SENSE OF SELF AMONG MINDFULNESS TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness meditation originates from the Buddhist tradition, where it was developed to counteract the tendency to cling to a solid sense of ‘I’. Recently, it has come to be used in a Western secular healthcare context as a way of witnessing physical and mental ‘symptoms’ without becoming overwhelmed by them. There is empirical evidence that meditation can both increase and decrease mental wellbeing. And transpersonal theorists have expressed concerns that, given the Buddhist purpose of mindfulness, such meditations might be disintegrative to sense of self, and should not be taught without a supportive spiritual context, or to individuals who have reduced ego strength. Against the background of these concerns, this study uses heuristic self-search enquiry to investigate experiences of self in people who teach the secular version of mindfulness.

The mindfulness teachers interviewed held sophisticated conceptualisations of self, and were aware of both Eastern and Western perspectives. They experienced self during meditation as located in the body, particularly the head, heart and lower abdomen, and used physical and spatial language to describe this. Sense of self was fluid and could also move, with awareness, to more peripheral parts of the body. At times, little solid sense of self was present, and was described in terms of a wider, interconnected awareness. In this way, self was experienced on a continuum between emptiness of inherent existence and form. Emptiness and form are two central concepts in Buddhist philosophy, and ‘reality’ is seen as a constant interplay between the two.

Co-researchers described mindfulness as predominantly helping students integrate and accept painful and difficult parts of the self under the compassionate gaze of a witnessing ‘I’. Teachers consciously used language and the relational process to reinforce the
development of a compassionate witnessing ‘I’. In general, they reported that students’ psychological defences protected them from potentially disintegrative experiences. However, they also reported occasional instances of phenomena suggesting disintegration of the sense of self. In groups where they suspected that fearful or disintegrative experiences of ‘emptiness’ might be more common, they repeatedly encouraged students to attend to the world of ‘form’ – that is, to everyday sensations.

The co-participants in this study were experienced in psychotherapeutic and spiritual exploration, and skilfully blended Buddhist and Western understandings of mindfulness to produce an effect that was overall, strongly therapeutic. It would be interesting in future research, to explore experiences of self in mindfulness students and less experienced mindfulness teachers.
AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

This dissertation was prepared myself alone. Parts of the literature review build on, and are revised from work previously submitted for a Post Graduate Diploma in Mindfulness Based Approaches to Healthcare at the University of Bangor. I have not previously published any work relevant to this dissertation.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness meditation is a practice of paying attention to the shifting contents of inner and outer experience from moment to moment. It was developed in the Buddhist tradition over 2000 years ago, as a method of dissolving the human tendency to grasp onto a solid sense of the world, and in particular, to a solid sense of ‘I’. In Buddhist philosophy, this tendency of ‘ego-grasping’ is seen as the means by which suffering is created. The process of dissolving ‘ego-grasping’ is often long and arduous, and is practiced in a context of support from a teacher (Guru) and spiritual community (Sangha), and within a philosophical framework (Dharma) (Ray, 2005).

In the 1960s and 1970s many Europeans and Americans became involved with Buddhism for the first time, and imported Buddhist practices to the West. It is against this background that mindfulness meditation has recently become a popular ‘intervention’ in physical and mental health care settings. The purpose of this intervention is to reduce the suffering inherent in illness by teaching people how to watch symptoms come and go, without being overwhelmed by them. In line with this therapeutic intent, evidence is emerging that mindfulness practice may increase psychological wellbeing (Baer, 2003). Implicit in this Western use of mindfulness is the assumption that the meditator can develop and occupy a steady ‘witnessing self’ – a very different focus from the original Buddhist purpose.

The originator of mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention is Jon Kabat-Zinn. Although Kabat-Zinn’s (2003) work sprung from experiences of Buddhist practice, there is no reference to the Buddhist philosophy of self in mindfulness teaching materials. However, the Buddhist purpose of mindfulness has not been overlooked by writers in the psychodynamic and transpersonal traditions of psychotherapy (e.g. Engler, 1984;
Washburn, 1988). And they have urged caution in using meditation as a psychological technique, particularly in situations where sense of self is wounded or fragile. They suggest that in these circumstances, meditation practice could cause fragmentation of the sense of self and psychosis, and there is some empirical evidence for this (Chan-ob and Boonyanaruthee, 1999; Sethi and Bhargava, 2003).

The research on meditation shows that it can have both positive and negative effects on mental wellbeing, and there is debate on whether mindfulness is integrative or disintegrative to sense of self. The literature relevant to this debate is reviewed in Chapter 2. However, there has been, as yet, no empirical investigation of the question of self in secular mindfulness practice. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate experiences of self among people who teach mindfulness meditation in healthcare settings. This investigation is personally relevant – I have practiced mindfulness in a Buddhist and secular context, and work as a psychotherapist. I wanted to be able to integrate my own experience with that of others working in the same field, and to clarify my own understanding of whether and how I could use mindfulness safely with clients. To do this, I needed a qualitative method that would reflect the subtle and nuanced understandings of mindfulness teachers, while allowing me to work further on my own experiential understanding of the subject. I therefore chose to use the methodology of ‘Heuristic self-search enquiry’, as described by Sela-Smith (2002) in her critique of Moustakas’s (1990) Heuristic method. Sela-Smith’s method allows continuous dialogue between data collected from ‘co-researchers’ and the researcher’s own emerging understanding of the subject under investigation. My co-researchers in this study were 7 mindfulness teachers attached to the Centre for Mindfulness at the University of Bangor, in Wales. The centre trains mindfulness teachers, conducts research into mindfulness, and provides mindfulness
teaching to the general public, in a secular context. The methodology is discussed, and the method described in Chapter 3 and Appendices I-III.

The co-researchers had experience of both secular and Buddhist mindfulness theory and practice, and I wanted to investigate how these experienced practitioners held together two seemingly contradictory understandings of the purpose of mindfulness, with respect to the concept of ‘self’. Also, against that background, how did they experience self in their own practice of mindfulness – where was it located, how fixed was it, and did the sense of witnessing ‘I’ ever disappear? I also wanted to investigate whether co-researchers were aware of any experiences, in themselves or among course participants, which might point to dissolution or strengthening of the sense of witnessing self. If phenomena suggestive of disintegration were occurring, how were these managed? Did meditators’ psychological defences prevent these experiences, or were they fully felt? And were there ‘protective’ factors in the way the practice was framed which allowed a sense of ‘I’ to remain intact?

The findings from my interviews are described in Chapter 4, and individual portraits of co-researchers’ experiences are described in Appendices IV-VIII. A ‘creative synthesis’ of my own understanding is presented in Chapter 5. The findings, and the research process are discussed, and conclusions offered in Chapter 6.

In summary, the Buddhist and secular presentations of mindfulness practice offer differing ultimate purposes. The Buddhist practice is geared towards dissolving the human tendency to cling onto a solid sense of ‘I’. The secular practice is not explicit about sense of ‘I’, but may encourage the development of a compassionate witnessing ‘I’, which watches the contents of consciousness, but is not disturbed by them. This study investigates how people who teach mindfulness in a secular context reconcile Buddhist and secular purposes of
mindfulness, how they experience self during meditation, and to what extent mindfulness practice, in a secular context may be integrative or disintegrative to the sense of self.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Evidence for the clinical efficacy of mindfulness meditation**

Mindfulness is usually taught in healthcare settings as an ‘eight-week course’, called either ‘Mindfulness based stress reduction’ (MBSR), or ‘Mindfulness based cognitive therapy’ (MBCT) where participants learn, in weekly, three hour sessions how to do various mindfulness practices, and establish a daily practice at home. The course is highly structured and manualised, and is delivered in a group. This format was developed by Kabat-Zinn (2003), and has come to be the standard method of mindfulness delivery in healthcare settings around the world.

There is a growing literature which supports the use of mindfulness meditation in working with physical and psychological suffering (Germer, Siegel and Fulton, 2005). Perhaps because of the medical context in which mindfulness has been mainly employed, much of this research has had a quantitative, positivist basis. For example, in a randomised controlled trial, Ma and Teasdale (2004) evaluated MBCT in people recently recovered from depression, and found that it reduced the relapse rate for people with more than three previous episodes of depression. They suggested that this finding could be accounted for by mindfulness disrupting ‘autonomous relapse / recurrence [cognitive] processes’ which were better established in people who had suffered more depressive episodes. This suggestion is consistent with an established cognitive model of depression – the Interacting Cognitive Subsystems (ICS) model (Teasdale, Segal and Williams, 1995), in which people with depression are thought to develop a ‘reverberating circuit’ of negative physical, cognitive and emotional perceptions. Once stuck in the loop of this circuit, the theory holds that it is hard to step outside, and to see reality in any other way. Teasdale, Moore, Hayhurst, Pope, Williams and Segal (2002) provide some empirical evidence that mindful
witnessing of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations provides a way to step out and witness this loop, rather than being caught up in it.

In 2003, Baer reviewed empirical evidence for the efficacy of mindfulness training in diverse mental and physical health conditions. She pointed to several methodological flaws in the studies to date, but concluded that mindfulness-based interventions ‘may help to alleviate a variety of mental health problems and improve psychological functioning.’ (Baer, 2003 p139)

**Potential difficulties with using mindfulness**

In Buddhist psychology, mindfulness was ‘designed’ as an introspective technique which would ultimately reveal the ever-shifting, impermanent nature of all physical and mental phenomena, including the self. Atwood and Maltin (1991, p373) point out that ‘[t]he Eastern philosophies do not try to fill the existential void at all or overcome it in any way. Rather, they provide a way to go further into the emptiness.’ In Buddhism, what is usually translated as ‘emptiness’ does not mean that phenomena are nonexistent, rather, that they do not exist in any independent, solid form. The teaching of ‘dependent origination’ holds that phenomena arise always in dependence on each other, and are constituted in an ever-shifting network of interaction – the constant play of emptiness and form. (Gyatso, HH The Dalai Lama 1999)

It could be said that both Buddhist mindfulness and Western psychotherapy aim to help us live at ease in reality – to increase our acceptance in the face of suffering. However, the type of acceptance with which psychotherapies based on Western philosophy are concerned, is at a different level from that with which Buddhist practice is ultimately concerned.
Buddhist psychology distinguishes between three – increasingly subtle -levels of suffering. At the most gross level is dukkha-dukkha or ordinary suffering, which arises from our reaction to painful stimuli. The next and more subtle level is dukkha-viparinasa, which is caused by our wish to avoid loss and change. The third, and most subtle level is sankhara-dukkha or suffering as a conditioned state. This level of suffering arises from our clinging to a conception of self and world as having an inherent, independent, solid existence.

Buddhism allows work with this last type of suffering by providing meditative methods to relax into the free-fall of existential uncertainty that realization of sankhara-dukkha causes, and a philosophical rationale for doing so. Psychotherapies, which are based solely on Western philosophy are geared towards working with dukkha-dukkha and dukkha-viparinasa, but do not encompass work with sankhara-dukkha.

