to do with the body, but I guess it's to do with the energy as well, very gentle feeling. Very gentle butterfly type of feeling, butterflies in your stomach type of feeling...not not painful, not too much, not excessive at all.

(Day 36)

The inner experience was difficult to articulate in words. Despite the beauty of the digital artwork, it failed to convey the duration of time. Many discomforts (tightness and pressure) and personal reflections on motherhood and spirituality were discussed in the self-interview. This was not shown in the artwork which required more space than the orange hue (represented discomfort) at the top.

Summary

The *mandala* journey emphasised the importance of integrating multiple forms of expression to capture the richness of my meditation experience. Digital art captured the indescribable aspects of my experience, but not details such as duration. The experience of time was strongly influenced by thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. I found time to

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be an elastic experience: it was fast when my mind was active, and slow when I was calm and focused. I felt disheartened when my time goal was unmet during challenging sessions, but experienced joy and accomplishment when I exceeded my expectations. This was illustrated in the digital artwork characterised by balanced and calm compositions that reflected my inner state. The subjective experience of meditation revealed an interplay between time, emotions, and experience.

Discussion:

The Essence of My Discoveries

Ancient Indian texts, such as the *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, provided valuable insights into my meditation experience. Three distinct themes were recognised during the analysis: two themes with subthemes and a third standalone theme. The first theme, “Expanding Limitations: Embracing Pleasure and Pain,” addressed the physical and energetic dimensions of experience. The second theme, “Flowering Feelings: Blossoms of Awareness,” focused on the emotional dimension of experience. The last standalone theme, ‘Petals of Time: Absorbed in My Garden’,” explored the temporal aspects of my meditation practice. These themes and knowledge from *yoga* philosophy supported the conceptualisation of my journey towards self-realisation and stability. The discussion is divided into two parts: the first part examined the results through *yoga* and compared it with Western psychology, while the second part explored the results through a Western therapeutic lens. Finally, I explain why this research is important in the discipline of psychology.

Part One: Navigating results through yogic psychology

Layers of Being – Panchakoshas

There are various layers of human existence. The concept of *panchakoshas* (five sheaths), as described in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* (Sathiyaseelan & Balasundaram, 2016;

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Sharma et al., 2023; Sharma, 2020; Tembe et al., 2018), explained that different aspects of our subjective experience. The bodily sensations were associated with the *annamaya kosha*, whereas the energetic sensations were connected to the *pranamaya kosha* (energy body). Fluctuations in mental and emotional states were related to the *manamaya kosha* (mental body). The first three *koshas* were situated in the physical plane of existence and could be perceived from tangible to subtle, indicating the level of depth (Sharma et al., 2023). However, based on skill, the understanding of subtlety can be subjective. Some suggest that the energy body is subtler than the mental body (Sadhguru, 2021), and I agree with this viewpoint that my ability to perceive and understand the mental body is greater than the energy body.

In my meditation practice, I gained momentary insights that helped me overcome obstacles. I believe these insights were from a higher ego state related to the *vijnanamaya kosha* (wisdom body). Although brief, they provided a method to work with challenges such as catching and releasing thoughts with the exhalation of the breath. The fifth layer is closest to the *atman*, *anandamaya kosha* which is the subtlest and is associated with the feeling of bliss. The *vijnanamaya* and *anandamaya kosha* are difficult for me to comprehend, as they are beyond my experiential level. The knowledge of *panchakoshas* highlighted areas in my practice that require attention to delve deeper into meditation. I am consistently aware of my *annamaya*, *pranamaya*, and *manomaya koshas*. My understanding of *pranamaya kosha* is very limited. I have however, related the intuitive insights such as ‘absolute acceptance’ and ‘letting go through the exhalation of breath’ to *vijnanamaya kosha*.

Sathiyaseelan and Balasundaram (2016) examined the correlation between the *panchakoshas* and Maslow’s five fundamental hierarchy of needs (physical, safety, loving and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation). Maslow’s hierarchy ascended towards self-actualisation, similar to the *chakra* system (related to the *pranamaya kosha*) to understand individuals’ existence in the world (Sathiyaseelan & Balasundaram, 2016). The concept of *chakras* originated from *Rigveda* and *Upanishads*, with variations in numbers and



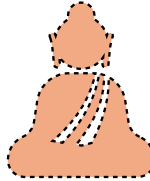
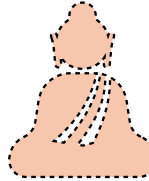





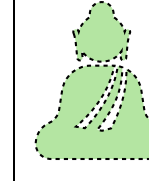


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descriptions (Kaur & Rani, 2023). *Chakras* are the wheels or centres of the spine that are activated (opened) when *kundalini* energy travelled upwards along the spinal column (Kaur & Rani, 2023; Sadi, 2022). Similarly, the concept of *panchakoshas* is a model of self-experience where each layer is more refined than the previous one, which ultimately led to the *atman*. The boundaries of the layers are unfixed and influence each other, even at the societal level (Tembe et al., 2018). This has challenged its comprehension.



















My self-questionnaire explored the experience of these layers during meditation; however, I excluded its investigation to focus only on my breath rather than on intellectual desires which would make the mind more active. My purpose during meditation was simple: to focus on breath for two hours. The processes of letting go, total acceptance, and determination showed how to delve deeper into meditation, and in turn understand my true self. I believe that knowledge and understanding of *koshas* should be retrospective and not an aim. Understanding *koshas* should be experiential rather than intellectual pursuits.

Table 4

My Representation of the Pancha Koshas

Annamaya Kosha						
Manomaya Kosha						

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Pranama ya Kosha						
Vijnanam aya Kosha						
Anandam aya Kosha						

I think each *kosha* can be “perfected.” For instance, my experiential understanding of *pranamaya kosha* is rudimentary. A comprehensive understanding would imply an experiential understanding of *chakras* and the ascension of *kundalini*. Table 4 is my visual representation of delving deeper into meditation through each *kosha* from fundamental to advanced: the *koshas* are permeable layers (colours) with different levels of expertise, each characterised by a range of hues, tints, tones, and shades. Advanced experiential understanding is closer to that of *atman*. Six columns were used for visual representation only.

Comparison to Western Psychology

In Western psychology, there is no direct equivalence to the concept of *panchakoshas*. However, there are several theories and models which attempt to describe the human experience through layers or dimensions: Maslow’s model of hierarchy, Jung’s model of the *psyche*, and Wilber’s integral theory.

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As mentioned above, Maslow's model is somewhat similar despite its roots from another cultural and philosophical stance. There is a progression from basic physical and safety needs to higher levels of psychological and self-fulfilment needs, such as belonging and self-esteem. The realisation of full potential culminates in self-actualisation.

