ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF CULTIVATING MINDFUL SELF-COMPASSION

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The Grit That Becomes a Pearl

Thanissara (2014)

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May all beings be well, safe, joyful and peaceful. 🖤

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW & SOCIAL SCIENCES
PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This research explores self-compassion and how it contributes to wellbeing. Research indicates that self-compassion improves life-satisfaction, reduces inner-judgement, counters burnout, strengthens resilience and motivation for self-care. The aim is to investigate the process of cultivating self-compassion through engaging in Neff's theory of self-compassion. I wanted to develop practice, identify barriers and any transformative aspects of self-compassion to understand how they could benefit me personally and professionally as a psychologist. There is an absence of personal stories from psychologists concerning their experience of occupational hazards, burnout and managing self-care.

My research draws from a Buddhist perspective and is located within a Buddhist Practical Theological paradigm. The research was conducted over one-year taking an inductive, first-person approach combining the methods of autoethnography, journaling, contemplative practice and critical reflection. Autoethnographic methods were used to gather, analyse and interpret self-reflective material. My research revealed how developing self-compassion reduced my inner-critic, sense of loss, fear, depression and anxiety. It provided healing, acceptance, inner strength, resilience and integration; personally, relationally and in social and environmental activism. Professionally, self-compassion enhanced therapeutic presence and practice. Researching self-compassion alongside Buddhist practical theology enriched my Buddhist practice and reinforced the relevance of Buddhist praxis to contemporary issues.

This research shows the power of story to deepen self-understanding, gain new insight, re-story a life and challenge dominant discourses. The methodological approach taken provides a valuable model for contemplative practice and research. The research contributes to existing self-compassion research through elucidating the process from a first-person perspective and has contributed to the field of Buddhist practical theology. The capacity of contemplative practice to nourish and integrate valued areas of life was also discovered. As a result of my findings I commend Mindful Self-compassion personally and propose that it becomes integral to professional training for psychologists and healthcare professionals.

Keywords: Mindful Self-compassion, autoethnography, contemplative practice, psychologist burnout, therapist wellbeing.

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List of Acronyms

BPS	British Psychological Society
CCare	The Center for Compassion And Altruism Research And Education
CFT	Compassion Focussed Training
CMind	The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CMSC	Center for Mindful Self-compassion
HCPC	Health Care Professionals Council
MSC	Mindful Self-compassion
MSCT	Mindful Self-compassion Training
SCS	Self-compassion Scale
WHO	World Health Organisation

Glossary of Pali Terms

Anattā: not-self, impersonal

Anicca: impermanence; inconstancy

Avija: delusion

Bhāvanā: meditation, cultivation

Brahmavihara: divine or sublime abiding

Buddha: an enlightened being

Citta: mind, consciousness, mental state

Dana: generosity

Dhamma: (Skt. dharma) liberating law discovered by the Buddha, that which gives support to wisdom and liberation. Summed up in the Four Noble Truths: the truth, reality, natural law, all physical and mental phenomena

Dukkha: unsatisfactoriness, suffering, pain, distress, discontent, stress,

Karuna: compassion

Metta: loving-kindness, goodwill, deep friendship

Mudita: sympathetic or appreciative Joy

Pañña: wisdom, understanding

Pratītyasamutpāda: interdependence or dependent origination

Samadhi: concentration; meditative absorption

Samatha: Calmness

Sangha: the community of Buddhist monks and nuns, the community of followers on the Buddhist path

Sati: mindfulness, awareness, the quality of noticing, of being aware of what is happening in the moment, not allowing the mind to be forgetful

Satipatthana: foundations of mindfulness

Sila: moral conduct; precept; virtue; moral restraint

Sutta: (lit. thread; Skt. sutra) discourse of the Buddha or one of his leading disciples

Tanhā: (lit. thirst) craving, desire

Theravada: (Doctrine of the elders) school of Buddhism that draws its inspiration from the Pali Canon, or Tipitaka, the oldest surviving record of the Buddha's teachings. Has been the predominant religion of southeast Asia (Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma)

Upekkha: equanimity, even minded

Vipassana: literally, "to see clearly"; insight; insight into the truth of anicca (impermanence), anatta (not- self), and dukkha (unstatisfactoriness)

Yoniso manasikara: wise reflection

Sources: Titmuss, 2017; Insight Meditation Center, 2017.

Glossary of Buddhist Nikaya and Suttas

The following discourses in the Pali Cannon and corresponding teachings used in this thesis are as follows:

AN: Anguttara Nikaya
MN: Majjhima Nikaya
SN: Samyutta Nikaya

Sutta	Buddhist Teaching	Page number In thesis
AN 3:65: *Kalama Sutta*; I 188-93	The Buddha's teaching to the Kalama tribe on "No Dogmas or Blind Belief" (Bodhi, 2005, pp.88-910).	44
AN 8:39; IV 245-47	Five Precepts: harmlessness, trustworthiness, refraining from sexual misconduct, right speech and non-intoxication.	46
MN 10:1 *Satipatthana Sutta*: I 55-63	The four foundations of mindfulness: body, feeling, mind states and mental events.	34
MN 21:1 *Kakacūpama Sutta*; 1 126-27, 129. and MN 99: *Subha Sutta*; II 206-8	The four sublime abidings *(brahmavihara)*: Loving-kindness *(metta)*, Compassion *(karuna)*, Sympathetic Joy *(mudita)* and Equanimity *(upekkha)*	45
MN 93:11 *Assalāyana Sutta*, abridged; II 147-54	"Purification Is for All Four Castes" (Bodhi, 2005, pp.132-137).	49
SN 1:8; 143-153 *Karaniya Metta Sutta*	The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness	147
SN 12:1; II 1-2	Dependent origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda)*; everything is intricately dependent and interconnected with everything	147
SN 22:45; III 44-45	Three Marks of Existence *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha (suffering/desire/unsatisfactoriness)* and *anatta* (not-self).	45
SN 36:6; IV 207-10	"The Tribulations of Unreflective Living. The Dart of Painful Feeling. (Bodhi, 2005, pp.31-32	81
SN 45:8; V 8-10	the Noble Eightfold Path - Right: View, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, Concentration/meditation	113
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Sources: Bodhi, 2005, Access to Insight, 2005b.

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Part 1. Pathfinding

Chapter 1. Orientation and Beginning… the First Step

It is 3.53 am, the sun has not yet risen and in the stillness and quietness of pre-dawn, I have begun writing about my experiences of cultivating Mindful Self-compassion. I was awakened by the sound of my voice, quietly speaking in my mind, uncovering the words that invite my story to emerge. After all the thinking, feeling, uncertainty and silence, I wondered how it would all start. My writing will follow many paths into past, present, known and unfolding experiences, along the way I will be entering into dialogue with myself and all who are part of my story. This involves deep intention to honour my own truth and write from the heart of my experience. I want to share what is meaningful, inspiring, joyful and painful for me in this precious life. My purpose is to engage and evoke through mind, body and in spirit. My heartfelt wish is that my contemplations will resonate with others and that my work will move, encourage and challenge. What a privilege it is to be at the threshold of this encounter through sharing my experiences of cultivating self-compassion.

1.1 My Personal, Professional and Spiritual Contexts

I am one of over 7 billion humans who currently inhabit the Earth, alongside innumerable other living organisms and sentient beings. I am female, of Irish and Scottish descent, and I came into this world, amidst much drama, in the summer of 1963.

1.1 Mary Cathrine – 2 hours

My husband of 28 years describes me as beautiful, complex, intriguing, loving, intense, courageous, compassionate and passionate. Close friends say I am kind, loving, loyal, smart, funny, impatient and prone to swearing. All have said at various points that I work too hard, worry too much and that I am way too hard on myself. I see myself as shy and introverted. I love the sanctuary of home but am also adventurous and a daredevil. I am gentle, kind, deeply loving and yet can be distant, angry, hateful, jealous and Machiavellian. I can be generous as well as mean and selfish. I am courageous, often afraid and sometimes cowardly. I can be manic, generating great energy and enthusiasm and conversely have little energy and need to withdraw. I self-actualise and self-sabotage. Optimism and hopefulness do not come as easily to me as despair and pessimism. I can be happy and content but I also live with depression and anxiety, which distorts my view of self, others and the world. I am intelligent, smart and yet often feel inadequate. I have always felt like an outsider, different, that I do not really belong.

My various roles and identities include daughter, wife, friend, animal-lover and environmentalist. I became a Chartered Counselling Psychologist in 2005, work in private practice and specialise in adult mental health. Previously, I have worked as an education researcher, in dementia care and in the polar opposites of the City of London (international private banking and Lloyd's of London) and Birmingham (Christian housing association for ex-offenders and addicts).

In 2004 I became a lay Buddhist in the Theravada tradition at Amaravati Monastery. In Buddhist teachings there are Three Characteristics of Existence (Sumedho, 2010): impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactorines (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). These are too vast to cover in detail but I mention them because, not only are they core teachings, but there are a lot of I's in this introduction. As a Buddhist I am learning that in terms of non-self teachings; I or ego are all impermanent constructs and are the cause of suffering if we identify too strongly with them (Sumedho, 2010). Reflecting on and realising these characteristics, it is possible for a sense of liberation to emerge through finding freedom from conditioning, expectations and attachment to self-views. It is a work in progress.

1.2 The Area of Focus

The focus of this thesis is exploration of the process of cultivating of Mindful Self-compassion (MSC) which simply put, is compassion directed to the self (Neff, 2003a). I feel fortunate to be a psychologist and psychotherapist, especially over the past 14 years, because it has been a time of significant change in perspectives, particularly with the emergence of mindfulness-based approaches (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005; Williams, et al., 2007). I believe that the synthesis of Eastern wisdom and Western science that has emerged with Mindfulness is significant and offers opportunity for change, internally and externally, in terms of growing awareness and committed action to create healthy and sustainable lives and societies (Macy and Johnstone, 2012). Compassion and interconnection are central in this process of change and they challenge the dominant discourses of individualism, self-interest, competition and exploitation. Such are the needs, benefits and power of practising compassion, and this endeavour begins with cultivating compassion for ourselves.

> The Great Turning arises from shifts taking place in our hearts, our minds, and our views of reality. It involves insights and practices that resonate with venerable spiritual traditions, while in alignment with revolutionary new understandings from science (Macy and Johnstone, 2012, p.26).

I use the word cultivation because it denotes creating the optimal conditions for germination and growth. This metaphor aligns with the Indian agrarian context in which The Buddha used the term (Peacock, 2011). In Buddhism, the Pali word for cultivation is *bhāvanā,* this relates to mental development, dwelling on, or application by means of thought or meditation (Access to Insight, 2005b). The closest English definition of cultivation in the context of this thesis is “Try to acquire, develop (a quality or skill)… Try to improve or develop (one’s mind)” (Oxford University Press, 2017).

This thesis draws principally on the work of Dr Kristin Neff who, since 2003, has developed and researched the psychological concept of self-compassion. Neff’s work has engendered a burgeoning field of research and practice, and in collaboration with Dr Chris Germer, she developed a Mindful Self-compassion training programme (MSCT), (Neff and Germer, 2013) that is now used with clinical and non-clinical populations in 22 countries (CMSC, 2016).

My reasons for choosing Neff's conceptualisation of self-compassion is that the work originates from Buddhist teachings and practice and is researched from a psychological and Humanistic perspective. All these factors resonate with my personal, professional and Buddhist philosophies. Whilst the concept of compassion for self and others is central to Buddhist practice, it appears to have lain dormant in the field of psychology until relatively recently, despite the emergence of mindfulness approaches. Research findings indicate that MSC can make a significant contribution to personal and professional wellbeing and augments existing clinical approaches, particularly mindfulness based interventions. Through the eight-week MSC training programme (Appendix 1), MSC has been found to counter negative aspects of self-esteem and harsh self-criticism, foster deeper and more loving connections with self and others, generate proactive healthy responses and increase life-satisfaction (Neff, 2003b, 2004, 2011; Neff and Vonk, 2009). In psychology, burnout is an ongoing and very serious issue. Anxiety and depression levels are increasing for clinicians (The New Savoy Partnership, 2016) as well as for clients and the general population (World Health Organisation, 2014, 2017). Therefore, I wish to explore how cultivating self-compassion could benefit me personally, as a psychologist, and consider wider benefits to other psychologists, clients and the general population.

1.3 My Understanding of Compassion

Before I explore the landscape of self-compassion research literature in Chapter 2, I would like to consider what I understood compassion to be prior to engaging in this work. I believed compassion was something religious people, saints and martyrs offered to the poor and suffering. It was certainly never on my radar as something an individual could offer to themselves directly. In my family of origin there was kindness and love but also struggle and conflict. Compassion was not in my family discourse, it would have been viewed as weakness. These views arose from harsh realities that my parents faced: starvation, separation, loss, discrimination, abuse, civil and world war. However, although compassion was not explicit, Molly and George, my Mum and Dad, were incredible, extraordinary, ordinary people with great depth of character and tenacity, who came out of adversity and despite all of their struggles were able to show love and care.

Before I became a psychologist, I worked in research, which was often defensive and competitive. Likewise, working for 12 years in the City of London, there was no room for compassion. Furthermore, I cannot recall the word ever being mentioned in 10 years of training to become a Chartered Psychologist. Although the therapeutic relationship is implicitly compassionate and the core conditions of Person Centered Therapy (Rogers, 1951) emphasise empathy, neither explicitly refer to compassion. The same applies to mindfulness. I have practised and trained in this approach since 2004 and, until recently, compassion was rarely mentioned. It feels as if the Western mindfulness movement is playing catch-up with compassion possibly because it had became lost in the operationalisation and secularisation of the practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2015; Ricard, 2015). However, Buddhist teachings and practices of mindfulness have always been steeped in compassion. My initial understanding of compassion was more akin to pity but in Buddhist teachings this is viewed as the near enemy that masquerades as compassion (Pasanno, 2001). I now realise that it means so much more.

1.4 Theme: Finding the Way

Throughout this thesis, metaphors of landscape, navigation and walking a path will be engaged. From age seven, following my first visit to Ludlow Youth Hostel and the beautiful rolling Shropshire hills from inner-city Birmingham, I have loved being in nature. This was the beginning of my life as a hill walker. I never tire of exploring, finding my bearings, discovering paths, getting lost, pausing, listening, sensing and connecting. As we journey together across a range of landscapes of consciousness, action and transformation (Dyson, 2007, p.36), I hope and trust that memories, experiences, reflection and discovery will unfold. Traversing my internal and external landscapes carries a warning to MIND THE GAP in Paper 2 (Appendix 16). The gaps contain pain, depression, anxiety and self-criticism, there are also dark chasms carved deep into the heart and body as a result of childhood loss and the lifelong loss of motherhood through childlessness and miscarriage. I have encountered these gaps and chasms in many ways; covering up, filling in, ignoring, diverting around or falling in. With compassion, I feel there is the possibility of finding refuge within the emptiness and pain, where I may rest, steady myself and feel unafraid.

After years of avoiding and repressing the pain in the gaps, I realised that not only do these strategies not work, they add suffering upon suffering. Therefore, I needed to learn what difference self-compassion would make in the process of facing pain and learning acceptance. As I began this process I was unsure as to whether I had the courage to contemplate the sources of pain, meaning, impact and what is needed in terms of change, but I was prepared to try. I had no concept of what these dark fearful spaces would be like if compassion filled them. What I did know was that without the faint sense of compassion that had already touched me I would not have been able to begin this journey, I would not have been able to bear it. There are other gaps within the story I am writing here, ones that I am very aware and protective of, stories that cannot be written down, protecting the living, the dead, the innocent, the guilty and the clueless. Make no mistake, I am no longer a powerless secret-keeper, I have the power to speak and equally have the power to choose silence.

To communicate the process of finding a way to face, accept and mend my brokenness, in Chapter 5, I have drawn upon a metaphor of the 500-year-old Japanese art of Kintsugi. In the philosophy of Kintsugi a broken item is not viewed as beyond repair and discarded, it is mended with gold. In creating such a beautiful repair it becomes even more precious and has a new lease of life. Rather than hiding brokenness, the unique golden lines make history and stories visible (Smith, 2017).

1.5 Intentions

Stage One of this Professional Doctorate comprised of three papers: Paper 1 (Appendix 15) explored key psychological and Buddhist voices in compassion research and implications of self-compassion for professional practice. Paper 2 (Appendix 16) was a pilot study of contemplative inquiry through autoethnography in relation to integration and authentic living. Paper 3 (Appendix 17) formed the research proposal for this thesis in which I argued that meaningful exploration into self-compassion requires immersion into inner life. My intentions in undertaking this Professional Doctorate research are to explore the cultivation of self-compassion from a first-person perspective; to deepen my understanding of the process, what enables, hinders and sustains development. I would like to see how beneficial self-compassion could be to my physical, psychological and relational wellbeing across all of my contexts. Finally, I am curious to discover the impact this work might have in terms of my Buddhist practice and vice versa.

Part 2. Mapping the Territory

Chapter 2 Theoretical Landscapes

2.1 Reasons for Exploring Self-compassion

How to kill a living thing

Neglect it
Criticise it to it's face
Say how it kills the light
Traps all the rubbish
Bores you with its green
Continually
Harden your heart
Then
Cut it down close
To the root as possible
Forget it
For a week or a month
Return with an axe
Split it with one blow
Insert a stone
To keep the wound wide open

By Nic Eochaidh (2002, p. 108)

To treat ourselves this way is to create deep suffering. Yet, this is how I treated myself, even when I was successful, it was even worse if I failed. Therefore, I worked very hard not to feel this harsh pain – too hard, driven by neurotic perfectionism (Hamacheck, 1978; Neff, 2003b) to the point of feeling worthless and burnt out. Outwardly invisible, this horrific storyline kept playing over and over in my life, inside my head and throughout my body. I needed it to cease or I would eventually stop and perhaps even come to a… Dead End.

This is why it is so important for me to explore and learn to cultivate self-compassion.

During a seven-day meditation retreat in 2009, I was struck by the extent of the pain, exhaustion, tears and despair of the psychologists and psychotherapists I encountered. For the first time I could see that it was not just me who felt this way, I felt relief, which was a change to the inadequacy and ambivalence I usually felt in the face of my own distress. We were in such need of the same care and compassion that we offered to clients. Inwardly I questioned how it was possible to be in a profession dedicated to the care of others where, in stark contrast, there seemed to be such a deficit of care for the practitioners; from themselves as well as within the organisations they worked for. It could be argued that this group was self-selecting, small and not representative, but as I investigated further, I found many colleagues who had similar experiences. This situation was again highlighted during a psychotherapy conference in 2010 when, in a room of approximately 50 healthcare professionals, only three meagre crumbs of examples of self-care were shared. It seemed to me that we had neither learned how to be kind and compassionate to ourselves nor was it a priority. A search of the research literature at this point revealed Neff's work on self-compassion, this was new to me and relatively new in the field of psychology. I had identified a gap in my professional practice and knowledge and was intrigued as to how the MSC approach could be of benefit. Engaging in the Professional Doctorate provided the opportunity to conduct research in this area through my personal and professional practice.

2.2 Defining Compassion and Self-compassion

Depending on the particular belief system in operation, the definition, source and application of compassion can all vary. The Oxford Dictionary definition is "sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others". The Church Latin origin comes from *compassio* or *compati*, which means "to suffer with" (Concise Oxford, 1990). The Buddhist view of compassion is that it is part of our true nature and stems from the desire that suffering be recognised and alleviated. The power of compassion arises from acknowledging and understanding suffering and the motivation to reduce it rather than share in it, "the quality of compassion is not a state of suffering" (Amaro, 2003). The Pali word for compassion is *Karuna* and this definition contains the elements of beneficial action and engagement. A description that recognises our individual and collective need for compassion is provided by Tenzin Gyatso, the XIVth Dalai Lama "The Buddhist interpretation is that genuine compassion is based on a clear acceptance or recognition that others, like oneself, want happiness and have the right to overcome suffering" (Gyatso, 1995, pp.62-63).

The Golden Rule places compassion at the heart of all major religions and philosophies, this is encapsulated in the Charter for Compassion (2015), (Appendix 2). According to Armstrong (2011): “Compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else” (p.6). It is, therefore, imperative that we learn to tend to our own suffering with compassion because only when we do this will we truly be able to respond in kind (Gyatso, 2011; Hanh, 2014).

Neff emphasised that self-compassion is not distinct from compassion, rather, it is compassion turned inward (Neff, 2003a, 2009a; Neff and Pommier, 2012). Self and others are not viewed as separate entities; therefore, any cultivation of compassion must include ourselves (Neff, 2004, 2008; Gilbert and Irons, 2005). Neff argued that self-compassion engenders a sense of connection rather than disconnection, which counters the perception that self-compassion is selfish. The definition of self-compassion that I will be using in this thesis is provided by Neff (2003a, 2003b), who posited that self-compassion is comprised of three dynamically interacting components: self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness, they are summarised as follows.

1. Self-kindness as opposed to self-criticism

Appreciation, kindness, warmth, and goodwill. Desire to love, care, alleviate suffering and create wellbeing for oneself.

2. Common humanity as opposed to self-isolation

Acceptance of being human (fallible, flawed, imperfect), that we all share trials and suffering in life and are, therefore, not alone.

3. Mindfulness as opposed to emotional entanglement or over identification

Balanced awareness of, and genuine concern for, one’s own distress and learning to tolerate this without avoidance or aversion, self-criticism or personalisation.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives

Two areas are covered in this literature review; first, the development of self-compassion research and second, the cultivation of self-compassion in relation to the wellbeing of psychologists. Keyword searches were: psychologist, self-compassion, burnout, and therapist wellbeing. I also searched for contemplative and Buddhist practice, autoethnography and first-person account research in relation to these keywords. The timeframe of the search was 1995 to 2017, the databases searched were: PsycINFO, CINAHL, MEDLINE, PubMed, Science Direct, British Library Ethos and ARRO. This review also drew from Neff's website (Neff, 2017), which lists a comprehensive number (442) of published scientific papers and book chapters. From these databases, 48 papers were selected, including 8 papers in relation to psychologists, plus 5 reviews (meta-analysis, general review and comparison studies with mindfulness interventions). The remaining papers were excluded because the areas of investigation were outside the scope of this thesis.

This review begins with two seminal papers by Neff (2003a, 2003b), who began researching self-compassion arising from a personal need to offer herself care and compassion (Neff, 2009a). Neff aimed to explore the psychological components and benefits of self-compassion; this was from a theoretical perspective because in 2003 there was very little research on self-compassion (two papers). The situation has since changed considerably; a search of self-compassion in the PsychINFO database resulted in 960 returns (19 June 2017).

Neff (2003a) drew on Eastern philosophy, using the Buddhist notion of self-compassion. She aligned the concept with Western Humanistic psychology, in particular Rogers' (1951) Person Centered approach involving unconditional positive regard and self-acceptance. Neff (2003a, 2003b) positioned self-compassion as an alternative to self-esteem because research indicated that self-esteem fostered a harsh self-critic, increased defensiveness and judgement of self and others, increased a sense of separateness and narcissistic tendencies (Swann, 1996; Harter, 1999). Neff argued that developing self-compassion could provide the benefits of high self-esteem but without the downsides and, through reducing fear and judgement, would provide the conditions to develop self-acceptance and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1968).

The literature suggested that whilst aspects of self-compassion are related to self-esteem, self-compassion is not linked to a sense of superiority or narcissism. Therefore, Neff proposed that self-compassion could be employed to understand how people can develop a healthy attitude to themselves (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Neff addressed misconceptions of self-compassion as weak or passive, emphasising that it is the opposite of self-pity, which fosters separateness and personalisation (over-identification), whereas self-compassion encourages acceptance, relatedness and shared experience. Neff argued that intrinsic motivation arises with self-compassion, which allows development of acceptance of personal shortcomings and willingness to change. This contrasts with extrinsic motivation, which is fear-based and can engender negative comparison, evaluation and judgement. Neff also proposed a relationship between self-compassion and emotional regulation and intelligence because of its potential role as an effective and positive coping strategy, thus providing a healthier response to difficult emotions.

Neff's second paper (2003b) sought to clarify components of self-compassion and their interrelatedness to distinguish it in theory from other emotional responses, such as pity, passivity and avoidance. She hypothesised that self-compassion would have a positive impact on emotional intelligence and regulation and lower anxiety and depression because it reduces harsh self-judgement and over-identification by taking a more balanced and less personal view. In order to provide empirical evidence for the construct and investigate correlations between self-compassion and benefits to psychological health, Neff designed a self-compassion scale (SCS) to refine and test the validity and reliability of the measure. A two-phase pilot was conducted with 68 students in small focus groups completing self-report questionnaires. Two larger studies (391 and 252 students) sought to establish reliability, validity and predictive capability of the SCS. This involved administering a range of measures (SCS, social desirability, self-criticism, connectedness, emotional intelligence, perfectionism, anxiety, depression, life satisfaction, self-esteem and true-self esteem, narcissism, rumination, thought-suppression and an emotional approach to coping). The sample was drawn from college educational psychology students in the United States of America (USA). A third study investigated construct validity comparing the SCS and self-esteem scores of 232 students from study 2 and a Buddhist group (43), via an email survey.

As predicted, self-compassion scores for Buddhists were significantly higher than the student sample and number of years as a practising Buddhist was a factor. The results demonstrated SCS could distinguish between different populations, self-compassion and self-esteem. Results indicated the SCS had good construct, content, convergent, discriminant validity and good test-retest reliability. As predicted, results showed significant positive correlations with social connectedness, life satisfaction, emotional regulation, clarity and processing. There were significant negative correlations with self-criticism, depression, anxiety, neurotic perfectionism, rumination and thought-suppression. The research highlighted differences in levels of self-compassion between men and women. Men had higher self-compassion scores than women, who had higher scores on self-judgement, over identification and isolation. However, these differences were not apparent in the Buddhist group comparative study, which suggests that Buddhist practices could have a particularly positive effect on the wellbeing of women.

With the emergence of mindfulness into the world of psychological wellbeing and clinical treatment in the 1980s, it has become an important and effective therapeutic development in the West, (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2005; Neff, 2004; Williams, et al., 2007). Neff highlighted that self-compassion has been overlooked (Neff, 2003a; Goetz, Keitner and Dimon-Thomas, 2010); she argued that whilst you cannot have one without the other, self-compassion “cannot be reduced to mindfulness” (2004, p.29). Mindfulness is an essential component of developing self-compassion, in terms of awareness, acceptance, being non-judgemental and emphasising interdependence rather than over-identification (Neff and Lamb, 2009). Research indicated that self-compassion has a stronger predictive capability in relation to life-satisfaction and wellbeing than mindfulness (Germer and Neff, 2013; Neff and Dahm, 2013). Mindfulness training raised self-compassion (by 19 per cent), whereas specific Mindful Self-compassion training (MSCT) raised self-compassion by 43 per cent (Neff and Germer, 2013).

Self-compassion is associated with healthy psychological functioning, lower levels of anxiety and depression and greater adaptive coping with perceived weaknesses or failings (Neff, 2004; Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007; Neff, 2008). Leary, et al. (2007) found, across five different quantitative studies, that higher self-compassion indicates better coping abilities and emotional regulation, buffers negative feelings and increases acceptance of responsibility for mistakes and failings.

They also found evidence that people with higher self-compassion were more realistic in appraising themselves whereas people with low self-compassion made more negative comparisons and undervalued their performance. Furthermore, rather than being egocentric or narcissistic, as can be the case with self-esteem, findings suggest that self-compassion reduces absorbed self-focus (personalisation) and fosters the ability to turn towards one's own suffering. It also brings a sense of connection rather than disconnection through seeing the context and the universality of the experience (Gilbert and Irons, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007; Neff, 2008).

From the literature I began to understand how, through reducing the impact of the inner-critic, self-compassion could provide a sense of emotional safety, "motivation would not stem from the need to escape harsh self-criticism, but from the compassionate desire to create health and wellbeing for oneself" (Neff, 2004, p.30). Research has shown that developing self-compassion raises awareness of, and genuine concern for, one's own distress and an ability to tolerate this without self-criticism or judgment. In addition to increasing motivation, self-compassion is also positively correlated with creativity and resilience (Neff, 2004; Gilbert, 2005; Germer, 2009; Neff and Lamb, 2009; Germer and Siegel, 2012).

Self-compassion was considered from evolutionary and attachment perspectives by Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude (2007); they highlighted how self-compassion soothing practices activates the mammalian care system and reduces activity of the fear system in the brain. This paper introduced me to the United Kingdon (UK) based work of Professor Paul Gilbert and colleagues who have made significant contributions to clinical and compassion fields through investigating the effect of bringing kindness and compassion into areas of clinical work including depression, anxiety, shame and self-attacking-based disorders (Gilbert, 1989, 2000, 2005; Gilbert and Irons, 2005; Gilbert and Proctor, 2006).

Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT), was developed by Gilbert (2009) which is based on Social Mentality Theory (Gilbert, 2000, 2005). This holds the premise that different social interactions activate different emotional and motivational systems in the brain. Gilbert takes an evolutionary and neurophysiological approach that encompasses the biopsychosocial model. The work also draws on attachment theory and Buddhist teachings, primarily from the Tibetan tradition. CFT utilises a variety of techniques comparable to MSC including visual imagery, compassionate letter writing, evoking a loving compassionate inner dialogue and mindfulness.

Similar to Neff's work, Gilbert's research emphasises the detrimental effect of harsh self-criticism. He highlights factors that maintain the self-critic such as beliefs that it helps, keeps one safe and has one's best interests at heart (Gilbert and Procter, 2006; Gilbert, et al., 2006, 2012). Gilbert's work has developed understanding of neurological processes whereby the presence of compassion activates emotion regulation systems. Research on CFT as an intervention has shown that it can turn down the threat system and activate the soothing system (Gilbert, 2005). In chronic depression, CFT has been found to reduce shame and self-criticism (Gilbert and Proctor, 2006) and provide improved immune system function (Pace, et al., 2009). The primary focus of CFT is on clinical intervention and I completed training in CFT in 2010 in order to be able to apply this approach in my clinical setting. However, it was not until the emergence of MSC research and training, that I recognised personal relevance and could connect with compassion as a practice that was commensurate with my Buddhist practice rather than as a clinical treatment.

Early research by Neff was instrumental in establishing the construct of self-compassion. It identified potential benefits for psychological wellbeing and opened up future research directions into the function of self-compassion as well as educational and clinical applications. However, in these early stages it was unclear how self-compassion is developed in practice. From 2011 Neff and Germer collaborated to develop an eight-week MSCT programme for general and clinical use. Neff and Germer (2013) conducted a pilot study of 21 adults to investigate changes following MSC training and a random controlled trial with a treatment group (N=25) and waiting list control group (N=27). Results from both the pilot study and treatment group showed significant increases in self-compassion, mindfulness and wellbeing. These results were sustained when participants were re-tested, 6 and 12 months later. Research findings demonstrated that self-compassion is teachable and beneficial effects are maintained, with the aspect of life satisfaction increasing beyond the one-year point (Germer and Neff, 2013).

I turn now to secondary sources in the form of reviews of self-compassion research. Goetz, Keitner and Dimon-Thomas (2010) reviewed compassion literature from an evolutionary perspective; they found empirical support for compassion as an evolved emotion that can be developed, that is attuned to suffering and shifts focus from the individual to others. Their review positioned sympathy, empathy and pity as part of "an emotion family of compassion related states" (p.2) with compassion and sympathy being close relations.

They made a distinction between three levels of analysis involved in compassion: state/emotion, mood/sentiment and trait. The main shortcomings in this review is the omission of research by Gilbert and colleagues and identifying pity as part compassion; this is counter to Buddhist teachings and Neff's psychological perspective because pity is associated with a sense of separateness (e.g. poor them) and self-absorption (Neff, 2003a). Barnard and Curry (2011) conducted a review of research into the conceptualisation, correlations and interventions of self-compassion. They found a consistent relationship between wellbeing and the efficacy of self-compassion as an intervention. Barnard and Curry recommended further empirical research into construct validity and measurement, clarification of the relationship between the three factors of self-compassion, using a more diverse sample and, rather than relying on self-report measures, employing other approaches to understand the process of self-compassion, such as experience sampling. A meta-analysis of 14 peer-reviewed papers on self-compassion and psychopathology was conducted by MacBeth and Gumley (2012). They found evidence of a strong association between high levels of self-compassion and good mental health (lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress). They recommended longitudinal research with more diverse populations to further establish this association and for additional research to better understand the effect and interactions of the components of self-compassion. They also argued that because of an over reliance on self-reports, using interview-based measures would enrich data and make the research more robust.

Zessin, Dickhauser and Garbade, (2015) reviewed 65 quantitative papers in relation to self-compassion and wellbeing, and made a distinction between cognitive, affective and psychological forms of wellbeing. They found that self-compassion had a strong effect of on psychological wellbeing, and medium to lesser effects on cognitive and positive affective wellbeing. They advocated further research into self-compassion and the distinctive forms of wellbeing. Finally, Kirby (2016) conducted an overview of eight compassion-based interventions, with specific focus on Random Controlled Trials. Kirby found evidence of psychological benefits across compassion approaches but emphasised that the evidence base needs to be further developed to establish efficacy in clinical and non-clinical populations. One of Kirby's recommendations was to include more qualitative research on experiences of enabling factors and barriers. Since 2003, self-compassion research has moved into many areas ranging from clinical, academic, gender and sexuality, cultural, and across the lifespan from adolescent, mid-life and into old-age. However, quantitative research has dominated and it is only in the last few years qualitative data has begun to emerge (Reyes, 2012).

Other research literature pertinent to this thesis relates to self-compassion and the wellbeing of psychologists, in particular from a qualitative perspective. There are a range of publications on self-care, resilience and compassion fatigue and burnout for psychotherapists, physicians and health and social care workers (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter 2001; Rothschild, 2006; Wicks, 2008; Ying, 2009; Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2011; Adams, 2014). However, with the exception of Desmond (2016), there is little or no mention of self-compassion in these publications. Maslach and Leiter (2016) defined burnout as “an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment” (p.103). A review by Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001), described how origins of research on burnout, which emerged in the 1970s, began in healthcare settings. I then realised that in ten years of training to become a Chartered psychologist, I had never been taught about burnout, occupational hazards or self-care. I checked my core training manuals (Woolfe and Dryden, 1996; Bor and Watts, 1999), and did not find anything on these issues and definitely no mention of compassion. These are startling omissions considering the potential consequences of occupational hazards, which range from reduced cognitive, emotional and physical functioning, increases in depression, anxiety and stress levels to burnout and suicide (Zur, 1994; Shapiro, et al., 2005; Shapiro, Brown and Biegel, 2007; Finlay-Jones, Rees and Kane, 2015; Simms, 2017).

Furthermore, since 2015, my professional body, the British Psychological Society (BPS), have not offered any courses on burnout or self-care in their Professional Development. There has only been one workshop on stress and the first self-compassion training was the one I delivered in June 2016 (Appendix 3). Psychologist wellbeing is not even listed as a workshop topic (BPS, 2017). The impact of therapeutic work on practitioners does not appear to be acknowledged or addressed either professionally or organisationally (Walsh and Cormack, 1994), and yet I know from my own experience, and that of other colleagues, there is a lot of suffering in silence. It is unclear whether this absence is due to the assumption that because psychologists teach wellness and self-care, they will automatically do it for themselves, or that the benefits of the work, of which there are many, outweigh the costs, or that the stigma of being a wounded healer silences many practitioners. The ethic of care must not only apply to our clients, practitioners need to be included too. Such an omission is, I would argue, unsafe and unethical.

Figley (2002) undertook research on compassion fatigue, he highlighted that lack of self-care and burnout is common in the mental health field which, unfortunately, 15 years later, remains an under researched area of concern. However, Klimecki and Singer (2012) made an important discovery; they found, rather than compassion fatigue, it was empathy fatigue that resulted in burnout. Ricard (2013) argued that empathy fatigue arises from over-identifying with suffering, which results in physical and emotional exhaustion. The presence of compassion, however, engenders a willingness to respond to suffering, offer comfort and care and fosters positive emotion, greater resilience and courage. Compassion is, therefore, a more sustaining and effective antidote to empathy burnout (Klimecki, Ricard and Singer, 2013; Singer and Klimecki, 2014). These findings have significant implications for therapeutic training where emphasis is placed on empathy. Furthermore, Bloom (2016) highlighted that whilst there are benefits and advantages to empathy, research on the limitations of sentimental or over emotional empathy and the potential dangers of empathetic distress and bias need to be borne in mind.

I found very little research in terms of the development of self-compassion for the practitioner psychologist (Shapiro, et al., 2005). Shapiro, Brown and Biegel, (2007) highlighted occupational hazards that can be encountered by therapists. They conducted cohort-controlled research with 83 students on a Masters counselling psychology course and found that students who received Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction training showed an increase in awareness, attention and self-compassion. They argued that self-care, specifically mindfulness and self-compassion, should be part of pre and post-qualification training for mental health professionals. An Internet survey of 350 counselling psychology students by Kyeong (2013), indicated that higher levels of self-compassion acted as moderators between burnout, depression and psychological wellness. These findings supported existing research that developing self-compassion is beneficial for mental health and promotes positive affect. A review of the literature in relation to self-compassion and rehabilitation counsellors by Stuntzner (2014) emphasised the need to understand barriers to developing self-compassion, such as high levels of negative emotions (anger, judgement, clinging and isolation). Stuntzner recommended acknowledgement of these barriers or mind states in order to reduce their effect and for practitioners to personally engage in self-compassion training so that they can reflect on their practice and better communicate to clients how to develop it.

A literature review on self-compassion, mindfulness, empathy and the benefits of mindfulness training to healthcare professionals was carried out by Raab (2014). She found that mindfulness and self-compassion was beneficial to both healthcare professionals and clients and supported existing recommendations that mindfulness and self-compassion be incorporated into training. However, there were two shortcomings in this review, first, the focus was primarily on Figley's (2002) view of compassion fatigue, with no reference to the work of Klimecki and Singer (2012), discussed previously. Second, the MSC training that Neff and Germer began in 2012 was not included and this would have provided a more complete picture of the field.

The impact of practising self-compassion on trainee counsellors was explored by Patsiopolous and Buchanan (2011) using interviews and narrative inquiry. Their findings emphasised the benefits of self-care, self-compassion and the need to formally integrate self-compassion into training. This was traditional qualitative research told in the third-person with voices of participants being relayed by the researcher. A rare first-person narrative inquiry was provided by Maris (2009) who explored her experience of developing mindfulness training (personally and in counsellor training). This paper demonstrated the effectiveness of integrating mindfulness and self-care activity into counsellor training, through reducing fear, increasing tolerance and improving quality of presence, which benefited both therapist and client.

There are several areas worthy of critique in relation to the papers in this review, despite burgeoning research in the field of self-compassion, with the exception of the work of Gilbert and colleagues in the UK, the vast majority remains USA-based. The population used for establishing the SCS scale was predominantly from an undergraduate student population, therefore, a broader age range, inclusion of a clinical population and psychological practitioners would be beneficial. The field is heavily biased towards quantitative methodology with an over reliance on self-report questionnaires and scales, correlational studies and Internet and email surveys. Limitations of self-report scales are widely acknowledged yet still commonly used, in particular, they depend on the respondent's ability to self-reflect and have a fine-tuned level of awareness, additionally there is the tendency to provide socially acceptable answers. Attempts to mitigate against these shortcomings have included using a battery of clinical measures but here there is danger of a fatigue effect with some studies using up to ten different measures numbering hundreds of questions.

There is little qualitative or longitudinal research to investigate long-term effects of MSC training. Qualitative research conducted alongside quantitative research could have elucidated questions of process and function at an earlier stage. This is demonstrated by Germer and Neff (2013) in their phenomenological approach with a case study of 'Brian'. The research illuminated the process of developing self-compassion, how practices were embodied and adapted and how wellbeing continued a year after completing MSC training. This phenomenological account is pertinent to the real-life experience of developing self-compassion, it is an encouragement to practice by showing what can realistically be attained rather than trying, and failing, to live up to an ideal. The paper was, however, written in the third-person so the opportunity to hear Brian's voice was limited. In the compassion field there are a few examples of the power of personal story in autobiographical contributions by Germer (2009), Neff (2011b), Gilbert and Choden (2013) and recently in Parry (2017). However, even though McIlveen (2008) argued for the potential of autoethnography in methodology and psychological practice research, I have been unable to find any first-person, autoethnographical accounts detailing the process of developing self-compassion in relation to psychologist wellbeing and specifically in my field of Counselling Psychology. I will be addressing this gap in the research through my autoethnographical approach to this thesis.

In relation to Buddhist teachings, which underpin the concept of self-compassion, neither of Neff's 2003 papers clearly explains the Buddhist origins or how it is developed in the Buddhist population. Neff's work draws on the writings of the eminent Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh (1976, 1997) and respected Western Buddhist teachers and practitioners (Goldstein and Kornfield, 1987; Gunaratana, 1993; Kornfield, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Salzberg, 1997). Whilst these are highly regarded and scholarly sources, there is no reference to Buddhist texts. As Reyes (2012) argued below, drawing directly on these texts would enrich understanding of the practice of self-compassion.

> Although self-compassion as a motivating factor in human behaviour is a relatively new area of research in the social sciences, Buddhist philosophy has explored the concept of self-compassion for centuries. For this reason, Buddhist sutras translated into English and scholarly Buddhist texts are important source materials on self-compassion (p.82).

Furthermore, rather than solely relying on traditional research methodologies, Ekman, et al., (2005) argued that Buddhist practices could offer a methodological in-road to "help individuals report on their own internal experiences, and such practices might thereby provide crucial data that is much more detailed" (p.62). This is where I believe the Buddhist contemplative practices I will engage in throughout this thesis, alongside a first-person autoethnographical approach will enable rich material from inner experience to emerge. There are critics who argue that a subjective phenomenological approach is not testable, generalisable, systematic or transparent (Dennett, 2001). My response to these criticisms is to emphasise that Buddhist practice, contemplative inquiry and autoethnography take empirical and systematic approaches. They involve analytical observation and critical reflection, both of which bring rigour and trustworthiness to the research (Chang, 2008; Wallace, 2012; Dunne, 2013). Therefore, I propose that the combination of contemplative practice and a first-person methodological approach fills a gap in the research and can make a valuable contribution to the field.

2.4 Research Rationale and Questions

My review of the literature has identified a number of gaps in knowledge and professional practice, in particular, a lack of self-compassion training for psychologists. There are also methodological gaps in terms of first-person research and contemplative practice. Therefore, my aims, detailed below, are to explore, inquire, understand, practise and integrate self-compassion into personal and professional practice.

- Deepen understanding of the process and impact of self-compassion in relation to my physical, psychological, relational and spiritual wellbeing.
- Understand how self-compassion enables my professional self-care and resilience and develop this work into providing training for therapeutic practitioners to support wellbeing throughout training and into Continuing Professional Development (CPD).
- Explore the role of self-compassion in responding to contemporary issues.
- Consider the relationship between practical theology and Buddhist theology in terms of methodology and praxis.

My Research Questions are:

- How is self-compassion developed and sustained and what are the barriers?
- What does it mean to be a self-compassionate practitioner?

The theoretical perspectives I have considered have guided my research design and I intend to develop a deeper understanding of self-compassion through a systematic investigation of internal and external processes from a first-person perspective. Research will be conducted through a methodology of autoethnography, contemplative practice, Buddhist inquiry, MSC practice and critical reflection, which is detailed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Signposts

3.1 Ethical Considerations

Before discussing my methodological approach, I would like to begin with ethical considerations. These are fundamental both personally and professionally; an ethical vein runs deep through this research, from inception to completion and dissemination. Compassion is an ethical response, with the intention of reducing suffering and harm to self, all sentient beings and the Earth. As a psychologist, I adhere to an ethical code of practice, which entails maintaining four principles: respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. The principles safeguard clients and research participants through ensuring privacy, consent, avoidance of harm and risk to physical and mental wellbeing. In all dealings, emphasis is placed on maintaining truthfulness, accuracy, fairness and boundaries (BPS, 2009a).

Ethics lies at the heart of Buddhism, the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold Path are ethical imperatives to recognise, understand and end suffering (Appendix 4). Following the Buddhist path means cultivating skilful views, speech, intention, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration (Hanh, 1998; Keown, 2005). All of which, I would argue, are very relevant to all research activity. Wallace (2012) stated that ethics applies to all areas of life, including psychological, spiritual, social and environmental aspects. Furthermore, Gyatso (2011) emphasised that “Living ethically requires not only the conscious adoption of an ethical outlook but also a commitment to developing and applying inner values in our daily lives” (p.103).

Ethical issues of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent (Appendix 5) and awareness of power dynamics are followed in order to protect me as well as the constellation of family, friends, colleagues, clients and students involved in my story. For me, the ethic of care is also concerned with the impact of my private world being made public (Wall, 2008). This required awareness throughout of my areas of personal and professional vulnerability, which could be ignited through the telling of my story and has resulted in a confidentiality clause with a two-year embargo being placed on the thesis. To perpetuate self-harm during the writing of this thesis would be unethical and the antithesis of self-compassion, “Professional etiquette uniformly concurs that no one deserves harm or embarrassment as a result of insensitive research practices” (Christians, 2005, p.145).

To meet these ethical needs I have support from my partner, friends, spiritual teacher, academic supervisors and a personal therapist (Muncey, 2010). Particularly relevant to autoethnographic research is relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), which emphasises that a personal story is populated with others who need to be considered in terms of potential impact arising from the storytelling (Chang, 2008; Wall 2008). Although the ethics of truth, accuracy and trustworthiness were followed as closely as possible, particular circumstances and characters within my story have been altered or omitted to protect all concerned. Ultimately, I believe that all research activity needs to fall within an "epistemology of love" (Zajonic, 2009, p.179), which involves respect, gentleness, intimacy, humility and care.

3.2 Research Methodology

> Obviously, it is not enough for us simply to think about how nice compassion is! We need to make a concerted effort to develop it; we must use all the events of our daily life to transform our thoughts and behavior (Gyatso, 2012).

My aim was to explore the cultivation of self-compassion within my personal and professional contexts across a timespan of one-year. I needed to understand self-compassion from the inside out, therefore, I chose a first-person autoethnographical approach because I felt that this was the best approach to access, reflect on, make sense of and communicate my experiences. Taking this perspective, described by Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2015) as an "epistemology of insiderness" (p.30) enabled my experience to be explored in a way that positivist and other traditional qualitative approaches could not access from the outside. My reflections and experiences were captured in a journal format, which included material from past diaries, meditation and retreat journals, poetry and photography. The research was conducted through my contemplative practice, which is underpinned by Buddhist teachings, principally from the Theravada tradition. This comprises contemplative Buddhist inquiry, meditation, mindfulness and MSC practices alongside critical reflective practice. The process entails awareness of, and inquiry into, cognitions, emotions, felt-sense and embodiment of experience (Etherington, 2004). The intention was to deepen awareness, in-action and on-action (Schön, 1991), and more clearly understand the internal and external processes that can enable and inhibit self-compassion.

My epistemological position is that reality and relations are transactional, subjective and intersubjective, where values and meaning are co-constructed. Ontologically, I take a relativist view that knowledge exists in relation to society, culture and historical events, rather than as an absolute truth (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Robson, 2011). As a social and systemic psychologist, my paradigm of choice, which underpins my epistemological and ontological position, is constructivist (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Constructivism considers that research takes place in a socially constructed world with knowledge being transactional. I support the view, shared in Buddhism and constructivism, that there is no objective reality, it is a dynamic construction with a person both constructing and being constructed by events (McWilliams, 2010).

As a Chartered Counselling Psychologist, I found an individualistic approach too narrow to encompass the messy and complex worlds I encountered, within me and with clients. I found stronger personal and professional affiliation with social constructivism, which emphasises "multiple influences, multiple voices… to engage with others as well as resist and change our social and cultural heritage" (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996, p.265). Furthermore, constructivists view a sense of identity, a 'self', as being conditioned, relative, dependent on our social relations, where we are situated geographically, culturally, economically and on our ethnicity and gender (Gergen, 1991). This perspective aligns with Buddhist teachings, that not only are self and identity constructions, they are impermanent, there is no true or fixed self (Sumedho, 2010). Constructivism emphasises the interdependent nature of our existence and knowledge and Buddhist philosophy extends this view, stating that all living organisms (humans, animals, environment) are interdependent (Hanh, 1998; Gyatso, 2011). Neff's (2003a) definition of self-compassion includes common humanity, which recognises shared experiences, emotions, relations, needs and behaviour. I believe we are all interdependent and at the heart of every living being is the need to love, be loved and free of suffering. A constructivist approach fits with my personal, professional and Buddhist philosophies and it is the most appropriate approach for my research into subjective experience. My postmodernist position is in contrast with the positivist approach, which aims to reveal the 'truth', with the perceiver objectively observing reality directly; Guba and Lincoln (2005) describe this as naive realism. Constructivist and Buddhist perspectives view truth as relative, a convention (McWilliams, 2010), they are concerned with how meaning is constructed and in challenging normative assumptions and received wisdom.

I fit into the role of a “new-paradigm inquirer… increasingly concerned with the single experience, the individual crisis, the epiphany or moment of discovery, with that most powerful of all threats to conventional objectivity, feeling and emotion” (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p.205).

A qualitative methodology has been chosen because it provides an opportunity to explore the richness of experience and meaning. It is able to account for the subjective, representational and contextual nature of experience (Chase, 2005). This methodology is humanistic and includes a critical perspective, recognising that knowledge is embedded in power relations as well as being shaped by culture, ethnicity and gender. McIlveen (2008) emphasised the interconnected and dynamic relationship between “theory-research-practice-person” (p.5), this is pertinent in relation to the process of cultivating self-compassion in personal and professional contexts but it is also relevant to my social, political and environmental activism where power imbalance and injustice needs to be recognised, challenged and changed. I believe that as well as being evocative and illuminative, research needs to offer the possibility for challenging the status quo, dominant discourses and effecting change and transformation. For this research, emphasis is on viability rather than the traditional research concept of validity (Raskin, 2002) and follows the principles of authenticity and trustworthiness. Guba and Lincoln (2005) proposed criteria for authenticity as follows: fairness (ability of research to be inclusive and give voice to those that are marginalised), ontological and educative authenticity (increasing both individual and group awareness), catalytic and tactical authenticity thus enabling individual and collective action and change (Morrow, 2005). Critical reflexivity is integral to the whole process of this research; the critiques, context and transparency of reflexivity provide rigour and trustworthiness to the work (Etherington, 2004; Swinton and Mowatt, 2006).

The research sample comprised of one person, namely me, the primary source of self-reflective material was from my experiences. The research design was inductive in order to enable exploration and development of understanding of the process of cultivating self-compassion as it unfolded. This allowed a dynamic movement from detailed observation and inquiry of internal experience to looking outward, taking an observer position to explore and investigate experience in terms of impact, meaning and change within different contexts (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The areas of focus were multidimensional encompassing personal, professional and theological contexts. Levels of investigation were interpersonal as well as intrapersonal because alongside me there are many participants in the co-creation of my story (Chang, 2008).

3.3 A First-Person Approach

> Objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p.208).

This research is written in the first-person, it would be incongruent to value and investigate my own experience and then write as an objective observer, speaking about myself in the third-person. Adopting a first-person approach aligns with my research philosophy and it is the most appropriate way of addressing the research questions and navigate through the multidimensional nature of inquiry. Writing from a personal position brings particular responsibility and accountability in terms of transparency and authenticity in the act of honouring and telling personal reality or truth (Dyson, 2007).

The first-person approach is commensurate with Buddhist teachings, which emphasise contemplating direct experience through deep listening and investigation in order to see through biases, mental habits and delusions. It does not advocate depending on someone else's experience, imposing your own view on others or speaking for another. A first-person methodology or "inner empiricism" (Ó Nuallain, 2006, p.30) enables a systematic exploration of inner experience and it has much to contribute to research findings emanating from "outer empiricism" (p.30). Rather than sitting in opposition, a first-person approach offers a meaningful and productive relationship with the dominant paradigms of traditional science through informing and illuminating existing third-party approaches and thus contributing to our understanding of consciousness (Varela and Shear, 1999; Wallace, 2002; Watson, 2009). I support the work of the Mind and Life Institute and in my own small way, through the first-person approach I have taken, share their aims to:

> Foster interdisciplinary dialogue between Western science, philosophy, humanities, and contemplative traditions, supporting the integration of first-person inquiry through meditation and other contemplative practices into traditional scientific methodology (Mind and Life, 2014).

3.4 Autoethnography

Following my decision to write in the first person, I chose evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 2000; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Muncey, 2010) because I believe it is the most appropriate way to explore deeply and better understand the complexity, contexts and meaning of human experience (Wall, 2006). I considered other qualitative approaches, such as action research, case study and narrative inquiry. I found that autoethnography shares some features of each of these approaches; indeed, autoethnography has been described as individual action research (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Wall, 2006). However, action research tends to involve participants rather than the researcher themselves, with focus on improving practice and problem-solving rather than exploring dynamic processes between practice, personal and professional change. Whilst autoethnographies are compared to case studies, and both suffer from similar criticisms such as bias, subjectivity and external validity, case studies tend to be bounded in relation to specific subject matter and focus is on the case or participant rather than the researcher (Stake, 2000; White, Drew and Hay, 2009).

With a narrative inquiry approach, emphasis is placed on the sources and analysis of the narrative itself (Trahar, 2009), rather than focussing on critical reflection of my own personal story or narrative within a particular culture. I am writing within the cultural landscape of being female, white, western, a psychologist and a Buddhist. Autoethnography is able to encompass individual experience as well as social, historical, cultural and political contexts (Muncey, 2006, 2010). This approach is commensurate with my philosophical position as a social and systemic psychologist because I believe that we are situated in, and shaped by, all of these aspects. My position also draws from a critical-ideological paradigm, described by McIlveen, (2008) “Autoethnographers are avowedly transparent in the expression of their values and personal concerns, with critical-ideological adherents acknowledging their ideological stance in writing out their experiences and transformative intentions” (pp.3-4).

Whilst I resonated with autoethnography, I initially felt confused by it in terms of form and method. Taking this approach elicited a need to “scurry[ing] for paradigmatic comfort zones” (McKenzie, 2006, p.235), whilst at the same time heeding McKenzie’s dramatic warning: “Wrap your autoethnography in the research paper of positivist science, and you have sold your soul to the devil” (p.235).

The process of producing an autoethnographical account was detailed by Wall (2006). Her paper reflected my inspiration, confusion and normalised my uncertainty and anxiety. In sharing the process, challenges, ethical considerations, emergence of reflection and illumination, Wall's paper acted as a compass bearing that helped me orientate myself. Working autoethnographically allows a different way of knowing and sharing personal experience. This methodology provides analytical investigation of what arises, which aligns with my psychology and Buddhist practice, and enables meaningful action that moves beyond theory into praxis, as stated by Guba and Lincoln (2005) "action on research results as a meaningful and important outcome of inquiry process" (p.201).

An autoethnographic account allows silenced and marginalised voices to be heard and made visible (Muncey, 2006). This relates to my experience of marginalisation and identity crisis through childlessness. In the light of discovering autoethnography, if I were designing my Masters thesis now on the Exploration of Long-term Unexplained Infertility, I would write it very differently. My voice would run right alongside those of my participants rather than be reduced to a few token paragraphs of description. The importance of this approach is captured by Wall (2006).

> I find that the relentless nudging of autoethnography against the world of traditional science holds wonderful, symbolic, emancipatory promise. It says that what I know matters. How much more promise could it hold for people far more marginalized than I? (p.3).

Taking an autoethnographic approach will enable me to make intimate contact with my experience and meaning-making within multiple contexts as I engage in the theory and application of MSC (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015). This methodology provides the freedom to engage in a variety of approaches and perspectives that resonate with my personal, professional and Buddhist life. Particularly relevant is Ellis's (1999) description of "He*art*ful Autoethnography", which "examines how human experience is endowed with meaning; is concerned with moral, ethical, and political consequences; encourages compassion and empathy" (p.669). This perspective links with Kabat-Zinn's (1990, 2005) description of mindfulness as heartfulness and similarly to the open-heartedness of self-compassion described by Neff (2011b).

Criticisms of autoethnography include being too introspective, self-indulgent, biased and not generalisable (Dennett, 2001; Holt, 2008; Tolich, 2010). Indeed, in some quarters it does not even have the “status of proper research” (Sparkes, 2000, p.22). Such criticisms do not consider the argument that “Autoethnographic texts point out not only the necessity of narrative in our world but also the power of narrative to reveal and revise that world” (Holman Jones, 2005, p.767). Neither do they value or recognise the contribution of relevant experience and expertise of the writer. I would also argue that it is unreasonable to accuse a biographical account of being out of context or in a social vacuum because even a single, lone voice is socially constructed and embedded in context. In response to criticisms, Chang (2008) proposed five criteria to ensure rigour: 1) a social and cultural context, 2) analytic reflexivity, 3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, 4) clear links with theory and practice and 5) data collection and analysis to be transparent. Questions to ascertain value in a story, proposed by Ellis (2000) are also pertinent: Can the author legitimately make these claims for their story? Did the author learn anything new about themselves? Will this story help others cope with or better understand their worlds? As long as my work follows these criteria, is disciplined, truthful and transparent, I can remain rigorous methodologically and still honour my experience. My premise is founded on recognition of commonality wherein my personal experiences can resonate with a reader and consequently invite their own engagement and reflection. This position is supported by Wall (2006) who states, “I have lived long enough to have learned that when I am thinking something, I know someone else is, too…” (p.10). This speaks to the interconnectedness of inner experiences, relatedness and influence of the society, culture and environments we inhabit.

Autoethnography provides the rigour of the ethnographic method, the power of narrative research and the richness of social, cultural, political and historical contexts (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2009). It offers a creative framework and can provide a transparent process with in-depth, systematic and theoretical analysis of material (Muncey, 2010). All of which gives access to multidimensional worlds (inner and outer) and allows an interweaving of personal and transpersonal experience (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Anderson, 2006). Autoethnographic methodology will allow me to capture, reflect, analyse rich field material and share my experiences in the most viable and direct way. The methods that underpin my autoethnographic approach are a) Buddhist meditation and inquiry, b) MSC practice and inquiry, c) critical reflexivity and d) journaling. All these contemplative activities are integral in exploring my cultivation of self-compassion.

3.5 Contemplative Practice

Contemplative practices in Eastern and Western spiritual traditions “have figured prominently in religious, philosophical, and humanistic traditions since antiquity” (Davidson and Dahl, 2017, p.121). Definitions of contemplation include the Latin *contemplari*, which denotes a place for observation, it also means to survey, regard, reflect and intend (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1990). A description of contemplative practice is offered by Duerr (2004) as “A practice undertaken with the intention to quiet the mind and to cultivate a personal capacity for deep concentration, presence, and awareness. Ideally, the insights that arise from the mind, body, and heart in this contemplative state can be applied to one’s everyday life” (p.37).

In relation to my research methodology, Farb et al., (2015) define contemplative practice as comprising of “traditions of first-person reflection upon or cultivation of specific modes of experience” (p.3). The following definition highlights the central place of contemplative practice in relation to first-person research and autoethnography. I select this definition because it conveys the power and pragmatics of contemplative practice to develop wellbeing transform and challenge the status quo both internally and externally. It is a definition that is accessible to people of all faiths and none and it also emphasizes that practice can take place amidst the noise and activity of real life as well as in solitude.

> Contemplative Practices cultivate a critical, first-person focus, sometimes with direct experience as the object, while at other times concentrating on complex ideas or situations. Incorporated into daily life, they act as a reminder to connect to what we find most meaningful… Contemplative practices are practical, radical, and transformative, developing capacities for deep concentration and quieting the mind in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life (Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2015).

Contemplative practices are present across a range of belief systems including Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam and a wide variety of activities can be involved such as prayer, meditation, chanting, music, yogic practices and shamanism, to name just a few. (Plante, 2010), for the purposes of this thesis I will be focussing on a Buddhist perspective.

Within a Buddhist context, Wallace (2012) states that contemplative practice involves commitment to developing clarity, awareness, concentration, observation and insight into the true nature of mind and all phenomena. The main purposes are to calm and center the mind in order to develop clear understanding of the causes and effects of suffering and cultivate compassionate qualities of mind and wise action so that suffering can be responded to in the most skilful way. Contemplative practice is a potent and fluid process that involves dedication to formal meditation in solitude, stillness and silence. Such deliberate and sustained practice can then nourish and support a wide range of contemplative activities such as mantra, reading, writing, movement (walking, yoga and dance), and relational and compassionate action. Zajonic (2009) emphasises that we need to engage in deep contemplative practice and inquiry with love, humility and reverence in order to cultivate the wisdom and insight needed to be fully active and effective in our outer lives as well as maintaining a flourishing inner life.