Many clients come to therapy because what Buddhism would call an illusion of permanence has been destroyed without their wanting it (Urbanowski and Miller, 1996). Western psychotherapy can do much to provide a secure and compassionate holding environment for clients who have experienced such trauma. However, there is a risk that therapy in a Western paradigm might not meet clients at the level where the suffering of realising impermanence resonates through to the level of sankhara-dukkha. This level of suffering may not be consciously expressed as such, but rather experienced as an imminent sense of existential fragmentation or dissolution of the self (Kornfield, 1994; Engler, 1997).

**Interpretive critiques of meditation as a therapeutic tool**

Several authors, writing mainly from a psychodynamic perspective, have suggested that meditation might be detrimental to mental health, particularly where sense of self has been
wounded, or is tenuous. From this viewpoint, early experiences of loss, trauma, abandonment or abuse can disrupt the development of a secure sense of being in the world. If a person’s feeling of existential security has been threatened by early trauma, experiences of ‘things falling apart’ can be easily reawakened. ‘Deconstructing’ the solidity of self – albeit inadvertently - in meditation could resonate with early experiences of disintegration of the child’s world. This could lead to decompensation of psychic defences which have hitherto ‘held things together’, with a risk of regression or psychosis. (Barendregt, 2006; Engler, 1984; Michalon, 2001; Sass, 1987; Urbanowski and Miller, 1998: VanderKooi, 1997).

In a recent study, a clinical psychologist and Buddhist meditator interviewed by Swan (2004) summed up the position of those who fear that mindfulness may be disintegrative to the sense of self. When asked if he taught mindfulness to his patients, he replied that he did not, because ‘the whole point [of mindfulness practice] is to shake you up out of your confusion and dullness and ultimately to destroy your whole world…to shake your concept of self…to turn everything upside down’.

Accounts in the psychotherapeutic and spiritual literature suggest that even in those with a ‘robust’ sense of self, mindfulness, and similar practices, will eventually undermine the solidity of identity. One theorist who has written in depth about the potential effects of spiritual practice on the sense of self is Washburn (1994), a transpersonal psychologist, who integrates psychoanalytic, Buddhist and Christian contemplative traditions. Washburn describes a process of regression and identity disintegration as a necessary prelude to a more open, compassionate state of being, which he calls ‘integration’. Washburn’s account challenges that of Wilber (Daniels, 2005), who, influenced by Advaita Vedanta,
sees spiritual ‘development’ as a ladder-like progression from ‘lower’ to ‘higher’ states of consciousness.

Washburn’s account integrates many of the phenomena described by other authors writing from Buddhist, Christian and psychotherapeutic perspectives (for example, Eddinger, 1972; Kornfield, 1994; Bogart, 1991; Tillich, 1952; Starr, 2002; Barendregt, 2006; Engler, 1984; Michalon, 2001; Bache, 1981; Kara, 1979) who have written about the changes in sense of self which can result from spiritual practice, and it is for this reason that I will describe his work in some detail. According to Washburn’s developmental model, the infant’s nascent psyche is unified with ‘the Dynamic Ground’ – an undifferentiated and highly charged universe of psychic potentials and archetypal energies. As the infant starts to mature, he or she develops a primitive Ego, which is, at first, relatively unboundaried, porous to, and swayed by powerful currents which circulate in the Ground. As the Ego differentiates further, in order to begin relating (with other Egos) and functioning as a separate being, it starts to close off to the Ground. This is accomplished in the early years of life by the act of ‘Original Repression’, whereby the Ego starts to experience itself as ‘all there is’, and the powerful potentials of the Ground are repressed into the unconscious. Eventually the Ground is completely repressed, and the psyche functions as a dynamic dipole with the conscious, less powerful Ego at one pole, and the unconscious, more powerful Ground at the other. For a number of decades, the Ego functions well in the world. Indeed, it may be possible to preserve the illusion that ‘the Ego is all’ until the time of death. However, for some people - whether through traumatic life experiences, which rip apart the knot of Original Repression, or through contemplative spiritual practice, which gradually dissolves it – it becomes increasingly difficult to uphold the sovereignty of the Ego. It is at this point that ‘Regression in the Service of Transcendence’ begins. This is a disturbing process in which all certainties, and assurances of the integrity of Ego start
to fall away. The psyche falls into an abyss of meaninglessness and despair, only to then be
flooded with powerful (and initially dark) upwellings from the long-repressed Ground.
Washburn’s description of this process is similar to St John of the Cross’s accounts of the
‘Dark Night of the Soul’ (Starr, 2002). As identity comes to be seen more and more as a
series of arbitrary constructions, various ‘regressive’ phenomena arise. The falling away of
constructs of identity are interpreted in the light of early childhood experiences of
impermanence, abandonment and fear of annihilation. This recruits ‘primitive’ defences
(for example, ‘narcissistic’ and ‘borderline’ patterns), early patterns of object relating,
depression, feelings of dread and existential despair. Understandably, this is disturbing for
the practitioner, who may interpret these happenings as evidence that he or she is ‘going
mad’. If the Ego is flexible and strong enough to stand the encounter with its opposite and
more powerful pole, eventually, the stage of ‘Integration’ starts to dawn. This heralds a
new era of grace and compassion, in which the Ground, and its natural harmonic purposes
move freely through the Ego without distortion, and the personal sense of ‘I’ is less fixed
and more open to the unknown. However, the process is not without hazard, and Washburn
cautions that it may degenerate into a permanently regressed and fragmented state. It is for
this reason that Washburn cautions against the use of meditation as ‘a virtual panacea for
physical and psychic ills’ (Washburn, 1988, p150)

DelMonte (1987, p293), writing from a Personal Construct Therapy perspective, suggests
that ‘experiences that are too threatening to one’s core psychological functioning can be
suspended without being fully processed or integrated at a conscious level of awareness’,
and can emerge into consciousness during meditation, in a process which he calls
‘unstressing’. From here, the meditator may become ‘stuck in unstressing’, or may
transcend and reintegrate the de-repressed material into a new, more adaptive construct
system.
Engler (1986), writing from an object relations point of view, suggests that psychological disturbance in adult life is often due to a failure to develop an integrated cohesive sense of self (due to trauma or inadequacy of early relationships). According to Engler (1986), the purpose of psychotherapy is to help construct an integrated sense of self – to strengthen the Ego (in Washburn’s terms). The purpose of Buddhist practice on the other hand, is to recognise the illusory nature of identity. He therefore cautions against use of techniques such as mindfulness in people whom he considers do not have adequate ego strength – that is, people with ‘autistic, psychopathic, schizophrenic, borderline or narcissistic conditions’ (Bogart, 1991, p399). However, psychoanalytic writers (for example, Washburn, 1994; Podvoll, 1990; Klein, 1946) would contend that we all have within us ‘autistic, psychopathic, schizophrenic, borderline or narcissistic’ tendencies. According to Klein (1946), given a severe enough internal or external threat, we can all regress to states such as these. And according to Washburn, these states are normal components of the regression that takes place if spiritual practice is pursued to a deep enough level. This would concur with my own clinical experience as a psychotherapist, and my personal experience of spiritual practice.

Epstein (1986) contends that if meditation stresses insight into the fleeting nature of phenomena – that is their emptiness of inherent existence - at the expense of stabilising concentration on form, states of barrenness, hopelessness and existential despair can result. But Washburn, in concordance with many writers in the Buddhist (for example, Barendregt, 2006; Phillips, 1987) and Christian (for example, Starr, 2002; Tillich, 1952) traditions, would disagree with Epstein’s assertion that existential despair is a symptom of meditation that has somehow ‘gone wrong’. In Washburn’s view, it is necessary to pass through this territory to be freed from the normal constraints of identifying with the Ego.
Only this radical ‘falling away’ of identity will allow surrender to a greater state of integration and union with, in the case of the Christian mystics, God; in the case of Buddhism, Buddha Nature and in Washburn’s terminology, the Dynamic Ground.

**Empirical studies of meditators’ experience**

There is some empirical evidence to suggest that meditation may produce some ‘unpleasant’ effects. Shapiro (1992) found that 69.2% of meditators whom he interviewed experienced adverse effects during and after meditation and 7.4% experienced ‘profoundly adverse effects’.

The ‘adverse effects’ reported in the literature include anxiety (Shapiro, 1992; Craven, 1989; Miller, 1993), confusion (Shapiro, 1992), dissociation, guilt and suicidal feelings (Craven, 1989), depression (Shapiro, 1992; Miller, 1993), despair (Kutz, Leserman, Dorrington, Morrison, Borysenko and Benson, 1985), fear (VanderKooi, 1997; Miller, 1993), loneliness (VanderKooi, 1997), grandiosity (Craven, 1989), mania (Yorston, 2001), disturbing hallucinations (VanderKooi, 1997; Miller, 1993) and mixed ‘psychotic’ symptoms (Garcia-Trujillo, Monterrey and De Riviera, 1992; Miller, 1993; Chan-ob and Boonyanarathee, 1999; Sethi and Bhargava, 2003; VanderKooi, 1997). Subjects also experienced eruption of traumatic memories from the past (VanderKooi, 1997; Kutz et al, 1985; Miller, 1993).

Yorston (2001) presented a case history of a Zen meditator who developed disinhibition, disordered thought, restlessness, sleeplessness and labile affect, after meditation retreats. However, Yorston (2001, p211) commented that ‘interestingly, the patient herself likened both episodes of mania to a release of tension and blocked energy from years of not dealing with emotions in a helpful way’.
Apart from the case study described by Garcia-Trujillo et al (1992), none of these studies investigated whether negative symptoms were related to pre existing psychological difficulties (Perez-De-Albeniz and Holmes, 2000). Nor did they enquire about participants’ experience of sense of self. So it is hard to gain a picture of the phenomenological context of these ‘symptoms’ or of the cognitions, feelings and felt senses which might have brought them about.

One study of Buddhist meditators did examine self concept using psychometric questionnaires. Emavardhana and Tori (1997) studied a group of young Thai meditators who engaged in a practice similar to mindfulness on a 7-day Buddhist retreat. They found increases in self esteem, benevolence and self acceptance after the retreat. It is important to note that this was a short retreat, in a collectivist culture, where concept of self may differ from that in the West. It was also conducted in a spiritual context, with interpersonal, cultural and philosophical support for the meditators. The secular teaching of mindfulness in the UK is different from that studied by Emvardhana and Tori (1997). Here, practice is mainly solitary, especially after the initial eight week course, and takes place in an NHS mental health context, in an individualist culture.

It may seem from the foregoing discussion that at least for inexperienced meditators, using mindfulness in situations of trauma and psychological difficulty would be inadvisable. And yet, here is what Podvoll (1990), an experienced Buddhist psychoanalyst, says in his ‘Emergency instructions’ for people in the grip of a psychotic episode:

‘You have the power to prevent the scattered discharge of bodily energy by remembering… to hold still and relax. .............You can feel your body and its
sensations, a sense of weight and presence. This mindfulness of the body has the effect of slowing your thoughts.’ (Podvoll, 1990, p168)

Other authors have reported success among people with borderline personality disorder (BPD) who have learned mindfulness to work with their psychological suffering (Robins, Schmidt and Linehan, 2004). Interestingly, the DSM IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) criteria for BPD include ‘chronic feelings of emptiness’ and ‘marked and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self’ – similar characteristics to those described by Washburn in the disintegration of ‘Regression in the Service of Transcendence’. This raises the paradoxical possibility that mindfulness can not only be the cause of disintegrative experiences, but also their cure.