(Sathiyaseelan & Balasundaram, 2016; Pandey & Mishra, 2021). While Maslow's hierarchy is sequential, *panchakoshas* are not, as they represent the dimensions of existence (Mustofa, 2022; Pandey & Mishra, 2021). Maslow's model faced criticism for the lack of empirical findings and variations across cultures (Loh et al., 2000; Sathiyaseelan & Balasundaram, 2016).

Carl Jung's model of the psyche is a foundational concept in analytical psychology (Waddell, 2002). It explored the conscious ego, the personal unconscious, and the universal archetypes that reside in the collective unconscious. This model is based on psychological analysis, while *panchakoshas* is rooted in self-realisation according to *Vedanta*. It is interesting to mention that although Jung assisted in *kundalini yoga* seminars, his theory is viewed as originating from a different source with different applications (Cox, 2022). However, there are similarities in understanding the mind from an eastern perspective. The *annamaya kosha* is a physical body like the ego (conscious self and identity). The *pranamaya kosha* involves personal experience and energies which drive behaviour and perception similar to the personal unconscious (forgotten memories and suppressed emotions). Lastly, the *vijnanamaya kosha* represents wisdom and deeper knowledge of existence corresponding to the archetypes and shared human experiences of the collective unconscious.

Another theory similar to *panchakosha's* is Ken Wilber's map. A comprehensive map of human potentials across physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions acknowledged the interplay and permeability (Prinsloo, 2018). His theory divided reality into four interconnected quadrants (interior individual, exterior individual, interior collective, and exterior collective)

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with a series of developmental stages within each quadrant. It reflected a desire to understand human experience through layered dimensions of existence, from the most tangible to the most subtle.

Western psychology theories are similar to Eastern spirituality and philosophical traditions. However, there is criticism that there is a lack of empirical evidence (Brys & Bokor, 2013; Paulson, 2008). I believe the *panchakosha*'s and levels of consciousness (described below) are models of health relevant to broader psychological knowledge but situated within the IIP.

The Yogic Consciousness and the Nature of Mind

The teachings of *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* allowed the contemplation of various levels of consciousness, from wakefulness to *turiya* (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016; Williams, 2008). During practice, some days I found myself immersed in my senses in my wakeful mind (*vaishvanara*), while on other days I drifted into dreamlike states (*tajjasa*). Additionally, on rare occasions, I experienced a moment of profound, dreamless rest (*prajna*) (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016), where I experienced a detached sense of self from both physical and mental activities. These levels of consciousness helped deepen my spiritual awareness and understanding of meditation.

During meditation, I was aware of the contrasting nature of my thoughts and emotions and described them as attraction (e.g. I craved magical experiences) and aversion (e.g. I avoided emotional and physical pain). In the teachings of *yoga* philosophy, the concepts of *kleshas* (colorings) and *vrittis* (thinking patterns) explained this (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). Contemplating the influence of these emotional and sensory experiences was a useful tool for self-observation. Through meditation, I developed my ability to cultivate *vairagya* (non-attachment to pain or pleasure), *ekagra* (one-pointedness with a focus on breath), and *abhyasa* (determined practice through my personal *mandala* guidelines) (Rao &

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Paranjpe, 2016). These were the essential qualities for achieving personal growth and transformation which reduced the conflicting interplay of emotions, desires, and sensations.

In Western psychology, theories that offer similarities to the levels of consciousness and inner transformation are the theory of mind and cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). Sigmund Freud's theory of the mind focused on the psychoanalytical aspects of instincts and repressed memories (Alexander, 2007), such as exploring the levels of awareness (*vaishvanara*, *tajasa*, and *prajna*) and the depth of the human *psyche*. While there is an interplay among the concepts (id, ego, and superego) in the theory of the mind (Alexander, 2007), *yoga* philosophy illustrated a progression towards unified consciousness (Williams, 2008). In *vaishvanara*, one engages with the external world like the id with basic drives and motives. While the ego balances desires with the demands of reality, in *tajasa*, the subconscious mind processes experiences and emotions. *Prajna* reflects a higher state of awareness that transcends duality, like the morals of the superego.

Through CBT, cognitive distortions (such as negative thinking patterns) are identified and managed (Beal, 2024). It is similar to understanding the concept of *vrittis* and *kleshas* in *yoga* philosophy. The practice of recognising and altering one's cognitive patterns aligns with the *yoga* practice of observing and modulating thought processes to achieve mental clarity and reduction in emotional turmoil. The incorporation of mindfulness understanding into Western therapeutic practices and training (Mösler et al., 2023) supports the detached observation of thoughts and feelings.

With the increased integration of Eastern practices into the Western psychological framework, I believe research should focus on experiential understanding of the mind through qualitative introspective methods. Current psychological research focuses on meeting publication requirements and funding. Therefore, researchers are less inclined to undertake subjective explorations to study themselves, their emotions, and biases. In Eastern philosophical systems, truth is believed to be found within. The application of

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Eastern techniques into the Western scientific framework, an important aspect of the self, is lost in psychological knowledge.

Exploring the Paths of Yoga

The four yoga paths enhanced my meditation practice, each contributing uniquely to my spiritual journey.

Karma yoga as a selfless practice influenced my approach to emotional management and sensations during meditation. It fostered a state of non-attachment to the desired results (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). Meditation is perceived as an act of service to me, prioritising the process rather than the outcomes. I have realised that expectations lead to disappointments and hinder personal development.

Jnana yoga is a study of scriptures or direct experiences (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). It involved engagement with sacred texts in self-enquiry to directly confront and examine the ego and its constructs. Personally, I prefer direct experience within me to scrutinise my perceptions and beliefs. Through meditation, I found the nature of thoughts and feelings to be transient, not an eternal truth.

Bhakti yoga emphasises devotion and love (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). My meditation practice cultivated devotion, as I let go of my expectations. The devotion supported me to navigate emotional difficulties and cultivate a compassionate approach towards myself and others.

Raja yoga (path of meditation) offered a methodical approach to mastering the mind by adhering to the eightfold path outlined in the *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). Ethical disciplines, physical postures, breath control, and stages led to deep meditation and a *samadhi* state of mind. The path provided a rational framework that did not require belief in religious knowledge.

Together, the four yoga paths allowed me to understand my meditation practice as holistic and adaptable to my needs.

Integrating Yogic Knowledge into ‘Expanding Limitations: Embracing Pleasure and Pain’ Theme

My meditation practice is rooted in the traditional yoga framework, as described in *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*. It included mental and emotional discipline beyond physical postures. The practice of *samyama*, combines *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), and *samadhi* (enlightenment) (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016), played an important role in managing my cognitive processes, physical experiences, and emotional states.