Interest and research by the scientific community on the benefits of contemplative practice has intensified over recent years and application in clinical settings has grown significantly (Plante, 2010). Through the growth of Mindfulness based approaches, there has also been increased engagement in contemplative practices in secular settings such as business and education as well as in the therapeutic contexts of psychology and psychotherapy (Ekman, et al., 2005). Mindfulness is an important part of Buddhist teachings and contemplative practice; it engenders an attentive and clear presence of mind. The Pali word for Mindfulness is *satipatthana*: *sati* means to remember or recall, and *patthana* refers to awareness, steadfastness and deep observation (Thera, 1998; Analayo, 2004; Amaro 2015).

Cultivating a quality of presence and deepening awareness through contemplative practice has been found to play a part in developing emotional regulation, well-being and connectedness (Neff and Germer, 2013). It cultivates development of meaning and intentionality and, as I will explore in Chapter 4, is an important part of theological reflection (Ault, 2013; Wessels, 2015). Contemplative practice can provide a space for inspiration and renewal, as I will show in Chapter 7. It also supports the process of writing an autoethnography because it offers space for self-exploration and an opportunity for transformation. As argued by Blanton (2007) “contemplation involves letting go of one’s definition of self. In silence, a new sense of self emerges, a self that is larger than what one knew oneself to be” (p. 215), this process enables new stories to emerge and be told.

Contemplative practice is integral in this research because it can encompass many aspects of my personal and professional practices. I was inspired by the work of Zajonic (2009) who explored contemplative practice and inquiry through meditation and by Duerr (2002, 2004) who, using the metaphor of a tree, illustrated practices that connect with each other and branch out. Zajonic and Duerr's work provide me with a framework for exploring and integrating my contemplative practices and offer a way of envisioning a Buddhist practical theology; this is illustrated and discussed in Chapter 4. One aspect of my contemplative practice, that is central to the process of exploring self-compassion, is Buddhist inquiry and I will detail this in the next section.

3.5.1 Buddhist Contemplative Inquiry: A Radical Reflection

3.1 Changing perspective: from narrow view to multiple dimensions

Buddhist contemplative inquiry (shortened to Buddhist inquiry) is a science of the mind that provides the opportunity to reveal multiple dimensions, as shown in the installation above. It involves a process of interiority, empirical rigour and ethics that encourages scepticism and develops awareness, investigation and understanding into the nature of the reality of mental and physical phenomena (Dunne, 2013). My experience of Buddhist inquiry is captured by Brach (2003) “to awaken to our experience exactly as it is in this present moment... it focuses on our immediate feelings and sensations... It is important to approach inquiry with a genuine attitude and unconditional friendliness” (p.78). In common with autoethnography, Buddhist inquiry is “a more radical opening” (Welwood, 2000, p.99), concerned with knowing and insight through experience. The term radical reflection is used by Kittisaro (2014b) based on the English translation of The Buddha’s phrase *Yoniso manasikara* meaning wise reflection. Kittisaro emphasises the word radical because it denominates rootedness and a process of getting deep into the roots of phenomena. This involves actively inquiring whether a thought, sensation or deed is helpful, skilful, non-harming or unhelpful, unskilful or harmful. As this understanding develops, the view becomes less obscured due to aversion, grasping or identifying with thoughts, emotions and experiences. This form of inquiry fundamentally recognises that all phenomena is conditioned and, therefore, impermanent and empty. It allows deeper awareness of cause and effect, so that phenomena can be understood and responded to in a way that reduces suffering and increases thriving (Kittisaro, 2014a).

The Buddhist inquiry questions I applied are detailed in Appendix 6. The seemingly simple, yet profound question of What is this? is a direct inquiry into experience and is investigated through the four foundations of Mindfulness: body, feeling, mind states and mental events (MN 10:I; Sumedho, 1987; Hanh, 1998; Kittisaro and Thanissara, 2014). When there is stillness, concentration and awareness (*Samadhi*), it is possible to comprehend experience more intricately and comprehend more precisely what 'this' is. For example when sadness arises, there could be the physical sensation of heaviness, pain and tears, feelings and emotions are observed in terms of intensity and variability as well as noticing thoughts that can precipitate aversion or clinging. Having made these observations, compassion can then be offered to the full experience (causes and effects) of sadness. In Theravada Buddhism, inquiry focusses on intention and whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome (Amaro, 2015). This can involve asking questions such as: Is it greed, hatred or delusion? Is this the basis of long-term harm and suffering or wellbeing and happiness? (Ṭhānissaro, 1994). I have included three additional questions from Kittisaro (2014a): "What are the effects of spiritual practices in my life? Are wholesome qualities of the heart increasing - like generosity, kindness and wisdom? Are unwholesome ones - greed hatred, delusion - decreasing?" (p.2).

A question does not need to be overly complex, highly philosophical or esoteric. Even asking a question needs to be questioned, such as What is the purpose of this? Am I trying to grasp an answer to fix or control something? Or, Is this a distraction or a dead-end question? (Ṭhānissaro, 2002). Rather than finding a particular answer, sometimes inquiry is more subtle: an acknowledgement of feelings such as uncertainty, avoidance or doubt, mindfully noting what arises or encouragement to explore further. Having outlined questions that can be posed in Buddhist inquiry, I would emphasise that there are no strict or formulaic questions, it is more a case of open curiosity towards what is being directly experienced at a given moment in time together with the deep listening involved in insight meditation. The purposes of inquiry are to raise awareness, bring acceptance and find freedom from conditioning, an end to suffering and ultimately, enlightenment. Throughout inquiry, unconditional friendliness and compassion are cultivated because if we do not care for ourselves as we turn towards pain and distress, we would be unwilling or unable to sustain this presence. The process and core practices are illustrated in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1. Model of Buddhist Contemplative Inquiry: Process and Practice

3.5.2 Mindful Self-compassion Practice and Inquiry

The practices learnt during my initial MSC training and teacher training (Neff and Germer, 2013) were central to this research (Appendix 1). The initial training consisted of eight two-hour sessions, 30 minutes of daily home practice and a half-day retreat. My teacher training followed the MSC programme format in a 7-day intensive training that was augmented by 9 supervision sessions. Similarly to Buddhist inquiry, MSC practice and inquiry involves noticing, turning towards, acknowledging suffering, seeking understanding and offering compassion. Particular questions are used (Appendix 6), such as How can I best be with this experience? What do I need in this present moment? and Can I be kind to myself and recognise the humanness of this experience? (Germer, 2009; Neff, 2009a). There is a full list of MSC practices outlined in Appendix 7, the core practices are called Affectionate Breathing, Loving Kindness, and Giving and Receiving Compassion. There are also additional formal and informal practices such as Soothing Touch and Self-compassion Break, which are particularly helpful in eliciting a soothing response from our mammalian care-giving system and the release of the neurochemical oxytocin (Germer, 2009; Gilbert, 2009; Neff, 2011a).

3.5.3 Critical Reflection

> The first step in freeing ourselves from the prison of unconscious identification is to make it conscious, that is, to reflect on it (Welwood, 2000, p.106).

Another component of my contemplative practice is critical reflection. As a psychologist and researcher, critical reflection is an integral part of ethical and professional practice, which creates space to evaluate what has been experienced, meaning and what could be improved. For this research, focus was on investigating and understanding the impact (or not) of self-compassion upon me and in my professional practice as a psychologist and within the therapeutic relationship. My critical reflections included questions such as: What do I know? How do I know? Where is the evidence? Is there another explanation? What is the effect of the interaction? and How does this contribute to knowledge? (Schön, 1991; Etherington, 2004). For me reflection involves exploration, justification, scepticism and considering different perspectives, it is also able to accommodate and contain uncertainty, as well as fragmented and incomplete understanding. Reflection is a dynamic process that cultivates awareness of ever-changing internal, relational and external experiences. Reflection provides the opportunity for clarity, understanding, awareness of blind-spots and weaknesses. It allows contexts, values and beliefs to be made explicit and helps me form a basis for stating: Here I stand and these are the grounds for saying what I am saying.

Reflexivity lies at the heart this thesis due to its Buddhist and psychological basis, it is also integral to the autoethnographic and contemplative approaches I have taken, which McIlveen (2008) states is a “method of reflexive enquiry for narrative research and practice” (p.20). This is important in order to establish transparency and trustworthiness of an autoethnographical account (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Etherington, 2004).

3.5.4 Journaling

I have chosen the journal method to capture thoughts, feelings and experience because I believe it allows space for deep listening, awareness, unravelling and exploring multiple layers. Keeping a contemplative journal will provide the material to enable my story of cultivating self-compassion to emerge, be told, and for new stories to be created.

In my psychology practice, informed by the work of Pennebaker (1990) on the use of writing to work with and heal trauma, I encourage clients to keep a therapeutic journal where applicable. I have kept personal diaries since 1980 that ranged from recording basic details of events to deeply reflective writing from my inner world. Journaling offers the opportunity to self-witness with words reflecting back to me what is seen and what was previously hidden (Reiter, 2009). Working in this way provides a safe, creative, even sacred, space to give voice to struggle, confusion, seminal moments and inspiration, “A journal provides a map of the journey towards growth, healing and change” (Thompson, 2011, p.30). My journal of a year of contemplative practice includes a variety of sources and materials, which have been a “means to turn-life-into-text” (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p.18). The act of externalising interior experience is often a mysterious unfolding, where witnessing and self-reflexivity deepens my awareness and understanding, challenges my assumptions, changes perspectives and situates me within social and political contexts.

For me, poetry is an important element of reflection in journaling, I find it medicinal and an intimate way of processing and expressing deep feelings and experience. Professionally, I regularly share poetry with clients, it can provide a powerful channel for emotional engagement. Poetry has the ability to “help make evident personally significant material lying just beneath our consciousness” (Chavis, 2011, p.229) it is also artful in its means of encapsulating and communicating experience (Etherington, 2004). I used the poem Wild Geese (Oliver, 1986) throughout my autoethnography as an inspirational reference point and a frame for the elements of self-compassion. In doing so I was “merging story and theory so that story becomes theory in action” (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015, p.92).

3.6 Material Collection and Analysis

I have not used the reductionist term data because my experiences and relationships are not mere data. Data implies a concrete, stable and measureable thing, often elevated by positivist approaches as evidence of a fact, whereas my experiences are living, evolving and impermanent. My position is encapsulated in the following comment. “Seeing is not believing, believing is not seeing. Data isn't everything, everything isn't data. Data is just one segment” (RenegadeEcon, 2015). Therefore, I prefer to use the term material rather than data.

My contemplative journal was the primary source of material, it contained day-to-day reflections on contemplative and self-compassion practice and anything else that was relevant and inspiring. The journal comprised written text, poetry and photography and a range of material from Buddhist teachings, social media, emails, television, radio programmes and theatre. I used my emails, Twitter feed, Facebook and website as spaces to think, wonder and write. I also drew on teaching and clinical notes as well as previous personal, research, and meditation diaries. The journal comprised concurrent self-observational and archival material (McIlveen, 2008), it was written over a one-year period from 1st July 2014 to 1st July 2015. Journal writing took place daily where possible, at a variety of times, but often in the morning. The journal was written by hand in notebooks and kept in a central file as well as entries made on my phone and laptop computer.

In the original research proposal, I stated that I would be conducting reviews of the journal at weekly and monthly intervals. I decided not to do this because I felt that analysis at these stages would interfere with the natural flow of recording experience. I wanted the process to evolve rather than imposing early and intermediate analysis and interpretation. The narrative was mainly in free format alongside some pre-format such as: day/time, context, interaction, activity and location. Journal entries included experiences that arose in my personal life, at work, on retreat, at conferences and undertaking the Professional Doctorate. Specific journaling was also carried out to record and reflect on the process of becoming a trained teacher of the MSC programme at the beginning of the research between the 1st and 7th of July 2014 and the experience of delivering the full eight-session MSC training by the end of the research period. Composites of client and MSC student experiences that illuminated particular phenomena in relation to self-compassion were also included. In addressing ethical issues of respect, care and protection of those who populate my story, I ensured that any identifying factors in the composites were removed. I also checked with my husband, throughout the whole process, on how he felt about his inclusion and the impact that reading my story had on him.

In preparation for writing-up the research, fieldwork material was collated from all the various sources and sorted into chronological order. A lot of material had been amassed; the portion of the journal on my computer alone amounted to 39,309 words.

Although I did not apply heuristic inquiry throughout the journal analysis, aspects of this approach described my engagement with the text. “Heuristic inquiry requires that one be open, receptive, and attuned to all facets of one's experience of a phenomenon, allowing comprehension and compassion to mingle and recognising the place and unity of intellect, emotion, and spirit” (Moustakas, 1990, p.16). The six phases involved in heuristic work acted as stepping-stones as I made my way through the narrative. Engagement with the material involved curiosity and the dynamic of the tacit dimension (Polanyi, 1962; West, 2011) of awareness, impressions, sensing, listening to my inner voice and experiencing the impact and movement of emotion and memory in my mind and body. For two months I was deeply in the immersion phase; reading through several times, making preliminary notes as part of the initial sense-making. It was an intense process, best described as sometimes fluid and at other times turbulent. Analysis felt like getting into water, sensing the impact on my body, feeling out of my depth, fearing I may drown, panicking, finding anchor points, calming and then enjoying immersion. Beginning to make interpretations could be likened to climbing out of the water, sitting on the side, taking in another view, seeing patterns, regularities, inconsistencies and connections emerging.

I took time over several weeks to allow what I encountered in my journal to percolate, what Moustakas (1990) describes as incubation. This process was very necessary and could not be forced or rushed, it allowed me space to pause, be curious and also for my voices as a Buddhist, Psychologist and researcher to emerge and speak to the experience. I did not have to search the landscape for long before prominent themes emerged, they were visible for miles, whether I wanted to see them or not. As I sat in my garden with the journal I heard Chrissie Hynde on the radio sing, “something is lost but something is found” (Keene, 1986) and this reflected my sense of what was emerging of things lost and found. In reflecting on emergent themes, I asked questions posed by Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2015): What’s going on here? and What does this mean? What story are you telling about yourself and your fieldwork? What does your experience suggest about culture? and What does the culture/context teach you about your experience? (pp.70-71). The themes and these questions were woven into the landscape of my stories alongside relevant sections of the journal and photographs. Analysis and interpretation of my self-reflective material and throughout the writing of my stories was guided by the questions compiled in Appendix 8.

Although planning was necessary to prepare and begin the journey, there was no rigid or predetermined route laid down to be followed, it was an exploratory and immersive process that I increasingly learned to trust as I proceeded (Dyson, 2007; Adams, 2015). In terms of the stories that formed, supported by my contemplative practices, I wrote as I was moved to do so, guided by strong feelings and memories, sometimes bringing pain, sadness and anger and at other times relief, loving-kindness and, above all, compassion. Narrative analysis continued as the “messiness, depth and texture” (Etherington, 2004, p.81) of my story developed. Along the way I questioned the effect of culture and context on my experience, how meaning is emerging and changing through writing my story and how cultivating self-compassion impacts on the narrative (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015). When the first draft of the thesis was completed I went through the journal again to check for anything overlooked, understated or misinterpreted. Macfarlane (2012) observed that “Paths connect. This is their first duty and their chief reason for being” (p.17); the whole process was one of connection, with my voice, experience and body, to meaning, need and understanding, within the theory and practice of self-compassion and wider cultural contexts.

Finally, the metaphor of navigation and mapmaking that I introduced in Chapter one, expresses my experiences of walking this path, finding my way and mapping out the journey into self-compassion. “Autoethnography could be likened to an adventure; setting off with a map and compass and some understanding of the territory but not hidebound by expectations or predictability” (Muncey, 2010, p.63). It is a journey that reveals complex terrain above and below ground and, whilst I would not presume to advocate an ideal route to take, my intention and hope is that the mapmaking illustrates pathways to self-compassion, self-care and healing that are clear and meaningful, and encourage new paths to be taken. No matter how earnestly and assiduously you study a map, it cannot provide the experience of exploring and walking a path; you have to live it, you have to experience it. Buddhist teaching is often described as a map, “Essentially, Buddhism is a map. In this case, the journey is a pilgrimage to our true nature, to the place of safety and peace” (Kittisaro, 2014a, p.1). In the next chapter I will be considering how Buddhist practical theology provides the compass points and guidance that translates theory and intention into practice.

Chapter 4. Guiding the Way to Compassionate Action: Buddhist Practical Theology

4.1 A Meeting Place

> The place that Solomon made to worship in,
> called the Far Mosque, is not built of earth
> and water and stone, but of intention and wisdom
> and mystical conversation and compassionate action.
> (Rumi, excerpt from The Far Mosque in Barks, 1997, p.191)

In this chapter I will be considering practical theology and Buddhism and the concept of Buddhist practical theology in terms of relevance, challenges, methodology and praxis. I will be reflecting on my theological position and how Buddhist practical theology can be understood and translated into daily life. In this context I will be exploring my contemplative practice and use of a contemplative practice tree, which represents a living practice with many branches, that is rooted and strong, can weather storms and be responsive to climate and environment (Duerr, 2002; Law and Basil, 2016). Trees have held symbolic power and been imbued with sacredness from ancient civilisations to our current age, used across cultures, religions, in science, art and philosophy (Lima, 2014). Trees feature strongly in Buddhism where it is believed that the Buddha sat under a Bodhi Tree until he attained enlightenment. Gatherings and teachings often took place at the roots, and under the shade of trees. They were places to dwell and also used symbolically in Buddhist teachings (Gethin, 1998).

Developing an understanding of a relationship between Buddhism and practical theology and what this means in practice has been challenging for me (Gross, 2000; Unno, 2000). In common with other Buddhists, I found the term theology problematic, particularly when centred on Christian theistic traditions, which contrasts with the Buddhist nontheistic position. However, discovering that engagement in theology involves critical reflection, discourse on a system of beliefs and emphasis on practical application, alleviated my unease and ambivalence. A starting point for me was recognising that theologians and Buddhists both “draw critically upon the resources of tradition to help [them] communicate in a new and authentic voice to the contemporary world” (Jackson, 2000, p.ix).

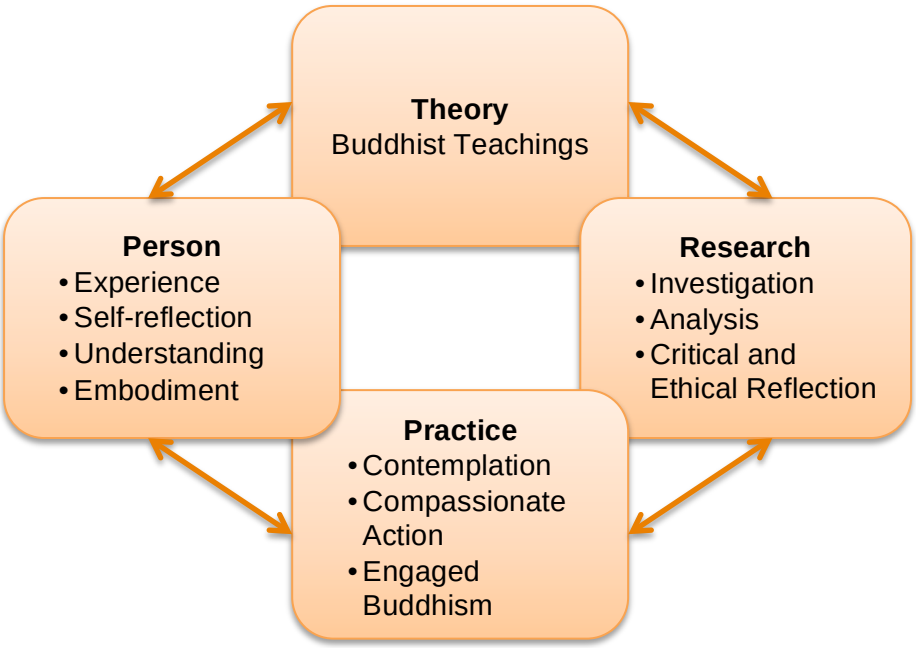
Integration is necessary in order to communicate with the authentic voice that Jackson describes; yet in my professional context, my Buddhist practice was kept hidden from clients and peers (Jackson, 2000). Spirituality, let alone Buddhism, was never included in my psychology training and, although the climate is changing, I had previously encountered an unreceptive environment to Buddhist practices within Counselling Psychology, for example, when my offer of morning meditation at an annual conference was rejected outright. However, I found an academic and spiritual home within the Cambridge Theological Federation where I could explore self-compassion and include my various contexts and beliefs rather feeling split between psychology and Buddhism. My experience is captured in an observation by Trinale (2014) who stated that "Western Buddhist practical theologians seek safe havens in historically Christian seminaries and colleges in order to pursue research vocations discoursing on Buddhist praxis" (p.11).

4.2 The Landscape of Buddhist Practical Theology

In considering the meaning of practical theology, two particular propositions resonated with me: Miller-McLemore (2012) stated that it is "concerned with the embodiment of religious belief in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities" (p.11). Makransky (2000) specified that Buddhist theology "includes critical reflection upon Buddhist experience in light of contemporary understanding and critical reflection upon contemporary understanding in light of Buddhist experience" (p.19). The dynamic process in theology was also highlighted by Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) whereby both researcher and praxis are changed as a result of engagement in practical theological research. They defined practical theology as "the theological study of the praxis of lived religion… the practical theologian is almost by necessity a concerned or engaged scholar" (p.99). A description of the theological process is provided by Atkinson and Field (1995, cited in Woodward and Pattison, 2000) as "Theology thus arises from practice, moves into theory and is then put into practice again" (p.6). In terms of Buddhist practical theology Sanford, (2016) describes the process as "action-reflection-action" (p.57), however, I found that McIlveen (2008), when writing about reflexive narrative, offers an extension of this process in describing a "nexus of theory-research-practice-person" (p.5). This model connects theology to practice through the dynamic of Buddhist teachings, critical reflection, contemplative practice and action and recognises the central role played by the person in terms of experience, understanding and embodiment (Dreyer, 2016).

Figure 4.1 below illustrates my understanding and experience of the theological process, adapted from McIlveen (2008) who describes this as a nexus rather than each component being an end in themselves. Ethics, wisdom, meditation and discernment are implicit throughout this process, as is *phronesis* as compassionate action and ethical reflection (Osmer, 2008). Reflection is essential in enabling these aspects to emerge, as emphasised by Wallace (2000) "analysis and critical evaluation must both precede and follow the practice of meditation" (p.72).

Figure 4.1. Conceptualisation of theological process in Buddhist Practical Theology



A definition of Buddhist practical theology offered by Sanford (2014) is "a theological discipline within Buddhism that uses empirical description and normative construction in a dialogical relationship with lived experience to study, understand and beneficially transform human activity" (p.20). The importance of adapting and applying Buddhist teachings, through systematic Buddhist analysis, reflection and action in response to contemporary needs was emphasised by Makransky (2008) who warned that without such an approach there would be a "risk of losing the full liberating potential of Buddhist practice for present and future generations, the possibility of attaining deepest human freedom, nirvana, enlightenment" (p.140).

Currently there are very few publications on Buddhist theology; it was not until 2000 when Jackson and Makransky edited a seminal publication on Buddhist theology, in which Buddhist scholars, from a variety of traditions and contexts, offered a compilation of essays on contemporary issues. They considered different methodologies, critical reflexivity and applications of Buddhist theology and invited dialogue and cooperation to further the endeavours of Buddhist theology. There has been even less published in relation to Buddhist practical theology, the first two papers were by Trinale (2013, 2014), followed by Sanford (2014, 2016). Trinale (2014) argued that the "systematic, critical and pragmatic reflection on praxis" (p.7) offered by practical theology, is of value to Buddhist practical theology. She went on to demonstrate how models within Christian theology could inform Buddhist theological reflection, academic discipline and practice.

Sanford (2014) provided the first literature review of Buddhist practical theology and formed the definition of Buddhist practical theology that I have used. She supported the work of Trinale in emphasising the importance of exploring and clearly communicating applicable theological methods for Buddhist practice and engagement with contemporary issues. In 2016 Sanford contributed a book chapter on approaches drawn from Buddhist practical theology to engage with and support the practice and care of the Buddhist community. She recommended the application of "action-reflection-action" (p.57), through the framework of Osmer's (2008) Four Task Method of description, interpretation, normative and pragmatic analysis, and linked this process to the Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

From the limited literature on Buddhist practical theology together with Christian practical theology writing, I have found common ground between the methodology, critical reflection and praxis of practical theology and Buddhist empiricism. The Buddha's teaching to the Kalama tribe emphasised an empirical approach through imploring people to test the veracity, truth and skillfulness of any teaching for themselves in order to understand skillfully and see clearly, from their own experience (AN 3:65 I; Bodhi, 2005). One definition of empiricism in relation to Buddhism is that the teachings are to be "used, investigated, and, as far as is possible for a particular individual, confirmed in experience. As such it can be said that the Buddha is a kind of experientialist or empiricist, as opposed to one who relies solely on revelation or trust in reasoning alone" (Harvey, 2009, p.175).

A definition of practical theology that encompasses empiricism and transformation is proposed by Pattison and Woodward (1994) “Pastoral/practical theology is a place where religious belief, tradition and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming” (p.9). As a Buddhist, I would place less emphasis on religious belief and more on “moral ethics and inner values” (Gyatso, 2012, p.xi). Care is needed with using the word theology, whilst it may enable inter-faith dialogue, for other audiences use of the word may hinder rather than help dialogue (Gross, 2000; Sanford, 2014). It may be more helpful if emphasis is placed on a broader definition based on the Greek root *theo* meaning a discourse on the divine “however that may be conceived” (Jackson, 2000, p.1). For me, the most important aspects of Buddhist practical theology are how it informs and transforms my practice and enables me to embody and communicate Buddhist teachings as I understand, experience and apply them throughout life.

4.3 Grounding: My Buddhist Theological Position

For clarity with Buddhist terminology I have provided a Glossary of Paili Terms (p.ix) and a Glossary of Nikaya and Suttas in relation to the core teachings I have refered to in this thesis (p.x). In summary, the Buddha means the historical Buddha as well as Buddha nature; Dhamma refers to Buddhist teachings and practices as well as all phenomena (Nhat Hanh, 1998); Sangha consists of spiritual teachers and community (Sumedho, 2010). Teachings from the historical Buddha provide a clear, ethical and empirical approach as guidance for a way of living and to enable humans to become awakened. Engaging with Buddhist teachings offers the possibility for a Buddhist practitioner to become free of suffering through understanding their life experiences in the light of the Three Marks of Existence (SN 22:45 III; Bodhi, 2005; Thera, 2006): *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering/desire/unsatisfactoriness) and *anatta* (not-self). Also, to help counter the three poisons of fear, hatred and delusion (Thera and Bodhi, 1999), the Dhamma advocates practising generosity (*dana*), virtue (*sila*) and goodwill (*metta*) alongside development of the four sublime abidings *(brahmavihara)* which are: Loving-kindness *(metta)*, Compassion *(karuna)*, Sympathetic Joy *(mudita)* and Equanimity *(upekkha),* (MN 21:I; Pasanno and Amaro, 2001; Feldman, 2017).

As a Lay Buddhist, I Take Refuge in The Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and I uphold the Five Precepts of harmlessness, trustworthiness, refraining from sexual misconduct, right speech and non-intoxication (AN 8:39 IV; Amaravati, 1971). The foundations of my Buddhist beliefs and practice are the Four Noble Truths (SN 56:11 V; Sumedho, 1992), which are not linear, they flow and arise together, 1) *Dukkha*: there is suffering, unsatisfactoriness, discontent, stress; this needs to be comprehended. 2) There are causes of *dukkha*: craving *(tanha)* for sensuality, states of becoming, clinging to what is desired and aversion to whatever is considered unacceptable; these are to be abandoned. 3) The cessation of *dukkha*: it can be extinguished when we desist from craving or aversion; this is to be realised. 4) There is a way to end *dukkha* through the path of practice found in the Noble Eightfold Path; this is to be developed. Following the Noble Eightfold Path involves a lifetime of cultivating practices to live skillfully and develop wisdom, ethics and meditation (The Threefold Way). As with the Four Noble Truths, practices in the Noble Eightfold Path are not linear but completely interrelated and often arise simultaneously. I have summarised the practices as they correspond with The Threefold Way in Figure 4.2, (See Appendix 4 for further detail).

Figure 4.2. Summary of Practices and Intentions of The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path	**The Threefold Way**
(The term Right can be interchangeable with skilful) Right understanding Right intention	**Wisdom, Discernment *(paññа)*:** Understanding and insight into the reality and true nature of all things.
Right speech Right action Right livelihood	**Morality, Ethics, Virtue, Conduct (*sila*):** To live one's life in a way that helps, rather than causes harm, including social/environmental, psychological and spiritual (Wallace, 2012).
Right effort Right mindfulness Right concentration/ meditation	**Meditation or concentration (*Samadhi):*** Transforming the mind through meditation practice and *satipatthana* (Foundations of Mindfulness)

Source: Adapted from Access to Insight, 2005a

As proposed by Sanford (2016), Buddhist practical theology can provide a framework to support the Buddhist community and inform Buddhist academics in critiquing and applying Buddhist teachings to everyday life and contemporary issues. A definition of what it means to be a Buddhist theologian, that aligns with my practice, is provided by Gross (2000), “to bring my experiential knowledge of Buddhist thought and practice into discussions of contemporary issues and problems, to work with the collective wisdom, compassion and skillfulness of Buddhist traditions” (p.55). Through this definition, I can see a consensus between Buddhist practical theology and how I live and practice in day-to-day life.

4.4 Applications of Buddhist Practical Theology

The area of self-compassion is multidisciplinary; it includes Buddhist teachings and practices, social and psychological theories of self-worth, resilience, motivation, emotional intelligence, attachment, depression, anxiety, shame and neuroscience. In my clinical setting, I work daily with the causes and consequences of shame, high self-criticism, self-hatred, neglect and abuse, which are all painful barriers to compassion. Buddhist practical theology can offer a rich “field of practices” (Ganzevoort and Roeland, 2014, p.94) to these disciplines through theological reflection and praxis, which entails reflecting, evaluating, developing understanding and investigating issues, needs and applications. In Buddhism and clinically emphasis is placed on the value of personal experience as essential material for inquiry, insight and transformation. Such exploration and critical reflection also aligns with the philosophy of autoethnography. Hereby, my Buddhist, psychological and academic contexts bring to life a “three-way critical conversation” (Pattison and Lynch, 1997, p.412) of experience, tradition and academic discipline. This is particularly relevant to the work of cultivating MSC, which encompasses the whole range of physical, mental, emotional, relational and spiritual needs (Neff, 2011; Germer, 2009). Indeed, it is important that I bring understanding and reflections of my experience and practice of MSC directly into my teaching of it, in doing so I am able to both model and embody compassionate presence.

4.4.1. Praxis: Engaged Buddhism

Definitions of praxis include “action, practical ability or practice… a combination of action and reflection aimed at transforming an oppressive situation” (Ford, 1997, p.752). Coseru (2014) describes praxis as a dynamic process that involves “a gradual progression from the act of listening to, and reflecting upon, a set of statements, to actualizing their significance in an enactive manner” (p.254). Pattison and Lynch (1997) emphasise that the intention of a practical theologian is “to make an impact on the way things are understood and done in order to encourage more thoughtful healthy and authentic forms of living” (p.412). My Buddhist praxis in relation to the cultivation of compassion involves all of the above aspects and is concerned with developing intention, attention, awareness, attitude and action (Shapiro, et al., 2006). Zajonic (2009) emphasises attitudes of deep humility and respect, curiosity, gentleness, intimacy and communion, vulnerability, illumination and insight. Without these aspects, both professional and spiritual practice is in danger of being overly theoretical and intellectual.

I believe that Buddhist teachings and praxis create an authentic way of living and meets McCarthy’s (2000) spiritual authenticity criteria of: Contemplative Awareness, Effective action in the world, Community, Disposition of openness, Non-dualistic thinking and Discernment and skilful living. The wish that all beings be liberated and free of suffering lies at the core of all Buddhist traditions; such a deep and active care for life, engagement with society and the wider world constitutes a relevant, ethical and authentic praxis. This is made explicit through Engaged Buddhism (King, 2009) and the practices of venerable Buddhist teachers, such as The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh (Order of Interbeing), Ven. P.A. Payutto and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Buddhist Global Relief). These are just a few examples, to include the many significant past and present Buddhist activists here would be too great a task. The praxis of Engaged Buddhism is the conscientious compassion spoken of by Bodhi (2015) that is cultivated through commitment to investigating and practicing the Dhamma, practicing formal and informal meditation and mindfulness and, through this process, compassionate intention is translated into wise action (Germer, 2009; Neff, 2011; Hanson, 2015).

Buddhist practical theology, Engaged Buddhism and my philosophy as a psychologist, can be likened to a radical-liberationist approach because concern is focussed on social conditions, oppression, power dynamics and abuses, as well as individual physical and psychological wellbeing and liberation (Pattison and Lynch, 1997). Considering the society and culture at the time of The Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, believed to be over 2500 years ago (Cousins, 1996; Gethin, 1998), the teachings that arose from his enlightenment on social justice and ethical living, regardless of status, power or religion were radical and counter-cultural, and still are to this day. The Buddha led by example, living a life in awareness, love and compassion through praxis, the aim was not to form a religious movement (MN 93:II; Batchelor, 2014). As I engage in Buddhist praxis I am increasingly aware of the deep transformations, within me and in relation to others.

4.4.2 Buddhist, Theological and Psychological Reflexivity

Reflexivity is essential to praxis and Buddhist practical theology provides framework for critically reflecting on experience of the Dhamma. Buddhist praxis involves integrating practice and theory into life through inquiry, engaging in critical reflection and taking appropriate action. Reflexivity is also integral in writing this thesis, my autoethnographic approach and journaling and my practice as a psychologist. When I use the term reflexivity, I include critical personal reflection and introspection and I am referring to a process, which invites us “to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political” (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015, p.2.). A view of reflexivity that relates to how I experience the process is “an acknowledgement of the significance of the self in forming an understanding of the world” (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p. 20).

As a reflexive researcher, Etherington (2004) highlights the process of engaging in multiple levels of awareness and critically making the implicit explicit, thus providing transparency. Rennie (1998) emphasises agency, embodiment and action in reflexivity “to think about our thinking, feel about our feelings, to treat ourselves as objects of our attention and to use what we find there as a point of departure in deciding what to do next” (pp.2-3). Rennie’s description captures the dynamic nature of reflection and observation and hints at the Buddhist practice of developing equanimity and mindfulness. This is vital in reflective and contemplative practice, otherwise we can become solipsistic, entangled in content and attached to views, “Reflexivity is a process of making oneself an object of one's own observation, examining the narratives that structure one's own experiences and vice versa” (Lax, 1996, p.8).

Trinale (2014) emphasises that praxis and methodology involve critical, normative and pragmatic reflection. She highlighted the process of theological reflection in relation to compassion, which for me also describes the role of contemplative practice in cultivating self-compassion:

> A Buddhist studies compassion theologically and historically as a foundation for becoming more compassionate… then attempts to integrate this capacity for compassion during day-to-day life. Through regular reflection, students can examine if in fact they are behaving more compassionately, and adjust their balance of study and practice efforts accordingly (Trinale, 2014, p.10).

Given the myriad of critical reflection models, frameworks and cycles of reflective and reflexive learning, I considered what my reflective practice consisted of. Since the beginning of my counselling training, two decades ago, I have used Schön's concepts of reflection-in-action and on-action, which draws on experience, intuition and tacit knowledge both in-action and on a post hoc basis on-action (Schön 1991). The uncertainty, ambiguity and contradictions often encountered in my work requires "a kind of inquiry which falls outside the model of Technical Rationality" (Schön, 1991, pp.41-42). Additionally, where clinically appropriate, I use Gibbs Reflective Cycle: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action (Gibbs, 1988). These processes of critical reflection and co-construction of meaning and understanding are at the heart of my work with clients. They also form part of case conceptualisations, client reviews and supervision and inform my internal supervision (Casement, 1985; Etherington, 2004). As best as I can, I critically reflect on whether my intentions and rationale are clear, what is useful, and what hinders my own and others understanding. I also consider the extent to which my values, beliefs and philosophy are embedded in what I teach; I am mindful of the need to be alert to assumptions, biases, and blind spots and be aware and responsive to other perspectives.

Sometimes the reflexive process is joyous, generative and free-flowing, at other times it is painful, slow and there is often silence, as part of contemplation, but also into which the unspoken and unwritten are placed (Walton, 2014). Reflexivity has always been an integral part of my professional practice but in the last three years it has become part of a much deeper process; that of contemplative practice and Buddhist inquiry, which is now present in all of my contexts.

4.4.3 Buddhist Inquiry

During March 2014, in preparation for my year of contemplative practice, I outlined the Buddhist inquiry questions, shown in in Figure 4.3 and detailed in Appendix 6; I had not operationalised them in this way before. These are questions that Buddhist teachers had guided me to use in my practice since 2004 when I became a lay Buddhist. In November 2014, I encountered Osmer's (2008) Four Task Method when Trinale (2014) presented a paper on Buddhist practical theology at an International Symposium for Contemplative Studies. When I compared my Buddhist inquiry questions with Osmer's framework, I was struck by the similarities, and I, therefore, support arguments by Trinale (2014) and Sanford (2014) that Buddhist theological inquiry is compatible with Osmer's (2008) Four Task method: descriptive-empirical (what is happening), which is a deep exploration of experience with a calm, mindful presence; interpretation (why is it happening) coming to a wise explanation and understanding as to why something has occurred; normative (what does it mean) drawing on theology and taking an interdisciplinary approach in the inquiry and pragmatic (how might we respond) responding with discernment and skilful action and reflection.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, the framework of Buddhist inquiry questions have not been devised as a research tool or technique but form part of my regular meditation and contemplative practice. Rather than getting tangled up in language, questions and over analysing, Buddhist inquiry is concerned with developing openness, curiosity, acceptance, understanding and insight. This involves a rich process of developing awareness of and investigation into what arises, what changes and the physical, mental and emotional reaction to phenomena (Amaro, 2010). Whilst proliferation and rumination are understood to be unhelpful, not all thought is viewed as a hindrance. In Buddhism, mental activity conducted in a calm and focussed way, involving reflections or inquiry that cultivate discernment, are viewed as skilful responses. When the key aspects of Buddhist inquiry and the various reflective cycles are compared (Figure 4.3), there are commonalities between Buddhist inquiry, Osmer (2008) and Trinale's (2014) models of theological reflection, Gibbs reflective cycle and the general critical reflection questions that I use in therapeutic practice. It is heartening to see the common ground here between Buddhist and Christian theological reflection, which could encourage interfaith and cross-discipline dialogue.

Figure 4.3. Comparison of Buddhist, Theological and Psychological Reflection

Buddhist Inquiry in My Contemplative Practice	**Osmer's Four Task Method (2008)**	**Trinale (2014)**	**Gibbs Reflective Cycle (1988)**	**Critical Reflection questions: In and On action (Schön, 1991)**
What is this?	Descriptive-empirical (What is going on?)	Critical	Description Feelings	What do I know? How do I know? Where is the evidence?
What is the cause and effect?	Interpretation (Why is this going on?)		Evaluation	What is the purpose and effect of this engagement?
What are the consequences?	Normative (What ought to be going on?)	Normative	Analysis	Is there another explanation?
What skillful response is needed?	Pragmatic (How might we respond?)	Pragmatic	Conclusion and Action	What learning or insight has arisen?

Sources: Sumedho, 1987; Gibbs, 1988; Hanh, 1988; Schön, 1991; Osmer, 2008; Sucitto, 2011; Kittisaro, 2014b; Trinale, 2014; Amaro, 2015

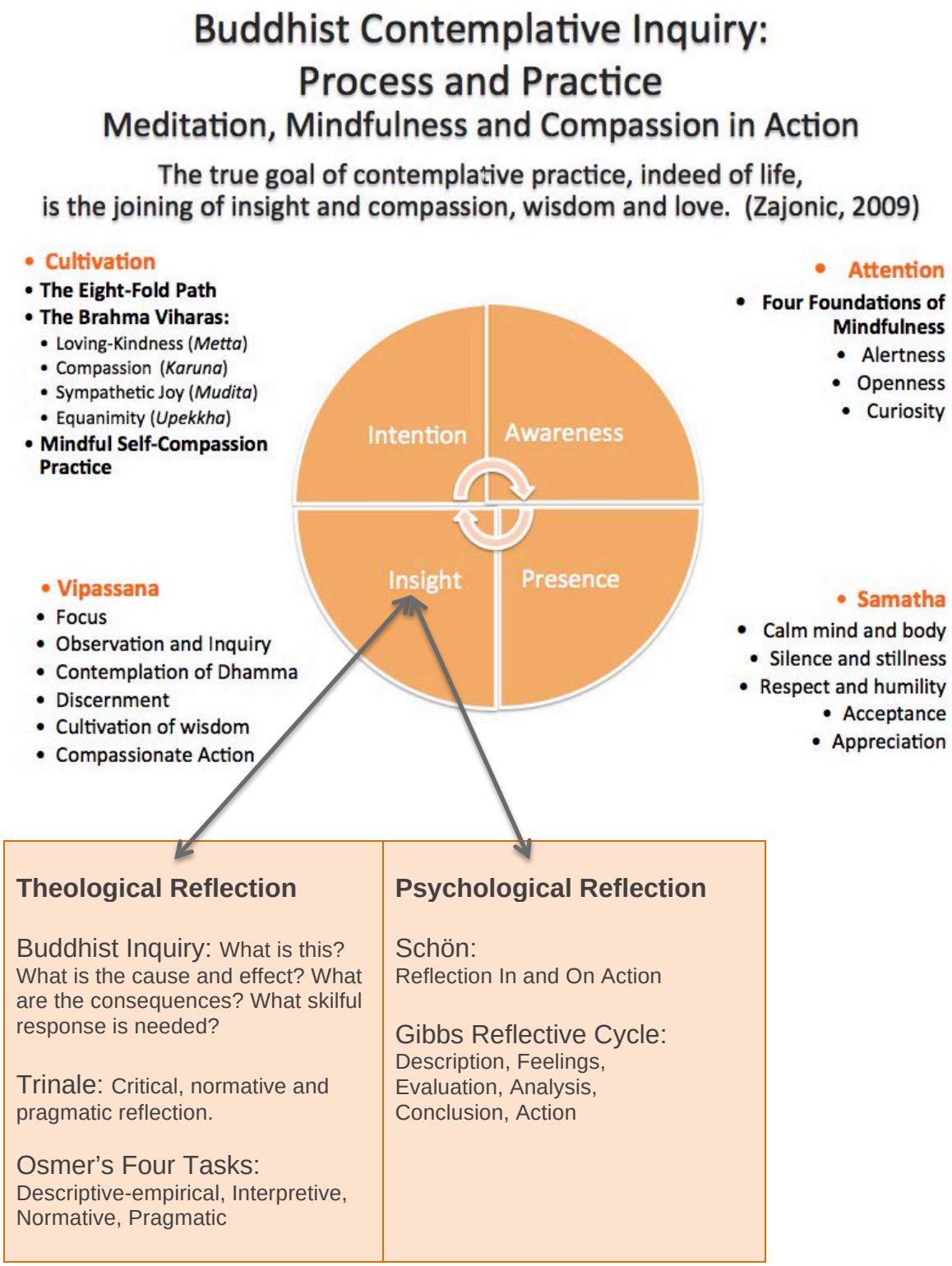
In Theravada Buddhism, meditation practice entails *Samatha* and *Vipassana* meditation. *Samatha* allows calmness and tranquillity to arise in the mind and body; it brings a sense of steadiness and ease through attitudes of openness, attentiveness in listening and observing with a mix of focussed and open awareness. When *Samatha* is established, the conditions are created for engaging in *Vipassana* (insight meditation). This is an opportunity to see experience clearly, to notice, explore and investigate what is present. When there is a deep experience of *Vipassana* "there is a change of heart that comes from seeing things in a different way" (Amaro, 2012).

One of the main criticisms of introspection is that it is too self-focussed and unreliable (Costall, 2006). However, if conducted skilfully, reflexively and contemplatively, the opposite is true because to look inward in such a way allows the possibility of gaining a deeper understanding of experience, patterns or habits of mind (Ekman, 2005; Wallace, 2002) and learn from body sensations that can provide access to tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1962). Importantly it can provide the conditions in which to cultivate self-compassion, equanimity, clarity and understanding of our interrelatedness and common humanity.

Furthermore, sharing these inner experiences in written form transforms the private into public. This becomes a reflective dialogue for the writer as well as the reader and provides the potential space to air silenced voices, “Reflexivity enables the recognition of social, institutional and political contexts in which the practitioner operates… Writing can aid an analysis and engagement with social and political realities” (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, p.45). This process of deep inquiry also “depends upon *not* knowing. It depends upon us being open and ready to not know. It depends upon us, allowing mystery and letting the knowing arise out of that” (Amaro, 2010, p.267). This reminds me of a phrase by Schön that I have always enjoyed, and experienced frequently “much reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise” (Schön, 1991, p. 56).

The model in Figure 4.4 overleaf is an extension of Figure 3.1; it illustrates the interactive and multifaceted nature of the inquiry process in my Buddhist practice and incorporates psychological and theological reflection. It shows the inquiry process of gently setting intention, this creates conditions to develop awareness through mindfulness, openness and curiosity, and helps establish a quality of presence, which can allow insight to arise. The process outlined could be perceived as iterative and flowing in a circular direction but in practice, movement can be bi-directional. The four segments are purely for illustrative purposes, in reality all aspects are deeply interconnected. I have included the two boxes summarising psychological and theological reflection in the insight part of the process because engaging in these cycles at this point can bring awareness, understanding and discernment and they are important elements of my praxis.

Figure 4.4. Model of Buddhist Contemplative Inquiry encompassing Theological and Psychological Reflection



4.5 Contemplative Practice

> Authentic religious thinking, traditionally called theology in the West, is a form of second-order critical reflection on religious belief and practice. It aims to propose ideals for thought and practice that inspire full engagement with the most vital questions and concerns in life. Theology is thus a form of contemplative practice (Wright, 2015, p.3).

In addition to contemplative practice being an integral part of my research methodology, it has become absolutely essential to my Buddhist practice, self-compassion practice and indeed, all aspects of my life. In the USA contemplative practice appears commonplace; with scholarships in contemplative science and contemplative practice built into education, health and science programmes and in the workplace. The term is less used in the UK, although with increased engagement in Mindfulness approaches, recognition of contemplative practice has begun to emerge, particularly in higher education at the Universities of Bangor, Oxford, Exeter, Aberdeen and Queen Mary Edinburgh. A Contemplative Pedagogy Network has also been established in the UK and online.

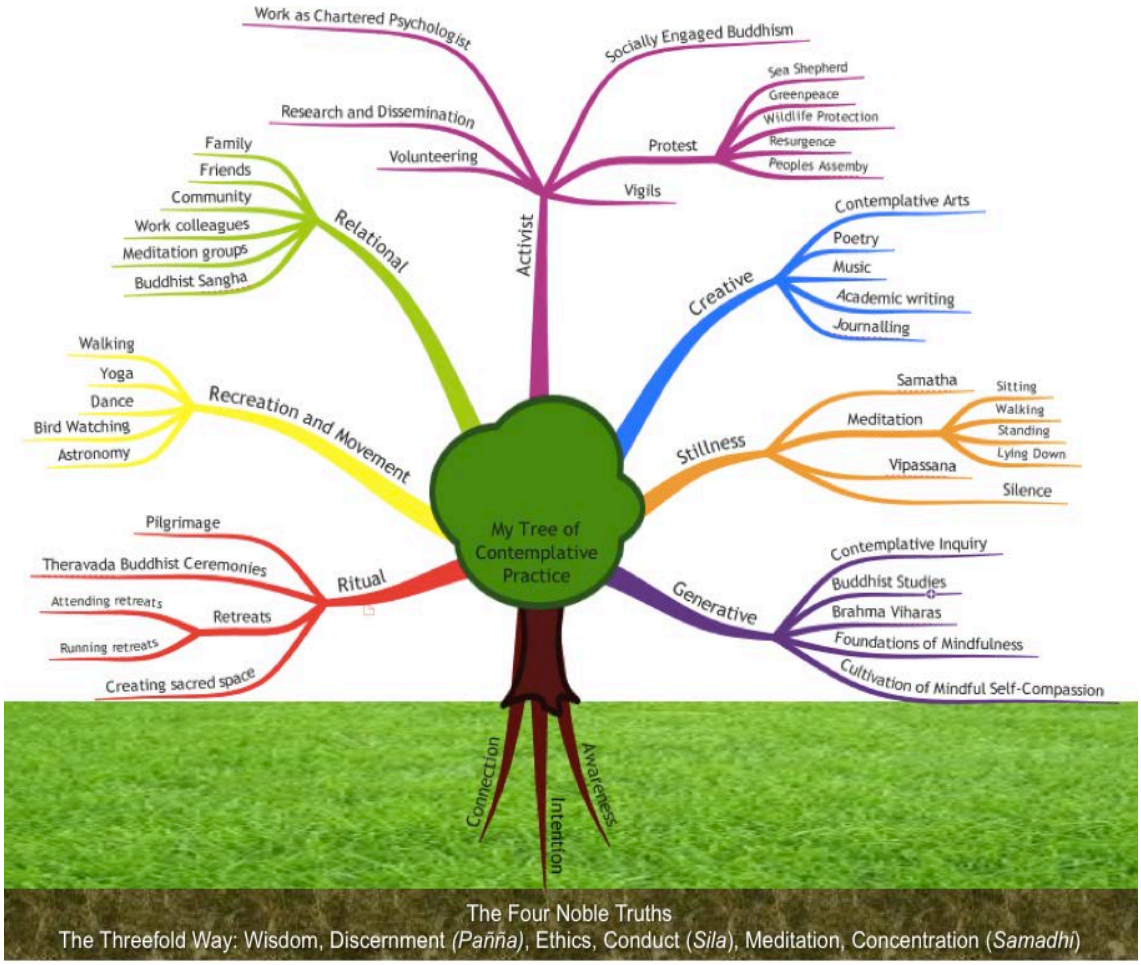
The word contemplation was not one that I was familiar with; it conjured up images of Saints and monastics within the Christian traditions. I mistakenly believed that it required separation from the world and involved years devotional of prayer and renunciation. This was not the kind of thing a working class woman from Birmingham, living in Essex gets involved with, and definitely not a psychologist. My only encounters with contemplation had been through prayer when, from age 5 to 18, I went to Methodist and Evangelical churches. However from age 19, disillusionment arose from the hypocrisy and oppression I experienced, especially as a young woman, within the Christian organisations I was involved with. I then faced rejection because I chose to marry a non-Christian person. These painful experiences repelled me from any kind of spiritual activity for the next 21 years. Then, at age 40, I stumbled upon Buddhist teachings; they opened up a new way of seeing and engaging with life. The teachings that love and compassion is our true nature, and available for all beings, resonated deep within me. The psychology in Buddhist teachings increasingly began to covertly inform my work as a psychologist as well as my fledgling meditation practice. For once, I could begin to sense the possibility of being in the world from a more accepting, peaceful, calm and aware place, both internally and externally.

Whilst the Buddhist traditions are not immune from controversy and change is needed, particularly in relation to the full ordination of women, I felt safe and at home in the Buddhist Theravada tradition; there was no judgement, rejection, condemnation or hell-fire aimed in my direction. My engagement in Buddhism was not about checking-out and turning new-age and alternative, it was most definitely about checking-in and connecting with life. For the next ten years, my Buddhist and psychology practice continued to develop, social and environmental activism began to re-emerge, and yet they all felt like very distinct parts of my life. This began to change through the process of the Professional Doctorate and after encountering the work of Zajonic (2009) on contemplative inquiry. I attended and presented a scientific poster (Appendix 9) at the 2nd International Symposium for Contemplative Studies in Boston in 2014. I was one of 20 people from the UK out of approximately 1700 delegates and this was my first exposure to contemplative practice and all that it could involve, including the integration of Eastern wisdom and Western science. During this time I began to realise that contemplative practice could be a unifying factor and a powerful bridge between my private, professional, academic and Buddhist life.

Essentially, contemplative practice provided a framework through which I could envisage what Buddhist practical theology looked like in practice, develop self-compassion and integrate my various practices and contexts. Indeed, as highlighted by Duerr (2004) “These practices have the potential to bring different aspects of oneself into focus to help develop personal goodness and compassion, and to awaken an awareness of the interconnectedness of all life” (p.37). I have found contemplative practice to be a dynamic process that allows a deeper engagement and exploration of experience. It encourages practice and helps me to consider which causes, conditions, views and practices enable or disable self-compassion, wellbeing and spiritual development (Hanson 2009). Through contemplative practice and developing self-compassion I have found integration on many levels, where important aspects of my life could be incorporated into my practice. The metaphor of the Tree of Contemplative Practice (Duerr, 2002; CMind, 2015) provided a creative framework for this integration.

My Contemplative Practice contains many sources of inspiration, each aspect is detailed in Appendix 10. Figure 4.5. below illustrates my Tree of Contemplative Practices. At the roots are intention, connection and awareness, all embedded in ground that is nourished by the Four Noble Truths, wisdom, ethics and concentration. There are seven main branches, all of which enable intention to turn into practice and Dhamma into compassionate action.

Figure 4.5. My Tree of Contemplative Practices



4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the relevance of practical theology to Buddhist practice, in relation to methodology and praxis, and what I understand Buddhist practical theology to be. For me, Buddhist practical theology and praxis is Engaged Buddhism, that responds to human struggle, contemporary issues and offers ethical, spiritual, philosophical and psychological guidance to reduce suffering and enable compassionate living. I have considered how Buddhist practical theology translates into practice for me and has deepened my understanding of Buddhist teachings through a disciplined and systematic approach involving contemplative practice and theological reflection. I have shown that there is complementarity between Buddhist and Christian theological reflection, and psychological reflexive practice. Whilst it needs to be borne in mind that some aspects of practical theology may not apply to Buddhist practical theology (Sanford, 2016), Christian and Buddhist practical theologies can learn from each other and have much to contribute to cross-disciplinary dialogue and contemporary issues (Osmer, 2012; Sanford, 2014). I have shown how Buddhist practical theology can make a valuable contribution to theological academia in terms of theory, method and praxis.

The next three chapters move into what unfolded as a result of my year of contemplative practice. Buddhist teachings and practices and practical theology methods of reflexivity, praxis and inquiry are woven into the stories that will emerge. My autoethnographic journey is about to begin and it will follow many paths and cross varied terrain as I explore the experiences of learning, applying and teaching MSC.

Part 3. Finding the Way: A year of Contemplative Practice

A Field Guide to Chapters 5, 6 and 7: Paths, Routes and Wider Horizons

5.1 Castleton 2016: Shedding light on the landscape.

I would like to shed some light on the following three chapters that will chart the paths I have taken in exploring the landscape of self-compassion. This journey was recorded in my contemplative journal, where the challenges, revelations and changes that arose from my inner world and experiences were captured and reflected on. My journal was not the story; it provided a vast and rich source of raw material that formed the basis of the stories that I am about to share. As the core themes became prominent they informed my decisions on what to include in the following chapters relative to what was most pertinent to understanding the development, application and impact of self-compassion across all my contexts. Whilst my contemplative journal was the primary source, there were instances where, in order to tell a more complete story, I drew upon excerpts from my MSC training, research and retreat logs, unearthed historical documents, old personal diaries and photographs. All entries from the journal, logs and diaries are shown in italics.

Chapter 5 details my personal journey into self-compassion. Exploring this interior and exterior landscape allowed fresh light to be shed on what had previously been shrouded by darkness and despair. Stories emerged that had never before been told; they had lain dormant for a lifetime but in the safe and healing embrace of self-compassion they dared to emerge.

Throughout Chapter 5, to illustrate my brokenness, I followed the process of the Japanese art of Kintsugi where a broken item is mended with gold (Figure 5.1). It is a contemplation on the imperfect nature of life and challenges “the desire for perfection to reveal a truer and more beautiful view of life” (Juniper, 2003, p.81). My poem Mending with Gold and corresponding photographs illustrate my experience of Kintsugi and what this represents in my story. As the contemplative year unfolded and I tested out self-compassion practice for myself, I experienced many changes and began to trust in the power of compassion to face pain, mend brokenness and be a golden seam of strength, balance and joy.

Chapter 6 focuses on my professional context in which I explored the impact of self-compassion on myself as a psychologist and an MSC teacher. Mistakenly, I initially assumed that this would be less challenging terrain than Chapter 5. What emerged was the extent of my emotional vulnerability, the impact of my driveness and the hazards in my work. I realised the impact of meeting these experiences with self-compassion when I experienced psychological and behavioural changes in relation to how I cared for my professional self as well as changes in how I clinically practised, supervised and taught.

Chapter 7 explores the far horizons of self-compassion, covering areas that are intricately connected to my personal, professional contexts, Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist practical theology. It illustrates the process of “theory, research, practice, person” (McIlveen, 2008, p.5) and how this informs and generates wise compassionate action. This chapter shows that rather than being a self-focussed activity; the inner support, nourishment, courage and resilience that emerges from practising self-compassion enables engagement in the world, without burning out.

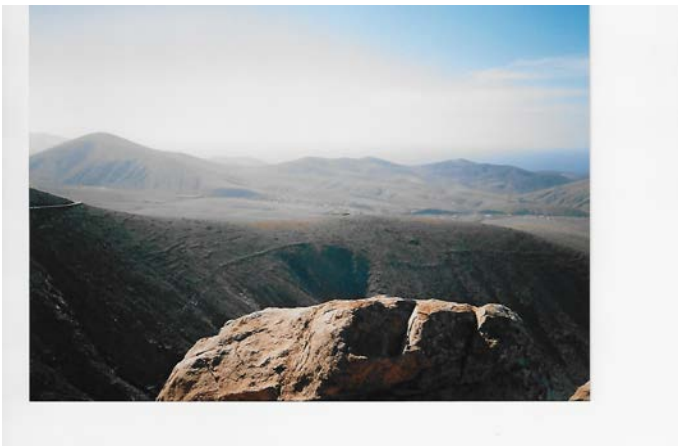
Finally, because of the sensitive nature of the material I am sharing, I trust that readers will practise self-care and I would encourage this. We are all walking wounded and the following chapters could activate areas of pain. My intention is to engage and evoke, not cause distress. My ethical responsibility is to tell the most complete and truthful story that I can, with least harm. I have written from the heart, not just from the hurt (Brown, 2016), my stories emerge from a place of healing that occurs where love, compassion and joy meet loss, deep pain and despair. For some of my experiences the healing is transformational and complete, in others it is partial and ongoing, and areas remain where work is yet to begin.

Figure 5.1. Kintsugi: Mending with Gold

Mending with Gold

It took time to find the right container
Then in a heartbeat, Sasha cat died
leaving her water bowl
I notice the heart pull to preserve the perfect bowl,
reluctant to add more brokenness.
I wrap up the bowl to contain the broken fragments
I pause, stand, feel the weight of it in my hand
On the outbreath I let go
Falling to the ground
I hear the sound of breaking upon impact
The sound of pain in my heart
I unwrap and brokenness is revealed
the pieces are gently laid out
Noticing the impulse for a quick fix
I worry that it is too broken
What if I can't be mended?
I get to know the edges and angles
Carefully offer up fragile pieces to each other
Finding the strongest fragment to support the weaker
Intention and focus support an unsteady hand
a strand of glue is applied to the edge, bonding begins
each piece held while mending takes place
When the seam is strong, another fragment is added
Rushing the mend will break it again
Piece by piece, each patiently reunited
Fractures find healing and new life
transformed with seams of gold
Story lines brought into present view
Better than New
Beauty in brokenness and imperfection.

Chapter 5. Personal Paths: Mountains and Valleys



5.2 Cradled by the Earth (March 1999)

A resting place for my broken heart and tired body in a warm hollow of the mountain

5.1 Standing at the Threshold

My stories arise from all of the paths I have walked, mountains I have climbed and rested upon, valleys I have entered and holes into which I have repeatedly fallen. I am shaped by my birthplace, where I have lived, who and what I have encountered, felt, seen, done and had done to me. The landscape of my life is formed by deep impressions, chasms, wastelands, sublime mountain peaks and rich abundant valleys. Conditions have been harsh and unrelenting as well as beautiful, joyous and tranquil. There are many paths; new, well-worn, diversions, dead-ends, painfully steep and rock-strewn as well as those yet to be discovered, they are all part of the adventure.

My heartfelt intention is to share the story of my journey into self-compassion, with the hope that elements of my experiences may resonate, be a source of reflection and encouragement for new journeys to be undertaken and shared, for the reader as well as myself. As I step over the threshold into writing my story, I notice uncertainty, discomfort and the presence of some of the Hindrances, identified in Buddhist teachings as desire, doubt, anxiety, torpor and aversion (SN 46:55; Thera, 1994; Bodhi 2005). In the midst of the fog they generate, I pause, breathe and offer compassion and loving-kindness to ease these feelings. This helps me acknowledge what is arising and needed, I am calmed, soothed and ready to continue.