**Conclusion**

Meditations such as mindfulness appear to have potentially contradictory effects on the sense of integrity of self, and on psychological health. Hitherto, much of the research on mindfulness has been quantitative, and interpretive approaches tend not to be supported by a body of empirical data drawn from meditators’ lived experiences.

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of teachers of mindfulness in secular settings, to shed light on how self is experienced and theorised among this group, how they conceptualise the therapeutic value of mindfulness, and whether they are aware of any negative effects of mindfulness in their teaching and practice.
3. METHODOLOGY and METHOD

Methodology

The majority of studies of mindfulness follow a positivist paradigm and investigate health benefits of the practice. However, positivism contains several assumptions (Smith, 1998) which could constrain study of this area. Firstly, phenomenalism excludes metaphysical experience from being counted as valid data. Mindfulness arose from a spiritual tradition, and many of the experiences described by meditators could be termed metaphysical.

Secondly, nominalism rules out concepts such as ‘the unconscious’, or ‘emptiness’, which are central to psychoanalytic and Buddhist understandings, respectively. Thirdly, the separation of facts from values, and the search for universal scientific laws do not allow for a perspective on culturally-determined construction of meaning - interplay between two different cultural understandings, Western realist psychology, and Buddhist relativism, is an important aspect of this study.

Some studies have used psychometric instruments to investigate meditators’ experience (eg. Emavardhana and Tori, 1997; MacPhillamy, 1986). However, psychometric instruments only measure experience which comes within their own ‘bandwidth’. Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that the complexity of human discourse and shifting currents of meaning cannot be reflected in an attitude survey. Sense of self may be conveyed in subtleties of language and unique metaphorical expressions, which would be lost by using a questionnaire format.

There is some interpretive writing on sense of self in meditation, from Buddhist, transpersonal and psychoanalytic traditions. However, this writing does not explicitly report the experiences of individuals, and casts the writer in the role of a slightly distanced ‘author’ (Barthes, 1986) The reader is then perhaps left wondering if the experiences
described actually happened to the ‘author’, and if they could happen to people like her. 
For these reasons, I have chosen to use the heuristic method rather than positivist or purely 
interpretivist approaches. 

Heuristic research is intensely personal and subjective, and as such has been criticised for 
‘aping realism’, ‘imprisoning the data’ (Martin, 2003, cited in Etherington p126), and not 
addressing ‘the more outgoing dialogic and culturally embedded relationships between 
researcher and researched.’ (Speedy, 2001, quoted in Etherington p126) I believe that these 
are potentially significant problems for the method. However, as will be discussed later, 
allowing in a Buddhist perspective on the realism – relativism issue, may provide ways of 
leavening the apparent solidity of the heuristic methodology.

I would agree with Speedy (2001) in his caution against neglecting cultural aspects of 
relationship. I believe that the heuristic method gives broad enough scope to allow this. As 
a researcher who has studied social sciences over the past decade, and who is familiar with 
methodologies such as discourse analysis, I hope that tacit and explicit understandings of 
‘dialogic and culturally embedded relationships’ are integrated in the personal perspective 
I bring to heuristic research.

This raises the question of why I have chosen the heuristic method over a discourse 
analytic one. The main reason for my choice is that to analyse experiences as ‘texts’ would 
create an artificial distance between myself, co-researchers, and a topic that is of intense 
personal interest. Intuitively, this feels inauthentic in the context of my life as a 
psychotherapist.
I would also take issue with writers in the discursive tradition (for example Edwards, 1997; Jackson, 1993), who question the notion of a universally relevant ‘inner life’ of emotions. These writers argue that emotions are constructed in response to historical and cultural conditions. Against this, I would argue that emotions recorded in the literature of different cultures and times are easily recognisable to modern readers – for example, Dido’s grief at the departure of Aeneas, Hamlet’s existential despair and Job’s agony as he rages against God. Arguments against the existence of an emotional inner world also neglect the bodily sensations and autonomic responses which are often instant companions of emotion. These have been demonstrated by neuroscientists studying the nervous systems of humans and other animals (Bechara, Tranel and Damasio, 2000). I would follow Craib (1995) in his suggestion that, in clinical practice, ideas such as those expressed by Edwards (1997) and Jackson (1993) are frequently employed as a defence against powerful emotions.

Having established my reasons for choosing the heuristic method, I would now like to examine some of the philosophical issues which are important in its practice. The word heuristic is derived from the Greek *heuriskein* – to find or discover. Moustakas (1990), was influenced in the development of this method by several thinkers, among them Gendlin and Polanyi.

Gendlin (1962) contends that there is a realm of *experiencing* and a realm of *symbolisation*, and that the two are intimately interrelated, but fundamentally separate. Experiencing goes on all the time that humans are conscious, and can be symbolised in a myriad ways. This theory is the philosophical basis of the psychotherapeutic technique of *focusing* (Gendlin, 1978), which is used in the discovery process of heuristic research. In focusing, one alternately dwells in the realms of experiencing and of symbolising - expanding one’s awareness out from what is known about a phenomenon to what is not yet
known. This takes time, and patient waiting, and the process of shifting between experiencing and symbolisation is iterative. With each shift, the focuser learns more.

Polanyi’s (1964) concept of ‘tacit knowing’ also informs the heuristic method. This is a capacity to intuit the wholeness of an experience from knowledge of its individual parts. Polanyi suggested that subsidiary factors (conscious, visible, easily described, distinctive elements) combine with focal factors, (which are unseen, implicit and subliminal), to produce holistic knowledge of a phenomenon.

Heuristic research aims to elucidate interior subjective experience by allowing the researcher and co-researchers to dwell in the unknown, while opening to tacit knowledge, and to focus on their own feeling responses to the subject of study. Thus symbolising and experience, focal and substantive factors are woven together into a pattern that constellates a greater whole. In this process, the researchers are inevitably transformed. However, there is a potential source of tension in this process, from a psychodynamic perspective. Krippner and Ryan (1998) suggest that internal structures created by all our experiences, woven into tacit knowledge, in the form of a ‘personal myth’, act as a ‘chaotic attractor’ which pulls towards it experiences and interpretations which support the existing structure. This principle is well known in psychotherapy. Our past experience, particularly if it is traumatic, influences how we see the world (for example, Casement, 1985; Stewart and Joines, 1987; Fennell, 1999).

Sela-Smith (2002) suggests that the basis for our tacit knowledge is pre-verbal. She therefore contends that the kind of restructuring of tacit knowledge required for a fresh perspective on data may need to take place at the level of ‘pre-verbal, body-based, global experience’ (p62), rather than at the level of reflective reason. For this reason, she
advocates a deeper and more personal immersion in the heuristic process than that practiced by most researchers using this method. Accordingly, she reviewed 28 research papers whose authors claimed to have used Moustakas’s (1990) method. In all but three, she found no evidence of the ‘free-fall surrender’ to the process advocated by Moustakas (1990). Also, researchers derived the themes for their enquiry from co-researchers’ experiences, rather than their own. She suggests that Moustakas’s (1990) description of the methodology offers mixed messages about what is being studied. As he develops his description of how to carry out heuristic research, the focus subtly shifts from ‘experiencing’ (as a verb) to ‘experience’ (as a noun). Emotions and felt senses become something that happens to someone else, other than the researcher.

Sela-Smith (2002) advocates that rather than being the primary focus of study, co-researchers’ experiences ‘are valuable as reflectors of possible areas of resistance that may be out of conscious awareness in the form of denial, projection, or incomplete search. This sends the researcher back into the self to continue the self-search into deeper or more distant tacit dimensions, thus allowing the transformation to be more expansive.’ (p78) To illustrate this, she cites Humphrey’s (1989) heuristic study of life meaning. Humphrey discovered in the process of talking to others, that he was avoiding the darker side of his own experience. Conversations with co-participants helped him to experience the phenomenon under study more fully. She suggests that Moustakas (1990) shifted the emphasis in his method to co-participants, away from his self, in order to make his methodology more acceptable to positivist science, and perhaps as a result of unconscious resistance to uncertainty and personal pain. She proposes a revision of Moustakas’s (1990) method – Heuristic self-search inquiry – which holds the subjective experiencing of the researcher as the touchstone of the method. In this way, the emphasis is shifted from the
study of ‘experience’ as an object at one remove, to ‘experiencing’, which is fluid, alive and intimately felt.

It seems that unconscious or partially conscious processes can intrude on, and influence any of the steps of the heuristic search (Table 1). I would argue that such intrusions can be reduced in three ways. Firstly the perspectives of co-researchers will help to open up the researcher’s blind spots. Secondly, if there is a supportive (therapeutic) relationship in which the researcher can feel contained while entering new territory, this will facilitate a relaxation into the unknown (Etherington, 2004). Thirdly, contemplative meditation practice can also act to clarify and contain the researcher’s experience (Louchakova, 2005).
### Table 1. Potential blocks to the heuristic process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Potential blocks to process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Initial engagement</td>
<td>Discovery of a research question which has intense personal interest for the researcher.</td>
<td>Personal pain linked to research project may shift focus to something less threatening. Unconscious drive to resolve painful question may persist, and split the focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
<td>Intense focus on, and ‘living inside’ the question.</td>
<td>If the research concern is not central to the researcher’s concerns, and has been undertaken, for example to fulfil institutional or organisational requirements, immersion will not be possible, as the unconscious conflict between personal and organisational will sabotage the process. Researcher’s own past experience may create unconscious distortions in direction of focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Incubation</td>
<td>Retreat from the question.</td>
<td>Researchers may fear that if they retreat from the question, they will lose motivation and fail to complete their research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Illumination</td>
<td>Naturally occurring intuitive insight and spontaneous elucidation of the phenomenon.</td>
<td>If previous stages are incomplete or not wholehearted, illumination will not occur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Explication</td>
<td>Full examination of what has emerged into consciousness in the previous stage.</td>
<td>If the major source of data is not personal, but is focussed outside on the experience of others, the phenomenon cannot be felt from the inside, and therefore cannot be authentically explored in the researcher’s own subjectivity. Researcher’s own past experience may act as a ‘chaotic attractor’ for particular interpretations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Creative synthesis</td>
<td>Holistic expression of conclusions</td>
<td>If the researcher is lacking in self confidence, or has previous trauma surrounding creative expression, the full unfolding of the final phase may be choked.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of this methodology to study sense of self raises an ontological question about the ‘reality’ or permanence of the researcher’s self. Buddhist epistemology questions the
notion of a solid, inherently existent self. And this raises the question ‘who researches’? Moustakas (1990), from a humanistic perspective, does not question the existence of a core ‘self’. But if the ‘self’ that Moustakas (1990) recommends using as the primary research instrument is fluid and does not inherently exist, where does that leave the methodology? For me, this question is like a koan at the heart of this project. The notion of koan has a parallel in heuristic research. Here is a description of the solving of a Zen koan: ‘Whether in actual zazen [sitting practice] or in working, walking, eating or sleeping, it becomes his [the practitioner’s] ‘thing’; he becomes a mass of existential concern wrapped around the koan.....oneself becomes the koan question to be answered’ (King, 1970, p311). Compare this with Moustakas’s (1990) description of the immersion phase of heuristic research ‘...the researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states. Everything in his or her life becomes crystallized around the question.’ (p28)

Perhaps Tibetan Buddhist conceptualisations of self (Preece, 2006a) allow a way of working with this koan. In relative terms, there is a construct called self that is needed to function in the world. While in absolute terms, this self is seen as fluid, impermanent and ‘dependently-arising’ moment to moment from the interplay of multiple contingent conditions (Gyatso, 1999). If this premise operates, it does allow for a ‘relatively existent’ researcher who can study relatively existent phenomena, even although these phenomena, and, by inference, the researcher herself, may operate as verbs, rather than nouns. This resonates with Sela-Smith’s (2002) reformulation of heuristic inquiry, as studying ‘experiencing’ rather than ‘experience’.
Method

Sample
Seven mindfulness teachers (6 female, 1 male) were interviewed. These teachers were part of a network supported by the Centre for Mindfulness at the University of Wales, Bangor. All had undergone formal training in Mindfulness-Based Approaches to Healthcare. This training was designed to equip teachers to deliver the MBSR and MBCT programmes devised by Kabat-Zinn (2003) and Segal, Williams and Teasdale (2002) respectively. Four of the teachers had extensive experience in Buddhist meditation. Three had experience of other Eastern meditation practices. Six were counsellors or psychotherapists by training. All had taught mindfulness in a group setting, and most also taught mindfulness to individuals.