Engagement in the *mandala* practice illustrated a delicate study of the mental process, and I wondered whether spending time alone, away from family, would have been more useful. The presence of family, friends, and social situations appeared to hinder my ability to delve deeper into myself. However, they also became training grounds for my mind to find stability.

During my daily sessions, my ability to sit in *ardhasiddhasana* for two hours required stability in my physical body and mind to allow deeper concentration. On some days, it was effortless to sit in this *asana*, while discomfort predominated on other days which made it difficult to achieve my desired duration for practice. These experiences of success and failure taught me to accept my current level of progress and learn from each session. During the practice, I prioritised achieving a state of ease in my posture for a prolonged duration.

Through the *annamaya kosha*, I acknowledged the physical sensations of breath and bodily discomforts, which were crucial for progress towards deeper spiritual exploration (Sathiyaseelan & Balasundaram, 2016). The perception of these sensations of pleasure and pain as transient cultivated detachment, regarding the body as a vehicle for spiritual journeys (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). Through the *pranamaya kosha*, I observed the movement of breath and subtle energy sensations. My practice focused on the natural flow of breath, not the

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pranayama practice (deliberate manipulation of breath). After achieving stability in the body, the next step is awareness of *prana* (Muktibodhananda, 2012). Through my practice, I understood the differences in surface-level and deeper abdominal breathing which echoed the flow of thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Physical discomfort contributed to breathing more on the surface and in the chest area. The perception of subtler sensations was observed when the breath was very gentle and soft. The experience of subtle energetic flows felt magical and surreal.

I have observed that during practice, in the *vaishvanara* state, my awareness is focused outwards: I actively interact with the outside world using my senses (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). At the start of practice, I was acutely aware of my immediate physical surroundings, including both noises within my home and those coming from outside. On some occasions, despite distracting external sounds, my meditation reached a deeper level, and these sounds diminished, allowing heightened and more intense internal concentration. The meditation practice allowed me to observe the mind and manage thoughts and emotions like the cognitive restructuring techniques in CBT (Beal, 2024). My practice led to identification, challenges, and changes in disruptive thought patterns. Moreover, mindfulness and acceptance strategies enhanced my emotional regulation and distress tolerance which involved acknowledgement and acceptance of my feelings and thoughts (Kirschenbaum & Jourdan, 2005). This is similar to humanistic therapies.

My sensory awareness and focus on the first three *koshas* reflected the principles found in somatic psychology. Somatic experience is a non-psychoanalytic biopsychological model for understanding and treating posttraumatic stress disorder (Levit, 2018). This attention is on bodily sensations, emotions, and images, with a focus on sensing the body (Levit, 2018). Individuals learn to respond more effectively to these processes with interoception (experience within the body) rather than introspection (contemplation of thoughts and desires), often emphasised in psychoanalytical therapy (Levit, 2018).

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Prioritising ease in my *asana*, I became attuned to sensations of breath and bodily discomfort. I learned to view discomforts and pleasures as transient experiences and fostered their detachment. Observing the flow of breath and energetic sensations deepened my understanding of their connection to thoughts and emotions. The practice shifted from *the vaishvanara* state to deeper levels as I became more comfortable and at ease with the practice. Overall, my practice of meditation involved interoception and introspection.

Weaving Yogic Knowing into “Flowering Feelings: Blossoms of Awareness” Theme

Many distractions led to emotional instability. This aligned with *manomaya kosha* which acted as an intermediary between the physical body and the innermost layers of my being (Sathiyaseelan & Balasundaram, 2016). It included observation of patterns and inclinations of the mind without attachment that cultivated inner silence which cannot be achieved through mental force (Woods et al., 2020). I have let go of my thoughts and ideas to develop inner stability for deeper introspection and enhanced self-awareness.

The mind turned inward and generated a subjective reality (dreams) through thoughts, images, and scenarios when I closed my eyes and detached from the visual sensory perception (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). The *tajjasa* state dominated my meditation practice, although I was not actively asleep. My mind created many stories and illusions, and I was able to concentrate on my breath by acknowledging it as transient, and training my mind to focus on it.

Sensations, emotions, and desires exerted considerable influence on my meditation practice. According to *yoga* philosophy, these are seen as natural but become restrictive if they dominate our awareness, stemming from an inclination towards desire (*raga*) and avoidance (*dvesha*) (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). While the act of sitting established stability, unmet expectations resulted in frustration and disappointment. I frequently experienced negative emotions influenced by external social circumstances. Meditation practice enabled the emergence of deep-rooted disturbances (Perlman et al., 2010) which could be

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acknowledged and dealt with without immediate reaction. Non-judgment reduced the impact of these emotions on my mind. Telling people to meditate is easy, and I wondered if long duration is considered a progress in meditation or strength of the mind.

Engagement in *mandala* practice intensified the recognition of challenges and taught me to be gentle with myself. I found it similar to attending regular therapy sessions, without financial commitment. As the practice deepened, the challenges became more difficult. Over time, my focus shifted from gross physical sensations to mental and subtler energetic sensations, moving towards higher states of consciousness where dualities like attraction and aversion began to dissolve. The reflexive practices of autoethnography contributed to recognising the disturbing emotions of my meditation, similar to uncovering emotional conflicts and working through them for emotional release and understanding in psychodynamic therapies (Alexander, 2007; Waddell, 2002). My *mandala* practice embodied a therapeutic approach to understanding oneself that fostered deeper self-awareness, emotional resilience, and psychological well-being. It emphasised the interconnectedness of mind and body with spirit, often directly ignored in Western psychology.

Enveloping Yogic Knowledge into “Petals of Time: Absorbed in My Garden” theme

During my practice, I found that the advanced stages of *yoga* like *pratyahara* (sensory withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), and *samadhi* (deep absorption) (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016) were not experienced in a linear or sequential manner. Frequently, I found myself directing my attention either towards my natural breath or towards the centre of my forehead. Frequent mind wandering turned meditation into a playful challenge of returning the focus back to the breath. It was amusing to observe my mind's tendencies to engage outwardly and not listen to me.

Pratyahara is a withdrawal from external senses (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016), a state I have briefly illustrated in the first theme. Inner stillness is essential for deeper introspection, and I

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have yet to experience *dhyana*. I encountered only a few moments of insight (*vijnanamaya kosha*) that brought deeper understanding and guidance from my *buddhi* (higher intellect) than my *ahamkara* (ego) (Sathiyaseelan & Balasundaram, 2016). These insights assisted my rational mind to dispel illusions generated by the ego and emotional recollections of the past. I have experienced *prajna*, which is devoid of dreams and mental constructs (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016), for possibly only a fraction.