> At this threshold a great complexity of emotion comes alive: confusion, fear, excitement, sadness, hope. This is one of the reasons such vital crossings were always clothed in ritual. It is wise in your own life to be able to recognize and acknowledge the key thresholds: to take your time, to feel all the varieties of presence that accrue there; to listen inward with complete attention until you hear the inner voice calling you forward. The time has come to cross (O'Donohue, 2008, p.48-49).

At this threshold my inner voice is calling for urgent change, for my own and the sake of everyone around me. I am exploring my process of cultivating Mindful Self-compassion (MSC) because I need to learn how to relate to myself differently, feel more at ease, less depressed and fearful, more balanced, joyful and connected. I also need to feel more resilient and less overwhelmed in my work. I could see how self-compassion could help and I had begun to work with clients in this way, but despite all the wise teachings I encountered in psychology, Buddhist teachings and MSC trainings, I still had not really found my own path. I believed in the work and had felt some benefit but I did not know it for myself (Jung, 1959). This story involves significant encounters and moments in time, it has meant facing pleasant and unpleasant experiences, some welcome and inspirational, others unwelcome, intrusive, feared and, until now, avidly avoided. As I begin to write in early 2016, I return to the year-long contemplative journal I completed in July 2015 to find a starting point. I still recognise the terrain but much has changed. Scrambling around in the undergrowth, I remember the poem by David Whyte (2012) that tells me to honour my own experience:

> Start close in, don't take the second step or the third, start with the first thing, close in, the step you don't want to take. Start with the ground you know, the pale ground beneath your feet, your own way to begin the conversation.
>
> (Excerpt from Start Close In, Whyte, 2012, pp.360-361)

My words can fail me when I need them whereas poetry never has, so many times in my life only poetry has held the power speak to me, to meet emotion and be witness to my experience. Chavis (2011) emphasises "the power of poetry to awaken our minds and spirits, soothe our hearts and even transform the course of our lives" (p.24).

In November 2014, during morning meditation, I contemplated the poem Wild Geese below, I have often heard and shared this poem but reading it that morning was profound and the words fell deep into my heart (Germer, 2009). The poem captures all the elements of Mindful Self-compassion: mindfulness, loving-kindness and common humanity, but more importantly, I felt it encapsulated my experiences and needs. Oliver's words will weave like silken threads through my unfolding stories.

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you about mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
Are moving across the landscapes,
Over the prairies and the deep trees,
The mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clear blue air,
Are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
The world offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
Over and over announcing your place
In the family of things.

(Oliver, 1986, p.14)

5.2 Be Good and Walk Perfectly

5.3 The Perfect Bowl

> You do not have to be good.
> You do not have to walk on your knees
> For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting
> You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves
> (Excerpt from Wild Geese, Oliver, 1986, p.14)

When I read Oliver's words my heart soars, then my inner-critic overwrites them, declaring that not only must I be good, I have to be perfect. I knew my inner-critic would be coming along on this journey, it is inescapable and has dictated the terms under which I have operated for as long as I can remember, repeating *ad nauseam* "not good enough". Right from the beginning of my journal, the picture-perfect contemplative landscape, expected by the inner-critic, is shattered with my practice following the familiar spasmodic pattern I had repeated for the past 10 years. My experience of practice varies wildly from feeling nurtured, strong and finding refuge to encountering fear, boredom and frustration. Compassion practices that soothe, encourage and strengthen can also be totally drowned out by mind storms. This is the normal ebb and flow of practice, it is naturally imperfect, but to my inner-critic this is proof that my Buddhist and contemplative practice is not good enough, and herein also lies the tyranny of idealism purveyed by my "spiritual superego" (Welwood, 2000, p.213).

5.4 Brokenness revealed

It was weeks into the journal before I offered myself what I needed which was some loving care, rest and space to soothe my hurt and heavy heart, tired mind and body. When I am able to do this, rather than being stuck in despair, I am motivated to engage in greater self-care such as meditation, walking and yoga. However, when things go wrong and I am struggling, I relate to myself in a very harsh, critical and painful way and negatively compare myself to others (Neff, 2003a). This generates further feelings of inadequacy, fear and aversion. It is, therefore, important to understand the causes of this distress (past experiences, present views and future predicting), be mindful of the painful, destructive and distorting effects of self-criticism and learn to respond with compassion and kindness.

Before encountering MSC, when I practised loving-kindness for myself I did not fully feel it in my heart because I believed I did not deserve it. However, I began to notice that when I followed the MSC practice of making physical contact where pain and stress was felt in my body, I felt soothed and found greater emotional connection with the kind words and loving wishes. It then became possible for me to glimpse what it really means to be a “good friend” to myself (Germer, 2009, p.136). This is counter to my usual harsh self-criticism, which is a form of self-hatred (Rubin, 1975). When this concept was raised with the Dalai Lama in 1989, he was perplexed and struggled to understand how this was possible given that true human nature is based on love and compassion (Kornfield, 2008; Jinpa, 2015).

5.2.1 My Inner-Critic: The Moose

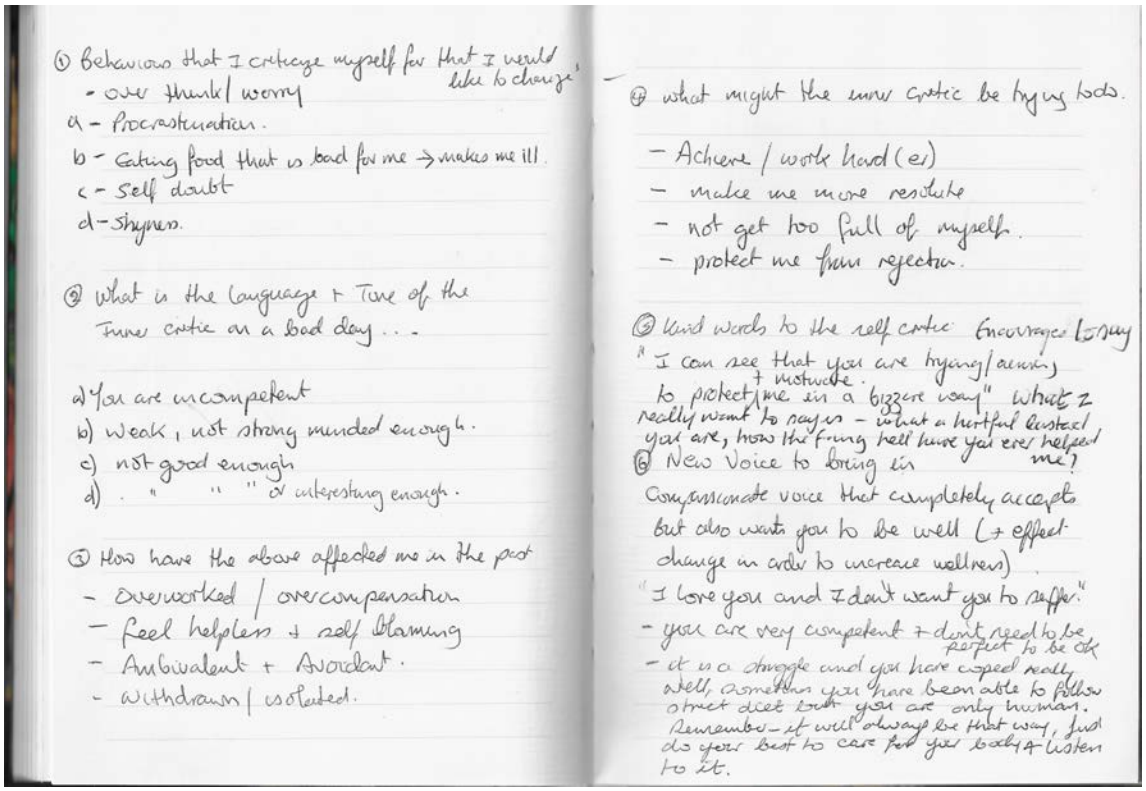
The prevalence of self-criticism, particularly in Western culture, is a matter of concern, in Buddhism and psychology, because it distorts our relationships with ourselves and others and separates us from our true nature. Such a disconnection holds destructive potential for the individual but there are wider implications because it can also foster damaging behaviour (Welwood, 2000). Therefore, it is vital to understand sources of self-criticism, recognise the impossibility of perfectionism, learn to forgive ourselves for not being perfect (Jinpa, 2015) and then cultivate earnestly the antidote to self-hatred, which is the practice of self-compassion and loving-kindness (Rubin, 1975; Salzberg, 1997; Welwood, 2000; Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007; Kornfield, 2008).

The inner-critic arises from fear of rejection and judgement and evaluation, it evolves primarily from childhood experiences in relation to parents and significant others (Germer, 2009; Gilbert 2009). The underlying purpose is to keep us safe, avoid judgement or rejection, to learn and improve (Neff, 2011a). However, it is common to internalise a sense of being wrong and inadequate, feel isolation, shame and engage in self-attacking as a result (Neff, 2003a; Gilbert and Choden, 2013). An inner-critic can be present as one's own voice or the internalised voice of another, either way it is powerful and poses as the truth, when it is actually a judgement. Working on the inner-critic is challenging, in August 2012, during the first Mindful Self-compassion training course to be held in the UK, I encountered the Inner-Critic exercise, here is the note from my reflective training log:

> *The exercise on 'Motivating ourselves with Self-compassion really shook me up. Recognising how much pain, hurt and disablement my inner-critic had caused made me very angry; I had no kind words to offer to it. When Kristin suggested some phrases, they did not resonate because I feel I deserve the criticism. I felt distressed and then shut down emotionally, I was unable to do the written exercise or the compassionate letter to self. I thought about clients who have savage critics inside their heads, I wonder how this exercise would be for them; my own inner-critic is bad enough!*

I engaged in further MSC work on my inner-critic between 2012 and 2014, which involved recognising the tone of the voice in my head, the impact in my body, then soothing myself in response to this and trying to bring a more compassionate voice. However, I still had not fully engaged with this work because my inner-critic would drown out kind words with harsh ‘truths’. I also felt shame over the presence of my inner-critic, which would mock “if you were any sort of half decent psychologist, mindfulness teacher or Buddhist you should have got this sorted by now!” In the MSC Teacher Training in July 2014, I decided to face it, commit to the Inner-Critic exercise and see what unfolded. Figure 5.2, below, shows what I recorded in my MSC training log:

Figure 5.2. Inner-critic Work recorded in MSC Training Log



① Behaviours that I criticize myself for that I would like to change
- over think / worry
a - Procrastination.
b - Eating food that is bad for me → makes me ill.
c - Self doubt
d - Shyness.

② What is the language + Tone of the Inner critic on a bad day . . .

a) You are incompetent
b) Weak, not strong minded enough.
c) not good enough
d) " " " or interesting enough.

③ How have the above affected me in the past
- Overworked / overcompensation
- Feel helpless + self blaming
- Ambivalent + Avoidant.
- Withdrawn / isolated.

④ what might the inner critic be trying to do.
- Achieve / work hard (er)
- make me more resolute
- not get too full of myself.
- protect me from rejection.

⑤ Kind words to the self critic Encourages + motivate.
" I can see that you are trying / aiming to protect me in a bizzare way" What I really want to say is - what a hurtful bastard you are, how the f-ing hell have you ever helped me?

⑥ New Voice to bring in
Compassionate voice that completely accepts but also wants you to be well (+ effect change in order to increase wellness)
" I love you and I don't want you to suffer."
- you are very competent + don't need to be perfect to be ok
- it is a struggle and you have coped really well, sometimes you have been able to follow street deal but you are only human. Remember - it will always be that way, just do your best to care for your body + listen to it.

I remember staring at the page with a sad and heavy heart, realising not only did I carry all this pain around, but these critical and punitive ‘facts’ have nearly driven me into the ground. The request to offer kind words to the inner-critic still felt impossible so, to counter the anger and ambivalence felt, I decided to externalise this demon and use humour; I decided to call my inner-critic The Moose.

I have had several encounters with Moose, they are strong and imposing beings, if you keep your distance they appear calm and peaceful but at close quarters they can be temperamental and aggressive. A wilderness guide in Canada told me that if a person was mean and nasty they were called an ‘8by8’ which equates to the number of points on each side of the antlers of a fully grown adult Moose. My inner-critic was definitely a fully-grown 8by8 moose; here is a likeness of her:

5.5 The Moose

In part 6 of the Inner-Critic exercise, a compassionate and kind voice emerged this time, hesitantly saying: “you… don’t need to be perfect to be ok”. This time, the words flowed right into me; I felt the truth of them, which brought deep relief. My recognition of being OK diluted the feeling of fear and from this position I could begin to see that most of The Moose’s declarations were untrue. I also felt more able to face the possibility that some of the criticisms may be true and rather than this being proof of my inadequacy, I could accept these shortcomings as part of being human. Through seeing this more clearly, I felt motivated to respond for my own wellbeing rather than feeling defensive, defective and, therefore, avoidant and undeserving. I experienced what Neff (2003b) predicted; that the more self-compassionate we are, the greater willingness there is to accept failings and be motivated to make positive change. Additionally, through awareness of the pain and sadness from the impact of my harsh words, rather than making a situation worse by inwardly and sometimes outwardly, shouting at myself, I began to respond with kindness. Caring for my feelings in this way was more helpful, less hurtful and helped me stop fuelling the proliferation in my mind (Gilbert and Irons, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007).

Journal: 1 October 2014

Inner-critic present, I feel low, had to work at just sitting for a few minutes. Feelings of sadness and heaviness in my chest. The Moose reinforces one of my bottom-lines of not being good enough - the rule is that I have to work harder than everyone else to the highest standard in order to be any good at all (Fennell, 1999). My critical thoughts are: You do not work hard enough, write well enough, obviously you are ***not*** *smart enough. I mindfully breathed with the sadness and dejection that arose then compassionately said to myself "you work* ***too hard****, you want to do something well because it matters but the judgement you heap upon yourself eclipses this and distorts the view". I gazed at the outline of my body reflected in my computer screen, I felt moved as I looked at myself and allowed loving kindness to fill my heart. I smiled warmly, feeling deep gratitude for the person that I see, glad that she is alive on this earth. I could see that this is a truer picture, it feels good and the Moose slinks off into the woods.*

When I offered compassion and soothed the feeling of sadness over this struggle, I found ease but sometimes there is resistance, due to feeling that being compassionate was letting myself off the hook. I know this view is incorrect but old habits cling on, I am learning that it takes time for the mind to change and this requires an ongoing commitment to continually develop these skills to enable compassion to flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). As my awareness develops I am more able to notice the acutely painful impact of judgment and this generates a sense of urgency to repair the damage. I have also learned the futility of trying to fix something through liberally applying meditation or MSC exercises; I have tried it, and failed, many times (Germer, 2009). Essential parts of the process, through contemplative practice, are learning to accept, understand cause and effect and skillfully respond to what arises (Sumedho, 2010). This process is akin to fully inhabiting the foothills and valleys and taking time to get to know the landscape in detail rather than always striving for results or the success of the ascent (Shepherd, 1977).

The Moose often operates imperceptibly, powerfully and without question, making declarations of inadequacy, blaming, pouring out insults and sarcasm and raining down endless negative judgements. It says things like: What is wrong with you? You have no right to feel this way, you are just not good enough, interesting enough, successful enough, once people get to know you they will be disappointed, everyone else copes, does it better, smarter, faster, etc.

When I investigate this diatribe, it is no wonder that I ruminate, overreact, blame, and experience reactive depression and anxiety. Maladaptively, I would do anything to escape this pain, usually through overcompensation, over working or employing the safety behaviour of avoidance to protect myself from failure. Now, when something goes wrong, I am more able to see what actually happened, what was needed and acknowledge how I feel rather than be dictated to by distorted and destructive views. Whilst this considerably quietens The Moose, she can creep out of the undergrowth at any point and go on the attack; in the face of this I can find it hard to initiate a compassionate response.

> *Research Journal: 29 August 2016*
> *Right now, writing this first draft, I am thinking this is a complete mess, sobbing, I say to P, I just can't fucking do this, I hate what I am writing, I have been going round in circles for weeks, I don't think I have it in me to carry on. He hugs me and says "let me just check"… he places his hand on my chest, smiles and says, "no… its ok, the heart is still in there". Such a deeply wise and compassionate response. He then asked, "Is it as bad as you think it is?" I shouted "**Yes,** you have NO idea, all the time I am writing I can hear you have failed, its not good enough". He looked at me intently and asked "all the work you have done before, what has the feedback been?" Reluctantly I replied, "it has been very good, no one has said I am not capable, people have said they are delighted and honoured to be involved". I know this is true, but still feel sick; I sit here now acknowledging and soothing the anxiety and distress.*

When I feel dispirited, vulnerable and uncertain, my inner-critic just tramples over me. In this mind-set I question the quality of my MSC practice; if it was really any good, how come I feel like this and I am not automatically soothing myself? Then I remember that awareness of this struggle *is* the practice, this enables me to see where kindness and compassion are most needed and respond appropriately. I can then say to The Moose; "see, I am not rubbish at self-compassion and, by the way, I do not need to be perfect".

> For many, improving self-esteem through self-improvement is a moving and receding target, as the habit of self-judgment outruns all efforts to overcome it… Among Western Buddhist practitioners, this experience is often unresponsive to healing through *sīla* or mindful awareness, leading many to seek more targeted practices such as mindful self-compassion and psychotherapy (Fulton, 2015).

5.2.2 Weather Warning

5.6 Heavy rain and storms ahead, will cause damage

The work I have done on my inner-critic has borne fruit but it is far from being extinguished, the deeper constructs of beliefs and expectations that form the basis of a perfect ideal self can still have the power to cause suffering.

> *Journal: 20 July 2014.*
> *I have been reflecting upon the expectations and pressures that arise from the tyranny of this unrealistic and unachievable Ideal Self (Rogers, 1959). The Ideal… woman, wife, friend, psychologist, Buddhist, academic just feeds into my perfectionism and sense of failing. However it is important to remember that this is all conditioning, it is not-self, it's all bullshit.*

The conditioning that underlies an ideal self is learned from early years and propagated by society and culture. Jack (1991) highlighted the impact of gender ideology of the "good me" (p.91) and because of the pervasive and unrealistic nature of expectation of this ideal, depression, disconnection and self-rejection can arise. Jack and Ali (2010) emphasised the dangers of silencing the self arising from the conditionality of being female and the rules that constitute being a good woman i.e. always being selfless and putting others needs first or being compliant rather than conflictual. Such conditioning can be a barrier to self-compassion because it can cause a loss of voice, self and power; the consequences of which can be anger, fear, depression, shame, repression, IBS, lack of self-care, eating disorders, post-natal depression and self-harm (Jack, 2014). I have experienced all but the last three of these consequences.

I learned the rules very quickly, particularly that as a female you will be loved according to how good and compliant you are. From early childhood I was praised for making myself useful and I was also a tomboy, unconsciously trying to be the complete child; Daddy's little girl as well as John, the longed for son who died at birth. I played and watched football and cricket and read Spiderman comics. Social and cultural conditioning go very deep, and for me, several years of therapy, and reflecting on the Buddhist teaching of non-self (*anattā*), have been necessary to even begin to challenge this conditioning and alleviate the effects. This work continues.

5.7 Football in the park with Uncle Cecil and Uncle Harry

In addition to the pressure of ideals and expectations, during May 2015, I reflected in my journal at what point had I become a perfectionist where failure was not an option. I see perfectionism in myself as being self-orientated and centred around striving (Hill and Curran, 2016), a definition is "working very hard to achieve standards and being highly self-critical when these are not achieved" (Egan, Shafran and Wade, 2012, p.1). I work with clients who are experiencing the tyranny of perfectionism, but I had not done the same therapeutic work on myself, because I felt that my perfectionism was necessary, imperative to my survival and my very sense of worth depended on it (Egan, Shafran and Wade, 2012). My inner-critic and perfectionism had been around from early years, perfectionism then morphed into a full-blown apparition by the time I had completely failed to have a child. From the day I called a halt to proceedings in the midst of yet another infertility consultation - when I said that I had to stop, find another life, find a reason for being on this planet - I *had* to find purpose and direction and so embarked on the road to become a Chartered Psychologist. On one hand this response was adaptive because it helped me cope, I achieved my goal of becoming qualified and successful at developing the most challenging and rewarding career I could ever have hoped for. However, a maladaptive aspect arose when it became about my identity, value and a reason to exist.

These were ideal conditions to propagate fear of failing and fuel overcompensation and unrelenting perfectionism. The consequences have been to increase my propensity for depression and anxiety and cause stress, exhaustion and reinforcement of the view of not being good enough, all of which adds to the feeling of being deeply flawed and wounded. The wounds cannot be seen on the outside, they are well hidden, but internally it is a different story. Storms of depression have accompanied me throughout the past 44 years, invisibly battering me from all sides. I know from my own experience and witness daily with my clients, the pain, shame and struggle with depression, not least the feeling of weakness, failure, judgement, stigma and despair that it brings.

> *Journal: 22 February 2015*
> *Feeling horribly depressed today, the dull, flat feeling of the last few days has moved to a deeper, sadder, more painful place. It is like being stuck in treacle thick bog surrounded by dense fog – requiring great effort to move as well as not being able to see clearly or even care. A particular detachment comes into play, not dissociation, more like having an anaesthetic that has not worked, where there is disconnection with the physical body together with a dire mixture of feeling dead inside and at the same time experiencing crushing pain.*

The depression I experience probably falls unhelpfully under the diagnosis of "Depressive Disorder Not Otherwise Specified" (DSM-IV-TR, 2000, p.178-9). Patterns of my behaviour include hyperactivity, restlessness, seeking extremes of experience, overspending and drinking too much. At the other end of the scale I can experience hopelessness, withdrawal, alienation, anxiety, rumination, inability to cope and chronic fatigue. These symptoms are mercifully not experienced to a clinically acute level of being unable to function for months but it can entail days and sometimes weeks of desolation and despair.

5.2.3 Storm Damage

A perfect storm is "an extremely bad situation in which many bad things happen at the same time" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017). This phenomenon occurs where a multitude of conditions converge at a point in time with serious consequences and this is what happened, right in the last month of my year of contemplative practice.

My journal entries between 8-18 June 2015 showed warning signs and consequences of overcompensation and overwork, but at the time I was blind to the oncoming storm.

> *Journal 8-12 June 2015. Short evening sit.*
> *I just want to write down that the last few weeks have been unspeakable, there are no words. MSC teaching, more clients than I dare say, 50+ hours over 4-days. We leave tomorrow for Dover at 4.15am. I need a break but am sick at the thought of it all. I barely pack, just shoving whatever I can into bags washed, unwashed, ironed, not Ironed, I have no idea.*
>
> *Journal: 12-18 June 2015 - away on holiday. Monday 15 June*
> *I am at the point of drowning and exhaustion, the knot in my stomach is tight, contraction and unease increase and joy evaporates. My body lets me know that I have not been at all kind to myself, even though my mind tries to minimise this.*
>
> *Journal: Tuesday 16 June*
> *Feeling bad… must take more responsibility for how I am. If I cannot meet my own needs how can I even begin to meet others? I am not an easy person to live with, it must be exhausting, I am exhausted with myself.*
>
> *Journal: Wednesday 17 June 2015*
> *I have gone into Meltdown – seriously on the edge. Not coping at all, feeling overwhelmed. The time pressures of the past days were the last thing I needed. Crying and feeling hysterical, shouting uncontrollably at P for missing a turning, noticing crushing self-blame but unable to stop it. A small explosion has gone off in my head, feeling sad, hollowed out, empty – in a bad way. Lying down inside our camper looking out at everyone on the campsite, happy relaxed and smiling, I feel envy, alien, angry. I don't wash, brush hair, change clothes, it is all I can do to sit upright at a table and try and swallow food. I crawl into bed and stare into the darkness, I am afraid, I just breathe, my body and mind cannot cope with anything else.*

5.8 Tears inside the Happy Camper

Thursday 18 June 2015

Taking one breath one moment at a time – I am unable to do anything else, can't make it all right – even for P, I have no energy. I am alarmed by the intensity of my feelings. Went to a spa and bathed in the warm waters for hours, it soothed my fragile body and mind. I practised soften, soothe allow, felt a little ease. This was short-lived as I was awake most of the night, feeling rigid, frozen, and barely able to breathe. I repeat Loving-Kindness over and over, eventually, I soften enough for tears to break through. Sleep comes at some point in the dark. P worried about me, me too, I cried as I rested in the loving-kindness he was giving me. I needed reassurance that I had not failed. We rearranged the holiday and headed home.

Journal: 20 June 2015 Back Home

Lying awake again, Panic – I wondered as I come to the end of the year of self-compassion practice and all the journal work, if it has made any real difference… Surely I should not still be so distressed, reactive, repeating the same old behaviour and still not noticing the early warning signs. I am shocked that I tumbled into such a dark hole. I put my hand on my heart and notice my body soften to this tender response. I realise I have been doing a lot of the core practices without thinking or writing about them. Just quietly practising amidst the whole storm and here I am 4 days later, not in great shape but better than I was, whereas not that long ago I would have been in a mess for weeks.

I had done it again, despite being exhausted I had still crammed things into every minute and organised the holiday to death, down to the last detail of time (hours and minutes) and places to get to over thousands of kilometres. This behaviour escalates to compulsive levels when I feel out of control and overwhelmed. Back in 2002, when my Dad was dying, one of my lists dropped out of my diary during supervision. When I went back to collect it, my supervisor said she was “horrified” by it. I tried to laugh it off but was mortified and felt shame that my only way of coping had been exposed. I find it hard to accept that I can still be as manic, non-stop and extreme as ever and that this behaviour has continued for so long.

In the poem The Guest House, Rumi said: “This being human is a guest-house, every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness. Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all!“ (Barks, 1997, p.142). My response is that there was no opportunity to open the door and welcome anything in, the force of my emotions put paid to that:

Gate-crashing

On a searing hot June Day
Somewhere in the Black Forest
I am in Rumi’s Guest House
But I didn’t get the chance to
open the door and welcome them in
It got smashed in by the unstoppable storm force
The house was ransacked
I fell down, crushed, helpless
mute, motionless
Barely breathing in the darkness
I crawl out of the rubble when light comes
And the dust settles
Taking one breath, a moment at a time
Offering Loving-kindness
It is all I can do amongst the debris.

Through MSC practices I am also now able to mentally and physically soothe myself through soothing touch, affectionate breathing and loving-kindness, which was not available before. These practices do not always have an immediate positive effect but are vital to continue to practice because they provide comfort, relief and a pathway to reconnection. The view of myself in a depressed state has changed; previously the inner-critic would have rejected the actual self, holding the ideal self up as a damming indictment of what I am not (the perfect, smiley, happy person). Now practising self-compassion allows care and kindness to enter into the struggle. Other important things that stop me going under more often are the precious relationship with P and a few close friends alongside my anchor points of Buddhist and other contemplative practices involving poetry, walking, being in nature, bird watching and astronomy. These activities encourage my ever-decreasing, spiralling down perspective to open outwards to take in the delights of sky, stars, sun, elements, birds and all the life around.

Journal: 20 June 2015 Evening sitting and walk, then writing:

Don't' Run… Slow Down

You don't have to keep chasing, fleeing, hiding
Slow down… take a breath, it is ok
You've always been running, fear fuelled
To attain, not fail, to not get found out
To get away, stay safe from hurt and rejection
To not feel, to feel something, anything
To feel there was a point to being alive after all
At the finishing post of fleeing lies exhaustion,
disconnection and absolute acute loneliness
Slow down just enough so you can see more, sense more
Allow the storm to pass
Hear the birds calling and nature's voice whispering, "you are not alone"
All around is earth, air, sky, and life in abundance
Be still long enough to see, hear, feel, and heal
To realise you are enough – you always were – from Day 1
Be still long enough to find strength and courage
to turn towards the pain and emptiness
To allow, soothe, pour loving kindness and compassion in
Peer right into the cracks to see jewels of love, life, heart, and spirit.
In community with all living things
Be still long enough to see you are not alone, never were, never will be.

Coming back to my writing today (28/5/2016) I feel deep care for myself and want to shout yes, yes, yes. I remember the sitting meditation on the evening of 20th June 2015, when I got up before the end bell of my session and hand wrote the Don't Run… Slow Down poem in my diary without stopping, it was a direct transmission from my heart. As I write now, I realise that I have not felt depressed for almost a year.

5.3 The Void

> One can either flee from the void or face it. If we fail to successfully come to terms with the void, then we forfeit the chance to become a whole person… The void in the human heart means that something vital is absent. It has an ominous aspect to it in that it indicates that the individual has been deprived of that which is desired and required to live a full and happy life (Harms, 2015, p.3).

Turning towards painful places reveals the wounds and the cracks, this is important because from this place the healing process can begin. Rumi implored, "Don't turn away. Keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That's where the light enters you" (Barks, 1995, p.142). However, you need to tread carefully because in looking closer, you may be staring into a void, as I found. Whilst my tireless efforts to fill the void resulted in achievements and many extraordinary experiences, what had created this chasm had lain buried for a long time. Causes of my depression involve the inner-critic and perfectionism but there are far deeper sources of pain that can be found in the void; what lies here is early childhood loss and disenfranchised loss through childlessness (Harvey, 2002). Both inhabit a place that I have actively avoided for a long time, afraid of the darkness.

Journal: 11 September 2014. Morning sit and walking

<u>The Void</u>

A cold, dark, heavy mist rolls in
I sense the presence of the void
Fear, panic and a freezing arises,
Then, futile filling-in or fleeing ensues,
Lest the void opens
And I fall in, never to re-emerge.

Four months after my contemplation on the void, I returned to it, or rather, it returned to me during professional training involving deep inquiry and Focussing (Gendlin, 1981). Similar to MSC practice, focussing practice offers acceptance, presence and inquiry into what is needed (Madison, 2014). As I practised, I noticed the familiar tightness and fearful anxious feelings in my body, guidance was then given to create space for what had arisen, and this is what unfolded:

> *Journal: 9 February 2015*
> *Second exercise today was visualising lifting out all the things in the way, that have to be done, thought about, etc. The intention was to clear space and create lightness but the more I cleared the heavier my chest felt – the word VOID came up. I felt abject panic, the strength of it scared me, I shut down. I did not do anything more in the workshop, but did feel able return to this when I got home this evening. I felt the pain of old wounds, that in the past, I feared would eliminate me. For a while I was scared that this would inflame again. I took several deep breaths to see if I could gently be with the feelings. I breathed in deep compassion creating a safe, soothing space, after a while I felt different; rather than being solely filled with pain, anger, turmoil, there was sadness and tenderness. I cried softly in acknowledgement and held my chest. Allowing as much time as was needed, I could then engage with some Buddhist inquiry questions. I enquired whether these feelings needed anything else and the response was simply – more tenderness, so this is what I offered. I felt calm.*

This was an important experience, it demonstrated the process of change over several months when feelings in relation to the void were acknowledged in September 2014, and then four months later were more fully experienced and related to with compassion. For me this required great courage, patience and kindness and when I felt steadier, I was able to engage in deeper reflection through Buddhist inquiry. To rush, ignore or not respond compassionately to such feelings, as I had done previously, is sheer unkindness that just creates more pain. Reflecting on the effect of offering kindness and compassion into a place where I am deeply hurt and afraid further reinforces my understanding and trust in the self-compassion process. Although, cultivating a compassionate inner voice had quietened my inner-critic, I was still striving to fill the void, through overcompensation in my work and private life. Harms (2015) argues “One can fight the void and attempt to flee it; or one can face it and fill it with meaning” (p.49). I feel it is time to face it as best as I can, with the heartfelt intention of responding compassionately.

5.4 Lost and Found

This part of my story is about the suffering in the void, it tells of being lost in grief and sorrow, but it is also a story of being found, finding love and meaning in the pain and finding my place in the world. It involves finding the courage to look deeply and learn to relate in a kind and loving way to what is alive in me.

> Grief and loss and suffering, even depression and spiritual crisis - the dark nights of the soul - only worsen when we try to ignore or deny or avoid them. The healing journey begins when we face them and learn how to work with them (Kornfield, 2014, p.4.).

Kornfield's quote above emphasises that the most important response to suffering is to face it with the compassionate intention of healing. We cannot escape struggle and pain in life, it is an integral part of the path, "Life is tough. Despite our best intentions, things go wrong, sometimes *very* wrong" (Germer, 2009, p.1). The first Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths recognises the unavoidable existence of suffering (Bodhi, 2005). If we are unable to accept that this is part of life, precious time and energy are wasted in resisting and rejecting suffering. Such aversion adds further suffering, described in Buddhist teachings as the second "dart of painful feeling" (SN 36:6, Bodhi, 2005, p.31) that adds to the first dart of suffering. I know this to be true; this is how I lived for most of my life.

Being lost at various points along our life journey is inevitable but the experience of it can be very different depending on context. It can be liberating, opening up the delights of discovery of new and unplanned experiences and encounters. You can also be lost in pain, darkness, fear and aloneness where you feel you cannot continue. These are the very places where self-compassion can provide much needed nurturance and healing so that you can find your way again. However, loss can be so profound that there are no reference points, it can take a long time to find a bearing because the world as you knew it has irrevocably changed, "when you look at yourself in the mirror, you recognise the person that you were but the person inside the skin is a different person" (Cave, 2016). There was the death of my Mother (1974), miscarriage (1999), loss of motherhood (1994 to date), loss of my Father to dementia from 2000 until his death in 2003. These are the catastrophic losses that blew my world apart and littered the landscape with debris, left me not knowing which direction to take or comprehend how I was still standing.

After my Dad died, loss marched relentlessly on with six more deaths in six years, by the end of 2010 my husband and I felt like two punch-drunk prizefighters, still slugging away but numbed out to the pain and with nothing left to give. However, my understandable instinct to flee from and resist all the pain caused further pressure on the wounds. Being able to offer self-compassion and a tender witnessing of the pain from my losses has brought much needed solace. It felt safe to be present with the pain and in this awareness I could also feel the love and meaning within the losses rather than experience a singular universe of pain. From this place I began to engage with the landscape of loss in a new way and I now feel able tell the story of losing my lovely Mum, Molly Thompson (nee MacLeod). It is one I have never fully told; I have always reduced it to a rarely shared single headline “my mum died when I was ten”. The death of my mum was too sad to talk about, adults did not want to upset me, nor I them and so a veil of silence was drawn over it all. This has lasted 44 years and added to my sense of aloneness and self-neglect. Here is the story of the little girl who lost her Mum…

> It is the end of February 1974, I am 10 years old, Mum was admitted to the Queen Elizabeth hospital following a routine appointment. When I got home from school I packed her case for Dad to take (sneaking in her lighter and a packet of 20 John Players cigarettes). I was not concerned, I had become accustomed to hospital visits; Mum had been unwell for 3 years with pleurisy, hospitalisation and convalescence for months and leg ulcers that I learned to dress. I was allowed to visit her Sunday evening, I remember walking quickly into the hospital ward, eager to see her then walking straight past her. She was unrecognisable, face and hands swollen, red and bruised. I was not prepared for this, neither were the adults, I could tell. I remember feeling confused and afraid, I held her hand but not for long as it was too sore, the rest of the visit was a blur, I cannot even remember saying goodnight. It was the last time I saw her. Less than 48 hours later she died from a blood clot to her heart, age 41, in the early hours of Tuesday 5th March 1974.

The wound opens as I write this, I have had to stop typing, and my heart is pounding. Weeping, I place my hand on my heart, breathe deeply and pause for a while before I can continue.

The Tuesday afternoon of 5th March Auntie Hilda collected me from school for tea. I remember feeling something was wrong, she was unusually quiet, I thought I had annoyed her. All the adults came into the lounge, my Dad stood in front of me and told me my mum had died. I cried loudly like I had never cried before, I remember feeling stone cold numb, no pain. For years I carried shame about this, only later would I realise it was shock and find that the pain would later emerge and continue throughout my life. I have no other memories of that evening or of returning home.

5.4.1 The Blue String Bag

The day after my Mum died I was sent to stay at Aunt and Uncle's house, I remember the 20-minute walk down the road, on my own. I had just crossed Carshalton Road to continue down Caversham Road and I remember stopping, standing on the corner and staring down at Mum's blue string bag in my left hand, my few bits and pieces poking out of the holes. I felt profoundly alone, feeling this was all I had, everything I knew had gone. In a haze of pain and fear, I stood there, frozen. I have no sense of how long it was before I continued walking, past the church, on my way to Auntie's. Can you see her? Can you picture the little 10-year-old fair-haired girl with her Mum's blue string bag, walking down the road on her own on this ordinary Wednesday morning, her life shattered and irrevocably changed?

5.9 The walk to Auntie's house

This happened 44 years ago but memories and emotions do not keep clock time. When I close my eyes I can clearly see Mum's blue string bag, I can feel the braided handle in my left hand and the strong pain in the depth of my chest. The body remembers, "traumatic events exact a toll on the body as well as the mind" (Rothschild, 2000, p.8). My world had completely broken and an infinite void had opened up; on one side was my life with Mum, on the other was life without her, with me swallowed up in the darkness of confusion and despair in the space in-between. Such a tearing apart causes deep wounds and changes the course of a life, my life.

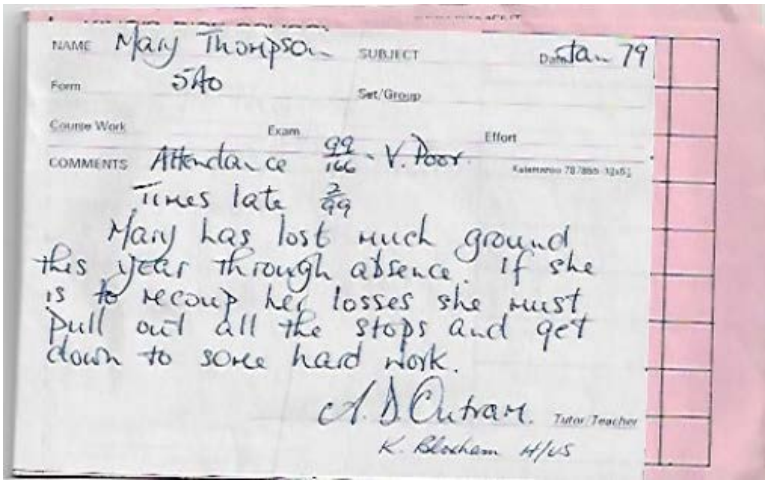
For the next four years I never slept at home during school terms because Dad was a postman who got up at 4am and I would have been left alone with no help to get to school. Our amazing next-door neighbours Alice and Walter offered to care for me, I would go round to their house late evening, Alice would bring up a glass of warm milk at bedtime and Walter taught me cribbage, which I love to this day. What they did for Dad and I was so significant, without them I could have ended up in care. Alice and Walter were our neighbours, not relatives acting out of duty, but they helped keep our little family together. This was true compassion and I wholeheartedly thank them, wishing they were still alive so I could tell them. Staying next-door also meant Dad's bedroom was next to mine, every night we would knock a message to each other. Knock (1). Knock, knock, knock, knock (4). Knock, knock, knock (3): 143 = I love you. I tapped the same message to Dad on his coffin nearly 30 years later in December 2003.

> The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication… Every separation is a link (Weil, 2002, p.145).

5.4.2 Losing Ground

I did not have a Mum anymore, I felt completely lost and yet everyone else seemed oblivious and carrying on with life as normal. No-one spoke a word to me about what had happened when I returned to school two weeks later. I did not know anyone else who had lost their Mum, I kept it to myself; something terrible had happened before the Easter holiday that I should not talk about. Two months after Mum died I took, and failed, my 11 plus exam, I was top of the class and expected to pass, I felt I had failed her. No-one asked what went wrong.

In this lost state, I rebelled and the consequences of my Mum's death began. I dropped out of senior school, going from being top of the top stream in year 1 to barely being there at all by year 3. I was told I was trouble, wasting my life with truancy, smoking, drinking and being in a gang, when I should be paying attention. I did not care. It was two decades later before I began to regain ground; gaining degrees and Chartership to where I am now, writing a thesis. A reminder of the ground that had been lost can be seen in the picture below of my final school report. Reports from the previous two years were much worse, they never made it home.


NAME Mary Thompson SUBJECT Date Jan 79
Form 5A0 Set/Group
Course Work Exam Effort
COMMENTS Attendance 99/166 - V. Poor.
Times late 2/99
Mary has lost much ground this year through absence. If she is to recoup her losses she must pull out all the stops and get down to some hard work.
A D Outram Tutor/Teacher
K. Blackham H/US

5.10 Year 5 School Report

The silence around of the loss of Mum continued into adulthood. I had no point of reference or comparison, just heart-breaking unspoken emptiness and sense of difference. I never found anyone else who had lost a mother age 10. Then in September 2014, I heard a radio programme on childhood bereavement, it completely stopped me in my tracks:

> *Journal: 30 September 2014 – missing pieces*
> *On the way to work today was a Radio 4 programme (One to One with Paddy O'Connell, Tuesday 9.30) on the Childhood Bereavement Network and the loss of a parent. I stopped driving. I have never met another child with a similar experience to me yet apparently a child loses a parent every 22 minutes in the UK – astonishing. After experiencing such a profound unending loss at age 10, I felt alien to everyone else and I waited in dread for the next bad thing to happen because I now knew they could. I sat in the car feeling deep compassion for all children who had lost one or both parents, breathing compassion in for myself and out for them.* ***For the first time, I no longer feel alone with this loss.***

The whole area of childhood parental loss remains under-researched, including baseline data, longitudinal, socioeconomic and child-centred research (Penny and Rice, 2012; Ellis, Dowrick and Lloyd-Williams, 2013). I find this hard to fathom considering the scale of such an event and given that: “We estimate that in 2014, 23,200 parents died in the UK, leaving dependent children (23,600 in 2013). That's one parent every 22 minutes” (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2016). Reviews of research in this field by Tennant, Bebbington and Hurry (1980) and Crook and Eliot (1980) showed inconsistencies in findings on links to adult depression and childhood parental loss. However, several factors have been identified that can have a serious impact and contribute to vulnerability and depression: age of occurrence, pre- and post-death family disruption, socioeconomic distress (McLeod, 1991), effects on health and emotional wellbeing, educational disengagement and low attainment to age 30 (Parsons, 2011), low self-worth and isolation (Ellis, Dowrick, Lloyd-Williams, 2013). I have experienced all of these.

My “Rules for Living” (Fennell, 1999, p.44), constructed primarily from my early experiences and followed ever since, are: Rule 1: I must always be strong, getting upset only makes matters worse and other people do not want to see it. This resulted in hiding feelings and not sharing my story. Rule 2: always consider other people’s feelings before your own. This meant that I closed down and rejected my feelings. Rule 3: these losses must not define me. On one hand this provided momentum but it also resulted in suppression. These rules meant that loss was not visible or communicated and with this silence, no recognition or support was forthcoming and, as time went on, the silence deepened (Harvey, 2002). Not only does major loss resonate throughout life it also has a cumulative effect on subsequent losses which is further exacerbated where multiple losses have been experienced over a short period of time (Harvey, 2002).

> *Journal: 13-16 August 2014*
> *Feeling lost in the depths of sadness and sorrow for the last two days. Tears bubbling up from the well of grief. So sad that Tony Benn and Robin Williams have died. The inevitability of losing loved ones feels overwhelming and crushing right now. The pain and suffering in the world feels unbearable. I soothed the pain and breathed in compassion for myself and sent this out to all who suffer loss. This brings some relief and calm as well as reminded me that I am not alone and that this is part of life.*

Reflecting on my story and imagining the stories of many thousands of children who experience the death of a parent every year, I am profoundly moved. I recall the long-lost multi-coloured patchwork blanket Mum knitted for me and decided to make another one, sadness arose that I have no child to wrap it around as she did with me. I breathed gently with this and then I realised this is not true, there are plenty of children, displaced, dispossessed in this war-torn, famine ravaged world that need a blanket. I resolved to start knitting again.

As I began to write this paragraph sorrow welled up… I stopped typing, went into our bedroom and took my precious lovely blue-eyed 49-year old yellow bear Sammy out of the wardrobe, pictured below. I held him close into my chest, softly stroked his fur for a while and when I felt soothed, tucked him back onto the shelf. The little girl with the blue string bag who lost her Mum is comforted, this is now allowed, she is no longer alone with her loss, I am with her.

5.11 My Bear Sammy

> You will see that life will become a thing made of holes. Absences. Losses. Things that were there and are no longer. And you realise, too, that you have to grow around and between the gaps, though you can put your hand out to where things were and feel that tense, shining dullness of the space where the memories are (Macdonald, 2014, p.171) .

Until now, this part of my life has been hidden in blind sight but this opening has enabled connection, as described above by Macdonald. A plan has also been generated to develop my professional training and network with relevant organisations to see what would be beneficial for me to offer in the child bereavement field. A wonderful opportunity has arisen through contemplating and writing my story, the feeling of loss has changed and the healing continues.

5.12 In the Process of Mending

The experiences that break us and the wounds we carry are considerable and yet when we are able to offer them compassion and share their stories, they lighten with the release and ease of pain. The love that resides deep in the heart can then to pour into the void and mending can begin. This is a much-needed precious resource, which can be seen in the next section, as I write about the loss and grief of childlessness.

5.5 The Empty Nest

Whilst out walking, an empty nest may be found, it invites curiosity; does it mean success or failure? Did it contain new life that has fledged or remain empty, its purpose unfulfilled?

5.13 The Empty Nest

Reading through my contemplative journal, I was faced with the reality that childlessness is ever-present and that it called for my compassion and acknowledgement. I had tried to shut it out of my life but this meant emotions were denied and supressed. Like an underground river that bursts through to the surface wherever there is a crack, it kept seeping into my journal and I could not ignore it. If I had been told that I was going to write about infertility and childlessness again I would probably have run away. I have been mired in ambivalence, spending weeks trapped in agitated cycles of writing and deleting. As far as I was concerned the childlessness issue was over, I had gone through it, dealt with it and moved on, there was nothing more to say, therefore, the work of self-compassion was not needed. Despite this resistance, my story of childlessness caught up with me through the journal in relation to theological reflection, when I encountered Walton's (2014) question "What have I left out?" (p.xxiv), I knew the answer. I realised that I was in danger of leaving out an important and ongoing part of my story; I acknowledged that it would never go away… this is still my story.

My experience of infertility involved invasion, humiliation and physical pain, plus the mental and sexual exhaustion of treatment. Throughout which were the interminable, hateful, long waits in antenatal clinics to see various consultants who were unable to help. The regular features of these meetings were desperation, hope, outrage, frustration, tears of despair and failure. In Vitro Fertilisation was eliminated because my body was unable to tolerate fertility drugs, but we tried everything else. Shame and stigma accompanied the deep pain, grief and distress. It was lonely too, apart from my husband and a few friends, nobody knew of the carnage; I felt like a pariah, misunderstood and isolated. As if this was not hard enough, the desolate landscape became littered with broken friendships (Thorn, 2009). There was also a loss of worth and identity in being unable to complete this major life-stage amongst the 'normal' life stages involved in social and cultural conventions (Olshansky, 1987; Rutter and Rutter, 1993; Gonzalez, 2000; Kroger, 2000; Sugarman, 2001; Thorn 2009). The picture of my utter failure as a woman was complete.

After all attempts failed there was the horror of falling into the void created by infertility (a medical condition), that deepens further with involuntary childlessness, which is a social condition (Letherby, 2002). The unwanted identity of being infertile and childless was all-consuming, this only changed when I started to regain control and stopped treatment (Kroger, 2000). My experience is captured by Chester (2003): "In the end, we walked away. I cried, but I did not doubt. It was the single most brave thing I have ever done. I took my life back" (p.778). It took many years of redefining my life before the landscape of my heart and life became rich and meaningful again.

Despite taking back control and making many positive life changes, infertility really is the painful gift that just keeps on giving. The journey that begins with beautiful horizons and hope of life in abundance turns into a perilous, dark and stormy passage filled with crushing failure making it seemingly impossible to navigate and see a way through. Three years after resigning to fate, I became pregnant only for an unfathomable crevasse to open up with the miscarriage of a child, who would have been born in September 1999, something so devastating I can barely speak of it, even now. This was the closest so far that I have ever come to wanting my life, and the pain, to end. The only things that kept me going were love and compassion; shown by the female hospital registrar, P's arm tightly around me as we left the hospital at midnight and feeling a heart-breaking connection to Mum who lost a son at birth.

Here was another disenfranchised loss, silent and unending. Seven years later I stood for a long time on this bridge in Japan that specifically marked the losses of miscarriage; I was many miles away from home but I felt there was a place for me to remember and morn.

5.14 Koya San, Japan 2006: Bridge of reflection for miscarriages

Ten years ago early menopause arrived, bringing an end to any last remnants of hope, and now another childlessness weather front sweeps in with friends and family becoming grandparents and fading from view into childcare again. I see older friends being cared for by their children and worry about what lies ahead for P and me, despite the myth of guaranteed care in old age if you have children (Letherby, 2002). My experience of infertility and involuntary childlessness, just as with childhood loss, brought about disenfranchised loss where there is no rite of passage for the bereaved child and no ritual for the loss of early miscarriage or the complete absence of a longed-for child (Harvey, 2002).

Where losses are not publicly acknowledged, mourned or discussed, they become invisible (Harvey, 2002; Chester, 2003). This can give rise to Chronic Sorrow, a concept introduced by Olshansky (1962), defined as “the periodic recurrence of permanent, pervasive sadness or other grief-related feelings associated with ongoing disparity resulting from a loss experience. Chronic sorrow is viewed as a normal response to ongoing disparity associated with a loss situation” (Eakes, Burke and Hainsworth, 1998, p.180). This definition emphasises three very important aspects; that Chronic Sorrow is normal as opposed to pathological, that it arises from significant loss that creates a disparity between actual experience and expected outcomes, and that the sorrow is unending and recurring through the life-span (Teel, 1991; Ahova, Luomi and Simpson, 2013).

I was not aware of the term Chronic Sorrow until now and I have found it very validating of my past and present experiences, it legitimises my feelings and recognises their meaning and importance rather than dismissing or corralling them into a grief time-frame (Teel, 1991; Neimeyer, 1993; Eakes, Burke and Hainsworth, 1998; Klass, 2013). Chronic Sorrow involves significant and enduring sadness, that comprises of acute phases, and continues through all major events in the life-cycle: marriage, births, deaths, graduations, grandchildren, anniversaries, birthdays and the menopause. With childlessness there is disparity across social, developmental and personal norms (Burke, et al., 1999), I would go further and agree with Attig (2004) that the disenfranchisement of such a loss is an “empathetic, political and ethical failure” (p.197). There is often lack of understanding, dismissal and neglect by experts as well as the general population, it is a “failure to respect the overcoming of suffering, the efforts of hope and love at the heart of grieving” (Attig, 2004, p.205). This is why stories of childlessness throughout the life-cycle have an important part to play in being mutually supportive to others in similar situations. Through recognising Chronic Sorrow and challenging dominant discourses, the courage it takes to face a life-course so disrupted and finding a way to rebuild that life, can be witnessed and understood.

5.15 Empty Nest Reconstructed

Journal: 8 June 2015. Morning Sit

The Empty Nest

We busily collected all the nest materials
Eagerly engaged in time-honoured rituals to produce young…
Nothing happened, pain and dismay filled the empty space
Years of anticipation, hope, longing
Still nothing but an empty nest
No eggs, no fertilisation, no hatching, rearing or fledglings.
One miraculous moment an egg fertilised
Life flickered into being… we soared with pure Joy
Catastrophe – the precious life failed, it ceased to exist, so did I
In the end there was Nothing
Nothing to bring into this world, to nurture, to love.
The crushing, painful, chronic wound that formed
Left us injured, flightless and staring into an abyss.
The presence of the nest materials - too much to bear
were delicately moved into the loft
The blessing and curse of hope finally fades as years pass
One ordinary day we solemnly, silently disposed of the nest materials
No one would ever know what the black bag contained…
Hopes, dreams and precious material from the Empty Nest
Consigned to the well of sadness at the bottom of the void.
We continue with our lives, constructing a different family nest,
Precious space where we rest, repair, replenish, thrive,
a place of safety with many sources of nurturing and joy.
Love constantly pouring into emptiness
Bathing and easing the painful wound
Allowing an invisible mending
So we could learn to fly again

The ritual of clearing the loft of all the nesting materials for baby was an important turning point that allowed space to grieve and begin rebuilding our lives (Chester, 2003). The process continues through beautiful engagement with life, loved ones and contemplative practices, all of which give pain, loss and sorrow a voice, that allows self-witness and the possibility of being witnessed by others. This is a powerful process of acceptance and reflection and, from the grit in this painful space, a pearl emerges (Thanissara, 2014).

5.16 The Pearl in The Nest

As long as life continues for my partner and I, the sorrow continues, there is no cure, no closure. There is, however, change and transformation, this included making peace with my body during a compassion retreat in my second year of the Professional Doctorate. At the end of a mindfulness meditation on the body, a compassionate and empathetic connection emerged, which was very healing. Here is an excerpt from my retreat meditation diary:

> *I painfully whispered to my body that it had let me down, was not productive, tears flowed as I sat then my body replied "I did my best, if I could have given you a child, I would". Many tears flowed now as I felt so sorry for the struggle my body had been through. I realise that I need to pay more attention to how it feels, forgive it and make peace with it. CF said that even if the bud doesn't flower – it is still lovely inside. I broke down at this point – this took me straight back to the Registrar in charge of my miscarriage who told me that it was like a bud that had not flowered.*

Although my little bud never managed to flower, its arrival was a miracle, I felt deep love and joy. Rather than despise my body for failing, I am deeply grateful to it for trying.

5.17 Beauty in the Bud

Two years after the above reflection, the pain re-emerged, this time it was met with even more compassion and equanimity, as can be seen from the journal entry below. Facing this pain without these qualities of mind would have been unbearable, no wonder I had buried it previously.

Journal: 22 October 2014
Feeling tearful and sad this morning, yesterday I was in a car park in Colchester and the last time I was there was 1999 when I was pregnant, feeling happily tired, walking back to my car on a cloud. A moment when I felt complete, a week later all was gone. 15 years ago, seems like last week. The wound continues, unseen, unspoken… I sit noticing what is present, allowing… feeling the pain of fragility and poignancy of life. I did not need to ask myself what I needed, I knew. I went out on walking meditation, walking amongst the tress in this early autumn, leaves turning and gently falling to the ground, I was reminded of the natural cycle of things. That we are passing through in this body then return to the Earth from whence we came. I felt more peaceful and calm, more accepting of the way things are. Tried to think what I would have done before self-compassion – I would have fallen into depression.

Five months later, from the following entry into my diary, I can see how journaling and reflecting on loss has helped me to process and communicate my feelings more completely and clearly (Pennebaker, 2004).

Journal: 13 March 2015. Walking Meditation and Contemplation

Mothers Day

It is Mothers Day on Sunday, I had completely forgotten
I heard it mentioned yesterday and thought…
This does not apply to me. I am not a member of this club.
But this isn't true, I had a mum,
She was in my life for 10 years before she died
She was fierce, playful and strikingly beautiful too
In the beautiful topaz blue floral flared dress, eyes sparkling,
Her presence remains in memories of her
stroking my forehead to help me sleep, tickling me, laughing together,
wrapping me up tight in the itchy blue tartan scarf
and the multi-coloured blanket of knitted squares, a labour of love.

I was a mum too, albeit for only a few fleeting months
Mum to the little cells of life within me
that miraculously emerged and then traumatically left
I have felt the deep love that comes from having and being a mum
And I am so profoundly grateful for this.
The deep pain of these losses lives on within me
Connecting me back too with my Mum who lost a son at Birth
As I walked this morning, remembering
Birdsong tending to my sore heart
I felt the warm gentle sun on my back, soothing me
The cool wind in my face, wiping away the tears.
I continued along the path
Now feeling the sun's warmth caressing and drying my face
The strong wind behind me, gently supporting my body
I bathed in the elements and felt ease.
I thanked Mother Earth

My past response to pain was to act like a wounded animal who crawls off into the undergrowth, curls up, afraid, suffering and waiting to either recover or die. I medicated the anger, despair and hopelessness with alcohol and overcompensation. The healthy adaptive coping strategies I have since developed involve generating a meaningful and purposeful life, which reduces the impact of Chronic Sorrow. My response has further evolved through self-compassion; I offer acceptance of the pain, acknowledgement that it's ever presence is normal and part of common humanity and reframe pain from being a shame-inducing sign of weakness to seeing the courageous compassion and love needed to bear pain. It has also helped me to pro-actively respond to my mind and body in a healthy way through caring for the wounds with tenderness, which brings ease, resilience and strength. This enables greater engagement with people, places and activities, and provides nourishment and connection. The story continues and so does the need for self-compassion. Even though I am more balanced and better at coping, I can still react, get angry and be disappointed in relation to the discourse of childlessness. These feelings are ignited by articles on infertility that I find are superficial, glib, narcissistic, with a happy ending topped off by the stereotypical perfect family life picture. My journal entry below relates to a workshop billed as "celebrating the whole woman - from menstruation to motherhood".

> *Journal: 26 January 2015*
> *This view of a 'whole' woman makes me very angry, such partial and distorted beliefs exclude many wonderful and very whole women, this does not do justice to or celebrate them. Years ago this would have fed into my insecurity and inferiority, but not anymore. What is inferior and incomplete is the stereotypical mother ideal that perpetuates what is deemed to be a whole woman!*

Another source of frustration arose from two publications on women and depression (Jack, 1991; Jack and Ali, 2010) where I did not find a single reference to childlessness or infertility as a source of depression for women. What makes this worse is that the authors writing about these important gender issues are female, so, yet again, I feel excluded and silenced by women who, ironically, are writing about silent women. Letherby and Williams (1999) argued that discourse on non-motherhood was lost in feminism and that "awareness of this complexity is essential to feminism, because all women do not share the same realities… only now has a significant feminist discussion begun on the definitions and exclusions that women without children are still made to feel in our society" (p.727).

Frustratingly, 15 years on from the Letherby and Williams paper, these issues remain and “childlessness is unfinished business for feminism” (Day, 2014). My experience supports this view and I feel that there remains much more to be said and challenged. How infertility is portrayed in the media has influence, Sangster and Lawson (2014) found overemphasis on medicalisation with In Vitro Fertilisation proffered as the main solution, despite the continuing low success rates (25%). Focus is also placed on female rather than male infertility thus promoting the pronatalism that pervades our society. Carroll (2012) urges us to go down the “pronatal rabbit hole” (p.7), to challenge this dominant ideology and see that living a life without children is not a failure of destiny, it is a wholly legitimate, meaningful and valuable life. It is very important for this to be communicated to childless people and recognised culturally and societally; “Dealing with the emotions that come with being childless is challenging enough. There is undoubtedly grief, but it’s easier to work through and self-reflect on the best next course to take if society’s judgments about not being able to get pregnant are not also an issue” (Carroll, 2012, pp.29-30).

My story is no longer one of overwhelming failure; childlessness was the beginning of enormous change in my life. The landscape has changed; it is now bathed in the warmth of loving-kindness, which powerfully demonstrates that my life is not a barren wasteland. Gradually, with courage and determination, I managed to recover purpose, find opportunities to nurture and new directions that gave me a different “wild and precious life” (Oliver, 2004, p.94). I can face the void, yes there is pain but there are also immeasurable amounts of love and meaning. I do this all alongside an incredible Husband, in an ever-deepening relationship that was already wonderful. We have a strong loving bond that contains a hole, as you can see in the sculpture below, which will always need tender care.

5.18 P and Me entwined, containing the emptiness in the void.

The path of compassionate engagement that I am taking has, as with childhood bereavement, brought me to a place where I can feel and speak from an embodied position of strength, courage and feeling. One thing I do know is that I am no longer prepared to be silent about loss and sorrow and pretend that all is fine. My own discourse has changed; when clients ask if I have children, my body usually contracts and a wave of panic arises and I incongruently reply cheerily (without going into details) “no we could not have children but that is ok, we have plenty in our lives”. I now say, “no we were unable to have children, it is one of the hardest things but it was not to be so we built different lives”. No more fake, sugarcoating, no more minimising or secrets as can be seen in an excerpt from my personal diary.

> *17/9/16: Dinner with friends. M asked what I have been up to, I replied: “writing about our childlessness, disenfranchised loss and chronic sorrow”. Stunned wide-eyed silence. I smiled and said, “it’s really important stuff”. M responded: “Fucking hell, we had better get the wine ordered then!” We laughed and M’s wife S looked at me warmly and intently, we talked, it was a really intimate evening. They have their own painful ongoing story of infertility; my openness has cleared the path for many rich and meaningful encounters.*

I am deeply grateful to have been able to share my stories of what has been lost but also what has been found, “tears and ink serve similar purposes – they are the tracings of the heart” (Reiter, 2009, p.255). A well of compassion and loving-kindness overflows, this is a desert no longer, but a rich and abundant life rooted in fertile land (Ramya, 2014). Macdonald (2014) found the words to express the feeling in my heart. “For the first time I understood the shape of my grief. I could feel exactly how big it was. It was the strangest feeling, like holding something the size of a mountain in my arms… all the grief had turned into something different. It was simply love” (p.268).

