Altered Perception and Experience of "Self" Through the Cultivation of Bodily Awareness – A Phenomenological Investigation Among Long-term Body-based Practitioners.

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Abstract

Extensive research points to the efficacy of “mindfulness” to alleviate diverse psychological and physical symptoms. However research has afforded markedly less attention to the lived experience and mechanisms of *being* mindful. This study investigated the perception and experience of “self” among long-term practitioners of body-based techniques, such as meditation, Yoga, Tai Chi Chuan, and forms of breathwork. Five participants were engaged in semi-structured interviews, with a single researcher adopting the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology. Four overarching themes emerged: “The corruption of thought-based perception”, “Contacting a more direct truth through embodiment”, “Beyond the obsession with the body: Contacting the true self or no-self?”, and “Self-reflection in the environment”. Theme two, relating to bodily awareness, was the dominant theme of the study, comprising four subcategories: “Experience lodged in the physiology”, “Living inside out”, “The relationship between thought and sensation”, and “Non-reactivity and release”. The current findings illuminate body awareness as a potent pathway to self-discovery, providing a more direct truth of one's place in the world and a gateway to a deeper self. By interweaving cognitive psychology, neurophenomenology, and both Eastern and Western philosophical systems, this study probes into simultaneous insight into an essential self as consciousness, and an absolute absence of self. All participants concurred that this process of self-discovery originated from an initial dedication to inward attention, anchoring on direct bodily sensations as opposed to the mind’s interpretations.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Imagine this scenario: As you amble down the street, you notice a person, a tree, and a dog. These visual encounters seem to flow in through the doors of your eyes; but to what extent are you truly witnessing "reality", and how much is your subjective impression of it? Crucially, *who* is it that is experiencing this all-encompassing scene?

This study finds some alignment with the Hermeneutic Phenomenological (HP) epistemology – a perspective pioneered by Martin Heidegger positing that human experience is entirely subjectively constructed, wherein the potential for meaning-making is boundless (Packer, 1985). HP disputes a subject-object separation, and thus rejects a dualistic empirical approach of observing a world "out there", void of the subject's influence (Laverty, 2003). While the current study heroes our pre-verbal and direct lived experience, it also assumes that any attempt to describe these experiences render the experiences indirect. Thus, this study will grapple with the unavoidable transition from participants' direct lived-experience, into the domain of conceptualisation – where experience is interpreted or perceived, both by the individual and researcher – thereby rendering it inherently indirect (Packer, 1985).

We begin with an overview of neuroscientific and cognitive psychological research and principles. While Heidegger believed abstraction further estranges the subject from context, a rudimentary understanding of relevant psychological and physiological mechanisms positions us for a richer examination of our qualitative investigation of "self". This knowledge also places us in an optimal position to achieve the study's objective – discerning how sustained engagement with body-based awareness practices influences the perception of self in daily life.

1.1 The significance of perception

1.1.1 Exteroception

In this study, "perception" will be employed in line with cognitive psychology's interpretation, as the mechanism wherein sensory inputs are received

and organised, thus weaving together a coherent interpretation of “reality”. Exteroception, fundamentally, is how we interpret our external world through the five senses (of vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell). Picture this: You stroll into a sauna, where the unmistakable scent of sweat permeates the air. The olfactory data collected is interpreted by your brain, instigating an appropriate response – perhaps deciding to opt for the steam room instead, or engaging in cognitive reframing to perceive the sweat as a harmless aspect of the sauna experience. Exteroception, thereby, is critical to our everyday functioning and survival, equipping us with the means to interact with our environment, and formulate a sense of order amid the potential chaos of our surrounding world (Goldstein, 2019).

It is estimated that the brain houses an astonishing 100 billion neurons, each capable of forging connections with 1,000 to 10,000 fellow neurons (Schoenberg & Scott, 2011). Despite this incredibly complex network of connectivity and potentiality, we tend to display a consistent character throughout life, typified by enduring tendencies, peculiarities, and habits, many rooted in our early years. Yet, a functional brain must retain the capacity to adapt, or “rewire” itself, to ever-shifting environmental circumstances. Such adaptability is challenged by the necessity for reliable internal and external models to precisely anticipate safety and threat. Thus, our brains have evolved to strike a delicate balance between both malleability and maintenance of perceptual frameworks that represent ourselves and our surroundings. This fascinating interplay between the comfortable and the unfamiliar is at the heart of the current investigation as we probe into both the functional and detrimental aspects of these programmed frameworks.

Perceptual processing can be divided into two main categories: “top-down” and “bottom-up” processing (Keenan, 2023). Top-down processing engages the mind's pre-established frameworks or expectations to make sense of incoming stimuli. This method employs advanced cognitive functions such as memory and language to interpret and, as we will discuss further, *predict*, sensory experience (Barrett & Simmons, 2015). Conversely, bottom-up processing starts with unprocessed sensory data and gradually merges with top-down processes to

conceptualise these sensory inputs. While our brain's rapid recall and anticipatory capacities serve survival purposes, they are not intrinsically tuned for accurate perception. Instead, the brain is oriented towards economically satisfying resource requirements in response to sensed physiological needs (Barrett, 2016). Furthermore, our brain's predilection for the known is a well-documented phenomenon spanning various disciplines. The field of psychology is abundant with instances of cognitive biases – systematic errors in thinking – that can lead both participants and researchers to unwittingly distort their perceptions (Kahneman, 2011; Weiss & Daye, 2019). This automatic twisting of raw sensory data through perception suggests that our lived experience is heavily predicated on pre-existing mental schemas, nudging us towards familiar (and often incorrect) conclusions. Thus, considering that exteroception is inherently flawed due to the brain's bias for efficient management of vast amounts of sensory stimuli, we might question the wisdom of basing our self-perception on this data. Consequently, our ensuing discourse will delve into “interoception” – the brain's detection, processing, and awareness of bodily states – to investigate how our emotional experiences and internal constructs of our place in the world are shaped by these internal mechanisms (Craig, 2009).

1.1.2 Interoception

It is widely accepted that the human nervous system comprises the Central Nervous System (CNS) – consisting of the brain and spinal cord, and the Peripheral Nervous System (PNS) – incorporating all sensory pathways beyond the CNS. These systems work harmoniously, mediating interoceptive processes such as hunger, thirst, heart and respiratory rate, pain, muscle tension, body temperature and sensual arousal. There is a finely tuned interplay between the CNS and PNS in constant pursuit of balance or homeostasis – a concept we will soon return to (Dewey, 2022). Although delving into the neuroanatomy of interoception is beyond the purview of this review, it is crucial to recognise the plethora of evidence indicating the activation of similar brain regions during the processing of internal sensory information and the experience of conscious emotions (Craig, 2009; Gray & Critchley, 2007). This implies that phenomena like bodily discomfort wield a

considerable influence on our moment-to-moment lived experiences. In is within this context that the present study aims to probe the extent to which such experiences shape our self-perception; questioning for example, the extent to which cultivating “interoceptive awareness” alters reported subjective experience.

Further complementing this inquiry, Porges’ (2011) Polyvagal Theory offers compellingly evidence for interoceptive processing, emotional appraisal and co-regulation among nervous systems. At the heart of this theory is the role of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) – a subset of the periphery nervous system that is traditionally segregated into the sympathetic (“fight-flight”) and parasympathetic (“rest and digest”) components. Porges refines our perspective of the ANS, by dividing its parasympathetic division into two distinct systems: the frontal vagal system, which traces the frontal part of the body, from the brain stem down to the abdomen, and is associated with the conventional rest and digest function; and the dorsal vagal system, which follows the backline of the body and accounts for the vegetative aspects of our threat response, including the “freeze” reaction. These subdivisions of the ANS have evolved to augment an individual’s capacity to adapt behaviourally to their surroundings, with the frontal vagal system playing a particularly pivotal role in self-regulation.

Porges (2011) introduces “neuroception”, a subconscious process in which the brain evaluates risk, influencing behaviour and emotional regulation. It posits that social engagement relies on risk assessment and suppressing our limbic system's primitive reactions. Therefore, the frontal vagal system's efficiency is crucial in threat evaluation. Dysfunction can trigger hypersensitivity, social avoidance, and anxiety-like physical symptoms (Porges, 2011). These processes, occurring independently of conscious thought, shape human behaviour and interpersonal interaction significantly, inviting us to ponder over the idea of “separate” lived-experiences when the state of one person's nervous system directly influences another's before the conscious “self” can even respond or interpret. Our discussion thus far also invites us to question what unfolds within the realm of phenomenological experience when individuals engage in practices that

transform the body's physiology and their awareness of it? Yet, before investigating this from neurophenomenological standpoint, defining the term "self" is essential. To do this, we will integrate philosophy, chiefly Western and Buddhist, to navigate these often abstract concepts, while acknowledging that the term "Western" is a broad, and potentially oversimplifying categorisation.

1.2 Theories of "Self" and "No-Self" in Western and Indian Philosophy

Delving into psychological and philosophical models of selfhood is often a circular endeavour, potentially provoking more bafflement than clarity. Nevertheless, understanding what we mean by the word "self", or the paradoxical absence of it, is crucial to our present exploration.

1.2.1 Western Discourses

A fitting point to start this brief journey into subjectivity is to view it through the prism of Sigmund Freud, often hailed as the father of psychoanalysis. Freud (1940) famously segmented "personality" into three parts: the "id", which stands for our unconscious, instinctual urges and repulsions; the "ego", representing the rational, conscious segment of our minds; and the "superego"[1], offering a structure for societal expectations and responsibilities, reflecting the most advanced component of our personality (Freud, 1940). Within this model, conscious and unconscious forces drive individual behaviour, where the "I" or "me" is predominantly encapsulated within the ego, the orchestrator of the personality, according to Freud (Mosig, 2006). This interpretation continues to inform psychodynamic therapeutic approaches, proposing, in part, that a "healthy self" adjusts the id's instinctual desires to better fit with external realities, moderated through the interplay of the ego and superego (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018).

Echoing elements of the psychodynamic concept of the self, person-centred therapy, shaped by humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, utilises the term "self-concept" to represent the amalgamation of beliefs, perceptions, judgements, and relationships that form the individual "I" (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018; Rogers, 1959). Within this Rogerian framework, self-image or self-

concept stems from an accumulation of personal experiences and evolving perceptions about oneself and one's interactions with the world (Rogers, 1959). Consequently, our self-perception, informed by both our internal viewpoint and external feedback, plays a substantial role in influencing our present-moment thoughts, feelings, and actions. Indeed, one of person-centred therapy's approach to pathology centres around reconciling the discord within different versions of ourselves, for instance when the idealised self clashes with self-perception (Rogers, 1959). Thus, despite humanistic psychologists emphasising the inherent motivation towards self-actualisation and growth, they maintain a fundamental premise that the "self" is an entity possessing a degree of organisation (Rogers, 1959).

In contrast to this notion of a somewhat solidified self, an existentialist approach to selfhood rejects the "thingness" or any structural aspect of self within an individual (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Influential existentialist thinkers of the 20th century, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, and to some extent, Martin Heidegger, propounded our existence as *Being-in-the-world* as a fluid state of unceasing metamorphosis that lacks an innate essence and is inseparable from what we regard as the "external" world (Hermann, 2013; Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Denying the notion of self-as-structure, existential therapy engages with the individual in the context of three existential modes: *Being-in-nature, Being-with-others,* and *Being-for-oneself*. Elucidating these modes: Picture Bob, who finds little joy in solitary walks, and Ella, who relishes the serenity of solitude but loathes walking in company. It might be deduced that Bob has neglected to nurture his bond with nature (Being-in-nature), while Ella has distanced herself from forging meaningful connections with her fellow beings (Being-with-others). If both Bob and Ella define their identities primarily through the lens of others' perceptions, they have sidestepped the indispensable act of engaging with and introspecting upon their own existence (Being-for-oneself) (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018).

For existentialists therefore, an awakened self is tantamount to an authentic self – one characterised by openness and harmony with all the modes of being, neither shrinking from nor evading the world but embracing it with curiosity and

direct engagement. While the existential approach to self is artfully described in myriad ways, it invites a line of inquiry that is pertinent to our present exploration: How might the mind traverse its own labyrinthine fragments? Is it imperative for individuals to grasp the complexities of an existential analysis of the self in order to break free from the shackles of dysfunctional facets of their modes-of-Being? What does direct experience truly entail; and do these forms of talk therapy actually give people the tools to access their direct experience?

Lastly, let us consider the more pragmatic approach of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), where there is a marked departure from deep analysis of self. CBT portrays human experience as an interplay of five components (a.k.a. The Five Part Model) – comprised of thought, behaviour, emotion, physical sensations, and environment. CBT emphasises the interplay among these elements, wherein a change in one domain invariably reverberates through the others. Yet CBT's emphasis on maladaptive thought and behaviours patterns continues to reify a dualism of the separate individual managing their worldly engagements. This is still the case, even among "new wave" CBT modalities such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which ventures into the realm of Self-as-context, encouraging clients to expand their understanding of the self beyond the objects of their consciousness. In advanced ACT interventions, clients are invited to see self as a backdrop, a stage upon which experiences are enacted, and consequently, the "I" is distinct from the thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and sensations that parade across it (Harris, 2019). Here, we witness a subtle transition from the notion of a concrete self to that of the self as an encompassing space in which life's tapestry unravels.

Intriguingly, ACT's self-as-context approach to externalisation, finds parallels in Eastern perspectives of the self, but it also raises a conundrum: How does one discern between genuinely adopting a stance as the expansive context for experiences and merely adopting a new cognitive story which, while perhaps temporarily useful, remains tethered to the constructs of thought and, as such, is subject to the whims of mental fluctuations? Thus, even as the different strands of

CBT therapies each carry their unique textures which are highly valuable for some individuals in some contexts, there exists an underlying assumption that the current investigation calls into question: The proposition that a radical metamorphosis of our identity and place in the world can be achieved solely within the confines of the thought-based mind. The endeavour of this study is to scrutinise this premise in non-clinical populations through an intimate exploration of immersion in practices that offer immediate embodied feedback, rather than relying solely on additional theoretical constructs produced by mind.

1.2.2 Buddhist philosophy

Buddhism has been chosen as a touchstone primarily for the parallels that can be discerned between its many philosophies and Western science. Given the intricate variances between these schools of thought, our primary focus will be on Mahayana, one of the two main branches of Buddhism, though we will also reference principles that are shared broadly across the schools. The model of the five skandhas are one such overarching assumption and will serve as our tool to understand the Buddhist conceptualisation of the person as a dynamic interplay of shifting components, devoid of a central core, or self (Gupta, 2021).

The term “skandhas”, loosely translated from Sanskrit, signifies aggregates – pointing to clusters or stages of perception (Osto, 2018). The model reduces the person to five stages of perception: firstly of “Form” (Pali, “rupa”) – including all physical matter or the fundamental elements of existence; comprising earth, water, fire, air, space, and our sensory engagement with the world via the five senses. The second skandha, “feeling” (Pali, “vedana”), denotes the automatic, unconscious internal responses to sensory experiences, categorised as pleasure, pain, or neutrality, not to be mistaken with the Western understanding of “feeling” as emotion. The third skandha, “conceptions/perception” (Pali, “samjna”), refers to the instantaneous cognitive labelling of our ever-evolving experience. The fourth skandha, “mental formations” or “dispositions” (Pali, “samskaras”), represents our psychological propensities, habits, beliefs, memories, and karmic conditioning. From a cognitive psychology viewpoint, these samskaras house our world schemas

or models we have built since childhood; for behaviourists, samskaras contain reinforced behavioural patterns, or operant conditioning; and for psychoanalysts, they represent the storehouse of the “unconscious”. Essentially, samskaras or dispositions consist of what many call the “mind”, replete with all its conditioning. Lastly, the fifth skandha, “consciousness” (Pali, “vijñāna”), denotes the sphere of awareness encapsulating all preceding skandhas. In Buddhist philosophy, consciousness is always consciousness *of* something; no standalone state of awareness exists separate from the mental or physical objects the person is conscious of. Therefore, consciousness comprises the previous four skandhas.

As pointed out by Westerhoff (2009), a thorough comprehension of the five skandhas is less essential than recognising that all Buddhist schools view the skandhas as comprehensive, with their existence defining the complete person. From this standpoint, Westerhoff (2009) suggests that for a self to be present, it must correspond to one or a mixture of these elements. Yet, this idea encounters logical inconsistencies when evaluated from various perspectives. Let us, for instance, entertain the idea that the self is identical to any of the five aggregates at a specific moment: “I” would have to equate to my perceptual schemas and conditioned reactions (samskaras). Yet, what becomes of the “I” when these perceptual schemas are confronted or altered? Is the “I” then defined by the new perceptual frameworks? If each aggregate fluctuates from one moment to the next, where can a substantial self be situated? Thus we begin to see how the model of the skandhas sets the stage for the ‘Doctrine of No-self’ – another central pillar of Buddhist philosophy endorsed across all its schools (Gupta, 2021).

Sanskrit terms “sunya” or “śūnyata”, often translated as 'emptiness', are integral to Buddhism, emphasising the absence of an independent existence beyond the aggregates (skandhas) that constitute an individual (Garfield, 1995). This contrasts with Hinduism's concept of “atman”, interpreted as soul or self, but does not correspond with the Western “soul” notion. It represents an eternal, unchangeable aspect that reincarnates or exists as pure consciousness (Osto, 2018). Buddhism’s focus on “anatman” negates any enduring entity, including a

“true self” behind the experiential aggregates. Further, Buddhism's Four Noble Truths acknowledge dissatisfaction, triggered by desire and aversion, as an inevitable life facet (Gupta, 2021). However, the Buddha's critical realisation of Impermanence suggests that it is not objects of consciousness causing suffering, but the mind’s attachment to, or identification with, them. Therefore it is the mind's inclination towards “thirst” (Pāli, 'tṛṣṇā') for pleasure and aversion to pain engenders suffering (Gupta, 2021). Pleasure, like pain, is fleeting, inciting perpetual striving for more, thus propagating dissatisfaction or suffering. Thus, the issue lies not in the transient nature of all things but in our attachment to them. As we continue to review related literature, a primary line of inquiry concerns whether body-based awareness practices can challenge this sense that there is a self to cling to experience in the first place.

1.3 Reviewing the “Effects” of Mindfulness: Quantitative Evidence for the Psychological and Physiological Changes Associated with Mind-body Interventions on Clinical and Non-clinical Populations

The current study views mindfulness as, being *full* of the present moment, through paying attention to the contents of experience purposefully, without evaluation. As discussed in Section 2.3.1, this term has its roots in Buddhism, surfacing from Pāli language. Bearing this definition in mind, let us explore mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) within both clinical and non-clinical populations. MBIs encompass various forms of yoga asana (poses), forms of breathwork, and forms of meditation practices; all of which are methods potentially effective in fostering a state of mindfulness (Taylor et al., 2020). Our objective remains to explore the shifts in individuals' lived experiences as they engage in these mind-body practices, while critically examining the quantitative methodologies employed.

1.3.1 “Stress”

Let us commence by delving into a term so ubiquitously used that it has almost been stripped of its significance. The management of stress in dealing with the challenges of daily life has been intrinsically linked with mindfulness practices in

Western societies, with celebrated programmes like Jon Kabat Zinn's (2014) Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction frequently cited across quantitative research (Taylor et al., 2020). It is crucial, though, to precisely delineate what we mean when we speak of stress. In psychological contexts, stress is often perceived in connection with its causative factors: either direct exposure to a significant event or the perceived inadequacy of personal resources needed to manage a given situation (Sadock, 2014). Yet according to the Polyvagal Theory posited by Porges (2011), “stress” is not defined in relation to the external circumstances, but as a result of inadequate frontal vagal tone or activation, indicating self-regulation deficiencies. This perspective suggests the source of the stress response resides within the individual rather than the external situation. Nevertheless, given the highly documented physical and psychological impacts of chronic stress (Rohleder, 2012), it is intriguing to consider the potential shifts in individual experience through the engagement in mindfulness practices like yoga.

Elisabetta Della et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating that yoga practices result in lower stress levels, suggesting their efficacy in mitigating work-related stress. A significant proportion of the studies reviewed used self-report measures like the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), assessing manifestations of stress such as distress, irritability, and perceived lack of control. Despite acknowledging the value of PSS scores in associating reduced stress with improved wellbeing, the authors overlook the impact of expectancy effects—limitations in self-report measures due to individuals' subconscious belief influence on their behaviour and perception (Ghanbari Noshari et al., 2022). Indeed, in a separate study, Ghanbari Noshari et al. (2022) revealed that the positive belief in a “mindfulness” task led to enhancements in post-test measures; the authors attributing these improvements to expectancy effects. This understanding of perception distortion raises critical questions regarding the efficacy of mindfulness interventions: Are they genuinely effective or do they create temporary perceived transformations through expectancy effects? Furthermore, can practitioners discern whether they are merely lulling themselves into perceived enlightenment or actually transcending thought-based perception distortions?

1.3.2 “Trauma”-related symptoms

Though trauma has also evolved into somewhat of a buzzword, acknowledgement of these processes importantly broadens our understanding of the ways our nervous system can become ensnared in a harrowing past. Prior to delineating this term and probing how alterations in trauma-related symptoms influence individual experience, we turn our gaze to Seligman’s (1972) seminal work on “learned helplessness” to exemplify how maladaptive learning can arise from exposure to traumatic events. Seligman’s shocking experiments revealed that creatures subjected to recurring stress with perceived lack of control do not necessarily seize opportunities to escape, illustrating learned helplessness. This provides insight into humans' inclination to stick to familiar life cycles, even when circumstances contributing to suffering are no longer imposed on them. It is in this context that we examine the effects of mindfulness interventions to extricate participants from the chronicity of this dysregulated state of the nervous system.

Taylor et al. (2020) meta-analysed 25 studies, casting their net over Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs), including yoga postures, Tai Chi Chuan, and Qigong. These were deployed amongst psychiatric patients who had weathered an array of traumatic events including maltreatment, sexual violation, and neglect. Taylor et al. align with a rising tide of scholarly agreement (Van der Kolk, 2014) lending weight to the notion that trauma is far from being solely the province of cognition, but rather, is engrained in the very tapestry of our physiology. Taylor et al. therefore argue that interventions such as MBIs can be extremely potent in reaching beneath the surface of perception to address the physiological imprints of trauma in the body.