Spiritual masters embody the true essence of *yoga*, where the distinction between the observer and observed dissolve in the highest state of consciousness, *turiya* (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). This is experienced in *samadhi* (deep absorption). Despite my ability to sit for longer than two hours, I believe I only experienced *pratyahara* and *dhyana* had not begun. In my opinion, teaching *yoga* without attaining *turiya* does not adequately honour its fundamental spiritual origins. *Yoga* in the Western world is taught as physical *asanas*, without understanding the deep impact on the mind. The true value of *yoga* was lost. *Yoga* transcends physical practice and influences every aspect of life by teaching intentionality, awareness, and compassion (Govindaraj et al., 2016).

My experience of emotional and mental states to time is related to internal clock models, particularly Scaler Expectancy Theory in psychology (Block & Grondin, 2014). According to this theory, time perception is viewed as a process involving a pacemaker-counter device (Block & Grondin, 2014; Ulrich et al., 2022). It is an internal mechanism that generates pulses at a regular rate, similar to ticks in a clock. It explained how time intervals are measured and perceived, providing a quantifiable method to understand time perception. The perception of time is not always linear and is influenced by internal states, as evidenced by variability in pulse rates, the impact of background noise, cognitive strategies like temporal segmentation, and adjustments to pacemaker speed (Ulrich et al., 2022). The attentional-gate model is significant for the internal clock perspective and suggested how attention can change the flow of impulses and influence time perception (Ulrich et al., 2022).

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My experience of time felt stretched or short was in parallel to findings in psychology: subjective experience of time can vary significantly based on emotional states such as anxiety (San et al., 2022). Task difficulty and motivation have been shown to affect how long a task feels, with more challenging tasks often perceived as taking longer (Sucala et al., 2010). Increased concentration altered one's perception of how quick or slow time passed (Sucala et al., 2010). Being present and focused can slow the perception of time, making the moment appear longer and more detailed, similar to deeper states of meditation (Pintimalli et al., 2023). While positive emotions made the time feel faster, negative emotions slowed it down (Sucala et al., 2010). This is similar to my experience. The subjective feeling of being rushed in modern societies and the experience of chronic time pressure (Szollos, 2009) contrasts with the state of calm and timelessness sought in *yoga* practice. My *mandala* fostered transcending ordinary time awareness and reach a state of timeless absorption. Further insights into the subjective experience of time can be obtained through autoethnographic study of different meditation practices.

Blending the Threads of Yoga Psychology

The incorporation of yogic philosophical principles into practice complemented the emotional and physical aspects of the meditation experience. It transformed my practice from a mere routine into a dynamic exploration of the self and consciousness. Analysis of the themes provided an opportunity to actively implement and encounter these principles which served as a passage through different aspects of *yoga* and discovery of universal truth.

Meditation sought to surpass the different *koshas* to experience the *atman*, who resides beyond all physical and mental constructs (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). I understood the *annamaya*, *manomaya*, and a little bit of the *pranamaya kosha*. The others were out of my level of experiential understanding. The various levels of consciousness highlighted that the majority of the practice I spent in *vaishvanara* or *taijasa* state. By exploring emotions, desires, and sensations during meditation, I aimed to transcend duality between self and

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others, observer, and observed (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). The *mandala* practice revealed that duality is a play of consciousness that hides the *atman* and its discovery. Through my meditation practice, I was able to incorporate yogic teachings beyond physical exercise. It was a method to delve deeper into understanding the truth. In addition to managing discomfort, each moment was an opportunity for significant personal and spiritual growth. I learned how to regulate my emotions through consistency of practice.

Subjectivity is viewed as undesirable by the academic world; therefore, very few researchers have explored the subjectivity of meditation. Most studies on meditation have sought empirical evidence with generalisable findings for a wider society (Khandelwal & Koradia, 2020). The outcomes of meditation were frequently measured using questionnaires and self-reported scales. Although meditation is a deeply personal activity and practiced around the world, its subjectivity and process of transformation has not been captured academically as far as I am aware. Compared with previous studies on meditation, I artistically demonstrate the subjectivity of regular meditation practice and the challenges in the body, mind, and emotions. By seeking to understand my subjective experience through *yoga* psychology, I illustrate how the theory could be applied and understood to explain my personal experience. The discipline of psychology could explore how meditation influences knowledge about one's sense of self and identity, levels of consciousness, states of mind, and spiritual experiences. I believe that psychology is incomplete without the incorporation of spirituality. *Yoga* psychology provides a non-religious and rational method to explore the health and well-being of an individual. I also support autoethnographic research for undergraduate students to explore themselves and their personal transformation, rather than taking existing theories for granted.

Part Two: Intersecting Yoga Psychology with Therapeutic Insight

My meditation experience reminded me of my therapy experience. The psychotherapeutic techniques of modern psychology could ensure cultural relevance by the

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inclusion of spirituality in healthcare practices. The meditation practice acknowledged my cultural heritage and provided process insights into somatic psychology, emotional and psychological distress, and subjective perception of time.

Neuropsychotherapy integrated neuroscience with psychotherapy, with a specific emphasis on understanding neural adaptability and neuroplasticity (Grawe, 2017). This provided therapists with knowledge about the neural mechanisms of their clients' thought processes and behavioural and emotional responses for long-term mental health improvement. According to the consistency-theoretical model of mental functioning, individuals fulfil their basic needs by employing behavioural patterns that are predominantly characterised by approach or avoidance strategies (McNaughton et al., 2016; Ward et al., 2017). Human beings are motivated by basic needs (orientation/control, pleasure/avoidance of pain, need for attachment, self-enhancement), and they actively work towards fulfilling them. When the needs are unmet, it leads to a state of 'incongruence'. Additionally, when multiple processes clash with each other, it creates a 'discordance' that has consequences for mental well-being.

The basic need of pleasure and avoidance of pain, and the approach and avoidance strategies, corresponded nicely with the concepts of *raga* (attraction) and *dvesha* (avoidance) in *yoga* psychology (Satish, 2019). An individual's happiness or unhappiness is determined by their perception of success and failure. Letting go through *vairagya* (non-attachment) is a process to discover the truth about oneself during meditation (Vivekananda, 2012). While attachment is crucial for a child's development (Cooke et al., 2019), it can also hinder the inner growth of adults by not moving beyond these attachment styles. When considering the basic need for control, I am reminded of *abhyasa* (persistence practice) and *ekagra* (one-pointedness concentration) (Vivekananda, 2012). The objective of *yoga* is in harmony with the basic need for self-enhancement.

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While the consistency-theoretical model and yogic philosophy may seem reductionistic in their approach, I believe that meditation is a process of relinquishing complexity, with a focus on enhancing perceptions. Heightened perception, clarity and concentration that supports higher functioning of the mind is better than intellectual analysis (breaking things down and separate them) (Nisbett et al., 2001). While the focus on gross reality is advantageous, it cannot comprehend the subjective reality advocated by Eastern cultures.