5.19 Back together in one piece

5.6 Found: Coming out of hiding

> Seeking safety in not being seen. It's a habit you can fall into, willing yourself into invisibility. And it doesn't serve you well in life. Believe me it doesn't (Macdonald, 2014, p.68).

Loss not only entails being separated from self, others, places or something precious, it can also include becoming free as a result of losing something that causes pain. This final section reveals a path where shame and shyness of a socially anxious introvert is lost and connection with my own loving presence and with others is found. Introversion and shyness are separate constructs; there can be a misperception that introverts are shy but introversion relates to the preference for one's own company and being comfortable with this (Cain, 2013; Afshan, Askari and Manickam, 2015). Shyness is associated with fear, anxiety, avoidance and inhibition in the presence of others, with great concern over being evaluated and judged (Cheek and Buss, 1981; Germer, 2009; Hofmann, et al., 2010; Cain, 2013). I have the dubious privilege of being introverted and shy, this is compounded by The Moose who scowls "you are pathetic, you are in your fifties, surely you have gotten over shyness by now!" Shyness may have been acceptable in childhood and looked cute in a bridesmaid photo, but by the time one passes into middle-age and the pervasive and excruciating feelings continue, shame is added into the mix.

5.20 Shy Bridesmaid Age 6

I have managed to do many public talks and presentations because I could hide behind the mask of a role or an identity. However, my crippling shyness continued unabated, from the Christmas party age 5 feeling mortified and unable to speak, to the online climate challenge talk in 2014:

> *Journal: 5 October 2014.*
> *Global call and meditation with One Earth Sangha. Powerful talk given, then panic – the call went live to discussion groups. I froze, stayed silent. I did not know these people… I hung up. Shame and judgement initially drowned out self-compassion. My body was rigid, I breathed and softened, which contained the shame, steadied me, and helped reflection on what really happened - fear of sounding stupid, being judged. I offered myself kindness in acknowledging the painfulness of these feelings, the self-judgement lifted a little. I remembered I went on the call because I cared deeply about these issues and wanted to connect with like-minded people. Ah, exactly! I saw how much I was projecting my fearful views onto others, and yet we had much in common. I offered loving-kindness meditation to myself and everyone on the call, the shame dissipated.*

Through practising self-compassion and loving kindness for self and others, I felt more connected and less inadequate (Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007; Germer, 2009). My view moved from unhealthy inner focussing and disconnection to being able to widen my perspective and see what united me with others and even consider the possibility that others might feel the same as me (Neff, 2003b, 2004, 2009a). This in turn has encouraged me to be more open about my affliction of shyness.

> *Journal: 12 November 2014*
> *The process of self-compassion allows me to be authentic. In supervision with MW I shared the shyness and anxiety I feel with people. For once I did not pretend to be something other than who I am and it felt good. This is the opposite of my usual rejection fuelled pretence and shame of being defective. MW was surprised, saying warmly his experience of me was a good communicator, networker and not shy at all. We spoke of the possibility of being all of these things and still feeling shy, anxious and needing to regularly recover.* ***I saw that am not the story I have about myself, this is just one of many stories that make up my life.***

Social situations are particularly stressful for the shy, Germer (2009, 2015) has courageously written about his struggle with shyness, he advocates practising loving-kindness to self and others to counter this and foster a sense of connection. Germer emphasised that we are hardwired to engage and connect, therefore, when we are disconnected we feel pain and "at odds with our deepest sense of self. That's why it hurts" (2009, p.164). The importance of belonging is highlighted by Monbiot (2014, 2016) who argued that loneliness was at epidemic proportions, that it is a serious social and health issue that is causing low levels of life satisfaction, disease and higher mortality rates (Cacioppo, et al., 2002; Thomas, 2015). When we are less anxious and fearful, we feel connected, this was revealed in my experience on Dartmoor in the following journal entry and pictures.

> *Journal: 2-6 April 2015. Silent Walking retreat in Dartmoor*
> *An intriguing 5 days – many spaces inside me, previously occupied with anxiety, doubt and self-criticism are now filled with warmth, openness and seeing the good in people (because I am so much more able to see the good in myself). Not judging, comparing or projecting leaves a profound sense of peaceful presence, more openness, being able to look at people directly and genuinely smile. Standing in a circle at the end of our day on Friday, I looked at each person with love – not fear. I just stood there in awe and wonder. I have never felt this in my whole life, had I not felt it so strongly and enduringly over the following days, I might have doubted it really happened. For the first time in my life I realise, deep inside, that IT IS, AND I AM, OK. I NO LONGER NEED TO WORRY. The absence of tension and fear, replaced with calmness and stillness, feels strange; I have a real sense of finding a refuge inside me rather than the need to flee. I did not set out with the intention of striving to attain such states of mind; this is a realisation of the process of transformation that is emerging. I no longer feel small and judged, I feel I belong. We stand and walk together!*

5.21 Standing and Walking Together

> When you do find a sprig of self-compassion in your heart, nurture it with your tears and encourage its growth. If you practice self-compassion daily, it can heal your aching heart, and even your jittery body. It heals at the deepest levels and is a noble endeavor that can greatly assist you in finding your way through shyness (Flowers, 2016).

Cultivating a kind and compassionate response to what is present, sharing, writing and reflecting on experience has helped me see others and myself through more compassionate eyes. I am struck by the power of this transformational process; there is a deep sense of an uncurling happening within me, the shy girl no longer hides away afraid anymore. She is alert and outward-looking, free to explore and connect as she strides out into the world, she can also be still, calm, and retreat to recover when needed. This is represented in my drawing below of myself as a lioness at the foot of a magnolia tree.

5.22 Sitting at the foot of the Magnolia Tree

5.7 Reflections and Conclusion

Pausing to reflect, I am mindful that deeply personal landscapes have been encountered throughout this Chapter. Undertaking this journey has required courage to be vulnerable, face pain and weather the storms as I learned to comfort, love and heal myself. To reach this point has required the crossing of many thresholds into a variety of liminal states where I have felt stuck, lost, confused and uncertain. Liminality was originally proposed by anthropologists Van Gennep (1960) to denote the transitional stages of rites of passage, and Turner (1964), who described the liminal process as a "betwixt-and-between period" (p.20). The state of liminality was described by Land, Rattray and Vivian (2014) as "a space of transformation in which the transition from an earlier understanding (or practice) to that that which is required is effected" (p.200). This liminal process is explained by Kiley (2015) as "the state where a learner has left behind her/his pervious self but has not yet become the new self" (p.53). Through the process of reflection, contemplative practice and writing, a changed perspective of myself has emerged, my understanding has developed and I have experienced integration and embodiment (Meyer and Land, 2003; Meyer and Land 2006; Land, Meyer and Smith, 2008; Trafford, 2008).

Crossing the threshold into self-compassion has been troublesome and deeply challenging but it has transformed how I view and relate to myself (Perkins, 1999, 2006; Meyer and Land 2006). Another characteristic of a threshold concept is that, once entered, it is irreversible, even though this can involve "oscillation between states, often with temporary regression to earlier status" (Meyer and Land, 2006, p.24). Self-compassion is not a concept I would wish to unlearn and revert to a pre-liminal state, even if it were possible to do so. The scale of personal change is depicted in Appendix 11, where I have compiled two Johari Windows (Luft and Ingham, 1955; Luft, 1969). The first represents me at the beginning of this Doctoral process and the second illustrates the process of transformation as I finish the thesis; from being closed, defensive and fearful to gaining greater awareness and openness through self-understanding and acceptance.

In this chapter, I have identified the scale of destruction and distortion of my inner-critic together with the tyranny of perfectionism. Practising self-compassion has changed my inner dialogue into one that is kind, realistic, motivating and accepting. Importantly, being self-compassionate has halted endless fleeing from the pain and emptiness in the void.

Through exploring the impact of childhood loss of a parent and childlessness I have challenged assumptions, silence and personal, social and cultural discourses that surround these issues. I have highlighted how shame blocks compassion but meeting this with loving-kindness brought a powerful sense of belonging and connection with others. I feel more balanced, peaceful and calm, and when fear arises I now know how to take care of myself. Significantly, I realise that I am not the story that I have kept repeating about myself; different stories of vulnerability, courage, love and joy co-exist. My experiences have shattered me, but compassionately tending to the wounds has allowed stories most meaningful to emerge. Through self-compassion, my broken pieces have been put back together and made whole again, this time with the cracks visible in gold, as can be seen in the picture below.

5.23 Better than New: Beauty in brokenness and imperfection

My personal engagement in self-compassion has been transformational and this is inextricably connected with my professional practice. The next chapter will focus on my work as a Chartered Counselling Psychologist. I will be exploring the impact of self-compassion in therapy, my MSC training and teaching and will consider how it has helped me navigate the Professional Doctorate.

Chapter 6. Professional Routes

6.1 Carrying a Heavy Load

6.1 Uphill Struggle

> Vulnerability and pain are not the enemy. Providing they are owned and acknowledged, respected for the weight and texture they give to our lives, they will be the very tools through which we do our best work (Adams, 2014, p.141).

My decision to include details of the volume and impact of my work into the journal turned out to be uncomfortably revelatory as it dawned on me that I had become a workaholic, defined by Clark, et al. (2016) as "an addiction to work that involves feeling compelled or driven to work because of internal pressures, having persistent and frequent thoughts about work when not working, and working beyond what is reasonably expected… despite potential negative consequences" (p.1840). Figure 6.1 below displays some of the words that frequently arose from work entries in my journal:

Figure 6.1. Words of work

Knackered, exhausted, load of clients, worked solid, late evenings, long days, bracing myself, guilty, inadequate, work upon work, feel like crying, no time or headspace, killing me, done-in, can't switch off, stress, survival mode, work harder, shut down, at wits end, nothing left to give, hollowed-out, no exercise, no self-care, no social, didn't sleep, distress, no peace, mind-dead, feeling crushed, asphyxiated, sapped, worked all weekend, supervision, despair, mind numb, unspeakable, no respite, need a break.

In the face of perfectionism and my inner-critic, my good intentions and mindfulness practice were insufficient to enable change. My body, heart and mind have been shouting to be heard, but still I refused to listen, even having already burned-out mentally in 2003 and physically in 2005. Upon reviewing my journal, what had become normality and, therefore, unseen, became clear, bringing a more accurate perspective of the scale and impact of work. I realised that I hardly ever switched off, still working even when I am not actually at work. Seeing how I consistently added more busyness to already packed days has been difficult and challenged me to face why I do this - to try and fill the emptiness within the void.

> *Journal: Monday 18 August 2014*
> *Bracing myself for another packed week of client work, I feel guilty/inadequate and done-in, it is hardly hard physical graft, other psychs see twice as many clients per week. I don't count the hours of business admin – this comes on top of the client work, prof doc work, mindfulness/meditation groups, MSC training, running a home and that comes on top of family. Oh…. I have just realised what I have written! Not only because of who is at the bottom of the pile but also because I am not there at all… feel like crying.*

> *Journal: 27 May 2015*
> *Feeling like a hollowed-out tree. Sturdy on the outside but inside – nothing, empty, no energy – sapped. When I feel like this, the well of compassion within me dries up. Feeling tired of client work, overwhelmed by admin, accounts and drowning in domestics. My critical voice says you should cope, your life isn't so bad, other people have it much tougher. A compassionate voice (still doesn't feel completely mine) says you do really good work, you work so hard, it is important for you to rest. I still ignore this, why can't I listen!*

Through my work I can bring psychological understanding and draw on a wide range of resources that benefit family and friends (Råbu, Moltu, Binder and McLeod, 2016), however, my work can also have a negative impact on them. One of the few papers on this area is by Zur (1994) who considered the impact of psychotherapy on practitioner's families. He highlighted negative impacts as being emotionally drained, distant, lacking in empathy, responsiveness and tolerance. Indeed, the care and compassion that I offer clients can be in short supply when I get home.

Journal: 23 July 2014
Extremely tired - 18-hour day, spirits really low, body drained. Had an argument with P on the phone, which is in stark contrast to my feelings of overwhelming love, joy and great fortune of sharing my life with him. I remembered Monday evening, when he arrived home after a very long day, I watched him looking for the little bee with the broken wing in the garden. Such thoughtful loving care for this little being… sometimes I am this little bee, desperately trying to survive with only one working wing. I am so grateful for his care.

Journal: 22 May 2015 Evening sit.
G left a message on the answer machine, haven't seen her in ages but I can't face another conversation. I feel guilty that I am neglecting someone I really care about. Despair is clouding everything.

6.1.1 Danger Zones

The journal brought the impact of my work into sharp focus, this helped me acknowledge what was needed and take urgent compassionate action, rather than repeat the usual cycle of reactive aversion and self-criticism. In the literature, I found two papers that highlighted potentially hazardous occupational risks to the mental health of psychotherapists and psychologists (Shapiro, Brown and Biegel, 2007; Finlay-Jones, Rees and Kane, 2015). There are also publications that address risk, physical and mental self-care, resilience and burnout prevention (Rothschild, 2006; Norcross and Guy, 2007; Wicks, 2008, 2010; Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2011). During my literature review, I was astonished when I realised that this information had never been part of my training, supervision or CPD, neither were they familiar to most therapists who attend my training courses. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) provides a comprehensive online guide of occupational hazards, vulnerabilities, warning signs, consequences and ways for practitioners to protect themselves. Similar guidance is sadly lacking in the UK; currently there is nothing significant that covers these issues on either of the British Psychological Society (BPS) or Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) websites. They focus on duties of care, fitness to practice requirements and the duty of organisations to improve staff wellbeing (BPS, 2009a, 2009b, 2016; HCPC, 2016).

As a Counselling Psychologist, I draw on rich resources from the fields of MSC, mindfulness and compassion-focussed approaches and engage in numerous creative and empirically grounded ways of working with clients to improve wellbeing. Unfortunately, it does not appear commonplace for the pearls from such wisdom to be explicitly offered to psychologists. Some practitioners may engage in self-care but most of us struggle, we are only human and cannot always practice what we preach. There are barriers to accessing support and self-care, which include stigma, resistance to admitting distress, fear of exposure, difficulty in selecting a therapist, confidentiality and dual relationship issues, lack of emotional, time and financial resources (Mahoney, 1997; Barnett, et al., 2007; Bearse, 2013). There is particular difficulty in being a psychologist who suffers from depression, as I do, it is rarely openly discussed with peers because of the power of stigma (BPS, 2016; Hacker-Hughes, 2016; The Secret Psychologist, 2016a, 2016b). I believe self-care needs to be embedded in practice from the beginning of training and throughout professional life, because by the time someone gets to the point of burnout, their capacity to take action is diminished. When I experienced burnout, even the thought of opening post and emails, let alone responding to surveys on wellbeing, was too much. In order for psychological practitioners to recognise and maintain health and wellness, it is helpful to remember the World Heath Organisation definition:

> Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity… Mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community (WHO, 2014).

The BPS Professional Practice Board (2009b) argued for a new ethos of greater understanding of the biopsychosocial factors in wellbeing for clients, including preventative and integrative care and greater resources. I wholeheartedly support this ethos but again, the care and wellbeing of practitioners, individually, systemically and culturally, is barely mentioned, and yet surely this is what a truly integrated health system looks like.

The BPS (2009b) recommended, “organisations take active and effective steps to maintain and support the positive mental health of their employees” (p.21). However, six years later, the BPS and The New Savoy Staff Wellbeing survey (2016) revealed the following disturbing information.

> In 2015 we found alarming levels of staff stress (70%), feelings of failure (50%) and depression (46%). Overwhelmingly, staff tell us this is caused by the relentless pressure to meet targets with inadequate resources, as well as loss of autonomy, degrading of the professional role of psychological staff, and excessive managerial control (The New Savoy Partnership, 2016).

These findings highlight the need for more research and for these important issues to be urgently addressed on the basis that prevention and promotion of wellness is better than cure, for all concerned. The BPS and New Savoy Partnership launched a Charter for Wellbeing in February 2016, but focus is on NHS staff, independent psychologists, such as myself, are not included. Emphasis needs to be placed on maintaining wellness, improving resilience and enabling all psychological practitioners to thrive. This requires a greater awareness and understanding of where the dangers lie individually and organisationally, what the barriers are to change and how best to remedy them. As highlighted by Zulueta (2013) what is needed is “professional care that at its best demonstrates solicarity, equality, responsibility and community – and, of course, compassion” (p.89).

A comprehensive list of hazards in psychotherapy is provided by Norcross and Guy (2007, p.37), the causes of which include business demands (administration, accounting, marketing), client issues (expectations and challenges, therapeutic relationship, case workload, litigation), work setting (culture and environment), personal vulnerabilities and also personal life issues (Kramen-Hahn and Downing Hansen, 1998; Barnett, et al., 2007; Wise, Hersh and Gibson, 2012). I have experienced many of these hazards; they featured throughout my journal accounts of professional life. Combined with the way I work - in terms of my own vulnerabilities, drivers and habit of overworking and over compensation – these hazards create a very toxic cocktail. I know this, I have experienced all bar three of the symptoms of occupational hazards that are shown in the summary I have provided in Figure 6.2

Figure 6.2. Summary of Symptoms of Occupational Hazards in Psychotherapy

▪ Stress overload ▪ Empathy fatigue ▪ Poor concentration and attention ▪ Diminished skills in: communication, problem solving and decision-making. ▪ Physical and emotional exhaustion ▪ Emotional dysregulation ▪ Low job satisfaction ▪ Reduced motivation	▪ Depression ▪ Anxiety ▪ Suicidal ideation ▪ Vicarious trauma ▪ Isolation ▪ Obesity ▪ Relationship breakdown ▪ Sleep problems ▪ Substance abuse ▪ Burnout

Sources: Zur, 1994, 2015; Shapiro, et al., 2005; Shapiro, Brown and Biegel, 2007; Finlay-Jones, Rees and Kane, 2015

6.1.2 Lightening the Load

My journal entry below highlights the often-stated barrier of not having enough time. This can be a red-herring because what is actually needed are changes to what is already being done and changes to my intrinsic motivation and expectations.

> *Journal: 1 June 2015. Morning sit.*
> *I have been contemplating on the process of turning intentional compassion into action. This challenges me to be clear about action I need to take to restore myself… Need more quality time – with P and for me: outside, wildlife trust and birding, walking, more social activity to strengthen any sense of belonging.*
> *More time to cook and more time to exercise – yoga, etc. More meditation and retreats. More journaling and study time and less computer time. More help at home, need to let go of domestics, not feel guilty and let P help. Wait a minute…. How many times have I said MORE?!!!!! Do I not really need/mean to say ENOUGH!*

Self-care is an ethical imperative, which involves awareness of, and mitigating, the causes and effects of distress. Therefore, an ongoing compassionate response is needed individually, systemically and culturally to prioritise and actively foster care and wellbeing in psychologists (Barnett, et al., 2007). More research is needed in relation to psychologist mental health and self-care and the need for greater openness to reduce stigma (Zur, 1994; Barnett, et al., 2007; Hacker-Hughes, 2016).

Given the complex combination of personal vulnerabilities and occupational hazards, referring to the well-worn phrase work-life balance is too simplistic (Råbu, et al., 2016). It is important to make explicit what brings relief and reduces symptoms. It would also be beneficial for personal experiences of self-care, and lack of it, to be shared between professionals. After all, how can we speak of struggles and remedies relating to self-care if we do not engage in our own discourse and take action? A comprehensive approach to improving wellbeing is provided in a literature review by Walsh (2011) who proposed evidence-based Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes (TLCs) with regard to nutrition and diet, exercise, relationships, recreation, stress management, spiritual and community involvement. Walsh argued that not enough importance is placed on these interventions, which leads to "professional deformation" (p.589). Wise, Hersh and Gibson (2012) advocated that Walsh's TLCs contribute to an ethical imperative that fosters care and wellbeing in psychologists and I support this view. In Figure 6.3, I have compiled a summary from the literature as guidance and encouragement for therapist wellbeing:

Figure 6.3. Summary of Key Contributors to Self-care and Wellbeing

Personal, social and recreational	Acknowledging personal vulnerability and distress Improving body awareness, soothing the body, calming the nervous system Regular exercise routines and good nutrition Engagement in nature Frequent engagement in intimacy Participating in own therapy when needed Monitoring and regulating exposure to multi-media Involvement with hobbies, social and community activities Responding to spiritual or religious needs Regular self-appraisal and revision of self-care plan
Professional	Valuing our personal and professional selves Clear boundary setting and developing rituals for leaving work at work Fostering supportive supervisory, peer relationships and networks Recognising and responding to barriers in seeking support Balance of activities outside work

Sources: Walsh, 2011; Wise, Hersh and Gibson, 2012; Desmond, 2016; Simms, 2017

Through developing MSC, contemplative and Buddhist practice, self-care is now a priority for me. Theologically, wise and ethical reference points for me are the Noble Eightfold Path (Appendix 4). They provide a clear pathway to wellbeing, consisting of eight aspects, which are translated as right or skilful: View, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, Concentration/meditation (SN 45:8; Hanh, 1998; Bodhi, 2005; Hanson, 2007). All eight aspects are interconnected but three are particularly helpful in relation to professional self-care.

- Right view: understanding what causes suffering and how it can be transformed. Cultivating goodwill, peacefulness and positive emotions, such as loving-kindness, compassion and equanimity, to replace harmful thoughts.
- Right action: being ethical and responsible for the consequences of one's actions. Mindfully refraining from harmful activity and acting with kindness, and truthfulness.
- Right effort: consistently set clear intention and take action to reduce unwholesome motivations and cultivate wholesome ones. Develop and maintain skilful states based on generosity, love and wisdom.

In addition, Hanh (1998) invites a compassionate question; “What nourishes joy in me?” (p.41), it is a deep encouragement to remedy causes of suffering through cultivating joy. Research into the outcomes of engagement in mindfulness and self-compassion practices have demonstrated improvement in healthy and adaptive coping mechanisms and increased motivation to care for self (Neff, 2004; Gilbert, 2005; Germer 2009). Neff and Germer (2013) have shown MSC provides greater focus on intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, which increases resilience, personal accountability and improved emotional regulation. Compassion lies at the heart of wellbeing because it ignites motivation to take action and care for ourselves. According to Neff (2011b) “Self-compassion taps into your inner desire to be healthy and happy. If you care about yourself, you’ll do what you need to do in order to learn and grow. You’ll want to change unhelpful patterns of behaviour” (pp.165-166). Desmond (2016) emphasises the importance cultivating happiness and reducing suffering in ourselves and argues that when we nourish our own wellbeing every living thing benefits, therefore, it needs to be a priority. Desmond recommends six key areas for therapists to attend to: 1) replenish before depletion, 2) value and prioritise wellbeing, 3) cultivate happiness, 4) connecting with ourselves and others in a loving-kind way, 5) learn to let go of things which no longer serve or benefit us and 6) develop and commit to a care plan.

With MSC, responding to suffering begins with awareness of what is present in mind and body, responding to what is needed through loving-kindness and compassion, and ensuring enough time is dedicated to allow the process of healing and restoration. My intention is not to preach or pay lip-service to the ideal work-life balance, neither is it to compile a list of things to do. As well intentioned as this might be, I would either not start or continue with it piece-meal, as my history shows. It is only through practising MSC and quietening my inner-critic that I actively pursue the necessary changes for wellbeing. In doing so, I can authentically share the stumbling blocks and the benefits of self-care through self-compassion with others. Although it is challenging, I have learned that making such changes brings relief, more head and heart space, greater resilience, happiness, joy and connection. I am slowly learning to STOP, rest and restore, to subtract rather than add. I have reduced and actively monitor the client caseload. Meditation, walking, yoga, and rest are embedded into my diary and I even try and increase these activities during times of greater demand. This would have been unthinkable previously but the following journal entry demonstrates the process of awareness and compassionate responding.

> *Journal: 12 February 2015*
> *Feeling overwhelmed with work, it is filling my head and all my time. The Moose says why are you making such a big deal about it? I notice tightening in my upper chest, I soothed myself and stopped engaging in the critical thoughts that imply this is weak, signs of inadequacy… I see you thoughts, I am not buying it!!!!! I acted, switched everything off and went walking – this was the most important thing I needed to do, everything else can wait. I was glad I stopped, I needed to. I was holding distressing stories from client work as well as feeling the impact of awful world news, filled with horror, cruelty, suffering. As I walked I felt laden down and did not like being in the world as it is, then I corrected myself – the world as it is presented. I recognised this is not the whole story and the main thing I can change is how I am in the world. I breathed in compassion for myself and stayed with this until I felt ease and then offered compassion outwards. I returned home clearer, calmer and ready to begin work with my clients.*

In the fog of self-criticism and exhaustion, boundaries are lost but through the warmth of self-compassion this dissipates. If, as sometimes happens, the worries, distress and stories of the day remain too strong to leave behind, when I return home I re-establish boundaries through rituals which enable a transition from work space to personal space.

I spend time practising compassionate breathing and loving-kindness meditation. Beside me is a Singing Bowl. The Singing Bowl vibrations resonate deeply with me, Gray (1989) referred to the singing bowl being “the sound of the void”. This acts as a reminder of the Buddhist teachings of voidness or emptiness, impermanence, and non-self (Hanh, 1998), which emphasises that everything changes and we are not separate or alone. Desmond (2016) offers clarity and encouragement in relation to what is needed and important:

> When we recognise the incredible value of our own happiness, we become determined to do whatever we can to nourish it. We want to care for it as if it were our only child… We have to see that it is possible to prioritise our own wellbeing *as a service to others* rather than as a way of neglecting them (p.184).

In summary, when I overwork and feel completely overwhelmed it can be likened to being in a Whiteout on a mountain where in certain weather conditions, snow and sky blend seamlessly together. It is completely disorientating and deprives the senses of vital information (Brotherton, 2011). With wisdom, experience and practice we can learn to be better prepared, more fully equipped and trust that we can cope with whatever arises. In establishing good practices we can then head off and safely experience the joy and exhilaration of the adventure.

6.2 Whiteout

6.2 Walking with my Clients

6.3 Mucking, Essex: Footprints in the Mud

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you about mine.

(Excerpt from Wild Geese, Oliver, 1986, p.14)

My vulnerabilities and the hazards of my work are only part of the story. Being a psychologist forms a rich and meaningful seam in my life, it is an alchemy of art, science, imagination, curiosity and use of self, from which I have benefitted personally and relationally (Råbu, et al., 2016). My work involves many therapeutic encounters that are filled with great courage and powerful transformation, it is a deep privilege to walk alongside, witness and hear my clients' stories. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a full account of self-compassion as a therapeutic intervention, my intention here is, through composites of encounters with clients and MSC training participants, to elucidate the impact that self-compassion has had on me as a therapist and how this influences the therapeutic process.

Research is gradually developing in relation to the application of self-compassion as an intervention across a variety of clinical conditions, in particular; Gilbert (2005, 2009) for whom self-compassion is part of Compassion Focussed Therapy. Germer (2009), and Germer and Neff (2013) have provided evidence of MSC as a clinical intervention. Neff and Germer (2013) who used a case study approach to track progression of self-compassion practice and Desmond (2016) who has written the first book covering the principles and process of MSC in psychotherapy. A complete guide by Neff and Germer, the co-founders of MSC, is due for publication in early 2018.

A compassionate alliance lies at the heart of the therapeutic process and relationship; it incorporates the core conditions of empathy, positive regard and congruence (Rogers, 1957; Mearns and Cooper, 2005; Desmond 2016). First-person experience and the uniqueness of the person are honoured in the therapeutic encounter. The therapeutic relationship is also viewed in terms of common humanity rather than expert-novice, of being alongside rather than 'doing to' and of the unfolding of experience rather than an intervention-driven dialogue. This humanistic approach is commensurate with the philosophy of Counselling Psychology (Woolf and Dryden, 1996) and Buddhism, which takes a non-dualistic view of self, environment and experience in terms of not being separate objective entities but deeply and dynamically interrelated.

As a therapist, cultivating a mindful and compassionate presence has fostered greater openness and awareness in the present moment. In the true spirit of compassion, practice is dedicated to reducing suffering which requires courage and strength as well as empathy, understanding and kindness. I often encounter disconnection, saturation, helplessness, inadequacy and anger in clients, I know these feelings too. The sense of despair and loneliness that arises from these experiences is powerful, as is the exhaustion from trying to escape such painful feelings. In these situations I encourage mindful inquiry and work on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (body, feelings, mind/consciousness and mental qualities). In Buddhist teaching, the first three foundations are seen as awareness processes and the fourth is concerned with the process of awakening (Hanh, 1998). The aim is to develop awareness of present moment experience, increase ability to focus and be more physically and emotionally stable (Germer, 2009; Warren, Smeets and Neff, 2016). In this process I am engaging in reflection in-action (Schön, 1991), which involves being fully present and tuned-in to what arises moment to moment and encouraging the client to engage similarly. For me, therapeutic awareness and skilfulness is nurtured by my compassion, contemplative and Buddhist practices. Indeed, it is an ethical requirement for a meditation and mindfulness teacher to have an established personal practice; this provides authenticity, a stronger alliance and the best conditions for improved therapeutic outcomes (Desmond, 2016).

I often encounter with clients the need for a quick-fix to make the pain and distress end as quickly and painlessly as possible. This is an understandable and very human expectation but the current malaise of consumption also feeds it, including striving, acquisition and success equals happiness traps set by Western culture (Madison, 2014). Therefore, gentle encouragement and support is needed to work with fear and resistance as well as pressure for results. To set more realistic expectations, I emphasise that allowing time is vital and that; "it's just not possible to avoid feeling bad. But we can learn to deal with misery and distress in a new, healthier way" (Germer, 2009, p.1). Because self-compassion is often an alien concept to new clients, a form of scaffolding is necessary in terms of psycho-education and guidance through the process (Wood, et al., 1976; Bruner, 1978). The first time self-compassion is brought into the therapeutic space is always interesting, sometimes challenging, puzzling and often moving.

> *Journal: 9 October 2014*
> *Self-compassion exercise today: client said they had never placed their hand on their heart, but when they did, they felt that their heart leapt out to meet their hand – very moving.*

> *Journal: 22 April 2015*
> *Motivating self with compassion exercise: client cried at the end, which I wasn't expecting. There was a pause then client said, "I have just realised that I have never told myself that I loved me before". My heart filled with joy and we spoke of what a precious, painful and beautiful encounter that was.*

Since I have begun to work in this way, I have encountered many similar responses to the ones above. Each time is so special and poignant. There is often a very positive response to such profound experiences but this has to be handled with care and tenderness as it can be a powerful reminder of what has been lacking within oneself and from others, it can also be rejected where strong shame is present (Gilbert, 2000; Gilbert and Procter, 2006; Gilbert, et al., 2012).

Working with compassion brings me into direct contact with deep pain; clients pain as well as my own, sometimes simultaneously. Witnessing the courage of my client and the power of compassionate presence to bear the pain enabled me to face my own wound in the same way. The shared silence, filled with compassion and soft tears were all that was needed, no words were necessary.

Journal: October 2014. Evening sitting

Unspeakable communicated

Pain seeping out of every pore, in expression, posture, tone
We spoke of many things then,
when it could no longer stay locked inside
with 5 minutes of our session left
The unspeakable emerged
A soft voice, barely audible, said oh… and I had a miscarriage…
Despair and pain pour into the silent space,
Compassion tenderly holds the suffering
Our eyes meet, bodies incline,
Sorrow spoken, witnessed, shared
Tears emerged to bathe the wound.
As she left, my heart ached for her, and me
My hand rested on my heart without thinking.
Next client arrived.

Our common humanity of shared struggle is highlighted within this exchange, whilst I would not share personal pain in this context, I do safely share examples of fallibility and still being an ok person. Where flaws are met with compassion, forgiveness and acceptance it allows the strength to be honest and motivation to change rather than recoiling from being beaten with a verbal lashing.

Journal: December 2014

Shared an example with a client who persecutes herself, of me not locking up correctly at the room I use in town…I highlighted old self: anger, criticism, shame, recrimination. Compassionate self: aware of frustration and regret, responding, apology, forgiving myself (it had been a long and hard day).

6.4 Alongside Each Other

In therapy, emphasis is placed on empathy, which entails putting yourself in the shoes of another, seeing and feeling from the client's perspective (Reber, 1995). At the Retreat, where I have a consulting room, visitors are invited to remove their shoes. Most clients respond warmly to this, a few decline, some miss the sign, but generally it is felt to be a very levelling act, respectful, humble, another symbol of our common humanity.

> *Journal: 14 January 2015*
> *I hadn't noticed it before but the therapeutic position of being alongside my clients is personified by the way my client's shoes were set right alongside mine in the hallway. Our shoes sitting beside each other as we entered together into the therapy room. I hold this is a precious and beautiful thing and which symbolises the spirit and heart of our work and our common humanity.*

A few weeks after journaling about our shoes being together, the reflection was used as a therapeutic intervention where there was a power issue and I brought my client's attention to our shoes in the hallway. My personal and therapeutic philosophy is founded on collaboration and empowerment, but on this occasion I was blind to an imbalance of power in the consulting room. It was a timely reminder of power dynamics, and the influence of perceptions of power due to economic, social or expert status. When these issues remain in blind-sight or normalised to the point of dropping out of awareness, they can be pernicious, disempowering and diminishing.

This final vignette personifies the healing and immeasurable qualities of self-compassion. This is a compilation of my reflections over the course of several months where I was fortunate to accompany a client as the view of themselves as unworthy and unlovable transformed into one of regard, cherishing and loving both the child and the adult. This is a process that, as I know for myself, is an example of the power of story, and through compassion, our capacity to change.

Journal: March-May 2015

Reflections on the power of self-compassion to change a life-script.

Working with a client who described themselves as a "difficult child" who, into adulthood carried this label. This generated self-blame for anything that went wrong and silenced client's right to acknowledge and express needs. This life-script fed a core belief of defectiveness, being unlovable, not good enough and all the pain that such beliefs entail. Slowly, tentatively, self-compassion was introduced, with all the discomfort of trespassing. We began, gradually finding a safe place to allow the process of opening, closing, retreating, fear, confusion, frustration and ambivalence whilst at the same time drawing on the warmth, soothing and nourishment available from compassion. Realisation began at the level of intellect then gradually moved into the body and heart. Initially, there was recognition of capacity to offer compassion to others, then came the possibility offering the same to self, although, still feeling very alien. Taking small steps, stopping when needed, just like a child learning to walk or an animal learning to stand on new and fragile legs. What courage this takes. Slowly, trust in the experience and the feeling of self-compassion began to grow, with the heart opening a little more so the deeper pain can be cared for rather than rejected and pushed away whilst also learning that it can be safely shut again as a defence against the presence of too much pain.

A breakthrough occurred… a seismic shift of perspective and story. Through acknowledging the struggle and distress in childhood, client wondered in disbelief how on Earth the child coped with what was happening. Deep compassion was felt for and offered to that child.

This brought clarity into the experience rather than the previous view, which was through the lens of an adult. The realisation that the child was afraid, in pain and distress – not difficult, brought a strong rejection of the view that had held such authority for so long. Client recognised and was angry that their life-script had been penned by an adult who could not cope with a sick child and could not adequately respond to that child's needs. Who inadvertently taught the child that to be in distress and have needs would result in rejection. So began a process of much needed love, care and healing for the child and the adult that previously, the "difficult child" would not have felt deserving of. The life-script is being re-written in the style of a wonderful child who got through tough and scary times, who is brave and worthy of love and belonging.

A beautiful flower unfolds… it cannot be rushed, such deep understanding and wisdom takes time.

When this kind of experience unfolds in therapy, I feel a sense of wonder; in the deepest valleys of pain, there is no separateness, only experiencing and being present and alive in that moment. Even though my work can leave me feeling low, sad and in a worn-out place, I often encounter the bountiful gifts of courage, generosity, warmth and love. Words cannot convey the meaning and privilege of being able to accompany, show, and help someone make changes, to witness their realisation of how precious their life is, how worthy of love they are and that the miracle of just being alive on this Earth is everything. That happiness is not about material things, status or high achievement, it is found through learning to live in awareness with love, compassion and joy. As I have discovered through the process of the Doctorate and autoethnography, the more I feel this for myself, the more authentic my voice is in sharing such things with others. Herein lies the power of first-hand experience.

6.3 Teaching Mindful Self-compassion

6.5 Dartmoor, Easter 2015: Being guided along the Path

6.3.1 Being Guided along the Path

Cultivating self-compassion and experiencing how transformational it is for me led to my deep wish to guide others along this path. In 2014, I committed to teacher training at Bangor University and became one of the first cohort of recognised trained teachers of MSC. In this section I will be exploring how cultivating MSC helped me in teacher training and then in teaching others, it was not an easy process and it began with some trepidation as can be seen from the next journal entry.

> *Journal: 2 July 2014. Day 1*
> *Strong feelings of unease, anxiety and apprehension, wondering why I put myself through these things. Deciding that this will be the last time I do this – I am tired of all the internal upheaval it never gets any better/easier. Everyone seems uber sorted, super-skilled, loads of teaching experience, blah, blah, blah. After the end of this first evening session we were invited to meet for coffee and network. Arrgghh I really hate bloody networking, makes me feel sick to my stomach. The pressure to make friends has haunted me all my life, as an only child I was always being told to do this and it still strikes fear and panic right into my heart… fear of rejection. I left the building as fast as possible, walked up the road with waves of shame washing over me, feeling like a failure and then I looked further up the hill and saw several others from the course, I paused, smiled inside, it isn't just me who feels this way, I didn't feel so alone when I went back to my room.*

Without MSC I would not have noticed that I was not alone walking up the hill. My usual intense focus and judgement on myself no longer had such strong a strong grip (Neff, 2008; Germer, 2009). Through mindful awareness I was able to look outwards, notice others and, rather than the contempt for myself completely obscuring the view, care and compassion spontaneously arose for myself and others.

> *Journal: 3 July 2014. Day 2*
> *Chris Germer (CG) asked how would we like to be treated – by ourselves and others. My body softened upon hearing the wishes and intentions for kindness by others in the room. The question was then asked: What do you need / need to hear? I reminded myself about my intentions and how much I want/need to do this training.*

Emphasis was on considering how we wish to relate to others and ourselves and what we needed. In making these aspects explicit, a safe space was created both internally and externally. We also reflected on what kind of teacher we would like to be based on our past experiences of teachers. The qualities I wish to cultivate as a teacher are: warmth, care, gentleness, generosity, humour, authenticity, sincerity, joyfulness and enthusiasm. It is also important to be honest when these elements are not present and be willing to be vulnerable. Thus modelling to students that it is safe and ok to be an imperfect human, showing how I walk-the-talk, do the best I can and that it is absolutely ok be imperfect.

> *Journal: 4 July 2014. Day 3*
> *Yesterday, involved finding Loving-kindness phrases with to generate goodwill to self. My god, this is demanding. The question was What do I really need to hear? The response that arose within me was: "you are doing great kid" – my Dad speaking – tears immediately came, my heart raced, I didn't hear the rest of the exercise, I was too busy trying to compose myself. So many people seemed able to do the work. I sat irritated, how come they found this so easy? Hearing the warm, beautiful words they offered themselves made me feel disconnected, alone. I also noticed that not everyone had shared and wondered if they felt like me. I wanted to say something but couldn't find the courage. Something must have been processing overnight because when I came back to the exercise today, I formed the following phrases: May I encourage myself, May I learn to embrace myself and life more fully, May I feel connected, There is no need to fear – I am ok, and… "you are doing great kid" – thanks Dad ☺*

This journal entry shows how powerful asking ourselves what we need to hear can be, it also highlights how pain can arise when we open up and really listen. The practice can bring forth words we long to hear, such as Dad's much-loved phrase, however, care is needed because this work could elicit an abusive, or critical voice and also, if the language of compassion is yet to be learned, nothing comes. Experiencing how tough this process is challenges perceptions that compassion is weak, indulgent or passive. As well as encountering strong emotions, patterns of avoidance can be expected to show up. It is important to be aware of this because therein lies another opportunity to offer ourselves what is needed in terms of support and encouragement. Where MSC is present there is less of a tendency to avoid painful feelings (Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007) and, therefore, a greater chance of responding to need and finding a way through difficult terrain.

Journal: 6 July 2014. Day 5

Homework is to write a compassionate letter to myself, I can't form the words. I feel irritated, why can't I just do this?! Staring at a blank piece of paper, I begin to feel sad then block it all out, leave the exercise, I watched a film as a distraction. As I write this, I notice my usual habitual avoidance patterns and it is really uncomfortable, doesn't resolve anything really. I am going to practice the self-compassion break then go to bed. Also had to write our own eulogy from this day onwards and a vow to self, which connects us to what we value and how we are and wish to be. It took a couple of days but here it is:

Mary deeply loves her partner, friends, members of her family and all her cats. She knows she is loved by them too. She is passionate about caring for all living beings, nature and the Earth and wants to have made some positive difference in her time on this planet. Buddhism is important to her, it provides meaning, purpose and connection. Through learning to care for herself and respond to her needs with wisdom, compassion and loving-kindness she is able to offer the same to all beings. She accepts she is a flawed and wonderful human being who is enough, just as she is. She loves having fun, being playful, having adventures and brings love and joy into hers and others lives.

MY VOW to myself: I vow to nurture compassion and connection with my authentic self, with other beings and the earth so that all will be well and live with ease.

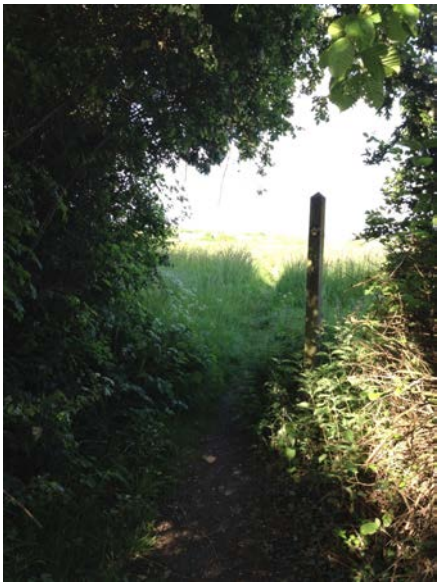
Writing my eulogy and vow helped me find a way to write the compassionate letter to myself, through connecting to what is most meaningful and valued in my life. My experience highlighted that although the instructions may appear simple, this is no easy task, however, real benefits and poignancy can emerge. MSC participants are only asked to write the compassionate letter once, which can feel like a huge task so, rather than a one-off exercise, I also encourage regular letter writing or messages to self to reinforce the work.

Compassion is pivotal in generating courage in the presence of pain because it enables a person to feel supported and strong enough to face it and then respond in a healthy way. The journal entry that follows was a powerful experience that was imbued with loss, love and belonging. The pain burned right through me, I can feel it as I write now, but even stronger are the feelings of loving compassionate connection. The catalyst was the courage of a group member who spoke his truth about pain, in doing so he became a witness to my own struggle and validated my experience. The group response was heartfelt compassion; real compassion in action, I will never forget it.

> *Journal: 7 July 2014. Day 6*
> *Today we did the Compassionate Friend exercise, I felt devastated, that apart from P, there isn't anyone living, who came to mind who would really fit the role. The other lovely family members and friends who I felt really loved and accepted by are all dead and this is so painful – I really miss them. Envisioning a formless or imaginary presence didn't cut it for me either. I sat in deep sadness, loneliness arose and I felt desolate. Then an incredibly courageous act occurred, a member of the group spoke with great honesty saying that there was no-one there for him in the exercise and how hard it was. My heart went straight out to him and so did everyone else's, no judgement, just loving kind care. I cried with relief and joy. I spoke to him privately and thanked him deeply for his courage and honesty and told him that this stopped me spiralling into despair. We smiled and hugged, acknowledging our humanity and connection.*

The final day of training was very emotional; there was such a strong sense of community, very few of us were in a rush to leave – including me. There was also a sense of excitement, of being at the forefront of MSC work and appreciating the privilege of now being able to share this with others.

6.3.2 Guiding Fellow Travellers



6.6 Showing the Way

As I have shown, my path of cultivating self-compassion involves many positive experiences and discoveries but it also entails walking with discomfort, feeling bruised and wounded, with resistance, fear, shame and pain as companions. However, as I continue along the path I find precious relief, care and connection through being more loving and kind to myself. Additionally, I have the joy of inviting others along, being able to show the way, guide and explore and emphasise belonging. It is an invaluable opportunity to share stories and be part of the rich learning that arises from collaboration in a true dialogue imbued with love, humility, hope, inquiry and unfolding transformation (Freire, 2005). In this section I will provide a composition of journal reflections that arose throughout the eight-week MSC training that I provided during the research period. The aim is to highlight key landmarks along the way and reflect on the process and practices that fellow travellers and myself were engaged in.

Journal: 13 April 2015. Week 1
My question to self and the group: Why am I here?
I write down: To learn to be more compassionate and take care of myself better.
Why am I really here?
I write: So I suffer less and live more fully.

In the first week of the MSC training, participants are introduced to the practice of placing their hand on their hearts, or making contact with another part of the body where distress is felt, in order to experience soothing. This simple but powerful action engages the mammalian care-giving system in the brain, which then releases the neurotransmitter oxytocin and other opioids that generate feelings of calmness, bonding and affiliation (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert and Procter, 2006; Rockliff, et al., 2011; Desmond, 2016). I know how soothing and comforting this feels but there have been times when there is strong resistance in terms of not wanting to make contact with pain. I share these reflections with the group to emphasise patience, gentleness, and the courage this seemingly simple gesture can take. To model common humanity, I also share something of my shyness to normalise nervousness of being in a new group. I close the first session with Mary Oliver's poem Wild Geese to symbolise all the components of MSC and relay the essential message of belonging.

The process over the eight weeks is rich and varied but generally, participants begin to notice the extent and impact of their harsh inner-critics and their guilt over responding to their own feelings. Participant's start to notice and share incidents when they remembered to do soothing touch and being pleasantly surprised at how this helped, and felt strong rather than weak. Strong emotions also arise including; anger, rage, frustration, sadness, grief and vulnerability, this is why the concept of 'backdraft' is taught in week two. Backdraft occurs when fire is exposed to oxygen (Germer, 2009) it symbolises how the oxygen of self-compassion can fuel the fire of pain, distress, shame and rejection (Gilbert and Choden 2013). The presence of compassion can remind us of something we have never had; the symptoms are usually distress, resistance or ambivalence (Gilbert, et al., 2012). It is important to normalise this reaction and offer encouragement to meet it with kindness and, rather than perceiving this as danger, seeing its presence as part of the healing process. It is also important to normalise resistance because this is a very natural response to painful and difficult emotions that we want to supress and avoid. There can also be fear that if strong emotions are given space they will overwhelm, however, if they are resisted they remain firmly in place. In fact, as participants discover, emotions will calm down and often dissolve or resolve when they are given mindful and compassionate attention.

It is also important to emphasise that we have defences for good reason, which is to keep us safe, therefore, participants are encouraged to shut down, do something else, comfort and soothe whenever this is needed. I emphasise throughout the training that the process takes time and patience because people are working on strong habits of mind and body that have accumulated over years. I stress that this is a work in progress where trust increases as the practices are tested out. I also reiterate on a regular basis that when love and compassion are developed for ourselves, everyone benefits, therefore, it is not selfish (Neff, 2004; Neff and Davidson, 2016). I make it explicit that the positive and negative experiences of MSC work are all part of the practice. As did I, participants felt overwhelmed with home practice and reading and guilty for not having completed it all. This provides a wonderful opportunity to offer care when struggling and meet difficult emotions with kindness rather than becoming a form of self-punishment. There is profound relief to learn about commonality of feelings and in not feeling so alone. What happens between sessions is also a vital source of learning:

> *Journal: 20 April 2015. Week 2*
> *I lost the plot yesterday during prep for week 2. Rather than keep on shouting and going over what should have happened, I soothed myself, I put my hand on my chest and felt my pounding heart and gently stroked my stomach which was tense and churning. I stood doing this for a while until my breathing settled, allowing myself to be soothed, paying kind attention to the painful feelings inside. My whole state of mind shifted to acknowledgement of the sadness and frustration that was present, I felt a little relief. I inquired and listened intensely for anything else that was arising and I noticed an old rule: I shouldn't ask for help because this is being weak and inadequate. I was then able to see this as an unhelpful, defensive and fearful response that no longer serves me.*

I felt deeply humble and humanly flawed as I began teaching week 2, I shared what had happened with the group and was very moved by the compassion, love, kindness and acceptance that flowed from the group to me. Here was an example where being compassionate creates the conditions for a wise and skilful response right at the time of suffering, just when it is needed the most (Neff, Rude and Kirkpatrick, 2007).

As well as sharing the challenges, I also offer what I have found supportive:

> *Journal: 27 April 2015. Week 3*
> *Sitting in my garden, resting before teaching this evening. I would never have done this before, I was always working till the very last minute. Watching and listening to the wonderful swifts, smiling at the starlings and taking in the sweet scent of Clematis Montana carried on the breeze. Deep sense of gratitude for this space where I restore and then go out into the world. I practised Self-compassion Break most days this week – personally and with clients. It has a stabilising and calming effect, gives me a chance to pause and gather myself. Used affectionate breathing in the cinema when a film turned out to be violent and horrendous. Shared this with the group too. It's all practice, wherever we are… listening, sensing, inquiring, cultivating, closing and opening. I am so moved by the care the group take of each other and for the deep care and affection I feel for everyone there.*

Reflecting on my journal, I can see how precious the care I offer to myself is and that when I do so, a sense of gratitude and connection overflows. I also notice how, in the process of offering care to ourselves that this is spontaneously and generously extended from the group towards each other. I witness growing awareness and concern for each other; unprompted help to set up and clear away, and increasingly tender greetings and goodbyes. A palpable warmth and connection arises that immediately re-ignites when group members encounter each other months later in the catch-up sessions and day retreats that I run. The group dynamic and connection made in this training is like no other training I have encountered. For example, I can still remember with fondness, the names and faces of many of the people I trained with back in 2012.

> *Journal: 4 May 2015. Week 4*
> *Participants shared that they are beginning to learn it is ok to be themselves, to allow time for self-care and not to keep striving to achieve everything, including all the MSC work. It was great to see so many smiles and nods in agreement.*

In week 4, work begins on the inner-critic. As shown in Chapter 5, I know how painful this is so we gently work with emotion, invite words we need to hear, begin to find meaning in struggle and work with painful judgement and shame.

This is challenging but as compassion grows, as I have found, criticism and shame can become more manageable, less punishing and different responses begin to emerge. When working on the inner-critic, I make it explicit that it is ok to 'open and close' to the work as needed and that learning to care for ourselves with self-compassion takes time. To set expectation, I shared how I did not complete the inner-critic exercise the first time and struggled the second time but that I now see the inner-critic for what it is and find I can motivate myself to change with self-compassion rather than via a harsh inner-critic (Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Germer and Neff, 2013; Neff and Dahm, 2013). They laughed when I introduced them to The Moose. In preparation for week 4, I completed the inner-critic exercise again and there was a strange, but very welcome quietness and calmness, it felt very odd. I was aware of significant change and less fear and aversion, which had continued from my experience on the Dartmoor walking retreat. I bowed my head with immense gratitude for the deep workings of compassion.

Journal: 10 May 2015. Evening sitting,
The Moose has left the building
The Moose exits stage right – what a show!
She will be back soon for the usual encore
Wait… she isn't going to reappear after all. Oh…
You haven't clapped and cheered for More!
She no longer feels Centre Stage, in demand
A smile of compassion now occupies her spot.
The Moose has now left the building
That's All Folks! You can go home now.
Don't worry, she'll be back…

6.7 Moose Resting

At this mid-way point there is acknowledgement and normalisation of the three main stages that can be experienced as the training progresses: infatuation, arising from relief and sometimes elation that the fix of self-compassion has worked. Then comes disillusionment, when it is realised that it does not work in the longer term when used as a resistance to experience. The third stage is acceptance, which involves letting go of striving and over-doing and learning to meet difficult experiences with love and compassion. Participants find that making these stages explicit is very helpful, however, they do not fully capture what I had found, so I share experiences that I recorded in my journal (Figure 6.4), to encourage reflection and recognition of what can be encountered.

Figure 6.4. MSC Process Words from my Journal

Longing, fear, pain, uncertainty, confusion, questioning, frustration, hope, expectation, ambivalence, anger, persistence, curiosity, disappointment, ambivalence, understanding, awareness, enthusiasm, doubt, numbness, avoidance, shame, intellectualisation, weariness, pessimism, anxiety, reactivity, clarity, courage, ease, healing, simplifying, allowing, peace, calm, embodiment, acceptance…

By week 5, participants' inner-critics quieten to varying degrees and it becomes increasingly possible to be more loving towards self and motivate with compassion rather than fear. I share my story of my life change resulting from infertility and confess that it took me two years to write my compassionate letter to self. Doing so can be helpful but what emerges from the group is even more powerful as can been seen in my journal for week 5.

> *Journal: 11 May 2015. Week 5*
> *I shared my story of infertility in the exercise to find meaning in suffering because there is no 'silver lining' in terms of the struggle itself – there was no baby, but the gifts I have received as result of the changes of direction in my life now are immeasurable. For the group, being able to speak of painful experiences and the meaning of them with another person, who was practising Compassionate Listening was very, very powerful. Participants shared that knowing the listeners were breathing in compassion for themselves and out to the speaker felt safe, containing, caring and nourishing. I watched how tenderly they held each other in loving presence, the gentle tone that rippled through the sanctuary – loving kindness, compassion and humanity was palpable. As they worked together, I sat still on my cushion, closed my eyes and my heart filled with love and joy.*

During this week I share the Japanese art of Kintsugi where a broken bowl repaired with gold becomes unique, of great value and meaning. As I illustrated throughout Chapter 5, I use this as a powerful metaphor for the preciousness of brokenness, the strength found in mending and of this being an invaluable, moving and beautiful part of ourselves that we also have in common with others.

6.8 Beauty and Brokenness shared

Journal: 18 May 2015. Week 6 – Working with Shame
I was worried about doing the group work on shame so started to over prepare, thankfully I noticed and stopped. I practised mindful breathing and my wise compassionate voice said, "I don't want you to suffer, you have a great heart, good intention, you are smart, intuitive and caring – you have everything you need already" WOW… I felt more balanced and took care of myself as part of the preparation for the evening. I then went and LEFT ALL MY PAPERS BEHIND! Incredibly, I was not harsh with myself, it was such a relief not to have beaten myself up. I confessed to the group, they laughed and shared their own stories. As we worked with shame it was a very open, inquiring and enlightening session with nearly everyone joining in and supporting each other in sharing their experiences. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, bravery, joy, courage and transformation in the room. There were some great observations about how much shame ignites the inner-critic and how liberating sharing experiences of shame felt in a safe environment.

In addition to the MSC teaching guide, I drew on the work of Paul Gilbert and colleagues who work extensively with shame (Gilbert, 2005; Gilbert and Irons, 2005; Gilbert and Procter, 2006; Gilbert, et al., 2012). Common humanity is important to emphasise where shame is concerned as this provides an antidote to the toxicity of secrecy, invisibility and isolation that shame propagates. To demonstrate this I invited everyone to stand, and then asked them to sit down if they have never made a mistake, never hurt anyone, never failed, and have never felt shame. Every one remained standing and I invited all to look at each other and recognise these shared human experiences.

I stressed the importance of naming shame and distinguishing between guilt and shame (Brown, 2012); guilt centres on behaviour (I did a bad thing or did not do the right thing) and shame focuses on the person (I am a bad thing, I am no good). To emphasise safety when approaching this work, I shared two personal but manageable examples of shame and made it clear that there were many other experiences that I choose not to share with anyone. My concerns about facilitating this work were unfounded, but great care is needed with each group.

6.9 17 April 2015: Moments before the MSC half-day retreat

Following week 6 and the half-day retreat, participants speak of noticing self-compassion arising without thinking about it, feeling more at ease and aware, noticing a more gentle, accepting and compassionate way of being and of changes in interactions with other people. There is still understandable resistance and struggle with painful feelings but at this point it was common for members of the group to be more open and courageously honest, which was so helpful to the rest of the group, particularly those who are too afraid to say publicly, just like I was. We journey on together with love, laughter and tears.

In Week 7, the focus is on challenging relationships whilst taking care of ourselves. In particular, working on caregiver fatigue is a chance for participants to learn about the power of compassion with empathy and equanimity and the need to challenge selfless caring and over empathising. Of particular relevance to therapists and carers, I include research that indicates that empathy rather than compassion is a factor in fatigue or burnout, and that compassion alleviates distress (Klimecki and Singer, 2012; Klimecki, Ricard and Singer, 2013; Singer and Klimecki, 2014).

Empathy means to feel the pain in the experience of others, putting yourself in their shoes. Although this is a very important part of our connection with others, on its own it causes distress and drains energy and resources. This can lead to burnout but when we bring compassion alongside empathy, there is greater connection, resilience and energy (Ricard, 2009, 2013). Important elements of compassion are wisdom and courageous action (Neff, Rude and Kirkpatrick, 2007). Practising Self-compassion with Loving-kindness in difficult moments and relationships can help heal painful areas as well as strengthening connection through setting intention, attention and taking positive action. Through this awareness it is possible to discern whether compassionate action is helpful or harmful, for example, maintaining an unhealthy situation, over-identification or over-involvement. This is essential in the care and relief of suffering in ourselves and others.

The final week focussed on reviewing and reinforcing learning, setting intentions for a life practice and expressing gratitude and appreciation. At this point, I introduce the contemplative practice tree (Appendix 10) and encourage everyone to sketch out their own. I empahise that every tree is unique, takes time to grow and does not stand alone because the roots run deep in the soil, making intricate connections to form a family of trees (Simard, 2016). I reiterate that although everyone has completed the training, it is still early days; everyone goes at their own pace in this life-long practice. I welcome everyone into the self-compassion family and bow to them with heartfelt gratitude to have been able to share MSC work with them. As a final act together we write, read out then place messages of compassion wishes for ourselves and others into a bowl. I collated and emailed them to the group, the compilation is detailed in Appendix 12. In closing, we dedicated the fruits of our efforts to the benefit of all beings, including ourselves.

It is important to encourage and support ongoing MSC practice and foster a sense of community, therefore I offer evening check-in sessions and day retreats every few months. There are additional sessions to cover specific areas such as ongoing work on the inner-critic and also forgiveness, which was dropped from the eight-week training due to insufficient time. I also send regular updates of other online trainings and workshops, which can reinforce and develop practice such as Positive Neuroplasticity Training (Hanson, 2016), The Compassionate Mind Foundation, Center for Mindful Self-compassion and The Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education.

6.10 5 October 2015: Ready for MSC Group Check-in Session

6.3.3 Reflections on Teaching

I used my journal to reflect on my teaching, which helped me critique, inform and further integrate my practice as teacher and practitioner. I also recorded which formal and informal MSC practices (Appendix 7), that I consistently weaved into the heart of everyday life. These were: Soothing Touch, Soften Soothe Allow, Compassion for self and others, Self-Compassion Break, Affectionate Breathing, Mindfulness in eating, walking and in daily life, Sense and Savour Walk and Loving-kindness to others and self. Journaling also strengthened the testimony of my own experience as to how powerful MSC practices are and I find again and again that when I speak from heartfelt experience, how much it encourages and resonates with others, "When we expose our own hurt or fear, we actually give others permission to be more authentic" (Brach, 2003, p.294). I also find it exciting to share the latest empirical research that underpins the training, however, I have to keep a watchful eye on my enthusiasm as the first group were overwhelmed with all the information.

To become recognised as a trained teacher, I was required to complete nine group supervision sessions via video link across the World with seven other practitioners. The cruel irony of the inner-critic is that it can appear even when I teach MSC, particularly if I am uncertain and in unchartered territory. The combination of first-time supervision with people I do not know is enough to put The Moose and me on full alert, as I recorded in my following journal entry.

Journal: 27 March 2015

My anxiety and attachment to 'doing it right' came out in the first MSC teacher supervision last night. I felt my hard-edged inner-critic dictate how I 'should' be; it was harsh, absolute, uncaring. It comes from fear of being nothing less than brilliant (failing), the rule that everything has to be right/perfect is a painful uncompromising place that squeezes the delight out of everything and silences me. I had forgotten to soften and soothe or be fully present and allow things to unfold. What was reflected back to me by the supervisor was openness, honesty, deep encouragement and the importance of care for ourselves as well as participants. It was wonderful.

All the MSC supervisions modeled compassion; through the warmth and kindness offered, in normalising uncertainty and fallibility and emphasising the importance of prioritising self-care. It provided an antidote to my fearful self-criticism with safety and encouragement to be human rather than perfect. Subsequent sessions reinforced the need for softness rather than rigidity in relation to course content, engaging in more heart than headwork and keeping process above content. Even more pertinent was how our supervisors embodied the work, which I found inspiring and encouraging. The sessions felt so kind and supportive that I found the courage to be authentic and shared my vulnerability and stumbling points with the group. Such disclosure would have been unthinkable for me 12 months ago, but this became the norm. These supervisions were markedly different to my experience in clinical supervision, both as a supervisor and supervisee; here emphasis was on being rather than doing and allowing rather than intervention. My experience of these sessions has now formed the basis of my clinical supervision.