My own experiencing formed part of the data. I have had a Buddhist practice for 12 years, I work as a psychotherapist, and have received formal training in Mindfulness-Based Approaches to Healthcare. I do not teach mindfulness to groups, but teach it to some individuals as part of psychotherapy.

Interviews
Interviews were of one to one and a half hours in duration (median, 70mins), and were conducted by myself either in the University of Bangor or in co-researchers’ homes. The instructions to participants, participation release agreement and interview schedule are in Appendices I, II and III respectively.

Equipment
Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder (Sanyo digital talkbook ICR-B80NX), and subsequently transferred to CDs for transcription.
Reflections and focusing

My reflections on the data and heuristic process were recorded in a research journal after meditation and focusing sessions. The final focusing session, which formed the basis of the creative synthesis, was recorded by the same method as the interviews, and transcribed immediately after the session.

The rationale for focusing is described above. The process involves the ‘focuser’ (myself) describing the contents of consciousness to a ‘focusing practitioner’, who reflects back the focuser’s words with minimal paraphrasing or interpretation. I have worked with the focusing practitioner who helped me in this study for three years. He has over 20 years of focusing experience, and trained with Eugene Gendlin at the Focusing Institute in California.

Transcription

Interviews were transcribed by myself, according to the method described by Taylor (2001, p30, extract 3). In this method, talk is organised into sentences, for ease of reading and analysis, while still retaining the irregularities of everyday talk. Potter and Wetherell (1987) point out that ‘for many sorts of research question, the fine details of timing and intonation are not crucial, and ….can interfere with the readability of the transcript’. (p166) However, long pauses (over 2 seconds), strong tonal emphases (for example, ‘no **fixed** self’), and gestures (for example *pointing to the centre of the chest*) were recorded in the transcript, as they often helped to convey a particular meaning.

Procedure for analysis
Data were analysed according to the Heuristic Method described by Moustakas (1990) and revised by Sela-Smith (2002). The stages of this analysis are shown in table 2. Step 3 was included to reinstate my participation, as the researcher, throughout the process and helps to continue the thread of my own ‘experiencing’ throughout the process, as suggested by Sela-Smith (2002).
Table 2. Stages in the Heuristic process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Interviewing participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Immersion in data</td>
<td>Listening to interviews, transcribing and re-reading transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Reflection on researcher’s own experience of the research questions</td>
<td>Focusing (Gendlin, 1978), observing own mindfulness practice, reading and journal writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Incubation</td>
<td>Setting aside data for two weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Review</td>
<td>Reviewing all material derived from each individual in turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>Making notes from data, identifying qualities and themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Individual depictions</td>
<td>Construction of individual depictions of co-researchers descriptions and the researcher’s experiencing, retaining original language and examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Checking depictions</td>
<td>Checking out the accuracy of depictions with co-researchers, and against the original data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Revision</td>
<td>Revision of depictions if necessary, in light of co-researchers’ comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Collection</td>
<td>Individual depictions are gathered together and studied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Incubation</td>
<td>Period of rest, to allow qualities and themes to be internalised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Composite depiction</td>
<td>Composite depiction is produced, using illustrative examples taken verbatim from the data. The composite depiction includes all the core meanings of the phenomenon as experienced by the researcher and co-researchers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Producing individual portraits</td>
<td>Individual portraits are derived from the raw data, from participants whose experiences exemplify that of the group as a whole.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Contemplative processes (mindfulness, focusing, recording of dreams and intuitions) are used to tap the researcher’s tacit-intuitive awareness of the core meanings of the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Creative synthesis</td>
<td>A creative synthesis of the researcher’s understanding is produced in the form of poetry or other creative expression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethical issues

The study gained ethical approval through the process of submission of a proposal and ethics review checklist to the Open University.

Risk

The degree of psychological work that co-researchers and myself had undertaken in the past made it less likely that exploration of the subject of self in interviews would open up traumatic material, than it might in a ‘clinical’ population. The British Psychological Society (1990 p270) ‘Statement of ethical principles for conducting research with human participants’ suggests that participants should not be ‘induced to take risks that are greater than those that they would normally encounter in their life outside the research’. The issues covered in this study are likely to arise during the course of this group of co-researchers’ normal working lives. Therefore discussion of these issues can be assumed not to pose any unusual degree of risk to this group.

Consent and withdrawal

All co-researchers gave informed consent to participate in the study. I explained to co-researchers the purpose and content of the study, and what they would be asked to do. Participants were given the option of withdrawing from the study at any time, should they want to. All co-researchers were asked to approve the summaries (steps 12 and 13, table 2) which formed the basis of the results chapter, and all gave approval to proceed.

Debriefing

Co-researchers reported that they found the interviews interesting and enjoyable. One participant volunteered that they had found the process therapeutic.
Confidentiality

Descriptions provided by co-researchers in the results section were made anonymous.

Bond (1993, p137) discusses the use of material from clients’ experiences in research. He states that ‘the publication of material which is not personally identifiable does not require the consent of the client’. He comments that if the counsellor working with clients is named, then the risk of the client being identified is increased. Certainly this does not apply in this study, as none of the co-researchers were named, and I provided no details on specific clients with whom I have worked.

Co-researchers did not at any time name students. However, some accounts did include combinations of events which could lead to students identifying themselves, were they to read this study. With this in mind, some minor changes were made in the reporting of clinical material, to remove specific details or circumstances. In this area, I wanted to strike a balance between preserving the privacy of students, and retaining the potency of co-researchers’ accounts. Detailed ‘case-histories’ can be very powerful in illustrating the psychological processes involved. I think I erred on the side of caution in this matter, and probably lost some illustrative power, as a result. It is also relevant to note that it is unlikely that students on mindfulness courses offered to the general public (from whom any reported case histories were drawn), would be among the readership of this study (Bond, 1993).
4. RESULTS

Four overarching themes emerged from the interviews:

1. Co-researchers’ theoretical concepts of self
2. Their own experiences of self in meditation
3. Experiences of self in the therapeutic work of mindfulness
4. Impermanence and existential issues

A composite picture of the data is presented below. This is drawn from summaries of transcripts (Step 12 table 2), which retained the words of the researcher and co-researchers (identified by letters A to G). Individual illustrative portraits of co-researchers’ experiences (Step 13 table 2) from the transcript summaries are presented in appendices V to VIII.

1. Theoretical concepts of self

Theory of no self – experience of self

Co-researchers often expressed a sense of contradiction between the Buddhist concept of ‘no-self’ and their everyday experience of self.

There are aspects to my personality, like facets on a disco ball. And various ones catch the light. It changes and changes and it’s always rotating. And how it is at any one moment is absolutely interdependent with a multitude of environmental factors. There’s a fluidity to self - no fixed self. In terms of theory, I buy that. There’s a difference between my concept of the self and experience of the self. I catch myself over and again experiencing myself as somewhat fixed. Now, I don’t believe that’s true (B).

I feel very in sync with the understanding that there is no self in an actual sense. But also in a conventional everyday reality, I feel a sense of self. I have more continuity of understanding that there isn’t a self, in an intellectual sense than I do in an experiential sense. When I’m investigating, I can see that there’s no substance to any of this. All of the sense of self that I have is grounded in fragmentary moments that seem to have continuity, but if you really investigate, they don’t. They just disappear (D).
‘You’ve got to be somebody before you can be nobody’

Co researchers were familiar with the concept expressed, most famously, by Engler (1984) as ‘you’ve got to be somebody before you can be nobody’ – that it is necessary to have a developed sense of ‘I’ before that can be de-constructed in meditation.

At a retreat that I went on, the monk [who taught us] said how important it is to build up ego strength in order to be able to experience the dissolution of it. And he said the folk who come into the monastery who have a really hard time are those who don’t have ego strength. He used the metaphor that you need to have the eggshell firm for the baby bird to develop inside, and then the eggshell can be broken at the right time for the bird to come out and to become a full bird (C).

In order to contemplate the teaching about having a sense of no self, we need to have some sense of self from which we do that. To do it the wrong way round would be dangerous. I think that’s true for anybody. Somebody with recurrent depression is already questioning ‘is it worth me being here?’ So in terms of priority, we need to be life enhancing in helping them to explore the life that they live in that moment, and how they’re holding that. On the whole, I think we stay fairly solidly with this sense of ‘what do you notice?’ - the subtlety of language between saying ‘bringing awareness to the knee’, and ‘bringing awareness to your knee’. I’m aware of the effect, and I tend to say ‘your’ - the sense of the personal feels important (D).

There’s that Buddhist idea of letting go of the self. But there’s also that idea that it’s necessary to have a real sense of yourself before you can let go of that. I struggle with that, because I think that with a lot of the interventions and the way [MBCT] is taught, there’s almost a denial of the self…..with people’s individual sense of self and how they experience it, I don’t think there’s a lot of room for bringing that out (E).

2. Experiences of self

Sense of self when teaching

Co-researchers experienced differences in their sense of self while teaching, depending on whether or not they felt relaxed with a group.

[Sometimes], it’s just like the teaching’s happening, if I’m in a situation where I feel very comfortable, then there’s less of a sense of ‘this is me teaching’. Whereas if it’s a new
group, and I’m a bit unsure, then [my sense of self would be] more solid, more impacted (C).

When I’m teaching, my sense of myself is extended to the whole room…….sharing that distributed sense of my surroundings with the client I’m teaching. (G)

Appendix IV gives a more detailed portrait of one participant’s thoughts on teaching mindfulness

Experiences of connectedness in meditation
Co-researchers experienced a softening or dissolution of the boundary between self and environment in meditation.