Therapeutic relationships play a crucial role in impacting neural processes and promoting recovery and growth (Ward et al., 2017). It is the bond and collaboration in therapy between a therapist and a client who are working towards therapeutic goals and tasks (Howard et al., 2022). In the practice of meditation, the consistent act of sitting at a specific time and place created a therapeutic connection with myself that allowed the disturbances to surface, making it challenging to relax. I wonder if the elements of talk-focused therapy and inner-focus meditation can be compared. Does the focus on communication distract us from deeper somatic healing and awareness? Rather than talking, would experiencing emotions and feelings without avoidance heal the individual. For me, it provided a tool to practice regularly and let go of emotional and psychological pain. Emotional disturbances can be observed as neural mechanisms attempting to alleviate psychological pain or re-experiencing traumatic memories (Yuan et al., 2014).

Within the context of psychoanalytical processes, Bion's concept of container and containment refers to the function of nurturing figures or therapists in facilitating the processing and regulation of intense emotions (Waddell, 2002). This assistance enabled individuals to develop the capacity to independently manage their emotions. Klein's object relations theory explained the impact of early relational patterns with internalised figures on an individual's emotional and physical responses (Waddell, 2002). Concepts such as splitting and projective identification illustrate the ways in which we handle complex emotions toward significant figures from childhood. Therapy essentially facilitated the integration of

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fragmented perceptions, leading to a more cohesive and authentic self-image and perception of others (Waddell, 2002). Emotional maturity and security in relationships were dependent on this integration. I believe that daily meditation practice can assist competent individuals (those who can function reasonably well in the world without therapeutic intervention) in reprocessing and integrating traumatic experiences that emerge in their daily lives, especially when regular therapy sessions are not financially feasible, accessible, or available.

During meditation, while the body serves as the container, the unwavering commitment to remain still and concentrate on the natural breath acted as a means of containment (Kumar, 2013; Vivekananda, 2012). Additionally, to smoothly overcome barriers, the qualities of *ekagra* (training), *abhyasa* (commitment), and *vairagya* (non-attachment) should be cultivated (Agrawal & Sahota, 2020).

Projective identification is a psychological defense mechanism (Waddell, 2002) that can explain my emotional attitude in relationships where I have projected an internal concern onto them. Defense mechanisms (projective identification, transference, container, and containment) are developed extensively by psychology theorists such as Freud, Klien, and Bion (Waddell, 2002). Klien's projective identification is an early defense mechanism with complementary identification as countertransference (Kernberg, 1987). This involves internal relational phantasies about self and object (females or males in my case) and external interactions in the environment shaping transference (Waska, 2008).

During my practice, I recognised that when interacting with females, I tend to project my unresolved feelings or negative experiences (with authority or being dominated) onto them, especially when they attempt to care for me or give me instructions. I unconsciously view their actions as dominating or oppressive which resulted in strong feelings of rage that I externalised. This caused disturbances within me and in my relationship with them. Their complementary identification (or countertransference) is potentially the unaffected response

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and continuation of the same activity, as disregarding my anger provokes me. This involved unconsciously absorbing my projection and playing a reinforcing role in this dynamic, behaving as an unwavering figure of authority. Ideally, this repetitive and unhealthy interaction is explained, understood, and processed in the therapeutic relationship with the therapist. I had strong defense mechanisms in place where, despite attending therapy, I could not explore these dynamics. Additionally, it could be because living in New Zealand is more comfortable and I did not encounter them often to explore.

I understood these dynamics based on my prior knowledge of these terms and through self-reflexivity. Throughout the *mandala*, engaging in meditation and reflective journaling facilitated the identification of these triggers. For others, self-reflection may support the identification of triggers, but further support is required to understand the deeper aspects. I believe these further supports could be provided more efficiently that does not require weekly therapy. Furthermore, clear boundary establishment was effective in managing my emotions during and after the *mandala*. This meant emphasising that others are not obligated to take care of me and that I am capable of self-sufficiency.

My experience with the opposite gender during the *mandala* can be explained by Freud's concept of projection. I projected my uncomfortable feelings of suspicion and betrayal based on past experiences onto the opposite gender (Waddell, 2002), even in situations that appeared harmless. I scrutinised their interactions with other females excessively. Their counter-projection manifested as a sense of unjustly accusation or control, which caused them to withdraw through distancing behaviours. During the *mandala*, I made considerable progress in building trust with the opposite gender, communicating my insecurities, and articulating how their behaviours disturb me. This echoed the therapeutic principles of attachment theory, where secure relationships help frame and resolve past relational traumas (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005). The reassurance of commitment to their partners and maturity assisted me to reconsider social circumstances and refrain from reacting impulsively.

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Although I have not completely resolved from my previous experience, I have managed to establish an emotional space between the perceived threat (such as the feeling of losing control or the fear of betrayal) and the need to impulsively react. I have achieved this by engaging in daily meditation, self-reflection, and artistic expression of unresolved feelings. Therapy was not financially feasible for me to navigate through this emotional instability in an unfamiliar environment; I found solace in *yoga* principles of meditation and witnessing the *kleshas* (colouring) of *vrittis* (thought patterns) (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016) to diminish their grip on my negative thinking patterns by training the mind and cultivating non-attachment. With regular practice, I believe that these perceived threats/emotional triggers will turn into neutral memories without *raga* (attraction) or *dvesha* (aversion) by creating distance to avoid impulsive reactions.

AI Generated Digital Art for Subjective Reflective Practices

Creating digital art has therapeutic aspects like meditation (Nam, 2015). This builds a unique relationship with the art-making process. After analysing the self-interview data and collaborating it with the AI-generated digital artworks, I realised that the artworks did not fully capture the entire depth and dynamics of my meditation experience. The digital artworks represented my belief of what was important for me to express outwardly; therefore, some concepts were oversimplified, creating a gap between the actual experience and its artistic portrayal.

AI-generated digital art offered several advantages in illustrating the subjective experience of meditation practice. It enabled the expression of complex emotions and fostered engagement through its interactive components during image generation. I found that daily digital artwork captured the essence of the practice: a visual representation of my internal state. It facilitated catharsis, a remembering of traumatic experience, and emotional release (Pliske et al., 2021). Catharsis is the natural expression of feelings where therapists allow thoughts to occur without interference, encouraging patients to engage in them for greater

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awareness and responsibility (Nichols & Efran, 1985). I believe emotions should be felt, understood, and experienced within the body and mind, rather than verbally, as is commonly encouraged in therapy. Daily meditation and self-reflection allowed this catharsis to happen for me. Reflecting on the digital artwork I created a year ago, I still vividly recall the emotions invoked in me: the rage inside myself, feeling disgusted at food, compassion, and tenderness towards my broken heart or the magical energetic sensations in my body. The digital artwork captured the states of tranquillity, stability, and aspiration to explore the depths of my own truth.

