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Contemplative practice, internal family systems and affect regulation : an exploratory study : a project based upon an independent investigation

Jessica Jeanne Prodis

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Jessica J. Prodis
Contemplative Practice,
Internal Family Systems
and Affect Regulation:
an Exploratory Study

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study was undertaken to investigate the ways that contemplative practices across varied traditions may aid practitioners in the development of tools for emotional containment and regulation. The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model of psychotherapy (Schwartz, 1995) was used as a theoretical framework for this study. Findings were compared to the ways that affect regulation and containment are conceptualized within the IFS model.

Eleven subjects who identified as utilizing contemplative practices from various traditions participated in this study. Interview questions were designed to explore the ways that engagement in a daily contemplative practice for five or more years had changed the ways that participants perceive and interact with their varied affective states. Data were organized in themes that highlighted commonalities between the conceptualization of the internal holding environment, or true Self in IFS, and the ways that contemplative practitioners articulated their experiences of compassionately witnessing and tending to challenging emotional experiences.

Major findings of this study revealed that taking time each day to reflect upon and tend to one's adverse emotions may strengthen one's ability to contain and regulate

challenging affect. Findings also suggested that the benefits of a daily contemplative practice are not tradition-specific. Therefore, clinicians may consider how to develop personalized daily practices of internal reflection with their clients as a way to foster more adaptive skills for emotional containment and regulation.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE, INTERNAL FAMILY SYSTEMS AND AFFECT
REGULATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Jessica J. Prodis

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2010

Guest House

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!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

-Rumi

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I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Youssou, and my son, Ahmed. Thank you both for believing in me, for cheering me on, and for the many sacrifices you have made in order for me to accomplish this. Thank you for being the container of home, a place to learn and grow and be real, where all of the complexities and intricacies carve out more space for the light to come in. I love you both infinitely. This is for us.

I want to express my gratitude to my ancestors, for all of their sacrifices and hardships, joys, and victories. Your courage feeds me each and every day. To my mom, Leslie, and my dad, John, for teaching me that I am always healing and healed, powerful, capable and whole, for giving me life. To Melissa, Yako, and to my entire extended family, you are each an integral piece of this project. Thank you to my thesis advisor Mary Beth Averill for all of your invaluable support through this process. Thank you to my beloved community, north, south, east and west. I give thanks for my ever-growing true Self identity, inviting me to shine more brightly, to speak more clearly, to love more deeply and to live more courageously, in service of all life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
III. METHODOLOGY.....	27
IV. FINDINGS	31
V. DISCUSSION.....	70
REFERENCES	79
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: HSR Approval Letter.....	80
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter.....	81
Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer	82
Appendix D: Informed Consents for Participants.....	83
Appendix E: Mental Health Referral List.....	85
Appendix F: Interview Guide	86

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this exploratory study was to examine the ways that various daily contemplative practices may aid practitioners in their ability to contain and regulate varied emotional states. The purpose of this study was to explore whether a consistent daily contemplative practice may serve a similar purpose to the Internal Family Systems model of psychotherapy, which is to foster an internal holding environment in which the relational patterns of the sub-personas, internalized objects, or narratives may be compassionately observed and potentially re-patterned. For the purposes of this research, *contemplative practices* were defined as customary activities performed with the intention to cultivate one's personal capacity for reflective attention and insight. (What are Contemplative Practices?, 2009)

Emotion containment and regulation are found to be integral to the development of pro-social behavioral and relational patterning. Affect regulation skills appear to be a significant component of individuals' subjective well being and adaptive relational skills across the life span (Cohn, Jakupcak, Seibert, Hildebrandt, & Zeichner, 2010; Cohn, Zeichner & Seibert, 2008; Heilman, Crisan, Houser, Miclea & Miu, 2010, Martini & Busseri, 2010; Schuengel, Sterkenberg, Jeczynski, Janssen, & Jongbloed, 2009). Current research suggests that a shift in the quality of attention paid to an individual's experience of emotion may serve to strengthen one's ability to regulate and contain emotion. The content of this paper will suggest that when the intervention of compassionate acceptance

of one's given emotional state is applied, sustainable skills for internal emotional containment and affect regulation may develop.

The founder of Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS), Richard Schwartz (1994), postulated that every individual has many internal objects, or sub-personalities. Schwartz (1994) asserted that dysregulation of affect occurs when the sub-personalities are locked into conflictual relational patterning. The individual may then experience over-identification with one particular sub-persona, or feel overwhelmed by the urge to fix or escape negative affective experiences. Schwartz (2008) postulated that every person has access to internal identification with their true Self, an aspect of the individual's identity that has the innate knowledge and capacity to compassionately hold space for the traumatized aspects of themselves (or sub-personas) and for their personal emotional healing. In the internal family system, the true Self serves as an internal container or holding environment for the compassionate tending to and emotional regulation of the sub-personas.

This study aimed to explore whether a daily contemplative practice may foster an internal compassionate holding environment similar to the true Self in IFS (Schwartz, 2008), for the regulation of varied emotional states. The literature reviewed suggests that across varied traditions, engagement in a daily contemplative practice may increase a practitioner's abilities to observe, contain, tend to and regulate experiences of intense internal affect. Contemplative practitioners reported various ways that their practice aided them in attempts to contain and regulate their emotions. All participants felt that their daily practice helped them to deal with intense internal and external affect more effectively. IFS and contemplative practice both appear to be modalities that enable

individuals to access and utilize the aspect of the Self that is a compassionate, neutral observer.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed in this paper will examine the commonalities between the ways that the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model of Psychotherapy (Schwartz, 1995) and various contemplative practices support the emotional containment and affect regulation of practitioners of each modality. The operational definition of contemplative practice for this research is: a customary activity performed with the intention of cultivating one's personal capacity for reflective attention and insight. This literature review will first outline the importance of the development of emotion regulation skills. The text will then explore the internal processes of emotional containment and affect regulation that IFS therapists aim to develop in their work with clients. Next, a dynamic definition of contemplative practice that highlights the common threads between varied religious and spiritual contemplative experiences will be developed. Lastly, the author will explore commonalities between contemplative practices and IFS and will highlight further questions to be explored regarding the differences between these modalities.

The literature reviewed will examine the notion that changes in individuals' patterns of affect regulation and emotional containment can occur when compassionate acceptance of one's affective discomfort is the intervention applied. Current research suggests that a shift in the quality of attention paid to an individual's experience of emotion may serve to strengthen one's ability to regulate and contain emotion (Cohn et al., 2010; Cohn et al., 2008; Heilman et al., 2010, Martini & Busseri, 2010; Schuengel et

al., 2009). Specifically, the content of this literature review will suggest that when the intervention of compassionate acceptance of one's undesirable emotional experience is applied, sustainable skills for internal emotional containment and affect regulation may develop.

The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that every individual has the innate knowledge and capacity to compassionately hold space for the traumatized aspects of themselves, and for their personal emotional healing. IFS and contemplative practice appear to offer two modalities that enable individuals to access and utilize the aspect of the self that is a compassionate, neutral observer. As illustrated in this literature review this compassionate and neutral aspect of an individual appears to nurture the creation of an internal container, where difficult emotions can be tended to without the pathologizing qualities of fear and judgment that disrupt more adaptive patterns of affective regulation and emotional containment.

Emotion Regulation and Human Behavior

The development of affect regulation appears to be a significant component of subjective well-being and adaptive social behavior across the life span (Cohn et al., 2008; Cohn et al., 2010; Heilman et al., 2010; Martini & Busseri, 2010; Schuengel et al., 2009). Current research suggests that children's secure attachment to a caregiver fosters emotional regulation (Schuengel et al., 2009). Although the development of affect regulation skills may be formed later in life, current studies indicate that compromised regulatory skills are a predetermining factor in maladaptive behaviors such as self-injurious behavior (Schuengel et al., 2009), increased aggressive behavior in men (Cohn et al., 2008; Cohn et al., 2010), compromised decision making in circumstances of risk

and uncertainty (Heilman et al., 2010), and an overall decrease in experiences of subjective well-being. (Martini & Busseri, 2010) Increases in emotional restriction and labile affect are also included in current research as potential maladaptive results of compromised affect regulation skills. (Cohn et al., 2008; Cohn et. al., 2010)

In their study of supporting the development of affect regulation in therapy with children with multiple disabilities, Schuengel et al. (2009) suggested that disruptions in early attachment relationships may predispose individuals to disordered attachment patterns, and a resulting decrease in emotion regulation skills. The authors noted that approximately half of the children with intellectual disabilities experience many clinically significant mental health and behavior problems, frequently including problems related to maladaptive affect regulation. (2009) Schuengel et al. highlighted the critical role that a therapist might play in forming attachment relationships with children who are experiencing, or have experienced, disrupted attachment with their primary caregiver(s). The authors stated, “Clients may be better able to regulate their emotional responses to frightening situations, memories, or thoughts if they have formed an attachment relationship with their therapist” (Schuengel et al., 2009, p. 298). With a clinician as a secure base, or holding presence, clients may begin to take risks in the exploration of new ways to cope with maladaptive affective responses.