Teaching places me outside my comfort zone but I find it a rich and exciting process that I am learning to trust. The deep listening that lies at the heart of compassion practice brings a level of awareness and elicits skilful responses that help me feel more confident and calm in the knowledge that I will not harm myself in the process through being over-critical or over working. Knowing that I can, and do, give myself permission to have a break and take nourishment is a huge change from the endless striving and perfectionism that had previously driven me into the ground in the past. I am humbled by the insight and change, stillness, steadiness and gentleness that I find within me and in the MSC groups.

For me, and fellow travellers, this is a process of unlearning, changing views, perceptions, scripts, stories, and beliefs and assumptions. Over the MSC training weeks I experience an uncurling, a softening in myself and within participants. It is such a privilege and an honour to witness the courage it takes to face pain and see what unfolds. Our common humanity is realised and we learn so much from each other. Glimpsing a participant making physical contact with a painful place, tenderly holding pain is like witnessing something sacred.

6.3.4 The Distance Travelled

The old combination of my inner-critic, perfectionism, shame, shyness and social anxiety would never have allowed me to be exposed, particularly in front of my peers. Fearing annihilation, my safety behaviour was to steer clear of any situation perceived as potentially calamitous to ensure that others would not be able to see that I was not good enough and have the opportunity to judge, criticise or reject. I would either avoid presenting, teaching or public speaking or, when I had to do it I would overwork, overcompensate and obsess to the point of joyless exhaustion. Research has indicated that benefits gained from learning MSC remain stable over time, with levels of depression, anxiety and fear decreasing and life-satisfaction increasing after 12 months (Germer and Neff, 2013; Neff and Germer 2013). My experience resonates with these findings; indeed, as my MSC practice has continued, so much has changed since I began my journal in the summer of 2014. The following three examples illustrate the distance travelled.

First, in May 2016, I actually looked forward my Confirmation of Candidature for the Professional Doctorate, which is an assessment and presentation that must be passed in order to continue into Stage 2. I relished the opportunity of sharing my work, I was anxious but fear was no longer present. Second, having identified the occupational hazards, discussed in Chapter 6.1, and found for myself how much self-compassion builds resilience and wellbeing, I decided to offer MSC training to psychologists and other healthcare professionals. So, in June 2016, I taught a one-day workshop on Mindful Self-compassion to my peers at the British Psychological Society (Appendix 3). I worked hard to prepare but paced myself, I felt joy at being able to build a compassionate day for colleagues who were travelling from across the UK. On the morning of the training I meditated and offered loving-kindness to myself, and everyone I was about to meet. Again, I noticed normal nerves but not the terror I knew of old.

The day went very well, not perfectly, there was room for improvement and that was OK too. I felt I was myself; warm, funny, playful, serious and passionate, I felt very privileged to share the work with such a diverse and thoughtful group. I walked to the station feeling proud that I had done something I never thought I would be able to. Two days after the presentation I woke with a vulnerability hangover (Brown, 2012) when I realised that the very person who needed to be perfect had said in front of her peers that she had suffered all bar two of the symptoms of occupational hazards in the psychology profession! However, the sheer panic I felt soon subsided when I remembered that it was ok to be vulnerable and human, particularly when it is founded on compassion and authenticity.

> *Practice Journal: 2 July 2016*
> *Panic and shame washed over me as I remembered I had stood up in front of my peers at the BPS and admitted to having experienced all bar two of the symptoms on the list of Occupational Hazards. I inwardly exclaimed, "what was I thinking!". I caught my breath - Shit. Panic said, no one else owned up to anything, they probably think I am flaky, flawed… I stopped, aware of what had arisen, I responded with true acceptance of my self, respect for my courage and felt peaceful in the knowledge that I spoke of what was true for me. My heart filled with joy and incredulity - so much has changed.*

Two weeks later came the third example of distance travelled when I delivered the MSC training at a London teaching hospital. Until now, I never imagined that I could ever do this but it was possible because I was no longer afraid to try, no longer afraid to fail, no longer afraid to be my human self (Neff, Hseih and Dejitthirat, 2005; Neff, 2009b). Here is a note about the day from my ongoing contemplative practice journal:

> *I felt was nervous but excited, this turned to terror when I walked into the room, over 60 people crammed in. I looked across the room and saw that some had just finished a night shift and others were eating their breakfasts before starting their day. Fear subsided, I felt such warmth and regard for everyone, I could see their stress and strain, there was widespread recognition of the Occupational Hazards. As I guided them through the practices it was wonderful to see some ease, the effect of hands placed on hearts, and the warmth, comfort and even a few smiles that emanated. As I travelled home I felt joy at being able to bring this work to people, and deep gratitude for all my teachers, in psychology and Buddhism.*

6.4 Taking the Academic Road

6.11 Between a rock and a hard place.
Hofn, Iceland: Blooms between Basalt Columns

The picture above represents the beauty and life that can unfold, even in a challenging environment. This is symbolic of my experience in academia with the Cambridge Theological Federation where at times this felt like being stuck between a rock and a hard place, particularly as I was one of only two Buddhists on the Professional Doctorate. My feelings of vulnerability, anxiety and doubt all created rigidity, paralysis and resistance to push ahead and cross thresholds but I knew that unless I did there would be no possibility of discovering new horizons. I have encountered these tensions many times whilst working on this thesis.

Through the process of developing MSC and Buddhist practices and inquiry, in this academic environment, I have discovered a lot about myself, in terms of how I sabotage but also what I have to give and that it is ok to ask for help. Before learning self-compassion my inner-critic would have a field day with actual or predicted negative comments or appraisals, causing me to be reactive and defensive, with rumination and procrastination closely following. The habit of procrastination, fuelled by fear of failing, is significantly diminished because being self-compassionate has helped me acknowledge the scared part of me and offer soothing and gentle encouragement rather than beating myself up over what I have or have not done (Germer, 2009). As a result I feel more resilient, balanced and resourceful (Neff, Hseih and Dejitthirat, 2005) and, rather than being demotivated through self-criticism, I am more motivated to improve (Breines and Chen, 2012).

Journal: 12 September 2014

First two months of writing have been chaotic and spasmodic, feeling frustrated with myself as usual. Rather than this becoming a negative downward spiral of criticism and procrastination, I find this behaviour reduces when I bring in kindness and appreciation of what I do, do. I then feel encouraged and consequently more motivated. The effect is noticeable and I am aware of a softer more compassionate voice within me, I am glad of its presence.

When doubt creeps back in, as it inevitably does, I find it harder to gather courage to begin writing and keep going. A core MSC practice that I apply is Loving Kindness for Ourselves, this encourages a wise compassionate voice that acknowledges struggle and advocates changes in thoughts and behaviour in order to reduce suffering. Neff (2011b) argues that rather than brandishing a stick to beat ourselves with in order to perform for meagre morsels of self-esteem, our self-compassionate actions emerge from a wish to thrive and be well. Rather than focus on negative and critical thoughts which activate the fear system and keeps attention on the accompanying pain (Gilbert and Proctor, 2006; Gilbert, et al., 2011), I can now bring in positive, constructive thoughts that broaden my perspective and opens up more helpful choices and responses (Fredrickson, 2001; Germer 2009). When I feel drained or despairing I will rest, when I have felt deeply affected by what has arisen in my writing I now stop and take care of myself. An indicator of the extent of my commitment to self-care was taking a year intermission, this would have been unthinkable previously but this level of active care provided recovery and brought greater strength and resilience, which enabled me to return to the doctoral programme.

Journal: 6-8 February 2015. Doctoral process

Noticing that lately my feeling towards this Doctorate is a labour of love, feeling great benefit from the contemplations and readings and deep joy when the fruits of practice act as nourishment for me, clients and students. This is in stark contrast to the majority of time in the previous 4 years when it has felt like a battle, a struggle for acceptance (on both sides), with persistent fierce doubt and despondency. Reflecting on what has shifted and how… it is due to increased self-compassion practice and study exponentially improving motivation and reaping benefits. My Buddhist practice and professional life feels so integral now compared to the fragmentation at the beginning of the process.

The Professional Doctorate requires continual navigation through demanding internal and external landscapes, exploring, connecting, analysing and understanding. Uncertainty is also an important part of the experience and sometimes I need to go round in circles and repeat the same routes until there is clarity. However, to ensure that I do not get hopelessly lost, I check that I am on solid ground theologically, conceptually and experientially. I do this through contemplation, Buddhist inquiry and testing out the teachings in order to be clear about what arises and how best to respond rather than seeing what is preferred or avoiding what is uncomfortable. Learning to seek help and cope with constructive criticism is a challenging part of the doctoral process but this has been significantly eased through self-compassion. With feedback on drafts and early papers, I found critiques hard to take and would also dismiss all the positive feedback (Neff, 2004; Neff, Hseih and Dejitthirat, 2005). It was a no-win situation; if the level of criticism did not match my own, I would feel mistrust, and when there were compliments I might feel short-term relief but my own judgments would soon erase any positive effects. In May 2016, I realised how much less personally I take comments and in doing so I am better able to respond to feedback and take responsibility for my part in the process.

> *Research Journal: May 2016*
> *T said "you present much better than you write, if you wrote as succinctly as you speak it would be a lot better", my ego felt bruised but my heart knows this is right. I remember smiling as we walked down the stairs and feeling grateful that she cared enough to be so forthright. Trusting this authenticity means also acknowledging all the very positive and encouraging feedback, recognising and accepting that both can have equal weight.*

6.12 Flourishing
Hofn, Iceland: Blooms between Basalt Columns

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the impact of my work and the effect of MSC. I have argued that psychology training and continuing professional development needs to include MSC training, make the hazards explicit, identify barriers to practitioner care and challenge the stigma of depression and burnout among psychologists. I have considered how MSC enriches the therapeutic relationship and the process of becoming an MSC teacher. My experience has highlighted how particular care is needed when engaging in this work because it makes direct contact with pain and can elicit very strong emotions. However, the fruits of MSC practice have been demonstrated, which are: awareness, acceptance, connection, wellbeing and transformation. Academically, self-compassion has helped with procrastination and motivation, taking responsibility, and has provided balance and resilience.

My aim in Chapter 6 was to discover what it really means to become a self-compassionate practitioner. I found how powerful it has been to form and share my story and how developing self-compassion fosters wisdom, courage and radical action. In Chapter 7 I will explore the far-reaching benefits of self-compassion in terms of how it can enable individuals and communities to take compassionate action into the world. Before we move onto the wider horizons of self-compassion, I will leave the last words of this chapter to two final reflections in my journal:

> *Journal: 24 June 2015*
> *Noticed that I began the day by asking what I needed,*
> *NOT what do I need to DO!*
>
> *Journal: 30 June 2015. The last day of my one-year journal.*
> *Very fittingly, I am not working today! I have cleared my diary to spend it with a much-loved friend so that I will have the nourishment and therefore the energy for Prof Doc work this weekend.*
>
> *I am learning….*

Chapter 7. Wider Horizons of Mindful Self-compassion

7.1 Far Horizon of The Broomway

As I take care of myself, I take care of the World.
As I take care of the World, I take care of myself.
(Rothberg, 2006, p.110)

In Chapters 5 and 6 I have considered the impact of self-compassion upon me personally, professionally and academically. I have also found that the effects of self-compassion extend further than these horizons. Because self-compassion cultivates interconnectedness rather than self-focus and isolation (Neff, 2003a, 2011a; Gilbert and Choden, 2013), it can also generate motivation to act compassionately to reduce suffering wherever possible. Indeed, Thanissara (2015) emphasises that inner change and individual action are essential to foster wellbeing, peace, justice and conservation. In this chapter I will be exploring how self-compassion, alongside Buddhist teachings, fosters belonging, connection with nature, equanimity, and can provide the resources to address contemporary social, political and environmental issues. Each of these areas is a doctorate and lifetimes work and I cannot fully do them justice within the boundaries of this thesis but they are important across all of my contexts.

7.1 Jewels along the Path

Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are
Moving across the landscapes,
Over the prairies and the deep trees,
The mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clear blue air,
Are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
The world offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
Over and over announcing your place
In the family of things.

Excerpt from Wild Geese (Oliver, 1986, p.14)

7.1.1 The Jewel of Belonging

According to the English Oxford Living Dictionary (2017) to belong can mean ownership, connection, affiliation, or having criteria for membership of a group. Belonging is important to mental and physical health, it "soothes the pain of disconnection" (Germer, 2009, p.162). Many times I have felt I did not belong and this pervaded multiple levels of my experience; personally, relationally, socially and culturally. As I discussed in Chapter 5, disconnection came primarily from self-judgement, depression, anxiety and shyness, and social anxiety. Culturally, family identity was fractured because my parents fled their birthplaces to settle in Birmingham (Mother fled from abject poverty in the Hebrides and Father escaped religious conflict in Northern Ireland). They did not want to belong to the former and never connected with the latter so consequently neither did I. Belonging, for me, has long been an elusive and painful thing "Loneliness comes from a feeling that we don't belong, whether or not we are in the presence of others" (Neff, 2011b, p.64).

Journal: 11 January 2015. Morning contemplation

Belonging

The need to belong is a deep yearning
It's not about property, possessions or status
It is about feeling part of, together with, connected
to people, places, culture and all precious living things.
Many times I felt I didn't truly belong, anywhere…
Not Irish, Scottish or a 'Brummie'
In Childhood: often too shy to say 'hello'
Teenagers were alien tribe for the adult too young
Womanhood was a complete mystery without mum
Childlessness meant membership of parent club denied.

Belonging, filled with love and compassion, has been found,
Through the beauty of loving and being loved, I belong.
I belong to the feminine; magnificent, powerful, nurturing.
Realising interconnectedness, I know I belong to the Earth.
Held in a tender, safe embrace that cares and protects,
Deep connection, peace and joy flow from this eternal place.
Reflecting and writing has helped me see
That I belong to all my stories and they to me.
You are now part of the story, you belong here too.
Welcome to the family.

The MSC components of common humanity and loving-kindness have helped develop my sense of belonging and connection to others; this has changed how I relate, as can be seen in Chapter 5.6 where I shared my experience at the Dartmoor retreat. Buddhist teaching helps to remind me of an important aspect of belonging, because it states that all phenomena are impermanent (*Anicca*), change is inherent in everything (Chah, 2005). Accepting that change is ever present makes it possible for me to see that connection and belonging are precious and no less meaningful for their impermanence. Consequently, nurturing connection and belonging with awareness of impermanence and the suffering (*dukkha*) that arises through attachment and clinging is deeply compassionate, for everyone concerned.

Furthermore, the Buddhist teaching of interdependence or dependent origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda)* is relevant on individual, social, cultural and ecological levels. It means that we are not completely independent, everything is intricately dependent and interconnected with everything (SN 12:1; Hanh, 1998; Bodhi, 2005). The illusion of dualism and of separateness has gone, I realise the depth of my belonging, as captured by Watts (1966) “We do not “come into” this world: we come out of it, as leaves from a tree” (p.9). Where a deep sense of belonging is present we are moved to eliminate causes of suffering, to care, nurture and protect (King, 2009; Macy and Johnstone, 2012). In my view, the Metta Sutta (Appendix 13) could not make the extent of this care any clearer.

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies, and downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill-will.

Excerpt from *Karaniya Metta Sutta: The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness.*
(SN 1:8, The Amaravati Sangha, 2004)

7.1.2 The Jewel of Connection

> The invitation to friendship with nature does of course entail a willingness to be alone out there. Yet this aloneness is anything but lonely. Solitude gradually clarifies the heart until a true tranquillity is reached. The irony is that at the heart of that aloneness you feel intimately connected with the world (O’Donohue, 2004, p.17).

The sense of belonging, through awareness of being deeply connected to nature, is captured in O’Donohue’s writing. Indeed, when I am in nature, seeing life all around, I recognise that I am part of it and therefore never alone as I recorded in my journal after a walking meditation.

Journal: 20 March 2015

Walking this afternoon

Clear bright blue sunlit sky
a cool, kind breeze greets me
Immeasurable Joy arises.
Fields full of crops offering rich bounty from the earth
Surround and nourish me
I bow in deep gratitude.
50 shades of green emerging into spring.
Animal tracks signalling Fox, Deer and Badger life,
Encounters with Water Vole, Heron and huge solitary Bee,
Hosts of Starlings, Robins, Finches and Blue Tits.
Anticipating the immanent and miraculous return of Swallows.
Life abounds inside me and all around;
flourishing, generous, ever changing, interdependence
No more loneliness, only belonging and connection
imbued with the deep wish to love, care and protect all life.

7.2 At the Retreat: Under the Willow Tree and in the Landscape

Being in nature is essential for my wellbeing, it is where I work, play and, as my journal highlighted, where I do a lot of meditation practice. The pictures above show where my consulting room is located at The Retreat, it is a beautiful rural location where I can sit or take a walk between therapy sessions. Clients can do the same and, where appropriate, we walk together, sit and talk under the trees or beside the river. This environment offers the opportunity of a rich sensory experience, to savour and feel part of the ever-changing nature of things, thus helping to gain a different perspective and reduce the pain of disconnection.

Connecting with nature offers the possibility of a mutual relationship of healing; it is physically and mentally beneficial for humans and nature can also benefit from the loving care humans are capable of giving when they discover such a connection. Conversely, Soga, et al. (2016) found that where contact is lost there can be an “extinction of experience” (p.143), which could have serious implications for environmental protection and wildlife as well as human wellbeing. Therefore, it is imperative to nurture awareness of our interdependence and encourage interaction with nature, wildlife, ecological diversity and conservation (Soga, et al., 2016).

There is a growing body of research supporting Ecotherapy as a clinical intervention, which demonstrates the physical and mental health benefits of being in nature through increased activity levels, reduced stress levels, improved mood, self-esteem, increased social contact, community and environmental engagement and sense of belonging (The Wildlife Trusts and RSPB, 2015). Exposure to nature has also been found to improve attention, cognitive performance, levels of creativity, positive emotions and pro-social responses (Berman, Jonides and Kaplan, 2008; Zhang, et al., 2014). An evaluation of Ecominds, a Mind ecotherapy project by Bragg, Wood and Barton, (2013), recommended this approach to healthcare providers, concluding; “healthy lifestyles and environmental behaviour can result from all types of ecotherapy” (p.6). As a result of my Doctoral research I plan to develop this area in my private psychology practice and, as discussed in Chapter 5, collaborate with organisations to working in nature with children and young adults who have experienced bereavement. Given all the benefits I experience and research findings on Ecotherapy, wherever possible I encourage clients, retreatants and students to connect with nature. Therapeutically, I teach MSC practices such as taking a mindful Sense and Savour Walk or Compassionate Walking where loving-kindness is offered to all living things, including ourselves.

Journal: 25 March 2015. Early morning walk in the sunshine.
Material things will never completely satisfy
Yet, even a few moments in the company of a songbird
is more than you could ever need or hope for.
Everyday a delight unfolds
You just have to turn up for it, Tune in, Be still,
Wonder, Smile, Breathe
Take this into the rest of the day.

7.1.3 The Jewel of Equanimity

> While we can love the world and hold the sorrows of the world in compassion, we also need equanimity and peace to teach us balance with the things we cannot change (Kornfield, 2014, pp.55-56).

Equanimity (*Upekkhā*) can be defined as observing with neutrality and "a balanced reaction to joy and misery, which protects one from emotional agitation" (Bodhi, 2005, p.154). Equanimity brings a sense of ease, strength and clarity, which enhances an ability to be present, compassionate and kind. There had been precious little of this in my life for as long as I can remember, I always felt off balance, either manic or very down, reactive, avoidant and anxious. Four months into my research I began to notice and journal my experiences of equanimity, which felt like an emerging internal process of stability, balance and fluidity, with a peaceful quality of awareness.

> *Journal: 22 October 2014*
> *I feel more peaceful and calm, more accepting of the way things are. Realising that this is equanimity and thinking what a priceless treasure it is - a firm foundation in the ending of suffering.*

> *Journal: 16 June 2015*
> *Old response – 1 year ago would have been to be distracted, detached, rejecting the experience. Not this time, equanimity was present, I could stay more open-hearted, steady and mindful… I could be fully present.*

When equanimity is present, even when there is chaos all around, I am aware of inner stillness and calm and it feels very liberating. Cultivating equanimity allows curiosity about what arises as opposed to resistance, aversion or entanglement in judgement. It enables contemplation on causes of imbalance, which separates me from a sense of ease, particularly when I am feeling saturated and/or resisting taking action (Kornfield, 2008). I am increasingly conscious of how my contemplative practices and MSC nourish calmness and emotional balance. This allows me to respond skilfully according to whether I needed to conserve, nourish or expend energy, physically, mentally or spiritually. This also provides the energy needed to turn towards my own suffering and pain, and to stand up for my needs. When I do this for myself I am then strong enough to take a stand for others.

7.2 Taking a Stand

> Compassion allows us to recognize that, paradoxically, freedom and happiness can only be won when we work for the freedom and happiness of others. Every time anyone of us understands this, truly the world is shaken by a compassionate revolution (Edwards, 1998, p. 210).

In Chapter 6.3 I shared my vow to nurture compassion and connection with my authentic self, with other beings and the earth so that all will be well and live with ease. To honour this vow calls for compassionate action, for myself and also politically, socially and environmentally (Thanissara, 2015). Buddhist and MSC practices can generate the care, resilience and wisdom needed for all forms of action, including volunteering, campaigning and protest. As I stated in Chapter 4, this for me is Buddhist practical theology or Engaged Buddhism (Hanh, 1987); defined by King (2009) as applying “the set of values and teachings of Buddhism to the problems in society in a non-violent way, motivated by concern for the welfare of others as an expression of their own Buddhist Practices” (p.2). As a Buddhist I am guided by the middle way in the form of the Noble Eight Fold Path, walking this path provides clear, practical and ethical ways of living and engaging with the world.

7.2.1 Individual Change

It is easy to fall into the trap of believing that the scale of challenges, both caused and faced by humanity, is so great that anything we do individually is insignificant. This inhibits motivation to act compassionately and is described by Slovic (2007) as “psychic numbing” (p.79), therefore, it is important to counteract this response by changing the storyline and reinforcing the message that we are not helpless. Individuals can take action through lifestyle choices as well as collective protest. For example, I contemplated what being self-compassionate meant in terms of skilful living and this precipitated significant change in my behaviour in terms of my emotionally driven levels of spending and consuming, which were at odds with my core values. Initially, this was difficult because I had to learn to ride the strong urge for gratification and reward. However, as I began to see my behaviour in terms of desire, grasping and harm, I could see the inherent unsatisfactoriness and consequences of my consumption. This brought resolve and discernment concerning what is needed rather than wanted.

Choosing to purchase with restraint and discrimination is a direct and ethical protest against consumerism, it also reduces the environmental cost and exploitation of workers (The True Cost, 2015). Personally and professionally I see how consumer pressure, unencumbered spending, debt, striving, envy and competition, chronically depletes and disconnects human beings. Living under these conditions causes suffering and generates an unquenchable thirst that never brings happiness. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that, because we are all interdependent, anything we do to make positive change and reduce harm is of benefit, to ourselves and also on a wider scale.

7.2.2 Political and Social Action

> Sometimes we need to get up, shout out the truth, march, protest, do whatever is necessary to protect our life and the lives of others… Retaining our own fierce clarity, we too can seek justice, yet do so with a loving heart (Kornfield, 2017).

Compassionate action in response to suffering can necessitate engagement in protest and political discourse in order to challenge injustice, deceit and abuses of power. I believe it is important to take action in accordance with my ethics and values in all areas of life and I support Kinderman's (2016) argument that [as psychologists] "we have a duty to speak out about the psychological mechanisms implicated in some of our major social problems: inequality, injustice, abuse, war, terrorism and climate change. And we need to offer practical solutions" (p.415). I have particular political allegiances but the ethics of applying compassion, wisdom, generosity and loving kindness to counter fear, hatred and delusion, transcends party politics (Bodhi, 2017). Sometimes, however, events take a turn that elicits a strong response in me:

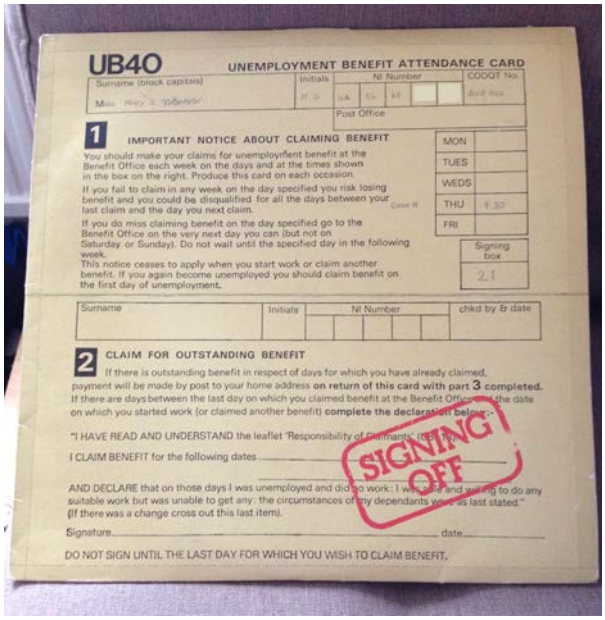
> *Journal: 8 May 2015*
> *Cried this morning. Sheer frustration and despair a) at the election result and b) out of fear of the consequences of another 5 Tory years and c) over the sheer complacency for the 73% of people in my area who didn't vote. I am fucking angry too. Played The Ghost Of Tom Joad (Springsteen, 1995), sang it out loud and on repeat all the way to Group meditation at the Retreat this morning.*

On the surface I felt anger but underneath there was dread and concern in the face of the prospect of more brutal right-wing capitalism and savage austerity measures. Although I have strong resolve, I felt temporarily floored and *"too heartsick to write over the past few days" (Journal, 10 May 2015)*. I spent time at the local nature reserve to restore myself and get away from social media. My activist response, in addition to a lot of meditation practice, includes anti-austerity campaigning, supporting local and national initiatives such as The People's Assembly, Psychologists Against Austerity and Walk-the-Talk, where psychologists protest and raise awareness of the benefits system, homelessness and food poverty, "calling on policy makers to address the impact social inequalities have on mental health" (Walkthetalk, 2015).

In December 2016, I was starkly reminded why social and political issues are so important to me. I watched the film I Daniel Blake (2016) directed by Ken Loach, and found it devastating. The film unearthed painful memories of when Dad and I almost went under. It was 1981, I was unemployed, Dad was the only breadwinner and his wage as a postman was not enough; paying the rent left other bills unpaid and debt increased. Mercifully, friends and neighbours lent us emergency money. At age 18 I felt desolate, afraid, trapped and powerless (McGrath, Griffin and Mundy, 2015), this is reflected in the following excerpts from my 1981 Red Diary.

> *Thursday, 19 November 1981: Things are really bad at the moment, we have no money at all and bills we can't pay. Dad didn't even have enough for any cigarettes and Smokey cats got no food. I have got to get a job soon or social security – Anything.*
> *Monday 7th December: looks like this week is going to be the same, it is only Monday and we are broke already. We have run out of bread.*
> *Thursday 10th December 1981: Had a terrible blow today, the interview I didn't have at the DHSS was the one that determined all of my money, I have waited 10 weeks for nothing. When Dad got home, I couldn't stop crying. I have never felt so shattered or hard done by in my life.*
> *Monday 14th December 1981: I am terribly depressed, I phoned up the DHSS again to see if I could see someone about my money but I can't have an appointment till 4th Jan. I am really cuicidle as I will have no money for Christmas.*

As I read the entries in my old diary I puzzled at my spelling of suicidal, then I cried and pressed my hand firmly to my heart as I felt the cold shadow of past pain. I felt for my younger self and Dad as we endeavoured to survive and I was moved with gratitude to the friends and neighbours who helped, we could not have coped on our own. One scene in the film was painfully familiar; there was not enough food so Katie, the mother, missed a meal saying she had eaten something earlier. Heartbreakingly, I had heard this before, I will never know for certain whether my Dad went without meals to feed me, but I suspect he did and I cannot comprehend his despair and shame. It was a tough time but I was not alone, I was a “One in Ten, a number on a list… a statistical reminder in a world that doesn’t care” (UB40, 1981). As shown in the picture below, at that time, I filled in my own UB40 details on the 1981 UB40 album cover. We were saved just in time by the death of much-loved Uncle Harry in the winter of early 1982; he left a few thousand pounds, which enabled us to get out of the endless cycle of poverty and back on our feet. Towards the end of this period I was so desperate to get a job that I worked for expenses (bus fares) for 6 months until the organisation could get funding to pay me.



7.3 1981: I was a One in Ten

Here we are in 2017 in a position where, although the unemployment rate is down to 4.8 per cent, compared to over 10 per cent in 1981 (ONS, 2017), according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; “Of the 13.5 million people in poverty 7.4 million (55 per cent) are in working families” (Tinson, et al., 2016, p.21), furthermore, these figures have increased over the past three years.

I feel sickened that 36 years later such levels of poverty still exist, for working families and for those unemployed, disabled and needing social support; all facing a benefit system that is punitive to the point of neglect and cruelty. To fall down into the gaps and the margins can happen to anyone, we could all become Daniel Blake, it almost happened to Dad and me. In the media, compassion is thin on the ground where the rhetoric of scroungers and skivers is widespread (Monroe, 2016). It is ethically and morally wrong to treat people with such a lack of respect, dignity and compassion. Evidence from advice agencies (Perry, et al., 2014; Badger and Law, 2015), and many people in poverty and unemployment have testified, that I Daniel Blake was an accurate reflection of peoples' experiences (Walsh, 2016). In addition to raising awareness of important issues, the film demonstrates the power of story to stir the heart, challenge perspectives and dominant discourses, and hopefully change how we feel and act. I am so acutely grateful for all that my life entails now and even more resolute that inequality and failings in social support continue to be highlighted and challenged. This experience was a stark reminder of hard times and my poem below speaks of these.

Journal: 5 December 2014. Dad died today 11 years ago.

Dad's Pouch

Dad's Day:
Get up 4am, 4.30am bus to Hockley Post Office
Sort the post; fill his postman pouch to capacity,
heavy deliveries for miles, then repeat.
Finish work. Go shopping, fill pouch. Bus home to daughter
Waiting for her Dad to arrive with his pouch full of delight.
There were hard times
When Dad couldn't afford the food to fill his pouch.
He was strong for us both, he had to be.
Dad had a different pouch in his last few months
A pouch of food, delivered to him via a peg feed
Until the end, this day in 2003
I was strong for us both, I had to be.

7.2.3 Environmental Protection

Later that night
I held an atlas in my lap
Ran my fingers across the whole world
And whispered
Where does it hurt?
It answered…

Everywhere
Everywhere
Everywhere

Excerpt from *What they did yesterday afternoon*, (Shire, 2011)

Pain and suffering pour out of the words of Young Poet Laureate Warsan Shire, the context of this poem is the devastation of war, but for me it is equally relevant to the devastation of the Earth and the harm to all species. The tender caress of a hand across the atlas is a deep act of compassion, it moves me greatly. Cultivating compassionate and loving connections with ourselves, taking a non-dualistic perspective, understanding interdependence and impermanence allows us the best possibility of recognising that all life is precious. When these connections are nourished by wisdom, compassion, love and contemplation, there is motivation and resource to live ethically and actively protect the environment and wildlife, as well as fellow humans (Tatchell, 2017). There are times in advocating for justice, equality, peace and harmonious living, and when faced with exploitation and harm, that direct action is required. Bodhi (2017) argues for “a bolder agenda, a programme of collective resistance inspired by a radically different vision of human interconnection, one that affirms our duty to respect and care for one another and to maintain a habitable planet for generations yet unborn” (p.1).

Despite the significance of all these issues, there have been times when what is witnessed is too much for my heart to take and withdrawal is necessary in order to repair. Before finding my way along the Buddhist path and without self-compassion, I would often become overwhelmingly emotional and entangled in issues, which created a pendulum effect of reactivity and withdrawal.

Now that I have developed self-compassion and learnt to care for myself, I have found greater equanimity and in doing so I am less reactive and exhausted. As a result of these changes, I am stronger, more resilient and consequently better able to actively respond to issues that I deeply care about and recognise and accept when I am unable to respond. There is much at stake and worth fighting for, but in order to take a stand and respond effectively, it is imperative that we remain nourished and strengthened along the way and respond wisely to suffering rather than drowning in it (St. Ruth, 2002). Based on current research, and my experience, I propose four key ways to foster wise compassion and wellbeing in activism.

1. **Practice Mindful Self-compassion across all areas of life**: physically, emotionally, relationally, mentally and spiritually (Germer, 2009).
2. **Develop Contemplative Practice**. The power of this was highlighted by Laborde (2016), when at the Standing Rock oil pipeline protest; the Native American camp leaders urged everyone to constantly connect in prayer and contemplation, peace and compassion. These practices are viewed as essential in forging connection with all life and taking wise action as protectors.
3. **Cultivate compassion rather than sentimentality or over empathising**: Gyatsto (2011) warned that to remain at the emotional level of empathy could result in “dragging us further into suffering” (p.55). It is important to make the distinction between empathy and compassion and the role of empathy in burnout (Klimecki, Ricard and Singer, 2013; Singer and Klimecki, 2014). Bloom (2016) goes further and argues for “Less empathy, more kindness” (p.141), he highlights dangers where empathy alone can generate bias, reactivity resistance or numbing out, whereas compassion engenders clear thinking, loving-kindness and the capacity to witness and alleviate suffering.
4. **Draw hope and inspiration from role-models:** Thich Nhat Hanh, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Joanna Macy, Thanissara, Jane Goodall are exemplars. However, take care not make idealistic comparisons or have unrealistic expectations by recognising that small acts still make a difference. Individual engagement can include personal spiritual practice, signing petitions, making donations of time, skills, money, materials and even giving blood (Brodie, et al., 2009).

In order for individuals and communities to remain active, courageous and resilient, it is important to cultivate gratitude, interconnectedness and hope (Macy and Johnstone, 2012; Macy and Mowe, 2015). This includes compassion, care and nourishment for ourselves, gathering support, savouring and appreciating our lives. Kornfield (2008) emphasised "There is no separation between inner and outer, self and other. Tending ourselves, we tend the world. Tending the world, we tend ourselves" (p.356). Therefore, placing MSC at the heart of all my actions I take a "Great Vow for Mindful Activists" (Ikeda, 2016):

> Aware of suffering and injustice, I, *Mary* am working to create a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. I promise, for the benefit of all, to practice self-care, mindfulness, healing, and joy. *I vow to not burn out.*

7.4 Compassionate Activism

Greenpeace Save the Arctic Protest walking with Polar Bear Aurora

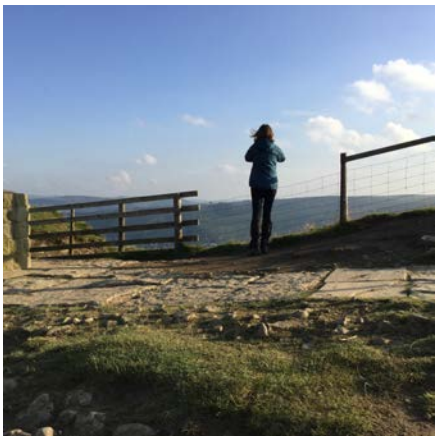
Save the Bees Protest to ban neonicotinoid pesticides.

7.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed individual, social, political and environmental challenges in the context of how engaging in MSC can cultivate self-care alongside deep love and compassion for all living things. I have emphasised that compassionate action has the power to transform and is a radical response in our individualistic and capitalist culture that requires wisdom and courage. I have shown how cultivating MSC has fostered belonging, connection and equanimity; all of which can provide the resources and resilience to actively promote individual and collective change, to ensure protection and flourishing and reduce harm (Gross, 1998), without becoming over-reactive and burning out. I continue to be deeply inspired, nourished and activated by MSC, Buddhist teachings and contemplative practice. From these living ethical practices, my beliefs and intentions are translated into wise action as I continue to learn and walk the walk.

Part 4. Discussion and Conclusions: Arriving at a Waypoint

Chapter 8: Discussion of Factual and Conceptual Findings



8.1 Looking back over distance travelled

If you can't see your own footprints behind you… don't go on.

(Shepherd, 1977, p.36)

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider the factual and conceptual findings in relation to my research questions and contributions to knowledge across four areas: methodology, theory and practice of Mindful Self-compassion, the impact and application of self-compassion in personal, professional, wider contexts and the contribution of Buddhist practical theology.

8.2 Factual Findings

Research indicated that MSC is beneficial to physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. I wanted to explore how this process developed and see how it could benefit me personally and professionally. There were no reference points in the literature in the form of first-person accounts that illuminated the MSC process. From this need, inquiry and gap in the research, two research questions emerged: How is self-compassion developed and sustained, and what are the barriers? And, what does it mean to be a self-compassionate practitioner?

My research aims that were outlined in Chapter 2.4 have been met. I have developed an understanding of the process of MSC and in doing so experienced significant benefits to my wellbeing. This enabled me to discover that self-compassion engenders professional self-care, resilience and counters burnout and being a self-compassionate practitioner has changed and enriched my professional practice. My research has contributed to developing and delivering MSC training to psychologists and health-care professionals. Furthermore, I found that MSC and Buddhist practical theology were valuable resources in responding to contemporary issues. My understanding and practice of Buddhist practical theology has developed in which theological reflection and praxis were shown to be foundational in translating intention into compassionate action.

8.2.1 Methodological Landmarks

Reviews of self-compassion research recommended more qualitative approaches and the need for greater understanding of the process of developing self-compassion (Barnard and Curry, 2011; MacBeth and Gumley, 2012). Therefore, to address these gaps, a qualitative, longitudinal, first-person and inductive methodology was designed that combined the methods of autoethnography, journaling and contemplative practice over a one-year research period, from a UK perspective. To my knowledge there are currently no other autoethnographic accounts of cultivating MSC from a Counselling Psychologist's perspective, therefore, this research complements existing quantitative research and contributes to qualitative research in the field.

8.2.2 Autoethnography

The power of story, told through autoethnography, is demonstrated in this thesis. This approach presented me with a blank page that involved intense listening, sustained contemplation and making detailed observations, supported by documentary evidence (Duncan, 2004). There was no hiding place, either from myself or behind a third-person narrative. Taking an autoethnographic approach meant leaving a familiar path of traditional qualitative research and going into unchartered territory. This often left me distressed and exhausted but also energised from finding sacred ground beyond thought. Autoethnography has advanced my understanding of the process of cultivating self-compassion. My story shows that I found solace and courage through compassion, equanimity and inspiration through my Buddhist practice and joy through transformation; without these elements I would never have ventured into the void.

Writing an autoethnography enabled me to challenge dominant discourses and offer sociocultural interpretation and insight (Chang, 2016). In section 5.4 my silence was broken with regard to childhood loss. In this under-researched area, my findings highlighted how important it is to give voice and respond to the emotional, psychological, familial, educational and socioeconomic effects of such profound loss. In 5.4.2, I challenged the view that I would not amount to much because I had lost too much ground at school, without anyone ever asking why I had become so disenfranchised. Through revisiting the void caused by childlessness in 5.5, I challenged the discourses of children making a woman whole, pronatalism and the view of childlessness as failure (Carroll, 2012; Day, 2012, 2014). I have argued for the importance of individual and societal awareness of the challenges and benefits of childlessness and for compassionate rather than judgemental or dismissive responses to this life-long loss (Harvey, 2002). Significantly, my research shows how my inner discourse has changed, it has shifted from judgement, shame and rejection to acceptance, encouragement and care. These changes have been transformational and enabled me to face, reflect on and feel strong enough to share my experiences. I have also challenged the professional discourse of duties of care as being insufficient; I have argued for occupational hazards to be recognised and therapist wellbeing to be made a priority (Desmond, 2016). In relation to wider contexts (Chapter 7), self-compassion was found to be a valuable resource in countering the discourse of helplessness and hopelessness, thus enabling engagement in compassionate action to challenge sociocultural, political and environmental issues. I have discovered the capacity of autoethnography to explore, reveal, challenge and revise stories. Through this research, rather than being defined by a short-story filled with judgement and fear, I now see that I am comprised of a multi-layered kaleidoscope of stories, overflowing with belonging, courage, joy and compassion.

8.2.3 Contemplative Journal

The documentary research of my contemplative journal provided material for my autoethnography. It enabled me to record, critically reflect and consider experiences in the light of self-compassion theory and Buddhist theology. Through the journal I could record and recall experience in greater depth and finer detail. It provided a timely and, therefore, more complete record of experience that aided memory, which is often selective and fallible. I used a variety of aides and artefacts to evoke memory, context and meaning, which contributed to the trustworthiness and truthfulness of my narrative (Duncan, 2004; Etherington, 2004; Muncey, 2010).

The journal significantly aided reflexivity through providing space to question assumptions, beliefs, rules and dominant discourses across multiple contexts. It enabled me to retrace my steps in relation to areas of pain and blind spots, which provided opportunity for greater awareness, different perspectives and new insights. For example, in section 5.2.3, Storm Damage, where my emotional crash in mid-June actually began in May. Journaling helped me retrospectively identify contributory factors and repeating patterns, thus allowing a more timely response in the future. Importantly, rather than the hopelessness and despair in depression, that can fill narrative, the journal provided evidence of how instrumental and courageous I can be.

In my research, poetry intimately met emotion and experience; it lit the way for memory and imagination and invited different perspectives, insights and catharsis (Muncey, 2010; Chavis, 2011). The emergence of my own poetry was unexpected but, without the perfectionistic inner-critic silencing me, my poetic voice emerged. Examples can be seen throughout Chapters 5, 6 and 7, for example: Mending with Gold, The Empty Nest, Unspeakable, Belonging and Dad's Pouch. This supports existing evidence that MSC reduces fear and engenders creativity (Neff, 2009b; Germer and Neff, 2013; Gilbert and Choden, 2013; Neff and Dahm, 2013). Journaling and poetry have become valued elements of my contemplative practice and informed my professional practice and MSC teaching.

8.2.4 Contemplative Practice

The term contemplative practice came alive for me through the research. It evolved to encompass and integrate many aspects of my life and thus strengthened my personal, professional and Buddhist practice. The contemplative practice tree complimented this process; it encapsulated growth and connection, which engendered authenticity and wholehearted engagement. I now use the tree with clients and MSC students to encourage ongoing wellbeing and compassionate action. A cornerstone of my contemplative practice is Buddhist inquiry; this deepened awareness of body, mind and emotion, provided clarity to see through bias and distorted views and encouraged investigation into causes, effects and remedies to suffering (Wallace, 2007; Dunne, 2013). Buddhist inquiry was integral in working on the inner-critic and facing the void in Chapter 5. It helped me address overworking, informed my learning and teaching MSC (Chapter 6), and supported compassionate action in Chapter 7. Buddhist inquiry enhanced MSC inquiry and sustained practice through deepening reflection, intention and fostering wise and skilful action (Welwood, 2000; Kittisaro, 2014b).

My research shows that the research design was appropriate and the combination of autoethnography, contemplative practice, journaling, critical and theological reflection provided valuable resources for this thesis and for future research and reflective practice. These approaches have enhanced my understanding of MSC practice and significantly contributed to my personal, professional and theological development.

8.2.5 The Territory of Mindful Self-compassion

In answer to my question on how self-compassion is developed, sustained and what the barriers were; my research found that MSC can be learned and sustained (Neff and Germer, 2013). The eight-week training was pivotal in establishing formal and informal practices that soothed my body and mind, which provided a sense of emotional safety to work with painful experiences. With regard to the three components of MSC, mindfulness alone, and as taught in Western and secular contexts, is beneficial but not always enough when working with suffering (Neff, 2004; Fulton, 2015; Germer, 2015); my experience of mindfulness since 2004 reflects this. However, mindfulness with self-compassion has developed my emotional stability and reduced resistance. Evidence showed how the component of loving-kindness reduced fear and elicited the innate capacity to form loving connections with myself and others (Salzberg, 1997, 2017). Finally, common humanity was key in accepting human fallibility, recognising shared experience and fostering as sense of belonging. Cultivating MSC has enabled greater self-acceptance and willingness to engage in beneficial ways of relating to myself and others.

In terms of process, Germer (2009) describes three stages: infatuation, disillusionment and acceptance. Whilst I can attest to these stages, they did not tell the whole story. My journal highlighted a complex mix of responses and as a result I have adapted my MSC teaching practice to include my process experiences (Figure 6.4) in order to normalise and be explicit about what might be encountered. My research particularly highlighted the temporal aspect of developing and sustaining MSC. These findings support existing research, which emphasises that although the training is effective, it is not sufficient in itself, it is a life practice and is “dose-dependent” (Germer, 2009, p.540). Evidence from my research also demonstrated that journaling, theological reflection and contemplative practice contributed to sustaining and enriching MSC practice.

My research identified several barriers to developing self-compassion, which were consistent with existing research. These were self-judgement, shame, depression, anxiety and beliefs that it is selfish and weak (Neff, 2003a; Pauley and McPherson, 2010; Gilbert, et al., 2011; Stuntzner, 2014). Evidence is provided in this thesis of the courage required to work with pain plus the benefits to self and others, which strongly counters misperceptions of weakness and selfishness. My inner-critic was a major barrier and reducing this was instrumental in developing self-acceptance, care and concern for my own wellbeing and reducing perfectionism and anxiety. It became increasingly clear as the research progressed just how destructive and pervasive the inner-critic is and how it hampers engagement and change. MSC was found to be a powerful antidote to these effects, my research supports findings by Warren, Smeets and Neff (2016) who identified that “self-criticism is a transdiagnostic risk factor” (p.19). They highlighted the detrimental impact it has on depression, the therapeutic relationship and a range of clinical disorders. Evidence from my research showed that my depression improved in terms of intensity, duration, recovery and relapse as can be seen in 5.2.3, (Neff, 2004; Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007). Indeed, it is now two years since my last depressive episode. I found that the other barrier of shame and the inner-critic feed each other. Shame also blocked out reflection, even in the safety of my journal. As can be seen in 5.6, it took me two years to engage with shame issues, I could not do this earlier because this would have highlighted my perceived defectiveness and my self-compassion was not sufficiently developed to counter this. It is outside the scope of MSC training to cover serious issues of shame, however, greater integration of work by Gilbert into MSC training would be beneficial. It is also important to signpost to additional specialist support and resources where appropriate (Gilbert and Proctor, 2006; Neff, 2008).

Research and training in MSC is evolving and my research has highlighted several areas where it could be enhanced. First, including gratitude earlier than the final week, because this can provide respite to pain work and is beneficial to mental and physical health and relationships (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Wood, Froh, and Geraghty, 2010; Seppälä, 2016). Second, although MSC is a secular training, there are two particular Buddhist teachings, which are implicit, that I plan to make explicit because they are inextricably linked to compassion (Makransky, 2012). The first is the Noble Eightfold Path, which provides detailed guidance on living ethically and mindfully with wisdom (4.3). The second teaching is cultivation of the *brahmaviharas* (love, compassion, joy and equanimity) because they are all intricately interrelated (Pasanno and Amaro, 2001; Feldman, 2017).

Buddhist teachings can be skilfully framed in a secular fashion and comparative aspects from other wisdom teachings and belief systems can also be incorporated as appropriate. Theological and psychological reflection helped to sustain my MSC and contemplative practice and although MSC training encourages weekly reflections on sessions and intervening practices, there is little guidance on critical reflection. I have, therefore, adapted the model of Buddhist contemplative inquiry and theological reflection (Figure 4.4) into a secular framework called the Contemplative Cycle of Inquiry and Reflection (Appendix 14). Furthermore, the MSC training lacks an explicit framework for wellbeing, therefore, to encourage the intrinsic motivation that self-compassion generates, I have developed a Compassionate Wellness Model (Appendix 15) that incorporates Maslow's basic-needs (1968, 1971) and the aspects of The Eightfold Path. This Model can stand alone or be incorporated into the contemplative practice tree framework. Both of these models are due to be piloted with MSC colleagues and in MSC training from the end of 2017.

Finally, as my research has shown, MSC involves contact with painful memories and emotions, for which I have needed therapeutic support. MSC training emphasises that it is not therapy and advocates therapy where needed and, following my experience I would strongly endorse this. Consequently, my findings support the position that MSC teachers need to be qualified therapeutically and have regular teacher supervision. It is also important to screen participants in relation to their history and mental health, and for there to be a clear understanding of the potential negative and distressing consequences of engaging in meditation (Lindahl, et al., 2017).

8.3. Conceptual Findings: A Transformed Landscape

8.3.1 Personal Paths

My second research question concerning what it means to be a self-compassionate practitioner is addressed in the following sections. As shown in 5.2, facing my relentless inner-critic, The Moose, was very challenging and took over two years to begin to change my relationship with myself. Through MSC practices I became aware of the physical, emotional and behavioural destructive impact of harsh judgement and learned to respond with kindness and understanding, which significantly reduced the level of inner-criticism (Neff, 2003a, 2009b; Gilbert and Procter, 2006; Gilbert, et al., 2006, 2012).

This allowed a more balanced view of my perceived weaknesses or failings (Neff, 2004; Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007; Neff, 2008) and enabled me to make changes rather than continuing to engage in rejection, overcompensation or avoidance. The judgement I oppressed myself with, and projected onto others, was increasingly replaced with encouragement and discernment. This work is particularly relevant in academia (Neff, Hseih and Dejitthirat, 2005), whilst I now experience greater intrinsic motivation and less perfectionism, I have needed all the self-compassion I could muster to support myself in the midst of many academic challenges. My research has demonstrated that engaging in MSC helped me face and transform pain rather than continuing to compartmentalise loss. I learned to soothe and care for my emotions, which led to emotional balance and healing (Neff 2003a; 2003b). This new emotional landscape brought a deeper acceptance of loss as it continues throughout life. It has enabled me to tell my story and revealed chronic sorrow and disenfranchised loss alongside deep love and meaning.

Through developing the components of self-compassion, as the literature predicted, I found greater acceptance of suffering as part of life rather than proof of failing. I meet my needs and see them in context and commonality with others, in turn; avoidance, rumination and personalisation are reduced (Gilbert and Irons, 2005; Gilbert and Proctor, 2006; Neff, Kirkpatrick and Rude, 2007; Neff, 2008). MSC practices activated my care-giving and soothing systems, provided emotional safety and the conditions for my physical, relational and emotional needs to be met and encourage self-actualisation (Maslow, 1968, 1971; Gilbert, 2000; Neff, 2003a; Neff and Costigan 2014).

The enduring sense of belonging and connectedness that emerged through MSC has been important for my wellbeing, strengthened my relationships and my resolve in taking compassionate action (5.6, 6.3.1, and 7). I also experience greater life satisfaction and joy, which was sorely missing at the beginning of this work; a search through Chapters 5, 6 and 7 revealed that the word joy was used 28 times. Furthermore, Neff and Germer (2013) found benefits from MSC training were sustained in a one-year follow-up. I can honestly attest that not only have the benefits endured beyond twelve months, they have continued to grow throughout the research process.

8.3.2 New Insight along the Personal Path

Evidence of the ongoing nature of inner-critic work emerged in 2017 with new insight. In April 2017, I undertook a course on the inner-critic from a Buddhist perspective, (Aylward, 2017). During an inquiry into who the inner-critic is, I wrote: *angry, harsh, impatient and female*, which was my usual answer. The next question was: How do you feel? I wrote: *anxious, defenceless, like a small child*. In a flash, I heard another voice and for the first time, I identified the originating voice of the inner critic: my Mum, memories flooded in. I had previously only heard and wrote about my own voice. I double-checked all my training notes from 2012 to 2016 and there was no mention of Mum, but now she is loud and clear. She was loving and playful but was also a fierce and unrelenting critic, swift to verbally and physically punish the slightest mistake. I had shut this out.

After the shock of this revelation, came disbelief that I had suppressed this, but now I have made the connection with Mum, my feelings of anxiety and inadequacy have begun to make sense. This realisation has been painful; I felt angry, sad, and very protective of me as a little girl. A lot of compassion was needed, for me first, then compassion and forgiveness for Mum. Being good and not upsetting Mum was very important especially as she was chronically ill for half of my life. When children experience such things, they learn to attend to how the adult is feeling and supress their own needs, as I had done (Korneluk and Lee, 1998; Aldridge and Becker, 1999). Additionally, Mum escaped poverty through achievement and she wanted me to achieve; these are the sources of the '*be good, be perfect*' rules, seeing this has brought understanding and acceptance. My interpretation as to why this insight has emerged now is twofold; first, breaking the silence of my loss and honouring my needs through telling my story has unlocked experiences in relation to Mum, which were not OK for me, and broke the spell of an idealised lost Mum. Second, now that the little girl is cared for and protected by a loving compassionate grown up girl, it was emotionally safe enough for these aspects to emerge.

8.3.3 Professional Routes

The inner work I have engaged in during this Professional Doctorate has contributed to and changed my professional practice. It has also opened up avenues to explore in therapy and academic research in terms of training provision for psychologists, working with a new client group and taking a different therapeutic approach through Ecotherapy. My research highlighted how the distorted lens of my inner-critic denied the impact of over-working and need for self-care (6.1). Occupational hazards and key issues in relation to burnout and therapist wellbeing were also identified. In offering MSC to my feelings, I recognised need and sought out publications on self-care, whereas I had never looked previously.

Significantly, I found that where emphasis on self-care is usually focussed on external activity, self-compassion focuses on the inner work of care and wellbeing. Consequently, as self-compassion became more established and embodied, I was motivated to reduce my workload, engage in nourishing activities, and when I relapsed with bouts of depression I recovered more effectively and quickly (Neff, 2004; Gilbert, 2005; Germer, 2009; Germer and Siegel, 2012). My research emphasises the importance of addressing professional barriers to therapist self-care (6.1.1) and building self-compassion into training and CPD as a priority in order to foster resilience and healthy coping strategies (Shapiro, Brown and Biegel, 2007; Ying, 2009; Kyeong, 2013). As a consequence of my personal development and professional insights, I now provide MSC training for practitioner psychologists and in other healthcare sectors (6.3.4).

My therapeutic practice has changed because engagement in self-care is an imperative (6.1.2). It is of benefit and in service to clients (Desmond, 2016) because I feel physically and emotionally stronger, more present and less drained. MSC has been an effective intervention with my clients and a catalyst for change in participants of the MSC training (6.2, 6.3). Furthermore, my increased understanding of the influence of an inner-critic means that I engage with this issue more directly and deeply with clients. On reflection, I may not have worked to this extent previously because I had believed the inner-critic was normal and necessary. Additionally, following my experience of supervision throughout the MSC teacher training, how I am as a clinical supervisor has changed. I emphasise self-care and model self-compassion with the intention that supervisees feel safe to express struggle, face uncertainty and fears, feel nourished, supported and develop their own internal compassionate supervisor.

8.3.4 Wider Horizons

Part of the philosophy of the Professional Doctorate is to explore the role of practical theology and ethical practice to engage in wise action in relation to individual, community and wider contemporary issues. Evidence in Chapter 7 demonstrated this; self-compassion transformed my connection with others (Brach, 2003; Neff, 2009a), engendered a wider compassionate response to contemporary issues and reinforced my vow not to burnout (7.2.3). My research supports current research findings that, as self-compassion develops, so does a sense of caring for and belonging in this world that is fearless and transformative (St. Ruth, 2002; Macy and Johnstone, 2012). Developing Buddhist theological reflection enhanced the benefits of MSC because it helps ensure my resilience when engaging with social, political and environmental issues, without harm to self. MSC training does not specifically cover these issues and there is little self-compassion research in these areas. Therefore, my research contributes to the field through making the wider benefits of self-compassion explicit, which in turn can foster hope and encourage change.

8.3.5 Guiding the Way: Buddhist Practical Theology

Engaging in Buddhist practical theology enriched my journey into self-compassion and strengthened my commitment as an Engaged Buddhist (Gross, 2000; Makransky, 2000). It provided structure and spiritual nourishment through encouraging critical reflection, study discipline and discernment (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005). The framework provided by McIlveen (2008) supported the process of contemplating Buddhist teachings, testing and putting them into practice. Evidence of the fruits of praxis is shown in 5.2.2 where Buddhist teachings of non-self helped me challenge roles, identity and expectations. I found that The Four Noble Truths were instrumental in acceptance of suffering (5.4) and provided guidance on wellbeing in 6.1.2 (Sanford, 2016). Teachings of impermanence and interdependence brought acceptance of change (6.1.2 and 7.1.1), underpinned a sense of connection and belonging (6.1.2 and 7.1.1) and encouraged compassionate action together with equanimity (7.1.3). Buddhist practical theology alongside contemplative practice has enlivened and unified my personal, professional and spiritual contexts. It has synthesised my Buddhist and MSC practice into a heartful engagement that feels joyful and nourishing. Contemplation and compassion lie at the heart of Buddhism but until I engaged in the theory, research, practice and experienced it for myself; they remained impersonal and buried in the teachings, now they are realised, embodied and enacted.

8.4 Bridges

8.2 Sacramento Bridge: Illumination and connection

MSC research and training provides a conceptual bridge across a number of areas including Buddhist teachings, Humanistic Psychology and psychological theories of self-esteem, motivation and emotional regulation (Neff, 2003a). Through making the benefits of self-compassion explicit, MSC has provided a bridge between the Eastern wisdom of Buddhist teachings of compassion and the Western science of psychology, thus allowing opportunities for a powerful force for good to be tested, understood and applied (Goleman, 2015).

In taking a secular approach, MSC is accessible to all faiths and belief systems. Compassion is a central theme across many world religions and belief systems (Armstrong, 2011; Reyes, 2012), and I believe that MSC is well placed within this broader context. In relation to inter-faith and cross-disciplinary dialogue and compassionate action, whilst there are fundamental differences between Christian and Buddhist practical theologies, there are commonalities in methodology and praxis; both have much to offer to contemporary individual, social and environmental issues through sharing practice (Osmer, 2012; Sanford, 2014).

As a Buddhist at the Cambridge Theological Federation (CTF), being in a minority within a Christian organisation was challenging (6.4). I found that as acceptance deepened with my MSC practice, relationships grew to the point where I felt truly at home. Therefore, not only has self-compassion provided a bridge across belief systems, it has connected me back to my Christian roots and teachings and opened up a world of beautiful Sufi contemplations (Rumi in Chapters 4 and 5).

Contemplative practice provides a bridge that connects theory and practice, personal, professional and spiritual contexts. Contemplative practice can accommodate the diversity of faiths and traditions as well as secular belief systems (Kass, 2014). The contemplative practice tree has proven to be an accessible and engaging reflective tool that has provided a framework for application of Buddhist practical theology and living out my values and beliefs. It has also emerged as a creative space to cultivate and integrate MSC, existing valued activities and develop wellbeing practices.

8.5 Reflection: Crossing Thresholds

Throughout this Professional Doctorate I have crossed many conceptual thresholds and entered into “the transformational state of liminality” (Meyer and Land, 2005, p.380). The metaphor of liminality has reflected my experience; from making the methodological transition into the messy world of autoethnography to entering new worlds of self-compassion and Buddhist practical theology. All of these areas have contained the five threshold concept characteristics of transformation, integration, irreversibility, troublesome and boundaries (Meyer and Land, 2005). There have been several key transition points and resulting changes from crossing thresholds that include my encounter with contemplative practice, personal insights that arose though journaling, revisioning of my story as the autoethnography unfolded, MSC teacher training, personal application and delivery of MSC and discovering the wider benefits of MSC (Meyer and Land, 2005; Humphrey and Simpson 2012; Kiley, 2015).

In Chapters 1 and 2, I revealed the catalysts that led to my desire and willingness to cross thresholds, which were a deep need to find a way that could lead to greater wellbeing, enable personal change, alleviate professional burnout and integrate my Buddhist beliefs. Chapter 3 involved crossing the methodological threshold of autoethnography wherein I experienced many moments of stuckness within the liminal space and frequently encountered the “monsters of doubt” (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015, p.24). However, negotiating this challenging terrain enabled me face doubt and uncertainty and discover the rich and much changed landscape that I described in Section 8.2.2.

With regard to practical theology, as I highlighted in Chapter 4, the concept and language was alien and troublesome to me, on occasion it reduced me to despair. Through engaging in theological reflection and contemplative practice, this liminal space increasingly became “an open stance of waiting, listening and discernment” (Ault, 2013, p.297). Through grappling with this troublesome knowledge my experience shifted within the contemplative process from disorientation to understanding and integration (Perkins, 1999; Haynes and Macleod-Johnstone, 2017). My identity as a Buddhist practical theologian and Mindful Self-compassionate practitioner has been formed and transformed. My way of thinking, looking and listening has changed, I learnt the language, found “epistemic fluency” (Land, Rattray and Vivian, 2014, p. 214) and found my own authentic voice.