Even without any training in the prompt generation, it took me an hour per day to capture my meditation experience through *MidJourney*. It was not as simple as a single sentence of text; I redefined the prompts selected the images to upscale and blended them until a final image resonated with my meditative experience for the day, as described in the methods. I felt that this process was creative and therapeutic by itself. I felt proud that the artwork could capture my inner experience which was difficult to articulate and with no artistic skill. Digital artwork, however, would be difficult to interpret without the corresponding self-interview data and may appear impersonal due to the algorithmic nature of their creation.

Reflecting on Limitations

Autoethnography has some inherent limitations as a qualitative research approach. First, it is subjective as it relies on my own personal experience and interpretations. This results in biases in the perception and reporting of events that may not accurately reflect broader social realities. Therefore, its usefulness is limited when it comes to drawing wider social or cultural judgements (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Some researchers may contend that it lacks the scientific rigor commonly found in traditional research methodologies, as it does not allow empirical testing or falsification of findings (Reed-Danahay, 1997). The

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autoethnographic study was emotionally demanding and challenging, as it involved revisiting and analysing personal or traumatic experiences (McClain, 2024; Ørbæk, 2022).

Another limitation of this study is the utilisation of translated and commentaries of ancient texts to analyse and comprehend Indian psychological thoughts and *yoga* concepts. I wish I understood the Sanskrit language to explore the original texts rather than relying on translated information or articles published in unpopular journals. Despite these limitations, I strongly believe that meditation requires experiential knowledge, rather than intellectual understanding. Therefore, it was advantageous that I was unable to read and understand the ancient texts, as it allowed me to have fewer intellectual distractions during meditation.

Additionally, I have not learned prompt engineering which is the careful designing of prompts such as subject and style to meet specific requirements, artistic preferences, or prompt guided image editing (Liu & Chilton, 2022). My skill level is rudimentary, and I have briefly researched the Internet before generating images. I believe prompt engineering knowledge could allow more accurate redefining of digital artworks to capture subjectivity. However, revisiting my digital artwork from the first day to the last, I could see an improvement in describing prompts, and I am happy with the final images.

Future Directions

The research gap in exploring subjective meditation experiences can be challenged using a multimodal methodology (autoethnography and AI-generated digital art). Video analysis and other empirical measurements could also be included in future research for those inclined towards quantitative analysis. My research explored a new way of capturing subjective aspects of meditation and sense of self that aligned with IIP, but is not limited to it. In the future, I would like to compare the experiences and digital artwork of novice and experienced meditation practitioners. This methodology provided a visual diary of subjective experiences, and I would be keen to find recurrent themes (e.g. exploring images of balanced, disturbed, harmonious, and peaceful states of mind). The creation of an AI-

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generated digital artwork based on subjective experiences could have potential therapeutic benefits when integrated into therapy or discussions of psychological insights. The creation of a digital artwork facilitated a space in which the state of mind could be seen visually.

Conclusion:

Reflecting and Resting in My Garden

I delved into the transformative effects of daily two-hour breath awareness meditation for 42 days in this autoethnographic study. Through an analysis of themes and AI-generated digital artwork, I showed how the subjectivity of meditation could be explored. The themes revolved around understanding the physical experiences of pain and pleasure, emotional and psychological understanding of distress, and the temporal experience of meditation. They illustrated my subjective experience of meditation and exploration to attain inner stability.

My findings showed that meditation influences practitioners' sense of self and reality. This has been explored through Indian philosophy and *yoga* psychology. *Yoga* and meditation are not just a practice for relaxation or stress alleviation; they resolve deep-seated emotional and psychological issues. Understanding the experience through the concept of *koshas*, levels of consciousness, and various paths in *yoga* helped with self-awareness and understanding the subjective experience. The digital artworks provided a dynamic visual representation of the subjective experiences and highlighted challenges around capturing its full depth. The IIP provided a broader philosophical and practical framework for the meditative process and emphasised a holistic view in which spiritual dimensions of experience were also included.

This research advocates for a more subjective exploration of meditation, as it is a very personal activity and cannot be generalised. Meditation explores subjective aspects of the self which are excluded from traditional scientific research. Modern therapeutic frameworks advocate for the benefits of meditation without an in-depth understanding of its

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origins and how it influences the *psyche*. *The yoga* psychology framework provides a rational and universal methodology to explore existential truths. Knowledge of *panchakosha's*, *prana*, levels of consciousness, and progress in personal transformation (*vairagya*, *ekagra*, and *abhyasa*) are important aspects to consider.

In conclusion, my autoethnographic journey provided a unique research method to explore subjective meditation experiences through AI-generated digital artwork for psychological stability.

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Appendix A

Supplementary information about meditation practice

Pre-Practice	1. How am I feeling before the practice today?
Questions	2. How did I sleep during the night?
	3. How does my breathing seem? Surface/Nasal, Chest, Abdomen/Deep?
	4. How does the body feel? Am I feeling relaxed in the body? Tightness anywhere? Awareness?
	5. What is going on in my mind? Are my thoughts calm? Any ordinary/extraordinary thoughts processes?
	6. How am I feeling emotionally? Where can I feel this in my body? What are the emotions related to?
	7. How does the energy body feel like? Can I feel any blockages/flow of energy? Describe it? Why does it feels this way?
	8. What is my experience of time and space?
	9. What do you feel connected/disconnected to?
	10. How do you believe your practice will be like today? Anything you want to achieve? Are you looking forward to it? How did you prepare yourself mentally and physically?
	11. Anything else I wanted to say?