Without the opportunity to form secure attachments and to develop emotion containment and regulation, individuals may go on to struggle profoundly, particularly in situations of risk and uncertainty. Heilman et al. (2010) found that compromised emotion regulation skills may lead to maladaptive risk aversion and emotional restriction when making decisions in situations of risk and uncertainty. The authors postulated that, “acute

emotions may be mediated by emotion regulation strategies” (Heilman et al., 2010, p. 257), allowing individuals to make challenging decisions in times of acute emotional stress. Findings revealed that individuals with increased emotion regulation skills experienced fewer negative emotions when making decisions in situations of risk and uncertainty. Additionally, the authors concluded that suppression of emotion, in lieu of more adaptive affect regulation tools, did not decrease the experience of negative affect in participants. (Heilman et al., 2010)

This impaired ability to make sound decisions in times of acute emotional stress can have profound effects in the lives of people who struggle to contain and regulate negative affective states. In their study of the role emotion dysregulation, Cohn et al. (2010) found that “emotional dysregulation does mediate the association between restrictive emotionality and aggression” (Cohn et al., 2010, p. 53). In this study, emotion regulation was measured by an individual’s ability to accept or tolerate emotional experiences, rather than a measurement of one’s overall ability to regulate their feelings. Restrictive emotionality was defined as “conflict concerning expressing emotions and feeling emotionally vulnerable” (Cohn et al., 2010, p. 54).

Cohn et al. (2010) found that aggressive behavior in men seemed to occur as a result of men’s fear of their own emotions: “Therefore, anxiety about one’s internal distress may increase propensity to use aggression, or aggressive tactics, if these are considered [by the individual] to be the only acceptable forms of emotional display” (Cohn et al., 2010, p. 60). Another study by Cohn et al. (2008) found that masculine gender role conflict (GRC) predicted aggressive behavior, specifically at high levels of emotional lability in response to negative affect change. In this study, GRC was defined

“as a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences” (Cohn, Zeichner & Seibert, 2008, pp. 29-30). The researchers postulated that masculine gender role stress are representative of cognitive stress that may occur commonly in men’s lives. The literature suggested that GRC and aggressive behavior in men may be attributed to how they perceive and cope with negative affective experiences (Cohn et al. 2008). These findings suggested that an increase in emotion regulation skills for men may decrease aggressive behavior resulting from negative affective experiences.

Affect regulation skills are clearly an integral aspect of the development of pro-social behaviors in the above-mentioned cases. In addition to the reduction in anti-social behaviors, Martini and Busseri (2010) suggested that emotion regulation skills may enhance one’s experience of subjective well-being. In a study of emotion regulation strategies in elderly women and their adult daughters who help care for them, Martini and Busseri (2010) found that emotional suppression was linked with lower life satisfaction, increased negative affect and decreased positive affect. The findings of this study suggested that emotion regulation skills are likely to be “critical to the impact of the helping relationship on both relationship partners” (Martini & Busseri, 2010, p. 57). The authors suggested that the use of passive emotion regulation strategies, such as suppression, avoidance, and distraction may lower one’s personal sense of subjective well being because “such strategies are effortful and difficult to maintain” (Martini & Busseri, 2010, p. 54).

Strategies for emotional containment and regulation appear to be essential to the development of adaptive, pro-social relational patterns and subjective experiences of well being. Current research supports the notion that the development affect regulation skills

benefit individuals both personally and interpersonally. Strategies for the development of emotion regulation and containment are, therefore, particularly relevant to psychotherapists and people in all helping professions. The Internal Family Systems approach to the development of affect regulation tools and the ways that a daily contemplative practice may aid individuals in the regulation of their emotions may offer valuable information to clinicians seeking to aid people in developing new ways to interact with varied emotional states, as well as to potentially increase their personal sense of well-being.

Internal Family Systems

This section will offer a brief introduction to the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model of psychotherapy, as IFS is the theoretical lens through which contemplative practice is examined in this paper. The Internal Family Systems Model of psychotherapy, founded by Richard Schwartz, Ph.D., is a model that focuses on the sub-personalities (or internal objects) and the relational patterns of those sub-personalities. The IFS model applies “the concepts of systems thinking to the internal processes that direct thought and feeling” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 22). The goal of IFS is to identify and observe one’s own sub-personalities, or “‘parts’ of [the] internal mental system” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 22), in the interest of detecting internal relational patterns that may give rise to experiences of inner conflict. Although ego psychology, object relations therapy, transactional analysis, and psychosynthesis have shared the IFS focus on the internal object world, or the world of sub-personalities, IFS goes a step further in that this treatment modality attends to how the internal objects function in relationship to each other to cause difficult or easeful emotional experiences (Schwartz, 2008).

Schwartz (2008) proposed that sequences and patterns of internal interactions can be tracked in the same way that interactions are tracked among family members. Schwartz (2008) submitted that “inner roles and relationships [are] not static and could be changed if one [intervenes] carefully and respectfully (p. 1).” IFS addresses the intrapsychic, familial, and cultural patterns “with the same systemic principles, and [intervenes] at each level with the same ecological techniques” (Schwartz, 2008, p. 2). This is a very important concept, as our external object relationships become our internal object relationships. The use of the IFS model may therefore offer individuals the opportunity to tend to their internal needs and relationships through identifying, observing, and tending to the narratives that are discovered.

Managers, Firefighters, and Exiles

In the IFS model, patterns of internal relationships between sub-personalities appear repeatedly across individual cases. Schwartz (1994) defined sub-personalities, or “parts” as “a discrete and autonomous mental system that has an idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, and set of abilities, intentions, or functions” (p. 23). Within the IFS model, every individual has developed these “parts” or “sub-personas” in order to regulate their affect, and to keep them safe by maintaining a sense of control of one’s internal and external environment (Schwartz, 2008). These sub-personas are identified in three categories based upon the way that they work to regulate and protect the individual.

The first category of sub-personalities is identified as manager sub-personalities (Schwartz, 2008, p. 2). Internal managers serve to protect one from getting too dependent on others. The manager sub-personas are often very focused on taking care of others and are hypercritical of one’s self, actions, thoughts, and appearances. Internal managers also

play the very important role of protecting the individual from re-experiencing pain, fear, shame, or humiliation that they may have experienced in the past (Schwartz, 2008, p. 2). In IFS, these manager parts are seen to have developed in order to protect the individual from getting too vulnerable, or from getting hurt. In the IFS theory, managers have developed out of a very important need to protect the Self, and it is understood that the narratives of the managers deserve to be listened to. When the actions of the manager are examined with compassion, the protective purpose of the manager's narrative may be identified and appreciated.

There are aspects of every individual's past that can be very painful, humiliating, scary, or otherwise uncomfortable to mentally or emotionally revisit. The job of the manager is to protect the individual from having to revisit past traumas, but these traumatic experiences do not disappear. From the IFS perspective, the needy, vulnerable, and painful parts of the individual often get "locked away" (Schwartz, 2008, p. 3) into the recesses of the psyche. These imprisoned sub-personas represent the second category, and are known as "Exiles" (Schwartz, 2008, p. 3). Exiles are often repressed at a time in an individual's development when they can not see another way to process difficult emotional responses to a given event.

In his book, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, Schwartz (1995) proposed that once an individual's managers are acknowledged for their fears and purposes, the managers often agree to give some access to the exiles (p. 105). Schwartz noted the role of the therapist as a mediator, taking care to insure that the exiled images or feelings do not completely overwhelm the presence of the Self in the interaction. The sub-personas labeled as exiles represent parts of an individual that are stuck in a part of the individual's

life that was highly emotional. “Child-like [Exiles] are often stuck during a period when the person was scared, rejected, humiliated, abandoned, or traumatized, or experienced a loss” (Schwartz, 1995, p. 105). The exile sub-persona is often stuck in the time period of extreme suffering, and only the compassionate holding environment offered by the true Self can guide the exile into the present time where the extreme emotions of the past can be processed and honored in a safe inner-object world.

The last type of sub-personality grouping in the IFS model is identified as “Firefighters” (Schwartz, 2008, p. 3). “Most people are socialized to exile various parts of themselves, and once that process begins, the managerial and firefighter roles become necessary” (Schwartz, 1995, p. 51). Firefighter personas arise when, despite the manager’s best efforts, an exiled sub-personality has been triggered and is threatening to overtake an individual’s emotional state with extreme and uncomfortable affect, or an unsafe sense of vulnerability. When this type of affective discomfort arises, the firefighter personas arise in an attempt to quell the “emotional flames” (Schwartz, 2008, p. 3).

Firefighter sub-personalities tend to be highly impulsive and drive to find stimulation that will override or dissociate from the exile’s feelings. Binging on drugs, alcohol, food, sex, or work, are common firefighter activities. Whenever an exiled part is activated, the firefighters frantically react, doing whatever they can to aid the individual in extinguishing the exiled feelings. This process can happen with very little regard for consequence (Schwartz, 1995).

Managers, firefighters, and exiles all develop in order to protect the individual from difficult affective experiences. “The goal [of the internal family system, and all of the sub-personas therein] is to keep the feared feelings and thoughts from spilling over

the inner walls, so that the system remains safe and the person is able to function in life” (Schwartz, 1995, p. 49). The sub-personas have the potential to temporarily relieve, regulate, or contain emotion; however, eventually it becomes clear that the managers, firefighters, and exiles lack the ability to engage with the feared emotions with a feeling of “either compassion, curiosity, or acceptance” (Schwartz, 1995, p. 116).