Overall, Taylor and colleagues (2020) identified a moderately good impact of yoga asana (postures) and mindfulness practices in mitigating symptoms related to irregularities in the autonomic nervous system such as hyperactivity. Further, a significant proportion of the participants across the reviewed studies utilised Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) – an eight-week mindfulness regimen pioneered by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2014). We will return to MBSR as an effective

therapeutic approach later, however, it is worth noting that the short-term nature of such programmes poses a limitation to gauging long-term efficacy. Given that sustained follow-ups are not commonplace in quantitative research, this complicates the assessment of long-term sustainability of these interventions. Thus, while Taylor et al.'s results are echoed in additional standalone studies (Kim et al., 2013) examining the application of MBIs on trauma-related symptoms, it is crucial to recognise additional limitations present in quantitative reviews of this nature.

Firstly, Taylor et al.'s (2020) study was not tailored for trauma-related disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition [DSM-5] (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Rather, the authors addressed a spectrum of trauma-related symptoms across clinical conditions, resulting in a plethora of varied symptoms loosely tied to trauma exposure. This wide approach makes deriving conclusions about yoga or mindfulness's impact on a host of symptoms a challenging task. Additionally, nearly half the studies reviewed relied on passive controls, hindering solid comparisons and the elimination of extraneous influences like placebo effects (Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009). Therefore, despite the study's promise, its findings necessitate cautious interpretation due to these limitations. Still, we continue reviewing quantitative literature to broaden our understanding, with a focus on substance misuse and addiction.

1.3.3 "Addiction"

In its myriad manifestations, addiction is omnipresent. Two common forms – substance misuse and substance abuse – are widespread comorbidities spanning an array of clinical conditions (Sadock, 2014). However, it is important to emphasise that every "normal" body is passionately striving to fulfil its familiar chemical needs, a concept previously outlined in the context of homeostasis and allostasis (See Section 1.1.2). Yet find ourselves within a paradigm where there are certain addictions that are societally deemed more acceptable, such as to work, to overthinking, or even to binge-watching TV series, not to mention to the incessant sharing of personal ideas and emotions to project our "individuality" on social

media. On the other hand, other forms of addiction, such as recreational drug use and sexual intercourse, are typically met with societal disapproval and are rapidly pathologised. Although our review of the literature will centre on these more clinically recognised forms of addiction, it is important to outline a universal mechanism underlying all addictions as, the desire to either increase or have less of a particular internal feeling.

Li et al. (2017) analysed 42 studies, finding that MBIs largely reduced substance misuse symptoms, sometimes outperforming standard Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) (Garland et al., 2014). Most studies reported a decrease in substance consumption, such as alcohol, cigarettes, cocaine, and prescription opioids. Participants engaging in MBIs learnt to observe drug-related thoughts without succumbing to them, associating increased awareness with decreased impulsive reactivity. Despite these encouraging results, these studies, like many in quantitative research, hinge on predefined interpretations of “cravings” and “awareness”, limiting insight into individuals' experiences, including their physical feelings and processes of resisting substance use.

Even among people with severe mental distress, Sabe et al. (2019) suggest the potential for MBIs, as an auxiliary intervention, to foster a sense of personal agency which in turn has the potential to off-set self-deprecating beliefs typically accompanying negative symptoms. While further research is necessary to elucidate these clinical applications of mindfulness, we will now shift our attention towards quantitative findings of a somewhat different nature. To do this, we must first keep in mind our operational definition of perception as the mechanism by which sensory inputs (from vision, hearing, touch, taste, and smell) are received and organised, thereby constructing a coherent interpretation of reality.

1.3.3 Neurophysiological Models of Self

Burgeoning neuroscientific research places emphasis on the brain’s anticipatory inclination, as opposed to merely interpreting and reacting to new sensory information (Barrett & Simmons, 2015; Chandaria, 2022; Parr & Friston,

2018). While there is widespread acknowledgement the survival benefits of the brain's ability to predict physiological needs, there are also significant limitations of living through this predictive machine. For instance, Chandaria (2022) suggests that the brain constructs a generative model based on its hypothesis of what the sensory data might mean, which in turn predicts and manifests the associated sensory experience. For instance, I spot a four-legged creature on a pathway, specific neuronal patterns associated with "dog" are stimulated, resulting in the formation of a visual impression of a dog. While delving into the mathematical details of computational theories of predictive processing falls beyond the scope of this investigation it is crucial to acknowledge that in uncertain situations, such as on a misty day, the brain's pre-existing expectations or perceptual frameworks more heavily dictate what is consciously perceived. In other words, we default on our *prior* knowledge to understand ourselves and the environment, rather than spending precious cognitive processing power to decipher the actual, yet unfamiliar, sensory information (Chandaria, 2022).

Chandaria's (2022) theory essentially inverts the traditional processing model sequence — whereby the default mind reverts to a reliance on cognitive processing (perception) which in turn influences conscious sensory experience. It is easier for the brain fill a representation of "dog" based on prior knowledge than it is to register the raw visual sensory data of the furry creature. Interestingly, one hypothesis within this theory is that we feel bodily sensations, we are experiencing prediction errors – discrepancies between the brain's predictive models and unprocessed sensory data. In this context, according to Chandaria, our role then becomes reconciling these prediction errors, tweaking our models to align as closely and consistently as possible with our subjectively experienced reality.

However, if our phenomenological self is primarily a generative model, based on expectations of who we are in the world, then what occurs when individuals consciously divert their attention away from these perceptual frameworks and welcome discrepancies between the brain's predictions and the actual sensory experience? In other words, what happens to our self-perception when our

attention is persistently redirected towards bodily sensations, enabling sensory data to take precedence over our prior models of self and world? Could this amplify our capacity to engage with novelty and reshape outdated and biased perceptions of reality? In considering the self as a simulated model at the top of a hierarchy that shapes experience, we find a rich intellectual debate but limited practical guidance to reshape these neural pathways. It underscores the need for qualitative reports from individuals long engaged in these transformative practices. Our final aim of this review is therefore to shed light on perceptions of self and potential beyond it, focusing on selected qualitative reports.

1.4 The Phenomenal Self: Reviewing Qualitative Reports of Perceptual Changes to Self in Relation to Engagement in Mind-body Practices.

1.4.1 Short-term Interventions: Chronic Pain and Illness

Marikar Bawa et al. (2021) conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis on 34 adults who completed an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme. They investigated the participants' experience of pain and related emotions. A “transformation process” was identified, marked by improved navigation of pain symptoms via an enhanced bodily connection. Participants learnt to engage more intimately with physical sensations constituting pain, enabling a form of psychological reframing. Most participants did not report a significant reduction in physical symptoms, but rather cultivated mindfulness techniques allowing a closer relationship with their bodies without yielding to disruptive thoughts and emotions. Studies such as this underscore the importance of qualitative research in subjective fields like pain perception, where objective measures often fall short in adequately capturing these processes.

Marikar Bawa et al. (2021) further observed a shift in participants' self-perception – from helpless victims to empowered individuals deserving care, mirroring Rogers' (1995) self-construct (refer to 1.2.1). Marikar Bawa et al. attributed this transformation to increased freedom to respond differently to discomfort, rather than resorting to distractions like analgesics or television. These observations

suggests mindfulness techniques could encourage participants to move away from unrealistic expectations, such as being immediately pain-free, and reshape their self-concept to include their current challenges.

Malpass and associates (2011) also undertook an investigation into the perceptual shifts experienced by individuals suffering from a spectrum of ailments, including terminal cancer, clinical depression, HIV, and Parkinson's disease. Within their meta-ethnography comprising 14 qualitative studies, six reported notable transformations in self-perception in the aftermath of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). Notably, two studies within the analysis (Allen et al., 2009; Mason & Hargreaves, 2001) revealed that mindfulness-based group therapies – namely Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and MBSR – disrupted depressive symptoms, including over-personalisation and a pervading sense of dread by coaching participants to redirect their attention to felt physical sensations.

Malpass et al. (2011) depict participants' choice between immersing in their "narrative self" or direct sensory experience, the latter often burdened by societal expectations and negative self-talk. Extracting experience from ingrained narratives was pivotal in participants discovering new ways of being. Linking to our earlier discussion on the neuropsychology of self, these findings suggest that even short-term MBIs might disrupt habitual self-referential thinking and behaviour. Which prompts further speculation as to whether engaging with sensory information in the present moment instigates rewiring of fundamental self-forming brain networks, although this falls outside our current study's scope.

Marikar Bawa et al. (2021) and Malpass et al. (2011) assert the importance of participants patiently attuning to their bodies, possibly for the first time, and exploring pain through the "sensory self". These studies suggest participants are learning to accept difficult sensations as transient, reducing the negative emotional reactions often associated with chronic pain. This introduces intriguing questions: Are participants modifying their perceptual frameworks of pain by facing the felt-reality of physical discomfort? Could the genuine qualities of discomfort be more

tolerable than the catastrophic narratives that typically encase these sensations? Indeed, these questions align with Buddhism's classification of suffering, one being "the suffering of suffering".

Despite these intriguing speculations, qualitative analysis of pain perception also possesses limitations. For example, there is often scant discourse concerning whether the immediate perceptual alterations are sustained beyond the completion of the commonly utilised standard eight-week programmes. To what extent do these positive perceptual transformations require continued practice of mindfulness techniques to maintain them? How are these instructions relayed and adhered to? Despite this prevalent yet significant limitation, a strong consensus is beginning to emerge across qualitative research in this field; that an honest acknowledgment of the unfiltered nature of one's sensory experience, such as physical discomfort, can serve as a powerful non-pharmacological, bottom-up, approach to chronic pain and illness. Indeed, central to MBSR is the idea that a welcoming approach to discomfort might be more beneficial than strenuous attempts to alleviate or numb these experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Our exploration thus far illuminates initial engagement points, often prompted by life challenges, leading to the quest for relieving techniques. However, these studies, largely limited to an eight-week span, merely scratch the surface of self-identity, offering at best fleeting insights into what might lie beyond an ordinary construction of self. To extend our understanding, we will probe the self-perception evolution among long-term practitioners, where the lines between formal and informal practice often blur. Thus, the following and final section delves into such shifts among experienced meditators.

1.4.2 Perceptual Shifts and Reported Experiences in Relation to Long-term Engagement in Mind-Body Practices

Full et al. (2013) have made valuable additions to the burgeoning body of research (MacLean et al., 2010; Martin, 2018) on expert meditators. Conducted in Burma, Full et al.’s study spotlights mindfulness-based meditation instructors,

predominantly monastics, who practice tranquillity (“Samatha”) and insight (“Vipassana”) meditation from the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Echoing the qualitative research thus far reviewed, the findings of Full et al. emphasise perceptual shifts reported by participants, characterised by an augmented clarity in both “external” perception – of the five senses, as well as perceptions of “internal” experiences such as physical sensation and thought. Through an increased acuity of perception, these participants perceive the conditioned facets of their being, hinting at profound alterations in their personal experience of self. For instance, among the 18 participants in Full et al.’s study, a monk reported observing ingrained reactive patterns more transparently; and in doing so experienced a lessening of the impulse to attach another part of his being to them. The Buddhist notions of desire and non-attachment reverberate here and indeed will be evoked throughout our current study as we probe deeper into questioning who or what, if anything, could be gripping onto and personalising experiential phenomena such as the rise and fall of thought and sensation.

In a separate study, Martin's (2018) qualitative study probes into self-perception among Western-born practitioners engaging in Eastern meditation practices. The majority of participants refer to the “ego” as being "composed of all the conditioned aspects of identity that steer the individual and proffer a mundane sense of solace and safety" (Martin, p. 674). Both Martin's research and that of Full et al. (2013) find concordance among their participants concerning the notion of a pre-conditioned self, shaped by an amalgam of inherent and environmental influences – including parental traits, role-modelling, early life experiences, cultural norms, trauma, and more. While both studies acknowledge the protective role of the “ego”, they also prompt questions germane to our current analysis: To what extent does the ego's quest for comfort and security include defending against perceived threats to the validity of its own existence? This question also harks back to our earlier discourse regarding the brain's reliance on established perceptual frameworks or “priors”: To what degree are disruptions to these frameworks perceived as threats, and hence, tenaciously resisted by the mind?

Full et al. (2013) and Martin (2018) posit that amplifying sensory experience clarity can trigger profound insights into the self and environment interplay. However, it is crucial to recognise language limitations here, acknowledging the mind's tendency to divide reality into dualistic concepts like 'good/bad', “internal/external”, or “me/you”. While such perceptual models are fundamental for survival and thriving, they also solidify a distinct self-perception – one that exists in the mind, and perceives itself as interacting with a world “out there”. These limitations become particularly significant in relation to perceived and felt interconnectedness among mindfulness practitioners. Although evidence of perceptual shifts in subject-object relations among novice meditators exists (Nguyen, 2020), our investigation remains centred on the research exploring long-term practitioners in order to scrutinise the division, or lack thereof, between 'internal' and 'external' realities among long-term meditators. For example, a recurring theme for Full et al.’s (2013) participants is the recognition of the interdependence of all phenomena: "they are just dependent. That's all" (Full et al., p. 59). Notably, the shifts in perception move from being object-centric to being heavily influenced by the subject's current mental state (Full et al., 2013). At its core, instead of perceiving an external world, transpiring independently of the person, there arises an interplay between one's inner experience and its role in moulding the environment.

Full and colleagues' (2013) also broach the subject of non-conceptual perception, a term that may seem somewhat paradoxical given our current definition of perception as a process that is inherently conceptual. Although the authors do not elaborate on this, it might be that they are referring to perception as the immediate capturing of sensory information, prior to the mind's overlay of its interpretation. This brings to mind our previous discussion of the Buddhist model of the five skandhas (aggregates), suggesting that the non-conceptual perception reported in Full et al.'s study could represent the experiencing of sensory information from the first skandha (form), before engagement with the subsequent skandhas, which introduce cognition. Further, participants in Martin's (2018) study differentiate the ego from the self – the latter characterised as transcending the

limited “I” (the ego) and embodying an aspect of interconnectedness. We therefore circle back to the ego as burdensome, instilling a sense of being a separate entity from the rise of fall of “external” phenomena. This is contrasted with the participant's commentary on the transcendent-self: “It is not something I alone possess but it is something that is me but it is also everything else"; and another participant noting, “there is nothing to grasp, nothing that stays the same” (Martin, 2018, p. 674-675). Alluding to the Buddhist term of Impermanence, these quotes lead us back to a central query in relation to the reviewed Buddhist literature (See Section 1.2.2): If all Skandhas (the five aggregates of form, sensation, perception, mental formation, and consciousness) are impermanent, then where could a permanent entity such as the self be located?

Indeed, threading their way through Martin’s (2018) and Full et al.’s (2013) studies are the echoes of these Buddhist discourses, specifically in relation to the qualities of non-self, non-attachment, and non-grasping and impermanence. Yet, once again, expectancy effects – where perceptions are influenced by prior beliefs and knowledge (see Section 1.3.1) – must not be overlooked. Indeed, in research involving subjects with a religious bearing, it proves to be rather challenging, and some might argue, unattainable, to discern whether the reported changes are directly experienced or imagined through the lens of their respective cultures and traditions (Full et al., 2013). To what extent do the alterations reported by the authors of these studies reflect authentic transformations, and how much are they shaped by the tenets of Buddhist philosophy? Full et al. partially tackle this potential bias, positing that although the Pāli Canon — a scripture with which the participants are well-acquainted — does encompass notions such as the dissolution of a distinct “I”, it does not furnish explicit guidance on how this might be directly experienced. This observation perhaps lends weight to the authenticity and significance of their findings. Looking ahead however, future research could benefit substantially by incorporating comparative data from experts immersed in both Buddhist and, perhaps, secular practices. Nonetheless, with data emanating solely from a singular philosophical system, it becomes somewhat tedious to assess the

extent to which the participants' pre-existing knowledge and predispositions have shaped their experiences.

Similarly, while the participants in Martin's (2018) study were Western-born and did not associate with a formal religion, the study aimed explicitly to investigate Eastern conceptualisations of self, with a special emphasis on the Buddhist notion of no-self. Therefore, adopting an epistemological foundation rooted in Eastern understandings of self, there exists an inherent risk of interpreting ambiguous data through the lens of predefined spiritual or psychological constructs. Indeed, it is telling that Martin (p. 679) encountered a participant's admiration for an ostensibly "more expansive Buddhist/Eastern spiritual self", when compared to the constrained Western "ego". Consequently, one must entertain the possibility that the participants may have been actively striving towards and imagining what they had assimilated to be a more harmonious, Buddhist-informed, phenomenology of self (Martin, 2018).

1.5 Synthesising the Review of Literature and Preface

Psychiatric classifications have traditionally drawn a firm line between what is considered "normal" and "abnormal". However, in today's society, it is not uncommon to find individuals with a limited awareness of their bodily state, relying instead on abstract descriptions to articulate their experiences. Carl Jung (2002) pointed out that what an average person often recognises as self-knowledge is little more than a list of their personality traits. This review has ventured beyond these constructs, exploring what happens when attention is consistently redirected towards the introspective experience of the present moment. Within this context, the following questions arise: If our brain's interpretations of our physiological states influence our conscious experiences, emotions, and behaviour, how significantly can increasing bodily awareness alter our perception of who we are in the world? Secondly, does contemplation of life's meaning serves any practical purpose? For instance, does a profound understanding of "depression" contribute anything towards genuinely transforming this cyclical state?

The evidence presented here proposes that our perceptions — of both ourselves and the external world — are more than simply real-time constructs; they are also anticipatory fabrications, devised to predict reality based on our accumulated knowledge (Barrett & Simmons, 2015; Chandaria, 2022; Parr & Friston, 2018). This evidence poses further fascinating questions: To what extent can long-term practitioners extricate themselves from these predictive perceptions of reality?

While psychology often favours objective measures due to greater reliability in isolating variables, quantitative methods risk disregarding the unique nuances of individual subjective experiences. Yet it is these distinct insights that potentially illuminate the complex landscape of “self”, and hence, will form the focal point of this investigation.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Method

2.1 Methodology

The methodology utilised in this study drew its primary inspiration from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022), and was further enriched by Embodied Inquiry (Todres, 1999). Anchored in the intellectual traditions of the 20th century thinkers such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger, IPA is distinguished by its balance between delving into the descriptive (phenomenological) dimensions of human experience and interpreting these experiences through a hermeneutic lens (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022). In the context of this study, the phenomenological strand facilitated an intimate excavation into the participants' worlds, whilst its interpretative counterpart resonated seamlessly with my underlying epistemological premise: namely, that the verbal insights shared by participants would inevitably be shaped by their own interpretations which, in turn, would be further infused with my interpretative layers. Rather than obscuring this intricate interplay, IPA embraces the 'double-hermeneutic', which regards participants' lived experiences as interpretations, subject to further scrutiny and analysis by the researcher (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022).

In addition, IPA, whilst according a central role to cognitive meaning-making, is also committed to capturing the essence of pre-symbolic understanding, encompassing the immediate, bodily resonance with lived experience. As elaborated by Boden & Eatough (2014), IPA's approach values this tactile, experiential realm which transcends linguistic boundaries. Consequently, IPA dismisses any reductionist claims that truth can be entirely confined to reason, thereby accommodating shades of ambiguity, particularly where language fumbles in its constraints (Martin & Sugarman, 2001). Finally, this inquiry called for an adaptable methodology that would not impose an overly stringent framework on the flow of interviews, thereby ensuring an environment conducive to candid sharing on the part of participants. This approach not only illuminated singular cases with

distinctive insights but also facilitated the emergence of interconnecting patterns that wove together the tapestry of participants' revelations.

Embodied Inquiry (Todres, 1999) was incorporated as a complementary methodological lens. As with IPA, Embodied Inquiry advocates not only for the mere inclusion of the body in research but elevates the role of the body as a more immediate source of experience, prior to the application of cognitive processes (perception) that construct meaning. This was particularly crucial during data collection, where being overly absorbed in a mental space would potentially obstruct my own openness and receptivity to the data. Intriguingly, this process of 'bracketing' preconceived ideas also forms a fundamental aspect of IPA methodology, although, as will be explored through this research, it is through embodiment that one can genuinely put this into practice. As a result, techniques associated with Embodied Inquiry, which will be detailed in the following Analysis section, were employed as guiding principles.

2.2 Participants

The small sample size (n=5) of this study is reflective of IPA's emphasis on collecting in-depth data and aligns with the recommended number of participants for Master's level research (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022). This research aims to explore insights and perceptual shifts resulting from long-term engagement with body-based practices (See Section 2.3 for definitions) without aiming to derive generalisable conclusions, such as those pertaining to ‘the benefits of mindfulness’. In alignment with current literature on meditation and mindfulness-based interventions, for the purposes of this study, 'long-term' engagement was defined as a minimum of 7 years of regular practice; this operationalisation is consistent with the understanding that sustained and dedicated engagement with these practices can lead to significant transformative effects on individuals' well-being and self-awareness (Full et al.; Friedman et al., 2001; 2013; Martin, 2018). Although the unique lived experiences of the participants remain the primary focus of the analysis, IPA recognises that patterns can emerge across participants, particularly within a somewhat homogenous sample. Therefore, a screening questionnaire (See

Appendix A) was utilised to apply a set of selection criteria, allowing the researcher to establish a robust basis for interpreting the findings while prioritising participant safety.

Inclusion criteria consisted of participants who were over 18 years old and had long-term (7 years+) regular engagement with formal mind-body awareness practice(s) (Refer to Section 2.3). The term ‘regular’ was understood as maintaining a consistent practice rather than sporadic participation. However, this research did not stress the duration spent in 'formal' practice, acknowledging the natural blurring of boundaries between formal practice and daily life that occurs with long-term engagement in these practices. As such, valid participants who might not be practising intensively for a certain number of hours per day were not excluded. The researcher also recruited participants through their personal network, providing a degree of prior familiarity with the participants' sincerity and integration of their inner inquiry into daily life. Additionally, participants were not identified with a formal religion, not engaged in formal psychotherapeutic intervention in the last six months, not using medication to relieve psychological distress, and not regularly engaged with recreational substances, excluding alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. While all participants were living in Western cultures, the study was not limited to any specific ethnicity and was open to participants from any cultural background. It is important to note, however, that the nature of the project may pose challenges in the context of Te Ao Māori. For example, a Māori participant engaged in mindfulness techniques may interpret these practices differently from participants with a secular background. Similarly, the study did not have a specific gender preference and achieved a balanced representation with two female and three male participants. As a gesture of gratitude, each participant was given a small gift package containing edible items worth $25.