Especially on retreat I get that sense of having no boundary between me and other. It feels very safe and true and trustworthy…..there is that sense of coming home (F).’

One time I was on retreat, all this mental stuff that goes on to create the sense of me eating my breakfast suddenly fell away and there was just the breakfast being eaten. It was an amazing experience. It was uncomfortable, and it took a lot of holding together, but it was a really beautiful experience in other ways. I didn’t have any sense of what was going to happen next. There were no reference points. So there was this whole sense of being very exploratory (C).

All of my experiencing…..is contained within this wider field of awarenessing. There’s me arising within it as just an aspect of it, but I’m just one little blip (D).

Physical sense of self
Co-researchers experienced a sense of witnessing self located in parts of the body, particularly the head, heart and lower abdomen. This sense could shift, with awareness, and intention, to more peripheral parts of the body. It had the capacity to be more or less diffuse, and to expand.

In the heart, it’s yellow with white bits, diffuse, dappled. But it’s soft and warm - sunshine. In the lower abdomen, that’s more powerful, the pure source, more of a felt sense of energy (F).
There’s a central core that is definitely porous - pillar shaped. Like an apple core. There’s a sense of me often being in my head, and if I’m experiencing my left toes, then my attention stretches down into my toes, and I’m in my toes. It’s like a liquid, flowing down a flexible tube, so that it might get bigger at the end, at the toes. There’s something there about witnessing and intention being connected (C).

[The part that’s watching] can move around. It’s generally in my heart. It starts off as a physical feeling of warmth - and then expands and almost becomes transparent, and the observation moves out. It’s very fluid in expanding and contracting but also stays as a solid core that’s steady and the same (E).

There’s a lot of feeling in the heart. A feeling of kindness, compassion towards my own suffering, which can feel quite expansive (A).

A detailed portrayal of one participant’s sense of self in different parts of the body is given in Appendix V.

### 3. Self in the therapeutic work of mindfulness

*Integrating different parts of self*

Co-researchers reported that mindfulness enabled integration and co-existence of different parts of self, within a wider container of awareness.

I love the Rachel Naomi Remen story about the black pieces of the jigsaw. When she’s a child, she hides all the black bits down the sofa, and they couldn’t make the jigsaw. And she didn’t realise that the picture was going to be a beautiful scene of the beach. That’s the image I always have, that whatever’s not right is a part of the whole thing, and the whole thing’s right. Mindfulness is great at allowing that (F).

Mindfulness has helped me stay steady with whatever’s going on. No matter how scary or angry or crazy or exciting it is, it’ll come and go, and there’s a subtle awareness that somehow it’s OK because it’s what is (G).

An example of one researcher’s use of mindfulness to integrate parts of experience within herself and with a student is given in appendix VI

*Dissociation*
Co-researchers also described an integrating function of mindfulness in situations where the sense of self was split off from the body, in dissociation.

Lots of people [who come on the courses] are very disconnected with their body. It’s quite common for people with mental health problems to have no sense of below the waist. They can look down and see it, but when they shut their eyes and try and contact it, it’s just not there. There have been some people who have been unwilling to close their eyes and be with their private parts. So it’s like - let’s do a sitting meditation and you start from the base of your spine upwards. It’s OK not to go there and just explore what it’s like moving to the parts of the body you’ve a good connection with. (F)

I can think of a number of people who’ve spun off like we all do but in a more exaggerated way, losing their sense of connection with reality. We can’t stop ourselves spinning off, but we can learn to come to more often, and to help ourselves reconnect. I think for people who dissociate, their sense of self gets stronger through doing mindfulness. They’re more in touch with tangible body sensations. And there’s something particular and detailed that they can connect their experiencing to in this moment, which at one stage was a kind of blankness. And so there’s a stronger sense of ‘me sitting on this chair feeling upset or whatever, but here I am’. (D)

When mindfulness gets difficult

Co-researchers suggested that course participants’ psychological defence mechanisms would usually ‘kick in’ if experiences in mindfulness meditation became too threatening to the self. However, they also described a theme of staying with the practice in the face of distress, and the potential healing effect of doing this.

Things that were difficult to bear have come up for people in the course, but there was a sense of ‘Oh this has been there all the time. Perhaps I don’t need to keep pushing it down. I just need to be aware of it’ - then being able to let it go, or a sense of healing. My experience is that many people come into quite horrible awareness of themselves, or pain from their life but find it helpful to be with it. (A)

I can only think of one occasion where it felt like somebody blew apart with it. At the time it was terrifying for everybody involved. But my sense has been that people generally have either pulled out of the course or that their defensive strategies have kicked in. Or they’ve gone on with the course but not done the practice. My sense is that it’s pretty unusual for people to sit there for 45 minutes, terrified of losing their sense of self, and that they’d get up and walk away. My interpretation is ‘that’s probably a very skilful choice for that person at that moment’ We do say at the beginning ‘if there’s anything we say during this process that doesn’t feel right for you at this moment, use your own wisdom to decide what you want to do’. But still the reality is that people feel a sense of competitiveness with the group, competitiveness with themselves.
Unconscious material comes up for participants, and myself. Bringing it to the light of day has an effect. The consideration for us as teachers is - what are the risks that may be part of that? because it could be inconsequential stuff or it may not be. It may be pretty big and pretty painful. (D)

People are quick to pick up the culture of the group. So people either tend to keep quiet or adapt and say what they think we want them to say. And I wonder how many people are very alarmed by what’s happening. I think it does cause alarm because people often say ‘I go to sleep’, ‘I block off’……and I’m always thinking, ‘what’s happening underneath that?’ (E)

4. Impermanence and existential issues

Co-researchers described experiences of impermanence and existential issues, which they, and course participants had experienced while meditating. These were often ‘grounded’ by returning to everyday sensation or ‘form’.

[Do you or other people doing mindfulness experience difficulties or fears regarding sense of self?] I don’t think that happens very much with this down to earth Theravadan stuff. Stories come to mind about monks going to masters and describing bliss states and the masters suggesting they go off and chop some wood. It really brings people face to face with their stuff. Sometimes they report that as existential issues, but I don’t get the sense of people feeling as though they’re going to break up (B).

I think people with borderline personality disorder….struggle with spending time with themselves… [In mindfulness] there’s an understanding that it’s OK to spend time with themselves. And that’s a shift for lots of people…..I think most of them describe a sense of impermanence of themselves - a fear that they’re going to go ‘puff’ in a cloud of smoke. That’s why I think the connection between the physical body and the outside world is useful for this group. (F)

I’ve noticed [existential and death issues coming up] with distance learners - less so in the eight week group. I wonder if people don’t feel that they have permission - maybe that it would be difficult for the rest of the group. On retreats, people talk about this sort of stuff plenty. It’s all part of their practices, so that can very easily come into the teachings. I wonder how much this is cultural, something people don’t talk about except in very intimate situations. Culturally, we’re trying to make things as permanent as we can. And yet this is something that everyone experiences, particularly when they’re going through difficult times. (C)

I think often people come away from groups with an urgency around ‘needing to live my life in the way that I truly want to. Because I can really feel that this is going to end.’ Fear’s the thing we’re working with all the time - existential fear - a driving force under all of it. The fear of not existing - of not being solid. Needing to grasp onto something that feels solid. (D)
More detailed perspectives on this issue from two participants are shown in Appendices VII and VIII.
5. CREATIVE SYNTHESIS

This creative synthesis of my understanding is taken from a focusing session, which followed a contemplative process (table 2, stages 14 and 15). In order to preserve the quality of here and now ‘experiencing’, the original words of the session are presented with little alteration. The creative synthesis acts as a bridge between the data and the discussion. Line numbers are inserted for ease of cross referencing with the discussion that follows.
There’s the theory of no self, and the experience of self.

People had an idea from Buddhism that self was fluid and ever changing - no fixed self.

Outside of meditation, they felt more fixed - a continuous thread of ‘me’.

But when they meditated they got a feeling of no fixed self so it wasn’t just an idea any more…

It was a feeling of thoughts coming and going and facets of themselves coming and going and things happening in the everyday world moment to moment.

So in meditation they got a sense that filled in that Buddhist theory… that there’s no self-thing

Somebody talked about loosening the grip on self and that was a relief - as the sense of self softened.

And I feel that too.

Fleeting flitting thoughts.

No solid centre to it.
The paradox is that when I notice it as I talk I can feel a settling into the centre - down here the solar plexus the heart. And people described this as well a physical feeling that settled in the heart or lower down in the abdomen. The heart mind settles down smooth and calm warm energetic. I want to stay there And things arise and pass. I’m not stuck in this centre. The process of things coming and going - that’s still there. There’s something in the centre of the body. It’s not solid like matter.
It feels physical but it’s also energy.

And it’s based in this container of awarenessing coming and going weaving in and out.

Even that’s too spatial.

Things come and go but they could pass through that centre like a neutrino passes through the earth.

It’s not like they’re coming and going out there, and there’s this centre in here.

They’re co existent – but that’s too much about time.

They interpenetrate – but that’s too much about space.

Whenever I use language I can feel it solidifying things.

Even if I was to draw or make a sculpture it would make it too dense.

It’s like light.

Maybe it’s like light.

When people felt they were teaching well they stayed in that centre place.

The teaching was just happening.
When I’m teaching mindfulness
I’ve got this feeling of spaciousness
and myself and all the sounds and the breath are all shared in that space.
They don’t belong to anybody.
They’re phenomena happening
and I’m passing that way of awarenessing on
but I don’t even know if it’s through my words.
It’s almost by contagion
we can learn to feel that way
of being with experience.

And then people described how,
when they’re teaching,
if they’re feeling self conscious or worried
the sense of self solidifies or goes out of the body and up into the head.
I feel that happening just now
and I don’t like it very much.
Most people weren’t so keen on that.
Feels a bit precarious.
The connection to the body’s thinned right down.

Somebody talked about how they could open something
like a tube that would feed awareness
into the part of the body they chose.
I need to feel that now.
I’ve got very little sense of the head now.
I think I’ve gone down into the legs.
There’s this other quality to it……I don’t know where I am.
That feels like what somebody described on retreat
- things just being there and happening there.
Not much executive self.
Exciting and scary.

I feel scared
on the edge of totally letting go to that……..
Scared that I might disappear

It’s vast.
And the sense of the body’s not the usual.
The legs are aware
but not much in the top.
It’s hard to talk from this place……
I’m just waiting……….

I’ve gone to an extreme
- the far end of a continuum.
The middle is being in here – in the heart.
The other end is being identified with phenomena.

At either end
it’s hard to pull away.

I can feel myself coming back in.

Starting to feel more ordinary.

The sounds are there.

I’ve got more of a sense of the body now
physical
material.

So what happened to me there?

I wouldn’t call it disintegration …but it was pretty dispersed.

An altered state.

People talked a lot about mindfulness helping
to integrate different parts of the self that were scary or painful.

That’s on a different level from what happened to me there.

The integration is more ordinary
more psychological.

The teachers were clear that they didn’t want
to get into altered states of consciousness
with people they taught
- might be dangerous.