The Self

In the IFS model, in addition to managers, firefighters and exiles, there is believed to be a true Self at the core of every person. “It is the Self which has the ability to achieve a meta- perspective on one’s own inner predicament and compassionately view the situation of the parts/ sub-selves” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 26). In IFS, the Self is said to “[contain] many crucial leadership qualities like perspective, confidence, compassion, and acceptance” (Schwartz, 2008, p. 3). “Everyone has this healthy and healing Self, despite the fact that many people have very little access to it initially” (Schwartz, 2008, p. 3). The goal of IFS practitioners is to recognize and strengthen one’s relationship to, and identification with, the true Self in order to utilize the resources of the Self in helping the firefighters, managers and exiles out of their extreme roles.

Releasing the resources of the Self is at the core of calming down emotions in the IFS model. Identification with the true Self is believed to counterbalance the internal voices of the sub-personas that are often steeped in self-judgment, fear, criticism, and confusion. IFS practitioners work to help individuals identify their managers, firefighters, and exiles and to listen to and value the voices, experiences, and goals of these personas before asking them to step back temporarily, so that the individual might try to see through the lens of the “true” or “greater” Self (Schwartz, 2008, p. 4). As the presence of

the Self is strengthened, individuals become more proficient at relating to their parts/sub-personalities in ways that these aspects of the Self seem to need.

The true Self in IFS is the aspect of the individual that brings compassion, lucidity, wisdom, and interest in how best to understand and care for internal personas and narratives that have developed in response to times of distress and trauma. Individuals know that they have accessed their true Self, rather than another sub-persona, because “once in the Self state, clients [seem] to know just what to do or say to help each inner personality” (Schwartz, 2008, p 4). When the true Self is accessed, all of the identified personas can be compassionately witnessed from a confident, tolerant, and peaceful perspective, where all parts of the self are welcomed and valued. Learning to listen to the voices of the managers, firefighters and exiles, and seeing all of the parts with compassion and gratitude, allows the true Self to regulate and contain affective discord in the internal family system.

Psychoneurology and IFS

Schwartz noted that research on brain functioning indicated that “the brain actually consists of an undetermined number of independently functioning ‘modules’ with specialized functions” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 22). These findings have tremendous implications for the application of systems thinking to intrapersonal human psychology. We now understand that, as we move through every moment in our lives, we are unconsciously accessing different modules of the brain that operate differently and were developed for varied purposes in response to varied stimuli. According to Schwartz (1994), “our emotional lives are shaped by the relationship among modules as our cognitive functioning” (p. 22). Therefore, it is possible to observe the patterns of

interaction between the personas/modules, and to develop and work with the purpose of modules that were developed in response to experiences of trauma and distress. For more research regarding modules of the brain and the psychoneurology pertaining to IFS, see Gazzaniga (2000), Ornstein, (1986), and Ornstein (1977).

The discussion of various modules in the brain inevitably leads one to wonder whether there is an overarching consciousness which is ultimately the “true Self” that is really running the show. The concept of the Self in the IFS model describes a meta-consciousness that has the ability to hold a compassionate space for exploration of the sub-personas/ narratives/ inner objects. The true Self is believed to hold the ability to mediate, heal, and harmonize discord between the various sub-personas/modules of the brain. As individuals strengthen their abilities to observe their affective experience and inner conflicts from a meta- perspective, they begin to see themselves as containers within which interactions between sub-personalities occur. Research on brain and the neurology of various modules in relationship to a more overarching meta- perspective, (which would be deemed the Self in IFS) does not yet exist.

Conclusion

As one’s true Self identity is strengthened as the container of the experience, “one no longer identifies with any particular participant of one’s internal experience, but [rather] with the interacting nature of the system itself” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 26). From this perspective, the IFS model purposes that individuals begin to perceive a wide range of choices regarding how and why the sub-selves, or modules, are reacting, and how the true Self wishes to make sense of and work with these reactions. From the prospective of

the Self, “one’s state of mind hinge[s] not on any particular identification, but rather the relationship among these sub-selves” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 26).

Through the IFS model, practitioners seek to develop a differentiated, internal, true Self identity in order to foster a sense of internal leadership guided by a clear-sighted, compassionate, metaperspective. This approach proposes that as one identifies internal narratives/sub-personas at play, one may see where their perceptions about their true identity are unconsciously enmeshed in certain sub-personalities and extreme belief systems about the nature of who they truly are and their relationship to the external world. The IFS model seeks to nurture the individual’s identity with the true Self in order to allow the inherently competent Self to guide the internal family system in structural, strategic, and systemic changes (Schwartz, 1994).

In this model, the focus is not so much on clients’ pathology, but rather on the internal resources that are believed to lie at the center of every individual in the place where all of the inner conflict and affect dysregulation can be compassionately and reasonably observed and valued for its purpose. It is the approach to healing that makes the difference: pathologizing and pushing an agenda versus creating space for a compassionately supported organic healing/unfolding to occur. Schwartz (1994) postulated that when the true Self perspective is strengthened, the framework of family-systems theory can be applied to foster an organic process of healing through a re-patterning of the internal family of identified sub-personalities.

Contemplative Practice

Although practitioners of the IFS model aim to apply family systems theory to inner workings of the psyche, it is important to note that practitioners of IFS also aim to

strengthen the individual identity with the compassionately observant Self. This element of the IFS model appears to be in alignment with aspects of contemplative practice that focus on developing one's ability to compassionately identify, observe, and contain internal and external experience. This portion of literature reviewed will focus on defining the term "contemplative practice" as used in this study, and will explore commonalities between contemplative practice and the IFS model.

Defining Contemplative Practice

For the purposes of this research, as stated above, contemplative practice will be defined as a customary activity performed with the intention of cultivating one's personal capacity for reflective attention and insight. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CCMS) noted that "every major religious tradition includes forms of contemplative practice, such as prayer, meditation, and silent time in nature" ("What are Contemplative Practices?," 2009). Collard (2007) referred to Rick Hanson, PhD, who cited the six most prevalent contemplative traditions of the world as "Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, and Shamanic" (p. 173). Contemplative practices may be done in solitude or in groups. Contemplative practices are believed by many to generate a sense of calm and well-being, aid in stress management, deepen self-understanding, and to sharpen practitioners' focus, concentration and insight. Additionally, contemplative practice may aid individuals in their ability to perceive conflict from various viewpoints, to improve listening skills, and to problem-solve more creatively ("What are Contemplative Practices?," 2009).

The above-mentioned quality of reflective attention and insight cultivated in contemplative practice is often identified as mindfulness. Bishop et al. (2004) noted that,

although mindfulness has become a focus of considerable attention in the fields of psychology, neurology, and spirituality, an operational definition of mindfulness has yet to be developed. Bishop et al. (2004) attempted to develop an operational definition of the quality of mindfulness, or neutral observation that is cultivated through contemplative practice.

Bishop et al. (2004) focused upon the aspect of mindfulness that nurtures specific attention to one's moment-by-moment experience. "Broadly conceptualized, mindfulness has been described as a kind of non-elaborative, non-judgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is" (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 8). The authors cited techniques in contemporary psychology that aim to increase awareness and skillful responses to mental processes that "contribute to emotional stress and maladaptive behavior" (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 5). In addition to the Buddhist foundations of mindfulness, Bishop et al. (2004) noted recent innovations in Western clinical psychotherapy have benefited from the incorporation of mindfulness practices (p. 6).

The definition of mindfulness put forth by Bishop et al. (2004) did not, however, examine the ways that mindfulness manifests within contemplative practices found within varied religions and spiritual traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Shamanism. Nonetheless, their definition did give great attention to the ways that mindfulness requires sustained attention to a given focus, whether that attention is given to breath, prayer, chanting, yoga, walking, etc. The quality of mindfulness denotes a practitioner's cultivated ability to observe their thoughts and experiences, while

repeatedly returning to their practice, rather than succumbing to patterns of reactivity to the thoughts and experiences.

Bishop et al. (2004) proposed that when one gets caught thinking about their thoughts or fleeting experiences, one will be engaging in the distraction of “elaborative thinking” (p. 11), a process that takes one’s neutral attention away from the moment-to-moment experience. This process clouds one’s perceptions with assumptions, beliefs, and expectations about the nature of reality. Bishop et al. (2004) proposed that:

Because our attention has a limited capacity, when it is released from elaborative thinking more resources are made available to process information related to current experience. This increases access to information that might otherwise remain outside awareness resulting in a wider perspective on experience. (p. 10)

Psychoneurology and Contemplative Practice

As stated above, the author of this paper has elected to define contemplative practice as a customary activity performed with the intention of cultivating one’s personal capacity for reflective attention and insight. With this definition, I have attempted to encompass commonalities between various religious and spiritual practices that foster practitioners’ abilities to observe, attend to, and/or reflect upon their current experience. For the purposes of this research, an attempt was made to focus upon common threads between varied practices. Current research on the psychoneurology of contemplative practices appears to focus on specific traditions and their effects on the brain, rather on the effect that certain qualities of varied contemplative practices appear to have on the brain. The majority of current brain research on contemplative practice and the brain is focused on the various Buddhist meditations. For more information about this research, please refer to Amishi, Krompinger, and Baime (2007), Collard (2007), Davidson et al. (2003), Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard, and Davidson (2004).