Once the screening questionnaire was approved, participants were provided with an information sheet (refer to Appendix B) that offered a comprehensive understanding of the study's intended direction and methodologies. The sample questions outlined in the information sheet were intended to be contemplated by

the participants prior to the one-on-one interviews, which would serve as the main method for data collection. The information sheet further assured participants that the study would adhere to best practices for IPA data management and outlined their rights as study participants. Out of six suitable individuals who received the screening questionnaire, one returned it but did not respond to subsequent communication, resulting in a final sample size of five.

As elaborated in the information sheet, the incorporation of photography was initially envisioned as an auxiliary data collection tool. The primary intention behind this was to move beyond the constraints of language and to allow for a more abstract form of expression, through imagery, to capture the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Of the five participants, three adhered to this instruction. However, this facet of the methodology was eventually set aside; firstly, due to noticeable lack of enthusiasm among the participants in producing the photos and recognition on my part that an attempt to capture the fluidity of the present moment through imagery seemed to paradoxically solidify it.

2.2.1. Participant Engagement in Body-based Practices and Backgrounds

The participants involved in this study have been engaged in their respective practices for periods ranging from 8 to 20 years. As delineated in Table 2.2 below, these practices comprise a mixture of secular approaches as well as techniques informed by Eastern traditions.

This study refrained from exploring participants' formal practices, and the ways in which they might correlate with beneficial "effects". While novice practitioners often draw a distinction between formal practice and everyday life, it is commonly noted among long-term practitioners that this distinction tends to blur. This study is therefore interested in the way in which participants' daily lives are infused with their formal body-based practices. Given the intimate nature of this research, brief descriptions of each participant were also included. However, in the interest of maintaining their anonymity, personal information has been kept concise, and pseudonyms have been employed.

Table 2.2.1: Participants' Backgrounds and Engagement in Body-based Practices

	Life situation	**Current Formal Practices**	**Engagement in Formal Practice***
Greg 50-year-old male	Left a medical career to explore Eastern self-enquiry methods. Currently guides individuals and groups to explore their inner space towards inner harmony.	-Vipassana Meditation (in the tradition of SN Goenka): 2-3 hours daily -Tai Chi Chuan: 1-2 hours daily	20 years
Louis 38-year-old male	Recently completed a doctorate on the application of meditation in addiction; currently works as a wellness coach and somatic therapist.	-Vipassana Meditation: 1-2 daily practices -Yin yoga: Once weekly -Assorted yoga: 2-3 times weekly -Cold exposure: 4-6 times weekly -Sauna: 2-4 times weekly	8 years
Whitney 55-year-old female	Left a career in law to study Eastern philosophy and engage in self-enquiry. Currently practicing as a counsellor and group-facilitator of self-awareness.	- Conscious Connected Breathwork: Daily - Pranayama ("control of breath"): Daily - Yoga (asana): Daily - Standing meditation: daily - Seated meditation: Daily	13 years
Lucy 45-year-old female	Left a career in human resources, to explore self-enquiry. Currently facilitates yoga teacher training, holds regular international retreats and practices massage.	A combination of somatic movement, Qigong, Yin yoga and meditation: Daily.	15 years
Jake 33-year-old male	Former founder and CEO of a digital marketing agency. Currently training as a mind-body practitioner, with a passion for community cohesion.	- Conscious Connected Breathwork: Daily practice - Meditation – Single pointed focus ("anapanasati"): Daily -Meditation – Standing or seated (body scan): Daily	9 years

**The term "engagement" refers to participants' sincere participation in formal practice; thereby excluding periods of spontaneous or uncommitted engagement.

2.3 Defining Core Constructs

Given the significant uptick in interest surrounding "mindfulness" and "meditation" in Western culture, it is critical to elucidate one's application of these terms. While additional terms will be described in due course, let us begin with: "Mindfulness", "body-based practices", "self", and "mind".

2.3.1 "Mindfulness" Defined

An English rendition of the Pali term "sati", "mindfulness" was originally translated as "to remember" (Brewer et al., 2013). While an important aspect of mindfulness involves the *remembering* to return to the present moment, in contemporary Buddhist literature, sati is commonly used to signify "awareness" or "observation" (Bodhi, 2013; Goldstein, 2003). This quality of awareness stands, for example, in contrast to a thought-based anticipatory position about what may happen next, or a dwelling in the past. A substantial portion of the literature also points to the definition proffered by Kabat-Zinn (2014, p.15), the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, who characterises mindfulness as: "Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally". As such, mindfulness in the current study will refer to: Being *full* of the present moment, through paying attention to the contents of experience purposefully, without evaluation.

2.3.1 "Body-Based Mindfulness Practices" Defined

"He lived at a little distance from his body" (Joyce, 2001, p.198).

This quote encapsulates the essence of what body-based practices intend to address: The separation of body and "I". In this study, body-based mindfulness practices or, more succinctly, body-based practices, serves as an umbrella term encapsulating a variety of techniques designed to foster mindfulness of the body. These practices include, but are not limited to, forms of seated meditation (like the

body scan), Yoga asanas (poses), Tai Chi Chuan (a.k.a. “Tai Chi”), forms of breathwork, pranayama (loosely translated from Sanskrit as “control of the breath”), somatic movement, diverse dance forms, and cold exposure.

Given our corporeal dwelling, one could argue that all mindfulness techniques intrinsically engage the body; yet the focus of body-based practices leans towards mindfulness of the body, and not of thought. Body-based practitioners use the body as vehicle of feedback; becoming increasingly aware or mindful of their sensory, embodied, experience. This process takes place without being propelled by a judgemental disposition to amplify what is deemed “good” and diminish what feels uncomfortable.

2.3.1 “Self” Defined

Dissecting the “self” was a fundamental objective of this study, and thus its myriad subtleties will be explored in due course. For initial understanding, let us however refer to a definition of “self” from the Oxford English Dictionary (Pearsall, 2002, p. 1299):

1. “a person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action;
2. a person’s particular nature or personality;
3. one’s own interests or pleasures.”

All three definitions carry relevance for this investigation. As evoked by the second definition, we will delve into the peculiarities, tendencies, and preferences that comprise an person’s character, which some might subsequently label as their “self”. This cumulative “self” will be examined in relation to a sense of possession or attachment to the contents of experience, thereby forming personal interests and preferences, as noted in the third definition. In contrast, the first definition, alluding to an “essential” aspect of a person’s being is germane to this study’s quest to explore more fundamental aspects of “self” – those not confined to personality, or indeed any objects of consciousness. Therefore, the term “self” possesses multiple

usages within this investigation, each of which is contextualised appropriately to avoid confusion.

2.3.1 "Mind" Defined

Once again, we attempt to apply a symbol onto a phenomenon that holds different meanings for each person – some of which are elaborated on within this research. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Pearsall, 2002, p. 906): "Mind" is defined as:

1. "the faculty of consciousness and thought;
2. the source of a person's thoughts; the intellect
   - A person's memory"

These definitions primarily refer to ordinary waking consciousness and cognitive processing. They hold relevance for our investigation since the term "mind" will mainly be used to reference a thought-dominated phenomenon, emerging through complex processing in the brain. Concurrently however, this study acknowledges that thought is likely *one*, albeit limited, facet of "mind".

2.4 Interview Process

The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the Horopito Wellness Centre in Mount Eden, Auckland, barring one instance where the interview took place online via a video call. Participants were given flexibility to choose alternate venues, should they prefer. The interview protocol involved a singular 90-minute dialogue, with the potential for an additional session to ensure comprehensive data collection. Each conversation commenced with a grounding or stillness exercise, facilitating a shift from routine activities to the discourse environment (refer to Interview schedule, Appendix D).

While Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) served as the primary methodology underpinning this investigation, components of Gendlin's (1992, 1997) 'focusing techniques' were woven into the interview process. These techniques,

rooted in Todres' (1999, 2007) Embodied Enquiry, accentuate the profound ways language influences us, reaching beyond mere symbolic interpretation. The approaches employed encompass listening with open attention, engaging with the 'felt sense', strategic pausing, and locating fitting language.

Listening with open attention acknowledges that although the mind naturally leans towards analysis, interpretation, and judgment, this tendency can often obstruct novel insights. Engaging the 'felt sense' necessitates a redirection of attention towards internal sensing within the body, encapsulating the entirety of the sensory experience and sidestepping an exclusive focus on external factors. In this, the researcher ponders: How is my entire being receiving this? (Westland, 2021). This involves not only an awareness of gross sensations, like the feel of the chair one is sitting on, but also extends to an appreciation of the shared physical space.

Adopting conscious pauses, and encouraging participants to follow suit, fostered spaces for the emergence of both the participant's and researcher's felt senses, which in turn bolstered responsiveness to the present moment and limited preconceived judgments and analyses. Lastly, the endeavour was to identify the language that resonates most effectively. This involved allowing sufficient time for both researcher and participants to explore language imaginatively, especially when articulating abstract or multifaceted experiences.

I made a conscious effort to mirror back perceived understanding, averting potential misunderstandings. The use of examples and metaphors was encouraged to make abstract notions more accessible and pertinent to their everyday lives. As a result, I did not persist on dissecting every term, such as ‘consciousness’ and ‘awareness’. Instead, I was comfortable allowing their meanings to evolve organically, trusting in their lucidity to manifest within the broader context as our exploration unfolded.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim using Otter software. Following each interview, a thorough review of the conversation was conducted to verify the

accuracy of the transcript. Subsequently, participants were provided with their respective transcripts to peruse and suggest revisions. Data analysis was performed solely on transcripts that had been endorsed by participants through signed release authorities.

2.5 Data Analysis

Smith, Flowers & Larkin's (2022) six stages of IPA analysis was utilised as a navigational guide and, as is characteristic of this methodology, the analysis persistently evolved up until the final discussion. While these steps enabled a thorough perceptual exploration of both the individual and the collective, Embodied Inquiry was interlaced throughout the data analysis to honour both the cognitive ('logical') and sensory ('responsive') aspects of being in the world (Todres, 1999). This approach was guided by the central objective of the study: To conduct research that acknowledges the paramount importance of bodily awareness in the process of self-enquiry.

Thus in addition to the steps of analysis detailed below, the data analytic process incorporated:

1. Maintaining written research notes; to further record and set aside (or 'bracket') ongoing interpretations of the data.
2. Applying Embodied Inquiry techniques (as detailed above), which included a brief meditation practice at the commencement of each data analysis session to quieten the mind and establish a connection with the body.

Post transcription of all interviews, and subsequent participant verification for accuracy, the data was coded and securely stored prior to the initiation of analysis. The analysis for this project adhered to the six stages of IPA as recommended by Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2022).

2.5.1 Stage of Analysis

Stage one involved re-immersion in the data and making initial commenting. The initial transcript was revisited alongside the concurrent playback of the audio

recording. This enabled the recapturing of a vivid sense of the participant's world. Secondly, I made initial notes in the right margin of the transcript, concentrating on identifying emerging narratives, contradictions, rich segments of text, and interpersonal dynamics (rapport). This action signifies the onset of the double hermeneutic process, where the researcher begins interpreting the participants' personal accounts that are already interpreted (Laverty, 2003). The guiding principle of this stage is to set aside the researcher's impressions while maintaining a spotlight on the original transcript. Additional preliminary notes were annotated in the right margin of the transcript using green ink, outlining how the content was impacting the researcher's body.

Stage two involved making exploratory notes. Initial notes from steps one were expanded on, and began to merge with exploratory notes. As the analysis progressed, the notes moved beyond the superficial to explore the text at a deeper level. Exploratory notes were categorised into three general forms:

i. *Descriptive* notes maintained a focus on phenomenology.
ii. *Linguistic* and *interpretative* involved deconstructing language use and expressions.
iii. *Conceptual* notes were increasingly interpretative.

In this stage personal reflections were invited; thus acknowledging that the researcher’s perception and felt-sense of the data would contribute another layer of interpretation. However the organising principle of this step, and indeed the entire analytic process, was to deepen interpretation that was firmly anchored in each participant’s lived experience.

Stage three – constructing experiential statements. Concise statements were generated by utilising initial notes and exploratory commenting. These statements were then recorded in a digital document in chronological order as they appeared within the transcript, with a corresponding page number for reference. This stage moves away from the face-value, or description, of the transcript and actively invites the researcher’s interpretation. These statements represented a fusion of the participant's experience and the researcher's emerging interpretation, engaging the hermeneutic circle. Again however, while the researcher's interpretation gradually

becomes more substantial throughout the analysis, the original transcript remained the central focus. The aim of this step was to extract the core elements of a particular portion of the transcript, considering the researcher's comprehension of the entire dataset. The objective was also to simplify the amount of information while maintaining its nuanced and rich qualities.

Step four – searching for connections across experiential statements. In this phase of the analysis, I referred back to the research question to determine which statements from the previous step would be most useful. Experiential statements were then printed out and cut into individual slips, each labelled with its corresponding page number. These slips were then shuffled and laid out on a table, where I began to form clusters and subclusters based on possible connections between the statements. Throughout this process, the researcher remained mindful of the participant's world and experience. The clustering continued until a coherent conceptual pattern emerged. Certain patterns naturally converged while some themes were excluded due to insufficient supporting evidence. The aim of this step was to ensure overarching patterns within each transcript preceded the consideration of commonality across participants.

Step five – creating superordinate names and subheadings for each cluster. A distinct file was established for each transcript to document the themes identified. These themes are also referred to as ‘Personal Experimental Themes, which were intended to be highly applicable to the participant (personal), reflective of their actual life experience (experiential), and connected to the overall conceptual framework of the conversation (themes).

Step six – moving to the next case. To preserve the idiographic approach of IPA, efforts were made to set aside (‘bracket’) the content of previous transcripts as much as possible in preparation for the next data set, aiming to approach it with an open mindset, based on its own unique characteristics. By doing this, it will facilitate the emergence of novel themes. However, it is important to recognise that the analysis of previous transcripts may have influenced my own perception (‘fore-

structures'), which could in turn shape my interpretation of subsequent data to some extent.

Stage seven – looking for patterns across cases. A table of Group Experimental Themes (GETs) was generated to display convergence among participants. Using a large computer monitor, all five transcripts were displayed simultaneously. The process involved moving back and forth between the parts of the transcripts and the whole to identify shared aspects across participants; beginning with each transcript's PETs, and moving onto subthemes, and experimental statements. Existing PETs and subthemes were adapted or relabelled using terms that potentially make sense only at this higher order level (as umbrella terms). Divergences were also sought to preserve the idiographic nature of each participant's world, in line with the key aim for this step to showcase shared elements that bind the participants together while retaining each participant's unique expression of the whole. This step also laid the foundations for a synthesis of the whole, using potent aspects of the interpretative analysis. In preparing the write-up, I employed the GETs and sub-themes (as discussed above) as the foundational structure for each segment of the results.

2.6 Reliability and Validity

Reliability can, in broader terms, be characterised as the ability to yield uniform outcomes when employing the same method across diverse research subjects (Yardley, 2008). This study endeavoured to ensure methodological consistency by adhering to the distinctive framework of IPA. For example, while the semi-structured character of the participant interviews allowed for ample content adaptability, each interview was approached in a uniform manner. My own mindfulness practices also bolstered consistency by enabling me to delve deeper into each participant's lived experiences. This strategy helped mitigate the possible influence of my personal anxieties and physical discomfort during the interview process.

However, as posited by Braun and Clarke (2013), it may seem somewhat contradictory for a qualitative study to strive to meet key aspects that pertain to ‘good reliability’. Consider for instance researcher bias; an intrinsic part of an IPA study's aim is for the researcher to play a substantial role in the data interpretation, such that their background is overtly displayed as an integral component of the research. Indeed, the way in which the researcher develops rapport with each individual participant, as well as the navigation of the interview schedule depending on the vitality of the questions for each person, cannot be reliably replicated. A specific example relevant to this study would be the researcher's degree of insight and awareness about the explored topics; this will largely govern the depth of understanding the interviewer can achieve with each of the participants, consequently influencing the richness of the results. Finally, these results are not intended for generalisation, which is a primary reason for ensuring reliability in the first place in quantitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Validity, conversely, relates to the degree to which a study accurately represents the phenomena it claims to investigate. It pertains to a simple question: does the research deliver what it promises? (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This aspect of integrity is arguably more relevant to qualitative research and was firstly pursued by this study through internal validity. In this investigation, the IPA's insistence on the precedence of raw data was meticulously observed, from the participant-led interviews through to the final stages of crafting the Discussion and Conclusion. I remained cognisant of the mind's propensity to simplify and to strive for a cohesive narrative, and wherever feasible, I continued to respect each participant's unique expression prior to drawing any interpretations in relation to the collective insights. Although IPA does welcome the researcher's interpretative input, my primary focus was on understanding what surfaced within each participant's lived experience, with emphasis on their perception, sensory-experience and transcendence of ‘self’.

However, it is important to mention a fundamental issue intrinsic to investigations of this nature: The inherent difficulty in converting a person's somatic (bodily) experiences into symbolic representation (language). There is indeed a

measure of irony in any endeavour aiming to convey these direct bodily experiences indirectly; for the moment there is an interpretation of it, it ceases to be the original experience and becomes a derivative interpretation. Hence, one could argue that research of this nature can only truly be undertaken with 'validity' on oneself. Recognising this significant constraint from my own lived experience, I sought out participants who, I conjectured, would be more adept than others at transferring their somatic experiences into mental constructs. This confidence was partly grounded in the fact that all the participants were either undergoing training or deeply engaged in various therapeutic approaches that necessitate a strong capacity to translate these concepts into layman's terms for other people.

Finally, Braun & Clarke (2013) posit that ecological validity is pivotal for qualitative research. Indeed, it was significant for me to ensure that this study would be both relevant and comprehensible to a wide range of readers. The primary method of data collection was grounded in real-world interaction; I was simply seated opposite another person, participating in a dialogue. This investigation holds relevance for all bodies; even those whose minds may not wish to ponder whether a deeper 'truth' exists beyond their conditioned selves can still relate facets of this investigation to their own lived experiences. With this intention in mind, I consistently aimed to represent participants' insights to the reader, not driven by the quest for academic recognition, but rather to clarify, in layman's terms, the physiological and psychological (or mind-body) processes in which we are all immersed. This approach somewhat alleviated potential issues of validity as it deterred my own interpretations from slipping into abstract deductions.

This project was evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it was not reviewed by one of the University’s Human Ethics Committees. I took full responsibility for the ethical conduct of this research and consulted external sources where necessary.

Chapter 3: Results

This study, following the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022), presents findings as a blend of verbatim participant interview excerpts, and my own interpretative commentary. To promote clarity, each section is organised around an emergent theme: Theme one delves into the nature of perception and its inherent distortion of "self"; theme two illustrates how embodiment as a vehicle to accessing truth, though not absolutely; theme three uncovers the "essential self" as well as its total absence; finally, theme four examines subject-object relations, spotlighting the concept of "entangled consciousness" among people. Each theme contains subthemes to further categorise topics. Words that were emphasised by participants are underlined.

3.1 Overarching Theme One: Corruption of the Perceived Self

3.1.1 Formation of Perceptual Frameworks and Narratives of Self

All participants recognised the establishment of perceptual frameworks during early childhood. They accepted the function these models of themselves and the world play in navigating daily life, and did not dispute the need for basic programming – such as discerning between a benign dog and a menacing lion. However, as Louis and Greg elucidate, this intrinsic survival programming, or nature, is supplemented by impactful life events that also deeply ingrain into the nervous system, culminating in extra layers of conditioning:

> Greg: *A brain, giving rise to "mind"; perhaps the most basic function of mind, the survival function, would be to assess the environment and interpret the environment for survival purposes, to see what is safe and what is not safe. And so that interpretation is then <u>complexified</u> by appearance in upbringing, and experiences, and so on*....

> Louis: *Our programs and our conditioning are fabricated. Here's the baseline for survival, and then, here's the extra*

software that gets implanted into our nervous-system – based on our life experience and childhood trauma, or childhood experiences, environments, parents, culture, media, religion, whatever it may be. If we, if we are unconscious to that, that is just who we are.

An example of how these extra layers of programming might become problematic is a child who construes their identity as "good" only when they excel; or a child who feels the need to earn approval from authority – tethering their self-esteem to their *actions*, rather than innate sense of worthiness. Louis proceeds to outline how the formation of these belief structures can lead to a life experienced indirectly, through mental representations:

Louis*: So we're engaging with imagination, we're not engaging with reality. We're also engaging with our memories, conditioning and past software in our brain – our programming that's based on a childhood environment that doesn't exist anymore. This is why parents always treat their kids, or speak to their adult children, as if they're kids because they're engaging with ideas in their mind rather than with the actual person.*

It is often said that the true measure of one's spiritual growth is spending time with family; the challenge of navigating not only our own perceptual frameworks but also those that are deeply ingrained in others. Louis uses the metaphor of "software", highlighting how our perception of ourselves, others, and the world can be distorted by our reliance on data that no longer reflects the qualities of direct experience. Whitney echoes this sentiment, suggesting that clinging to a narrative of identity, both in our own imagination and through the perception of others, is akin to insanity:

Siân: *Why not validate the story over the sensation?*

> Whitney: *The story isn't real, it's indirect. It's not just my own, it's everyone's. We're talking about everyone's conditioned belief of what they're seeing, their perception of the world. It's just that's, that's insane. We never really see everyone's doing it* [chuckles]. *But my version of the story is totally different to your version, because I'm looking through my rose-tinted glasses* [mimics wearing narrow glasses]. *Yours is just gonna look totally different to mine. Why would I validate that? Why would that be of any importance, because it's just not real. I totally recognise it's my own conditioning.*

Demonstrating a keen self-awareness, Whitney has insight into her own conditioning, distancing herself from endorsing it as her truth. To her, these stories seem mere entertainments at best, and harmful illusions at their worst:

> Whitney*: Cause you know, I find less and less do I want to know everything, you know? I once would have had a voracious appetite for reading that everything and da de da da da...and understanding it, you know, but I recognise that... I still do in a sense...but it's entertainment.*

Whitney, and indeed all participants, have access to a more playful approach towards perception (thought) because they have cultivated an awareness of it. However, in these excerpts, Whitney underscores the profound folly (or even insanity) intrinsic to both founding one's sense of being on their own thought processes, as well as seeking feedback about oneself from other people – from other minds.

Louis takes a slightly softer approach to the narratives held by mind; recognising their inevitability in shaping the human experience, and thus suggesting that it is valuable to choose narratives that serve his flourishing:

> Louis*: Even the narrative of "let me just sit with this and be with this" is a narrative. So we can't escape narratives. But what we can do is at least consciously choose which narratives we align with. I happen to choose a narrative, which is an operation of the mind, but a narrative that aligns with the experience of the body – "that I can sit with this", but even that intention of experience is a narrative.*

Thus, Whitney, while not entirely discarding the mind's utility in formulating self-discovery intentions, contests Louis' claim of our inevitable entanglement in the mind's narratives. She maintains this stance for her own experience, despite acknowledging that such narratives seem to hold value in society's current evolutionary stage.