Video link	Daily meditation recording speed up at 1000x speed formed a 10-15 second video clip. These were combined to form a 5 minute video for the 42 days. https://youtu.be/cbcCQ2HtErA
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Appendix B

Glossary

Abhyasa	Practice and effort. It is the consistent and dedicated practice aimed at developing a skill towards mastery.
Agni	Fire - one of five elements according to Hindu cosmology
Ahamkara	The ego or I-ness. It is an aspect of the mind that identifies with the self and creates a sense of individuality.
Akasha	Ether or Space – one of five elements according to Hindu cosmology
Anandamaya kosha	The bliss body – part of panchakoshas according to Upanishads
Annamaya kosha	The physical body – part of panchakoshas according to Upanishads
Apas	Water – one of five elements according to Hindu cosmology
Aranyakas	A section of the Vedic texts that deal with rituals and spirituality. It is an intermediary between the Brahmanas and the Upanishads
Ardhasiddhasana	A half version of <i>Siddhasana</i> , a static meditation posture
Asana	Physical postures in yoga practice
Asana siddhi	Perfection of posture when one can hold a yoga posture comfortably for a long period
Ashram	A spiritual hermitage or retreat center, where spiritual seekers live and practice under the guidance of a guru

Atharvaveda

One of the four Vedas, it contains hymns, mantras, and rituals for healing, protection, and daily life

Atman

Refers to the “soul” or “inner self.” It represents the true essence of an individual, beyond the physical body and mind, and is considered eternal and unchanging

Ayahuasca

A psychoactive brew used traditionally in Amazonian shamanic rituals for spiritual healing and insights

Ayurveda

Traditional system of Indian medicine which focuses on balancing the body’s doshas (vata, pitta, kapha) through diet, herbal remedies, and lifestyle

Bhagavad Gita

A 700-verse Hindu scripture, part of the Mahabharata

Bhakti

Devotion emphasising love typically towards God

Bharata Varsha

An ancient name for India, often used in historical and mythological contexts

Brahmanas

Brahmanas are prose texts explaining the hymns and their ritualistic significance

Brahman

The ultimate, unchanging reality which is the source of everything in the universe

Buddhi

Intellect or discernment. The faculty of the mind responsible for judgement, understanding and wisdom

Chakras

Energy centers that are aligned along the spine in the body and influence physical, mental, and spiritual health

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Chi	These terms refer to the vital life force or energy that flows through all living beings, according to Chinese and Japanese philosophy. In traditional Chinese medicine, <i>Qi</i> is thought to circulate through pathways in the body, known as meridians, and imbalances in this flow can lead to illness
Ki	
Qi	
Dharana	Concentration, one of the eight limbs of yoga, involving focused attention on a single point or object
Dharma	Duty or the moral law, it is righteous living
Dhyana	Meditation which involves a deeper state of focus and contemplation
Doshas	The three life forces or energies in Ayurveda: <i>Vata</i> (wind), <i>Pitta</i> (bile), and <i>Kapha</i> (phlegm), which govern physiological processes
Dvesha	Aversion or hatred. It is an emotional response that leads to rejection or resistance towards experiences or people which contributes to mental disturbances.
Ekagra	Concentration or one-pointedness of mind. It is a key practice in meditation where the mind focuses on a single object or thought.
Gherandha Samhita	Classical text of Hatha yoga
Guru	A spiritual teacher or guide, especially in Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist traditions
Gurukul	A traditional form of schooling in India where students live with their guru and learn in a holistic environment

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Hatha yoga	A branch of yoga focusing on physical postures and breathing techniques to balance the body and mind
Hatha Yoga Pradipika	Classical text of Hatha yoga
Hauora	A Māori concept of health that includes physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being.
Jiva	a complex multi-layered being
Jnana yoga	The path of knowledge or wisdom.
Kapha	One of the primary doshas or bodily humors in Ayurveda. <i>Kapha</i> (phlegm/water) governs structure, stability, and lubrication.
Karma	the law of cause and effect, where actions determine future experiences
Karma yoga	The yoga of selfless action, focusing on performing duties without attachment to outcomes
Kleshas	The afflictions or obstacles to spiritual growth. These are ignorance (<i>avidya</i>), egoism (<i>asmita</i>), attachment (<i>raga</i>), aversion (<i>dvesha</i>) and clinging to life (<i>abhinivesha</i>)
Koshas	The layers, sheaths or coverings of the true self: <i>annamaya</i> , <i>pranamaya</i> , <i>manomaya</i> , <i>vijnanamaya</i> , and <i>anandamaya</i>
Ksetra	This term means the physical body or “field” in which the self (consciousness) operates
Ksetrajna	The “knower of the field” or consciousness that is aware of the physical body and its experiences

Kundalini	A dormant spiritual energy located at the base of the spine that can be awakened through yoga and meditation, leading to spiritual enlightenment
Lokayata	An ancient Indian philosophical system that emphasises materialism and scepticism, rejecting the supernatural
Mahabharata	Major epic of ancient India. The <i>Mahabharata</i> contains the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i>
Mandala	A spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism, representing the universe and used as a meditation tool. <i>Mandala</i> is also known as a phase of austerity that aims to develop a disciplined practice.
Manomaya kosha	The mental body – part of panchakoshas according to Upanishads
Mantra	A sacred sound, word, or phrase repeated in meditation to focus the mind and invoke spiritual power
Maya	An illusion or appearance of the world
Meridians	Pathways in the body through which energy (Qi) flows, according to Chinese medicine
Moksha	In Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, <i>Moksha</i> refers to liberation or release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (<i>samsara</i>). It represents the ultimate goal of spiritual practice, where the soul (atman) is freed from the bonds of karma and material existence, and merges with the ultimate reality, often conceptualised as <i>Brahman</i> in Hinduism. In other traditions, it

	is seen as reaching enlightenment or Nirvana, symbolising a state of eternal peace, bliss, and union with the divine
Nadis	In yoga and Ayurveda, <i>nadis</i> are energy channels through which <i>prana</i> (life force) flows. The three main nadis are <i>Ida</i> , <i>Pingala</i> , and <i>Sushumna</i> , which intersect at chakras.
Nastika	Refers to schools or individuals who do not accept the authority of the Vedas, Hindu scriptures. It is typically used to describe non-theistic or atheistic philosophies, like Buddhism and Jainism.
Niyama	The second of the eight limbs of yoga as described by <i>Patanjali</i> . It refers to personal ethical practices and self-discipline
Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras	A collection of 196 Indian sutras (aphorisms) on the theory and practice of yoga. It outlines the eight-fold path, including ethical precepts, physical postures, and meditation.
Pitta	One of the primary doshas or bodily humors in Ayurveda. <i>Pitta</i> (bile/fire) governs digestion, metabolism, and transformation
Prajna	Translated as the 'wisdom' or 'intelligence'. It refers to a state of deep understanding and insight. In the context of consciousness, it is often related to the deep sleep state (sushupti)

Prakriti	In Hinduism and Samkhya philosophy, <i>Prakriti</i> is the natural world or material reality, as opposed to <i>Purusha</i> (pure consciousness).
Prana	<i>Prana</i> is the vital life force or energy that permeates all living things. It is akin to the concept of breath or spirit and is believed to flow through the body via channels called <i>nadis</i> , similar to the concept of <i>Qi</i> in Chinese medicine.
Pranamaya	Breathing exercises in yoga, designed to control <i>prana</i> . It is one of the eight limbs of yoga and is essential for balancing energy and preparing for meditation.
Pratyahara	The fifth limb of yoga, which means “withdrawal of the senses.” It involves drawing attention inward by detaching from external sensory distractions.
Prithvi	Earth – one of five elements according to Hindu cosmology
Psyche	This term comes from Greek philosophy and psychology, referring to the human soul, mind, or spirit. It represents the mental and emotional processes that constitute consciousness, thought, and personality
Purusha	In Samkhya philosophy, <i>Purusha</i> refers to individual consciousness, the eternal, unchanging observer, distinct from the material world (<i>prakriti</i>).
Raga	Attachment or desire. It is the craving for sensory experiences or objects which can lead to suffering if not recognised or controlled