Commonalities between Contemplative Practice and IFS

In his discussion of the “object self” as the aspect of identity that drives an individual to act, respond, or fix (defined similarly to the “sub-personas,” or internalized objects/ narratives) versus identification with the compassionate observer, Deikman

(1982) noted the “intention to receive” (p. 71) that is present in contemplative and mystic practices:

The intention to receive... rather than to act... requires a different mode of consciousness, one that diminishes the sense of boundaries and permits the experience of merging with the environment. This ‘receptive mode’ is associated with a different sense of self... Past and future drop away and sensual attributes dominate over the perception of form and verbal meaning... The separate self dissolves, permitting the experience of connection or merging into the environment. Awareness of awareness becomes possible. (p. 71)

This “awareness of awareness” (p. 71), or “receptive mode” (p. 73) that Deikman (1982) noted refers to the aspect of consciousness that embodies qualities of receptivity, observing, letting go, and allowing. This relinquishing sense of control-the impulse to do something, or fix something-offers the contemplative practitioner an opportunity to connect with what IFS calls the true Self, the compassionate witness to all of the internal and external interactions that occur between the sub-personas at play: “In a state of mindfulness, thoughts and feelings are observed as events in the mind, without over-identifying with them, and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual pattern of reactivity” (Bishop et al., 2004, pp. 8-9).

Deikman (1982) noted that the goal of contemplative practices, or practices in mysticism, is not to exist only in the “receptive mode” (p. 73), but rather to establish a sense of harmony between the “receptive mode” and the “object mode” (p. 73). “The functions that the receptive mode provides are necessary to compliment the object mode as it increasingly [tends to] dominate perceptions and excludes from awareness dimensions not emphasized in that mode” (Deikman, 1982, p. 75). This description of a balanced perceptive state relates to the aspect of the IFS objective not to remove the sub-personas, but rather to foster one’s ability to compassionately observe the various aspects

of their internal system in order to regulate affective tendencies and patterns (Schwartz, 2008).

Goleman (1988) researched similarities between the contemplative practices, or “meditative systems” (p. 105) of twelve different traditions ranging from Sufism, to Kabbalah, Transcendentalism to Zen, and beyond. Goleman (1988) submitted that the learned belief systems of the meditator, or practitioner, determine the ways that the individual interprets and labels their contemplative experiences. The idea that one’s interpretation of a given emotional stimulus is learned has relevance in the exploration of commonalities between IFS and contemplative practice. Goleman’s findings (1988) supported the notion put forth by IFS practitioners who teach that one can learn new ways to identify, observe, and shift the relational patterns of one’s internal world, thus strengthening one’s ability to contain and regulate one’s affective experiences.

Goleman (1988) stated, “All meditation systems are variations on a single process for transforming consciousness. The core elements of this process are found in every system, and its specifics undercut ostensible differences among the various schools of [practice]” (p. 102). Goleman (1988) highlighted the strongest agreement among varied contemplative practices as the importance of retraining one’s attention. This aspect of contemplative practice connects clearly with the goal of cultivating Self-leadership in the IFS model, and elicits the question of whether contemplative practices have the same effect of shifting the internal relational pattern between an individual’s sub-personas, or narratives.

Goleman’s (1988) findings also suggested that through cultivating unconditional acceptance, one might gain the ability to shift their attention in order to change mal-

adaptive patterning. Goleman's (1988) findings supported the notion that change organically occurs when acceptance is the intervention applied. Goleman's (1988) submission may leave one to question the role of the therapist, which in the IFS model is essential in the cultivation of acceptance, particularly in the acceptance of extremely feared and exiled sub-personas.

Schwartz (1995) added additional structure to this process of retraining attention and transforming consciousness by adding the external client-therapist relational support. Schwartz (1995) suggested the following:

The goal of therapy [is to] help the client identify and change the internal and external constraints that are preventing Self-leadership. Thus, the therapists job is to try to help the client differentiate qualities that allow the client to understand and change his or her predicaments. IFS presumes that those qualities [of Self leadership] exist in the client, and the therapists job is to help the client elicit them (Schwartz, 1995, p.85).

In his experience with, and research of, contemplative practice, Glassman (1998) noted, "In most mystical traditions, the role of the mystic- and of the peacemaker- is to make whole" (p. 41). Glassman submitted that acceptance and wholeness result from one's ability to let go of their attachment to the goal, or the outcome of their practice (p. 43). He did not, however, propose that one must deny their desire for peace, or for change. The wholeness that Glassman (1998) discussed embodies "connection and harmony, not separation" (p. 43).

From Glassman's perspective on contemplative practice and wholeness, one can cultivate acceptance for a situation, exactly as it is, while simultaneously carrying a hope for change or healing. This aspect of contemplative practice applies to the IFS model because of the foundational belief in IFS that change organically happens when the

intervention of acceptance is applied. In the IFS model, one engages in the process of compassionate acceptance in hopes to create internal and external change. Through expanding one's ability to accept and hold an internal compassionate space for one's managers, firefighters, and exiles (Schwartz, 2008), one becomes whole, strengthens their ability to release their personal agenda, and a shift in the internal family relational pattern begins to occur organically.

Conclusion

Pro-social and adaptive relational skills and individual experiences of subjective well-being may be supported by sound emotion-regulation skills. The Internal Family Systems model of psychotherapy and core qualities of various contemplative practices suggest that change and healing happen when acceptance is the intervention applied. The literature presented in this paper suggested that re-patterning of maladaptive tendencies toward affect dysregulation and inadequate emotional containment can happen when a re-training of the mind's thoughts and attentional patterns occurs. Both IFS and contemplative practices offer tools for "the self-regulation of attention, which involves sustained attention, attention switching, and inhibition of elaborative processing [i.e. over identification with the sub-personas]" (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 11).

This literature review highlighted findings which suggested that pathologizing one's affective experience and pushing an agenda aimed at fixing a problem may be counter to the nature of healing that occurs within IFS and contemplative practices. Instead, the cultivation of a compassionate and supportive container for exploration of internal relational patterns is an approach that may support a more sustainable, Self-led healing to occur. The information on contemplative practice and IFS in this text shows

that when the action of acceptance is taken and an internal and external compassionate holding environment, or identification with the Self is cultivated, one's innate tendency to self-heal may be engaged.

This section touched upon points of inquiry for further exploration. In what ways do therapists in IFS model facilitate the integration of extreme exiles and mediate strong affect during the process of integration? What are the commonalities of this process in comparison to the ways that an unaccompanied contemplative practitioner integrates undesirable memories, narratives, and affective experiences? How do contemplative practice and IFS meet and integrate in therapeutic treatment? Are humans hard-wired to self-heal if a compassionate holding environment is created? Lastly, what, if anything, can the therapeutic relationship facilitate that cannot occur from contemplative practice alone?

Perhaps a third party observer helps to identify unconscious patterns of the internal family system. Therapists may serve to aid individuals in interfacing with extreme exiles, or it is possible that the compassionate observer that is strengthened in individual contemplative practice may serve a comparable role to that of the therapist in IFS. In any case, the literature reviewed in this text suggested that the cultivation of compassionate acceptance of difficult memories and intense affective experiences supports one's ability to contain and regulate varied emotional states.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory research project examined the ways that daily contemplative practices may aid in increasing experiences of emotional containment and affect regulation in people who have been doing a daily contemplative practice for five or more years. Research consisted of 30-60 min. interviews conducted with 12 practitioners who

have been engaged in a daily contemplative practice, four or more days a week for five or more years. Data were lost for one of the interviews; therefore 11 out of the 12 interviews were used for this study. The interviews focused on gathering information about ways that daily contemplative practice may have changed practitioner's relationships to and experiences of their emotions. Data from the interviews were used to highlight the findings in the theoretical portion of the paper. For more information about my study, please see Appendix A for my Human Subjects Review Approval Letter.

Participant Characteristics

My research sample consisted of a nonprobability sample of 11 practitioners of a daily contemplative practice. In order to qualify for this study, participants had to be at least eighteen years of age, speak English, and have performed a daily contemplative practice for five or more years. Participants were to be excluded if they had less than five years of experience with partaking in a contemplative practice at least four times per week. A sample size of twelve to fifteen participants was desired.

Recruitment Process

Participants were recruited from Bay area groups and communities that are focused on varied contemplative practices such as yoga centers, meditation centers, churches, synagogues, mosques, and various retreat centers. Recruitment emails were sent out to my personal email network and to the various groups and communities engaged in contemplative practices (see Appendix B). Flyers were also posted (see

Appendix C) in the above stated venues. Efforts to achieve diversity included distribution of recruitment materials in diverse spiritual, racial, and socioeconomic areas of northern and central California. Potential participants then contacted me by email or phone, and I screened them for inclusion. 14 responses were received, of which 12 participants were selected through a screening process. Two of the fourteen responders were not interviewed due to scheduling issues and time constraints.

Participants were sent two informed consent forms, either through email or in person, prior to the interview (see Appendix D). Interviewees kept a copy of the informed consent form, signed by the participant, and myself and I kept the second signed copy for my records. Interviewees were also given a list of counseling resources, should they have needed to access additional support services outside of the interview (see Appendix E).

Data Collection

Interviews with practitioners utilized a predetermined interview guide (see Appendix F) that was applied to all participants as a basis for an open-ended conversation about their practice and experience. Demographic data were collected regarding participants' gender, age, educational, and religious backgrounds. Interviews lasted from 45-75 minutes and took place in people's homes or by phone. I audio recorded and manually transcribed each interview. Open-ended questions, based upon research of the current literature, were utilized to capture the subjective experience of each participant. Interview responses were then organized based upon common themes and concepts.