Despite such contrasting views, participants collectively recognise the seemingly unconscious automation of our behaviour, moulded by these narrative structures. Simultaneously, they hint at personal revelations that enabled them to loosen the hold these frameworks had on them:

> Louis: *So to me that's what "mindfulness" means; we're full of the present moment, rather than being stuck in a single point of our best guess. This automatic* [slaps his hands together] *output that emerges is conditioning, and all these different influences that have led to this single thought emerging and we're thinking that, "this is what's happening", but it's not* [definitively]. *Another example is... we've got a snow globe; and there's something at the centre of the snow globe, and if we shake it up, all that snow is in the way; it's just thoughts, getting in the way of us seeing what's actually there. And if we are still and connect to the body, what happens to the snow when we stop shaking it?*

Louis uses the metaphor of a snow globe to illustrate how the incessant flurry of thought obscures a true essence – a topic we will explore later. Getting lost in

this whirlwind of thoughts means being driven by the very perceptual frameworks we have been discussing. Delving into the content of thought, Louis continues with an explanation of the mind's tendency to fragment reality:

> Louis*: So okay, once you say the word "perceive", you're involving the mind. So the mind, that's what it does though. So there's a single moment, a single experience a single expression of this, and the mind comes in and says: "Oh,* [pointing at me] *there's hairs on that head and two eyeballs and lips and a backpack and a chair and a wall..." But it's the mind that's coming in and dissecting this experience. That's what it does, that's what its job is in this... thing we call the "world".*

The symbolic essence of thought is inherently fragmented, thus when seeing reality through this lens, the wholeness of a given moment is broken into separate parts. Thus, while all participants accept this inherent nature perception, they all share insight into the mind's compulsive reclaiming and therefore fracturing of the flow of experience. These insights on the mind's frantic search for certainty and meaning are coupled with acknowledgement of the mind's tendency towards self-hostility:

> Lucy: *There's something in us that is so contracted and that was, that was the way I experienced myself: I was hypercritical. I mean, I still am, but you know it was 100 times more than that. There would always be this voice in my head that would be just so critical of everything. Sooo much self-doubt. So I was constantly delivered in this state of fear of being wrong, doing things wrong, not being liked* [using a cathartic, familiar and laboured tone of voice]. *And it was, it was, it was hard, and my outer life was kind of good, and I would have a good job and I would have friends, but my inner life was horrible.*

This excerpt initiates the exploration of the often violent quality of thoughts in our metaphorical snowstorm. Owing to their elusive nature, the potency of these snowflakes (thoughts) is easy to underplay; they seem to dissolve as swiftly as they appear. This raises questions about how these whirlwinds of thought influence our sense of self so significantly. For one participant, delving into the notion of "psychological time" becomes pivotal in untangling this inquiry.

3.1.2 Space-time Construct of Self

> Greg: *I think we have to look at what does "inward" mean? And maybe on a gross level, we can say, attention, centred outward, meaning on the environment, that appears to be separate to me, gives me feedback about myself through the environment, which means through minds. Through the distortion that is mind around me. Okay? So not aliveness, the distortion that is mind. So if my attention, my sense, or my experience of who I am, the source of my experience of who I am is located in the world it's located in thought. Which means it's located in time and in perception, and in conditioning, and in deception, and illusion and in delusion. It's, in other words centred in all things that are not real. And the more my attention is focused on all things that are not real, I'll build a concept of myself that is not real. And then I'll hang on to that concept, I'll live that concept as if it is real.*

The concept or image of self that we have from a young age is added to by external feedback from the environment, as well as our own mind's reactivity to that feedback. "I" perceive what the person's mind across from my is perceiving. This accumulated perception of self is entirely thought-based, memory-based, and therefore bound by time:

> Greg: *Why the time thing is important is that it's turning my dynamic moment to moment shimmer of an experience that is*

full of aliveness into a static memory-based projection. Nothing real about that. It's just an amalgamation of memory, perceptual input, conditioned input, and thought – conceptual input; and then I hold on to that as if this is a fixed state, but it's already dead in the moment that I even describe it or interpret anything that I'm given, that state is dead.

The notion of "aliveness" is crucial for Greg and will be discussed further. For the moment, understand that Greg is alluding to the aliveness of his sensory experience, which includes the five external senses as well as what is happening internally. This could be both the weight of the body on the chair and the tingling sensation in the hands. Yet, as those sensory experiences are converted into words, we create something static out of the "shimmer" of the direct sensory experience. We thus reify a separate "I", and transition into the realm of time, that inherently exists outside the real. While these insights led Greg to delve into the aliveness of the sensory realm that did not contribute to a thought-based illusion of self, he also underscores the importance of a "functional self". This is bound by time and a sense of separation, yet is crucial to navigate the phenomenal world of everyday life:

Greg: I see you and I, for functional purposes, you are a separate entity to me. You have your inclinations, your idiosyncrasies, your tendencies, and I have my inclinations idiosyncrasies and tendencies that pertain to my form, and that pertain to the conditioned aspect of mind...So on the most visible, gross level, you are separate to me. You are sitting over there, and I'm sitting over here, which means we have a space-time kind of consciousness; that there's something that occurs "over here", and there's something that occurs "over there". And I call this "me" and I call that "you", and there's a distance between us and there's a space between us, and it's generally

empty because of the degree to which I can perceive that which I call "you" in that which I call "me."

As we advance in this analysis, we will explore participants' insights into the space between people; this includes Greg's description that as one's perception of their own existence deepens, so too does the perception of others, which encompasses the space between two individuals. For now, take note of how Greg acknowledges this "functional" distinction between individuals, and envision a world where this separation was not available. Yet, participants are dissecting the unreality of living through this illusion of mind, or the distortion of perception.

Indeed all participants emphasise how living through a mind, chained to a past that no longer exists and a hypothetical future, hinders individuals from experiencing the richness of the present moment, a moment that inherently expresses outside these timeframes:

> Louis*: Time doesn't exist when we're fully in the body because time is an idea of the mind. It's a perception. It's a perceived slice of experience.*

Thought forms a part of experience, but it is not the entirety. Therefore, living through this function of the mind equates to living through only a fraction of the totality of experience. Louis reemphasises that time is a construct of thought, while also suggesting embodiment as an antidote to this non-reality. The shift of attention towards the sensory will become the crux of our second overarching theme and indeed the main focus of this research. For now, let us examine Jake's illustration of when action is grounded in this narrow perception of self:

> Jake: *I can even reference just last night. Being in a conversation entering into it quite in my body, quite emotional, quite whole. And then being triggered at some point to feel defensive, and through being triggered to feel defensive...um...without noticing it, my energy became more in*

the front part of my head. And the way I started communicating was in kind of an attacking way... I came out of the conversation and I just felt, yuck, you know? I didn't feel connected to the way that I showed up.

Jake outlines a direct instance of being ensnared by conditioned thoughts that sprung up in response to his sensory experience. One could ask: *who* was under attack? *What* was he defending? Jake notes that his "participation" in the separate self imbued his later experience with a sense of regret – suggesting that his experience was overwhelmed by a part of his being that did not represent the whole. Lucy also speaks on how a narrow perspective obstructs the perception of the vastness of reality, as demonstrated in her response to my question about conditioned aspects of the individual:

Lucy: *It's a tightening. It is part of who I am...but it can be a limiting force. Because it's like, it's like, there are these grooves, there are these railway tracks, and how they've been laid down is what your life has been thus far – what your life experience has been thus far. And so when I live through here* [points to her head], *I can only live along those tracks...they get deeper, and they get deeper, and they get deeper...and that's the only... that's a very narrow strip of life that I can experience* [pause].

Lucy compares the imprints in her psyche to railway tracks, moulded by her life experiences. She highlights that residing in the head and depending on rational thought processes confine her to these pre-established routes, deepening the tracks further. However, through their self-exploration, participants insert a wedge between the time-bound programmed reactivity and the boundless potential of their lived experience.

3.1.3 Seeing through the Desiring "Observer"

Whitney recognises the mind's cyclical patterns, understanding that adherence to its memory reserves would inevitably guide her towards preconceived notions of what is "good" and "bad"; which is turn fuels desire for the former and rejection of the latter:

> Whitney*: So aware that whatever sensation I'm having...so I cognise, I have an experience of having an interaction with something,* [knocks on the wooden chair] *of course there's sensation. Then it runs through a part of my brain that, it has collated all of my memories, and it does a recognition: "what is this? Is this good? Is this bad?" It's running through a memory bank, and it's going to make two lists for me; "this is good, keep it, have more of it"; "this is bad, not good". I'm aware of that, that it's occurring, and I'm able to intercept it. So nothing is good or bad. You know, what I mean by that is, of course, I can have experiences where I feel great joy and desire, but I'm aware... I'm not attached to that* [softly, resolutely].

Notice how participants correct themselves while identifying with their experiences: "then I, then it..."; highlighting the difficulty of conveying these experiences through language. However, it is important to clarify that participants are not vilifying positive states; rather, they are shedding light on the perpetual craving for what is good or pleasurable – a programmed pattern, leading to dissatisfaction when these desires are not fulfilled. Yet as Greg discusses, desire comes is myriad forms, including the desire to be free of desire by "witnessing" experience:

> Greg: *It's where a lot of processes really fall short because they teach about "observation", but observation can be done in the state of dissociation, and in the state of dissociation, the observation is thought, once again. And so you're introducing, subtly introducing, thought, which is the*

reaction – thought has caused the reaction to begin with... Do you follow?

When an individual becomes aware of undesirable aspects of their personality, such as a propensity for aggression or cynicism, they might follow advice to craft a new identity as a "non-reactive observer" of these traits. However, in psychological terms, dissociation refers to a coping strategy where the mind fragments itself to evade confronting painful sensations, emotions, and thoughts. As such, the mind may fabricate the concept of being a "mindful observer" as a means to cope with life's challenges, all the while moulding themselves into this new identity that seems preferable to the reactive personality they aim to alter. Yet, within this process, we delve into a duality – where "I" exist separately from the passing challenging thoughts and sensations; when in reality “I” am just another cluster of thought. During my dialogues with Greg, we frequently explored the paradox of layering identities under the guise of freeing oneself from identity, yet inherently being tied to thought and thus time, hence being disconnected from the actual moment's vitality. Greg employs associative creativity to demonstrate that while such individual expressions might appear unique, they fundamentally stem from existing knowledge, therefore, they are not entirely new:

Greg: *Associative creativity, that's something else. You talk to people about that and they, in creative industries like advertising; they, they realise that it's <u>associative</u> creativity, it's not, very few things, if any, that they do are <u>novel</u>. And the novel things occur when they momentarily step out of their recalcitrant process of <u>sameness</u>. And so people who have broken through barriers in technological development, apparently have done that on LSD – something that temporarily takes them out of the constraints of the conscious mind. And then in that area, or in that realm ideas, they have ideas that pop up that are not constrained.*

This leads us to ask: Can body-based mindfulness practices also offer the opportunity to transcend the mind's deeply ingrained patterns? The answer, as revealed in this research, is a resounding yes; with all participants describing a departure from a life dictated by familiar paths:

> Whitney: *If you think of ourselves as concentric circles going further and further out, and the circle in the middle as like a size of a pinhead; that's our personality, for me. And that's the level most people operate on. They don't realise there's any concentric circles around* [chuckling] *further and further and further out. So their whole lives are on the top of that pinhead. And initially, that little pinhead person has to sit down and start to at least recognise it's got an agitated attention. Eventually, as you practice, something happens where the "me", the "my", the "I", you could say it dies, it disappears. But you have to call it in when you, of course, when you're interacting with certain levels of life.*

While Whitney returns to the idea of a functional self (or pinhead) to navigate daily life, she, and indeed all participants, continue to place emphasis on a significantly wider reality – thereby alluding to a larger sense of being, beyond the thought-based perception of self.

3.1.4 Non-demonisation of Mind

Exploring such material, given the current research perspective, one might be tempted to cast the mind as the villain. However, this would be a misinterpretation. While some participants initially demonised the mind in their journey of self-discovery, all recognised its power and necessity. We have already mentioned the value of a functional self; another significant function, as suggested by the participants, is the mind's capability to harness attention — an aspect intricately linked to an impending concept: awareness.

> Jake: Okay, awareness and attention [long pause]. So, I feel like those are happening simultaneously. That my attention can be fully focused with you and this conversation right now; but my awareness is also aware of where we are, the surroundings, the birds. And I can, while I speak about it, by speaking about it I can bring my attention to each one of those things. But it seems that when my attention is focused, I choose to look at you and focus on you, then my attention is here. But there still is a wider awareness of what's around.

For all participants, attention possesses a more intensified, directive quality, akin to a spotlight, and is sourced from the mind. Attention's quality of intensification was also echoed during my discussion with Lucy:

> Lucy: *Attention is like laser beam channelling, right* [her speech slows down]. *So it's a way to concentrate. It's a way to concentrate our energy, so to speak. And...it is part of congruence and alignment – so in order to bring these different aspects of our beingness aligned together in the moment.*

As we will explore in the following section, lacking the ability to harness attention leaves one at the mercy of whatever grabs our focus next. Lucy's remark resonates with Whitney's earlier excerpt concerning the mind's default "agitated" or scattered state of attention, with the unsettled and fragmented mind mirrored in the body's contracted parts. In this research, participants stress the essential task of redirecting attention towards the vibrancy of the sensory moment; thus directing the depth of our incisions into the fabric of our mental perceptions.

Louis shares insights into how cultivating attention shapes his daily life, significantly influencing the quality in which he manoeuvre through existence:

> Louis: *It's a curiosity of: "Let's pay attention, something is happening, let's let's see, let's watch observe and, what what what's what's happening here?" It's like a barometer. It's like a: "Pay attention*" [using a soft cautioning voice of a parent]*. But, that mechanism for most people is, it's like the boy who cried wolf sort of scenario. It's so overactive that we pay attention to that, far too sensitivity at first. And as we get more comfortable with pain with discomfort or what the mind perceives as pain as discomfort, which is just sensation, all of a sudden the things that do grab our attention, are actual things that might be worthwhile to pay attention to.*

Indeed, emerging from a state of numbness or unconsciousness can often lead to a hypersensitive state – an increased focus on one's actual (sensory) experience may initially appear to intensify a sense of threat or vulnerability. This is where a lot of us may decide this "path" is not for us. However, as all participants assert, there is nothing inherently frightening in this process: They are merely learning to stay with the rise and inevitable fall of sensation. Observing this cycle, Louis learns to dwell within the continuous flow of experiences. His attention is captured when necessary, but it is not perpetually diverted.

Thus, among other functions, the mind's ability to manage attention emerges as an essential mechanism for steering conscious experience towards the present moment – deeply altering our subjective experience, as we will delve into further in the following section.

3.2 Overarching Theme Two: Embodiment as a More Direct Truth

3.2.1 Experience, Lodged in Physiology

By persistently inviting his attention inwards, Louis discovered that the root of his suffering lay in the form of unconscious impulses lodged in his body:

> Siân: *So why do you include the body in your practices?*

Louis*: My teachings and understanding...and experience have revealed that that's what is at the core of a lot of the challenges and suffering in my life. So when I wanted to find the core of my anger that emerged, it revealed itself as an impulse in my body that was...that I was unconscious of, that would, if left unattended or unconscious would express with words or actions that I'd have to apologise for later*.

For Louis, the genesis of his anger and addictive behaviours was traced back to bodily sensations, surfacing as impulsive urges beyond conscious awareness. By directing his attention to the body, Louis expands his inquiry to encompass processes beyond what the mind *guesses* to be true about experience. It is less a criticism of the mind – more a recognition of its propensity to expend significant energy trying to untangle the problems it has self-woven. Louis shares an illustrative analogy:

Siân: *So why go into sensation and not manipulate thought?*

Louis: *Because that's not the source. The thought is emerging as a consequence of the impulse. So here comes the discomfort and the mind is saying:* [with a sense of dramatic yet tedious urgency] *"How do I survive? How do I avoid? How do I fix? How do I control?"...but the mind's thoughts are only a guess* [decisively]*. It's like, your body's on fire...and there's smoke in front of your eyes, and you're trying to solve your problems because the smoke is making your vision blurry, and you're trying to fan away the smoke but every time you find a way a new smoke emerges, because we're not going to the source. And then we look down and we see, "holy shit! My body's on fire, why have I not attended to this?!" Why would why, I have been focusing on smoke my whole life...*

Siân: *Mmm, and that's using lot of energy...*

Louis*: A lot of energy to move smoke. And it's a great example as well – it takes a lot of energy to move smoke and it comes back almost instantly. And that's our attempts to try to get rid of thought. Whereas accepting thought is gonna happen, why judge it, it's just going to be there. If we pay no attention to it or notice when thought is getting carried away and instead align our attention in our body, then all of a sudden, we notice that thought drops away as experience, and sensation in our body expresses.*

Louis, in his insights, highlights the inefficacy of attempts to control, remove, or substitute thoughts while ignoring the physical body's cries for attention. These cries may have started as gentle whispers but over time, due to continued neglect, have amplified into desperate pleas. Louis uses the metaphor of "smoke" to signify the mind, which is constantly in a state of seeking solutions and creating labels in an effort to shield against discomfort that it perceives as threatening. According to Louis, we often navigate this process in a state of blindness, with our direct experiences veiled by the smoke of thought. To truly resolve the issue, he suggests, requires courage to gaze inward and confront the source of the problem.

Subsequently, Greg delves deeper into how this accumulation of experiences, or memories, within the body manifests as physical tension and contraction:

Greg:*...in areas where it may be chronically contracted or tight, and these can be superficial or deep muscles, the way you might feel in a hip joint when you touch the pelvis of somebody, and it is very tight in there, but they have flexibility, or they they don't register that that's a problem until a*

breakdown starts to occur in the body that is a reflection of accumulated psychological tension in that part of the body.

Before becoming consciously aware that one is "on fire", as Louis vividly put it, an individual may perceive certain areas of their body as being tense or stiff. Here, Greg returns to the notion of psychological time – proposing that these areas of tension symbolise trapped memory held in the body. He elaborates on this phenomenon, describing these contracted areas of tension as "pockets of time":

Greg: *I call them "pockets of time", they start to come to the surface...they are energies, chi, that have been constrained, become dense, were stagnant somewhere in the bodymind, and now those patterns come to the surface as sensations.*

The term 'chi', derived from Traditional Chinese Medicine, refers to an individual's energy source. For this study's scope, we will adhere to this rudimentary definition. We will also revisit the idea of "surfacing" and "releasing" these temporal pockets. For now, we focus on physical tension as the embodiment of cumulative lived experiences in what Greg dubs the "bodymind", a term intentionally devoid of separation, suggesting these phenomena's inseparability. Greg and Whitney, colleagues in therapy, exhibit similar views on these stuck pockets of energy in the body:

Whitney: *Time is where you fall into, analysing things into two sets; "good and bad", "craving and aversion". That creates time. And therefore now, I'm now, I'm trying to have an aversion to something, kind of push it away, try not to experience it...I wrap it up in that pocket of time, somewhere in my physiology. I get temporary relief by trying not to feel that.*

Through trying to control experience, we prevent the organic flow of sensory experience. This might take the form of using food to distract from loneliness, or

intellectualising and complicating one's relationship status to avoid a deep-seated truth, among myriad examples.

Whitney and Greg's perspectives converge on a specific interpretation of the reactive cycle, which contributes to the build-up of stagnant energy or, metaphorically speaking, more "temporal pockets", thereby limiting the ease of lived, embodied, experience. The critical insight is not about the starting point in this cycle but rather the interconnectedness of its components: First, a psychological reaction is triggered, typically by an external event – for instance, someone raising their voice or being cut off in traffic. Reactive thoughts cluster around related bodily sensations, essentially encapsulating them. This solidification of experience through thought confines the sensory experience within the physiology, manifesting as physical tension or contraction. This inhibits the sensation from following its natural course of expression, transforming it into a static "temporal pocket". Thus, while pseudo-spiritual discourses often urge followers to "let go" of the past, the participants point towards experience (time) being embedded in our physiology.

Yet, the reader could suspect that this still employs more narrative to mollify suffering. Indeed, convincing others about such matters seems futile and this domain – steeped in epistemological dilemmas of how one can arrive at "truth". Ultimately, this research contends that empirical self-discovery within one's own experience provides the only fertile ground for "truth". Nevertheless, the participants generously endeavoured to share their insights, asserting that for them, "truth", at least in the initial stages, is most readily accessed through engaging with the body.

3.2.2 Living Inside Out

Given the mind's strong inclination towards complexity and confusion, all participants resolutely choose the body as their anchor for attention amidst the everchanging tapestry of their lived experience:

> Greg*: And so if I wanted an <u>actual</u> sense of self, and I say <u>sense</u> here because it's not an <u>idea of self</u>. It's a sense of being, a sense of aliveness, moment to moment. Then I would*

have to do something to come out of thought. I'd have to explore, experience, something that is not thought based. And the first thing I would have to do is to turn my, the source of my attention, the focus of my attention, to the source of my attention. So I'd have to turn it from the outside to the inside. What does the inside mean? It means to the sensory – any part of the sensory experience because the sensory is happening outside of time.

Greg asserts an "internal reference of self" – based on the aliveness of uninterpreted sensory feedback, which we have already established exists outside of time. This aligns with Whitney's observation, that awareness of this sensory realm can be used to indicate the degree to which her being has arrived in the present moment:

Whitney: *So I am aware that everything that I feel has a sensory aspect to it, it is sensation. So everything I'm having an interaction with, which is everything as long as I am alive, and still breathing in this particular body. Then I'm having sensations 24/7.*

...if I can remain there, then no need to go to a story [Pause]. *I only go into story if I've run out of... you know, and now I'm going to indirectly have a perception of something, which is the story, which is not true. So it's like you've run out of absolute, into phenomenal reality.*

By keeping her attention and awareness anchored in this space, she bypasses the need to resort to a mental "story" to narrate her experience. Jake also touches on the unfolding of life as a continuous relational sensory experience:

Jake*: There's a space where you're just trying to feel. And that feeling does have an interpretation, which the mind interprets. But for me, I'm just trying to mostly be with that feeling first in*

its fullness – to actually feel that before allowing my mind to start analysing or understanding what that is.