They stayed at a pragmatic sensory level
- sensory of thoughts, body sensations, feelings,
everyday sensations.

Most teachers were aware that this practice can bring up fear impermanence
fear of death
- experienced, felt.
It can radically alter things existentially.

But they keep coming back to the everyday ‘down-to-earth Theravadan stuff’
back to what’s here right now.
This physical reality.

All the time with the material, physical way they describe things
they keep solidly anchored in form.

And there’s a vital kindness there in their relationships
in guiding meditation
and the enquiry that’s done after the meditation.
There’s human warmth
that’s not easy to access
from that ‘out there’ altered state.

There’s an animating breath
love

spirit

in the heart.

And so they stay in here

in the heart.

Human

and embodied.

It’s really important to be human

and in this body.

I think that’s the whole point

doing Christ’s life.

We need somebody fully human.

How else can that love be expressed?

Without that, it’s just a lot of things swirling around.

Sometimes things get in the way of expressing that full humanity.

One teacher described mindfulness as like cleaning off a pane of glass

- cleaning something up.

Buddha nature.

It’s described as gold

wrapped in dirty rags.

In mindfulness
we unwrap the rags
see what they are
and let the gold shine through.
6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the following discussion, key insights from my experiencing in the Creative Synthesis are referenced, with the line number, in parentheses.

Co-researchers’ experiences of self

The co-researchers in this study had a sophisticated understanding of self, and held conceptualisations that could be variously labelled Buddhist, Hindu, Post-modern, Humanistic or Psychodynamic, co-existing side by side. They were aware of self as ‘not fixed’ in both their theoretical understanding (1-4) and their own meditation practice (8-26). However, experiences of self were very variable, and ranged along a continuum from a fairly fixed ‘everyday’ sense of ‘me’ (6-7), a non-solid, but localised experience of a physical core (28-38; 51-54), an expansive and fluid ‘awarenessing’ (46-49; 56-74) to an experience of the phenomenal world which contained very little, if any, of what would normally be experienced as ‘I’ (106-123) (Figure 1).

Therapeutic and adverse effects of mindfulness

Over all, co-researchers described beneficial effects of mindfulness themselves, or among course participants, which correspond with Baer’s (2003 p139) conclusion that mindfulness ‘improve[d] psychological functioning’ in the presence of physical or psychological distress (201-211). Those teachers who worked with people with borderline personality disorder noted that although mindfulness was difficult for this group, and required much support and gentleness, in general it was a helpful intervention. This concurs with research described by Robins, Schmidt and Linehan (2004).
The increase in benevolence and self acceptance described by Emvardhana and Tori (1997) in young Thai meditators after a 7 day retreat were echoed in co-researchers’ impressions of the changes that course participants, and they themselves, experienced through doing mindfulness (40-44; 201-211). This is an interesting finding, given the differences in cultural context between the two studies, and suggests that these effects of mindfulness on sense of self may be relatively robust, independent of culture.

The concerns expressed in interpretive critiques (eg. Washburn,1988; Engler, 1984) were also partially borne out by co-researchers’ experiences. They described the emergence of, at times painful, previously unconscious material - generally, this was successfully integrated into the sense of self through bringing it to consciousness, as described by DelMonte (1987) (145-149). However, they also described infrequent instances of mindfulness students experiencing extreme psychological distress, and possible disintegrative experiences (159-163). One of the distressing experiences presented in this study did appear to be explicitly connected to an early experience of trauma, which had existential repercussions, as suggested in Engler’s (1984) caution against use of techniques such as mindfulness in the absence of adequate ego strength. Co-researchers were aware of the possibility of such negative consequences of mindfulness practice (151-154; 159-163), and took steps to guard against it, as will be discussed below. They also cited participants’ own psychological defences as usually being protective against such negative outcomes.

Washburn (1994) and others suggest that we all have the potential to experience existential distress and fear when engaging in contemplative practice. This was borne out to different extents for different co-participants and students (106-123; 159-163). However, it was often balanced by experiences of connectedness, peace and compassion (20-74). Five co-
participants (including myself) explicitly said that they were working with existential
issues on an ongoing basis. Interestingly, these participants came from a background of
either Hindu or Buddhist spiritual practice.

The group of meditators in this study is unusual, as all but one have been, or are practicing
psychotherapists or counsellors, and have had psychotherapy themselves in the past.
Perhaps this is relevant when noting that the ‘adverse effects’ of meditation reported in the
literature, particularly confusion (Shapiro, 1992), dissociation, guilt and suicidal feelings
(Craven, 1989), despair (Kutz et al., 1985), loneliness (VanderKooi, 1997), grandiosity
(Craven, 1989), mania (Yorston, 2001), disturbing hallucinations (VanderKooi, 1997;
Miller, 1993) and mixed ‘psychotic’ symptoms (Garcia-Trujillo et al., 1992; Miller, 1993;
Chan-ob and Boonyanarathee, 1999; Sethi and Bhargava, 2003; VanderKooi, 1997) were
not reported by this group, during their own practice. Co-researchers did report, at times,
having suffered anxiety (Shapiro, 1992; Craven, 1989; Miller, 1993), fear (112-116)
(VanderKooi, 1997; Miller, 1993), and re-emergence of traumatic memories from the past
(VanderKooi, 1997; Kutz et al, 1985; Miller, 1993). However, it is not clear to what extent
the difficult psychological experiences that emerged were a consequence of doing
mindfulness practice, or whether these were already-present states of mind which were
made more conscious by doing mindfulness.

Co-researchers did describe, among course participants, instances of suicidal feelings
(Craven, 1989), anxiety (Shapiro, 1992; Craven, 1989; Miller, 1993), depression (Shapiro,
1992; Miller, 1993), fear (VanderKooi, 1997; Miller, 1993), and re-emergence of traumatic
memories from the past (VanderKooi, 1997; Kutz et al, 1985; Miller, 1993).
It would be useful, in future research, to investigate the lived experience of participants on mindfulness courses. The co-researchers in this study are psychologically experienced, and are far from representative of the population who might be referred to mindfulness courses in the NHS.

**Buddhist and Western perspectives on self**

From a perspective which integrates Buddhist and Western psychology, the functions of mindfulness, with regard to the self, can be understood at two levels. The first holds that we have a distinct, inherently existent self, which can witness the passing of thoughts, feelings, and sensory impressions (28-74). In doing this, the self comes to know that such phenomena are insubstantial and impermanent. The witnessing self ‘decentres’ from what it observes, and develops a sense of being separate from and unperturbed by the contents of consciousness, as in Teasdale et.al.’s (1995) formulation of the ICS model. So, in this conception of mindfulness, all phenomena except the witnessing self are transient, and have no inherent solid existence.

The second level of understanding of mindfulness, holds that the witnessing self too is impermanent and without inherent substance (Ray, 2005). As soon as the spotlight of awareness is turned on the witness, there is potential for the practitioner to enter an existentially uncertain territory, as the questions ‘who am I’, and ‘do I exist?’ start to arise (114-116). It is in this realm that the concerns expressed by Washburn (1988), Engler (1984) and others about disintegration of the ‘normal’ sense of self, become relevant.

The manualised mindfulness course does not explicitly explore the concept of self, and one co-researcher referred to this as ‘almost a denial of self’ in the course materials. Co-
researchers were aware of the second understanding of mindfulness, both in their own experiences of practice, and in their philosophical exploration. And they often described their best teaching process when they were aware of being less solid and fixed – more in the flow of ‘dependent origination’ (76-89) (Gyatso, 1999). When they became anxious about teaching, the sense of ‘I’ became more ‘impacted.’ In Tibetan Buddhism, this increase in solidity of the ‘I’ as a reaction to threat is known as the ‘vividly appearing I’ (Preece, 2006b). However, in the content of their teaching, they stayed rooted in an approach informed by the first understanding. They subtly emphasised choice and skilfully used language, compassion and the relational process to reinforce a sense of ‘I’ in their students, and to strengthen a construct of ‘self as compassionate witness’ (165-199). This helped students bear difficult situations, sensations and feelings with equanimity, and to integrate previously split off parts of self (145-149). In this context, the witness acts like Winnicott’s ‘good-enough mother’ who allows the infant to integrate ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parts of self and surroundings by containing and allowing without reacting or rejecting (Epstein, 2005).

The description above infers that self may be seen as either having an inherent, independent existence or not. However, a more subtle understanding is of an experience of self that can move along a continuum between emptiness and form – this is expanded in Figure 1, and integrates Washburn’s (1988) model. From this perspective, the extreme ‘emptiness’ end of the continuum, where phenomena and self are ‘seen’ to have no inherent existence is threatening territory for the ego. This is the experience that ‘shake[s] your concept of self….turn[s] everything upside down’ (Swan, 2004). It seems that co-researchers, course participants and I did enter this territory at times (106-123). For the teachers and for myself, it was possible to return from this, and reconstitute an ‘everyday’
sense of self fairly easily. Although I noticed inertia in pulling away from such deeply absorbed states (130-131) (Holroyd, 2003). However, some of the descriptions of mindfulness course participants’ experiences suggest that, as postulated in the Literature Review, people who had experienced trauma and impermanence in early life found it hard to approach or return from the emptiness end of the spectrum. Mindfulness teachers had an explicit awareness that, repeatedly encouraging students to attend to form (as sensory phenomena, and a compassionate witnessing self) was an important ‘grounding’ safety feature in their teaching (165-199). This is resonant with Epstein’s (1986) view that meditation should balance insight into impermanence with concentration on form.
Figure 1. The spectrum between form and emptiness – psychological and experiential correlates

**EXPERIENCING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomena</th>
<th>Panoramic</th>
<th>Non solid core</th>
<th>‘Me’ witnessing</th>
<th>‘Everyday’</th>
<th>‘Vividly’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arising</td>
<td>‘Awarenessing’</td>
<td>eg. in heart</td>
<td>sensory phenomena</td>
<td>‘fixed’ sense</td>
<td>appearing ‘I’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>little or no sense of self</td>
<td>(56-74)</td>
<td>plus wider field of awareness</td>
<td>(133-139)</td>
<td>(6-7)</td>
<td>(91-94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(106-123)</td>
<td>(28-54)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EMPTINESS**

Identification with emptiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Borderline</th>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Adaptations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Experiences of trauma can cause shifts to either end

| Borderline | Narcissistic Personality | Adaptations |

Identification with form

Infantile state

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No object</th>
<th>Developmental progression</th>
<th>Identity project at mid life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>permanence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Integration of Ego and Dynamic Ground

Integration <--regression in the service of transcendence (Washburn, 1988)
Methodological discussion

In this section I will explore further some questions raised in the Methodology chapter. In particular, issues arising from my choice of method, and the exploration and representation of ‘experiencing’, rather than ‘experience’, and how this relates to my own sense of self.