Data Analysis

Data analysis examined common ways that daily contemplative practices fostered participants' abilities to contain and regulate varied affective states. Themes were

organized around commonalities between affect regulation approaches in the varied contemplative practices included in this study and in the IFS model of psychotherapy (Schwartz, 1995). Seven themes were noted: 1) The ways that a daily practice helped participants to cultivate their abilities to observe their internal belief systems and emotional responses. 2) The ways that a daily contemplative practice has helped participants to develop a sense of the sacred aspects of their lives, or a sense of familiarity with the practice and the teachings connected with the practice. This was often described as a sense of structure, and a feeling of connectedness, or of being held within something larger than themselves. 3) The connection between practice, emotion, and the somatic experience, as participants repeatedly noted that connections between these three aspects of experience are engaged and strengthened through a daily contemplative practice. 4) The ways that daily contemplative practices helped interviewees to cultivate compassion in relationship to others. 5) A discussion of themes regarding practitioners' relief from emotional suffering, or the ways that their practice has helped them to develop new ways of being with affective discomfort. 6) The challenge of conceptualizing the internal experience of contemplative practices, as much of the experience appears to be non-conceptual. 7) An exploration of the various reasons why participants have continued to engage in their practice each day for the past five to twenty years, depending on the individual. The themes that emerged from interview content are described in detail in the discussion chapter of this document and direct quotes are used to illustrate the participants' perceptions.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

There were seven major findings in this study. First, all participants noted ways that their daily practice helped them to cultivate their abilities to observe their internal

belief systems and emotional responses. Second, interviewees described the ways that their practice has helped them to develop a sense of the sacred aspects of their lives. This was also described as a sense of familiarity with the practice and the teachings connected with the practice, a sense of structure, and a feeling of connectedness, or of being held within something larger than themselves. Third, interviewees repeatedly noted the connection between practice, emotion, and the somatic experience, stating that the connections between these three aspects of experience are engaged and strengthened through a daily contemplative practice. Fourth, all participants noted the ways that a daily contemplative practice helped them to cultivate compassion in relationship to others. Fifth, themes regarding practitioners' relief from suffering, or the ways that their practice has helped them to develop new ways of being with what is arose. Sixth, all participants struggled to articulate the internal experience of their practice, as much of the experience appears to be non-conceptual. Seventh, participants gave diverse reasons regarding why they have continued to engage in their practice each day for the past five to twenty years, depending on the individual. Following the Demographics section below, the findings are described in greater detail. Direct quotes are used to illustrate the participants' perceptions.

Demographics

Eleven practitioners of daily contemplative practice participated in this study: 6 women and 5 men. Participants practiced contemplative traditions based upon Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Efa, Sufism/ Islam, Wicca, Christian New-Thought, Zen, Tai chi and

Qi Gong. Six participants had attained a minimum of one Master's degree, three had completed a Bachelor's degree, two had pursued alternative educational certificate programs after high school, and one participant did not complete high school but had pursued spiritual education from the age of sixteen. Participants were between eighteen and sixty years of age and had been engaged in a contemplative practice at least four times a week for anywhere between five and twenty years.

Nurturing the Observer

All participants affirmed that a daily practice cultivates an ability to observe internal, emotional responses. Participants noted growth in their sense of spaciousness around their reactions to emotional triggers. Interviewees consistently reflected on access to tools gained through their practice, which afforded them a sense of choice in perception in relationship to a given circumstance. Many interviewees also discussed the ways that their practices aided them in their abilities to take responsibility for their own feelings.

Cultivating Awareness of What Is Happening Internally

Participants consistently noted that a daily contemplative practice supports an ability to see what internal emotions are actually present, and to relate to those emotions from a witnessing standpoint, rather than from a perspective that is consumed or influenced by the given emotion. One Zen meditation practitioner described this experience in the following way,

I am able to more clearly see when I am actually angry or sad or joyful. It's cultivating a kind of awareness which, when I'm caught up in I may not know. Sometimes I am joyful and I may not even know it, but it's with meditation practice that I can cultivate more noticing when I am in these states.

Another described an awareness of her internal emotions, stating, “Sometimes, when I am not carried away by it, I am just recognizing, ‘Oh, that’s anger.’ Awareness, basically. Non-awareness is getting carried away; awareness is that moment of recognition.”

Another individual described this awareness as an ability to witness and study her thoughts, feelings, and sensations:

I think of my mind as the processes that go on inside of me, and so when working with my mind, this is a way for me to stand back a little bit and witness the processes of my thinking and feeling and my sensations. I guess it has to do with being a little bit more in the witnessing position as if I’m studying my experience instead of just experiencing it. I have an experience that there is a part of me that’s getting activated and that part of me has a whole cluster of beliefs, thoughts, and feelings and I really focus on that.

A daily practitioner of Orthodox Jewish traditions reflected on her ability to take life less personally, and to observe and re-evaluate her experiences with a sense of clarity. In the following quote, a practitioner of the Efa faith, in the Yoruba tradition, articulated his ability to connect with his own higher power as the observant standpoint and to make decisions from that observing perspective.

Your own Ori, or your own head, your spiritual head, is a divinity. Your Ori is yourself and often you will touch your head to any offerings you are giving because you want your own higher power to accept what you are doing because often we are not consciously connected to what we should be doing, or how to really lead ourselves to our destiny. So when we touch things to our head, we are symbolically saying “We want this higher notion of ourselves to approve of what we are doing and lead us on in a good way.” And if it doesn’t, nothing is going to happen. If your own inner divinity is like, “No, that’s not in your best interest,” it’s not going to happen.

A practitioner of Tai Chi and Qi Gong discussed the cultivation of an ability to relax and observe internal processes. He described his perspective of this observing quality in the following way:

It's about witnessing and overlooking what is happening, rather than being crunched in the experience. And the ability to do this is cumulative, so as time goes on I am just more and more relaxed, even with the things that bug me.

Consistently, participants described the ways that their daily practices strengthened their awareness of their internal affects, their abilities to honor their experiences and their abilities to observe the emotional processes from alternative viewpoints.

A Sense of Spaciousness around Emotional Triggers and Reactions

Many participants discussed an experience of spaciousness in the midst of emotionally triggering experiences, noting an ability to interact with their internal emotions. A Buddhist practitioner stated:

On an inward level, definitely I have more space in my mind and things sort of melt away much more easily and it doesn't mean that I don't have suffering experiences, shit still happens, but my being totally sent into the hell realms due to that is a little bit less. There is a little bit more of an ability to create more space around it and it doesn't have quite the impact. So there is some kind of freedom there.

A practitioner of Vipassana meditation shared that he feels like there are fewer emotional ups and downs since he has been engaged in a daily practice. He discussed his ability to interact with his emotions in the following way:

I think it's a little less of a roller coaster. I have a way to step out of it now. When triggering experiences arise, they're opportunities for learning to see from all the angles and learning to see from a place of wisdom, and to hold them in this really loving container.

A Sufi practitioner shared, "I think the real work of my practice now is to remain in the open space of the living moment and to really be present to Allah in the moment."

Practitioners reflected on their abilities to notice when they are being emotionally triggered, and to pause before reacting to bothersome experiences. Interviews

consistently illustrated the ways that this ability to take some space, or to step back when emotionally triggered, seems to offer a greater perspective on a given situation. One participant shared the effects of his ability to step back, or to take space from his emotional reactions:

This [taking space] has helped me to not get as lost in my emotions as I used to. I still get angry, or frustrated, or impatient but I am watching myself getting angry or impatient. There are times when I lose myself in it, but I don't stay as mad for as long. I am able to pull myself back. All of the difficult feelings slip away a lot quicker. I can say "Oh, that pressed that button." And that's all it was. I can let it go. It's not like I'm putting most of these things under the rug, I just am able to get clear more quickly.

The ability to step back, or take space, that is cultivated by a daily contemplative practice appeared to have profound effects on practitioners' abilities to interact with, to calm, and to regulate their emotional responses.

Access to Tools That Cultivate a Sense of Emotional Choice

All participants noted the emotional tools that development of a daily practice has afforded them. Across traditions, individuals discussed a sense of choice regarding who they want to be and how they want to perceive and/or react to a given situation. For example, one participant reflected upon the similarity between the Wiccan definition of magic, which is used in daily rituals, and prayer, which is preformed daily in the "New Thought" tradition of which she is a part. This participant noted that the Wiccan definition of magic is "to change consciousness at will" and the New Thought definition of prayer is "to create a shift in our own consciousness." Interviewees consistently noted that their daily practice had cultivated this awareness of options, choices, and tools that help individuals shift consciousness in the midst of emotionally intense situations. One

participant noted the ways that a feeling of access to tools offers him new choices regarding what he can do when difficult emotions arise:

There's really clear ways for processing stuff that comes up and that particular environment [within the meditation practice] feels more easeful for me because it's just my stuff and I get to be in this really safe little box where it's just myself, and there's [teachings] there. I think that part of the reason why it works is because we all get the opportunity to learn what to do when the [emotional] shit comes up, and how not to run away.

Another interviewee articulated the ways that his practice cultivated a perception of choice in regards to how he would like to relate to his feelings:

I think that feelings arise and they come and go, and it's like what kind of relationship do we want to have with those feelings? So this is another case where we don't have to take our feelings, either joy or sadness, or anger, or whatever, so seriously. It's just a feeling that arises and goes, we don't have to necessarily identify with it.

My practice is cultivating a different relationship with my circumstances. So the meditation for me creates a formal space for one to practice in a somewhat easier environment than one's external circumstances. I have seen my self be able to be another self, so that when I am having that X-Y conflict, and when I am able to, I can see that I can take response A or take response B, I can sort of be a different person to that circumstance, and that's what the meditation helps me to know, that I am not just a stable, fixed, solid person. Whatever personality I am taking on right now, doesn't have to be that personality to respond in all these circumstances.