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF MEDITATION

Raja yoga	A form of yoga focusing on meditation and mental control. It is often referred to as the “royal path” to spiritual enlightenment.
Rajas	One of the three <i>gunas</i> (qualities) in Hindu philosophy, representing activity, passion, and restlessness
Ramayana	Major epic of ancient India that tells the story of Prince Rama
Rigveda	The oldest of the four Vedas, containing hymns and praises to deities, considered one of the most important ancient Indian texts.
Rishi	Sage or seer in ancient India who are believed to have composed the Vedas. They were considered enlightened beings with deep spiritual insight
Ruach	A Hebrew term meaning “spirit,” “breath,” or “wind.” <i>Ruach</i> often refers to the spirit of God or the divine force that animates and sustains life
Sage	Another term for rishi
Samadhi	The final stage in the eight limbs of yoga, representing a state of meditative absorption and union with the divine or universal consciousness.
Samaveda	One of the four Vedas, primarily consisting of melodies and chants for religious rituals
Samyama	A combination of three practices: dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (absorption). Together they provide insight and understanding.

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Samhitas	<i>Samhitas</i> are collections of hymns and mantras in the Vedas
Samkhya	One of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy that explains the dualism of <i>Purusha</i> (consciousness) and <i>Prakriti</i> (matter)
Sastriya	Refers to something that is based on or in accordance with the scriptures (<i>Shastras</i>) in Indian tradition.
Sattva	One of the three <i>gunas</i> (qualities), representing purity, harmony, and balance
Siddhasana	A seated meditation posture in yoga known for its simplicity and effectiveness in promoting physical and mental stability
Siddhayoni asana	A variation of <i>Siddhasana</i> for females, where the heel is pressed against the perineum, often used in meditation practices.
Spiritus	A Latin word that means “breath” or “spirit.” In a broader context, it refers to the vital principle that animates living beings. In Christian theology, Spiritus is often associated with the Holy Spirit
Sri Aurobindo	An Indian philosopher, yogi, and poet, known for integrating spirituality with social and political thought. His teachings focus on spiritual evolution and the transformation of human consciousness
Sruthi	Refers to that which is “heard,” specifically the Vedas and other sacred texts that are divinely revealed.

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Sthira

Stability, firmness, or steadiness in yoga postures, as outlined in the *Yoga Sutras*

Sufi

A follower of Sufism, which is the mystical branch of Islam. Sufis focus on the inward search for God and seek to experience the divine directly through practices like meditation, prayer, and devotion

Sukha

Comfort or ease, often referred to in yoga as the state of being comfortable in a posture, or more generally, happiness and well-being.

Swami Rama

A well-known yogi and spiritual teacher, famous for his teachings on meditation, self-realization, and bridging the gap between Eastern and Western

Swami Vivekananda

An influential Indian monk and disciple of Ramakrishna, who introduced Vedanta and yoga to the Western world, emphasising the importance of unity and universal spirituality

Tajjasa

Luminous state of consciousness associated with the dream state (Svapna) where the mind experiences thoughts and images created from impressions

Taittiriya Upanishad

An ancient text that explains the layers of the self (koshas) and discusses the nature of reality, meditation, and the importance of knowledge.

Tamas

One of the three *gunas* (qualities), representing darkness, inertia, and ignorance.

Tantras	A set of esoteric spiritual traditions in Hinduism and Buddhism, focusing on rituals, meditation, and the awakening of spiritual energy, often through the chakras.
Tarka	Logic or reasoning. <i>Tarka</i> is used to establish correct understanding, especially in debates about spiritual concepts
Tridosha Prakriti	The three fundamental bodily constitutions in Ayurveda: <i>Vata</i> (air), <i>Pitta</i> (fire), and <i>Kapha</i> (water), which govern the body's functions
Triguna	The three qualities or energies that make up all matter and life in Hindu philosophy: <i>Sattva</i> (purity), <i>Rajas</i> (activity), and <i>Tamas</i> (inertia).
Turiya	The fourth state of consciousness in Indian philosophy, beyond waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, representing pure awareness or transcendental consciousness
Upanishads	Ancient Indian texts that form the philosophical basis of Hinduism, exploring concepts like the nature of reality, the self (atman), and the ultimate reality (Brahman).
Vairagya	Detachment or dispassion. It is the ability to remain unaffected by external circumstances or desires for inner peace.
Vaishvanara	Universal or cosmic aspect of consciousness representing the waking state. It's the universal self that encompasses all beings and experiences. It symbolises unity and collective consciousness.

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Vata	One of the primary doshas or bodily humours in Ayurveda. <i>Vata</i> (wind/air) governs movement and communication.
Vayu	Air – one of five elements according to Hindu cosmology In Buddhism, it refers to the feeling or sensation that arises from contact with the senses, categorized as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.
Vedana	
Vedanta	One of the six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, based on the teachings of the Upanishads, focusing on the nature of reality, the self, and liberation (moksha).
Vedas	The most ancient and sacred Hindu scriptures, consisting of four collections— <i>Rigveda</i> , <i>Yajurveda</i> , <i>Samaveda</i> , and <i>Atharvaveda</i> —containing hymns, rituals, and philosophical teachings. Originating from the Sanskrit root “vid,” meaning “to know”
Vedic	Relating to the Vedas or the Vedic period, the era in which these ancient texts were composed.
Vijnanamaya kosha	One of the five koshas or sheaths that cover the true self, according to the Upanishads. It is the intellectual covering.
Vipassana meditation	A Buddhist meditation technique focused on gaining insight into the nature of reality, particularly impermanence, suffering, and non-self.
Vrittis	The fluctuations or modifications of the mind. In yoga philosophy, understanding and controlling of the vrittis is essential for achieving mental clarity and stability.

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Yajurveda

One of the four Vedas, focusing on rituals and sacrificial formulas. It is a collection of mantras used in Vedic rituals and ceremonies.

Yama

The first of the eight limbs of yoga, representing ethical guidelines and moral restraints

Yoga

A holistic practice originating in ancient India, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual disciplines aimed at achieving union with the divine or higher consciousness. The term “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root “yuj,” meaning to yoke or unite.

Whakapapa

A Māori term from New Zealand referring to genealogy, ancestry, and the interconnectedness of all things