There are many aspects of the data gathered in this study that would have been hard to investigate, using a positivist paradigm. Central themes, such as emptiness, form, ego and connectedness cannot be quantified, and are essentially metaphysical – the positivist tenets of phenomenalism and nominalism exclude such concepts. The theme of different perspectives on self, which emerged in co-researchers’ accounts does not fit with the positivist separation of facts from values, and the search for universal scientific laws. The range of participants’ experience was diverse, and a psychometric instrument, such as that used by Lau et al, 2006 would not have captured this range, or the nuances of meaning attributed to it (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

One of the major weaknesses of this study is that it does not explicitly investigate the discursive currents that circulate in the data. A discourse analytic approach would have allowed this. MBSR and MBCT represent an interesting junction where cognitive behavioural, psychodynamic, humanistic, phenomenological and existential discourses in psychotherapy meet. They are also a meeting place of Buddhist and Western philosophical discourses. In addition, they were developed, and are delivered within a hospital culture which is strongly influenced by medical, psychiatric and managerial discourses. Two of the co-researchers alluded to early spiritual experiences in the 1960s or early 70s, and I suspect that the influence of sixties counter-culture on subsequent spiritual explorations would have been a rich vein of investigation in this group.
However, contrary to the views of the writers in the discursive tradition (for example Edwards, 1997; Jackson, 1993), who question the notion of a universally relevant ‘inner life’ of emotions, participants experienced a rich and predominantly bodily world of emotion and felt sense of self. This is in line with Bechara et.al.’s (2000) assertion that there are instantaneous and strong bodily manifestations of emotion.

As distinct from the interpretivist, positivist and discursive approaches, the Heuristic approach that I used, particularly with Sela-Smith’s (2002) modification, explicitly keeps the personal experience of co-researchers and my self at the centre of the study. I have regrets that, because of the word limit, I have had to cut back on the amount of co-researcher’s words presented in the analysis, as I believe that a fuller results section would have better respected the tenderness and subtlety of the teachers’ lived experience.

In order to give myself the best chance of restructuring tacit knowledge at the level of ‘pre-verbal, body-based, global experience’, as noted by Sela-Smith (2002, p.62), I tried to immerse myself as deeply and personally as I could in the data, as she suggests, and in particular made use of focusing, which relies heavily on bodily sensations as the source of new understandings. My experience of the heuristic method is that it did allow me to open to previously unknown and tacit dimensions of knowledge, and I feel profoundly changed by the experience, as suggested by Etherington (2004).

However, I was aware that my own personal experience, for example, early illness and trauma, experiences of physical and psychological healing, and ongoing spiritual practice may have acted as the ‘chaotic attractor’ described by Krippner and Ryan (1998) which
pulls towards it experiences and interpretations which support the existing structure. As I was aware of this possibility, I took steps to address some of the potential unconscious blocks to the heuristic process, described in table 1, and the measures I took to do this are described below. As these potential blocks are, by definition, not accessible to conscious knowing at present, it may only be possible to see if I have succeeded in avoiding these traps, when I reflect on this work in years to come.

As Sela-Smith (2002) suggested, I used co-participants’ experiences as ‘reflectors of possible areas of resistance that may be out of conscious awareness in the form of denial, projection, or incomplete search.’ (p78) In order to reduce the intrusion of the unconscious, I used the perspectives of co-researchers to help open up my blind spots (Stages 2 and 5, table 1). In a reversal of the process described by Humphrey (1989), whose interactions with co-researchers allowed him to open to the darker side of his experience, overall, my interviews encouraged me to open more fully to the lighter side.

Fortunately, I was under no organisational or institutional pressures to study this subject, and it was freely chosen as something that interests me intensely. However, it was not always a comfortable subject of study, and I was conscious that I needed to keep my focus on the question even when it felt painful (Stages 1 and 2, table 1). At times, the process involved exploration of altered states of consciousness and emotionally-charged areas. For example, during the focusing session which formed the basis of the creative synthesis, I experienced an altered state of consciousness in which I felt afraid. Remembering Sela-Smith’s (2002) critique of Moustakas’s (1990) possible defensiveness in the face of his personal pain, my experiences of previous meditation (Louchakova, 2005) and therapy,
and my trust in the focusing practitioner with whom I was working, encouraged me to
relax into experiences like this (Etherington, 2004), and to observe them clearly.

I was consciously aware of the need to discipline myself to complete each stage of the
heuristic process, and to come away from the data when required (I timetabled this in)
(Stages 3 and 4 table 1). I was also careful to stay close to the data and experience
phenomena from the inside. Throughout the project, I tried to allow the experiences of co
researchers to interpenetrate my own as much as possible – by repeatedly engaging with
the subject matter and the participants’ accounts in meditation and in focusing. By keeping
this close contact with my own experience, I worked to keep the flame of ‘experiencing’
alive. (Stage 5, table 1)

Although the creative synthesis is presented in the text as a modified transcript of a
focusing session, my first impulse was to present it in the form of an audio recording.
There is something less fixed and more transient about encountering the session as sound.
In Tibetan Buddhism, the sound of the bell is a metaphor for the interplay of form and
emptiness, for the transience inherent in all phenomena. That is how my understanding
feels. That is how my ‘self’ feels at the end of this project – less fixed, more transient; but
perhaps strangely, also more present.

In the end, I decided not to present the synthesis as sound, as I was concerned that format
might not be acceptable in this academic context. This concern highlights my ambivalence
about studying psychological life as a ‘science’. My intuition, my experience and my
reading tell me that the lived experience of the psyche is often better represented in art than
in science (Moore, 2004). But the strength of the ‘scientific’ discursive formations in
which I have been schooled causes me to hold back this intuition, for fear of not being taken seriously by the psychological establishment. A voice in me is critical about my creative synthesis, even in its written form - ‘It’s disorganised, incomplete’. Perhaps a positivist ideal of definitive explanation, and closure on the data lurks beneath these criticisms. Or, in a parallel process, some idea of a perfect ‘finished’ self.

I am left wondering if some of the difficulties I have described around the creative synthesis relate to previous trauma or undervaluing of the creative arts in my own life. Certainly, at school, because I excelled in academic subjects, my interest in creative and expressive arts went largely unnoticed and unsupported. This is perhaps relevant to the difficulties described in table 1 stage 6.

One of the criticisms that have been levelled at Heuristic Research is that it ‘imprisons the data’ (Martin, 2003, cited in Etherington, 2004, p126). Despite my concerns about the adequacy of my synthesis, that is not the sense I am left with on a personal level. If there is any imprisonment, it is by committing my findings to paper. I worry about presenting this snapshot of a process as if it were the final scene, when I know it is not. But, in the end, what I have discovered through this research has enriched my own spiritual life by creating more questions than answers, and continues to open a path whose destination is unknown.

While studying the data, the koan ‘who is this self?’ was ever present (see Methodology chapter, and King, 1970, p311). Jung (1964) talks of the principle of circumambulation in understanding dreams and symbols. Buddhists also practice circumambulation in relation to religious sites. During this research, I have ‘walked around’ this thing I call ‘self’, but I
am not sure if I am any closer to experiencing what ‘it’ is, or even if it is. This process has cast more doubt on the ideas of ‘I’ and ‘it’, and has helped me surrender to the walking.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this Heuristic study was carried out in response to a concern that teaching of mindfulness in a secular context might lead to students experiencing phenomena that were disintegrative to their sense of self.

The findings suggest that the mindfulness teachers in this study hold multiple experiential and theoretical understandings of self, which inform their practice and teaching of mindfulness. In particular, they are aware of Engler’s (1984) caution that it is important to build a solid sense of self before engaging in any practice which might question the solidity of self. They use these understandings, and the relational process in teaching to promote the development of a strong compassionate witnessing self in their students. While investigating the solidity of ‘I’ in their own meditation practice, they did not lead mindfulness students to engage in such investigations.

Mindfulness practice appeared to produce experiences of increased integration of self – bringing unconscious or split-off parts of self into consciousness, and increasing self acceptance. This is consistent with the literature which finds a beneficial effect of mindfulness on mental wellbeing (eg. Baer, 2003). It also appears to produce, at times, experiences, in a clinical context, which may be disintegrative to sense of self, particularly in the presence of previous trauma. This is also consistent with concerns expressed by transpersonal psychologists (eg. Washburn, 1988), and with the literature describing adverse effects of meditation (eg. Shapiro, 1992). However, there is a suggestion in co-
researchers’ accounts that course participants’ psychological defences are usually active in preventing disintegrative experiences.

Co-researchers experienced self in various ways during meditation. They described, using physical and spatial language, a sense of self that varied between diffuse and localised. However, even the most localised experiences of self were experienced as fluid and not ‘solid.’

This leads to my conclusion that self and phenomena can be experienced on a continuum between emptiness (of inherent existence) and form (Figure 1). I would suggest that if the sense of self is robust, there may be a relatively easy movement along this continuum. However, in conditions of psychological distress, the ‘emptiness’ end of the continuum may be experienced as threatening, and may either be defended against or act rather like a ‘black hole’, drawing the meditator into further distress. Co-researchers repeatedly encouraged students to return to experiences of ‘form’. It may be that this has a therapeutic effect in conditions such as dissociation and borderline personality disorder, where the link to the world of form can be tenuous.

This study concentrated on a group of mindfulness teachers who are experienced in their practice of mindfulness, and who have a sophisticated understanding of psychotherapeutic concepts. They are involved in training other mindfulness teachers, and in setting standards for the delivery of mindfulness based interventions in healthcare. Their depth of understanding and skill in using this knowledge to teach mindfulness ‘safely’ has positive implications for how these interventions are delivered in the future. However, there are aspects of this area that I believe could be explored in more depth. The subtle
understanding of the need to reinforce a sense of ‘compassionate witnessing ‘I’’ came from co-researchers’ depth of psychological and spiritual knowledge. This need is not explicitly stated in the source materials for mindfulness based interventions, and it would be interesting to investigate how mindfulness is understood and taught by people who teach mindfulness with less background knowledge.

Mindfulness practice was not without its hazards. Co-researchers were at times concerned about participants’ psychological distress, and about what was happening when people ‘shut down’ while in groups. There are no studies of the lived experience of these participants – how they experienced self, and what made them come away from the practice. This would be an interesting area for further study, and could inform mindfulness teachers about what would make the delivery of courses safer and more tailored to participants’ individual needs – in particular in the areas of participant selection, course delivery methods, theoretical underpinnings of teacher training, and additional psychological support for participants when necessary.

14,968 words
REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDICES

Appendix I: Instructions to research participants

Date____________________

Dear

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research on the experience of self in mindfulness meditation. I value the unique contribution you can make to my study, and am looking forward very much to your participation in it. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate some of the things that I have already described in my initial letter and to secure your signature on the participation-release form, which you will find attached.

The research model I am using is a qualitative one through which I am seeking comprehensive depictions or descriptions of your experience. In this way, I hope to illuminate or answer my questions:

‘How do mindfulness teachers reconcile Buddhist and Western/secular understandings of self in their teaching?’
‘What are mindfulness teachers’ experiences of self during mindfulness meditation and teaching?’
‘Are teachers aware of any experiences in themselves or others which point to strengthening or dissolution of a sense of ‘witnessing self’ as a result of mindfulness meditation?’

Through your participation as a co-researcher, I hope to understand the essence of the phenomenon as it reveals itself in your experience. In particular, I am interested in gathering vivid and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you; your thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical sensations, as well as perceptions of the environments connected with your experiences.