Participants discussed elements of choice regarding their personal priorities as well. Interviewees noted the ways that they are able to choose which challenges they wish to invest in, and to give themselves permission to let go of challenges that do not feel "worth" their mental, emotional, physical or spiritual investment. One participant stated,

When I get really stuck around things, it's like, "Is this really worth it? How does this compare to the value of my life and what I'm doing?" Going from being a child with the feeling that I have to conform and make things understandable for people was really damaging. So then I broke down all of the

walls and that was too chaotic, and then I came to a place where I was like, “Oh, here they can be gone, here they can be there.”

Another participant discussed the tools that he has learned and the way that he uses those tools in working with his emotional responses.

Everything is a matter of perception and if you change your perception, [your] world changes. My practice has taught me how to loosen up my mind so that I can break things down into their parts, ... examine [what is happening], and put that part back the way that I want it to be. The energy work that I do takes whatever the issue is and allows you to hold it, or personify it and talk with it. You can ask, “What’s really going on with you?” “What are you?” So I can take an emotion and quantify it, “What would that emotion look like? What color would it be? What would it feel like? If it was a person, what would they look like?” And you can communicate with it on that level and work with it. That’s basically what Tantra is. It takes everything and puts it into a workable, moldable form, and you become the molder of it, you can reshape it, or untangle it, and get it back to its original form, which was clear. The Buddha described this process. He tied a scarf in three knots and said “You tied the knots in this order; untie them in that same order. That’s my entire teaching.”

Taking Responsibility for One’s Own Feelings

Participants often noted the ways that their practices helped them to recognize and take responsibility for their own feelings. Interviewees discussed an enhanced ability to discern their personal stories and belief systems from the feelings of others, and from the actual, in-the-moment situation that is occurring. One participant illustrated this experience in the following vignette:

It was particularly interesting and surprising for me to notice the times when the feelings of anger arise . . . I don’t consider myself an angry person, but I notice these feelings more and that’s really surprising . . . You would think that it would make those feelings go away, but it’s helping me notice things that I didn’t see about myself in the past.

For example, my mother has cancer and my father, from my perspective, deals with it in a way that sometimes can agitate my mother and he ends up agitating himself and so they both have this sort of bouncing off of each other agitation that’s ongoing . . . When I’d go [to my parent’s] home, . . . I’d notice in the first two days or so that these concentrated feelings of agitation in me,

internally, arise too. I find that very new to deal with because when I am [at my home] I don't have that type of agitation.

Last time when I went home . . . when they started getting agitated, I started noticing myself getting agitated and I kind of pushed a little bit and I would say, . . . “why are you guys agitating each other over these simple things?” . . . Say were driving somewhere, mom likes to take route A and dad likes to take route B and dad is driving and mom is saying, “well, take route A” and dad is like “I want to take route B” and so they're fighting over these minuscule things . . . In the first few days I would point out to them that “These things are so minuscule, why are you getting so agitated?” But without noticing that in the process of doing that, I was also adding to my own agitation. So when I caught myself doing that I pulled back. I said, “okay, well I see these things as being minuscule, but this is there pattern and I will just be a witness to my own agitation around this and I will be a witness to their agitation too.” And then it became much easier for me to be in this circumstance and the agitation essentially calmed down a lot more.

Another participant reflected on the ways that identifying his own beliefs, and making conscious choices in relationship to those beliefs, has helped him to engage in what he calls “the living moment.”

One thing that comes to me is that we often times relate to our own images in life, and not as much to the living quality of life. Rather than seeing person [or situation] as its own living presence, we see them through our own inner images. We all have experiences that form those images, and the spiritual practice really grounds one in the living moment.

All participants in this study articulated similar experiences of contemplative practices as a way to take time out and to cultivate an observant awareness of internal affect. This emotional awareness consistently afforded interviewees an opportunity to notice one's personal feelings with a sense of spaciousness, to be accountable for their emotions, and to make choices about how best to respond to their feelings.

A Sense of the Sacred, a Sense of Structure, Familiarity and Connectedness

Participants discussed the ways that their daily contemplative practices cultivate an experience of being held within something larger than themselves. Interviewees

discussed a sense of familiarity and connectedness with the teachings linked to their practice, a sense of structure that has developed as a result of their practice, and the ways that their practice has helped to nurture an appreciation for the sacred quality of the life experience.

A Sense of Familiarity and Connectedness

Many participants in this study described a feeling of deep familiarity and connectedness to the teachings associated with their practice and to the ways that those teachings inform their daily experiences. One Buddhist practitioner shared that when she first heard the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, she felt as if she were finally at home. She discussed a deep sense of arrival, stating, “I don’t know why I’m connected, but I am so connected, I can’t be not connected. No matter how weird this is, my connection to my teacher just kept dissolving those concepts until eventually, it’s a second nature kind of thing.”

A Hindu practitioner shared the following story about a similar sense of familiarity with her chosen tradition.

Four months after I was meditating regularly, I went to a meeting called by my meditation teacher and they were showing videotapes of Maharishi Mehesh Yogi, who was at that point the head of TM and each week there would be a talk about some spiritual quality like unconditional love, abundance, peace, things like that, and I noticed that I knew exactly what he was talking about. . I just had an innate understanding of the truth of it. I had not done a lot of reading at all about any of this, so that got my attention.

Where some interviewees reflected on their feelings of deep connection and familiarity with a specific tradition or set of teachings, others noted the ways that their practice enhances feelings of connectedness to all living things.

A practitioner of Wiccan traditions talked about the ways that performing her daily practice helps her to remember that she is “a spiritual being in a physical body.”

She noted,

The only thing that needs to be healed is our sense of separation. To remember that I am one with all that is and that the divine has its being-ness through me, that that’s why I’m here. It gives me a sense of empowerment and a sense that anything is possible. It gives me a sense of believing in myself, knowing my worth, giving me a deep sense of well-being.

This participant went on to discuss the ways that, when she is immersed in this feeling of interconnectedness, every aspect of her life is held within that framework.

Interviewees consistently illustrated the ways that feeling connected to something greater than themselves, regardless of the specific tradition, offers new perspectives on life experiences. One participant noted,

Everyone has to find out what it is that makes them feel the connection. It could be sitting in your backyard looking at the stars, what happens [for me,] is that I go into a state of bliss where all of the knots and tensions and doubts and separate feeling, like what I want is out there and I am here, is gone. I am immersed in [the connectedness].

Practitioners consistently noted this feeling of connection as a feeling of containment, support, and immersion.

A Sense of Structure

Participants also talked about finding comfort in the structured tradition of their given practice. Individuals discussed the value of having a framework to guide them in their intention to engage in practices that would be good for them and to disengage from maladaptive practices with a sense of support and tradition behind their decision. Four out of the eleven participants reflected on the ritualistic comfort found in their given tradition and practice.

A practitioner of Orthodox Judaism discussed the ways that committing to what she believes is a literal adherence to the Torah has helped her life to feel much less disjointed. She shared that, as an outsider, Orthodox Judaism seemed very restrictive to her, and she noted that, as an insider, she experiences these traditions as “full of life.” This participant also discussed the ways that adherence to the teachings of the Torah has helped her children to have a sense of identity, safety, and confidence in the world.

Many interviewees reflected on the need for spiritual guidance in their lives before they chose to commit to their given practice. One participant shared,

I got to the point where I wanted to do more than read and talk about these things and I really longed for a tradition that had some weight to it and that was not just something that I created. I needed to be connected with other people and a tradition that said, “These things are real, this is how you work with them, and this is the kind of [role] that it plays in your life.”

The importance of some structured tradition was coupled with the importance of finding a teacher or mentor as a way to learn about applying the principles of the practice in one’s daily life. A Sufi practitioner articulated the importance of a teacher as a bridge between an ancient tradition and a modern practice:

God, for me, was abstract, until I met one of his friends, in a teacher. The major traditions follow great revelations that were given from God to a prophetic being. Part of those experiences that the prophets experienced is what led them to teach and to share that light. In my own tradition the belief is that that very same light has been passed from generation to generation so that the living version of the teachings come through the teacher, who is a living representative in every generation. They embody and transmit that light, and they are also holders of knowledge, so they are the living carriers of the tradition, they carry something that you could never find in a book.

When [we] come in contact with a living presence and a personality, who is a carrier of that light, we recognize in that one a fully flowered version of our self. We then see the possibility of love opening in our being and we really need God in that love. We meet these qualities of the divine, because they are alive. So, I was not attracted because of belief, it was actually coming into contact with a teacher who was a living presence of that love and that mercy and that beautiful

manner and atmosphere that surrounds a great friend of God. When we contact the livingness, that's what attracts us to God. The connection is first. It is the living God, not the idea of God.

Whether found through a doctrine, through a teacher, or as a personal and eclectic creation, all interviews showed that taking time out for contemplative practice each day offers practitioners a sense of structure as a container for their lives.

A Sense of the Sacredness or Preciousness of Life

Many interviewees discussed the ways that performing a daily practice has helped them to develop an appreciation of the sacred nature of their lives and relationships. One participant shared, "I think my perspective became a more spiritual perspective on things, something along the lines of 'things happen for a reason', and there is some higher organizing energy available and here possibly to support me." This practitioner noted that her practice showed her that a connection to the source, whether it is called God or Consciousness, was "the place from which it made the most sense for me to operate from as a human on earth." She stated,

The mantra that I have been using for 19 years now is called Ham So, which translates to "I am that." This acknowledges that I am the same as spirit, as consciousness, as God. This is the recognition that the mantra is God or consciousness and so are you. The idea is to have this recognition about everyone.