Notice the participants' collective passion for cultivating the ability to directly *sense* raw sensory data before succumbing to the mind's embellishment of meaning, interpretation and judgement.

The reader might however reason that these reported "direct experiences" (sensations) vary among the participants because they are based on their own subjective conditioning. And they would be correct. When Lucy states that her "life happens here" with her hands on her body, does she mean that her sense of being is *defined* by her conditioned patterning? It is in this context that following analysis notes the participants reference to the body as a *more* direct, yet not *absolute*, expression of an individual's truth:

> Greg: *Now you have the relationship with a body that is a more direct relationship, and then not an absolute one, but more direct relationship with the aliveness, with the quality of life that is expressing through this nervous system, not with the interpretation of that.*

While it may be alluring to consider sensation as an unadulterated representation of truth, as mentioned by Greg it is vital to acknowledge that it only conveys a *partial*, and still very conditioned aspect of reality.

> Greg: *The body doesn't lie about what is happening, it just shows what is happening. It reflects the state of mind, the contents of the mind. It reflects the relationship with the environment, and it reflects the experience of self, or the experience of what you are. It just presents that. Thought gives a view, it adds a view, an interpretation. It adds language description, interpretation, it adds analysis, it adds strain, it adds attention, it adds future, it adds past – it adds time. It adds a lot and it changes very quickly, it's very fickle, it's not a*

consistent feedback, besides it being incredibly confused and confusing. So I felt the body gave a more consistent presentation of what is. At least, the way what is expresses through this nervous system, this density of a form.

Greg views felt bodily sensations as a more stable point of reference. Yet these observations raise a question central to our ongoing exploration: Is thought (and therefore self-perception) inherently distinct from sensation? Or, are they merely two facets of the same entity? To navigate the distinction, or lack thereof, between mind and body, the following discussion probes the participants' views on the relationship between thought and sensation.

3.2.3 The Relationship Between Thought and Sensation

While participants are at different stages of insight regarding this relationship, all observe an intimate connection between the two. All participants also discuss a common incongruence between what an individual *thinks* and what the body's expresses, non-verbally. Louis, for example, has previously identified an impulse in the body as the source of affliction; here we see him toying with directionality of this interplay between thought and sensation:

Louis: *Sensation happens firstly, thought emerges as a reaction to sensation. Or, or they're either happening simultaneously; it's like a coin: "Here's sensation in the body, here's thought in the mind and where do we align our attention?" Or the thought emerges as a consequence; it's always a step behind the action – attempting to judge control analyse, understand, label...the present...the contact between sensations, contact between nervous system and our senses and environment. Whether it's sound, touch, taste...*

Louis' utilisation of the coin metaphor captures a collective insight among participants that thought and sensation are intimately linked, if not the same

phenomenon. Yet, through immersion in body-based practices, they choose to harness attention and awareness on sensation, rather than thought.

Greg also discusses the inseparability of thought, yet with more certainty in regards to the absolute inseparability of thought and sensation:

> Greg: *If you react to the sensation you're reacting to the thought, the structure of the sensation, what gives rise to the sensation and what gives rise to thought. So sensation giving rise to thought, thought giving rise to sensation, a loop that doesn't have a starting point. You are seeing both now. First one as it is it comes and goes but there's no attachment to the content of it. Then you're seeing sensation comes and goes, rises and passes; it has no meaning either, there's no interpretation to the sensation. But the deeper you observe sensation, in other words the quieter you become, the closer, the smaller the gap becomes between sensation and thought. And eventually the gap closes all together and what you experience is thought-sensation, thought-sensation, thought-sensation, faster and faster and faster you think, thought-sensation.*
>
> Siân: *So a thought is sensation?*
>
> Greg: *Yes, and sensation is thought.*

Greg is describing the gradual reduction of the perceived gap between thought and sensation, reaching a point where they become indistinguishable. This aligns with Whitney who also describes the inseparability of thought and sensation with equal certainty, and gives an example of the evolution of this transformed perspective:

> Whitney: *Well, they're intimate, are intimately connected...I guess you could say I've been socialised well, I was socialised to believe that they were, that I could control the body or the mind. And all I needed to do was get better at controlling it. Therefore, in some way that might have an impact on my emotions. Now I understand they're intimately connected so that everything that I'm experiencing... I'm experiencing as a sensation...They're the same, mind and body are so closely interrelated for me that they're not...there's no separation.*

Although all participants place emphasis on the inseparability of thought and sensation, Whitney observes reactivity or emotional "upset" as an indicator that her experience has moved into the realm of the thought-based mind. In doing so, she is orientated towards one side of the coin, but it is the side that tends to distort and dramatise reality. Thus she has trained herself to reorient her attention towards the body, effectively disrupting the cyclical feedback loop between thought and sensation.

The interplay between pre-existing frameworks and sensation is also discussed by Greg. This time offering an analytical description how accumulated memory in the body (manifested as discomfort and tension) influences our perceptual frameworks of ourselves and the world:

> Greg: *So what is happening in the body is not always congruent with that* [thought], *even though it often governs the perceptual framework, by virtue of its discomfort to its pain, the accumulated discomfort in the body is governing the perceptual framework, almost in a way of, in a way of... protecting the entity.*

Indeed, the theme of the mind stepping in as a protective mechanism was a recurring motif throughout the participant interviews. Many acknowledging

instances from their childhood, where these protective mechanisms were necessary to shield against perceived threats. Nevertheless, Louis goes on to demonstrate how, even in non-threatening situations, the mind holds onto a habit of hastily superimposing narratives in an effort to alleviate physical uneasiness:

> Louis: *So here comes this pain... and my mind's like "except the pain this is just sensation; I accept the pain, this is just sensation". But it's bullshit, because it's just a thought; I'm not actually accepting. So even though the teachers are saying... "it's just sensation"...I'm like yep, I don't get it* [directly, and non-judgementally]. *So practice, body-based practices, are almost like this, for my analogy, is like this petri dish of experimentation and refinement of how we are actually relating to the moment, and that allows us to practice* [with a soft and curious tone]*: "am I accepting, am I not? Where am I not accepting; where is this space in me that is still resisting?" And there was a single moment where... I gave up ...I'm like, "fuck it, it's just pain and honestly, let it be here and I'm okay with that." And there was this sudden instant* [claps his hands], *it was a moment where immense pain flushed just waves of euphoria and my body just straightened up and... no pain; my knees went through here, they just dropped and all of a sudden. And I'm like, what the fuck*? [astounded at the novelty of the experience]. *And so here's the experi:..."oh, this is what acceptance feels like"* [softly discovering] *. This is what it means to surrender and allow, rather than "I'm just gonna surrender and allow this."*

This passage continues to unpack the incongruence between the mind's stories and the felt experience within the body. Note firstly, how these intense experiences of pain are emerging for Louis during a 10-day silent Vipassana retreat – in a dark meditation hall with very little external triggers. The discomfort is

emerging from within. Louis' mind called on spiritual teachings regarding "the need to accept". Yet, having cultivated sufficient self-awareness and non-deception, Louis recognised the emptiness of these narratives, which he directly experienced as being incongruent with the actual pain he was feeling. It was only until he was truly willing and curious to *feel* the qualities of the "pain" that he contacted a direct experience of these sensations – and thus contacted an authentic state of acceptance.

Further, Louis conveys that within the by-product of acceptance, there is a natural transformation in the uncomfortable sensations themselves. This point was underscored by all participants as the beginning of release from the past:

> Jake: *I'm thinking more at times and practice where I've sat with very uncomfortable emotions or sensations or pain, and where if I was just participating externally within that I would move I would do something I would, I wouldn't sit in that space and feel that. But for me, with the journey that I've been on, I do surrender to those. And through surrendering, at some point, there's a shift where it's not as excruciating. It either lessens to a point where it turns into something else that's, I wouldn't, sometimes it's pleasant, sometimes it's just it's no longer at least affecting you in what feels like a hurtful way...And then definitely I have experienced where it totally just disappeared; where that pain or emotion or sensation has at some point disappeared.*

3.2.4 Embodiment: Not an Easy Way Out

While these findings are invigorating, showcasing that participants are not shackled to the mind's customary reactivity, it is noteworthy that these realisations tend to orbit around particularly challenging circumstances, often entailing what is initially experienced as acute discomfort or suffering. Indeed, all participants were emphatic in underscoring the intense discomfort that often accompanies the act of

permitting oneself to truly feel the nuances of a more direct expression of their truth. Naturally, a mind whose basic belief structures are confronted will generate potent experiences that discourage one from disturbing the status quo. Nevertheless, all participants emphasised the immense significance of perseverance along this path. Having taken this courageous step, all participants are equipped to continuously probe into their established perceptual patterns, often manifested since childhood. For example, for Louis, when he finds himself in a state of demanding inner growth or progress, without the readiness to feel and therefore accept, he sees he is driven by deeply rooted core beliefs centred around inadequacy:

> Louis: *...and I've noticed, any intention to move in that direction – and this has happened with Vipassana and other aspects of my life – there's tension in that; it's rooted by a fundamental belief of not being good enough. And I don't want that thought to guide that intention.*

These core beliefs materialise as contractions within the body, which when acted upon, perpetually reinforce both the limiting mental frameworks as well as the corresponding physical contraction.

Lucy also broaches the topic of reinforcing cycles of thought and sensation, by sharing her transition to body-based practices, in this case Yoga asana (postures), and her previous dependence on alcohol to mitigate the internal self-conflict stemming from psychological and physical pain rooted in beliefs of inadequacy:

> Lucy: *The thought would perpetuate forever and ever that contraction. I could not think myself out of that contraction at least that's my experience* [pause]. *So in the early days, the relief for me would be: okay, I would do my yoga class twice a week but then I would would drink, and that would be a relief.*

So just to loosen up a little bit... and not be constantly in that kind of fearful I'm doing life wrong type of a place, you know?

Participants faced intense internal struggles at times. However, by developing the capacity to avoid falling into habitual reactive patterns and instead accessing a timeless space (the sensory experience), they managed to shift the course of their lived experience. The cultivation of this ability marked a significant turning point, breaking away from past habits and patterns, and initiating a transformation in their understanding and experience of themselves and their interactions with the world.

Indeed, within this novelty, it was posited that deeper strata of their true essence was accessible. Raising the question as to what befalls the "self" if it can no longer delineate itself in relation to its accumulated programming? The following section will delve into participant observations of what we might term the "true" or "essential" self. Yet before we venture there, we will briefly examine the quality of "stillness" as this emerged as a crucial aspect of both the embodied truth as well as that which transcends the physical realm.

3.2.4 Non-Reactivity, Stillness and the Process of Release

A principal message from all the participants was the capacity that can be nurtured to step out of a discomforted, contracted, or pathologised self. To elucidate this, Louis cites a quote by Victor Frankl (2006) to exemplify the inherent human capacity to detach behaviour from reactive thinking:

Louis: *Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our happiness.*

However, Louis discusses a tendency of mind to identify with these automatic reactions:

> Louis: *Because the stimulus and the reaction are stacked; we identify as a reaction because we don't see that there's a space between the stimulus and the reaction.*

For Louis, stillness and body-based practices have therefore been essential for him to access this space between stimulus and response. Here, he uses one of his practices, cold-immersion, to describe the interplay between the two:

> *But stillness and body-based practices inherently, as we pay attention to the body, with this quality of stillness... to me, the magic ingredient is stillness, maybe I should have started this whole interview this way...Because if we're in an ice bath and we're doing this* [thrashes his arms restlessly] *and we're dancing around the experience, we're not in the ice bath. If we're in meditation, and we're doing this* [fidgeting with his hands, twitching his body] *and we're thinking about lunch, and we sit here like this for a couple hours, that's not what we're talking about...But stillness, as we drop it to complete stillness and observe, then all of a sudden, all of our internal experience that was below the surface of conscious awareness begins to rise up, and that can be an uncomfortable experience. So it's that stillness, it's that quality of stillness that allows us to say: "there's something more here than this thought". And as soon as we don't react, we create the potential for that reflection. Doesn't necessarily happen.*

Louis details a gradual unearthing and expression of what Greg and Whitney earlier referred to as "pockets of time" – experiences embedded within the physiology. This process of allowing past experiences to surface is what Louis refers to as "sifting away layers of programming"; a process that calls for the cessation of the ceaseless reactivity to the contents that are rising to the surface – it necessitates stillness. Recalling his snow globe analogy, we must cease shaking the

globe if we wish to see what is beyond thought. As we will explore in the next section, it is within this stillness that one is receptive to insights as to what lies beyond the conditioned self.

Indeed, the importance of appreciating gradual progress, as highlighted by Louis, cannot be understated. Although the mind might desire to expedite the journey towards a state of "unity" and "complete harmony", the process for most individuals unfolds at a more deliberate pace. It typically commences with settling the mind, thereby permitting the body to bring forth and let go of past experiences (or “pockets of time”). Following this, space is created for new experiences to arise. These small victories represent instances of being present in the space between stimulus and response, which is a crucial aspect of the transformative journey.

Let us also take a moment to hark back to Greg’s earlier excerpt, concerning the necessity for absolute quietude, for stillness, in observing the relationship between thought and sensation: “But the deeper you observe sensation, in other words, the quieter you become, the closer, the smaller the gap becomes between sensation and thought.” In the passage that follows, he persists in shedding light on the essence of cessation; a sort of non-action, a stillness, that actually necessitates less “inner work” than one might initially assume:

> Greg: *Not because you're thinking of anything, or doing anything, they just come because presence is maintained. And the longer and deeper presence is maintained, even though that's paradoxical because it is taking time to do so, but as a consequence of that pervasive presence, it starts to shine the light on everything that is time in the body; everything that is accumulated as thought, thought-reaction, the reaction of the observer, or the reaction as the observer; all of that is exposed. So there's still nothing to do. But see, notice what is occurring and simply the process of release, not the action of release, it’s a process of release; you recognise it for what it is and it releases* [unwaveringly]; *release is the natural next step,*

> *because there isn't the opposite of that which is to cling, it's simply the sensation. It's why everything is the cessation of something for the release of, of the body, the release of the mind, that's where the healing, that's where the healing takes place. That's where the liberation of the mind starts to occur, that's where freedom in the body begins to occur. It's where autonomy starts to arise; sovereignty of one's being because it's no longer shrouded in darkness, in mythology and or, what is the word I'm looking for? It's not shrouded in impression and certain ideas; ideologies, suppositions, constructs, impressions of self; it's not shrouded in that anymore, it's just exposed as light or a quality that is, that transcends matter. It's a quality that starts to radiate through matter, but it's not of matter; it's not a consequence of matter. It's just able to express through method more readily. The aliveness is more vibrant than it was before.*

Greg is not alluding to a psychoanalytical excavation of "self" over many strenuous and expensive hours in therapy. His words, much like the views expressed throughout the participant interviews, connote a sense of "dropping into" a space of receptivity, and allowing the natural process of release. This is not achieved through force or control, but rather through a readiness or curiosity to infuse the stagnant energy in the body with presence – a concept that will soon be discussed but one that continues to refer to a realm outside of psychological time. Here is a similar insight from Jake:

> Jake: *Just simply being like, initially, when you're describing it, you're like: "Okay, well thought is helping out here by describing what I am experiencing". But if you're able to be still enough, and just be with sensation, then you are kind of just feeling the energetics of that sensation expressing, and it doesn't seem that you're really engaged in thought at that point. And then thought might come in again* [speeding up],

and then it might disappear again, as you go back into the sensation, the actual experience of it.

Yet Lucy aptly addresses the paradox of practicing various structured techniques such as meditation, where considerable discipline and persistence is often required, at least initially, in order to authentically “let go”, or “drop in”, to something other than one’s own distorted perceptions:

Lucy: *There are times when I need to be more one pointed, because...there are times when we need more technique, and we need that technique to get our scattered bits together. And, and there are times when we can be more in that open awareness space; where we can hold this moment more in its entirety and we don't need to single one thing out and we can actually... we can actually be here and that's an interesting...um, we can actually be here as that awareness. And there's a certain leaning back that happens. And that's the most effortless. But it's not a doing. It's not, it's not... it arises.*

Having cultivated the requisite attention, Lucy describes surrendering or “leaning back” into a space that is characterised by all participants as a cessation rather than action. She calls this space effortless awareness, a concept that will be addressed in the following sections.

It is also vital to acknowledge the considerate undertone in each participant's narrative as they steer through the process of disentangling these habitual reactions to life. They exhibit a gentle awareness of moments when consciousness and stillness seem elusive, in their own experiences and those of others. Concurrently, they grasp the snare of creating a “non-reactor" identity — a superficial self-extension. This pitfall can be evaded by embracing one's own humanity, thus acknowledging one's innocence, and indeed, the innocence of others when reactivity prevails.

Yet the question remains: If sensation does not represent our absolute truth, then what does? The following section will examine how participants experience the entirety or essence of their being – beyond the physical realm.

3.3 Overarching Theme Three: Beyond Obsession with Body

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3.3.1 Contacting awareness

The participants and I were acutely aware of, and amused by, the constraints inherent in trying to articulate "awareness" through language. Although a blank page might arguably be the closest representation I could offer to capture the essence of this state, the nature of this research prompts an attempt to illuminate, through symbolism, a realm that all participants suggested as a direct, genuine expression of their existence. Greg initiates our exploration by flagging what seems to be a common conundrum within this topic:

> Greg: *This is impossible to explain, or impossible to describe to somebody because you're using words that are built out of, or constructed out of separation, even the terms "objective" and "subjective", that's a mental construction. If you say to somebody, "there's only subjective," they would refute it, because their mind would refute that:* [mimics the other person using a defensive tone] *"No, there is an objective observation, an agreed upon objective observation..."* [Returns to a softer tone of voice] *Only while there is separation, only while there is time, psychological time.*

One cannot *perceive* that which is beyond perception, because thought inherently fragments that which is not fragmented. Still, one might argue that "awareness" is merely another mental story, based on accumulated knowledge from abundant spiritual literature on the topic. While we will return to expectancy effects later in this section, these results suggest that our human ability to become conscious of the objects within our lived experience enables us to infer that this state of awareness, or consciousness, cannot be limited to these very contents:

> Greg: *Within that, there's then something that is conscious of that, there's an awareness of that. So the awareness of that cannot be that, they can't be the same thing otherwise there couldn't be awareness of that. That part that is aware of the*

form, the density, the inclinations, idiosyncrasies and tendencies, by its very nature transcends those things. It can't be bound by those things, because once again, then at some point, there'd be a limitation of what can be seen.

Greg acknowledges the body's pivotal role as a portal into this realm, yet now delves into insights of a wider reality, one that is not synonymous, nor tethered to, the contents of experience – including thought and sensation. It is worth noting, though, that while all participants simultaneously refute any notion that the inner inquiry in focus is restricted to a preoccupation with the physical body, they persistently return to a reference of the body in their therapeutic work with others. Once again, this is employed to prevent the mind from diving into esoteric imaginations of "awareness":

Louis: *The mere fact that I have awareness of them* [sensations] *means I am not them. And it's easier to see that with sensation than it is thought, because we're so* [clicks fingers] *in our thoughts. So I... when I teach this to my own clients, I'm not telling them that I'm teaching them how to observe and be 'stillness' and 'pure awareness', and use words that they will not understand or align with most likely. I say the body, but I'm secretly showing them that: "hey* [in soft, curious tone], *guess what, they are observing their body, and as a result, observing their mind.*

The participants frequently used imagery and metaphors to convey how the characteristics of awareness might differ from the everyday elements of our lives. A recurring image in my dialogues with Greg was that of a sine wave on an axis (Figure 3.3.1), utilised to depict awareness and the contents of experience:

Figure 3.3.1 The Sine Wave of Experience on the Axis of Awareness

> Greg: *So I describe that as the, the axis around which the wave occurs. If you want to describe the wave of emotion, ebb and flow as a sine wave, it has to occur around an axis; your entire experience has to have some sort of axis because it's an experience of contrast. For there to be Yin and Yang there's a, there's an equilibrium in the centre of that, always, it has to be. But you're becoming conscious of the equilibrium rather than obsessed with or attached to the Yin or the Yang. You see the equilibrium as the foundation for everything to occur in a dualistic manner, in a, in a way of expression of contrast.*

Readers may recognise the symbol of yin-yang, a circular motif divided into two contrasting halves. Yin is often depicted as the “dark side of the mountain”, while Yang is illustrated as the “sunny side of the mountain”. Together, these polar opposites fill an entire circle, symbolising an ancient Chinese philosophy of unity. Essentially, the tranquillity of Yin and the dynamism of Yang are interdependent; one cannot exist without the other. This interconnectedness of all elements, including ourselves, forms the basis for the final section of these results, where this concept will be examined further. In Greg's portrayal, awareness (represented as

the axis) remains unaffected by variations in his environment or oscillations in the physical body. Naturally, this brings us to query the dual nature of these statements. Are the participants referring to a “permanent” state existing distinctly from the contents of awareness (represented as the sine wave), as a “pure”, underlying reality? Or are we discussing the contents of experiences as they exist within awareness or consciousness, which permeates but is not confined to that form? While metaphysical debates around dualism and non-dualism stemming from these questions veer slightly outside this study's scope, it is sufficient to point our thoughts towards the prospect that what we're examining embraces, yet surpasses, what we have labelled “mind” and “body”, suggesting a broader, more spacious sense of self. Greg continues:

> *So wherever I am, whatever happens it may have a consequence in the body in that I feel something – my mind hears something that has occurred and a feeling emerges in the body, but I'm not disturbed by that. I can stay with the feeling and I know the feeling will pass and I'll remain at ease, regardless of the circumstance that arises. And of course it is... there’s a degree of that that occurs in a person, you're not going to go from zero to 100 overnight, but an increasing degree of settledness in the body; in the impermanence of the body, but also in the permanence of something within the body that isn't altered by the body or what changes around the body.*

Let us momentarily put aside Greg's use of “permanence”, as it may be an illustration of the challenges of using language to articulate this realm, rather than an assertion of some enduring entity that the mind can latch onto and proclaim, "this – this is awareness". Instead, let us concentrate on the idea of life's experiences, or the sine wave, being marked by transience, or in more Buddhist terms, impermanence. Greg sketches a journey towards a steadier stance within this ceaseless change. This should not however be construed as a detached state;

quite the contrary, it implies a deeper engagement; by cultivating the ability to disentangle his identity from the fleeting nature of all phenomena that constitute life experiences, he liberates himself from the mind's persistent impulse to either flee discomfort (aversion) or chase pleasure (craving). Essentially, Greg hints at equanimity – a stillness of being that finds reflection in a physical body's sense of ease or "settledness", remaining unscathed despite the capricious circumstances of the material world. This raises inquiries concerning the body's role at the participants' current stage in their journey.