I value your participation, and thank you for committing your time and energy to helping me with my study. If you have any further questions before signing the release form or if there is a problem with the date and time of our meeting, I can be reached at (phone number).

With best wishes

Margaret Kerr
Appendix II: Participation-release agreement

I agree to participate in a research study of experience of self in mindfulness meditation, as described in the attached letter. I understand the purpose and nature of this study, and am participating voluntarily and can withdraw my participation at any time. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing an MSc degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I understand that my name and other demographic information which might identify me will not be used.

I agree to meet at the following location __________________________, on the following date _____________________ for an initial interview of 1 to 1 ½ hours, and to be available for a follow up telephone interview of ½ hour if necessary. I also grant permission for the audio recording of the interview.

______________________________ Research Participant _______________ Date

______________________________ Primary Researcher _______________ Date
Appendix III: Interview schedule

1. **How do participants reconcile Buddhist and secular understandings of self in their teaching?**
   - While teaching mindfulness
   - While doing mindfulness meditation
   - Is there a difference in philosophical understanding of self that alters the intent or orientation of effort in secular vs Buddhist meditation practice?
   - Is there a difference in the ultimate purpose of both types of practice?

2. **What are participants' experiences of self during mindfulness meditation and teaching?**
   - While meditating
   - While teaching mindfulness (? absorption / flow ? less reflection on self)
   - At the time?
   - When thinking back on the experience?
   - Can you feel the witnessing self during meditation or do you look back and experience it?
   - Is there a process of flicking back and forth instantaneously between witness and direct experience or are the two there simultaneously?
   - Are there any experiences – anecdotal – which illustrate particular types of experience of self?

3. **Are participants aware of any experiences, in themselves or others, which might point to dissolution or strengthening of the sense of witnessing self?**
   - Any experiences of increased anxiety / depression / altered states of consciousness in self or group participants?
   - Any existential issues arising?
   - Sense of distance from or separateness from thoughts / feelings? ‘decentering”? depersonalisation?
   - What does sense of witness feel like?
   - Any evidence of hitherto unconscious material coming into consciousness?

   *What does the person know about this experience / issue?*
   *What qualities or dimensions of the experience / issue stand out for the person - what examples are vivid and alive?*
   *What events, situations and people are connected with the experience / issue?*
   *What feelings / thoughts are generated by the experience / issue?*
   *What bodily states or shifts in bodily presence occur in the experience or in relation to the issue?*
   *What time and space factors affect the person's awareness and meaning of the experience? (Moustakas, 1990)*
Appendix IV - Sense of self and mindfulness teaching – Co-researcher D.

In terms of mindfulness based teaching, I do feel that on the whole, it’s really important to have this background sense that this sense of self doesn’t actually exist in the way that we perceive it to. But at the same time, the teachings are intended to be pragmatic ways to deal with everyday life, and very much are grounded in this sense of self.

So my sense is that it’s important that as a teacher, we really have a looseness around seeing that’s not a fixed thing ....but I wouldn’t go so far within the context of an eight week course beyond the immediate things like ‘thoughts are not facts’, thoughts are these fragments of energy that move through our consciousness and then they’re gone. And so people are touching into these understandings but just touching in, and really their reality is in terms of how does this make sense? How can I better relate to my 2 year old?, or how can I more skilfully manage the overload I’m experiencing in my work life? or whatever.

I think that a big part of it is around not having this sense that it’s D who’s giving these teachings, but more a sense of how can I best get out of the way of all of this so that this becomes clear to people.

If it was D that was giving the teachings, it would give this sense that this was something that was very much attached around me, and that in order to believe in this they’d need to believe in me. Rather than beginning to see that actually they know all this already, it’s just giving themselves a place in which they can see what’s clear, and they’re already an expert in their own experience - learning to use that more in a more skilful way than they perhaps do already. Actually all you’re doing (as a teacher) is becoming more skilful in becoming a vehicle for something.

In a way, the less of you that’s in there, the better, but at the same time, you want somebody that has a very strong sense of self - that they have a confidence in their own being, which isn’t grounded in an ego sense of ‘I’m a good person’ or ‘I’m a……’ but that they trust themselves.

(Good teachers) really engage, but there’s a way in which they’ve got a freedom within that because they don’t see the way in which they engage with things as being the most important thing. It is this wider container that they’re doing it within.

That sense of authenticity is really key. They’re honest with themselves. There’s not a lot in the way really.

I think there’s this combination of very grounded realness which is to do with conventional reality and a sense of seeing space around that. This is just this moment and all of this is insubstantial in some way. But it’s combined with this very pragmatic engagement in conventional reality.

Appendix V - Sense of self in different parts of the body – Co-researcher F

I feel like there’s a spectrum that I move about on where I’m inhabiting the head, heart or lower abdomen or some combination of these.
In the head, my awareness is withdrawn from my body, and from the wider sense of connectedness. I don’t like it very much. It’s about a separate me - a narrow consciousness and awareness, and I think if I did it for very long, I’d get a headache.

The heart starts to feel very big and widens right out way beyond my body. There seems to be some sense of locus. Connectedness, compassion, love. Incredibly little sense of separate self.

In the lower abdomen I can reconnect with feeling the ground of my own experience - a physical sense of self and of substantiality - connected with the earth, the land and the elements, and I can know and sense much better from here than from my head.

Awareness and the sense of self can feel very refined, in a way that feels less located than any of the places I’ve just talked about.

Appendix VI - Mindfulness used to integrate split off parts of the self – Co-researcher E

Mindfulness is about enabling people to discover their sense of self, and to sit with that – all aspects of it. For me in mindfulness, the separate parts tend to stay separate within my whole experience of them. But they’re not separate in that I’m holding them and I can breathe into the whole thing. Then I can hold them both, and eventually they will merge. Someone in the last course I was doing was very angry - splitting it off, and wanting to get rid of this anger. And then I did the black spot. Imagining that you have a black spot that’s put on your hand, and then you look at the black spot, and what you tend to do is that you just see the black spot. You don’t want it there, or you may be concentrating so much that you become the black spot, and then when you’re in the black spot, that’s all you see. You stand back and look. Actually it’s just a black spot and there’s your hand around it. He absolutely got it. It was fantastic.’

Appendix VII - Existential issues arising in mindfulness practice – Co-researcher A

With the Zen teacher, and with Nisargadatta, you could feel that sense of non self. It was profound. A sense of void. I had a moment of looking in their eyes and having a sense of huge vastness - space. There was something good about it. Somehow it wasn’t an alien space. I’ve always come back to the thought that it is love - being lost in somebody’s eyes.

I don’t think that would be particularly helpful for people who are in the suffering state. They need the embodiment, feet on the floor. For most of us, we’re very much alive - here. Non self sounds unfriendly somehow – akin to death.

Occasionally when I’m teaching, people bring it up. Somebody brought that up and somebody else got very shirty and said ‘Can we get back to the real world now?’ I’m not sure how to work it in. I think it is a bit too explosive to be there. It would need it to be brought in a practical way where it relates to what we’re doing right now.

People are struggling to find some kind of place and, just taken philosophically, that seems even more alienating. People want to be a self. People are really hungry for self esteem and feeling ok about themselves. (It sounds as if you reinforce that in your teaching. How do
you do that?) Constantly coming back to the word kindness. And creating an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance, and acknowledging that people’s experience is frightening.

Impermanence of the self is scary for people. It comes up when I’m teaching. It’s not up front, but it’s there. It is a difficult one for me. I have to work it in more for my self first. I think that’s a real path for me. It’s a path that I’ve been on for a long time and am really interested in. It’s only on long retreats that I get a liberating sense of non self. But in everyday life, then getting to know this self is prominent. But what’s also important is not taking it personally.

Appendix VIII - Existential issues arising in mindfulness practice – Co-researcher E

I think that existential polarities are there….life – death; existence – non-existence. They inevitably come up, because when we sit with ourselves, we become more aware of that emerging sense of self and impermanence. Death of the moment. It’s so much a part of it, and again, one of the things that people will often push away from. Sitting with the knowledge of your own death - that all relationships end, some way or other. And then…what do we need in order to stay sitting with that?

I’m sure that some people deal with it by stopping meditating. It’s all very well knowing its universality, but I think we need a cognitive knowledge base to frame it, or the terror becomes uncontainable. Because it’s terror we go into - terror and despair. To sit with that requires a fairly steady sense of self or you’ll fragment…..So that needs building on that core sense of something to come back to. Not getting lost out there……. You have to do that before you can stay with that thing. And we’re very good at looking after ourselves. That’s why we learn to disassociate. Unless we’re being contained, we won’t do it.

(Have you had any experience of where you suspected that maybe a disintegrative experience has happened?) Yes. I can’t tell with the eight week courses that I’ve done because I don’t know enough about people. I don’t know enough beforehand. I haven’t been keeping a lot of contact when people are in the middle. Because another thing I don’t like to do is to infantilise people. Actually trust people to go if they need to go. That’s ok. Maybe they’ve got enough for now.

But from my experience in the drug and alcohol work and also doing some therapy with them, or supervising their therapists, I think that that often happens. They go in and then it just becomes too frightening and too much to contain. Just recently, there was somebody [who suffered severe abandonment trauma at birth], and managing all of that, with a lot of cutting, a lot of drugs, a lot of alcohol. And he stopped all of that, and was really building a sense of self and a sense of really being able to sit with things…and he’d gone through the fact [of that abandonment]. Then he’d gone to the existential place of ‘………… if nobody wanted him, did he exist anyway?’ And he seemed to really contain that, and then he had some insight around seeing that - almost back to being in the womb. And then he left. He left in the middle of the night from the residential.

But I think it was very interesting. Having felt that he had enough strength to be able to sit with it - and then he didn’t, and he went, and possibly because the therapist had been off sick that week. And I suppose it’s that early sort of Winnicott feeling, that if the parent goes, we have to be able to go into our own despair and find we can manage it and survive
it without the mother being there. And that’s what people haven’t got any ability to do. And I think mindfulness really helps that. But then I think then perhaps for him, there was a point where he wasn’t contained enough internally to stay with it. And then everybody said ‘oh should we have done…?’ No, but he took himself there, and he’s looked after himself by going away.

(So it feels, in a way, that mindfulness can take us into that territory of fragmentation and paradoxically, it can help us stay with it.) Yes! It’s completely existential. It takes us into that place of either living or dying. And then there’s also an element then of ‘do I stay living in my body or do I….?’ It’s almost like choosing a death in many ways ..choosing to go out of the body, in a strange paradoxical way.

I’m imagining that once people have allowed themselves to go there by choice in meditation, and then they go away, that they will probably come back to it. I wonder about that. If you’ve gone down to that fairly slowly because you will have been building or you won’t let yourself get there. Whereas some people when they first come in, you ask them to do the body scan and they have got no defenses available to them, other than to go or to drink or to whatever, and they plummet straight into that.

(And what happens then?) Usually they will disassociate, or not come back. But then do some people actually fragment when they do that? Because with people over-meditating, you get that sometimes in India in ashrams. People come and they just overdo it. People get lost, and people do go quite crazy with that.

**Appendices - 2838 words**