Participants described various ways that a sense of the sacred manifests in their lives. One Buddhist practitioner stated, "I think that my practice has helped me to see the preciousness of life and to not waste moments. I see how quickly life goes by, I value that more, and I'm a lot less fearful." In her discussion of the practice of keeping kosher, another participant noted, "It is all about separation and keeping it holy. My

understanding of why we do these things throughout our day is to help make the mundane holy, to elevate ourselves and to elevate our actions.”

An Efa practitioner discussed the power of viewing the mundane as sacred in his own life:

There are ways in which I can feel that [sense of the sacred] more in the small things that I do. I am going to eat my food, and I touch it to my head, and I feel like “wow, biting this apple, or drinking this water is a sacred thing.” Being reminded by the animals that I see that life is a really beautiful, sacred thing, and when I can stay in that, a lot of the details are just details. So the question becomes, “how can I stay with the blessings that I have as I work on the details.” So when I don’t get bogged down by [the details] and focused on what isn’t right, I can think “Okay, what’s really going on? Okay, this wonderful experience is going on.”

In his discussion of the Islamic prayer, or Salat, a Sufi practitioner discussed the ways that pausing to partake in the prayer ritual throughout the day has helped him to re-focus on the divine:

The idea is that it’s not about quantity, but it’s about continuing to turn your heart to delivering God, so that our orientation becomes God. The prayer is a means to an end. The end is to have one’s heart re-focused with the living presence of the divine.

One thing that has become clear is that I no longer am having a struggle about which part of my life belongs to God, or which part of my life belongs to me, or which part belongs to the world. The spiritual practice has unified my life.

My work life and my relationship and all of it is tied into my relationship to God because that is really all that exists. So I can bring myself to all of these relationships with love and presence. When I was younger there was great conflict about this and things feel fuller and more connected as a result of my practice.

In this statement about the benefit of Salat, this practitioner illustrated the ways that an experience of the sacred nature of life, regardless of the specific tradition, can unify and hold the many aspects of an individual’s experience.

In addition to the unifying perspective that appeared to be nurtured by a belief in the sacred nature of life, participants often spoke about the ability to let go and to allow

nature, or God, or a greater force to take its course. One participant shared, “In that morning time it is just me and the earth and the sky and I know that I am just this little thing on this huge beautiful sphere flying through these beautiful stars, and that’s it in that moment, and the rest is all going to keep doing what it does, so don’t worry about it.” This statement articulates the way that letting go of an imbalanced focus on the mundane, and cultivating an awareness of the divine aspects of one’s life, can offer practitioners a sense of peace or surrender.

Practice, Emotion and Soma: Working with the Connection

Interviewees repeatedly noted the connection between practice, emotion, and the somatic experience, stating that the connections between these three aspects of experience are engaged and strengthened through a daily contemplative practice.

The Physical Aspect of the Ritual as a Pathway Back to Center

Participants discussed the importance of the physical aspects of their daily ritual as an aspect of their practice that helps them to engage in their contemplative process. Interviewees reflected on the physical repetition of a given practice as a pathway, with given guidelines, back to a feeling of centeredness. In discussion of the Zen tradition, one participant expressed his experience of the value of the physical guidelines of his practice:

The meditation practice itself and the Sangha/community, and going to the physical building itself, builds this practice of working with your impulses, so entering, exiting, and being in a Zendo is a little bit more formal than entering a church. Entering a Zendo and bowing, or preparing to sit [at home] and bowing, doing all of the formalities, is sort of allowing external guidelines guide us through a process as opposed to our own internal impulses leading us to react in a certain way. And then when were sitting, it’s like, “when you have an itch, do you have to scratch?”

It's the same thing with your thoughts. It's the same thing when you are sitting still and you are not comfortable, do you have to move? When you have a compelling train of thought, do you have to follow it? Sometimes you might, and sometimes you may not need to, so then you can pause, reassess, and then make your decision.

The same applies to everyday life. When you have an experience and you are in the middle of it and you have had this pattern and practice of pulling yourself away from impulsive responses, or at least stopping and looking, and maybe you will say, "Hell, I wanna do those impulsive responses" then you go ahead, but at least you acknowledged it. So it's that meditative practice that transfers into everyday living.

Adherence to repetitive physical patterns and guidelines was continually described as a form of support for practitioners in experimenting with various responses to different triggers. Another benefit appeared to be the cultivation of an acceptance of the way that one chooses to utilize and respond to the guidelines, so an important part of cultivating acceptance included acceptance of the self, even when the individual chooses not to adhere to the guidelines of their given tradition.

Interviewees repeatedly discussed the power of engaging the physical body, in conjunction with the mind, as a way to fully engage in the experience of the practice. In discussion of the ways that Islamic prayer has the power to harmonize many aspects of the self, one participant stated,

Salat is a powerful practice. It is one of the most beautiful, transformative modes of prayer. All the forms of praise are there: the standing, the bowing, the reciting, the silence, the prostration, its like a global tour of prayer. The prayer times follow, very rhythmically, the rhythms of the sun, which is of course the rhythms of nature, the directions, it is very earth based in many ways. I can go to the prayer with my head full of a million things and I can just release myself completely and come back into a kind of harmony.

Interviews repeatedly highlighted the body's potential to signal the mind that one's practice, a moment of self-care, has begun.

Using the Body as the Focal Point for Stilling the Mind

Participants also often discussed the somatic experience as an important focal point in the quest to still the mind. Participants across traditions all talked about the use of breath and taking time to focus in on the somatic experience as a way to return to an internal sense of calm. In discussion of how these principles play out when she is in conflict with her husband, one practitioner stated,

Just the act of pausing, breathing, and feeling into my body allows me to be more present to [my husband] and to listen from a deeper place. Its not like I am waiting for my turn to make my point, there is less of that and there is more space inside of me to let him be who he is. Sometimes when I am really activated, I have to take a pause and close my eyes so that I don't do or say something that I am going to regret. I am able to give myself that space in the midst of interactions.

Many participants noted similar uses of breath as a way to remain centered in difficult interactions. A Zen practitioner discussed the ways that he is taught to use the breath as one way of coming back to stillness.

One technique is you observe your breathing in and out, connecting between the physicality and the internal psyche. One of the things we do is to notice the flow of the air in and out of our bodies. One technique is to notice the cusp between the breathing out and the breathing in. There is, at that moment, a period of stillness. It's by noticing the space between that in and out that you can begin to anchor yourself there, into that stillness. That's one way to do it.

Many practitioners noted that this stillness, or sense of reaching the goal of an experience of inner peace, is rare if it ever does occur as a result of their practice. However, participants reflected on the value of the process of working toward that sense of peace or stillness through observing and contemplating the somatic reactions to their emotions. It was consistently expressed that the goal is more about accepting the physical experience as a part of what is happening internally.

Observing What is Happening in the Body as a Way to Process Emotional Responses

Interviewees also discussed the value of focusing in on the somatic aspect of emotions as a way to calm the mind and to allow the emotional and physical response to take its course. Many times, participants described the ways that their practice has cultivated an ability to bypass their thought processes around deep emotional triggers and go straight into the somatic experience as a way to assess their needs and to take care of those needs. One participant discussed the ways that her practice has helped her to access the information stored in her physical experience in the following way:

I focus on taking a pause, breathing, and listening to my body. Where is the fear, the worry, the anxiety. If I can't figure out what it is, I go to where it is in my body. Meanwhile I'm staying with my breath and just that seems to contain me and calm me down. And then I can find out what it is that I need in order to be more at ease in that moment. Then there is usually some way of talking to myself but I think that essentially, the first action is to take a deep breath and to move into my body and to pay attention to what my body is telling me because I have this trust that my body is going to know what I need in order to calm myself down, to land, to return to a place where I feel safe.

Interviewees repeatedly noted similar skills of being able to access an observant standpoint through focusing on the body. This tool was particularly significant to participants when attempting to calm themselves in moments of intense emotional discomfort.

Participants also discussed the ways that the concrete aspects of their practice have helped them to trust that difficult emotions arise and pass, and that there is a structured approach to dealing with those sensations that will cultivate a calm mental perspective during emotional storms. One Vipassana practitioner shared the following:

When you're sitting with this stuff that comes up, there's like, a concrete way to deal with it. The body starts vibrating, the breath comes short and tense, all this stuff happens, and then . . . the mind will just kind of relax and then the body is just doing this thing that isn't so overwhelming, it's just like, well there's the wind blowing through the trees, the sky is blue, and I feel like there's an old

memory and wound coming up... it's always the same, the sky is blue, the wind blows, and there's this old wound coming up. So when the stuff comes up, my mind just slips into this place of, 'oh yeah, it's all the same,' and then it's not a problem anymore, and then the [emotion] just does it's thing and it vibrates the body and the mind for a little while, and then it's gone. On the one hand, I'm gonna hold this experience and it's gonna move around in my body and my mind and there's gonna be all kinds of things that are gonna happen biochemically, and my mind's pretty calm still, so I don't need to [fix] it, it's just going to work it's way through the body.