3.3.2 Consciousness Piercing Through Body

Mirroring Greg's earlier reference to his state of being remaining unruffled by life's vicissitudes, all participants concur in portraying the body as a conduit – a channel through which the currents of life can flow without overwhelming or dictating their state of being:

> Lucy: *And then combined with that* [Yoga asana], *the dance or the freeform dance, different modalities of that that I've done over the years, kind of serve the same purpose, but has a looser container, even looser container. So it's, how do I feel and then express what it is that is moving through me, through movement. And there's a, way how I've found in my experience, I can tap into areas and things that I don't even have a conscious awareness... I consciously don't know what that is that's moved. So there can be a lot of surprises when you, when you're able to go with that and kind of surrender and let the body guide you.*

There is no ascribing of personal significance to the object of her lived experience, whether they are emotions, thoughts, or physical sensations; she perceives her body as a channel through which these elements freely pass.

Louis also provides us with a tangible example of how this space is manifested in his physical bodily experience. Yet, as is often the case in this realm of introspection, he articulates his experience in terms of what is *absent*, rather than resorting to potentially restrictive positive descriptors that could be misperceived or too readily clung to by the mind:

> Louis: *There's, there's the absence of something. The absence of tension, the absence of constriction, the absence of craving, the absence of aversion. It's just like...*[sighs with relief] *"Okay, this is it"* [softly resolute]. *In fact that is how I make many of my decisions now, maybe most. I don't want to say <u>all</u> because I don't want to apply the universal to it. But many of the decisions I make: "Oh*, [with a soft realisation], *this is scary but, there's fear but, still, there's something about it, that feels right. Let's see what happens."*

While this section addresses a realm beyond an obsession with the body, it is evident that participants assert the physical vessel must be open enough to accommodate life's enormity, with an absence of tension and contraction serving as Louis' benchmark. Powerful emotions such as fear, hatred, and jealousy may persistently surface, yet, as highlighted by Louis and Lucy, our interaction with these emotions undergoes profound transformation. As discussed in the preceding section, the participants are becoming more acquainted with and accepting of the sensory signatures of these emotions, in their raw state; through this acceptance, they stumble upon a space that encompasses these emotions, a space inherently more expansive than the emotions themselves.

What is paramount to grasp here is the recurring theme of non-ownership within this space, echoed by all participants. This becomes complex to articulate, but essentially, if consciousness pervades the body, there is no entity within the body that can claim identification with that phenomenon. Consequently, there is awareness, or consciousness permeating the body, while it is concurrently orbited

by the ceaseless ebb and flow of sensations, emotions, thoughts, and the subjective elation or torment they can generate. Non-attachment, therefore, naturally emerges from the realisation that there isn't a tangible 'I' present to observe this continuous flux. It is within this context that equanimity of one's being surfaces — not as a fresh perceptual construct, but as a direct experience that my identity in the world is not defined by the ever-changing forms of my phenomenal reality:

> Greg: *It simply doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if it arises, it doesn't matter if it doesn't arise. The... it's the attachment to it arising that fades away...It's a bit like a thought arises in the mind at a given time, and you are surprised by it: "Where did that thought come from? That that's a bit of an aggressive thought, that's a bit of a judgmental thought. That's a bit of a of a critical or self deprecating thought..." But now there's just not the attachment to that. That's seen as a function of brain based on memory and conditioning. But not to be entertained, not to be engaged; not to click, in the way that you would click...you wouldn't click on a certain kind of ad that pops up on your computer because you know, if you click on it, you're gonna get 100 more of those. So you simply dismiss it, you're not up in arms that it popped up on your screen, you just don't give it any attention; there's no need to give it any attention. And so it fades into insignificance because it's not reinforced. But if you click on it, it will send you many more of those ads, and you will, you'll be enticed by hopefully one of them. And if you're enticed by one of them, it will send you 1000 more. Your brain is doing the same thing. Now you see this arising, the sensation arises. Yeah, that's unpleasant, but there's no attachment to the unpleasant because it's as transient as the pleasant. And your concern is with the sense of being, the*

sense of aliveness, not the passing of the experiences within aliveness.

In his crafted analogy, Greg draws our attention towards the destructive pitfall of obsessing, over regulating the contents of our lived experience. He likens the mind's thoughts to pop-up advertisements on a computer screen, subtly suggesting that we have control over whether or not we engage with a thought (akin to clicking on an ad). While this is something we can cultivate command over, it often transpires automatically in an innocent state of unawareness; such an action, predictably, leading to a cascade of additional thoughts, akin to a bombardment of further digital prompts. These thoughts and adverts share a common goal: to seize the treasured trophy of our attention.

So, what exactly is this "sense of being" that Greg references, and if there is no identification with the body or mind, then who am I? To answer my inquiring on the matter of non-identification with the contents of our life experiences, Whitney offers insights into her existence – from the gross to the subtle, to the empty:

Siân: *So are you that cluster* [of thought, sensation, emotion, et cetera]*?*

Whitney: *No, I'm not that cluster at all, this is just a form. This just happens to be a packet. You know, like a package, a vehicle. That's all it is; I can get out of the vehicle one day, or I'll hop out of this vehicle. Whatever 'I' is – the consciousness, the awareness, whatever it is that happens to have been given this particular vehicle to have this experience in.*

And later on in our conversation:

Whitney: *So, for me, this is what I can experience, is a breaking down of the body. Initially it starts is my ability to feel every*

single tingling part of my body, you know, the sensations are at a gross level initially. You'd say they quieten down into a very subtle level. And then, then the body parts start to just disintegrate completely...until such a subtle level of...ah...I move from form to formless, you could say [decisively]. *And then of course there's the moment or absence of the 'I'. Now that's a state for me where I am still learning in that state.*

She continues:

Mm but if I'm in it, whoever the 'I' is, and then the 'I' goes, and there's no thought whatsoever, there's just existence, there's just awareness. And I don't even know if there's awareness, you know, because then I'm putting a word to it. There's just nothing. I see why that's such a good word...there's nothing. I don't throw that one lightly [Pause]. *I guess that's consciousness* [Pause].

Through an ever-deepening capacity to perceive the nuances of experience, we transition into Whitney's insights of self-dissolution; a space wherein the power lies in defining what it is not – "there's just nothing". Whitney cautiously employs the term "consciousness", aware of the mind's propensity to contort it into something it is not. In this space, she explains, there is no longer a yearning to obtain an experience; there is simply the experience itself. Therefore, affixing labels such as awareness or consciousness may potentially distort the genuine essence of this space, a space that surpasses the reward-seeking dichotomy of effort and gain; there is an 'isness', a state of being. She does not endeavour to comprehend or accept this state, for to do so would drag her back into the realm of what she earlier termed the "pinhead" - her personality, constructed from thought-based mind that is not aware of the concentric circles (of awareness) that surround it. Essentially, in these passages, Whitney narrates how "she" is not the pinhead. Notice how the concept of the body being a "package" echoes what Greg earlier referred to as a

highly condensed facet of our perception; Whitney also contrasted it with the attributes of lightness and emptiness in her portrayal of consciousness as it infuses and transcends the physical body. She articulates her lived experience with this more expansive aspect of her truth, which goes beyond the constraints of physical form.

Certain readers will notice the close correlations with Eastern philosophies on these described aspects of self (or non-self) and consciousness:

> Whitney: *Yeah. It's just nothing-ness. Even to say consciousness is....The moment there's me in there observing...Oh, look what you're feeling, it's like nah* [makes swishing sound].

Whitney's discussion leans towards what is commonly referred to as "emptiness" in Buddhist philosophy - a philosophy that cautions even assigning this state a linguistic symbol may be misdirecting, as emptiness itself is also empty. Lucy also recognises the Eastern influence on her conceptualisation of self:

> Lucy: *But then it comes to the time old question: When I say 'I', what do I mean? And so again, there's probably again, my yoga philosophy background is gonna jump in here but our practice over time starts to also shift what is it that I mean when I say 'I'. And so it... one of the ways one of my teachers talked about it is there Is a word for "ego"...So what you sense as 'I' maybe when your start to practice, maybe as this body, as these thoughts; it can widen, it can broaden so your sense of 'I' becomes more – kind of shifts out of that realm that's constantly changing towards identifying with consciousness...*

Whilst she may draw inspiration from ancient texts, discussing the evolution of self from the "I" maker – the one who experiences (the functional self) – to a more

boundless stretch of consciousness, Lucy seems to have garnered an intrinsic insight of what it entails to cradle the contents of her experience within this grander sense of self. This implies that this extensive consciousness is not exclusive, but rather embraces everything. Indeed, Lucy's nor Whitney's fundamental essence is anchored to this "ego" or "pinhead", along with its peculiarities, proclivities, and predilections.

Finally, I note the qualities of participants' language among these topics; where referring to concepts such as the "pinhead", there is a sense of hardening, of contraction within the intonation. This is contrasted with words that denote the expansiveness of "awareness" or "consciousness". This too parallels our earlier conversation regarding attention and awareness dancing together to form what all participants refer to as dropping into or contacting a more integrated, less fragmented sense of being in the world, or a true self:

> Jake: *I would suggest it's more of a natural state, rather than a skill. I believe it's a state that one sinks into, rather than a condition one consciously chooses to adopt.*

And later in our conversation:

> *So right now there's an intense level of focus and attention, but then it's also sitting in a lot of softness of awareness. Whereas if I chose to not try not be aware, but just be full of attention, I kind of would probably be like hardening and intensifying* [contracts his body into a rigid posture and raises his shoulders]. *Whereas staying soft* [releases the tension], *I can still be fully focused and have my attention on you and our conversation but be soft to be aware of... And it's not just the physical thing of awareness or just a feeling, it's a feeling of just like softness, and being* [definitively].

A body unburdened of its tensions permits a purer essence to permeate through; there is a sensation of descending into, a yielding to this state. However, it is equally vital not to misconstrue this expansiveness as a state of being detached or spaced out. On the contrary, while all participants agreed on the experience of being more attuned to the present moment, Greg steered our dialogue down an alternative path to illuminate that it is within this true self (awareness) that genuine creativity and uniqueness can flourish:

> Siân: *So are you saying that a different type of uniqueness does express through the form?*
>
> Greg: *Of course because, what you call, you say 'a different kind' of uniqueness and I would say a 'uniqueness'...Because anything else is not...anybody trying to be unique is not unique. Because what are they basing the trying on? It's either the rebellion against something that is existing, or the conformity to something that is existing, that is the source of the individuality and uniqueness, but that is all just 'for or against' what is already in existence. There's nothing unique to that. The uniqueness comes when the mind is not the dominant state. When thought is not the dominant state, when the attachment to thought is not the governing modus operandi of their body, that human being, then a uniqueness can arise because that uniqueness doesn't have initially, it's not dimension bound, it's not parameter bound. There's a freedom to it. Those are the individuals that we see that we almost admire, we could never be like that, but we admire because they just, they are just not concerned with how they are seen, genuinely not concerned. They're concerned only with the actions that they take and what they engage in, how they engage, not with how it's seen as perceived by the world around them because they have, if they're genuinely there, they*

> *have ease in the body. They are at ease in here* [referring to the body]; *they don't need to look for ease in the world, and how the world sees them, they're already at ease in the body. And so they can genuinely express freely now, the uniqueness that is this aliveness in them, and they are simply using the multifaceted mind as a, as a vehicle for that expression.*

While it is invigorating to musing on the exuberance and boundless potential of this more genuine manifestation of the self, which is not constrained by the body, all participants were emphatic in asserting that there was no circumvention of the body. A body fraught with tension signifies a state in which the mind holds sway. Greg uses an example from one of his practices, Tai Chi Chuang:

> *It's nice to talk about 'chi' and the movement of chi through the body, but you can't, you can't move the body evenly from side to side yet without it straining and tensing in all sorts of places. So what relevance is it what the chi is doing? You can't even move the body yet. And for the chi to move the body has to be loose and open, it has to accommodate the vehicle has to be good for the contents the driver of the vehicle. You're putting a race car driver into a Nissen March that is standard; you can only do so much with it, you know? You have to first transform the car.*

This marked a sobering shift in our discussion, chiefly because I recognised its profound truth in my current circumstances. The insidious creep of spiritual materialism can catch one unexpectedly, and before long, you are lost in daydreams of 'enlightenment, openness and equanimity'. Hence, it seemed appropriate to conclude this section with such a direct note; this study, after all, aims to remain as grounded as possible in a domain laden with abstract concepts that may temporarily stimulate the mind, yet cannot replace the perseverance required to maintain a practice.

Nevertheless, for the time being, my task *is* to create a thesis, so we must press on with our exploration. We come upon an intriguing query: if this true self transcends the limits of our skin boundary and is not an attribute to be possessed, it prompts an investigation into the depth of separation between what I perceive as 'me' and what I identify as 'you'. This question will be explored in the final section of our results.

3.4 Overarching Theme Four: Reflections in the "External" Environment

3.4.1 Entangled Consciousness

To fully comprehend the forthcoming analysis on the interplay between one's inner landscape and the outer world, it is crucial to take a moment to revisit the concept of a "functional self" to underscore the necessary role its perceived separation between individuals plays in our everyday existence:

> Greg: *And so I see, if I'm answering or hearing your question correctly, I see there's a relative separation between you and I, and I call it a "functional relative separation" in order to, perhaps to experience what it is to be an individual human or individual being and have individual experience.*

While recognising the legitimate function of this perceived separation, the preceding section of these results delved into a domain that encompasses, but is not confined to, the borders of this perceived individual experience. Thus our conversations segued into discourses on the degree to which the space separating two individuals is not deemed to be vacant – rather, it is "entangled":

> Greg: *Entangled consciousness – consciousness that's not limited to the individual. The kind of thing that you see when you see the interaction with the world alters as <u>you</u> alter; your experience of the world alters as <u>you</u> change; it lightens,*

becomes more harmonious, et cetera, et cetera. That's because of the entanglement of consciousness, or as a consequence of the entanglement of consciousness. So it's more than that, the fullness of the truth, that it goes beyond the individual self. It includes the, the individual – the relative individual, but it goes beyond that as well.

In this instance, we witness a transition from the stance of an individual immersed in personal experiences and striving for harmony with the environment, to someone who acknowledges a dynamic interplay between their own evolution and the wider environment. The internal harmony attained through inward-focused attention finds its external counterpart in his interactions with the world. Although Greg articulates his insights thoughtfully, he admits that his response may not have fully addressed the query at hand. He proposes revisiting the question with a different choice of words, signifying his receptiveness to delve deeper into this multifaceted topic. This approach is a recurring theme in our exchanges, reflecting Greg's openness to new viewpoints and his abstention from relying on pre-formulated explanations.

For Greg, the term “integration” is important and should not be confused with perception. It transitions us from merely intellectualising these ‘spiritual’ subjects to embodying and actualising these insights in daily life:

Greg: *And yet at the level where that experience is integrated, not just perceived because at the level it’s perceived as still self or individual self, but at the level at which, perhaps, an insight is integrated through experience, there’s less of a self holding on to that insight, because if I observe correctly, or if I observe deeply, whenever there is an Integration of an experience, you* [the other] *also alter in the way in which you interact with me.*

Perceiving inner change necessitates one to maintain the role of the 'experiencer' (subject) of that experience (object), thereby creating a duality. What Greg is highlighting here is the harmonisation of these polarities and the consequential alterations in his surrounding life that naturally accompany this change. We thus return to the notion of there being a more essential or larger self that is not limited to our primary sensory inputs that comprise the experience of functional relative self:

> Greg: *You can say the 'self' that is the most dense part of the expression of self that is you or me is what's visible to me with the normal visual perception and other sense perceptions. But, of course, visual is my first interpretation of you. What is the deeper self that would be visible through deeper perception that isn't limited to the visual, that seems to be time and space bound. And so if I can see that there is a connection, a deeper connection, as far as how I interact with or relate to the world around me, and how much of that world I engage, how much I can actually perceive, that impacts on you, then that raises the question as to: To what degree are we connected? To what degree are we not split? So, still not probably answering your question completely, but perhaps that gives you a little bit more to do to dwell, to question into.*

By delving deeper into the nuances of his internal experience, he allows himself to more fully interact with life as it presents itself. Observing these natural reflective effects, without actively intending to alter his environment, prompts him to question the nature of shared experiences, beyond mere exchanges based on our perceptions of ourselves. To ensure I had fully grasped his meaning, I sought further clarification through the following question:

> Siân: *So, that field between two people, would it be a sharing of presence that you're noticing at that moment?*

> Greg: *You see, in answering that you have to slow everything down, right? You have to slow it down to a static kind of expression over there* [gestures towards me] *that is 'you', and a static expression, relatively static, that is 'me', and you see some movement in me but it's slow. It's words and expression and you can see my hands moving and it's all very slow, and dense and heavy* [tone is weighted and slow). *If you've... if you saw it with a somewhat deeper perception, it speeds up it becomes very, very fast and the movements may be slow, but inside the movement is incredibly dynamic* [tone is energetic, mirroring the word choice]. *There's a lot of hidden movement. There's a lot of shimmer, of solidity and non-solidity. So flickering between what seems to be dense matter to not dense at all, to being...*

Here we get a more direct lived experience of the deeper sense of perception Greg has been referring to. He describes a transitioning from a static, solidified state to one based on inner sensing, which he conveys as a "shimmer" with considerably higher frequency of movement. Mention of this fluid perception of experience reminded me of his previous reference to the mind as speedy, rapid, and fleeting, a state we discussed as being necessary to perpetuate its own density:

> Greg: *...it's dense because of its flightiness, it's constant reinforcement through* [in an exhaustive tone] *whatever avenue it can, of its own lethargy and density and recalcitrance and intransigence, it's very fast to reinforce that. Like the drug addict that you approach and you take the drugs away from, or you threaten to take the drugs away from the drug addict, the drug addict will start talking as fast as they can, to convince you to not take the drugs away; to necessitate why they need*

it, and they'll use every reason that they can muster to ensure that you keep, that you leave the drugs alone. That same mind if free, unencumbered by constant patterning and memory becomes very effective and efficient in its application to something.

Are we then trapped by our own personalities, our self-constructed beliefs of self? Do we, when our self-perceptions are challenged by the external world, behave much like a crafty addict, spinning tales upon tales to justify why we need to cling to these perceptions? And how does this inhibit our natural curiosity as social beings to delve into our shared connections, a beingness on a more energetic level, beyond the trade of our fabricated self-images?

The experience of interconnectedness transcending learned perceptions of self and the world emerged in all participant discussions. Louis, for instance, notes that this type of sensing is inherent in our physiology, irrespective of whether we consciously choose to nurture it, or whether there is curiosity of the inner space:

Louis*: So there's this energetic contact, this is when we walk into a room: something doesn't feel quite right here, or how we feel connection with someone else. To have that guide attraction and intimate relationship is a very different experience as well. And one that I had to learn how to do as well. So here comes 30 years of programming of letting the visual on the mind guide attraction and intimacy and how to change it, how to create a different process was wildly*...[searching for a word] *interesting!*

Louis, too, mentions his connection with a more nuanced sensory feedback from the environment, beyond the overt visual impressions formed. His choice of the word "interesting" indicates a complex, even challenging aspect of the process; again illuminating that these transitions carry their own difficulties. These could

stem, perhaps, from refraining to partake in the exchange of crafted self-images and instead mirroring back to others a more felt-resonance.

Lastly, Lucy brings our attention to a theme that permeated all of my participant conversations: the concept that we, as humans, originate from and are constantly immersed in a shared fundamental essence – consciousness. For Lucy, this shared essence underscores our interconnectedness and unity:

> Lucy: *So when I mentioned that there's like, a larger body that holds me, then that larger body feels like it has no boundaries. I don't... I often stay away from the word "oneness", because I haven't felt it per se, that you and I, at that moment...um... I wouldn't use those words that you and I at the moment are the same. For me, it's more that* [pause] *our...it's more if I would get cerebral with that then it would be...how I would maybe word that is that we, you and I, we arise from the same essence. So we have...there's a common, there's a common ground where these individual expressions arise....*

Lucy remains grounded in her personal lived experiences when exploring a topic that can easily slide into abstract obscurity. As she wrestles with the constraints of language, she articulates a sense of shared foundation common to all humans:

> *So there's a more palpable sense how I and that tree over there, and you know, whatever the natural world is around me, or maybe it's the human world...how we could not exist...so this is a very material part of it, like: we could not exist without each other. So there's a very kind of tangible inner connection, but then there's also the more ethereal, being an ethereal connection of wider, um* [pause] *of wider space, like whatever you can call it* [chuckles]*...like I call it awareness, a*

wider spacious, loving awareness where everything arises from...As soon as I put it into words, it feels that that's not it [decisively].

Lucy senses a bond with her environment on a tangible, material level; concurrently acknowledging that all that emerges here is contained within a broader space - consciousness. Let us however continue to dwell on the idea of human-to-human connection as these insights collectively share a theme: the changes within oneself, or one's state of being, mirrored in their interactions with others.

3.4.2 Interpersonal Relationship

In contrast to other participants, my dialogues with Jake recurrently revolved around the theme of human interconnectedness, and the potential this space holds for deepening one's self-discovery. While his understanding of the nature of consciousness is perhaps less defined compared to others, he exhibits a potent curiosity towards what Greg previously termed as the "entangled consciousness":

> Jake: *So rather than just having to sit and meditate to experience those things, there was suddenly a way in which with people and with the environment that you could create those types of internal experiences. And I definitely feel over time... um... that's deepened, and it's really helped through interactions, through deepening of intimacy with others...I don't know whether you call it... it's like with other internal states, or just both of us participating in the energetics, both of us participating with our internal sensors at the same time.*

For Jake, formal meditation practices serve as a foundation for his interactions with the world, but his sense of participating in or sharing energy with another person plays a vital role in his curiosity and willingness to preserve along his self-discovery path. In the passage below, Jake conveys his experience of the

meeting of two worlds, described as a sense of shared energetics, rather than the interaction between two personalities:

> Jake: *Yeah, the way I can relate to what you're saying is that, because I can feel the aliveness and the intimacy; or maybe not even the intimacy, the aliveness or the lifeforce within another being, and there's a sense of that, that I am able to experience with them. That does speak to, there's something within that being, that they are connected to, or maybe not consciously, but they are...they have and they are expressing through their being. And so I'm not sure what defines that – what creates that for another, but that is my direct experience of others, is that I get a sense of that lifeforce and energetic presence.*

We circle back to the concept of "aliveness" – a quality both he and Greg sense are inherent in each individual, irrespective of their conscious recognition or appreciation. Notice the parallels with Greg's use of the term "chi" – a term from Chinese philosophy to refer to an individual's energetic aliveness, distinct from awareness, or consciousness. Indeed, both Jake and Greg seemed to sense the aliveness within my questions; the absence thereof (particularly when I became overly analytical) was distinctly mirrored back to me – sometimes through silence, occasionally by asking for a rephrasing of the question, or by explicitly stating that the question did not resonate.