As I ventured more deeply into the inner landscape of self-compassion in Chapter 5, my previously held beliefs and understanding changed from initially questioning whether self-compassion could be learnt at all to challenging and changing long-held perceptions of myself. The result of this process was that self-compassion theory and practice became fully integrated into all of my contexts to the extent that my internal and external perspectives were completely altered. Indeed, as Meyer and Land (2005) emphasized, my old identity had been stripped away. I have experienced “a transfiguration of identity and adoption of an extended or elaborated discourse” (p.375).

Professionally, my research revealed “the previously hidden relatedness of something” (Meyer and Land, 2006, p.7). This was in terms of the significant negative impact my working practices had on my personal life and the positive impact that my personal cultivation of self-compassion increasingly had on every area of my working life. Furthermore, in Chapter 6 it can be seen how, from my experience of grappling with self-compassion, I was better able to support clients and MSC students as they encountered their own thresholds. I could offer the scaffolding needed (Bruner, 1978), as described in Section 6.2, and imbue the various stages of liminality with compassion, thus providing a sense of safety and encouragement to counter the understandable desires to retreat and avoid discomfort and shame.

My experience of liminality involved the “liminal monsters” (Turner, 1977, p.69) of disorientation, discomfort, doubt and many emotional and intellectual challenges. Nevertheless, the “fruitful darkness” (Turner, 1964, p.20) that lay within the liminal process of was of great importance because it provided a generative, revelatory and transformational space, where I could analyse and explore concepts, test out theories, play and develop practice (Turner, 1977; Meyer and Land, 2005). Additionally, through developing my understanding of liminality, the range of strong feelings I encountered were normalized and contextualised (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015). It is essential to recognise that progression in liminality is recursive rather than linear, that transformation occurs over time, can include regression and is not an end in itself but an on-going process (Meyer and Land, 2005; Land, Rattray and Vivian, 2014). Furthermore, it is also important to recognise that a person may not be ready or able to reach a threshold let alone cross it, enter a liminal space and continue through to the other side (Meyer and Land, 2006).

In addition to the discomfort of uncertainty and the troublesome nature of new knowledge, being in a liminal state requires courage because it can involve entering what Pussetti (2013) powerfully describes as “Woundscapes: suffering, creativity and bare life” (p.569). These spaces can contain “pivotal moments or sharp points, emotional uncoverings… emotional and relational borderlands” (Heynes and Macleod-Johnstone, 2017 p.183). These observations reflect my experience as I encountered serious roadblocks in the form of personal circumstances and work pressures, unearthing of past experiences and loss, negative affective states and the severe impediment of an inner-critic. Meyer and Land (2006) highlighted that being in a liminal state can be prolonged and indeed, I needed to take a year of intermission in the midst of the Doctorate. The demands of the doctoral writing process presented me with a liminal space that contained various states of turmoil; I really felt that I was “Writing on the Edge – And Without a Safety Net” (Vickers, 2002, p.608). When I returned, restored from the break, the resistance, discomfort and stuckness changed as I became more familiar with the territory and, combined with increasing self-compassion, I was better able to support myself along the way.

Navigation within the liminal space to a place of greater confidence and belief in myself involved deep reflection, focused reading and writing (Humphrey and Simpson, 2012; Kiley, 2015). Critical reflection was also key in negotiating liminal spaces through challenging previously long-held beliefs and transforming understanding, experience and identity (Mezirow, 1990; Hawkins and Edwards, 2015).

Buddhist teachings and contemplative practices kept me steady and helped with reorientation. Other crucial aspects within the process that enabled me to get to the other side, to a post-liminal space (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner 1977), were those of writing and telling my story, discussion and collaboration with peers and in supervision with wise guides who have been through their own 'rites of passage' (Barradell, 2012).

In summary, awareness of liminality encouraged a willingness to not know and fostered trust in my experience, whereupon a deep regard and reverence for this process grew. Alongside Haynes and Macleod-Johnstone (2017) I found "a profound respect for the work of compassion in forging liminal border crossings for human beings working our human difficulties, and for the frequent positive emotion and sense of recognition and connection it brought" (p.189). The unfolding process of the Professional Doctorate has truly been a "rite of passage" (Meyer and Land, 2006, p. 22) and the journey continues as new thresholds appear and invite me to explore unchartered territory.

8.6 Research Terrain: Issues and Areas for Further Exploration

My research approach means that it relies on my perspectives, memory and my version of truth, which is partial and subject to revision. Critics declare that it is unrepresentative and too subjective (Dennett, 2001). My methodological approach was inductive and therefore the findings are not generalizable. However, they are valid and contribute to theory. I have engaged in evocative autoethnography wherein systematic analysis, interpretation and reflexivity formed the basis of inquiry and provided transparency and rigour (Varela and Shear, 1999; Chang, 2008, 2016; Ellis, 2009). Throughout selection and analysis of material I applied the criteria and guidance provided in autoethnography (see Chapter 3.6 and Appendix 8) that questioned and established meaning, understanding, purpose, context and relevancy (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2009; Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015).

I have made links with theoretical underpinnings, application to practice and addressed issues within sociocultural contexts. Evidence from this thesis demonstrates that the research has, and continues to be, of great value to me as well as being "therapeutically useful, capable of helping and changing people, providing companionship and healing" (Ellis, 2009, p.374).

In response to any concerns over the timeframe from completing my journal in July 2015 to thesis completion two years later; my journal re-established context, which provided clarity and reliability of a narrative truth (Etherington, 2004; Muncey, 2010). The time gap allowed space for reflection, change, and for “movement of stories and interpretation… refusing to be finalised” (Ellis, 2009 p.374-5). No truth or story is fixed, and the stories in this thesis will continue to evolve (Etherington, 2004).

Diversity is an issue in qualitative and quantitative self-compassion research; although I am from an under-represented 50 plus age group, I am nevertheless white, female, professional and an academic. The field would benefit from greater representation from the male population, different cultures, ethnic and religious groups. There are prospects for change in these areas because MSC teacher training has been delivered in approximately 22 countries, in 11 languages, which resulted in 1,000 trained MSC teachers (CMSC, 2016).

Reflecting on my research, perhaps it could have benefitted from greater focus on attachment styles and their impact on developing self-compassion, however, these issues only emerged in the final months of the Doctorate. Greater inclusion of Compassionate Mind Training (Gilbert, 2000), which works more specifically in these areas than MSC, may have been beneficial. Taking a mixed-methods approach that includes application of the MSC Self-compassion Scale, pre and post training, alongside autoethnography, would also provide rich material.

Alternative approaches to Buddhist contemplative inquiry, that could provide intricate and systematic observation of first-person experience are: micro-phenomenological interviews, which are a detailed iterative process eliciting deep recollection of concrete and sensory experience (Varela, 1996; Petitmengin, 2006; Bitbol and Petitmengin, 2017). The other approach is the Focusing technique, which helps locate and explicate the felt sense or inner experience and has been used in psychotherapy and recently in theological reflection (Gendlin, 1981; Ault, 2013; Madison, 2014).

My research highlighted several areas for further research; in childhood loss, chronic sorrow, childlessness and Ecotherapy. The MSC literature is also sparse in relation to engagement in social, political and environmental issues and developing research in these areas would be beneficial.

I have focussed primarily on Neff's concept of self-compassion and the Neff and Germer model of MSC training, both of which are relatively new to Western psychology. However, since 2003, self-compassion trainings have grown considerably, in particular, research and training by the Compassionate Mind Foundation (Gilbert, 2000, 2005, 2009). Compassion trainings are now offered by several different Buddhist traditions and secular organisations (Kirby, 2016), therefore, research considering these multiple perspectives and approaches offers many possibilities to inform understanding and practice.

To enhance understanding of what it means to be a self-compassionate practitioner, I would encourage engagement in contemplative journals, writing first-person accounts and autoethnographic research as these would provide valuable contributions to the field and, as I have found, deepen MSC practice. Additionally, second-person accounts arising from autoethnographies, as a contemplative community of inquiry, would contribute to professional understanding and practice. This work is beginning to emerge, as more psychologists undertake compassion training, the first few autobiographical accounts in relation to self-care and burnout in clinical practice have been published (Parry, 2017). Finally, I am writing as a Counselling Psychologist in private practice where, possibly due to funding and resource issues, there is little research. From my experience of how this research has informed and enriched my psychology practice, I would commend such an endeavour. There is also need and scope for research in the application of MSC across health employment contexts. With increasing performance measurement, cuts in resources and escalating workloads for psychologists, I would argue that it has never been more pertinent to develop compassionate, restorative, contemplative and reflective practices.

9. Conclusions: Taking a Bearing and Continuing on the Journey

9.1 Arriving at the summit, the rest of the journey unfolds.
Berufjörður, Iceland.

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter will present the conclusions of my research, consider contributions to knowledge and professional practice and indicate future directions in terms of practice and dissemination. The area of MSC was chosen for this thesis out of personal and professional need to find a way of taking better care of myself. This research has sought to discover how self-compassion is cultivated and sustained, what the barriers are and what it means to be a self-compassionate practitioner. The aims were to understand and experience the process of MSC and develop self-care, resilience and wellbeing. A Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology was chosen because I wanted to develop and integrate my Buddhist practice as a lay Buddhist in the Theravada tradition with my personal and professional life.

9.2 Factual Conclusions

I designed a qualitative, inductive, first-person and longitudinal research methodology comprising of autoethnography, journaling and contemplative practice. Evidence from my research has shown that these approaches were appropriate because they enabled a deep exploration of my inner experiences and elucidated the process of cultivating MSC, thus making a contribution to knowledge (Ekman, et al., 2005). I propose the combination of autoethnography and contemplative practice as a methodological framework that is viable, trustworthy and of value to practitioners, clients and students. The research also challenged dominant discourses and fulfilled its emancipatory promise (Wall, 2006).

In answer to my research questions on how self-compassion is cultivated and what it means to be a self-compassionate practitioner; my research has shown that MSC is a valuable resource in terms of understanding and developing healthy responses to causes of suffering. My research findings support existing evidence that MSC can be learnt and sustained, that it creates the conditions whereby suffering can be faced and transformed and generates intrinsic motivation to develop and maintain self-care and wellbeing. Thus it confirms the findings and conclusions of Neff (2003a) and Neff and Germer (2013). MSC has increased my inner strength and resilience, alleviated depression, anxiety and countered burnout. I encountered the same barriers in relation to negative emotions as those identified in the literature (Stuntzner, 2014); in addition, my research demonstrated how certain facets of a person's life-story could inhibit development of self-compassion. I have contributed to understanding of the extent and power of the inner-critic and shown how, through MSC, it can be considerably changed.

Through my research I have identified several areas where MSC work could be enhanced, specifically concerning gratitude, Buddhist teachings, reflection and wellbeing. As a result I have developed, and will be piloting a Contemplative Cycle of Inquiry and Reflection framework (Appendix 14) and a Compassionate Wellness Model (Appendix 15). Based on my findings, in relation to shame and attachment issues, I am proposing that MSC practitioners explore inclusion of Gilbert's Compassionate Mind Training (Gilbert, 2000, 2005) as appropriate to their contexts as this could enhance MSC training, practice and teaching. Significantly, my research has highlighted the temporal aspect of self-compassion; time is needed to work with pain and for the fruits of the practice to emerge in what is a life-long process of care.

9.3 Conceptual Conclusions

Conceptually, self-compassion, Buddhist practical theology and my personal and professional contexts were engaged in a three-way critical conversation (Pattison and Lynch, 1997), with each concept referencing and informing the other. This dynamic process enhanced understanding and developed personal and professional knowledge and practice. Cultivating MSC has made a significant contribution to my life; it has transformed my landscape as a person, wife, psychologist, Buddhist, and an environmental, human and animal rights campaigner. After decades of feeling lost and disconnected, I found a precious sense of compassionate connection and belonging.

Engaging in Buddhist practical theology has been foundational to the research process; it has reinforced the relevance of Buddhist teachings and Engaged Buddhism to contemporary issues (Gross, 2000; King, 2009). Evidence from my research shows how it has developed my praxis and contemplative practices (Jackson, 2000; Ganzevoort and Roeland, 2014), and led to greater integration of the wisdom teachings of Buddhism across all of my contexts (Sanford, 2014, 2016: Trinale, 2014). I have adopted McIlveen's (2008) dynamic and reflexive process of theory, research, practice and person as a framework for theological engagement. Contemplative practice has also made a significant contribution across all of my contexts, which was an outcome of my research that I had not envisaged. Using the metaphor of a contemplative practice tree enabled integration of my Buddhist and MSC practices and all valued areas of life (Duerr, 2002, 2004). I commend this approach as a way of developing MSC practice. Through this research I believe I have made a contribution to the field of Buddhist practical theology.

9.4 Research Contributions to Knowledge and Professional Practice

The research approach I have taken contributes to qualitative methodology and fills a gap in current MSC research; from my knowledge of the professional literature it seems that this is the first autoethnographic account of MSC from a Counselling Psychologist and also the first time a multidimensional approach involving Buddhist practical theology has been undertaken. In terms of developing professional competency, my research has shown that MSC has enabled me to become a thriving and resilient psychologist who is intrinsically motivated to engage in self-care (Neff, 2004).

My findings demonstrate how developing MSC through the Professional Doctorate has informed and changed my professional practice. Clinically, my research has informed how I work with the inner-critic, shame and attachment. My therapeutic presence has been enhanced (Shapiro, Brown and Biegel, 2007), my approach to supervision has changed and my critical reflection is more compassionate, constructive and less judgemental. I am more emotionally stable and able to tolerate and engage in the messiness, discomfort, uncertainty and unpredictability of my work (Neff and Germer, 2013). In establishing self-care as a priority for myself, clients and students benefit from a psychologist who practices what she preaches and who is well and flourishing (Desmond, 2016).

My findings support existing research that developing MSC counters professional burnout, therefore, through research dissemination and training delivery I will be proposing that MSC training becomes integral to professional training and continuing development for psychologists and healthcare professionals. My findings have also contributed to knowledge through showing that MSC, combined with contemplative practice and Buddhist practical theology, provides valuable resources in mobilising compassionate action in social, political and environmental contexts (Macy and Johnstone, 2015).

9.5 Research reflections: Critique and Future Directions

Whilst my findings are highly personal and, therefore, not generaliseable, this research has been conducted in a systematic way that allows transparency and trustworthiness. I have demonstrated the revelationary and revisionary power of story (Holman Jones, 2005) and the relevance and value of personal experience of cultivating MSC to inform my professional practice. A mixed-methods approach including the MSC Self-Compassion Scale, applying a micro-phenomenological approach and developing a contemplative and autoethnographic community of inquiry would extend understanding and contribute to the field. Future areas of MSC research have been illuminated through my research, particularly in areas of childhood bereavement, childlessness, chronic sorrow and Ecotherapy. My plans in relation to dissemination of my research findings include publication in professional journals, consultations with MSC working groups, joining the Mind and Life contemplative community, making presentations at conferences and providing workshops.

9.6 Personal reflections

I have found self-compassion to be the missing path that I needed to find. I have changed and gained new insights as a result of this research and practice. My perceptions and behaviour have transformed from fear, avoidance and judgement to deep care, acceptance and a loving presence. I offer my stories as encouragement and an invitation to look at the bandaged place and learn to love and heal, through MSC I found the courage to do this. My story uncovered brokenness and revealed beauty in the cracks that have been repaired with gold. I now live well and with ease in a life filled with the jewels of compassion love, kindness, joy and equanimity.

Engaging in this Professional Doctorate and cultivating MSC, grounded in Buddhist practical theology, has became an immeasurable resource along my journey of discovery and change. Although this has been a transformative process involving considerable distances travelled, the journey has brought me home to my true nature which, according to Buddhist beliefs, include love and compassion. As I walk further along the path continuing to find my way, emotional detours, stumbling, play, stillness, ease and nourishment are all part of the ongoing adventure. The way is clearer and it is one that I am grateful to follow to the end; it is a journey of liberation, interdependence, transformation and transcendence.

9.2 A Compassionate Heart

Core components and fruits of cultivating Mindful Self-compassion

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Appendix 1

Mindful Self-compassion Training Outline

Session 1: Discovering Mindful Self-compassion
How to Approach MSC. What is Self-compassion? Misgivings about Self-compassion.
Practices: Soothing Touch and Self-compassion Break

Session 2: Practicing Mindfulness
What is Mindfulness? Wandering Mind, Default Mode Network, Letting Go of Resistance, Backdraft.
Practices: Affectionate Breathing, Soles of the Feet, Mindfulness in Daily Life, Here and Now Stone, Self-Compassion in Daily Life

Session 3: Practicing Loving-Kindness
Mindfulness, Loving-kindness and Compassion.
Practices: Loving-kindness for a Loved One, Finding Loving-kindness Phrases, Compassionate Movement

Session 4: Discovering Your Compassionate Voice
Stages of Progress, Self-criticism and Safety, Motivating Ourselves with Compassion.
Practices: Loving-kindness with Self-compassion, Compassionate Letter to Myself

Session 5: Living Deeply
Discovering Core Values, Living with a Vow, Finding Hidden Value in Suffering.
Practices: Giving and Receiving Compassion, Compassionate Listening, Compassionate Walking, Living with a Vow.

Session 6: Meeting Difficult Emotions
Stages of Acceptance, Strategies for Meeting Difficult Emotions, Understanding and alleviating the impact of shame.
Practices: Loving-kindness with Self-compassion, Labeling Emotions, Soften-Soothe-Allow for Shame, Working with Difficult Emotions

Session R: Retreat
Half-day silent retreat to engage in all the core MSC practices.

Session 7: Exploring Challenging Relationships
Pain of disconnection and connection Caregiving Fatigue.
Practices: Compassionate Friend, Self-compassion Break, Compassion with Equanimity, Self-compassion for Caregivers, Meeting Unmet Needs

Session 8: Embracing Your Life
Cultivating Happiness. Exercises: Savoring and Gratitude, Self-appreciation. Connecting with Intentions, What Would I Like to Remember? Closing Ceremony

Appendix 2

The Golden Rule and The Charter for Compassion

The Golden Rule

> Compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else (Armstrong, 2011, p.6).

The Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

Source: http://www.charterforcompassion.org

Mindful Self-compassion Training at the British Psychological Society

Developing and applying mindful self-compassion

Mary Younger, CPsychol AFBPsS

JUN 30

Explore and experience the process of enhancing existing and developing new ways of relating to ourselves.

Mindful self-compassion (MSC) is an empirically supported training program designed to cultivate the skill of self-compassion. Based on mindfulness teachings and the groundbreaking research of Kristin Neff, PhD and clinical expertise of Christopher Germer, PhD, MSC teaches core principles and practices that enable participants to respond to difficult emotions and moments in their lives with kindness, care, and understanding. According to Neff (2003), there are three key components of self-compassion: Self-kindness: Kindness opens our hearts to suffering, so we can give ourselves what we need. Common humanity: Opens us to our essential interrelatedness, so that we know we aren't alone. Mindfulness: Balanced, mindful awareness opens us to the present moment, so we can accept our experience with greater ease. Together these components of self-compassion comprise a state of warm-hearted, connected presence.

Self-compassion provides emotional strength and resilience, allowing us to admit our shortcomings, motivate ourselves with kindness, forgive ourselves when needed, relate wholeheartedly to others, and be more authentically ourselves. Self-compassion also helps us to develop a courageous attitude that stands up to harm, including the harm that we unwittingly inflict on ourselves through self-criticism, self-isolation, or self-absorption. In order for us to thrive in our personal and professional lives it is vital and indeed ethical that we actively cultivate a state of wellbeing, do we not work with our clients with this aim?

Who is it for?

This workshop is open to trainees, qualified psychologists and psychotherapists. No previous experience of mindfulness is required.

What will I learn?

- Practice self-compassion in your daily life;
- Motivate yourself with kindness rather than criticism;
- Handle difficult emotions with greater ease;
- Manage compassion fatigue; and
- Understand the empirically supported benefits of self-compassion.

Venue: BPS London Office
Website: www.bps.org.uk/2016cpd061

Appendix 4

The Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold Path

The Four Noble Truths

1. *Dukkha* exists – unsatisfactoriness, suffering, discontent, stress (to be Investigated)
2. The cause or origin of *dukkha* is craving (*tanha*-lit. thirst) or clinging (to be Abandoned)
3. *Dukkha* ceases with the relinquishment of that craving (to be Realized)
4. The path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* is the Noble Eightfold Path (to be Developed)

The Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-magga*) in Pali and English

I. *Samma ditthi* … Right view
dukkhe ñana … understanding suffering
dukkhasamudaye ñana .... understanding its origin
dukkhanirodhe ñana .... understanding its cessation
dukkhanirodhagaminipatipadaya ñana .... understanding the way leading to its cessation

II. *Samma sankappa* .... Right intention
nekkhamma-sankappa .... intention of renunciation
abyapada-sankappa .... intention of good will
avihimsa-sankappa .... intention of harmlessness

III. *Samma vaca* .... Right speech
musavada veramani .... abstaining from false speech
pisunaya vacaya veramani .... abstaining from slanderous speech
pharusaya vacaya veramani .... abstaining from harsh speech
samphappalapa veramani .... abstaining from idle chatter

IV. *Samma kammanta* .... Right action
panatipata veramani .... abstaining from taking life
adinnadana veramani .... abstaining from stealing
kamesu micchacara veramani .... abstaining from sexual misconduct

V. *Samma ajiva* .... Right livelihood
miccha ajivam pahaya .... giving up wrong livelihood,
samma ajivena jivitam kappeti .... one earns one's living by a right form of livelihood

VI. *Samma vayama* .... Right effort
samvarappadhana .... the effort to restrain defilements
pahanappadhana .... the effort to abandon defilements
bhavanappadhana .... the effort to develop wholesome states
anurakkhanappadhana .... the effort to maintain wholesome states

VII. *Samma sati* .... Right mindfulness
kayanupassana .... mindful contemplation of the body
vedananupassana .... mindful contemplation of feelings
cittanupassana .... mindful contemplation of the mind
dhammanupassana .... mindful contemplation of phenomena

VIII. *Samma samadhi* .... Right concentration
pathamajjhana .... the first jhana
dutiyajjhana .... the second jhana
tatiyajjhana .... the third jhana
catutthajjhana .... the fourth jhana

Sources:
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/waytoend.html
http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/dhamma-lists/
[Accessed 19 July 2015]

Appendix 5

Information Sheet and Consent Form

Title of Thesis: An Autoethnography of Cultivating Mindful Self-Compassion
Researcher: Mary Younger

For my Professional Doctorate I am conducting research into cultivating self-compassion. Current research into self-compassion has identified key components (kindness, common humanity, mindfulness), demonstrated efficacy as a clinical intervention, identified a role in combatting therapist burn-out as well as contributing to increased self-care, resilience and well-being. My research is written from a personal perspective; I wanted to develop my understanding of the process, develop practice, identify barriers, discover any transformative aspects to my physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing across personal and professional contexts. The intention is also to explore the benefits of incorporating self-compassion into training, supervision and continuing professional development of therapists. I have taken a first-person approach, using a methodological combination of autoethnography, journaling, contemplative practice and critical reflection. This work involved writing a contemplative journal over a 1-year period, which provided an opportunity to deeply investigate my experience of developing self-compassion. My reflections on professional practice include some brief vignettes, which illustrate the impact of self-compassion on the therapeutic process. One of these vignettes that I recorded in my journal relates to an exchange we have had. I have completed the first draft of the thesis and before I continue, I would like to ask your permission to include the text below. As you can see, to protect your privacy, I have omitted any identifying details changed the date.

[Insert specific text]

The Thesis will be seen by my supervisors and examiners and chairperson of my Viva. An electronic copy will be available in Anglia Ruskin University's repository, a hard copy will be held in the British Library and with the Cambridge Theological Federation for reference purposes. In the future, I may wish to use this material from my thesis in other publications and workshops, if this is the case I would not do so without again seeking your permission. If you are happy for me to use the above text please sign and date the bottom of this form and keep the second copy for your records. Please be assured that there is no obligation whatsoever for you to agree to this, your right to amend or veto is without question. If you have any questions or would like further information, please don't hesitate to contact me on mary.younger@talk 21.com. Thank you for your consideration.

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Information Sheet, I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
3. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.
4. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.
5. I have been provided with a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form.

Name: …….

Signed: …… Date: ……

Appendix 6

Contemplative Practice Questions: Buddhist and MSC Inquiry

❖ Buddhist Inquiry: a radical reflection

1. What is this? (thought, sensation or deed)

What has been noticed, unfolded and what has changed?

Is there anything else that needs attention? (Hindrances, avoidance, blind spots)

2. What is the cause and effect?

3. What are the current and future consequences?

Are wholesome qualities of the heart increasing – like generosity, kindness and wisdom?

Are unwholesome ones – greed, hatred, delusion, decreasing?

What are the effects of these spiritual practices in my life?

4. What skillful response is needed?

What needs acceptance? Is it possible to do this right now?

5. What nourishes joy and gratitude? (In me and others)

❖ Mindful Self-Compassion components and questions

Mindfulness: With openness, awareness and acceptance, asking: How can I best be with this experience?

Self-kindness: With care and non-judgment, asking: What do I need in this present moment?

Common Humanity: Can I recognize and connect with the humanness, of this experience and the imperfection, fallibility and frailty of life?

Appendix 7

MSC Core, Formal and Informal Practices

The MSC training involves core, formal and informal practices that can be used to strengthen the habit of responding mindfully and compassionately to emotional distress.

Core Meditations

- Affectionate Breathing
- Giving and Receiving Compassion
- Loving-Kindness for Ourselves with Self-Compassion

Formal and Informal Practices

- Loving-Kindness for a Loved One
- Compassionate Body Scan
- Compassion with Equanimity
- Compassionate Friend
- Compassionate Letter to Myself
- Compassionate Listening
- Compassionate Movement
- Compassion for Self and Others
- Compassionate Walking
- Finding Loving-Kindness Phrases
- Forgiveness to Myself and Others
- Here-and-Now Stone
- Labeling Emotions
- Living with A Vow
- Meeting Unmet Needs
- Mindfulness in Daily Life
- Self-Compassion Break
- Savoring Food
- Self-Compassion in Daily Life
- Sense and Savor Walk
- Soften-Soothe-Allow
- Soften-Soothe-Allow for Shame
- Soles of the Feet
- Soothing Touch
- Working with Difficult Emotions

Appendix 8

Guiding Questions throughout my Autoethnography

What's going on here? and What does this mean?
What story are you telling about yourself and your fieldwork?
What does your experience suggest about culture?
What does the culture/context teach you about your experience?
(Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015, pp.70-71).

Questions to ascertain value in a story:
Can the author legitimately make these claims for their story?
Did the author learn anything new about themselves?
Will this story help others cope with or better understand their worlds?
(Ellis, 2000, pp.70-71)

Am I exploring and analysing my experience in terms of impact, meaning and change within different contexts? (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

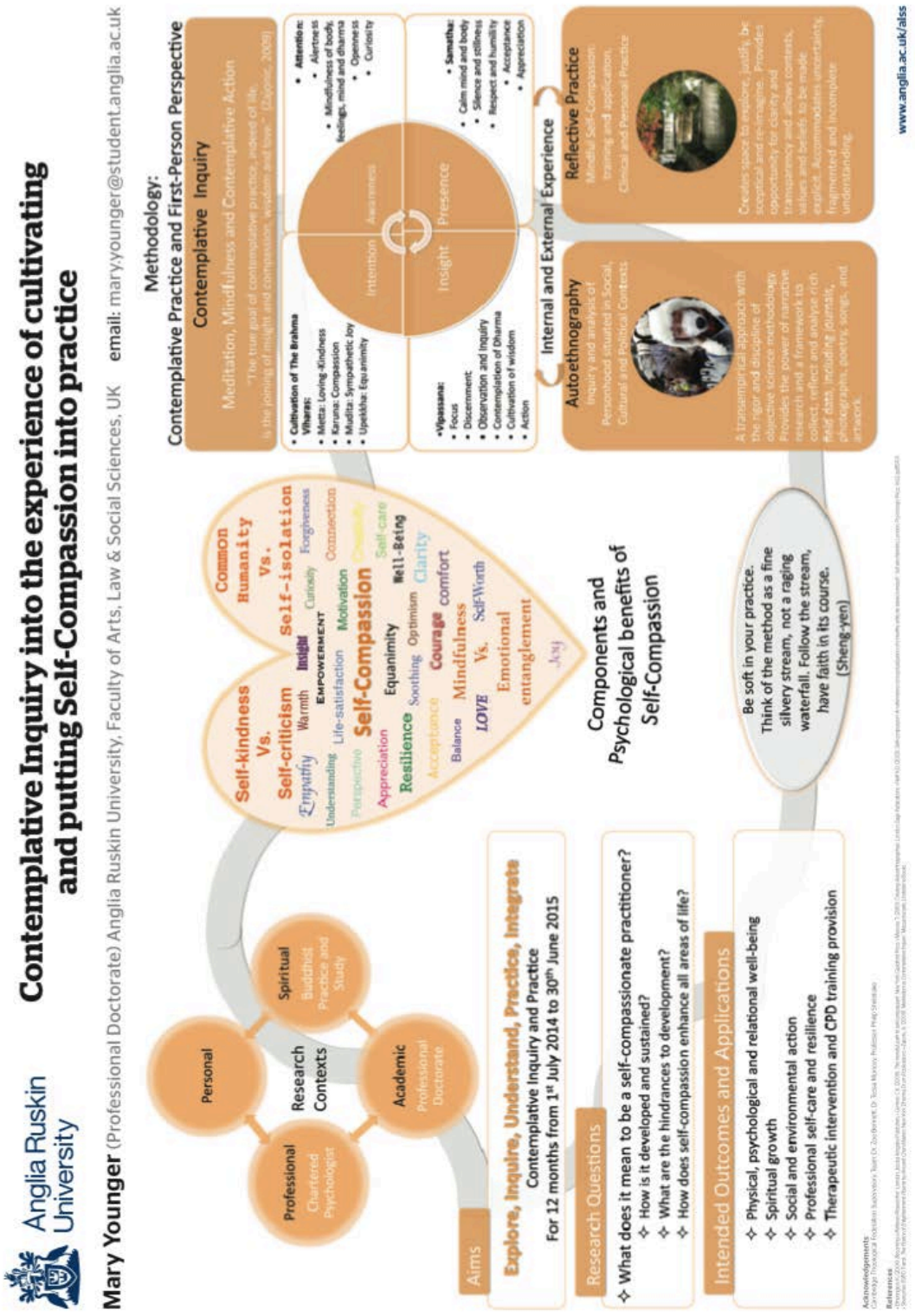
How is meaning emerging and changing through writing my story and how is cultivating self-compassion impacting on the narrative? (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2015).

Am I ensuring the following: 1) a social and cultural context, 2) analytic reflexivity, 3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, 4) clear links with theory and practice and 5) data collection and analysis to be transparent. Chang (2008)

Critical reflections: What do I know? How do I know? Where is the evidence? Is there another explanation? What is the effect of the interaction? and How does this contribute to knowledge? (Schön, 1991; Etherington, 2004).

Note: The above questions are applied in a climate of contemplative practice and inquiry that involves critical and theological reflection, MSC and Buddhist inquiry, meditation and mindfulness practices.

Poster Presented at the 2014 International Symposium for Contemplative Studies, Boston, USA.

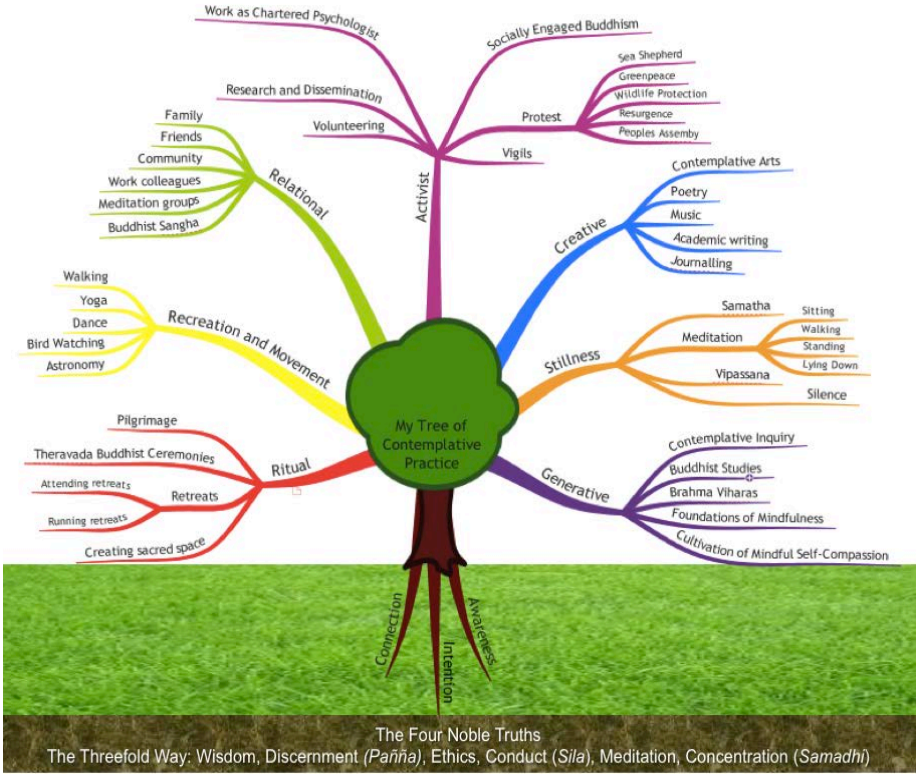


Appendix 10

Summary of Contemplative Practices and Contemplative Practice Tree

The Tree is rooted in wisdom, ethics and concentration. Practices are approached with 1) Humility, 2) Cultivation of focused and open awareness, 3) Sustained interest and desire to observe what is happening, understand clearly and to see what is possible, 4) cognition and intention (reflection) and finally 5) Investigation and discrimination (Zajonic, 2009; Amaro, 2010; Bodhi, 2010). This is radical reflective practice, where there is active inquiry as to whether a thought, sensation or deed is helpful, skilful, non-harming or whether it is unhelpful, unskilful or harmful. Contemplation is a call to action to understand the phenomena and respond in a way that reduces suffering and increases thriving, (Kittisaro and Thanissara, 2014). Each branch represents the following themes but this is open to be adapted as needed.

1. **Generative:** Contemplative Inquiry**,** Study of Buddhist Teaching (*Dhamma)*, Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Cultivation of the *Brahma Viharas*. Loving Kindness Mediation**,** Cultivation of mindful self-compassion.
2. **Stillness - Meditation:** *Samatha* (tranquility) *and Vipassana* (peace and insight) Wisdom, Ethics and Concentration.
3. **Creative:** Contemplative Arts, Poetry, Music, Writing
4. **Activist:** Work as a Chartered Psychologist, Professional Doctorate, Research and dissemination, Socially Engaged Buddhism, Volunteering, Protest: Marches, Vigils and organizational membership.
5. **Relational:** Family, friends, community, work colleagues, meditation groups, Buddhist Sangha.
6. **Recreational and Movement:** Walking meditation, Yoga, Dance, Bird watching, Astronomy.
7. **Ritual Practices:** Establishing a Sacred/Personal Space, Ceremonies and Rituals from Theravada Buddhism, Retreats: attending and running them, Pilgrimage.



Appendix 11

My Johari Windows

Window 1. Mary at the beginning of the Professional Doctorate, before learning MSC

	Known to self	Not known to self
Known to others	**1. Open** Kind, friendly, thoughtful, loyal, trustworthy, reserved, loving, funny, courageous, intense, passionate, adventurous hardworking	**2. Blind** Competent In control Intelligent Resourceful Beautiful
Not known to others	**3. Hidden** Emotional, afraid, sad, worrier, depressed, anxious, judgemental, shy, insecure, introverted, pessimistic, detached, selfish, afraid, manic, procrastinator, outsider, thoughtless, selfish, scatty, angry, hard on myself competitive, stubborn, impatient, unforgiving	**4. Unknown** Creative Compassionate Determined

Window 2. Mary at the end of the Professional Doctorate and after developing MSC

	Known to self	Not known to self
Known to others	**1. Open** Kind, friendly, thoughtful, loyal, trustworthy, reserved, loving, funny, worrier, courageous, intense, passionate, adventurous, hardworking, hard on myself, Emotional, afraid, sad, depressed, anxious, judgemental, shy, insecure, introverted, pessimistic, detached, selfish, afraid, manic, procrastinator, outsider, thoughtless, selfish, scatty, angry, competitive, stubborn, impatient, unforgiving, creative, compassionate, determined, competent, intelligent, resourceful, beautiful	**2. Blind** In control
Not known to others	**3. Hidden**	**4. Unknown**

The extent of loving connection and acceptance of self, and consequently others, is revealed in the level of self-disclosure in the open pane in Window 2. Previously, so much of myself was hidden through judgment and shame but through deep inquiry and compassion, I have found “a transformed internal view… a repositioning of the self” (Meyer and Land, 2005, p.373-4).

Appendix 12

Compassion and Loving-Kindness Wishes from MSC Participants

What you wish for yourself	What you wish for all beings
May I continue to learn to be kind to myself	May all beings know love, compassion and Joy
May I live with ease	Happiness
To stop feeling vaguely guilty about everything	May you be healthy and find peace from suffering whilst being safe, so that you may be happy
May I learn to live with ease…	I wish you peace and a happiness from within that makes you smile from the inside-out.
To soften my heart and always tend to it in any way it needs	May You be Safe
Happiness	To accept themselves as they are
May I be less fearful	May all beings know peace
May I be strong and be able to forgive myself as I continue along this journey in my life	That they may be safe and happy, especially children – who must be loved.
May I learn to live in the now and be happy	May you discover just how wonderful you are
May I feel free and be excepted as I am	May all people feel contented with their lives and live in harmony with their environment
May I continue to thrive	May all beings learn to thrive
May I live with ease	May you be peaceful
May I learn to love and accept myself as I am, right now (not as I think I 'should' be)	May we all find inner peace and acceptance of ourselves and others as we are – as imperfect human beings with unique qualities
May I learn to live with ease	May all beings know peacefulness
May I be happy	May all beings be free from suffering
May I be calm	May all beings be protected from malice of other beings
May I continue to learn to be compassionate to me and live with ease	May all beings know they are precious and may they dwell in love and care

Appendix 13

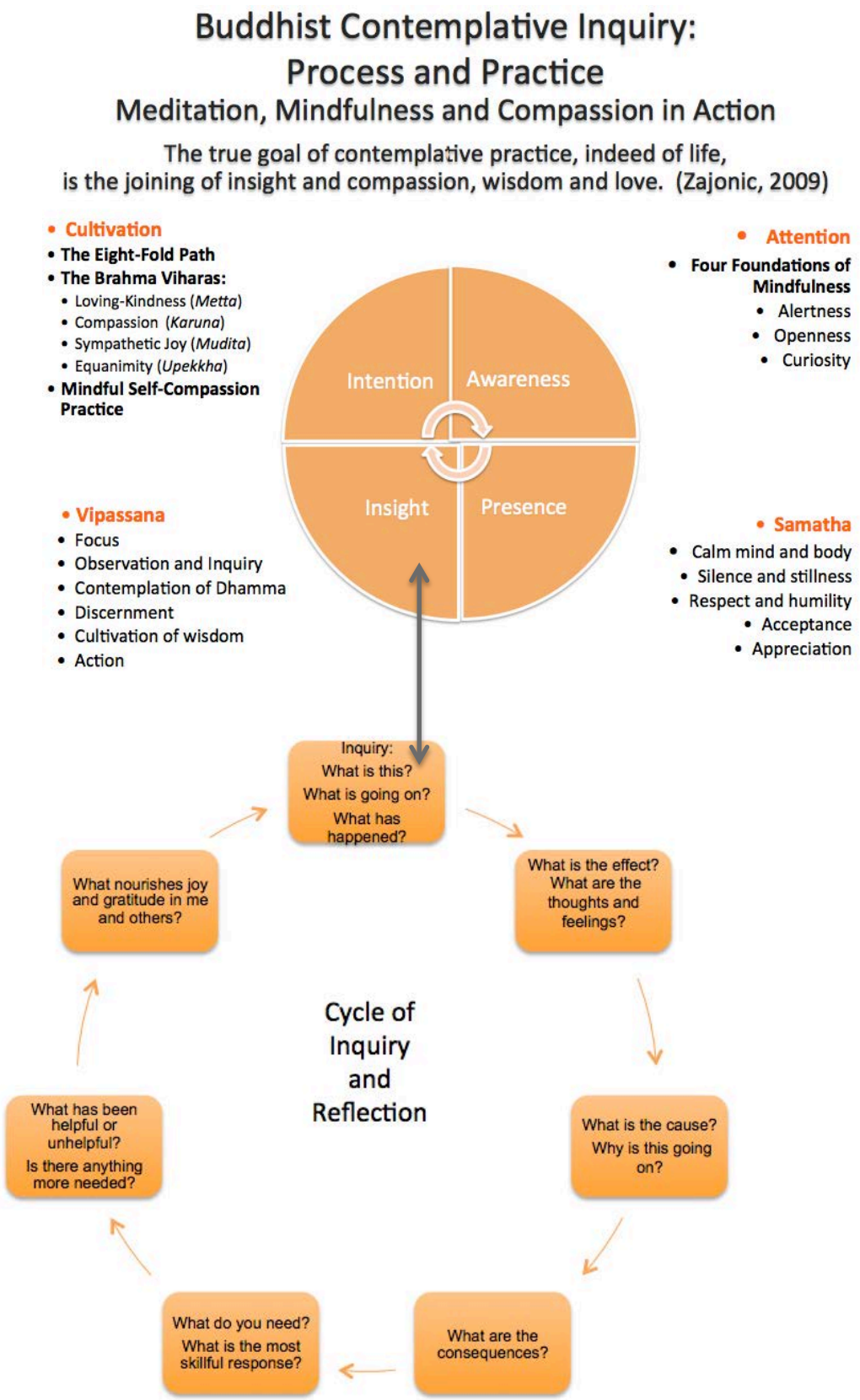
The Karaniya Metta Sutta: The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness
Hymn of Universal Love

This is what should be done By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited, Contented and easily satisfied.
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing That the wise would later reprove.
Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born,
May all beings be at ease!
Let none deceive another, Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies, And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded, Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

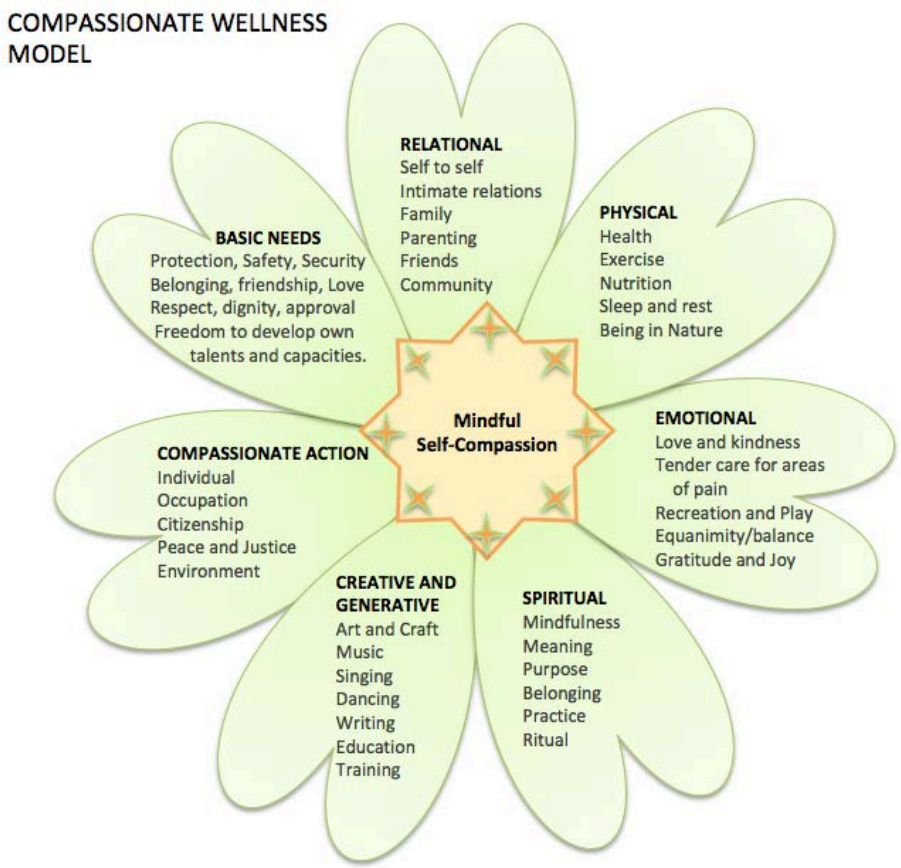
Source: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/buddharakkhita/wheel365.html

Appendix 14

Contemplative Cycle of Inquiry and Reflection



Sources: Sumedho, 1987; Gibbs, 1988; Schön, 1991; Hanh, 1998; Osmer, 2008; Sucitto, 2011; Kittisaro, 2014; Trinale, 2014; Amaro, 2015.



Sources: Maslow, 1968; Hanh, 1998; Duerr, 2002, 2004; Swarbrick, 2006; Walsh, 2011.

Guidance:

- The eight stars represent your views, thinking, effort, action, speech, focus, livelihood and mindfulness. In order to sustain wellbeing you need to consider whether they are enabling or unhelpful to you and what needs to change.
- Mindful Self-compassion is central because cultivating this meets our basic needs, generates connection, courage, motivation, appreciation, emotional balance, resilience and many other things. Remember too that everyone benefits when we are loving and kind to ourselves.
- Each petal represents an area of life that contributes to wellbeing. Some examples are provided but they are not exhaustive, exclusive to a particular area nor are they intended to be prescriptive. So, as you consider your wellbeing in terms of what you do already and what you need, please change and add your own valued areas of life in any way that is meaningful to you. You can draw up your own flower or use the template provided.

As you engage in this exercise, and continue to cultivate your wellness, ask yourself the following questions:

- What brings joy and gratitude into your life?
- Are there any areas that feel depleted? What areas do you need to nurture?
- What are your intentions in this moment, today, this week?
- What do you need to hear to take compassionate action to care for yourself?
- What do you need in this present moment?

Appendix 16

What is the significance of Self-Compassion from a Buddhist and Psychological perspective?

Paper 1 in partial fulfillment of the

Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology

Cambridge Theological Federation and Anglia Ruskin University

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Contents

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the significance and development of self-compassion. In particular, to consider the influence of spirituality and insight arising from Buddhist practice in relation to self-compassion; the impact on my professional practice as a psychologist and the transformational effect this way of being has on my personal life. This paper will also seek to illuminate ways of encouraging the development and practice of self-compassion for the wellbeing, resilience and enrichment of the therapeutic community.

1. Introduction: What is Self-Compassion and why is it so important?

A vast array of research has explored the important and ongoing issues concerning self-care, compassion fatigue and burnout for psychotherapists, physicians and healthcare workers (Rothschild, 2006; Skovholt, Trotter-Mathison, 2011). However, in the past there has been very little reference to self-compassion and it is only over the last decade that research into self-compassion has emerged and developed. In the USA, Professor Kristin Neff has pioneered research into self-compassion since 2000. She describes self-compassion as being able to experience warmth, kindness and understanding for oneself and suggests that there are three components: 'self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness'. Neff is also at pains to emphasise that it is not about self-esteem, indulgence or self-pity (Neff, 2003a). Other meanings attributed to compassion include the dictionary definition: 'sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others', the Church Latin origin comes from *compati* 'suffer with' (Concise Oxford, 1990). Germer (2009) argues that a major aspect of compassion is acceptance "*It is full acceptance: of the person, of the pain, and of our own reactions to the pain"* (p.33). Karen Armstrong's work on The Charter for Compassion is based on the Golden Rule which emphasises the vital aspect of self-compassion stating: "Compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else*"* (Armstrong, 2011, p.6).

From a Buddhist perspective, the Pali word for compassion is *Karuna* and it is classed as one of the 'Four Immeasurable Minds'. They are called immeasurable because when practiced they grow exponentially; the other three being love, Joy, and equanimity (Nhat Hanh, 1999). So why is cultivation of self-compassion so important?

In the Buddhist Dharma teachings, The Buddha is reported to have emphasized that compassion is not just a part of the practice; compassion and loving-kindness *is all of the practice*. His Holiness The Dalai Lama (2007) said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion" and Bodhi, (2010) emphasized the intersubjective nature of compassion “compassion arises by entering into the subjectivity of others, by sharing their interiority in a deep and total way. It springs up by considering that all beings, like ourselves, wish to be free from suffering” (p.22).

From my perspective as a practising psychologist, psychotherapist and Buddhist I would argue that development of self-compassion is essential. Without it we cannot be truly compassionate to others, indeed, we would be in danger of becoming dispassionate and disconnected with ourselves and our clients. Furthermore, research has highlighted how self-compassion fosters resilience, counters compassion fatigue and burn-out (Neff, 2004; Germer, 2009; Ricard, 2009). According to Ricard (2009), compassion is more sustaining and a more effective antidote to ‘burn-out’ than empathy, which is traditionally championed in therapy training.

So, where does spirituality come in? Without spiritual practice (in the context Buddhist practice), self-compassion could be reduced to simply being another tool in the tool-kit of positive psychology. In my experience the spiritual is the very essence of practice that integrates all areas of life and is what connects deeply within, rather than practice being based on theoretical, intellectual or academic endeavours. Furthermore, Buddhist teaching emphasises that ‘The Path’ must be realised, it cannot be taught. Nairn (2001) highlights the importance of direct personal experience to develop insight; “learning through direct perception, naturally gives rise to understanding. It is not learning through externally acquired information, something imported from outside... The way to wisdom and intelligence is to understand ourselves as human beings. Not through a theory, not through a concept, but through direct experience” (p12). In terms of a definition of spirituality that resonates with my own practice, Sheldrake (2011) describes contemporary spirituality as “Spirituality concerns what is holistic – that is, a fully integrated approach to life… It underpins a desire for meaning and, associated with that, implies some understanding of human identity, human purpose and human thriving” (p.1).

Moreover, Jack Kornfield (1993) emphasises the need for spiritual authenticity; “In undertaking a spiritual life, what matters is simple: We must make certain that our path is connected with our heart... all other spiritual teachings are in vain if we cannot love” (p19). Spirituality is the essence of transformation into a way of ‘being’ that allows a fuller integration of inner and outer life. Glaser (2005) wrote that The Dalai Lama proposed a ‘spiritual revolution’ and she further asserts, “the arsenal for this revolution is compassion” (p.42).

2. The Context of the Paper

2.1 My Personal Context

Self-compassion cannot be meaningfully explored without personal reflection on the inner life. Clinical psychologist and Buddhist from the Theravada Tradition, Jack Kornfield (1993) argues that “An integrated sense of spirituality understands that if we are to bring light or wisdom or compassion into the world, we must first begin with ourselves.” (p.10). I begin this personal reflection by acknowledging a distinct lack of compassion for myself for a large part of my life. My striving, need to achieve and fear of failing had evolved within me over a period of 40 years. It was the norm. It had been a successful strategy full of ‘self-actualizing’ (Rogers, 1961) and I had made great progress ever upwards on my ‘hierarchy of needs’ (Maslow, 1943). To all outside perspectives I was successful, achieving and life was great. Eventually, however, the internal cost began to outweigh the external rewards. Enjoyment, satisfaction and my resilience had been on the wane for several years and the effort required to keep these things to a beneficial level was increasing.

On the face of things there were no clues, no one could have detected such disparity but for me the reality was captured by poet Stevie Smith (1957, p.57) in her work ‘Not waving but drowning’:

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.
Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,

They said.
Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

Reflecting on the paths I have taken and the processes that have led me to where I am today; I realized that my striving and relentless pursuit of perfectionism was partly fuelled by loss, unrealized potential and a sense of failure of which originated in my early life. Two months after the death of my mother, when I was ten years old, I failed my Eleven Plus exam, when I was expected to 'walk it'. My interest in school went down from there until by the third year of secondary school I barely attended. I was truanting, rebelling, being chased by truant officers and the occasional policeman on too many occasions to recall. The messages of others' disappointment in me failing and dropping out were outwardly rejected but internally they were introjected. Support and compassion offered to me was rejected; I was too disaffected at this time and continued in my rebellion. Twenty years after leaving school I carried out research with disaffected children; it focused on the effect of the 'end of childhood and enforced adulthood' due to family trauma. The results were very revelatory and poignant for me as I realized I was one of those children.

I am an only-child and my aloneness fuelled my independent streak and the sense that I could not rely on anyone else but myself. There was no room for compassion. In an early 1980's recession hit Birmingham a job was very hard to come by so I found somewhere I wanted to work; a specialist Christian Housing Association called Adullam Homes. I worked for nothing initially then enrolled myself on to a Youth Opportunity Scheme until funding to employ me could be found. As a practising Christian at this time I felt this was the job for me. I loved the work and for most of the time, there was an ethos of compassion and loving care, until the religious emphasis became oppressive and dogmatic. Here also began my first lesson in striving and achieving; in three years I went from being receptionist to the youngest and well paid Housing Manager. It was never a case of overt ambition or having a strategic career plan. In hindsight I can see I worked hard, assimilated information quickly, adapted and achieved, but actually, at the time I did what I felt I had to do in order *to 'not fail'*. Even though I often felt utterly out of my depth inside, everyone had confidence in me and I was 'fortunate' enough to get recognition and promotions.

This pattern continued throughout my work in the City of London (typist to Chairman's assistant then Lloyd's Members Agency Manager). I was successful during these years but I felt it (I) was not enough and so the same time as working full-time in the City, going through infertility treatment, miscarriage, gallstones and cancer scare with major operation; I started and completed my BSc Hons. Following my degree I was offered a university research post whereupon I became research lead running three consecutive projects funded by HEFCE and European Social Fund. One of the projects ended up in national newspapers, leading to Parliamentary sub-committees submissions and being subpoenaed to give evidence at a Government Select Committee. During this time I began my MSc in Counselling Psychology as well as being the main carer for my Father who was becoming increasingly ill with Lewy Bodies Dementia. I often felt I was going under and without the support of my husband I believe I certainly would have. However, I viewed these feelings as failure and evidence of me not coping; I did not recognize my needs or view them with any compassion. I realize now that to have done so would have supported my resilience and helped me to respond.

My Father was now desperately ill. I continued with the MSc., working on clinical placement and, in pursuit of my Chartership as a Psychologist had committed to more training in London when I found myself unable to go on. As hard as I tried, I could not get myself on a tube train to South London, I tried for an hour on the basis of sheer force of will, but my mind and body had other ideas; I literally couldn't go on. I found myself in tears sitting outside Tate Britain writing a poem about fear of stopping and failing.

At age 40 I had stopped and after 20 years was finally faced with the fear of failing that had driven me. A month later my father died. I completed the MSc with distinctions but it was a full year before I could begin my Chartership training again. Differently this time, or so I thought, but old habits die hard. Alongside doing the Post MSc., I worked with the Alzheimer's Society, set up a horticultural therapy project and worked as an associate psychologist. I felt I was back to my 'normal' self until I was hospitalized with pleurisy. I was not happy – this was *not* in my plan. Even as I was being wheeled to a hospital ward I was giving instructions to my husband to bring my phone, diary, etc. With absolutely no compassion for myself or my body I got back to work as soon as possible but found to my horror, just as I had got to the place I was aiming for; my own Independent Practice in a profession I loved, I was feeling depressed, resentful of clients and beginning to burn-out.

I was indeed a ‘wounded healer’ (Jung, 1963), but I had not yet learned about healing myself. Although I had been instrumental in making a whole myriad of positive changes in my life, something had still to change within me. In February 2004 I took a day off and went on a Mindfulness Day Retreat. The silence and stillness shook me to the core in terms of what was present within me: physical and emotional pain, and equally, what was absent: compassion, kindness, patience and acceptance for and of myself. This realization seven years ago was the beginning for me along a path of learning about awareness, acceptance and compassion in both my personal and professional life. In my experience such insight and wisdom deepens through the ‘Triple Gem’ of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. It is further cultivated on Retreat, being part of the Buddhist community, through my own meditation practice and in teaching meditation and mindfulness. Rob Nairn in ‘*Diamond Mind’* (1999) emphasises “Insight is the most profound level of learning. It is learning through direct perception, which naturally gives rise to understanding” (p.13).

This deepening understanding and sense of connectedness through spiritual practice has enabled an internal transformative process to occur and lead to greater acceptance of and compassion for my own and others humanness, suffering and joys thus leading to a real sense of liberation. The Thirteenth Century Persian Poet Rumi implores us to look deeply and accept; “Don’t turn away. Keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That’s where the light enters you” (Barks, 1995, p.142). This wisdom is so beautifully captured by Leonard Cohen (1992) in the chorus of his song ‘Anthem’:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.

2.2 Professional Context

Contrary to what I previously believed, it was a relief to finally connect with the reality of being a ‘wounded healer’ and acknowledge the ‘hidden secret’ of fallibility. Such woundedness is often experienced amongst psychologists with all the shame, guilt and fear of failure that can ensue and yet it is an act of compassion to acknowledge our frailties (Martin, 2011).

Acceptance and compassion for our fallibility however, requires a continual process of cultivation. Recently, I did not even want to admit my blood pressure was high; particularly considering all the yoga and meditation I do – how could I admit such failure? Thankfully, I know now that this is my old habitual mind and it is not a wise and compassionate view. Pema Chodron (2005) emphasises that in drawing from the "wholeness of our experience, we learn as much from our failures as we do our successes" (p.33). Chodron further emphasises that "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present to the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognise our shared humanity" (Chodron, 2005, p.66). This is a view, which I wholeheartedly subscribe to, both personally and professionally.

Throughout my work as a Chartered Psychologist specialising Counselling Psychology, my aim is to work alongside clients, witness and relieve suffering, foster acceptance, compassion and connection with self and others and consequently promote resilience, wellbeing and fulfilment of potential (Woolfe, 1996). My philosophy and the active process of compassion is encapsulated in an observation by Robert Bor (1996) "The counselling process can be conceived as a journey of liberation from oppressive constraints to new possibilities" (p.251). Over the past seven years, cultivating compassion into all areas of my life has become increasingly essential and important. Over a similar period within the fields of Psychology and Psychotherapy, research and recognition of the vital aspects of compassion have continued to increase. The intention of my Professional Doctorate research is to explore in depth the lived experience of self-compassion and the role of the Dharma and Buddhist practices in this developing and transformational process.

I have kept a reflective diary since 1980, and in reviewing the past few years I realised that the deeper into Buddhist practice I go, the more compassionate and connected I feel towards myself [and consequently my clients]. My appointments diary also indicates change; although it remains busy it appears less chaotic, more spacious and more focussed. However, a recent experience highlights that being compassionate is an evolving process: My curiosity into researching self-compassion was ignited during a week of silent Retreat in Gaia House. Here, I realised I had little self-compassion for my body; I constantly work with clients' on their self-care yet I neglected myself.

Realising that I remained angry with my body for failing me with infertility then early menopause, I undertook compassionate meditation in that retreat space which allowed some healing to take place. Additionally, I witnessed other members of my group who were all involved in the care of others and were exhausted and drained. This phenomenon is sadly common in the mental health field and it does not appear to be improving (Figley, 2002). Whilst there is a wide body of work on 'self-care' focusing on reduction of compassion fatigue or burn-out, with the exception of American practitioners Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer, there is very little in terms of development of self-compassion for the practitioner, (Shapiro et al, 2005, 2007).

So, how is self-care different from self-compassion? I would argue that it is part of being compassionate to oneself but emphasis with self-care is more on external, concrete activity whereas self-compassion involves more internal processing with greater insight, more meaning and depth. The concept of 'wellbeing' through the process of self-compassion is more about a spiritual and transformational process rather than the 'to-do' lists that self-care approaches often advocate. Chodron (2005) argues that "Trying to fix ourselves is not helpful because it implies struggle and self-denigration. Lasting change occurs only when we honour ourselves as the source of wisdom and compassion. It is only when we begin to relax with ourselves that acceptance becomes a transformative process. Self-compassion and courage are vital. Staying with pain without living-kindness is just warfare" (p.66).

With regard to the important aspect of 'wellbeing' for psychologists, a burning question for me is: How can we be 'well' if we are not compassionate? At best we end up being dispassionate and at worst, disconnected and in more pain (Glaser, 2005). Psychologists have much to contribute to this area but there is always so much involved in the work that I feel there is little time to consider our wellbeing. Recently, at a British Psychological Society Practice Working Group I wanted to raise self-compassion as an area that we need to develop but felt there was no room in the discussions, which focussed on strategy, market share, curriculum development etc. I sat there questioning myself as to where this subject would fit in. Rather than squeeze in a last minute comment I reflected and noticed with interest the parallel process being played out; that there was precious little time to consider our wellbeing during the meeting, as is the case in the every-day world of a psychologist.