Jake then proceeds to posit that the extent to which each of us connects to our own "aliveness" determines the degree of this energetic resonance is accessed when interacting with another person:

> Jake: *And so participating in a more externally focused experience is giving me less of the resonance of feeling that I experience with the internal. So it's almost like a*...[pause] *I want to say a quality, it's almost a quality, a quality of*

experience, but it's not a judgmental quality, it's a....quality that's unique to each of us, depending on our vibration, our resonance. And so for someone that is more externally focused, they are getting met with a form of resonance that meets their quality of where they are.

Thus, we find ourselves drawn towards resonances similar to our own. Jake articulates that, were his primary focus directed towards his external experiences - those involving the five senses and their mental interpretations - his interactions with others would likely remain on this plane – the plane of self. This, of course, is still an experience, but one that perhaps dwells on the more constructed and therefore superficial aspects of one's being.

For Jake it is also important to note that the emergence of this deeper perception of himself, and subsequently the world around him, does not equate to him being more responsible for other people. In fact, Jake shares his journey of a letting go of a perceived obligation towards others, seeing these thought patterns and impulses as more manifestations of his programming:

Jake*:... I just don't feel the same level of responsibility for others, as what I did, and it was kind of like a knee jerk responsibility. That was kind of like, "I want to be seen as the person that helps others, that's there for others..."*

Siân*: So the image fell away, or the power of the image fell away?*

Jake*: The power of the image, yeah* [resolutely]. *The image is still there.*

It is only when we are willing to sense the, oftentimes uncomfortable, truth of our desires – in Jake's case, to be the "hero" – that we see the mind's corruption

and are curious to move beyond it. This discourse also reminds us of Greg's prior remark (see Section 3.2.1) about the coming and going of thought and sensation, while bearing "no attachment to the content of it". The images of who Jake previously conceived he needed to be still surface, yet his relationship to it has altered — or perhaps it would be more fitting to say, there is significantly less of a relationship with it. Jake describes a process of cessation of attachment to the ingrained tendencies towards others, the roots of which are now exposed as linked to the self's quest for validation.

Whitney also communicated the notion of ceasing reactivity, encompassing the sentiment of feeling accountable for others. When enquired if the unconsciousness of others elicited feelings of melancholy within her, here is how she responded:

> Whitney: *No. No* [softly resolute]. *I have experienced that prior, you know, in the last, you know, years ago, but I don't there's no sadness to be had. I could liken it to, I don't know, a hall full of people and we're all asleep, and then at some point, you notice you're starting to rouse and you know, you start to get up you roll into a foetal position and then you sit up and you notice, "oh three or four others just starting to sit up" [innocent, curious voice] in the room of 500 people. That's okay. You know, that each person will wake at their own time. Don't try and wake the person up next to you, that's not right.*

Note, in the following excerpt, how this dovetails with Greg's view of the individual waking up regardless of the state of society:

> *Greg: The society doesn't become awakened, the individual becomes awakened. So in my view, the concern is not the society becoming enlightened, it's the individual that becomes enlightened within the context of society. The individual*

realises itself within society as beyond society and the individualism.

It appears that the participants are contesting the prevailing paradigm of popular spirituality, pertaining to the need for society's "evolution of consciousness". Rather, these results suggest that awakening originates within the individual, and this section has delved into the external manifestations resultant from such inner transformation. These insights also deflate common misunderstandings portraying this type of "inner work" as necessitating a detachment from reality, characterised as being self-centred, or navel-gazing. The testimonies of the participants convey quite the opposite: Rather than severing ties with reality, they plunge more profoundly into it; this deepened engagement with lived experience allowing for the discarding of friction-causing perceptual-framework that may be the very walls that separate us from true connection with each other.

Throughout the interview process, I had the first-hand privilege of experiencing the transference of participants' deep engagement as well as their "positive" qualities – such as generosity and compassion. These states did not seem forced; instead, they appeared to be the participants' natural tendencies and states. From the results thus far, it is reasonable to suggest that these attributes manifest within the space of awareness, rather than representing new, thought-based identities. I can attest to this as the participants presence was sensed more palpably, rather than being restricted to my intellectual interpretation of the interaction. Louis, for example, seemed to fluctuate between two states when describe his internal self-talk; one where he emulated a petulant child, and the other, a nurturing parent. While he appeared familiar with both states, he consistently reverted to the characteristics of the unconditional parent throughout our conversations, with this nurturing demeanour extended to our interactions. In the ensuing passage, Louis underscores this natural sharing of positive attributes and how the shedding of negative self-perceptions had immediate benefits for those in his sphere:

Louis: *If I'm more capable of being attentive to the subtle shifts in my body, and the subtle shifts in emotions, and subtle shifts of sensations and experiences my own body, I can pick it up more clearly, and I'm more attuned to it and to seeing it in other people. It's like, I was incapable...I didn't know what empathy meant, until I had empathy for myself. I didn't know what acceptance meant, until I learnt how to accept myself. But when we give ourselves these qualities, were able to gift – I call them gifts – we can give to them in relationship, because they're part of our beingness thereafter...So to me self-care, self-care is about giving the best of you not what's left of you. So, when we care for our body, it's easy to care for others when we listen to our body, I can, you know, we can pick up on micro movements and expressions from others and go: "ah, I know what that means". We're more sensitive and attuned to that because we're not in our thoughts, we're not interacting with the world through a perception, we're engaged, and we're more sensitive to the energetic connection or the energetic contact between two human bodies, right?*

Louis describes a direct pathway to empathy that differs from *trying to be* empathetic. The quality firstly emerged within himself; a felt-sense was then contactable to "gift" to others. Considering this within the whole of our results, we could conclude that in ceasing to view existence as an island of human perception, all participants opened themselves to other, authentic, ways of being alive.

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 The Distortion of Perception

In this investigation, insight into the distortion of thought-based perception compelled the participants to seek a more direct source of truth. Participants explored how their mental programming from a young age could trap them in outdated representations of the past, incongruent with present reality. While the participants were in agreement about the indirect nature of perception, they differed in their evaluations of the significance and value of holding narratives for their own lives. Some conceded to the intrinsic entwinement of human existence and the narratives we construct, thus underlining the significance of choosing stories that contribute to personal growth and flourishing. Conversely, one participant perceived these stories as mere distractions in her lived experience. On the whole however, all participants acknowledged the necessity and usefulness of having a reliable "functional self" with which to navigate the phenomenal world.

Undoubtedly, none of the study participants advocated for a life completely devoid of self-referencing; they still put *their* signatures on bank documents, drive *their* cars, and return to *their* homes. Moreover, all participants in this study were far from oblivious to the reality that for many people, the pressure to navigate daily life's challenges leaves little room for curiosity about what might exist beyond their "functional selves". Nevertheless, this research provides potent evidence that human existence need not be confined to our avatar – crafted by and clung to by the mind. This level of inquiry mirrors previously discussed qualitative studies (Malpass et al., 2011; see Section 1.4.1); where seasoned meditators discern the "sensory self" from the "narrative self" as distinct experiential states. By nurturing the sensory aspect of their lived experience, the current participants also scrutinised their narrative frameworks. An emerging metaphor here is a blank canvas, capable of hosting myriad pictures. The core challenge, agreed by all participants, is the mind's fixation on any single picture – especially its portrayal of "self".

One participant's image of a stirred snow-globe fittingly captured the nature of the ordinary mind – where a blizzard of thoughts clouds a deeper aspect of experience. A shared understanding emerged whereby, the mind, built upon thought, is intrinsically sculpted by previous experience, thereby shackled to “psychological time”. As such, thought is invariably an interpretation of a past that is no longer, and an imagination of a future that does not exist. In a similar vein, our five exteroceptive senses – sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch – are also subject to interpretation. For instance, we do not typically perceive the world merely in terms of shapes, colours, or movements. Instead, we perceive what we *expect*, based on past experience – such as "a green ball rolling on the ground". Hence, these "external" senses are also inherently removed from direct experience; our encounter is not with the photons of light that collide with the ball, but rather with a conditioned and automatic interpretation. These findings align with previously reviewed literature (Chandaria, 2033; see Section 1.3.3), where we examined how the brain tends to assign more weight to what it knows (its “priors” or perceptual frameworks) to make sense of the cacophony of sensory data. Thus, while there is undeniably a survival necessity for the brain to select for and filter an infinite array of sensory information to make sense of the world, this study underscores the pitfalls of relying solely on the brain's *best guess* of experience, without the ability to access a more fundamental, direct, truth.

This investigation shows that a consequence of an over-dependency on thought can lead to what one participant characterised as a "thought experience of self"; a state, paradoxically, identified as an obstacle on the path of true self-discovery. This sentiment was collectively echoed among participants, where the “narrative self”, ensnared in a self-reinforcing cycle of familiarity, was seen to represent only a fragment of the whole human experience. In other words: Lacking the requisite tools to extricate ourselves from our own perceptual frameworks can lead us to live in cyclical patterns, wrestling with repetitive challenges and aspirations. Indeed, this research indicates that the body-mind's predilection for familiarity compels us to recreate realities that reinforce our mental constructs. This explains why substantial "external" changes to one's environment frequently result

in only temporary alterations to one's internal state – before the rampant resurgence of past conditioning surfaces, reasserting all-too-familiar challenges. Indeed, research (Lipton, 2016) investigating the extent to which our beliefs or perceptions influence our physiology is fascinating in this context, as it also aligns with hypotheses suggesting that our expectations (or “priors”) not only predict our exteroceptive worlds, but also shape our interoceptive sensory experience. Although this line of inquiry falls beyond the scope of the present study, it proposes a compelling avenue for future research.

4.2 Contacting a More Direct Truth Through Embodiment

This study has illuminated how the body can serve as a powerful channel to interrupt the mind's incessant, predictable and dull interpretative cycles. An emotion such as "sadness", which might previously have prompted rumination and been perceived as a precursor to “depression”, is now directly experienced: a heaviness in the chest, lethargy, numbness. Our investigation posits that body-oriented practices serve as a potent testing ground for shedding the layers of emotional narratives and revealing the root of the discomfort entrenched within our physiology. This process involves a stepping into the inherent existence of whatever arises within the nervous system’s raw sensory experience. This felt-sense is experienced *despite* the mind's unending judgement of whether the experience "should" or "should not" be in a particular way: it simply exists as it is, for the time being.

Naturally, this is not the only path; in addition to the plethora of mind and body-focused awareness techniques, the findings in this study bear resemblance to the renaissance in literature on psychedelic experiences among long-term meditators. For instance: Experiences that involve dramatic shifts toward embodiment, the disintegration of the self, a deep-rooted sense of interconnectedness with all living entities, or a felt-sense of unconditional love and awareness (Osto, 2016; Pollan, 2019; Smigielski et al. 2020). Though we shall not probe much further into this comparison, it merits mention that a significant drawback of a substance-dependant route to spiritual insight is a gamble one must

undertake within the spectrum of potential experiences that could unfold. Whilst exposure to sublime and novel insights could have extraordinarily valuable ramifications – especially if one is able to reconcile these perceptions into daily life – for some individuals, the abrupt surges of energy, the colossal energy consumption, and in certain instances the advent of clinical states of psychosis, suggest that a more gradual approach may be in order. This study has cast a light on such an alternative approach; with all participants making reference to a *process* of self-discovery through embodiment – marked initially by an opening and releasing within the body.

This study's emphasis of the "remembering" body aligns with the growing pool of academic literature pertaining to traumatic experiences being lodged within physiology (Van der Kolk, 2014; refer to Section 1.3.2). The contention here is that these experiential imprints are both psychological and physical, due to alterations in neural pathways and disruptions to the nervous system, and hence, can have enduring implications for a person's lived experience. In this context, the current participants observed the essential need to first turn attention inward; prioritising direct sensory information (introspection) over exteroception of the environment. This internal exploration was pursued in the face of the mind's attempts at denial, with all participants revealing a readiness to confront aspects of their lived experience that had become difficult to bear. For many individuals, this readiness or curiosity to *feel*, rather than *fix*, represents a powerful first step akin to self-compassion. Indeed, many evidence-based psychological interventions endorse "inner child work" – a process whereby the "adult self" assumes the role of a nurturing, unconditional parent for the part of their psyche rooted in the past.

In regard to the mind's denial, the current study participants discussed the colossal energy that can be squandered when focusing attention on attempting to manage thought, which participants referred to as the symptom rather than the source. This study thus lends credence to the proposition that, while cognitive insight and pharmacotherapy are undoubtedly instrumental at certain stages of addressing conflictual conditioning, a quintessential stride lies in rekindling bodily

connection and fostering a sense of autonomy through bottom-up processing – using direct sensory experience. While the current study was not conducted within clinical demographics, it is worth noting that many psychopathologies can be seen as acute exacerbations of the “ordinary” mind's capacities. Thus, the notion of experiences being physically archived, referred to in this study as “pockets of time”, encapsulates a fundamental process for all-bodies; where internal sensations are veiled by thought, and consequently by psychological time, thereby obstructing the sensation’s full expression.

Considering the body's role as the guardian of past emotional stress, all participants unanimously regarded the body as a closer, albeit not absolute, gauge of their lived experience. This “not-absolute” caveat was delineated by participants' observations that bodily sensations still operate within the realm of conditioning and are thus still bound by the illusion of past and future tenses (psychological time). Yet there was a collective convergence among participants that felt-sensory experience represents a more stable anchor than the fickleness of mind. Although thoughts may appear to influence our state less directly than an abrupt noise or physical discomfort, thought has a pervasive impact. Indeed, we are all familiar with how the mind can swiftly dominate experience – leading us into a state of thinking without knowing we are thinking. Thus, while thought-orientated mindfulness techniques are entirely valid – recognising the emergence of a thought, being aware of its path, noticing what transpires when one catches a thought – they also work on the level of an incredibly slippery and crafty phenomenon (the mind). Indeed, one participant likened this aspect of the thought-based mind to a “drug addict” – willing to concoct any narrative possible to get what it wants, or rather, to return to what it knows. Hence, the participants in this study unanimously posited the body as a more stable anchor, at least initially, as they observed less room for the body to distort reality to suit another agenda. Put simply: the body does not lie.

4.2.1 Living Inside Out

The proposition of initially establishing an internal self-reference, steered by raw sensory information, initiated an exploration of the interplay between thought

and sensation. All participants recognised a profound connection between these phenomena, with two participants detailing a perceptual shift wherein these ostensibly separate events are differing aspects of the same reality. This observation is especially intriguing, given the ongoing academic and medical discourse surrounding the body *and* mind. While we have made significant strides away from Cartesian body-mind dualism, the prevailing Biopsychosocial Model – acknowledging the equal contributions of biology, psychology, and environment – continues to compartmentalise "biology" and "psychology" as distinct entities. This study posits a departure from this perspective, as participants, through their enhanced attentional abilities, probed the connection between felt-sense and thought. However, if thought and sensation are simply two facets of the same experiential coin, as participants proposed, what repercussions does this hold for our phenomenal experience?

Many participants discussed the central role of the nervous system in shaping our subjective experiences; an inquiry closely aligned with the concept of interoception — broadly defined as the brain's interpretation of bodily states. Corroborating previous research (See Section 1.1.2), Herbert and Pollatos (2012) found strong connections between brain areas that process bodily states and those generating conscious emotion. Herbert and Pollatos also offer compelling evidence associating changes in emotional experience with shifts in awareness of bodily states, or "interoceptive awareness". For instance, the authors synthesise numerous studies correlating self-control, impulse-control and decision-making, with interoceptive awareness. This becomes intriguing when we contemplate the concept of a person's "intuition". Our current findings propose that bodily sensation offers a more direct expression of a person's truth, albeit still an output of the conditioned mind. Therefore, if physiological states significantly shape our emotional experience, we could infer that these "intuitive hunches" are more examples of the same cyclic reactivity, based on the mind's conditioning. Would we not need to access a realm beyond sensation to break free from this cycle?

For all participants in the study, accessing a state of “stillness” was key to halting cyclical reactivity. Revisiting our snow globe analogy, when we cease to agitate our experiential sphere, we can become attuned to the present moment. This willingness to directly experience what is happening within our own “globe”, extends an invitation to bring unconscious reactivity into conscious awareness. In effect, awareness, not being constrained by time, liberates parts of the body that are trapped or frozen in past experiences (“pockets of time”). While the mind may retain traces of its past, the integration at a physical level diminishes or eradicates the intense physiological reactivity that once moulded the individual's self-perception. This process facilitates the amalgamation of fragmented aspects of the self into the individual's whole experience.

Finally, referring back to our cognitive literature (See Sections 1.1.2 and 1.3.3), the brain plays a pivotal role in maintaining chemical balance and has an innate inclination to predict experiences – processes identified as homeostasis and allostasis. This study suggests that redirecting attention to one’s inner sensory experience can divert experience from the pre-established perceptions that inform the mind’s predictions. In other words, by engaging more directly with felt-experience (interoception), sensations become more prominent, increasing their influence on the present moment and decreasing the mind’s reliance on prior knowledge. For example, participants reported noticing bodily sensations before thought, thereby challenging the mental narratives that later surfaced. This process encourages the development of new neural pathways, resonating more accurately with actual lived experiences. It also raises a fascinating question for future research: Are the body's "pockets of time" akin to the mind's amassed predictions (or "priors")? And can practices that open up the body facilitate the release of these predictions, enabling the formation of new ones based on raw sensory data?

Yet, a reader may indeed ponder: "*Who* exactly is experiencing these processes?" This point brings us neatly into our ongoing exploration concerning participants' sense of self, or the perceived absence thereof. Yet we must tread with caution, as language can be misleading, inherently segmenting phenomena and

thus creating the illusion of a separate observing entity. Participants in this study are advocating a non-dual approach – not suggesting a mental projection onto the body, where attention is somehow stretched from the head to a particular body part. Rather, participants pointed to an ability to directly experience the movie of their life, not as distant observers. Yet, as we shall now explore, this direct experience transcends also the felt-experience of the physical body – thereby surpassing the skin's boundary and once again challenging the concept of a separate 'self'.

4.3 Beyond the Body: Contacting an Essential Self or No-self?

Despite the evident linguistic quagmires in conceptualising that which surpasses the confines of perception, the participants and I embarked upon an exploration of what envelops or extends beyond a preoccupation with the body. We delved into discussions regarding what some participants termed the “true” or “essential” self and what others perceived as evidence for the lack of self.

Two participants emphasised a rationale drawn from their observations: If they could be aware of experiential phenomena's contents (such as thoughts, feelings, sensations), then awareness must transcend these phenomena. In other words, if I can be aware of ruminating thoughts about last night’s dinner conversation, then awareness must be something beyond these thoughts and sensations. The implications of this insight circle us back to our ongoing discussion on predictive processing and the phenomenal self (See Section 1.3.3). The participants of this study allude to an ability to discern the canvas upon which perceptual models (or “priors”) are inscribed, and from this awareness assume full responsibility regarding whether they identify with any such picture, including that of the “self”. Therein lies choice; for there is a direct sense of a space that surpasses, yet *encompasses*, the contents of phenomenal experience. As will be further elaborated, the use of the term “encompass” here is crucial — as awareness is not necessarily separate from the objects of experience; rather the entirety of experience *emerges from* this sphere of consciousness. Thus, participants' non-dual perspective led some to perceive an absence of self within this field of

consciousness, as they recognised no central entity that could cling to the transient rise and fall of experience. Thus indicating the illusion of a fixed self. Of course, the terminology employed here is of little consequence; in essence, this inquiry intimates that contacting the expansive space – that we are calling awareness or consciousness – is tantamount to freedom from the constraints of friction-forming programming within mind. Further, freedom from these constraints is expressed through diminished contraction in the body, which we have established is a manifestation of memory held the body.

This awakening from the bondage of the mind's perceptual frameworks finds harmony with extant qualitative research. In our reviewed studies (Full et al., 2011; Martin, 2018; refer to Section 1.4.2) participants also reported the transcendence of the "ego" and the establishment of a connection with a "larger self"; a space beyond conditioning, paving the initial steps towards liberation from a narrowly defined self-identity. Thus, both reviewed qualitative studies support the current investigation's premise that the phenomenal self, like a bar of soap, is a construct with no inherent substance or essence. Yet, the current study also emphasises the importance of a functional self: Where participants generally reported liberation from this illusion as ongoing, some perceived the functional self as a readily accessible tool, akin to an avatar, not controlling but available for use.

The analogy of a sine wave oscillating around a stable axis effectively portrayed the perpetual flux of phenomenal reality (the sine wave) around an unwavering and constant core (awareness) (See Figure 3.3.1 below). This resonates with the fundamental Buddhist principle of "impermanence", with all participants acknowledging the transient nature of the elements constituting the sine wave, such as emotions at any given moment or perceptual judgments of something being "good" or "bad". Consequently, there was recognition of the folly of basing behaviour, let alone one's true sense of self, on these ephemeral phenomena. Contextualising the sine wave in daily life; it situates activities like doing the dishes and experiencing profound joy on the same continuum. Both of these states are objects of experience, arising and passing away on the continuum of awareness,

which remains impartial to whether these states elicit boredom or euphoria – for these emotions are also experiential objects. Thus, while the mind is inclined to seek more of what is pleasurable and less of what is uncomfortable, this study illuminates that anchoring our beingness to the incessantly shifting panorama of experience is akin to a futile quest to find permanence within impermanence.

Figure 3.3.1 The Sine Wave of Experience on the Axis of Awareness

Continuing the analogy, the axis can represent both awareness and an essential expression of self. Regardless of the terminology, this state evokes a steadiness, or stillness of the body-mind, where experience is not clung to or repelled. The term “state” is useful here, emphasising that we are not suggesting the formation of a new identity. Indeed, we have all come across “mindful” or “spiritual” personas, possessing an all-knowing smile, moving at a calculated pace, seemingly accepting everything, all in a bid to mask deep-seated unease. Rather, in this study, “non-reactivity” surfaced as a natural outcome of a willingness to feel; a curiosity and intimacy with the quality of experience without getting caught. Further, within the process of physical release that comes from this acceptance, a new benchmark of physical security is set that then mirrors the stability of the awareness penetrating the body.

However, two participants highlighted the mind’s profound attachment to the role of the experiencer and pointed out that not everyone is inclined to question its anchorage. Further, while the current findings point to an accessible realm for all

body-minds, the participants shared their personal journeys of substantial discomfort and suffering derived from challenging their body's chemical status quo and meeting the mind's resistance to change. This dovetails with our discussion on sincerity — a trait that participants asserted could be nurtured, but one that significantly determines the depth to which an individual will delve into the aspects of their conditioning. Participants therefore observed the power of curiosity and sense of determination, perhaps helped along by a sense that there is something "there" to be discovered, worthy of the perseverance it requires.

Should participants hint at an essential self as "awareness" that pierces through the vessel of the body, such a line of reasoning raises inquiries which will be addressed in the concluding section of this discussion: Where does the boundary of "I" give way to the onset of "you"? To what extent are our essential selves intertwined?

4.4 Self-Reflection in the Environment

With the intention of avoiding the well-trodden spiritual tropes of humanity's "oneness" or "unity", this portion of our findings touches on the interconnectedness of consciousness shared among people. Aligned with their emphasis on embodiment, the participants noted that shifts in their internal milieu – such as changes in bodily tension – were mirrored by alterations in their "external" environments. One participant took the helm in this discourse by examining the variations in perceptual acuity and the bearing it had on his external observations of another individual. He suggested that enhanced perceptual clarity of his mind and body naturally enriched his perception of other life forms he encountered. This, in turn, led to substantial recalibrations in his interpretation of "himself", "the other", and the space in between.

Indeed, there was agreement among participants that the relational space between two people is far from empty. This carries implications for the phenomenal self – as it is this very self that forms the illusion of time-space consciousness; where there is "you" over there and "me" over here. Thus, the termination of the

"experiencer" (or self) paves the way for the crumbling of the fabricated partition between "you and I". In other words, we transcend the confines of interpreting another person through perceptual frameworks or conditioning, and instead, contact what one participant characterised as a *less dense* perceptual experience, or a "shimmer" of entangled consciousness. Hence, by making contact with awareness, participants find their lived experience to be entwined in a lively interplay between the pragmatic availability of a functional self, and that which transcends it; an essence that is both shared among people and without borders.

As this study ventured beyond the dualistic stance of "man and the environment", we immersed ourselves in a more intertwined, reciprocal relationship. It is within this reflective milieu that all participants concurred on the futility of a fixed perception of there being an external world; positing that the fountainhead of disquiet resides internally, with the outer stimuli acting principally as a reflection or catalyst of this stored inner reactivity. Such an exploration begets reflection: How much does society at large mirror the individual? To what measure are we responsible for the tribulations in our world? While perspectives on the entanglement of consciousness varied among the participants, consensus reigned on the point that this internal-external reflection of resonance also included positive aspects of one's being. Just as internal discord manifested as external strife, qualities like compassion and patience, cultivated within, drew like-minded individuals closer, naturally reducing external drama and conflict in their lived experience. This happened not by pushing away the negative, but by tending to their own internal garden.

Lastly, it is of particular interest that the blurring of demarcations between the internal and external spheres in this study seemingly stands at odds with aspects of our current evidence-based psychotherapeutic approaches. Take Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), for example. Whilst CBT astutely weaves environmental factors into its Five-Part Model (as referenced in Section 1.2.1), the core focus of therapy chiefly rests upon cognitions and the subsequent ripples they cast upon emotions, feelings and behaviours within the individual, who is then expected to

seek *accord* with their environment. Thus we circle back to a dualism – man *and* environment. Undoubtedly, in numerous cases, this approach may prove efficacious in quelling immediate tumults, with a more intricate exploration of the "self" being untimely and potentially harmful. However, this study casts a discerning glance upon the limitations of such cognition-centric approaches, especially in light of the participants' experiential observations, which paint a vivid picture of the inextricable intertwinement of the "internal" and "external" realms.

One must however tread carefully whilst navigating these terrains. It is imperative, for instance, to refrain from hastily construing this aspect of the discussion as laying the onus for change solely at the individual's feet. Instead, this study posits that we find ourselves unwittingly emmeshed in unconscious reactive dynamics that sustain our external conflicts until we awaken to the source of these conflicts as stemming from within. Yet for the long-term practitioners in this study, there was a sense of existing within the world and authentically expressing their essence, unimpeded or dependant on external circumstances. Thus, it was asserted that the individual wakes to a deeper state of consciousness within society, while simultaneously transcending the limitations imposed by society.

4.5 Synthesising Through a Buddhist Model

Given the participants' collective inspiration from Eastern philosophies and/or practices, this study also facilitated an engagement with the Buddhist psychological framework of the Five Skandhas, as previously examined in Section 1.2.2. For example, the prevailing theme of directing attention away from mental interpretation, towards direct sensory experience, could be viewed as placing an emphasis on the first Skandha, "form". Thereby interrupting of the mind's continual reactivity that labels experiences as "good", "bad", or "neutral" – traits associated with the second Skandha ("feeling") that consequently drive craving and aversion.

Similarly, by prioritising embodied living, the participants could be seen as shifting away from a life lived through mental perceptions, or "samskaras" (Skandha four). Indeed, the perceptual frameworks under discussion in this study appear to

closely mirror the concept of samskaras. The annals of Buddhist teachings suggest that our present thoughts and behaviour are largely guided by an accumulation of these samskaras (Gupta, 2021). To illustrate, a child who consistently faces criticism for expressing distress may develop a samskara, a mental imprint, associating emotional expression with danger or threat. This resonates with what the current participants have referred to as “programming”, and what the cognitive literature refers to as perceptual frameworks or “priors” (see Section 1.1 and 1.3.3). While samskaras operate at a psychological level, this study underscored the physiological imprint of this programming and the process of its release within stillness. Set against this context, several intriguing questions emerged: Is it feasible to revert to the primal skandhas? Can we genuinely immerse ourselves in the realm of raw, direct sensory experiences? Can we free our experience from being guided by the mind's perpetual inclination to categorise experiences as “good” or “bad”?

Participants grappled with these challenging inquiries with remarkable eloquence and insight, suggesting that cultivating mind-full-ness of the body can lead to realising the empty nature of all the stages of perception (or Skandhas), and hence the fluidity of one's experience. Finally, we previously discussed Buddhism's Four Noble Truths and the inherent suffering that arises from pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain (see Section 1.2.2). The prevailing term here has been “attachment”: The issue is not the object itself – whether a thought or sensation – but the mind’s fixation upon it. When we perceive ourselves as the experiencer of these phenomena, we inevitably crave more of what we consider pleasurable. However, an attachment to that which is fleeting inevitably leads to dissatisfaction as the desired pleasure invariably fades.

4.6 Indications for Future Research

Using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, future research could explore the neurobiological mechanisms underlying self-perception and personal transformation. In particular, it would be fascinating to probe into the “prediction error” experienced by seasoned mindfulness practitioners, especially how they reconcile their mind's expectations of reality with conflicting sensory data.

Furthermore, given that the majority of participants in this study were from Western countries, a comparative analysis involving diverse cultural groups would be valuable. Considering different cultural perceptions of self, such as those found in Asian, Māori, and Pacific communities within a New Zealand context, for example, could be illuminating. Lastly, all participants in this study were involved in professions providing therapeutic benefits using body-based techniques. Exploring these themes among practitioners not involved in guiding others could yield additional insights and provide a broader understanding of these practices.

4.7 Strengths, Limitations and Reflexivity

This study invites contemplation on whether its participants are shaping yet another intricate narrative, now rooted in sensation, influenced by concepts like 'impermanence' or the 'nervous system'. As previous literature asserts, 'mindfulness' research runs the risk of subjects being swayed to perceive certain qualities like 'non-reactivity', more due to expectation and imagination than actual transformation. It might be supposed that seasoned meditators may avoid this pitfall, having had ample time to differentiate genuine experience from cognitive construct. However, this assumption does not hold water, presuming that extended practice automatically grants truth discernment. This study hinged on assessing expectancy effects in relation to participants' body-centric approach – giving them continuous empirical feedback throughout their process of self-discovery.

Our exploration into the nature of the 'self', or indeed its seeming absence, warranted a qualitative methodology. It allowed a rich portrayal of subjective truth, beyond conventional constructs such as 'quality of life' or 'stress-alleviating benefits of mindfulness'. In harmony with qualitative research's essence, this study demanded immersive engagement with the participants, given their insights' resistance to simple quantification. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) also offered a coherent framework and ample room for participant-led data. IPA's dual focus on the part and the whole chimed with participants' accounts of formal practices and everyday experiences. By intently concentrating on the

minutiae of their embodied experience, they discovered a resonance with the whole. This process mirrored my research method, where I analysed raw data fragments before reflecting on their relevance to each transcript's entirety and emerging patterns across multiple cases. Further, my personal engagement with body-based practices proved invaluable for the current research. During some analysis phases, the aim was to set aside prior interpretations and assumptions as much as possible. In this context, practices that diverted focus from the mind to the body were essential, allowing a fresh approach to each transcript, minimising comparisons with other participants' narratives or pre-existing beliefs. To achieve this, I made a conscious effort to ground myself before each interview and data analysis session, facilitating an open and attentive state of mind.

However this study is not without limitations. Articulating participants' somatic experiences through language is inherently fraught with difficulties, as the duality of language – 'good' versus 'bad', 'conscious' versus 'unconscious', 'small self' versus 'large self' – forces a fragmentation at odds with nature's fluidity. Therefore, while my use of IPA, focusing on raw data from individual narratives, ensured high internal validity, it could not fully encapsulate participants' lived experiences, as our medium of communication was primarily perception.

Further, researcher bias is expected to some degree in qualitative research, due to the researcher's active role, potentially influencing data. Indeed, there remained the risk of interviewer bias through leading questions or subtle influence. The potential for social desirability bias was also considered, particularly among less experienced participants. The unique setting of being researched could have affected responses, despite participants' practices likely neutralising tendencies to appease the interviewer. Hence, the findings are not generalisable, nor are they directly applicable to clinical populations. Finally, while the minimum participant age was 25 years, this broad range might introduce variation in 'self' experiences throughout a lifetime, making results not specific to a particular age group.

Reflecting upon my role within this research, it is worth noting that my ability to comprehend, intuitively grasp, and represent some aspects of these findings in a way that resonated with the participants' experiences was dependent on my own insights. Although I am a committed practitioner of body-based practices and have a robust intellectual curiosity in this domain – at least I did prior to embarking on this thesis – I still regard myself as a novice in self-discovery. Consequently, my capacity to receive and interpret these results was limited. This work significantly differed from my previous academic endeavours, necessitating an internal stillness to engage authentically, a challenge amidst academic deadlines and life's complexities. Thus, unavoidably, the quality of mindfulness proved elusive at times, forming another limitation of this research. As previously mentioned however, this was somewhat mitigated by my intention to avoid obscure jargon and strive to ground readers in the participants' accounts of their lived experiences using layman's terms, where possible. In my view, such simplification is vital to disrupt the mind's deeply rooted structures. It strikingly contrasts with the intricacy of the cognitive mind, which might be reticent to recognise some of the current insights, akin to a magician who keeps her tricks concealed from a spellbound crowd.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research could be aptly summarised by the phrase: Through learning to feel, we contact our essential self. Within the scope of this study, body-awareness is illuminated as a potent tool to untangle from the aspects of our conditioning that engender friction, including components of our perceived “self”. While acknowledging the foundational and complex facets of perception that significantly aid navigation of the phenomenal world, this study underscores the vast limitations in allowing the thought-based mind to monopolise lived experience. It draws a parallel to using a map for navigation, while acknowledging that the map is not the actual terrain. The participants' extraordinary articulations of their experiences illustrate that the terrain is far more vibrant and fluid than any static symbolic depiction can encapsulate.

This exploration suggests that by choosing to *feel* rather than *interpret* lived experience, it is possible to interrupt the momentum of our conditioned reactivity, thus moving beyond a thought-constructed perception of who we are. By redirecting their focus inward, the current participants utilised their bodies as an anchor in contrast to thought, which was collectively seen as intrinsically rooted in that which is *not now*: an imagined past and future – a realm where clarity is seldom found. Therefore, while this study suggests that our fundamental essence is not confined by the body's physical boundaries, it emphasises the importance of first getting intimately acquainted with every nuance of one’s felt bodily sense. This quality of unconditional regard allowing for the process of release and integration of the mind’s stored memories or "trauma” within the physiology.

Moreover, through the cultivation of awareness, participants unanimously saw that their existence cannot be fundamentally tethered to the personal traits, habits, and tendencies that might have previously delineated their "uniqueness". Instead, an "essential" or "true" self was allowed to pervade their nervous system, and indeed every element of their phenomenal experience. For some, this "essential" aspect of self was equated with "awareness" or "consciousness".

However, the lack of personal ownership in this state gave rise to a secondary interpretation that paradoxically aligns with the first: Within the immediate, present moment experience, there is no discernible self, only the hum and dissolution of transient phenomena. Thus, to label an “essential self” risks perpetuating an illusion that there is something to grasp. Nevertheless, this study indicates a halt in self-definition via comparison, shifting away from the mind's propensity to dwell in extremes – perceiving oneself as "superior" or "inferior" to different manifestations of one's self or others. Instead, contacting with awareness equates to engaging with a state of equilibrium – a central axis that remains undisturbed by the oscillations of experiences that ebb and flow around it.

Lastly, this study indicates that an eagerness to tune into one's inner experience naturally results in a deeper engagement with “external” life, especially in this case, with other people. Participants depicted interactions not as exchanges or transactions between two separate individuals; instead, in their unfolding openness and receptivity, they discovered an inherently *shared* dimension to these interactions. It is within this collective resonance, or *entangled consciousness*, that participants collectively find fertile reflection for their ongoing journey of self-discovery.

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Appendix A: Participant Screening Questionnaire

Participant Screening Questionnaire

Your curiosity in participating in this project is immensely valuable. Please answer the following questions in order to establish whether you meet the criteria for this research, which will allow me to establish a strong basis for interpreting the findings. ALL information shared on this form is confidential and will NOT be shared with any other party at ANY stage in the research.

Name:

Are you 25 years or older? **Yes / No**

Are you male or female? **Male / Female / Rather not say**

In the last 7 years (or more), have you been regularly engaged with formal mind-body awareness practice(s)? **Yes / No**

Please specify the practice(s) you are currently engaged with:

Do you identify with a formal/acknowledged religion? **Yes / No**
[*Do you believe in an ultimate reality, a God, deity or divine being*]

Are you currently, or have you in the last 6 months been engaged in formal psychotherapeutic intervention? **Yes / No**

Do you currently use medication to relieve psychological distress? **Yes / No**

In the past year, have you regularly engaged with recreational substances?
[Referring to illicit and mind-altering drugs; NOT including alcohol, tobacco and caffeine] **Yes / No**

Are you available for an in-person interview in Auckland? **Yes / No**

If you live outside New Zealand, please let me know your preferred platform for video calling:

Do you agree to provide written consent to participate prior to the interview, and verbal consent during the interview? **Yes / No**

Thank you. Please send return this form to me via email, embodyingresearch@gmail.com. I'll be in touch.

Appendix B: Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET

Introducing the Study
This study probes the interplay between mind-body awareness practices and one's perception of 'self' and surroundings. As a qualitative research, it employs a multi-pronged approach. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) lends structure to the detailed exploration of participants' experiences, while Embodied Inquiry gives depth to the 'felt-sense' of both participant and researcher. Photography aids in illustrating perceptions where words fall short. I, as the main researcher, will guide the participant-led discoveries and undertake mind-body awareness practices to foster openness for this joint endeavour. This research is the final component of my Master's degree at Massey University's School of Psychology.

A Brief Description
This study employs one-on-one interviewing as its primary data collection method. Interviews, typically 60-90 minutes, will take place at the Horopito Wellness Centre in Mount Eden. However, participants may wish to meet in a preferred location in Auckland. While a single interview may suffice, a follow-up may occur if deemed necessary. To assist, participants will receive a disposable camera two weeks in advance, or its digital substitute for those abroad. This encourages them to document significant aspects of daily life, offering tangible discussion prompts. Any photographs, if available for reference, are welcomed. As a token of gratitude, participants will receive a gift pack of edible treats. The transcripts will be examined through IPA and Embodied Inquiry.
I invite you to join this explorative journey.

Sample questions for the Interview Process
Interview questions are designed to guide the conversation; we are not required to discuss each question, and have the freedom to discover novel topics.

- Why does your practice include the body?
- Has practicing altered the way you view yourself as a person in the world?
- How do you know that changes to the way you perceive your reality are not new concepts?

Participants
Six participants will be recruited through the researcher's personal contacts. The goal of this research is to explore in-depth aspects of lived daily experience, and to potentially identify commonalities among people walking similar paths. Thus, as is typical for IPA, a semi-homogenous small sample will be used to avoid excessively generalised results, and to honour the timeframe of this research.

Please note that the following exclusionary criteria are to maximise the validity of the research; allowing the establishment of a strong basis for interpreting the findings.

Participant selection criteria:

- Engagement with formal mind-body practice(s) regularly for a minimum of 7 years.[1]
- Non-identification with an acknowledged religion.
- Available for in-person interviews if living in Auckland; or via video call if living overseas.
- Over the age of 25 years.
- Not currently engaged in psychotherapeutic intervention, including the use of any medication to relieve psychological distress.
- No regular use of recreational drugs in the past 12 months.
- Agree to provide written consent (prior the interview); as well as verbal consent (during the interview).
- No ethnicity or gender will be selected for.

This research is classed as 'low risk' and does not involve the use of therapeutic interventions, young people or clinical populations.

How the Research will Proceed

Each participant will be given a disposable camera three weeks prior to the interview. Cameras will be returned to the primary researcher to develop. Interviews will preferably take place in-person. Otter software will be used to automatically transcribe the interviews, verbatim. This recording may be requested by the participant to be switched off at specified moments, however a recording of the majority of the interview will be required. Following the interview, transcriptions will be manually checked by the researcher for accuracy, and by the participant before authorising use.

Data and Code Management

In line with the best practice for IPA, audio recordings, interview transcriptions, and digital photograph copies will be securely stored under password protection, with only me having access. Transcripts will be coded for anonymity and participant experiences will not be shared with others. Any quoted content in the thesis will be anonymous, ensuring confidentiality. Upon completion, participants will receive their transcript and a summary of findings, unless specified otherwise. Original photographs will be returned upon request, maintaining participant ownership.

Participant's Rights

[1] 'Mind-body practice(s)' include any formal practice (e.g., Yoga asana, sitting mediation, Tai Chi Chuan, forms of breathwork, etc...) that engages and cultivates specific qualities of attention and awareness, of both psychological and physical sensation. 'Regular engagement' is defined as consistent (predominately) daily use of respective practice(s), over the period of 7 years or more.

After reading through this information, it is entirely understandable if you decide not to participate in this project.

If you would like to be a participant, you have the right to:

- choose not to answer specific questions during the interview process;
- ask me questions at any point;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- withdraw from the study up until 1st October 2022;
- receive a summary of the findings at project completion.

If you have any questions regarding the research at any stage you are invited to contact the primary researcher, Siân Cottrell-Davies ********** email: embodyingresearch@gmail.com, or Dr. Heather Kempton (09) 414 0800 ext. 43103 email: h.kempton@massey.ac.nz

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named above is responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact A/Prof Tracy Riley, Acting Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 84408, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

How does cultivating direct *bodily awareness alter perception of being-in-the-world? An embodying phenomenological enquiry of long-term mind/body practitioners in daily life.*

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read and I understand the Information Sheet. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that I may withdraw my data from the study before [...].

1. I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.
3. I wish/do not wish to have my photos returned to me.
4. I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive.
5. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:

Full Name (printed):

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

- Welcoming
- Verbal consent for participation & recording
- Short seated meditation
- Description of practices

Bodily experience

- Purpose of intentionally including the body in practice?
- Has engagement in these practices influenced the way that you experience pain or discomfort?
- Are 'you' confined to the body?
- Is there a centre to your being?
- Can knowing occur beyond sensation?

Being-in-the-world

- Do you have access to this objective world?
- To what extent is external environment determined by our individual minds?
  - How is it that we all seem to be experiencing very different worlds?
- I'm sitting here, you're over there - I feel separate from you.
- Is there anything that connects us?
- Is the space between us empty?
- How does attention on the body shift your relationship with the world?
- Where is your attention when you are interacting with the world?
- Can you know yourself beyond the opinions of others?

Perception

- Define 'perception'
- What is sensation without perception?
- How do you perceive the relationship between sensation, perception, and time?
- Could you share with me how you perceive the word 'self'?
- How can you know yourself?
- To what extent is it important to hold narratives about our own lives?
- It's important that you sign your name at the bank, that you remember where you left your keys; that you return home to your house.
  - What place do you see what I will call the 'functional self' in daily life?
- If a 10 year old asked you: "what's the mind" what would you say?
  - Can awareness express through the mind?
- How do you perceive the relationship between thought and sensation?
  - What is sensation reflecting?
  - Why not work on the level of thought?
- How do you know awareness isn't just another concept? (belief vs. experience/empiricism)

Attention

- How do you perceive the term ‘attention’?
- Could you tell me how you see the relationship between awareness and attention?
- How have your practices impacted the quality of your attention?

Transformation & Change

- Can the individual change completely?
- How do you see the process of long-term change in the individual?
  - Where does it occur?
- Many psychological interventions assume that increased insight and understanding lead to sustained change in behaviour.
  How do you feel about this?
- What does the experience of ‘you’ become if we were to remove memory (or time)?

Appendix E: Transcript Release Authority

Transcript Release Authority

How does cultivating awareness of the direct bodily experience alter perception of being-in-the-world? An embodying phenomenological enquiry of long-term mind-body practitioners in daily life.

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: **Date:**

Full Name - printed

Appendix F: Example of Coding for Section 3.1

Group Experiential Theme: The corruption of perception nature of thought-based mind

Subtheme (derived from Personal Experiential Themes): Evolution and limitations of perceptual frameworks and its origin in psychological time

Experiential statements, Louis:
Time as construct; a perceptual slice of a greater reality, 30
Nature of the mind to react; craving and aversion, 8
Predictable fear-based survival programmes, 13
Thought as guesser of moment-to-moment experience,11
Perception of self defined by unconscious programming, 7
Snow globe; thought obscuring the actual, 15
Nature of mind is to fragment experience, 36
Thought synonymous with non-acceptance of what is, 13
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