Buddhist teaching argues that if there is no compassion for self, you would not have the energy to be compassionate for others (Neff, 2004). In his translation of the Raja Sutta, Thanissaro (2010) emphasized the interdependence between compassion for self and compassion for others: “Searching all directions with one's awareness, one finds no one dearer than oneself. In the same way, others are fiercely dear to themselves. So one should not hurt others if one loves oneself” (p.1). Additionally, Paul Gilbert (2009) described self-compassion as one facet of compassion that is created and flows within, which helps us “become kinder, more accepting and gentler with ourselves” (p.312). So, clearly, compassion and self-compassion is central to the practice of being a Buddhist and in my experience it is very relevant to the practice of being a psychologist. However, as I will explain in Section 3, it is not necessarily accepted or welcomed in the professional arena.

2.3 The Context of Practical Theology

Within the context of Practical Theology, Marie McCarthy in her paper ‘Spirituality in a Postmodern Era’ (2000), argues that “Spirituality as a discipline is a practical theological discipline” (p.201). She proposes a framework for ‘Authentic Spirituality’ that I believe provides a good fit for, and is relevant to Buddhist spirituality, teaching and practice. McCarthy emphasises connectedness and of spirituality being “concerned with the deepest desires of the human heart for meaning, purpose and connection, with the deep life lived intentionally in reference to something [not necessarily someone] larger than oneself” (p196). She further asserts that whilst there are many spiritual pathways, it is important to understand the spiritual context and for any such spirituality to be “grounded in tradition” (p. 197). Lest it be in danger of falling into the ‘New Age’ category that can comprise of any number of customised, productised, commercialised activities. Indeed, whilst Buddhism is an ancient tradition, it is also not immune from a ‘pick & mix’ culture, manipulation or distortion for commercial gain, medical economics, or empire building. I would argue that Buddhist practice directly meets the six criteria for ‘Authentic Spirituality’ that McCarthy proposes. Firstly in relation to ‘Contemplative Awareness’: at the very heart of Buddhist practice is meditation, primarily through Samatha (concentration) and Vipassanā (insight) meditation which undertaken in order to become fully awake and aware. Meditation practice is undertaken both in formal daily practice and on silent retreat and informal practice though mindfulness of everyday activity (Nhat Hanh, 1975; Kabat-Zinn, 2001; Gunaratana, 2002; Rinpoche, 2002; Ricard, 2010).

The second criteria is ‘effective action in the world’: An important part of Buddhist practice is Socially Engaged Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term ‘Engaged Buddhism’ to describe the direct action taken by Buddhists in response to social, political and global injustice (Nhat Hanh, 1975, 1993, 1999; King, 2009, Ricard, 2010). Engaged Buddhism is grounded in the practice of ethics, wisdom and meditation (the Threefold Way), compassion, interrelatedness, connectedness with all sentient beings and ultimately ‘non-self’, all of which are cultivated with the primary aim of “transforming suffering into peace, joy and liberation” (Nhat Hanh, 1999, p.3). In respect of the third criteria of ‘Community’, for Buddhists this is the Sangha comprising of a monastic community of monks and nuns as well as lay people.

For Buddhist practitioners the community of the Sangha is essential as it provides support, teaching and refuge. The fourth and fifth criteria of ‘disposition of openness’ and ‘non-dualistic thinking’ are equally applicable because openness, questioning and authenticity are imperative in Buddhism. In the Kalama Sutta, The Buddha provided a clear framework, which implores people to test the veracity, truth and skilfulness of any teaching (Bodhi, 2005, AN 3:65; I 188-93). In terms of the final sixth criteria of ‘discernment and skilful living’, the principal teaching of the Buddha is The Four Noble Truths: acknowledging the existence of suffering, understanding the origins, cessation and the way to end suffering – through the skilful guidance outlined in Eightfold Path (Nhat Hanh, 1999). Furthermore, a strong case is put forward for Buddhist Theology in a comprehensive, persuasive and acclaimed work entitled ‘*Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*’, edited by Roger Jackson and John Makransky (2000).

3. What are the barriers to developing of self-compassion within Professional Practice?

Current ‘Third Wave’ psychological therapies; mainly in the form of Mindfulness Based Approaches (Kabat-Zinn, 2001; Williams, Teasdale, Segal and Kabat-Zinn, 2007), Compassion Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2005, 2009) and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 2004), have incorporated Buddhist teachings (often covertly) into their approaches and have been instrumental in developing compassionate practices.

However, whilst some of these approaches are now viewed as mainstream treatments (NICE, 2003), support of these approaches in relation to any connections with Buddhism or spirituality by the psychological profession is neither widespread nor open. Indeed, personal spiritual practice of practitioners is often hidden, possibly due to fear of losing credibility in the science driven world of psychology.

In 1995 Faucheau and Weiss provided the context, which still prevails:

> Currently the dominant paradigm in psychology/psychotherapy is characterized by (or at least enamoured with) the term "scientific". The most recent manifestation of the "scientific" approach is represented predominantly by the behavioural/cognitive schools, the adherents of which maintain a firm grip on our universities, our professional associations, and our licensing agencies, apparently in Australia, clearly in America and Europe. The non-dominant or "alternative" side might argue that our emulation of materialist, empirical science has only served to cripple and dehumanize the field of psychology (once the study of the soul) (pp1-2).

It feels as if religion and spirituality are at best, kept at arm's length in the profession of Psychology. For example, in the April 2011 edition of The Psychologist the main theme was 'Psychology, Religion and Spirituality'. The key articles focussed on the cognition of religion, religion and mental health of patients, practice protocols in working with spirituality and religion, understanding cultural factors and the tensions between psychology and religion. All very interesting but there was nothing from the perspective of psychologists' personal spiritual practice. Additionally, open opposition by other Psychologists can be encountered: I recently offered morning and evening meditation sessions, free and open to all, at the Annual Conference of the Division of Counselling Psychology. Ironically, the title of which is 'Celebrating Pluralism in Counselling Psychology'. From one quarter it was assumed this offer was commercial, that I was selling something and seeking publicity and from a very senior quarter it was aggressively rejected as being "dangerous". This simple and genuine offering has caused furious emails between several senior members of the Division and so it will not be offered this time round. However, this is something I intend to work on over the next 12 months to see if there is any scope for more openness, acceptance and change.

4. Key voices in Self-Compassion Research, Buddhist and Psychological Practice

Responding to a lack of empirical research in this area, in 2003 Professor Kristin Neff began contributing to the theoretical understanding of self-compassion and exploring links between self-compassion and psychological wellbeing. Neff's work drew on the Eastern Buddhist concept of self-compassion and Western psychological theories such as feminist psychology and humanistic psychology, which recognised the importance for wellbeing of empathy, acceptance, unconditional positive regard and emotional regulation. Neff acknowledged the criticisms of 'individualism' often levelled at these approaches, stressing that self-compassion is not implicated in such a critique as a key component [of it] is shared experience and human connectedness (Neff, 2003a). Neff highlighted the contrasting perspectives between Eastern and Western cultures. In the West emphasis is on compassion for others whereas the Eastern traditions value kindness, care and compassion for the self as a way of being, as well as compassion for others (Neff, 2003a, 2004; Neff, Kirkpatrick, Rude, 2007; Neff, 2011).

Neff constructed a definition of self-compassion, which comprised of self-kindness and care, common/shared humanity, mindfulness, greater and more balanced awareness of self (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). She tackled misconceptions about self-compassion, these being; selfishness, self-pity, self-indulgence or passivity. Indeed, she argued that far from being a passive position, self-compassion provides a secure base to which encourages change through providing "emotional safety needed to see the self clearly without fear or self-condemnation" (2003a, p.87). Neff developed a Self-Compassion scale (2003b), which has subsequently been used in the majority of self-compassion research. Neff's research also identified various correlates and psychological constructs, and demonstrated that development of self-compassion provides many benefits to healthy psychological functioning and self-views with strong correlations with happiness, optimism, motivation, change, agreeableness, curiosity and exploration (Neff, Kirkpatrick, Rude, 2007).

Furthermore, in 2004 Neff stated that in relation to change "ones motivation would not stem from the need to escape harsh self-criticism, but from the compassionate desire to create health and wellbeing for oneself" (p.30). Findings further suggest that where self-compassion levels are high there is less anxiety, depression, rumination and isolation; consequently positive proactive behaviour is increased as well as resilience and overall wellbeing (Neff 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2007).

In 2004 Neff cautioned that self-compassion “cannot be reduced to Mindfulness” (p.29), and it is also important to remember that Mindfulness is only one aspect of the Eightfold path (Myint, 2010). However, Mindfulness is a key component of self-compassion (Gilbert, 2005), particularly as it includes acceptance, non-judgement, equanimity, connectedness and interdependence of self and other, all of which counter the tendency of over-identification (Neff, 2003a).

A large focus of Neff’s work argues that self-compassion is an alternative to self-esteem and challenging what she saw as self-esteem being a panacea. Indeed, her research demonstrates that self-compassion has many of the benefits of self-esteem but without the pitfalls (Neff, 2009b), some of which are the contingent nature of self-esteem being based on evaluation, comparison, competence and narcissism (Neff and Vonk, 2009a). Additionally, self-compassion has been found to be easier to develop than self-esteem (Swann, 1996) and therefore providing a more effective clinical intervention. Since 2003 Neff’s work has advanced understanding, dialogue and research into self-compassion and made a considerable contribution to positive psychology, rather than continuing with the focus on deficit model approaches and pathology. However, the focus has been almost exclusively on quantitative research and measurement using self-report scales. Despite advocating the use of other methodologies for future research and acknowledging that the majority of participants are white, middle-class undergraduate students with a female gender bias, the approaches favoured continue to be quantitative (Neff, 2009a).

There is a lack of acknowledgement of the shortcomings of ‘measurement’ approaches or the need for or value of the ‘depth’ approaches involved in qualitative research. Moreover, Neff’s work is firmly located within the scientific empirical research paradigm; therefore it is probably no coincidence that she makes no reference to the influence of spirituality in the cultivation of self-compassion in her research papers. However, in her 2011 self-help book on self-compassion Neff shares her personal story and struggle with her inner-critic and with acceptance of herself and family members. Although she does not use the word ‘spiritual’ it is clear that her journey through Buddhist practice has been transformational in developing her own self-compassion which has lead to deeper satisfaction, gratitude and savouring of self and life. My response to Kristin Neff’s work is that it is a valuable resource grounded in rich experience and research that supports my professional work.

However, for me the work of my 'second voice', Tara Brach on 'Radical Acceptance' (2003) speaks more powerfully, personally and directly to the heart. Acceptance is more often seen as a component of mindfulness; however, I feel that it merits prominence as it is an essential stage in the development of self-compassion (Germer, 2005, Mikulas, 2010). Brach's seminal work is *'Radical Acceptance, Embracing your life with the Heart of a Buddha'* (2003). She uses the word radical in the context of the Latin derivative *radix* "going to the root or origin" (p.41). Brach draws on over 35 years experience as a Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist. She writes in a deeply personal, direct and meaningful way about feelings that we all encounter; particularly those of inadequacy and fear of rejection, which engender a "trance of unworthiness" (Brach, 2003, p5).

Brach highlights the lengths we can go to in order to compensate for or avoid such painful feelings; striving for success, perfectionism, being judgemental of self and others, being eternally busy, going to extremes from risk taking behaviour to being risk averse, living in the past or future. Basically, anything to avoid living in the present and acknowledging life as it really is. All such strategies only serve to reinforce a sense of separateness, alienation or emotional imprisonment. These aspects are very familiar parts of my own story and the stories of my clients and it is important that the reality of the struggle is explicit and that is takes radical change to transform. Her work emphasises that 'Radical Acceptance' involves stopping the war with ourselves (Kornfield, 1993) and being "willing to experience ourselves and our life as it is... we begin with the fears and wounds of our own life and discover that our heart of compassion widens endlessly. In holding ourselves with compassion, we become free to love this living world" (Brach, 2003, p4). Thus pointing to the power and vitality of self-compassion and the interconnectedness of our human existence; all of which are essential for wellbeing.

This perspective also links with Jungian concepts relating to the need for an integrated self and of the 'wounded healer' who, in fully acknowledging and accepting their own suffering, consequently becomes whole. Similarly to Neff, Brach challenges common misconceptions about acceptance, emphasising that it is not about resignation, passivity, avoidance or self-indulgence. Rather it involves clarity, awareness, choice, loving-kindness and unconditional heartfelt care. Making such misconceptions explicit reveals barriers to development of acceptance and also challenges the 'inner-critic' that can perpetuate such views.

Brach also connects the practice of Radical Acceptance with spiritual awakening as this involves “the process of recognising our essential goodness, our natural wisdom and compassion” (p.12). Neff and Brach demonstrate the benefits of developing self-compassion, both personally and within the therapeutic relationship. They illustrate how self-compassion transforms experience of self, enhances interdependence with others and ultimately benefits others the world. The path or process of genuine acceptance and cultivation of self-compassion involves formal and informal meditation and mindfulness (Brach, 2003; Germer, 2009; Neff, 2011). However the danger is that these practices can, and have been, turned into secular ‘tools’ in the therapy toolkit; “psychotherapy supported by westernized mindfulness completely misses the philosophical and ethico-behavioural underpinnings... of the core of Buddhist teachings” (Myint, 2010).

Whilst they are very useful tools, they are actually aspects of the much richer, philosophical, psychological and spiritual practice of Buddhism. This is where my third voice of William L. Mikulas comes in because his work focuses on the integration between Western Psychology and the fundamentals of Buddhist teaching. His recent essay ‘*Integration of Buddhist Psychology and Western Psychology*’ (Mikulas, 2010) brings clarity in terms of the core teaching and builds a bridge between Buddhism and psychology in the West. Mikulas emphasises the strong connection and commonality between Buddhism and psychology “Both teach the appropriateness of compassion, concern and unconditional positive regard toward all beings. Both share the ideal of maturing and growth” (Mikulas, 2010, p.272). Mikulas uses the phrase ‘Essential Buddhism’ referring to Buddhist practices that are common to all Buddhist schools.

My spiritual home for practice is with the Theravada tradition. However, there are many forms of Buddhism; Theravada, Mahayana, Zen, Pure Land, to name but a few, flourishing in many regions and cultures around the world. Each having their own traditions, orientations and characteristics as well as using the different scriptural languages of Pali and Sanskrit. Mikulas therefore provides a clear and uncomplicated resource that is particularly relevant to professional practice. Furthermore, referring to Buddhist text, he asserts that rather than being religious, Buddhist teaching is educational and psychological. Although many Buddhists (including myself to some extent), and non-Buddhists, would argue that religion is involved; I believe that in practice, the teaching is also psychological and educational.

I would argue that without understanding and integrating the basic teaching, contained under the umbrella of 'Essential Buddhism', one cannot realise the essentiality of self-compassion, the depth of acceptance involved and the commitment required to engage in the process of developing it. The foundation of The Buddha's teaching is the Four Noble Truths; first, being human is to experience suffering, or more precisely, unsatisfactoriness (dukka). Second, there are causes of dukka, which are twofold: clinging to what is desired and aversion to whatever is considered unacceptable. Third, dukka can be extinguished when we desist from craving or aversion and thereby allowing compassion to become a motivating force, and forth, there is a way out of suffering through following the Eightfold Path of 'right or skilful', understanding/views, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration/meditation. Mark Epstein (1998) describes following this path as the key to relating to self and all beings and he emphasises the Buddha's instruction to ensure that the path taken is of one's own making that is carefully built over time through practice and experience.

Mikulas argues that "an integration of Buddhist and western psychology should yield a much more comprehensive psychology with more powerful and more applicable therapies" (p.287). An example of this in relation to the development of compassion is the Buddhist practice of Metta Bahavana or 'Loving Kindness' meditation (Germer, 2009; Neff, 2011). This practice is similar to counter-conditioning in Behavioural Psychology, which involves modifying behaviour by replacing negative emotion with positive emotion. This concept has also been developed by Paul Gilbert in his Compassion Focussed Therapy (Gilbert, 2005, 2009). The 'Loving Kindness' practice invites 'well-wishing' firstly for the self and then extends to all sentient beings. Initially, and at certain times, this can be a difficult practice but it is vital in order to introduce the possibility of loving-kindness and then for this to be developed so that it can equally apply to all. Thus cultivating equanimity, which in Buddhism is seen as a sublime emotion and one of the 'Four Immeasurables' (Nhat Hanh, 1999 p.169).

5. Future development and implications for Professional Practice

With ever increasing pressures on psychologists and psychotherapists, more needs to be done to emphasise the importance and benefits of being self-compassionate and well therapists. The significance of engendering self-compassion within psychological practice was demonstrated by Neuroscientists Klimecki and Singer (in press September 2011) in their research with Buddhist Monk Mathieu Ricard and other meditators.

They found that when focusing on being solely empathetic, the experience of 'burnout' happened relatively quickly. However, when compassionate feelings were introduced, distress arising from empathy subsided, therefore suggesting that 'burnout/compassion fatigue' is more a case of empathy fatigue and that the antidote to this was compassion. Their intention is to begin training therapists and caregivers in Buddhist loving-kindness practice (Ricard, 2009). Other research has emphasised the efficacy and positive outcomes in incorporating self-compassion training into conventional training programmes for psychologists and healthcare professionals (Shapiro et al, 2005, 2007; Moore 2008). However, in the United Kingdom, aside from Gilbert's work, there appears to be very little emphasis on, or specific compassion training available for practitioners. I would assert that developing compassion is so imperative for wellbeing and for reducing the risk of burnout that compassion training needs to be embedded into professional training and Continuing Professional Development as well as being modelled in supervision and developed further through research.

In order for a cultural shift to occur there needs to be a change in narrative. I carried out a brief content analysis of the British Psychological Society (BPS) Practice Guidelines, Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009), Generic Professional Practice Guidelines (2007), Guidelines for Independent Practice (2010). These documents emphasise the principle of 'no harm', importance of recognising impairment and being vigilant where health problems may affect 'performance'. All are important points but the focus was on 'deficit' with no positive encouragement to be active in wellbeing, and no mention of the words compassion or spirituality either.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to explore self-compassion from a Buddhist perspective in the context of personal experience and professional practice as a psychologist. All of which are inextricably linked for me and such integration has transformed my relationship with myself and others. I have illustrated through my personal context the damage and distress that result from lack of self-compassion and the healing and liberation that has resulted from development of self-compassion and my spiritual practice as a Buddhist. From my professional context, experience of self-compassion has enabled me to be more present, accepting, fallible, human and connected with my clients. Thereby leading to an alleviation of suffering, increase in happiness and sense of wellbeing for all. Barriers to self-compassion and areas of development within my profession were also explored.

In relation to my key voices; Kristin Neff drew from Buddhist teachings and academically established the importance of self-compassion and developed this field of applied positive psychology through research and practice. Tara Brach's work speaks from a powerfully reflective personal and spiritual perspective. Making a strong argument for Radical Acceptance, which I feel is an essential and transformational component of self-compassion. Brach situates the Buddhist practice of compassion right into "the soul of psychology" (Glaser, 2005) in such a way that is accessible and authentic. The work of William Mikulas informs and supports my understanding of Buddhist core teachings in relation to psychology, which underpins the cultivation of self-compassion. This work also enables me to make clear links with, and integrate Buddhist teaching into my own practice as a western psychologist.

Finally, and paradoxically, greater self-compassion leads to less self-centredness thereby allowing for realisation of the Buddhist concept of non-self, which in turn generates a deeper spirit of generosity (Epstein 1998). "The more one experiences compassion and loving kindness, the more one progresses towards authentic wellbeing, and becomes unconditionally available to others" (Ricard, 2009, p.11).

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Appendix 17

A pilot study to explore the application of Contemplative inquiry through meditation, using an Autoethnographic approach

"*This above all: to thine own self be true.*
And it must follow, as the night the day.
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

Polonius to Laertes,
Act 1, Scene 3,
Hamlet by William Shakespeare

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A pilot study to explore the application of contemplative inquiry through meditation, using an Autoethnographic approach

Abstract

This paper considers the deeper meaning, implications and impact of self-compassion practice and how this contributes to 'living with ease'. An exploration of the process of moving from intention to action, which deepens authentic and compassionate practice, was made as well as a consideration of what hinders the practice. The practice of contemplative meditation, within the context of the 2012 Winter Feast for the Soul, involved 40 minutes of daily meditation for 40 days. A qualitative approach was taken using autoethnographical methodology. This approach involved self-observation, reflection, an analytic, interpretive and narrative process drawing from a reflective meditation journal and a culture-gram (Chang, 2008), and included use of pictures, songs, poems and web pages (Muncey, 2010).

The outcomes of this research included an experience for the researcher of deeper acceptance and awareness, increased clarity and focus, together with a greater appreciation of the value of self-compassion and authenticity. The therapeutic process was enhanced and there was an experience of integration of multiple identities, roles, and beliefs alongside acknowledgement of social and cultural influences. This led to a stronger sense of 'personhood', which in turn provided the impetus to convert intention into action. This work has also provided an extended understanding of self-compassion which included connecting with inner values and living authentically, ethically and consequently 'living with ease'.

1. Introduction: My Intentions

> "It is important for me to integrate my faith into my clinical practice in a way that is both sensitive to other peoples needs and authentic to my personhood." (Scott, 2012)

In his review of 'Faith, hope and Therapy' (Grainger, 2011), Adam Scott made the above statement, which encapsulates my intentions in relation to integrating my professional and spiritual Buddhist practice. Scott's statement also communicates the delicate sensitivity that is required of me in my profession as a psychologist in being aware of and responsive to my client's needs and at the same time being congruent with who I am – my personhood.

Conley (2012) posits the following equation: Authenticity = self-awareness x courage. The two elements that Conley suggests make up authenticity resonated with me because being an authentic practitioner means that I am committed to 'practicing what I preach'. As a psychologist and scientist practitioner, and in line with my own values, I would never advocate something to my clients that I had not tested and/or experienced myself, or had not been scientifically tested for its validity and efficacy. Furthermore, self-awareness and courage is essential in order to be clear about needs, values and intentions and then to take action in accordance with them.

This paper aims to explore the process of moving from intention to action that enables a deeper, more authentic and compassionate practice. At the heart of this on-going process is the development of awareness, insight and self-compassion cultivated through meditation practice. For me, the path of genuine acceptance and cultivation of self-compassion involves a commitment to understand and integrate Buddhist teaching into all areas of life alongside practicing formal and informal meditation and mindfulness (Brach, 2003; Germer, 2009; Neff, 2011).

Shapiro et al (2008) described four key mechanisms of mindfulness and meditation practice: 1) intention, 2) attention (focus and awareness), 3) attitude (being non-judgemental, accepting and curious) and 4) action. I would argue that without all of the above elements, both professional and spiritual practice could be in danger of being reduced to the theoretical and intellectual and thus have the potential to create the conditions to becoming an 'Armchair Buddhist'.

Professor Kristin Neff identifies three components involved in self-compassion: 'self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness'. Neff emphasises that self-compassion includes acceptance, non-judgement, equanimity, connectedness and interdependence. All of these counter the tendency of over-identification and the misunderstanding that self-compassion involves selfishness, self-pity, self-indulgence, passivity or self-esteem (Neff, 2003a; 2003b). Practicing self-compassion implicitly means learning to experience warmth, kindness and understanding for oneself, which is particularly important in my personal and professional context because "if we are to bring light or wisdom or compassion into the world, we must first begin with ourselves." (Kornfield, 1993, p.10).

The purpose of this paper is to undertake a deeper exploration of meaning, implications and impact of self-compassion and to consider how cultivation of this leads to 'living with ease' both personally and professionally alongside my clients. The phase 'living with ease' comes from the Karaniya Metta Sutta (Buddharakkhita, 1995), which is set out in Appendix 1. An Autoethnographic approach was used to elicit reflections and insights arising from a discrete period of meditative practice and self-reflection. The meditation practice took place within the context of the 2012 Winter Feast for the Soul (Winter Feast), which involved 40 minutes of daily meditation for 40 days. This period of meditation provided an opportunity to encounter and consider what arose and reflect on any transformative aspects of my meditation practice alongside my psychology practice. It also allowed an uncomfortable but honest investigation of the hindrances to meditation practice, which were so often present.

In Buddhist teaching the main obstacles to practice are the 'Five Hindrances' (AN 5:51): 1) sense desire, 2) ill will, 3) sloth and torpor, 4) restlessness and remorse, and 5) doubt (Appendix 2). Giving recourse to the Hindrances, also known as obscurations, when encountering difficulties in meditation, can help one identify, understand and accept the experience. The aim is not to fix or eliminate what arises, but to enquire; name it and know it, then explore how it feels and what it does. It is important to remember that the Hindrances are viewed as universal conditions of the mind which arise throughout our lives and need to be understood and worked with rather than argued with or suppressed (Brahmavamso, 1999). The goal is to go beyond them in order to connect with our true nature, which Buddhist teaching emphasises is already there but is obscured. Patience and all the other attitudes of mindfulness throughout are needed to support practice (Appendix 3).

Whether someone follows a Buddhist path or has another or no faith, the benefits of meditation for psychological change, well-being and mental health have been widely documented and increasingly so over the past 20 years (Woodfolk and Franks, 1984; West, 1986; de Silva, 1996a; Ricard, 2010, Williams et al, 2012). Just a few of the recognised benefits include greater awareness, ability to concentrate, tolerate pain and discomfort as well as gaining a sense of stillness and tranquillity. Research has also identified neurological change alongside a range of physiological benefits such as reduced blood pressure and decreased reactivity of the autonomic nervous system. Indeed, in the West, meditation is now widely applied as a clinical intervention, treating conditions ranging from stress, anxiety, depression, obesity, pain management to sleep problems and addiction (de Silva, 1996b; Kabat-Zinn, 2001; NICE, 2003, Williams et al, 2007)

There are an inordinate amount of sources, both ancient and modern, of books, leaflets, websites, CD's, audio and video files which offer much wisdom and guidance in relation to meditation practice. They are important resources that provide teaching and encouragement to begin, continue and deepen practice. Buddhist teachings provide clear guidance and encouragement, particularly through the Eight-fold path which is part of the Buddha's first and most central teachings, set out in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, (SN 56:11). Emphasis is on attitudes of mind and actions that support practice, lead to wellbeing and ultimately enlightenment. Whilst I am deeply grateful for these sources of teaching, I am often overwhelmed by all the instruction of 'good practice' particularly as it frequently does not reflect the wide variations, tensions and conflicts within my own experience, no matter how good or clear my intentions. In my experience there can sometimes be a sizeable gap between my intentions and actions and also in comparison to how other practitioners describe their practice. However, what people say and what they do is another matter (Germer, 2009). So, how brutally honest about my 'lived experience' can I be within the framework of an academic paper? This is where the element of courage comes in for me. Also, it is important to question what use my reflections and analysis will be? The hope is that it will increase my own understanding of the process and how I respond to such difficulties within myself and also within the therapeutic relationship. For practical and hopefully illuminating purposes, rather than from a place of self-indulgence, I am interested in exploring 1) the impact of self-compassion practice, 2) the assumptions and expectations I have about my practice, and 3) why it can be so difficult to translate intention into action when the intention to reduce suffering [of self and others] and live with ease is so strong.

2. The Methodological Approach: Autoethnography

A qualitative paradigm and research design was chosen as the most appropriate approach to the subject matter because it provides the possibility of a deeper understanding of experience and allows context and meaning to emerge. Qualitative research "elucidates phenomena that would be missed or dismissed by other methods" (Banister et al, 1994: 57). A number of qualitative methods were considered for this pilot research including Independent Phenomenological Analysis, Case Study and Transcendental Phenomenology. However, Autoethnography was chosen, firstly because it provided a creative framework to facilitate understanding of individual experience located within a social and cultural context (Muncey, 2010) and secondly because such a reflexive approach complemented the psychological and philosophical positions of the researcher. Five key features of this methodology are: "(1) complete member researcher status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (Anderson, L 2006, p6).

This emergent methodology is not without its critics, who declare that it is not realist or scientific enough, is unrepresentative and too subjective (Holt, 2003; Marechal, 2009). However, it can be argued that it provides the rigor of the ethnographic method, the power of narrative research and the added richness of social and cultural identity (Chang; 2008, Ellis; 2009). Autoethnography involves self-observation, reflection and inquiry through applying an analytic and interpretive approach (Chang, 2008). With myself as the object and the subject (researcher and the researched), exploration takes place through a narrative format based on a reflective meditation journal (Appendix 4), which is the equivalent of an ethnographer's field journal, and a culture-gram (Appendix 5). The culture-gram shown in this paper is the unedited, first attempt, kept intentionally so in order to reveal the uncensored natural flow of thought and spontaneous connections made. Emergent elements within the narrative included blog postings, a web page (Appendix 6), poems, songs and pictures. This methodology focuses on the self and individual experience, which raises the "highly contentious issue of what is meant by the concept of self" (Muncey, 2010, xiii). Indeed, conceptualisation of 'self' contrasts greatly between Buddhist traditions and psychology as well as between Eastern and Western cultures.

For the purposes of this paper, and in line with an Autoethnographic approach, the 'self' is located within a social and cultural context, the basis of which is relational. Indeed, "self and other are viewed as mutually inclusive" (Chang, 2008, p.25), which is complimentary to the non-dualistic view and empirical standpoint of Buddhism. There are multiple contexts in which my 'personhood' evolves, and a range of identities, roles and memberships are involved. The culture-gram indicates primary contexts and identities of profession, spirituality, social/environmental, gender, class, nationality/ethnicity, and personal interests (Chang, 2008, 98-99). The culture-gram categories provided a framework for reflection and contributed in part to analysis of the meditation journal. It also generated a few surprises for the author.

3. The Context

The context for this period of meditation is the '2012 Winter Feast for the Soul', which consists of a world-wide virtual community of over 20,000 participants who undertake an annual commitment to practice for 40 minutes for 40 days (January 15th to February 23rd, 2012). Valerie Skonie founded the Winter Feast in 2007 having been inspired by the Rumi quote: "What nine months does for the embryo, forty early mornings, will do for your growing awareness" *(Barks, 1997).* It has been endorsed by HH The Dalai Lama since 2009 and takes a multi-faith approach with guided meditation practice and prayer guides led by teachers from Buddhist, Christian, Sufi, Vedic, Sikh, Kabalistic and Mindfulness traditions. There is an interactive dialogue via the main website, social media sites and e-mails, providing daily inspirational quotes, interviews from leading spiritual teachers on acts of kindness and on-line audio sessions. There is encouragement to continue with commitment to daily practice during the 40 days and then beyond. Indeed, the newsletter email of 1/2/2012 emphasizes the importance of starting again and not losing heart:

"Come, come, whoever you are.
Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving, come.
Even if you have broken your vow one thousand times.
Come, come again".
(Rumi in Malak, 2004)

The aim is to provide space to encourage a deeper spirituality and contemplative practice for people of every and no faith and for all age ranges as well as across cultures and languages. Knowing that you are part of a community of practice can be a great encouragement and the Winter Feast provides this community, or in Buddhist terms, a Sangha is formed.

4. The Process

Meditation and Contemplative Inquiry

The meditation practice adopted in this research is 'Samatha' (tranquillity or calm abiding) and 'Vipassana' (insight or clear seeing). It is based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (Satipatthana): Body and breath, feelings, consciousness/thought/mind, and mental objects (Piyobhaso, 2012). The attitudes being cultivated are: acceptance, gentleness, patience, kindness, non-judging, trust, letting go and non-striving (Kabat-Zinn, 2001), all of which are part of self-compassion. During meditation there is movement from outer to inner phenomenology, clear intention and attention, deep silence, moving from focussed to open awareness of everything exactly as it is (Zajonic, 2009). This silent presence is our most essential nature and allows the possibility of cultivation of illumination and insight.

In relation to the right conditions for meditation and contemplative inquiry, Zajonic (2009) argues that the process begins with an attitude of deep respect as a foundation for everything else; closely followed by gentleness, intimacy, vulnerability, transformation, illumination and insight. Wallace (2012, p.161) argues that contemplative inquiry has much to offer in providing language and insight, also emphasising empiricism, stating that a cornerstone of Buddhist practice is the "pursuit of self-knowledge through experiential and rational inquiry". Furthermore, in addition to advocating the practice of meditation to calm and train the mind, Tenzin Gyatso The 14th Dalai Lama (2012) stresses the importance of commitment and action:

> "So, since we desire the true happiness that is brought about by only a calm mind, and since such peace of mind is brought about by only a compassionate attitude, how can we develop this? Obviously, it is not enough for us simply to think about how nice compassion is! We need to make a concerted effort to develop it; we must use all the events of our daily life to transform our thoughts and behavior". (Dalai Lama, 2012)

In preparation for the Winter Feast, I took Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (The Triple Gem) and renewed the Five Precepts, undertaken by Lay Buddhists, which are as follows:

1. Harmlessness: not intentionally taking the life of any living creature.
2. Trustworthiness: not taking anything that is not freely given.
3. Refraining from any sexual misconduct.
4. Right Speech: avoiding false, abusive or malicious speech
5. Sobriety: not taking any intoxicating drinks or drugs.

(Adapted from Amaravati Monastery Retreat Guidance, 1971)

The practice was guided by 'The Threefold Way', which entails:

- Ethics: To live one's life in a way that helps, rather than causes harm. Three virtues: social/environmental, psychological and spiritual (Wallace, 2012).
- Meditation: Transforming the mind through meditation practice.
- Wisdom: Understanding through listening, reflection, and meditation and experiencing insight into the reality and truth of the true nature of things/how things are.

Whenever possible, a 40 minute sitting practice took place at 7am daily, followed at some point in the day by a walking meditation or yoga practice of approximately 30 minutes. If time did not permit, the practice of 40 minutes either took place in the evening or was split into two 20-minute sittings. At the end of each meditation the Metta Sutta was recited.

Reflections were recorded in the evenings as it was important to allow space between the meditation and any note-taking in order that the process of meditation would be interrupted or distorted as little as possible. A thematic analysis of the reflective journal took place two months after the last entry to allow sufficient time to create distance between the writing and analysis.

5. Reflections

5.1 Emergent themes from the Reflective Meditation Journal

> "Keeping a journal is itself a contemplative practice and a self-compassionate exercise. You're honoring the preciousness of your own experience, even if it's odd, funky or confusing" (Christopher Germer, 2009, p. 242).

Acceptance

Accepting uncertainty and being with 'what is' can be very difficult, uncomfortable, even painful, but to be able to do so is ultimately liberating. Having been very aware that negative mindstates of frustration and aversion relating to my hypertension (Day 17) were adding to my suffering, I brought attitudes of loving kindness and compassion to these feelings. The power of these two 'divine abidings' was evident in helping me recognize and accept the need to respond skilfully and take action that would care for and support my body (i.e. medication) rather than punish it by refusing treatment. Germer (2009, p.104) highlights the importance of self-compassion practice in relation to physical care and the importance of understanding two particular psychological responses to medication: refusing treatment (denial or self-punishment), medicating too much (avoidance or dependency). This is an area where I often find myself working with my clients and it is an experience from which I have learnt.

Being uncertain and accepting this condition is a familiar experience in my work as a psychologist as well as in life and meditation. Although it can be difficult, this experience is a powerful teaching in terms of learning to trust 'not knowing' and 'non-doing', acceptance that this way of being is beneficial allows space to be patient and listen to what emerges. What encourages acceptance and willingness to be with the experience as it is in the moment, is remembering that all things are impermanent, knowing that the current moment will pass and consequently that change will occur. Impermanence or change (*anicca*) is viewed in Buddhism as one of the three basic characteristics of existence (Thera, 2006). It is something that I am relatively comfortable with as a construct but the reality and lived sense of my own impermanence, emergent from the experience of waiting for test results on my persistently low white blood cell count, was far from comfortable (Day 23).

This experience raised a strong awareness of fear, fragility and vulnerability, very aptly portrayed in the song ‘Fragile’ by Sting (1987):

Lest we forget how fragile we are
On and on the rain will fall
Like tears from a star like tears from a star
On and on the rain will say
How fragile we are how fragile we are

Awareness of this fragility connected me to feelings of love, and ultimately loss, of life, generating a kaleidoscope of emotion that can flood moments within the heart of our lived experience. When the song ‘Fragile’ came to mind during meditation it illuminated a metaphor of water in the form of waves and the encouragement of mindfulness therapy to ‘surf the emotion’ (Walsh, 2006). In meditation, there was the experience of being present with these waves of emotion, surfing them, sometimes getting swept away and sometimes coming crashing down. Until, eventually, I end up in the warmer, shallower and more still waters where I can find my footing again and stand up.

As I do in my therapeutic work with clients, allowing space to be with my emotions, with an attitude of compassion and acceptance of what was present, helped me feel more stable. One can then feel strong enough to observe and understand these feelings more clearly whilst at the same time realizing that they change even from moment to moment. The importance for well-being of finding the courage to feel what is present is powerfully illustrated by Jeanette Winterson who said in her autobiography *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, “The things that I regret in my life are not errors or judgement but failures of feeling” (Winterson, 2011, p.210).

During a meditation on the body (Day 28), strong associations arose quite unexpectedly and served as a striking reminder of how powerful a ‘body’ meditation can be for myself and importantly, for my clients. I found myself gazing at my hands whereupon memories of my mother’s and father’s hands sprang forth. Intense emotions arose. Firstly there was fear, from awareness of the pain in my finger joints and remembering how my mother’s hands became disfigured with arthritis. Secondly there were strong feelings of deep grief, tenderness and love in remembering taking my father’s hands, while he was alive in his last years, child-like, being guided.

Then memories arose of the morning of his death, of stroking his still warm hand for hours after he had died. In the end, loving kindness and compassion are all that matter, as the moving picture below demonstrates. Here, in contrast to responses from onlookers, a Buddhist Monk tends to a man who died at a railway station in China.

Taiyuan Train Station, Shanxi, November 25 2011 (REUTERS/Asianewsphoto)

Awareness was the second major theme, which threaded throughout the meditation experience. This ranged from awareness of internal and external events; neutral, pleasant and unpleasant e.g. noisy thoughts, external noise, physical and emotional pain, to experiences of joy, peace and compassion for self and others. Sometimes the quality of awareness was low or dull but as the quality deepened, I was more able to see events for what they were, move beyond thoughts and not identifying with them. My trust in the process deepened and I felt more able to let go and in turn felt stronger and more connected with myself.

> Strong intrusive thoughts that I label worry, predicting and planning. Staying with these rather than trying to do something with them (escalate, suppress) allowed them to feel bearable, that I could tolerate their presence, they were only thoughts! Awareness of how familiar they are which helped me remember that I could do what I needed to do alongside these thoughts and feelings. Focus on the breath brought release. (Day 4)

Contrasts in meditation experience from moment to moment, sitting to sitting and day to day were evident, ranging from feeling deeply inspired and connected to feeling angry and frustrated (e.g. Days 12, 13, 22, 23). The practice of Mindfulness of breath and body (*Satipatthana* meditation), bringing the focus and awareness back to the breath and body many times, brought me release, rest and calmness.

Coming back to the Metta meditation at the end of each session also felt sustaining and supportive. The Pali word for Meditation is '*Bhavana*' which means to cultivate and there was a real sense of this on Day 17:

> Recognition of these mindstates creating problems and adding more suffering to the actual area of suffering and unsatisfactoriness… Remembering that loving kindness and compassion are aspects of human nature that need cultivation, something that we add to drop by drop into a bucket that gradually fills.

I was able to bring compassion to my experience when I was struggling in meditation due to tiredness, stress and the 'hindrances' of doubt and ill-will. This meant that I was less reactive, critical and defensive and as a result felt less discouraged and more motivated. What also emerged, which I was not as clearly aware of previously, was how detrimental my idealistic views of meditation are. Looking more deeply revealed striving, expectation, judgement, and fear of failure which led to a realisation of how delusional these states are. Awareness of the suffering they caused emphasised how important it was to let go of them. Furthermore, realising that all experiences are part of the practice allowed greater acceptance and liberation: "ALL IS PRACTICE☺" (Day 24).

The third theme to emerge was 'Increased clarity and focus'. During the last ten days of the 40-day practice I experienced a renewed commitment and intention to develop self-compassion for myself and to bring this practice to others. There was also a deeper recognition that the practice is not just an individual endeavour but for the benefit of all beings. However, this increased commitment was not without its anxieties, as can be seen from the following sequence of entries:

> Morning meditation: strong feelings arising in terms of a need to act. Thoughts about how to communicate the why and how of 'living with ease' – a website, journal and newsletter that brings together psychological and Buddhist practice" (Day 30). Identity, continuing from yesterday, wondering who I am: a Buddhist who is a psychologist or vise versa. Does it matter overall, does it matter in particular contexts? How does it feel one way or the other? Tessa Muncey asked: "*Can these aspects of self be held gently/lightly and openly or held tightly a close*". What is the interaction between the two? (Day 32)

> “Mind wondering about perceptions of me by clients, meditation group, family, friends. What I do to try and manage/control these things? Raises the question: does this compromise authenticity? Yes… when I lack the courage to be myself” (Day 35). Linking with yesterday as I was aware of the irony of the feeling of anxiety arising and tension in my body in relation to creating a distinct page on my website relating to self-compassion and living with ease. Found myself smiling at this. (Day 36)

The opportunity to contemplate the above through meditation meant that I could see barriers to action more, clearly which meant that rather than avoid or feel disheartened, I felt I could exercise choice. Finally, on Day 40:

> Powerfully aware of the deep wish and need to cultivate loving kindness and patience, treating ourselves firstly with gentle respect and care - as we would be with anything we love and cherish and want to nurture - exploring, listening, tending.

5.2 Emergent Themes from the Culture-Gram

There were many cross-over points between the meditation practice and reflections arising from the culture-gram (Figure 1 below and Appendix 5). This was particularly apparent in relation to my values and multiple identities and whilst there were concerns over making these explicit in my professional practice, there was recognition that in order to ‘live with ease’ and be authentic in my practice, it was essential action.

Figure 1

Conflicts and links between Professional and Buddhist Identity

The on-going conflicting question as to whether I am a psychologist who is a Buddhist or Buddhist psychologist was brought into sharp focus during the 40 days meditation and particularly so through the culture-gram work. Two experiences intensified this struggle and consequently contributed to a resolution. Firstly, January 18th was a PrD day in Cambridge, and in common with other PrD days, because of my previous experiences with the Christian church, I was aware of my defensiveness and reacting to 'old wounds'. Despite warm welcomes, encouragement and friendly curiosity, being in a Christian group was challenging. Being in a minority of two Buddhists, I felt spiritually invisible, alien even. This provoked me to find the courage to wear Buddhist colours. Muncey highlighted how important and meaningful such action is; "practices 'inscribe' or 'write' upon the body, marking it in culturally specific ways which are then 'read' or interpreted by others" (Muncey, 2010, p.13).

Making this statement and having the opportunity to present my experiences, work and beliefs helped ameliorate such difficult feelings and heal some of the 'old wounds'. On the second occasion, acceptance was further enhanced following the opportunity to arrange for a Buddhist Nun to speak at another study day. It was a positive experience, which demonstrated a deep respect for individual beliefs, differences and commonalities alongside a willingness to listen and consider a different perspective. An important dialogue emerged which allowed an opportunity for shared understanding and critical reflection.

Because of my internal conflicts, I kept these aspects of my identity discreetly separate or, more accurately, fragmented. However, from seeing how connected, sometimes complimentary and often integral, these multiple identities were in my culture-gram, I discovered a renewed commitment to be clearer about my identity as a psychologist who is also a Buddhist. This led to setting up new pages on my professional website; providing information, news and events updates as well as resource links (Appendix 6). I often work with clients who juggle multiple roles and struggle with identity; sometimes feeling their identity is lost, buried under everyone else's expectations and demands, sometimes afraid to reveal it. Working with my own fears about judgement, feelings of doubt and uncertainty have provided insight into these very human struggles and engendered deep feelings of empathy and compassion, for self and others.

It felt like a healthy integration and acceptance and a sense of feeling grounded emerged. One of my favourite pictures is a powerful composition by Steve Young (2010), which communicates a deep sense of connectedness and steadfastness - for whatever comes my way.

© Steve Young, Herring gull in wave (2010)

Furthermore, there was a moment in sketching out the culture-gram when a new identity of 'sister' emerged. This was astonishing to me as my brother John had died at birth, 2 years before I was born. He was always described as my brother but I had always been described as an only child and therefore the role of sister was never made explicit. On reflection I felt that because I never had the opportunity to fulfil this role, it went unrealised and unrecognised until now, whereupon the culture-gram highlighted who I am in relation to another. As a consequence of allowing myself to connect with this and other aspects of my history in relation to my identity, the following reflection emerged. I have called it:

'Mind the Gap'

Gaps in my life... (so far, age 49) I am...

A daughter to a Mother I had for 9 years before she died: A 40-year gap

A daughter to a Dad who also became mum, and died 2003: A 9-year gap

A sister to a brother I never had the chance to meet: A 49-year gap

A niece to an uncle who I didn't know existed until I was forty: A 40-year gap

A mother to a foetus (a precious flower that didn't blossom in the womb): A lifetime gap

A wife to a wonderful, loving husband who would have been an incredible Dad:

Another lifetime gap

A friend to beloved friends who died too soon: Many varied gaps

These are not small gaps, they are huge, gaping, bottomless, immeasurable,

But they are not empty... They contain very precious and much loved beings.

They are filled with boundless love that consumes pain and redefines loss.

There may be many deep gaps, but My Life is Full... Full of love ❤

Mary Younger, Sunday morning 22nd April 2012

Professional Practice

The reflections arising from the culture-gram and during meditation, which were related to loss, were of immense help in working with a client around the same time. The experiences I had enabled me to suggest a reframing of her loss with emphasis on the love she felt rather than being frozen in grief. She had been locked in the trauma and grief of a sister's death for several years, not speaking of it to protect other family members. Allowing space to express what had felt unspeakable provided the opportunity to bring compassion to the distressing feelings she was experiencing. Offering compassion to these feelings allowed her to be more open to them rather than trying desperately to suppress them. This in turn enabled her to reconnect with two very important things: the loving feelings she had always felt when her sister was alive, and then with her own life and needs.

Being alongside my clients, with empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959) is of great importance, but I would argue that you can't demonstrate any of these attributes without compassion. It is about a deep wish to be aware, be alongside and to alleviate suffering. This compassion for all beings is the same compassion that I aim to nurture towards myself. The famous song 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' by Simon and Garfunkel (1970) puts words to the act of compassion:

When you're weary, Feeling small
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all
I'm on your side when times get rough
And friends just can't be found
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down
When you're down and out, when you're on the street
When evening falls so hard, I will comfort you
I'll take your part, when darkness comes and pain is all around
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down
Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down

Through the on-going process of integration of professional and spiritual practice, I have found renewed energy to develop the retreat days that I began in 2010. This was a helpful antidote to doubt and procrastination, and led to me offering a half-day retreat focusing on self-compassion (Appendices 7a and 7b). A full-day retreat to develop self-compassion further is planned for September 2012 (Appendix 8).

The picture below shows the Sanctuary Room at Retreat Farm just before the participants of the April Retreat arrived. My act of kindness to myself was to arrive early in order to have time to sit and meditate for a while to prepare, which is a rare thing for me to do. This allowed a real sense of calm to arise, within me and also in the room.

During the Retreat I shared the fruits of my self-compassion and mediation practice in relation to learning Chi Kung. My old habits of mind would have been to criticize or judge myself for getting it wrong, not learning quickly enough and comparing myself (unfavourably) to others in the class. All of these attitudes are detrimental to motivation (Neff, 2009), whereas the compassionate attitudes of patience, gentleness and kindness act as encouragements to continue and to learn. All of these contributed to my sustained commitment and enjoyment in learning this ancient art.

Social and Environmental Context

As shown in the culture-gram, social and environmental issues are important elements in my life. I am engaged in activities with Greenpeace, Resurgence and Occupy, amongst many others. For me all of these activities constitute Socially Engaged Buddhism. The Winter Feast newsletter of 9th February 2012 highlighted the work of the Centre for Subtle Activism and this provided inspiration for action through meditation practice. These are all areas I am developing in professional and spiritual practice, beginning with walking meditation groups, film nights and re-starting a horticulture therapy group. Emphasis is on ethical living and common humanity, things that are beyond religion (Dalai Lama, 2012).

In this regard, Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay) teaches contemplation of Five Mindfulness Trainings of: Reverence for Life, True Happiness, True Love, Loving Speech and Deep Listening and Nourishment and Healing (Nhat Hanh 2009). I see this as a blueprint for 'living with ease'. In a recent interview during his visit to the UK, Thay stressed:

> You carry Mother Earth within you," says Thay. She is not outside of you. Mother Earth is not just your environment. In that insight of inter-being, it is possible to have real communication with the Earth, which is the highest form of prayer. In that kind of relationship you have enough love, strength and awakening in order to change your life. (Thich Nhat Hanh, Monday 20th February 2012).

Peace Sitting in Trafalgar Square with Thay and the Interbeing Sangha.
Saturday 31st March 2012

6. Conclusion

The work on the culture-gram reminded me how deep the roots of identity, social constructs and culture run, how they weave in and out of my values, impact upon how I see myself and how I engage with the world. Not only had I lost sight of how influential all of these co-constructed facets of life are (Hedges, 2005), but I have been reminded of the value and relevance of my Systemic Training as a psychologist and how powerful this way of working can be for clients. Fran Hedges illustrates my therapeutic philosophy:

> "Each person is born into a cluster of 'stories' including the political, economic and cultural zeitgeist as well as personal, family and community obligations. And systemic therapists honour all these contexts" (Hedges, 2005, p.5)

Using the methodological approach of Autoethnography has been complex, inspirational, painful and joyful. Privileging subjective experience has proven challenging and taken me out of my 'scientific' comfort zone. Criticisms against the approach are the same ones I have used many times when evaluating research. However, I feel this approach is justifiable as long as there is rigor in data collection and analysis, the process is transparent, and clear links with theoretical underpinnings and application to practice are made. The aim of this paper has been to incorporate all of these methodological elements.

In terms of development of future research, a multi-method approach such as combining Autoethnographical research with action research could be effective and illuminative. Indeed, there were overlaps in this study where reflections crystallized intentions, which led to action e.g. integration of identity leading to production of web-pages and organizing retreat days. A comparative approach could also be taken using multiple Autoethnographies of participants of a self-compassion training course. Quantitative research could also be incorporated in future studies, for example, pre and post measurements of self-compassion following training (Neff, 2003b). This research and future explorations are guided by the values of the Mind and Life Institute which:

> "Seeks to understand the human mind and the benefits of contemplative practices through an integrated mode of knowing that combines first person knowledge from the world's contemplative traditions with methods and findings from contemporary scientific inquiry. Ultimately, our goal is to relieve human suffering and advance well-being." (Mind and Life Institute, 2012).

The process of writing the paper has generated much reflection but has also acted as a catalyst to action, going beyond religion, not being an 'armchair Buddhist', but a socially engaged one. This brings a new impetus to 'walk the walk' and live in line more fully in my own 'personhood'. The encouragement below by Michael Kahn, to honour one's 'personhood', is very enabling and validating for therapists as well as providing a role model for clients:

> "When they [therapists] enter the consulting room, they don't need to don the therapist mask, the therapist voice, the therapist posture, and the therapist vocabulary. They can discard those accouterments because they have much, much more than that to give their clients" (Kahn, 1997, p.163).

The focused meditation period provided a profound experience of deep appreciation of being able to 'live with ease' and a recognition that I have enough food, warmth, love and security which generated and a feeling of gratitude for such abundance. At the same time, in relation to my clients, there arose feelings of compassion for those who do not have any or many of these things. There was also compassion for those who are seduced by the delusion that abundance is about acquisition and wealth; beliefs which lead to suffering and poverty of spirit, I frequently see such things in my consulting room. The reflections on loss were a valued teaching and very helpful therapeutically, for my clients as well as myself.

An unexpected outcome of this paper is the extension of my understanding and meaning of self-compassion. Yes, it involves warmth, care, acceptance, and self-kindness, but the aspects of common humanity and interdependence have really unfolded through this work. I would now put far greater emphasis on these, arguing that being fully self-compassionate means developing and connecting with inner values and integrating the multiple aspects of ourselves with a view to living authentically and ethically throughout life. The experience of such an existence is beautifully encapsulated in an editorial in Resurgence Magazine by Satish Kumar (2011).

> If we suffer from fear, anxiety, greed, anger, craving and selfishness, then wellbeing will remain a distant goal. But if we cultivate compassion, courage, caring, gratitude and humility, then wellbeing will be near at hand. Psychological wellbeing is a first step to social and environmental wellbeing, but without social and environmental wellbeing, psychological wellbeing will remain a distant dream. (Kumar, 2011, p1)

The aim of this paper has been to reflect on what it means to cultivate compassionate living for myself and others and explore what is involved in being congruent with my 'personhood'. The reader of this work may have felt uncomfortable with the level of disclosure of personal pain and struggle, but through learning to 'live with ease', with compassionate awareness, self-acceptance and being able to let go, I have well-being and am comfortable with being 'known'.

Suffering and rejoicing are all part of the human condition, of living authentically and with integrity:

> "In order to live with integrity, we must stop fragmenting and compartmentalizing our lives… Every aspect of our lives is connected to every other aspect of our lives. This truth is the basis for an awakened life. When we live with integrity, we further enhance intimacy with ourselves by being able to rejoice, taking active delight in our actions". (Salzberg, 1995, p.34).

May all beings be well. May all beings live with ease.

And finally…

Intentionally and actively taking time and finding space to be a reflective practitioner is an essential and vital process that is never finished.

Picture title: '*Finding space before the arrival of clients for evening clinic'*.
The Sanctuary, Retreat Farm, Wednesday 23rd May 2012 16:29

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Appendix 1

The Buddha's Words on Loving Kindness ∞ Metta Sutta
The Karaniya Metta Sutta: Hymn of Universal Love

This is what should be done By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited, Contented and easily satisfied.
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skilful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing That the wise would later reprove.
Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born,
May all beings be at ease!
Let none deceive another, Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies, And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded, Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

Source: Buddharakkhita, Acharya, 1995

Four Foundations of Mindfulness Meditation

Appendix 2

1. Breathing and body. 2. Feelings. 3. Consciousness/thought/Mind. 4. Mental Objects - **The 5 hindrances:**

1. Sensory desire refers to that particular type of wanting that seeks for happiness through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and physical feeling. In its extreme form, sensory desire is an obsession to find pleasure in such things as sexual intimacy, good food or fine music. But it also includes the desire to replace irritating or even painful five-sense experiences with pleasant ones, i.e. the desire for sensory comfort.

2. Ill will refers to the desire to punish, hurt or destroy. It includes sheer hatred of a person, or even a situation, and it can generate so much energy that it is both seductive and addictive. At the time, it always appears justified for such is its power that it easily corrupts our ability to judge fairly. It also includes ill will towards oneself, otherwise known as guilt, which denies oneself any possibility of happiness. In meditation, ill will can appear as dislike towards the meditation object itself, rejecting it so that one's attention is forced to wander elsewhere. Ill will is overcome by applying Metta, loving-kindness.

3. Sloth and torpor refers to that heaviness of body and dullness of mind, which drag one down into disabling inertia and thick depression. Thus, if one can learn to look at one's life or one's meditation, with a 'beginner's mind' one can see ever new angles and fresh possibilities. Similarly, one can develop delight in whatever one is doing by training one's perception to see the beautiful in the ordinary, thereby generating the interest, which avoids the half-death that is sloth and torpor.

4. Restlessness refers to a mind, which is like a monkey, always swinging on to the next branch, never able to stay long with anything. It is caused by the faultfinding state of mind, which cannot be satisfied with things as they are, and so has to move on to the promise of something better, forever just beyond. Restlessness is overcome by developing contentment. One learns the simple joy of being satisfied with little, rather than always wanting more. So be careful of 'wanting to get on with it' and instead learn how to rest in appreciative contentment. That way, the 'doing' disappears and the meditation blossoms.

5. Doubt refers to the disturbing inner questions at a time when one should be silently moving deeper. Doubt can question one's own ability "Can I do this?" or question the method "Is this the right way?" or even question the meaning "What is this?" It should be remembered that such questions are obstacles to meditation because they are asked at the wrong time and thus become an intrusion, obscuring one's clarity. Doubt in one's ability is overcome by nurturing self-confidence with a good teacher. A meditation teacher is like a coach who convinces the sports team that they can succeed. Experience also overcomes doubt about one's ability and also doubt whether this is the right path. A skillful meditator pursues a silent gathering of evidence, reviewing it only at the end to uncover its meaning. The end of doubt, in meditation, is described by a mind, which has full trust in the silence, and so doesn't interfere with any inner speech

Any problem, which arises in meditation, will be one of these Five Hindrances, or a combination. So, if one experiences any difficulty, use the scheme of the Five Hindrances as a 'check list' to identify the main problem. Then you will know the appropriate remedy, apply it carefully, and go beyond the obstacle into deeper meditation. Adapted from: Brahmavamso, 1999.

Appendix 3

Attitudinal Qualities of Mindfulness

Acceptance
Bringing openness to, kindness towards and welcoming experience just as it is in the moment.

Non-Judging
Being aware of the habit of constant judging and reacting and learning to step back from this. Assuming the stance of impartial witness to your experience.

Patience
A form of wisdom and recognition that things can only emerge and unfold in their own time.

Trust
Learning to develop a faith in the validity of our experience and an allowing of the process of bringing awareness to experience to unfold in its own way. Trusting your own wisdom.

Non-Striving
In meditation there is no other goal other than to be yourself. Non-Striving is an attitude of willingness to allow the present to be the way it is without trying to fix things, compete, achieve, force, be something or somewhere else.

Letting go
Seeing the possibility of moving out of the perpetual human tendency to want to hold on to the pleasant and get rid of the unpleasant. This is an attitude of non-grasping.

Beginners Mind
An experts mind is full whereas a beginners mind always has the space in which to learn. Keeping this attitude allows the mind to be willing to see everything as if for the first time with fresh curiosity and vitality.

Source: Kabat-Zinn, 2001

Shapiro (2008) highlighted the dynamic process of **intention** (focus, awareness, clarity), **attitude** (cultivation of the above attitudes) leading to taking skillful **action** - all of which lead to positive outcomes and increased wellbeing.

Appendix 4

Reflective Meditation Journal **Sunday 15th January to Thursday 23rd February 2012** **Observations**	**Reflections and analysis on 21/4/2012 and 28/4/2012**
Day 1 15/1/2012 Sunday Setting the scene and 'taking my seat' Opening ceremony. Emphasis on becoming awakened through a personal and intimate relationship with a 'higher self'. I feel a little resistant to this grand statement and prefer the Buddhist term 'True Nature'. Remembering the Importance of setting intention with grace and humility and preparing mind and body to awaken to compassion and a flourishing of the heart. Eventually, letting go of expectation, judgement and thinking, I had a sense of anticipation, yet calmness and steadiness.	'Taking my seat' Letting go of thinking, expectation and judging. Opening to possibility
Day 2 16/1/2012 Monday Reflecting on a dream I remembered from the previous night where a Buddha Rupa was in the middle of an empty silent space and realising in the dream the paradox that silence is a universal language. Initially sitting with anxious feelings with the intention to not struggle to fix it but allow the feelings to subside. Aware of the noise and busyness outside and also inside. Focussing on the present moment, on breathing, on settling and the dynamic process involved with gently bringing attention back from thinking to breathing. Awareness of moving beyond thought and being aware of a clear(ing), a limitless expansiveness within.	Power of silence Awareness, settling, moving beyond thought of silence
Day 3 17/1/2012 Tuesday Moments of 'letting go'. Awareness of the sound of my heart beating – feeling gratitude for this and reminded of Thich Nhat Hanh's expressed joy of being alive "every morning when we wake up, we have twenty-four brand-new hours to live. What a precious gift! (Nhat Hanh, 1991, p.5). Feeling cradled in Refuge. Noticing the ebb and flow of thought. The picture of the cormorants standing unwavering, facing into the wind, rain and waves of a storm comes to mind. A great encouragement for the presentation tomorrow.	Letting go. Connecting with life. Feeling rooted. Able to face discomfort.
Day 4 18/1/2012 Wednesday Short 20 minute sitting. Moments of stillness melting tension away into the breath. Strong intrusive thoughts that I label worry, predicting and planning. Staying with these rather than trying to do something with them (escalate, suppress) allowed them to feel bearable, that I could tolerate their presence, they were only thoughts! Awareness of how familiar they are which helped me remember that I could do what I needed to do alongside these thoughts and feelings. Focus on the breath brought release.	Acceptance. Allowing. Not identifying with thoughts. Breathwork bringing release.

Day 5 19/1/2012 Thursday Meditating alone in the morning, nothing arose within me, a neutral experience. Sunrise outside. Evening meditation with group – sense of being 'in communion'. Emphasis on the simplicity of the teaching and the practice and the opportunity of others. Strong sense of commitment. Trust issues over intentions of a new group member.	Importance of the Sangha
Day 6 20/1/2012 Friday Contemplation on the many aspects of Dukka, of sources of suffering and unsatisfactoryness. Feeling of disconnection with this in terms of intellectually understanding the concept that seeing it [suffering]for what it is (temporary, changing and not self) rather than identifying with it, lead to liberation. At the same time acknowledgement that the practice of this is not easy given the conditioning, reactivity and defences that are involved in being human. Nearing the end of the sitting I realised I had not judged myself but had been compassionate in relation this human experience.	Acknowledgement of struggle. Compassion towards human experience
Day 7 21/1/2012 Saturday Reflecting on an audio recording of Lun Por Sumedho speaking of attainment and ego. Helpful to me to remain mindful of striving. Also acknowledging the pressure of expectation and achieving in relation to this practice. Compassion practice, sitting in a hotel facing St. Thomas Hospital London. Aware of contrasting and multiple worlds of wellness and disease as well as internal and external suffering.	Awareness of striving. Compassion practice to others
Day 8 22/1/2012 Sunday Tiredness. Disturbed practice, feeling irritation, frustration, and aversion. Cut short my sitting – shouted at my Burmese cat for incessantly meowing, telling off partner for interrupting me "for no good reason"!. Aware simultaneously of my reactivity adding suffering to suffering.	Hindrance of ill will towards self and others
Day 9 23/1/2012 Monday Release of tension and tiredness within me following yoga practice and sitting, allowing mind and body to relax, rest and enjoy the silence and stillness.	Stress reduction through physical mindful practice
Day 10 24/1/2012 Tuesday Late night session following a guided meditation on Bodhisattva Practice focussing on opening the heart. A little ChiKung to stay awake. Warmth and gentleness felt in mind and body.	Practicing with gentleness and kindness
Day 11 25/1/2012 Wednesday Renewal. Feeling renewed energy of practice and commitment, receiving loving encouragement from Winter Feast email. Renewal – of commitment, of practice, of energy. Encouragement from the WFFS community. Act of kindness, to self and others – Offering of running a free yoga session: mind changing to calm and unflustered, body feeling more connected, more fluid.	Values, kindness, intention and action. Community of practice / Sangha
Day 12 26/1/2012 Thursday	Walking practice.

Walking meditation 1 and ½ hours – a real sense of engaging in an act of kindness to myself. Feeling energised. Thich Nhat Hanh – Kissing the earth with my feet.	Drawing in inspiration from TNH teaching
D13 27/1/2012 Friday Mind 'shouting', relentless. Muscles in face, neck and shoulders – rigid. Taking time to soften body and calm mind, allowing a sense of light and warmth into the interior. Breathing in and out of the heart area, bathing in soothing warm breath. Remembering and feeling humility – this allowing inner connection and then contemplation on what is needed. Space found to listen.	Contrasting experience with previous day. Being present and aware, calming mind and body. Moving from Samatha to Vipassana
D14 28/1/2012 Saturday Contrast between the 'natural state' of being happy and compassionate and the 'striving' that arises from the 'trance of unworthiness' (Brach) - a delusional state. The importance of: "cooling the flames of craving, anger and fear reduce the stress, anxiety and tension of modern living".	Awareness of striving and the suffering caused by this.
D15 29/1/2012 Sunday The act of sitting is the most important moment of practice – it signifies intention and commitment. This provides the conditions for focus and consistency. Once the seat is taken, this allows a sense of possibility that one [body and mind] is inter-related and 'included' in the practice. When this relationship is realized on an individual level, the sense of separateness reduces and a deeper quality of awareness can arise which recognizes that a wider view – that of connectedness within and at the same time externally, with all things. Thich Nhat Hanh describes this as 'interbeing' REF. The 'I', self that we construct is an illusion; "a figment of our imagination… the goal is to become who you are. Which according to Buddhist views is concerned with realizing our natural state of loving kindness and compassion, that all people, without exception have these qualities.	The significance of taking a seat – enabling connectedness both within and without – Interbeing.
D16 30/1/2012 Monday Wondering whether contemplative inquiry is similar/the same as Vipassana. Is it different or complementary? Awareness of the 'to do' list running through my mind and loss of awareness of the present. Agitation and aversion experienced.	Working with hindrances
D17 31/1/2012 Tuesday Turmoil, bordering on despair – struggle with non-acceptance/aversion relating the Blood Pressure issue. Recognition of these mindstates creating problems and adding more suffering to the actual area of suffering and unsatisfactoriness. Resistance = anger with my body, resulting in punishment and not taking caring measures to help it (remembering Christopher Germer's piece on this) Remembering that loving kindness and compassion are aspects of human nature that need cultivation, something	Power of 'The Immeasurables' Loving Kindness. Creating space for skillful action

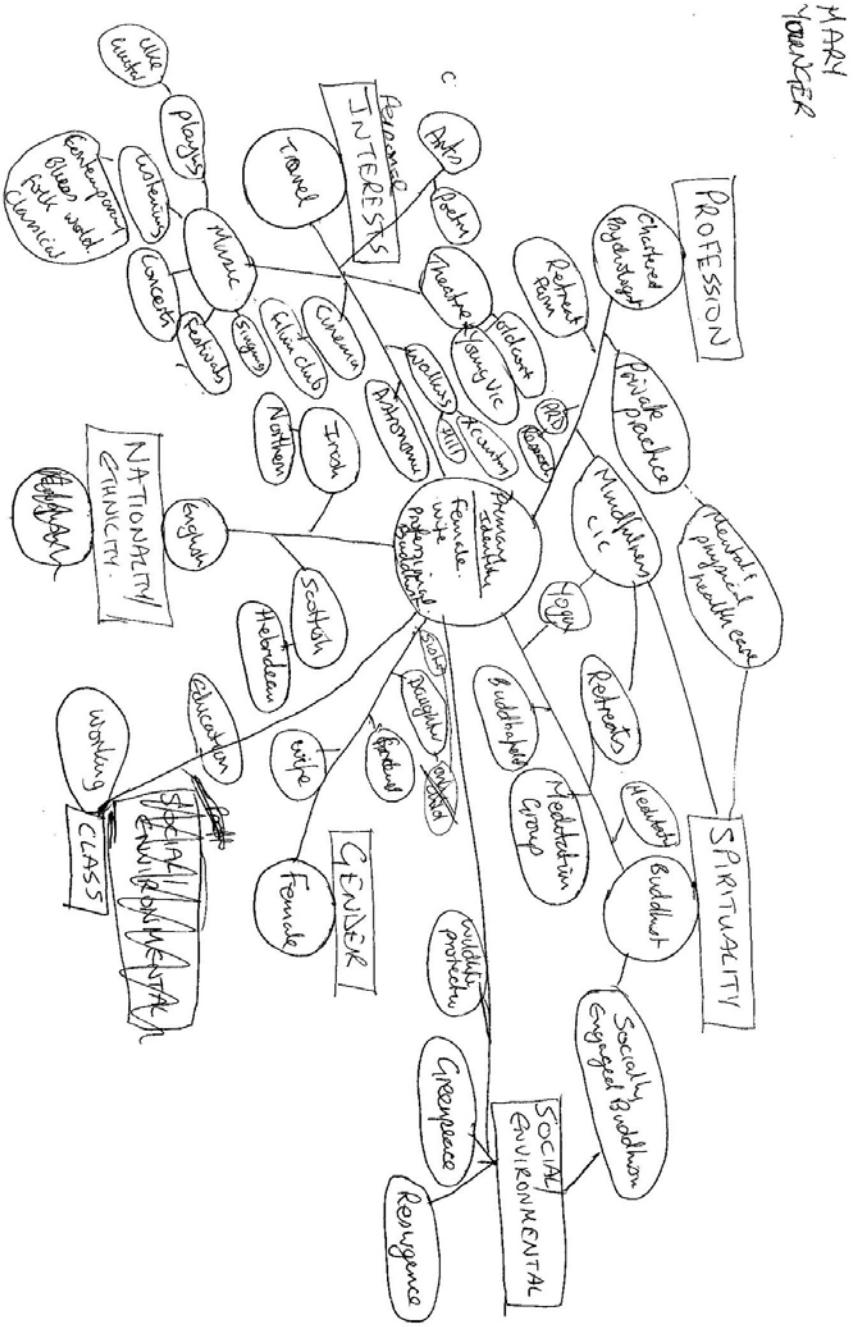
that we add to drop by drop into a bucket that gradually fills. LK was a practice offered by Buddha to the monks as an antidote to fear (Salzberg)	
D18 1/2/2012 Wednesday No formal meditation but feeling the benefit from offering time to help partner. Aware of the bounty from generosity.	Benefits of generosity
D19 2/2/2012 Thursday Informal practice throughout the day, even though there was a lot of 'doing' feeling a sense of being mindful, present and calm – not struggling. Short sitting, simple, enjoying stillness.	More 'Being' rather than mindless doing.
D20 3/2/2012 Friday Mindful eating: sensory overload. Deeply aware of the abundance and blessings present in the life I have. Client with eating disorder comes to mind.	Experiencing and recognizing the benefits of Eating Meditation. Taking this into therapy.
D21 4/2/2012 Saturday 'Living with ease'….. How? If I can't put this into practice, how can I offer this way of being to others. Morning meditation group – allowing emotion to arise [it is already there]. In awareness being able to respond to feelings of compassion, rather than with habit mind. Seeing more clearly the changing nature of things. Being able to see beauty amidst suffering and turmoil. Reminded of the meaning of Samatha: Peaceful Dwelling and Vipassana: clear sight.	Learning to respond with compassion to whatever arises
D22 5/2/2012 Sunday What about the 'now'? Why is it so difficult? Agitation over another interruption in my formal practice, then feeling guilty and judging myself over setting a bad example. Struggling with the concept of equanimity which would suggest that both experiences of meditation (pleasant) and interruption (unpleasant) be treated in a similar way. This feels simply beyond me. Evening meditation: full moon – offering clear light, then noticing how this changes when clouds obscure, changing the perspective, the light is still present even if it can't be seen. Awareness of being alive on this blue planet, insignificant yet miraculous and extraordinary. Looking directly at another planet in our solar system at this moment in time.	Clinging/grasping onto an 'ideal' view of what meditation should be and in doing so causing suffering/ unsatisfatoriness Connecting with being on this Earth and part of our Solar System. Connecting with something much bigger than self. Two very different experiences in one day.
D23 6/2/2012 Monday Walking meditation in the snow 1 ½ hours. Moments of blissful quiet and stillness. Mindfulness: awareness of the ground below, sky above, cool wind on face, birds singing. Evening sitting. Many moments of scattered mind: feeling lonely, sad, anxious. Sitting with deep worry over test	Connectedness with the environment. Connecting and allowing / accepting

results tomorrow, not knowing, feeling very vulnerable. Tune to Sting song running through my mind – how fragile we are. Tears.	strong emotion. Feeling compassion.
D24 7/2/2012 Tuesday No sitting this morning – far too tense. Evening sitting, noticing expectation of 'should' feel happy following results this am that were not too bad. Reality is I am tired and emotionally drained, interruptions again leaving feelings of despair, feeling frustrated, impossible. Feeling torn; wanting to meet needs of partner as well as my own. Tried to accept and go with the flow but felt weary of it all. On paper this all looks easy enough but it is hard. Turning to TNH for support, his encouragement to engage in 'conscious breathing' (p.12) and less thinking because most of thought is about past/present/future and mainly useless. Following the breath can help bring calmness and greater awareness of each moment – thus allowing connection with present life. 'Conscious breathing' can also be practiced anywhere therefore one doesn't always need to sit on the meditation cushion! ALL IS PRACTICE ☺ Highlighting my striving to 'get it right/perfect' and that I need to let go of this. Happy elated – observing this and smiling at the 'monkey mind'.	Feeling pressure of relationship. Remembering the importance of viewing this as part of the practice. Realisation.
D25 8/2/2012 Wednesday Creating space and encouraging focus. The intention of doing this in a morning sitting, just for 20 minutes, helps set the tempo and tone of the day. Clearer on action that I am choosing to take and not take. Also the choices involved in the attitudes I adopt.	Making clear choices.
D26 9/2/2012 Thursday Reflecting on private practice, somehow I need to reduce clients to 9 per week, I feel I am walking head on into a strong gale, trying to push on to get through the client workload. Recognising the passivity in my observations and that skillful action is needed. Very inspiring article in newsletter from Winter feast about the Centre for Subtle Activism, thinking about this in meditation and moved by the power of their action.	Responding rather than reacting.
D27 10/2/2012 Friday Feeling sadness for friends in difficulty, not sure how best to support. Sometimes it is not about 'doing' but being with… Renewal and beginning again. Remembering Herring Gull picture: Patience and persistence.	Being with uncertainly. Preparedness to 'be with' rather than 'do with' Drawing inspiration from picture
D28 11/2/2012 Saturday Extended morning meditation, focusing on breath and body. Felt soothing and calming, sense of appreciation of body	

during body scan. Towards end of meditation strong focus fell on my hands, in particular pain in fingers. Two very strong memories came to the fore: similarities with my hands and my Mum's arthritic hands. Then looking at my hands – seeing them cradled in each other – took me directly to my Father's death bed and holding his hand. A painful yet loving bolt from the blue, felt quite shaken by this, needing to be quiet, cancelled lunch in town.	Strong associations and emotions arising from body scan.
D29 12/2/2012 Sunday Curiosity about the variability of experience during one sitting and across many sittings. Remembering something that Christina Feldman said at the Insight Mediation Retreat at Gregynog 23-26 June 2006 Pupil: master, how do I get wisdom Master: Experience Pupil: how do I get experience Master: bad experience	Remembering the teaching of observing all phenomena as either: Pleasant Neutral Unpleasant Valuing experience – of all kinds.
D30 13/2/2012 Monday Morning meditation: strong feelings arising in terms of a need to act. Thoughts about how to communicate the why and how of 'living with ease' – a website, journal and newsletter that brings together psychological and Buddhist practice.	Recognising that this is not just an individual Endeavour but for the benefit of all beings.
D31 14/2/2012 Tuesday Identity, continuing from yesterday, wondering who I am: a Buddhist who is a psychologist or visa versa. Does it matter overall, does it matter in particular contexts? How does it feel one way or the other? Tessa Muncey asked: Can these aspects of self be held gently/lightly and openly or held tightly a close. What is the interaction between the two?	Multiple identities. Integration Willingness to allow.
D32 15/2/2012 Wednesday Discomfort and disappointment can be the starting points at which opportunity, learning, awareness and even change may be found. Hearing this in my own mind and feeling ambivalence/aversion.	Perhaps aversion due to wanting things to be other than what they are. Non-acceptance.
D33 16/2/2012 Thursday "Failing miserably"…. Family commitments competing for attention, sources of frustration – how hard can this be.. when I say leave me in peace for 40 minutes – why is this not remembered for more than one day! See TNH Miracle of mindfulness…	Experiencing all the hindrances at once. Feeling overwhelmed and frustrated – see also above comment!
D34 17/2/2012 Friday The song sung by Barbara Streisand kept coming into my head Do you know where you're going to? Do you like the things that life is showing you? Where are you going to? Do you know...?	Searching for clarity, with curiosity.

Do you get What you're hoping for When you look behind you There's no open doors What are you hoping for? Do you know...?	
D35 18/2/2012 Saturday Mind wondering about perceptions of me by clients, meditation group, family, friends. What I do to try and manage/control these things? Raises the question: does this compromise authenticity? Yes… when I lack the courage to be myself.	Worry and doubt. Insight from inquiry
D36 19/2/2012 Sunday Linking with yesterday as I was aware of the irony of the feeling of anxiety arising and tension in my body in relation to creating a distinct page on my website relating to self-compassion and living with ease. Found myself smiling at this	Moving to a commitment to action.
D37 20/2/2012 Monday Longer meditation allowing time to be more aware of the moment and the gentle balance between spaciousness and focus Meditation on Thay's Five mindfulness Trainings prompted by powerful interview in Guardian today	Noticing the shifting of focus and attention Interbeing
D38 21/2/2012 Tuesday Staying present: reducing the amount of comparisons made i.e. good/bad, worse/better, lessening time spent on the past or worrying into the future. Dhamapada 353 running through my mind: Let go of the past, Let go of the future, Let go of the present, And cross over to that shore That is free of suffering	Buddhist Teaching acting as a guide.
D39 22/2/2012 Wednesday How we respond to ourselves/our bodies in meditation is symptomatic/representative of how we are with things in the outside world.	Deep awareness of the parallels on a intra and interpersonal levels
D40 23/2/2012 Thursday Powerfully aware of the deep wish and need to cultivate loving kindness and patience, treating ourselves firstly with gentle respect and care - as we would be with anything we love and cherish and want to nurture - exploring, listening, tending.	Awareness of importance of quality and attitudes that accompany practice.

Appendix 5:
Original version of Culturegram



Sample of web page 'Compassionate Living' on www.my-therapy.org.uk

Appendix 6

Intentions: **Developing community**
Sharing experiences and resources
Provide information on retreats and events
Cultivating a deeper connection with ourselves, each other, all beings and Planet Earth.

This page is dedicated to the ever unfolding process of learning to 'Live with Ease' through Loving Kindness, Compassion, Joy and Equanimity. I feel that in order to live well and with ease we need to learn to develop self-compassion, it is a deep act of kindness from which all benefit. So, what is self-compassion? Professor Kristin Neff describes self-compassion as being able to experience warmth, kindness and understanding for oneself, comprising of three components: 'self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness'. Self compassion benefits us individually and collectively; "Compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else" (Armstrong, 2011, p.6). Consider how compassionate you are towards yourself but asking how much of the following attitudes are present in your life?

Acceptance, Non-Judging, Patience, Trust, Non-Striving, Letting go, Beginners Mind

They may all be present in abundance, but if like most of us, you feel they are in short supply, then they need to be practiced in order to develop compassionate living. The Threefold Way lies at the heart of this way of being, it encapsulates the more detailed guidance for skillful living and wellbeing contained in the 'Noble Eightfold Path. To lean more you may want to take a look at:
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/waytoend.html

Ethics: To live one's life in a way that helps, rather than causes harm. Cultivating social/environmental, physical, psychological and spiritual well-being for all beings.
Meditation: Transforming the mind through meditation practice.
Wisdom: Understanding through listening, reflection, and meditation and experiencing insight into the reality and true nature of things.

Your experiences, comments and questions are warmly welcomed, contact me through mary.younger@talk21.com, MY Counselling & Psychology Services LLP, my-therapy.org.uk

NEWS, WORKSHOPS AND RETREATS
The next day Retreat, focusing on developing self-compassion, will be held on Friday 7th September 2012. See 'Retreats' on main menu for details. On the first Saturday and third Thursday of each month a meditation group meets at the beautiful Retreat Farm in Little Baddow, Essex. See 'Meditation sessions' on main menu for details.

Appendix 7a

Mindfulness Meditation

Half-Day Retreat

Focussing on Self-Compassion

Friday 27th April 2012 - 10am to 2pm

Welcome from Mary

Lying down meditation: Body Scan

Sitting meditation

Mindful movement

Lunch

Standing Meditation and Chi Kung

Sitting meditation

Close

What is self-compassion? Professor Kristin Neff describes self-compassion as being able to experience warmth, kindness and understanding for oneself, comprising of three components: 'self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness'. Self compassion benefits us individually and collectively; "Compassion is aptly summed up in the Golden Rule, which asks us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain, and then refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever, to inflict that pain on anybody else" (Armstrong, 2011, p.6).

Appendix 7b

Half-Day Retreat: Friday 27th April 2012 - 10am to 2pm

Cultivating Self-Compassion

Most of us find it easier to feel compassion for others rather than for ourselves but we need to learn how to develop this and practice throughout our lives. "Give yourself permission to meet your own needs, recognizing that this will not only enhance your quality of life, it will also enhance your ability to be there for those that rely on you". (Kristin Neff, 2011)

You can begin by asking yourself the following, forming self-compassion intentions and then acting upon them:

- What do I appreciate about myself?
- Of the things that I do and take in, what nourishes me?
- What energises me, makes me feel calm and centred?
- What increases my sense of actually being alive and present, rather than merely existing?
- Of the things that I do and take in, what depletes me? How can I learn to approach the things that at present I find depleting in a different way? To practise being fully present with them, even if I find them boring or unpleasant – instead of judging them or wishing they were not there?
- What decreases my sense of actually being alive and present, makes me feel I am merely existing, or worse?
- How can I consciously choose to increase the time and effort I give to the things that nurture me, and decrease the time and effort I give to the things that deplete me?

There is more chance that we will skilfully respond to the above questions if we cultivate....

- Compassion
- Appreciation
- Gratitude
- Savouring
- Self Kindness
- Mindfulness attitudes

Appendix 8

Mindfulness Meditation

Day Retreat

Cultivating Self-Compassion

Friday 7th September 2012

9.45pm for a 10am start, finishing at 4.00pm

at Retreat Farm, Tofts Chase, Little Baddow, Chelmsford, Essex, CM3 4BZ

This full day Retreat offers more time to explore and an opportunity to deepen Mindfulness and Compassion practice. It is aimed at all who have attended previous Mindfulness Half-Day Retreats and who are developing their own personal practice.

The intention for the day is to develop experience and understanding of mindfulness and compassion practice through meditation, mindful movement and personal reflection.

- Come in loose comfortable clothing, bring warm socks, a shawl or blanket and cushion to sit upon. You will also need to bring along a notebook and pen
- There will be a Walking Meditation so if you choose to walk outside you will need to bring wish to bring outdoor walking shoes, coat and possibly an umbrella - keep an eye on the weather forecast.
- There will be an opportunity to take part in Mindful Yoga and Qigong, we have some mats at the Retreat but if you have your own it would be helpful to bring it.
- Various teas, coffee, fruit and biscuits will be provided but **you will need to bring a vegetarian lunch with you.**
- **The cost of the Retreat** is £60. This event is eligible for CPD purposes

To request a booking form and ask any questions contact Mary Younger on 07850 702640 or mary.younger@talk21.com

The facilitator for the Retreat is Mary Younger; she practices and has trained in Mindfulness and meditation (both personally and professionally) since 2004; each year attending many workshops, retreats and teacher training in the UK, Europe and in the US.

Appendix 18

Exploring the reality of putting Self-Compassion into practice, from a First-Person Perspective.

From the very beginning to the very end, pointing to our own hearts to discover what is true isn't just a matter of honesty but also of compassion and respect for what we see.

Pema Chödrön (1997, p.73)

Paper 3 in partial fulfilment of the
Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology

Cambridge Theological Federation and
Anglia Ruskin University

Mary Younger SID: 1015792

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Exploring the reality of putting Self-Compassion into practice, from a First-Person Perspective.

Abstract

This paper is the proposal to conduct research into the lived experience of developing self-compassion within my personal, professional and spiritual contexts. The growing body of research into self-compassion has identified key components (kindness, common humanity, mindfulness), demonstrated efficacy as a clinical intervention, identified a role in combatting therapist burn-out as well as contributing to increased self-care, resilience and wellbeing. The proposed research intends to explore: what it means to be self-compassionate, why it is important, how it contributes to life, work and wellbeing, how it is sustained and how best to encourage others to value and cultivate self-compassion. The intention is also to highlight the benefits of incorporating self-compassion into the heart of training, supervision and continuing professional development for all involved in psychological therapies.

A first-person approach will be taken, comprising of contemplative inquiry, reflexive practice and autoethnography. The research will be conducted over a nine-month period, recorded through a reflective journal using a narrative format and analysis. The rationale for adopting this approach is that it provides an opportunity to deeply investigate the inner and outer phenomenology of self-compassion; including resistance, hindrances, enablers to its development and also discovering how to weave this practice into all areas of life. In particular, exploring how integrating self-compassion into my work as a Chartered Counselling Psychologist impacts upon and benefits both my clients and myself. In taking this approach it is hoped that the research will further contribute to the existing body of self-compassion research by offering an additional perspective to those provided by the traditional third-person quantitative and qualitative approaches. Indeed, the research sets out to argue that self-compassion cannot be meaningfully explored without immersion into the inner life, through the inner science of contemplative inquiry.

1. Introduction

1.1. The research process from Paper 1 to Paper 3: Sharpening the focus of the Professional Doctorate (D.Prof)

This third paper in Stage One of the D.Prof emerges following an intermission of one year throughout 2013. Needless to say, this break was not part of the original plan nor was it welcomed at the outset but it has become a very important part of the process. This time allowed me to regain my strength, resilience, inspiration and sharpen focus and now the D.Prof feels like a privilege rather than a burden. A self-compassion retreat in August 2012 resulted in an emotional high but the demands and difficulties of the following four months gave rise to a painful awareness that the depth of my practice and connection felt on retreat was a world away from my day-to-day experience and that of doing the D.Prof. Feelings of disillusionment and disconnection arose personally, professionally and spiritually. I could intellectualise and talk about self-compassion and wellbeing, but I did not feel it. This generated storms of self-criticism, judgement and the 'old chestnut': fear of failing… self-compassion could barely get a foothold.

The intermission year was spent tending to my internal and external landscape by being playful, fooling around (which unlocks the imagination, Kay, 2014), [peacefully] protesting on environmental and social justice issues, taking care of the body and mind through eating well, dancing, walking, physical exercise, meditation, mindfulness, and drawing vast encouragement and guidance from Buddhist teachings (Dharma). The fruits of these 'reconnecting' activities became apparent during a silent 5 day retreat in October 2013 where I realised that I felt physically, mentally and emotionally well; my mind was clearer, open, calm and my body felt strong and more relaxed.

On reflection, the difference between my past and current patterns of responding was my willingness to listen and be aware of these mind-states [storms]. Rather than engage in aversion or overcompensation, I was more able to accept that these negative experiences were as much part of the practice as the positive or neutral states. This acceptance enabled me to gradually turn more readily and openly towards self-compassion where the aim is not to practice to feel good (although this is often the outcome) but to practice self-compassion when you don't feel so good (Germer, 2009; Neff, 2011).

At the end of 2013 I realised that during the 12 month intermission I had moved through the three phases of self-compassion, defined by Germer (2009) as “infatuation, disillusionment and true acceptance - culminating in self-compassion for its own sake” (p.222). My early experience of the positive effects of cultivating self-compassion generated considerable energy and enthusiasm. I felt better and, relationally and therapeutically there were positive effects too, all of which was very compelling, but this led to ‘infatuation’. However, life unfolds, worries, pressures, fears, unpleasant events and even more unpleasant mental states proliferate and ‘disillusionment’ can easily emerge. It could be viewed as naïve to expect self-compassion to be a protective force guarding against such inevitabilities, but it is very human to hope in this way. Becoming able to see and accept that this is all part of the lived experience is fundamental to wellbeing.

I used the word transformation in the titles of Papers 1 and 2 and I am reconsidering the wisdom of this because false expectations could be created. The trap in stating transformation is the emphasis on change, whereas a core component of self-compassion is acceptance. This means acceptance of all that arises, of all aspects of self and of all facets of experience. Therefore for the use of transformation to be appropriate in this context, all experiences need to be included. I am not saying that transformation does not occur as a consequence of developing self-compassion but the process will fail if that is the goal and disillusionment will arise. The third phase is ‘True Acceptance’, which involves allowing rather than pushing away, letting go rather than holding on. The intention throughout is to proceed with awareness, acceptance and loving kindness, which are all inherent in self-compassion (Neff, 2003). In summary, Chris Germer states:

> In the infatuation stage, we have the underlying wish to cure what ails us. The disillusionment phase calls an abrupt halt to that agenda. In the true acceptance phase, we care for ourselves because life is hard and a merciful response seems the only intelligent option (Germer, 2009. p. 226-227).

The whole process of arriving at this Paper has resulted in reviewing my motivations, aims and intentions and shifting the focus from “*cure* to *care”* (Germer, 2009 p.226). In particular, there is increased clarity with regard to my expectations and ego; my aim is not to become an ‘expert’ in Buddhism, a Buddhist intellectual or indeed a theologian.

I found the internal pressure from my ego to be a model Buddhist utterly oppressive, incongruent and alienating on both intra and interpersonal levels. In addition, what emerged from Paper 2 was how important, yet challenging, it is to live authentically and wholeheartedly, which requires fully integrating the various aspects of my personal, professional and spiritual life (Brown, 2010). So, with increased clarity, my intentions are to bring my authentic voice into the research to deeply explore and communicate the experience and meaning of living compassionately. On this basis I feel that I can proceed with the D.Prof.

2. Research Contexts: Personal, Professional, Spiritual and Professional Doctorate (Theology and Research).

Figure 1: Research Contexts

2.1. Personal and Professional Contexts

Figure 1. Illustrates the range and interconnectivity of the contexts within which research into self-compassion will take place. In my personal context I am a Western European female, born in England in 1963, and connected to my Scottish and Irish roots through my parents. I have been married for 25 years and have no children (unexplained infertility). My values, beliefs and philosophy emanate from the time and culture in which I live, from my relationships, community and through spiritual, social, political and environmental engagement.

My professional context since 1996 is that of scientist-practitioner, as a Chartered Counselling Psychologist and registered Psychotherapist. I set up in Private Practice in 2005 where I work therapeutically with individuals and couples and supervise other psychologists and psychotherapists. Self-compassion is essential in my work and it is hard/painful when there is a lack of its presence. Even with an established mediation and Buddhist practice to support me, I struggle sometimes, consequently I am keenly aware how much harder is it for clients and yet how important is it for them to engage in this process as best they can.

2.2. Spiritual Context

My spiritual context, since 2004, is as a lay Buddhist within the Theravada school of Buddhism. In my Buddhist practice I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, this involves daily meditation, study, yatra (walking mediation and pilgrimage), retreats and festivals. It is far beyond the scope of this proposed research, or indeed my ability, to consider all Buddhist doctrine or Dharma, therefore focus will be on primary teachings of The Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the 'Threefold' training in development of wisdom (paññā), virtue (sila) and concentration (samadhi). Reference will be made to specific discourses (Anguttara, Majjhima, Samyutta and Sutta Nipata Nikaya) in the Pali cannon (Tipitaka): in particular, the Dammacakkappavattana Sutta (The Four Noble Truths), Satipatthana Sutta (Mindfulness teachings), Kalama Sutta and Karaniya Metta Sutta (Bodhi, 2005).

2.3. The Context of Practical Theology

The main criteria for embarking on the D.Prof were to be able to deepen understanding and experience of Buddhist teaching and explore the process of integrating my Buddhist practice with my profession of psychology. Given my professional and spiritual contexts, it was therefore somewhat of a surprise that it was in a Theological Federation where I found my academic home but here I felt I could include all of my contexts in the research rather 'splitting' between psychology or Buddhist studies. Initially, I found the terms 'Theology' and 'Practical Theology' problematic, specifically in relation to the nontheistic position of Buddhism.

However, when Rita Gross (2000) described her aims as a Buddhist Theologian I began to see the consensus between Practical Theology and applied Buddhist Theology as well as an illustration of Buddhist praxis:

> To bring my experiential knowledge of Buddhist thought and practice into discussions of contemporary issues and problems, to work with the collective wisdom, compassion and skilfulness of Buddhist traditions (p.55).

Furthermore, in relation to Practical Theology, Buddhist teachings and praxis also meet the six criteria for 'Authentic Spirituality' proposed by McCarthy in 'Spirituality in a Postmodern Era' (2000), namely: Contemplative Awareness, Effective action in the world, Community, Disposition of openness, Non-dualistic thinking and Discernment and skilful living. All of which could form the basis of a Practical Applied Buddhist Theology.

2.4. Context as Researcher

I have been involved in social, educational and psychological research since 1996. My philosophy is that the research process must include the necessary commitment and discipline involved in contemplative and scholarly activity. Research also needs to embody self-compassion, which includes elements such as playfulness, loving-kindness and nurturing rather than harshness, self-criticism, doubt and unrelenting standards, which I can so easily default to. It also involves openness and connection to what is present rather than distraction and aversion and very importantly authenticity: being true to who I really am, accepting all my human limitations, and strengths, rather than trying to live up to a perfect, performing ideal.

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Current Landscape

Research into self-compassion has grown considerably, in 2003 there were two published papers relating to self-compassion, ten years later there are over 200 (Neff, 2013). However, as I found when conducting a literature search for Paper 1 in June 2011, a search in January 2014 revealed the majority of self-compassion research still emanates from the USA with focus remaining on the student and clinical populations and therapeutic interventions.

Extensive research by Kristin Neff (from 2003 onwards) established psychological constructs and components of self-compassion: 'self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness', (Neff, 2003a, 2009). The research has shown that experience of generating these components engenders appreciation, warmth, kindness and understanding for oneself as well as a willingness to accept self as being human (fallible, flawed, vulnerable). Research has also identified that developing self-compassion raises awareness of and genuine concern for one's own distress and an ability to tolerate this without self-criticism or judgment. Additionally, self-compassion increases motivation, creativity, resilience and life satisfaction, and importantly, reduces levels of depression and anxiety (Neff, 2003, Neff, 2004; Gilbert, 2005; Germer, 2009; Germer and Siegel, 2012). In my Paper 1 (2011), I emphasised Neff's (2004) statement that self-compassion "cannot be reduced to Mindfulness" (p.29) because I believe that self-compassion entails many aspects and applications both therapeutically and in life generally. Subsequent research (a random controlled trial and comparative outcome studies) has demonstrated that the effects on wellbeing of focussed self-compassion were twice as strong as Mindfulness training and also that self-compassion had stronger predictive capability in relation to life-satisfaction and happiness (Baer et al, 2012; Germer and Neff, 2013; Neff and Dahm 2013).

Overall, quantitative and qualitative research over the past ten years has established the importance of self-compassion and consistently demonstrated that self-compassion generates a desire to love, forgive, care for and create wellbeing for oneself. However, whilst there has been an increase in qualitative research to add to the large body of quantitative research of self-report questionnaires and measures, qualitative research has in the main remained wedded to semi-structured interviews and focus groups. It appears that only relatively recently has the subject area been researched from a phenomenological perspective. Germer and Neff (2013) used case study methodology to explore the experience of 'Brian', a participant in their newly devised 8-week Mindful Self Compassion training. The findings, from an interview with Brian a year after attending the course, meaningfully illuminated his process of learning self-compassion and highlighted how he felt empowered to develop his own strategies for wellbeing, which endured rather than petering out after the course ended. This paper, however, was still from a third-person perspective and focus was on client rather than practitioner experience.

For people working in the care professions, developing self-compassion has been found to foster resilience and counter empathy fatigue and burn-out (Neff, 2004; Germer, 2009; Ricard, 2009; Klimecki and Singer, 2011). Therefore, from a therapeutic practitioner perspective it is important that research speaks clearly and directly of the process and experience of fellow professionals. Patsiopolous and Buchanan (2011) used narrative inquiry to explore the impact practicing self-compassion had on trainee counsellors. They interviewed 15 counsellors face-to-face or by telephone, their findings make a strong case for the importance of self-care, including self-compassion, and emphasise the benefits of formally integrating such practices into training. Participants' wished to hear about the direct experience of qualified therapists in relation to developing self-compassion and also for contemplative practices to be included in the curriculum. It appears that in the USA there are courses that explicitly include contemplative practice, but to date I have not found any in the UK.

In relation to learning from other professionals' direct experience, currently in my field of Counselling Psychology, I have not found a first-person analytical account of the experience of becoming and being a self-compassionate practitioner. A first-person narrative account by Maris (2009) was informative on her experience of the development and benefits of mindfulness training on a personal and professional level (counsellor training). The paper also demonstrated the effectiveness of building structured self-care activity into counsellor training, which benefited both therapist and client. However, the main issues concerning this autobiographical account were that it lacked any clear methodological rationale, critical reflection or analysis. Christopher and Maris (2010) carried out a literature review of qualitative research on integrating mindfulness into therapist training as self-care, this provided a clear account of the benefits of cultivating this way of being. Nevertheless, I would have valued learning more about the authors' first-hand experiences of such development, which were not disclosed in this work.

The Barnard and Curry (2011) review of empirical research into the conceptualization, correlations and interventions of self-compassion highlighted a consistent relationship with wellbeing and its efficacy as an intervention. They recommended further empirical research into construct validity and measurement, and advocated exploring other approaches to understand self-compassion such as experience sampling. Whilst not an endorsement for autoethnography, this hints at valuing or at least including subjective experience.

The literature I have considered highlights how self-compassion, mindfulness and contemplative practice contributes to wellness for both client and therapist as well as on a personal level. However, the literature also indicates that there is a gap, and need for, first-person accounts of the experience of developing and integrating self-compassion into professional practice.

3.2. Research Rationale and Questions to consider

Given the gaps highlighted in the literature discussed in the previous section, I am proposing to conduct a contemplative inquiry into the development of self-compassion from a first-person perspective that will reside within the framework of an autoethnographic approach and reflexive practice. Contemplative inquiry will involve meditation and mindfulness, autoethnography will encompass the social, historical, cultural and political spheres and critical reflexive practice will be integral to the whole process. My philosophical position is social constructionist and, as a social psychologist, I believe that we are situated in and shaped by all of the above areas. Therefore, they need to be incorporated into all areas of investigation.

The main questions that my research will consider are:

- In what ways is self-compassion important personally, professionally and spiritually?
- What does it mean to be a self-compassionate practitioner?
- How is it developed and sustained?
- What are the barriers to development?
- How can others be encouraged to value and cultivate self-compassion in their lives?
- What else will arise during this contemplative period?

4. Methodological Framework

> Thus the entire process of training in the Dharma is rooted in personal experience. Even faith should be rooted in investigation and inquiry and not based solely upon emotion leanings and blind belief (Bodhi, 2005, p. 87).

4.1. First-Person Approach

The outline proposal produced at the commencement of the D.Prof centred on a traditional qualitative paradigm, from a third-person perspective, applying a semi-structured interview design and narrative analysis methodology. Paper 2 initially began as a case study in applying the methods of contemplative inquiry and autoethnography to explore self-compassion. On completion of Paper 2, the emergent properties of greater authenticity and integration had so deeply resonated with me that it became a pilot study for the main thesis. Focus in the thesis will remain within the field of qualitative research; which is anti-positivist and subjectivist, with naturally occurring data rather than the behavioural, 'natural science' model. However, the research will privilege the first-person over third-person perspective. In 'traditional' science (how I was trained in the psychological sciences) the presence of the researcher, if acknowledged at all, is minimised. However, this shift in approach to applying contemplative inquiry, Autoethnography and reflexivity places the researcher centrally and actively in the research process. Although not specifically referring to a first-person perspective, Swinton and Mowatt (2006) argue that the position of researcher as detached and separate to research is a fallacy because to different degrees there are elements of autobiography and "the researcher becomes the primary tool that is used to access the meanings of the situation being explored" (p.60).

The first-person approach I am taking is illustrated in Figure 2.; it draws on the 'inner science' of Buddhist practice (Thurman, 1999; Wallace, 2012; Dunne, 2013), which enables a systematic exploration of my inner and outer world of experiences, behaviour and human interactions. Developing this approach and methodology allows a dialogue between ancient and modern science and the possibility of furthering a meaningful and productive relationship with the dominant paradigms of traditional science (Varela and Shear, 1999). Pickering (1999) argued: "with the incorporation of first-person methods, the objects of science are enriched" (p.275).

I am therefore proposing that the first-person approach be placed in the 'field of study' alongside existing traditional quantitative and qualitative research, which has contributed much to the art and science involved in developing understanding and applications of self-compassion. During the process of producing Papers 1 and 2, I became aware of a deepening trust in the authority of my own experience, reflections and critical thinking. Buddhist practice and teaching emphasises contemplating our direct experience through observation, empirical investigation and deep listening in order to see through our biases, mental habits and delusions. Bodhi (2005) argued that The Buddha aimed *"to impart to us a radically new education in the art of seeing"* (p.185). Rather than rely on intellect and academic 'fire-power', emphasis is on knowing through practice and reflecting on what is internally present, taking individual responsibility for causes of suffering and developing understanding as to how to alleviate and end suffering, all of which I find very empowering.

In the Kalama Sutta AN III:2 (Bodhi, 2005) the Buddha encouraged the Kalama tribe to skilfully understand and clearly see from their own experience that which leads to wellbeing and happiness and that which results in suffering. The Buddha taught from his direct experience in order to cultivate wellness, spiritual development and enlightenment, thus providing a role model for the first-person approach. The teachings emphasise non-reliance upon [rather than rejection of] scriptures, rationality and spiritual teachers. The Buddha also advocated critical empiricism, instructing people to inquire, test out and evaluate evidence pertaining to the authenticity of a teacher or teaching. Furthermore, as a psychologist I work with my clients' direct experiences, their first-person perspectives take centre stage where all manner of personal truths and stories are disclosed, explored, reflected upon, analysed and even respectfully challenged.

The research activity will mirror the therapeutic process, within which fears, beliefs, causes and conditions of distress and possibilities for change can be explored. Together, therapist and client become their own scientists; hypothesising, researching and testing out theories and then turning understanding into action. Additionally, as a systemic therapist, external factors such as power, class, culture, ethnicity and social conditions are also taken into account. Ken Wilber's Four Quadrant model provides a relevant and holistic perspective, through which we can gain insight by considering our interior and exterior experience on an individual and collective basis, which encompasses mind, body, relationships and environment (Wilber, 2000).

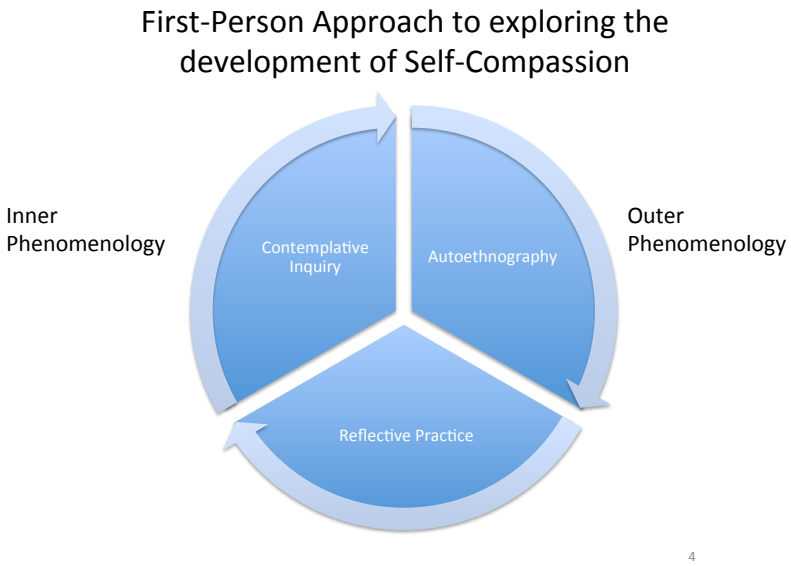

Figure 2. Components of the First-Person Approach

4.2. Contemplative Inquiry

Contemplative inquiry (illustrated in Figure 3) is a dynamic and fluid process rather than a staged or linear one. An attitude of curiosity, focussed attention and open awareness will be brought into considering what causes, conditions, views and practices enable or disable self-compassion, wellbeing and spiritual development (Hanson 2009). With regard to the meditative component, the core practices are 'Samatha' (tranquillity or calm abiding) and 'Vipassana' (insight or clear seeing). Fleischmann (2010) beautifully captures the essence of Vipassana, describing it as "a practice, a path, and a communion" (p.318). This approach to meditation, from the Buddhist Theravada tradition, provides a systematic framework, which allows a deeper exploration of experience and links the subjective to the objective. Similar to modern science, the Buddhist science of the mind (Dunne, 2013) encourages scepticism, unbiased inquiry and investigation into cause and effect. Emphasis is placed on the process of interiority, empirical rigour and ethics (p.320) to develop awareness, knowledge and understanding into the true nature of reality of mental (nama) and physical (rupa) phenomenon. Dunne (2013) also argued for a reflexive ethnographical approach to illuminate what *actually* happens at ground level rather than what *should* happen. Although he was referring to an institutional inquiry, the same could apply the practice of an individual lay-Buddhist, such as myself.

The teachings of the Satipattana Sutta inform my meditation practice, here focus is on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: Body and breath, feelings, consciousness/thought/mind, and mental objects (Nhat Hanh, 1999). Without investigation of these foundations the practice has no sound basis (Aske, 2012). Indeed, Rowan Williams (2014) recently emphasised the importance of seeing and understanding through "not just the mind but a whole embodied self… [which involves] attention, attunement and atonement" (p.34).

Although meditation is fundamentally a solitary exercise, paradoxically, silence and solitude fosters a deeper connection with all beings, which in turn leads to an awareness of 'interbeing' (Nhat Hanh, 1991). There is recognition of; common humanity, interconnection of all beings (non-self) and also impermanence. Furthermore, Zajonic (2009) urged us to "articulate and practice an epistemology of love instead of one of separation" (p.179) and this is why I have explicitly included the 'Four Immeasurables' of Loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity and joy into my practice of contemplative inquiry. Zajonic (2009) highlighted the dynamic process of movement between inner and outer phenomenology in contemplative inquiry. In stillness and silence, bringing calm, humility, clear intention and awareness into the present moment creates an inner landscape where illumination and insight can be cultivated. Indeed, Wallace (2012) emphasised that experience and rational inquiry were cornerstones of Buddhist practice that could result in insight arising from contemplative inquiry.

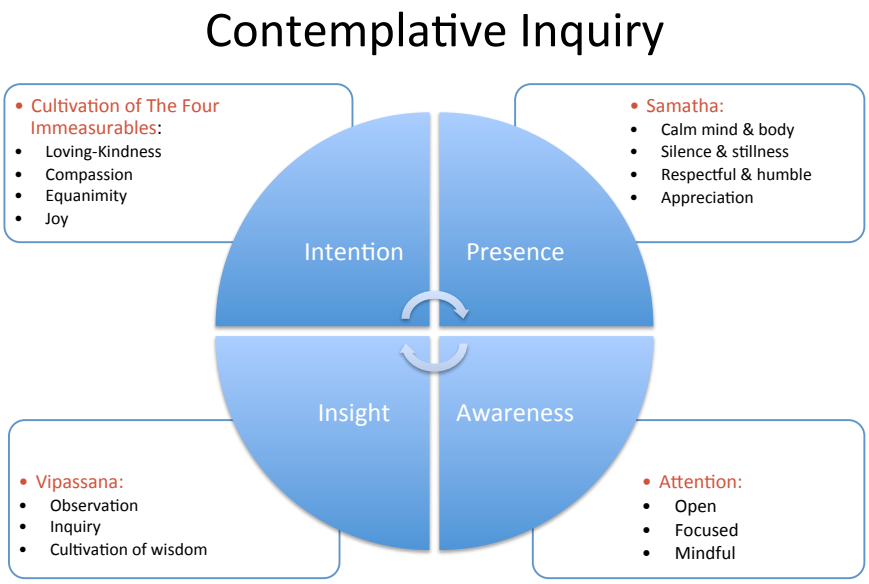

Figure 3: Process of Contemplative Inquiry

I leave the final word in this section on contemplative inquiry to Zajonic (2009):

> The true goal of contemplative practice, indeed of life,
> is the joining of insight and compassion, wisdom and love (p.13).

4.3. Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner, (2000) broke the definition of Autoethnography into three components: 'auto' (self), 'ethnos' (culture) and 'graphy' (research process). An autoethnographic approach allows exploration of the sociocultural web in which I am situated and argues from the social constructivist position that any interpretation of data is embedded within cultural, political and historical contexts. As well as connecting personal, sociocultural and historical contexts, autoethnography also provides a framework to collect and analyse field data including journals, photographs, poetry, songs, and artwork. The autoethnographical process aligns to my own philosophically as a humanistic psychologist where it is congruent to appropriately self-disclose, to share a personal story in order to co-construct, help reframe, normalise and re-story (Etherington, 2004). This approach also fits into the progressive, post modernist and social constructivist positions where the 'who, what, why, when, and how' are all viewed as being embedded within culture, history and politics, Furthermore, the autoethnographical approach aligns with another aspect of the research; that of shared experience and common humanity found in self-compassion. Therefore an autoethnographical approach, which illuminates an individual's lived experience, is relevant and generalizable based on the universality of human nature, experience and need.

Autoethnography requires in-depth and systematic analysis of data arising from experience. Chang (2008) argues for a transempirical approach that includes the rigour and discipline of objective science research methodology and also contains the three I's: Insight, intuition and impression (p.130). I propose to meet this challenge through engaging in contemplative inquiry as described previously together with reflexive practice that I engage in as a psychologist and researcher. These approaches are appropriate because they can access multiple (inner and outer) worlds and allow an interweaving of personal and transpersonal experience as the same time as upholding the scientific pillars of systematic research and transparency (Anderson, 2006; Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

4.4. Critical Reflection: Reflexive Practice

Etherington (2004) defines reflexive activity as “the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts… inform the process and outcomes of the inquiry” (p.31-32). This definition highlights how central reflexive practice is to the autoethnographic approach and narrative analysis being proposed. Indeed, referring to the field of Practical Theology, Swinton and Mowatt (2006) argue that reflexivity “is crucial for every dimension of the qualitative research process” (p.59). Reflexivity brings transparency to narrative data and “adds validity and rigour in research by providing information about the contexts in which data are located” (p.37). The aim will be to provide a sense of transparency in the writing in relation to who I am and the influence of others who populate my story. Reflexivity involves considering and critiquing my own and other actions and perspectives as well as assessing the value of what is being investigated and illuminated in terms of contribution to knowledge and understanding (Etherington, 2004).

As a psychologist, reflexivity is an integral, dynamic and interactive part of my work. It requires me to be fully present and aware of ever-changing internal processes and of the relational processes that transpire between myself and clients (both during and between therapy sessions). These processes are described by Schön (1987, 1991) as reflection-in-action and reflection on practice, Schön describes these processes as being more an art-form than technical science, whilst remaining rigorous in application. Schön also emphasised the artistry involved and the appropriateness of reflection particularly when dealing with “situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict” (1991, p. 50). Welwood (2000) makes a pertinent distinction between psychological reflection, which focuses on cognitive or conscious processes and contemplation/meditation where “one directly recognizes and meets one’s experience as it is… a more radical opening” (p.99). My reflective practice is central to both professional and research practice, however, my contemplative practice not only compliments these areas but it is becoming important in all aspects of life.

4.5. Research Design

The research design is inductive, with the intention to develop knowledge and provide a deeper understanding of the subject matter through a systematic investigation of internal and external processes. The research sample will consist primarily of myself but, because I am not adopting a solipsist attitude (Küpers 2010), the research will also include client case vignettes in the form of composites, and interactions with other Buddhist and Psychological practitioners as co-participants in my story (Chang, 2008). In addition, I also propose to include supervisors and a mentor as co-participants in terms of their experience of reading my research material.

Criticisms of the research design include firstly, the thorny issue of introspection. Introspection can be viewed as unreliable, not generalizable, testable or even useable according to Dennett (2001), who argues fiercely against the scientific validity of a first-person perspective and of any 'data' this provides. However, to counter such disparagement; systematic observation, critical reflection and contemplative inquiry bring a rigour, discipline and trustworthiness to the research. Dunne (2013) details the components of 'Inner science' as being analytical observation, unbiased inquiry and empirical examination. Therefore, as argued by Nuallàin (2006), a first-person approach or 'inner empiricism' is appropriate and valid, particularly within spiritual contexts, and has much to contribute to research findings emanating from 'outer empiricism'. Furthermore, Varela (1999) states that the role of a first-person approach is to inform and illuminate existing third-party approaches and to contribute to a "global perspective" (p.2).

Secondly, there can be no guarantee of validity in quantitative or qualitative research; both face issues concerning data manipulation, bias and interpretation. Qualitative research in particular needs to ensure that critical analysis is rigorously and consistently carried out and anecdotalism does not occur (Silverman, 1993). It is imperative as well as ethical to ensure than an accurate representation of events as possible is portrayed and a clear methodology is provided. Varela (1999) stipulated that two criteria need to be met in order for the term 'method' to apply: "(1) providing a clear *procedure* for accessing some phenomenal domain; (2) providing a clear means for an *expression and validation* within a community of observers who have familiarity with procedures as in (1)" (p.6).

In the case of this research, emphasis is placed on validation of accounts through critical reflection, linking observations to theory and Buddhist teachings, as well as through reference to psychological and Buddhist communities. If all of these factors are considered and carried out then the research can be considered trustworthy (Malterud, 2001; Shenton, 2004). Alongside acknowledging that biases, blind-spots exist, it is important to state that truth is not seen in the positivist tradition as an absolute, rather, it is viewed through a post-modernist lens, seen as multiple, subjective, constructed, provisional and uncertain (Muncey 2010; Badley, 2013). Truth in relation to my perception and memory is according to my understanding of the way things are as I see them, which is shaped by my beliefs, values and experience.

Memory can be fallible, incomplete and often selective, it can also vary in the level of accuracy in both creation and recall. Re-establishing context and connecting with meaning, emotion and sense experience (taste, smell, sound, sight, touch) when remembering can increase clarity and reliability which can contribute to a 'narrative truth' (Etherington, 2004; Muncey, 2010). Keeping a journal, as I have since 1980, can also be a powerful aide-memoir or sometimes provides bare details of an event long forgotten. The hope is that my account would be viewed as authentic and 'ring true', sparking recognition and agreement by others. Having said this, any aspects of my account are also open to discussion and disagreement. I agree with Muncey (2010) who argues: "what legitimates knowledge in the post-modern condition is how well it performs, or how it enables a person to perform" (p.101).

4.6 Data sources and collection

Self-observational and reflective data will be collected in the form of a reflective journal. Leshem and Trafford (2006) highlighted how recording our stories act as mirrors, which facilitate the learning process and enhances professional practice. Leshem emphasised the multiple layers of self-identity, assumptions, beliefs, making connections and generating meaning that can be generated and revealed in the dynamic process of recording, reflecting on and telling of personal experience.

> I wanted to make them aware that their own stories could provide insight into their present experiences. From that realisation, they could then reconstruct new knowledge that emerged through their additional experiences and observations (p.15).

Data collection, analysis and interpretation will be an on-going process from beginning to end of the research. Over a period of nine months a daily journal will be kept which will contain both a formal structure and free-format narrative. There will also be weekly and monthly interval reflective reviews, which will encourage micro (zooming-in) and macro (zooming-out) analysis (Chang, 2008, p.l29). Data will also be gathered on the basis of co-inquiry and client vignettes, or as Rodriguez and Ryave (2002) described; 'interactive introspection' between myself, clients and psychologist colleagues and Buddhist practitioners.

5. Ethical considerations

When conducting research, one of the principal ethical considerations is to be aware of the impact of the researcher on research participants and ensuring no-harm, protection of privacy, confidentiality and informed consent. These principles are equally imperative when engaging in the methodologies within the first-person approach, which present particular challenges relating to me as researcher in terms of what I reveal about myself and of those who populate my story (Chang, 2008). Upholding 'no-harm' to myself will involve a delicate balance between distinguishing what can be safely revealed and what needs to remain private and confidential. This is an issue and responsibility that needs to be considered throughout the research principally by me, but also supported by my research supervisors and mentor. The experience of writing paper 2 was very informative in terms of ethical considerations. The process enabled me to reflect on the impact of telling my story on myself as well as the reaction of the reader. Feedback on this Paper was that it was edgy, courageous and deeply personal as well as prompting personal reflection by the reader, such levels of engagement are precisely what I hope to achieve. Furthermore, ethics and morality lie at the very heart of the Dharma, applying to all areas of life including psychological, spiritual, social and environmental aspects (Wallace, 2012). The Noble Eightfold Path is fundamental in Buddhist teaching, it emphasises the three dimensions of insight, meditation and morality.

Following this path involves cultivating skilful view, speech, intention, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration (Keown, 2005). On a World-wide scale, His Holiness The Dalai Lama (1999) called for cultivation of inner values and the development of secular ethics in order for all beings and the Earth to flourish. Additionally, as a lay-Buddhist, I undertake to uphold The Five Precepts (Amaravati, 1971) concerning no harm, no false speech, not taking that which isn't freely given, no intoxication or immorality.

My Buddhist practice is essential to the discipline and quality of my meditation practice and contemplative inquiry. My commitment and intentions are renewed daily, deepening of my personal practice is nourished by meditation training, Dharma teaching, the Sangha and wider Buddhist lay community.

A deeply ethical stance also arises from the practice of self-compassion, the presence of which allows the psychological safety to be honest with oneself and others, rather than deny, judge, defend or self-criticise. This in turn allows an acknowledgement and deep acceptance of our very humanness, frailties, and imperfections, “a sense of common humanity versus isolation” (Neff, 2009, p.2). Remembering that *nobody* is perfect or doesn’t suffer, gives me courage to disclose.

Where client case vignettes and dialogues with co-inquirers are used, informed consent will be obtained, identifying details will be changed and confidentiality will be kept throughout. Before a draft is finalised, the person involved will be consulted and they have the right to amend or veto. The researcher abides with the code of ethics of Anglia Ruskin University (2007) and also those of the British Psychological Society (2011). Additionally, Dunne (2013) warms about the potential damage that can be done to the standing and future funding for research in this field if a Buddhist ‘inner science’ is not robust.

Muncey (2010) emphasises the ethics of ensuring that research methodology and writing is robust and can withstand examination in order to ensure that the “academy” is not compromised (p.104). She further emphasises the ethical dynamic: “Ethics is a continually negotiable set of responsibilities between the author and the story and the author and the reader” (p.108). Finally, as an ethical researcher, developing my skills in methodological understanding and application, writing and communication is an on-going process. Activities to support this development are built into my annual research development plan.

6 Research Plan

6.1 Timeframe

The plan is for the research period to run for 9 months from June 2014. For the entirety of this period a daily meditation practice will take place, which will be in the form of sitting and/or walking for approximately 40 minutes, plus allowing time, either immediately afterwards or later that day, to make entries into a reflective diary. Additional research activity will involve: meditation retreats at Amaravati Monastery in April and December 2014, and a Yatra (silent walking and meditation with sangha) during Easter 2014. There will also be formal training at the University of Bangor in teaching Mindful Self-Compassion (2nd to 8th July 2014) this will also provide an opportunity for co-inquiry activity with students taking part in the training course. Finally, I plan to attend and present a poster at the ARU Annual Student Research Conference in June 2014 and at International Mind Life Conference in Boston (30th October to 2nd November 2014). In line with the autoethnographic process, 'writing up' commences from the beginning of the research (Chang, 2008) and so will commence at the beginning of the 9 month research period.

At the end of the research period, and subject to confirmation of candidature, from Spring 2015, time will be devoted to analysis of data (from the reflective diary, case vignettes and co-inquiry dialogues), drafting chapters, completing research development requirements and making presentations. Retreats, meditation training and Yatra's will continue throughout each year to Thesis completion [and beyond]. Entry into the 'Writing Up Stage' is planned from September 2016 up to September 2017.

6.2. Dissemination of Research

A dynamic and multi-modal approach to dissemination is planned along the lines proposed by Harmsworth and Turpin (2000) who emphasised three key components of dissemination:

1. *Awareness*; (from beginning of the research) to communicate intentions, plans, activity, share interim findings and to gather support and interest for the subject area.
2. *Understanding*; to provide the opportunity for therapists and clients to gain a deeper insight and engagement with self-compassion not only in order that they will benefit but they will also be able to communicate the development of self-compassion to others, and
3. *Action*; in the form of individual and group work, wider training in the psychological and Buddhist communities and healthcare providers. On-going cultivation of insight, personally and with co-participants, which, in the same way that I work with clients, is about communicating 'with' rather than to'.

A wide range to communication tools will be used to explore wider, more innovative ways of communicating self-compassion and the research involved such as using social media; a blog, website, you-tube, pictures, plus utilising a mailing list, making poster and paper presentations at conferences, workshops and informing local media.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this research is to contemplate, investigate and communicate lived experience of development of self-compassion in terms of understanding, meaning making and barriers as well as considering any transformative aspects. Additionally, it is hoped that the research allow the possibility of a greater understanding of how contemplative practice impacts on professional practice. The aims of this work are also to contribute to the delivery of self-compassion in therapy and increase self-compassion in therapeutic practitioners to support self-care and enhanced wellbeing. I move forward into the next stage of D.Prof territory as a relative novice as far as Buddhist practice is concerned, acknowledging that I am not a Buddhist academic or intellectual, neither am I an 'expert' meditator or mindfulness practitioner, having only practiced for 10 years and taught for two.

However, through my contemplative practice and critical reflection, my intention is to explore further and deepen understanding about what it means to be self-compassionate. This is all done with a view to reducing suffering, increasing wellness, ease and developing my awareness and understanding as a human being, who is a psychologist and Buddhist, amongst many other things.

As a psychologist I am charged with examining the efficacy of all interventions I make with clients. Likewise, my concern with the efficacy of outcomes from this research is based on the following fundamental criteria: does the practice, view or action reduce suffering and enhance deep happiness and wellbeing? Is life enhanced and enriched? Has loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity been increased? If the answer is yes, then the work will have some worth and relevancy.

May all beings be well,
may all being live with ease,
may all beings be free of suffering.

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