Many participants noted that a daily practice has heightened their ability to notice the ways that their thoughts and feelings affect their body. When this occurs, many of the practitioners interviewed discussed an ability to allow the somatic responses to occur with ease, without needing to attach emotional labels to their experience. One participant stated, "I can also feel the feelings that come up, you know, like, the heart racing, and its easier to just feel that without turning that into 'I'm angry, or I'm scared, or I'm nervous' So I want to be present with that and to go on and do what I'm going to do." This statement pointedly articulated an overarching theme about the ways that a daily practice offers practitioners an ability to differentiate between the physical aspects of emotion and the mental aspects of emotion.

It appears that, as emotions arise during a given practice, practitioners strengthen their ability to calm the mind and to trust the wisdom of the body as they attempt to process their experiences. One interviewee articulated this aspect of contemplative practice in the following way:

Part of the meditative process is about learning to shut [the thinking] off long enough to sink down and to feel where it is. The practice is all about stilling your experience so that you can drop deep enough or go high enough, depending on your description, so that you can either look at it, or feel it totally, without your mind telling you what you are feeling. Because your mind will have a story that it will tell over and over again and that's why talking doesn't always work, because

you may just tell the story over and over again. You're not going in and clearing out the block, not that it's not important to communicate.

This quote clearly captures the perspective of the emotional and mental experiences as connected, but not one in the same.

Being the Peace; Cultivating Compassion in Relationship to Others

In discussion of the ways that a daily contemplative practice helped participants to cultivate compassion in relationship to others, interviewees discussed the strengthening of their ability to see aspects of their own experience in other's experiences. Participants also noted an ability to take things less personally in their relationships, to differentiate between their emotions and the feelings of others, and the commitment to cultivate compassion as part of their life's purpose.

Seeing Oneself in Others

Participants frequently noted the ways that their practice has helped them to see the many aspects of themselves more clearly. This capacity for insight appeared to inform participant's abilities to identify aspects of their own struggle in the lives of others as well. A Zen practitioner articulated this in the following way:

I think my practice helps me soften my responses or understanding or interpretation of other peoples reactions, how they are reacting to me. Precisely because I can see, a lot of the times, . . . that the ways that other people are responding are ways that I also can respond too. Not [necessarily] in this circumstance, but maybe I have in the past, so that helps me soften my response to other people and to my external circumstances. Knowing that I also have the capacity to respond in helpful and in un-helpful ways. Knowing that there are times when it is difficult for me to respond skillfully helps me to soften that relationship to others.

Participants repeatedly noted that an increased capacity to accept their internal processes also informs their ability to accept the processes of others.

In discussion of the practice of Buddhist Meta meditation, a meditation focused on loving kindness, one practitioner noted the ways that Meta meditation has made her much more compassionate to what others are going through. She stated, “I’ve really developed the ability to see that I am special and I’m not so special. Other people are exactly like me. They are also suffering.” In a discussion about the way that his practice has informed his relationship to people who he might see as oppressors, one participant noted the way that he makes sense of his ideas of what is right and what is wrong, stating,

It’s hard because I came from a perspective of there being right and there being wrong. It still feels that way, but I have more space for people who would be called oppressors. That they would behave in a certain way and that, fundamentally, I really do have to respect and honor them as a human being.

This theme of honoring the humanness of one’s own limitations and the limitations of others arose repeatedly in interviews as an integral aspect of compassion.

In addition to cultivating acceptance of others, interviewees discussed the ways that their practice has helped them to acknowledge their personal judgments and limitations. Participants consistently discussed the ways that the compassionately observant viewpoint has helped them to use difficult interactions with others as opportunities to reflect on the potential for personal growth toward a more expansive experience of inner peace. One interviewee articulated this perspective in the following way:

If I am judging someone, I will go in my mind and think about what I do that’s kind of like that person. When I catch myself complaining about somebody, this helps me to think “well, I’ve got problems too.” I get pissed off and complain sometimes, . . . on a certain level I understand that we are human and I can forgive [them] because anytime you run into a challenge with another person, it’s mirroring something in you.

This approach to the cultivation of compassion was a theme that repeated itself throughout the interviews, and across the various traditions represented in this study.

Taking Things Less Personally

Many interviewees discussed the ways that their practice has helped them to identify the suffering of others, and to take their expressions of that suffering less personally. All participants noted the ways that their practice has helped them to recognize that we are all dealing with our own suffering and that suffering often plays out in relationship to others. A Buddhist participant discussed the ways that the “larger” view that has developed through her personal practice applies to interactions with others:

The first thing is taking things less personally and recognizing that whatever they are coming at you with is their own suffering and delusion, so there is a sense of compassion for them, versus feeling attacked and getting defensive, or feeling a rush of whatever. There is some kind of larger view of experience versus that kind of in the moment [viewpoint].

Another participant discussed this same quality of relationship, but framed it as the cultivation of generosity, “Not taking things all that seriously or personally. Cultivating generosity, this includes being generous in interpretation... this allows me to not build upon the actions and reactions of others.” This statement highlights an understanding that the actions of others are based upon things that he could not possibly know. This quality of understanding was emphasized throughout all the interviews.

The perceptual differentiation between truth, or inner peace and acceptance, and illusion, or one’s personal wounds and belief systems, appeared to aid participants in the pursuit of a compassionate viewpoint in relationship to others. A practitioner of Wicca

and New Thought traditions articulated the ways that differentiating between a person's illusions and their "true nature" aids her in the development of compassion, stating,

I strive to remember that each person is a divine being and that when they are in their story, it's not the truth of who they are either. I hold people in compassion as much as I possibly can. When I find that I am in judgment I often go into prayer. I have been at this for so long that it is very rare for something to come up that does not go into some kind of process. Learning to pray with people [strengthens my compassion], holding space for them as they remember the truth of who they are and seeing through the layers of their story. Prayer is an incredibly powerful tool that can support people in shifting their own consciousness. For me, compassion is about remembering that others are human, having this human experience. It's about shifting my own consciousness so that I remember the truth of who they are and that has an impact on others.

Overall, participants noted their interest in identifying and working with their own suffering, and in supporting others in similar processes through the expression of compassion for their experience.

Differentiating between One's Own Feelings and Interpretations and the Feelings of Others

All interviewees reflected on the ways that their practice has strengthened their ability to identify and accept their own emotional responses and to differentiate between their emotions and the emotions, reactions, and experiences of others. One participant discussed her ability to identify and calm her personal feelings in order to be present for her husband's feelings, even when she is emotionally triggered.

I go into my body if my husband should do or say something that upsets me. This allows me to see him more and to sense him, so that a kind of empathy or compassion comes in a lot more where I am not entirely identified with my activated emotions. I am able to make a little bit more room without it having completely to do with what he is triggering in me. I am able to have more of an empathy, I guess, like a feeling into him as well that allows me to not be so argumentative or want to fight for what I want or what I need.

Participants discussed the ways that their ability to calm their personal emotional reactions can offer a sense of healthy boundaries with other people, as well as a sense of empathy and an ability to tolerate other people's pain or dysfunction.

Interviews repeatedly highlighted the idea that by really being able to know what you are feeling that you may then be able to discern what is yours, what is not, and how you want to handle what is happening. The ability to make choices about how to respond to one's own feelings allows for one to make thoughtful choices about how they want to treat other people as well. One participant made the following statement about the ways that she seeks to expand her perception when she is feeling emotionally triggered:

Whenever someone triggers anything it's just not always about you. Part of it is, because it's bringing something up, but you don't know if your experiencing it to support the other person, or what the potential learning is in that. [When it happens to me] I try to close my eyes and take a few deep breaths, I'll call someone I love who can hold up a mirror and remind me how I want to handle the situation, or I will go read something if I can.

Additionally, many participants reflected on the ability to move forward with compassion only after they have fully identified their personal triggers in a given situation. One interviewee discussed the ways that the Meta, or Loving Kindness meditation has helped her to find the root of her emotional reactions in some cases:

Because you have this person in focus [during the Meta meditation], you have the time to work it out. I realize how it's all in my mind. As I do this practice, I begin to realize how crazy I'm being! Once I did this practice for a year about these two people that were really triggering for me, and one day it suddenly hit me why I couldn't stand these two people, suddenly, like a flash. I found the old wound that I could tap into to understand it, and then that feeling was gone, and it didn't come back. When you are doing the practice all the time, you are realizing where the source of the contempt actually is. I started to realize that it was not about the other people, but rather about what they represented. They represented something very strong to me. Once I figured it out, I could understand where it was coming from and then I could stop judging myself, or them, for being crazy. They were not doing anything to me; it was me doing it to myself.

The identification of, and responsibility for one's personal process was viewed as integral to the development of compassion in all interviews in this study.

Compassion and Generosity as a Life Purpose

Many participants discussed the ways that their practice has led them to integrate compassionate principals into their perception of their life's purpose. One participant articulated this point when she stated,

My practice has brought me to a sense that my purpose in the world is just to be really, really loving and kind. It's that level of loving presence and that level of deep embrace and acceptance. I feel that my practice shows me that life is simple; it's about being really compassionate loving and kind. I am also able to look at my family with a real openness to who they are and I am able to just be in the unknown and the mystery of life and the uncertainty of life doesn't feel so daunting to me anymore. My practice has created a simplicity and a clarity about my purpose.

This notion that the cultivation of a compassionate viewpoint can increase one's experience of clarity, simplicity, and/or openness was articulated in all interviews.

All participants spoke about the development of compassion as a way to serve and benefit others. In the following statement, one interviewee reflected on his evolution from viewing his practice as a way to benefit himself into the view of his practice as a way to care for and benefit all living beings:

At first I thought, "Well, the path is really about undoing these knots, uncovering that light in myself," and that's true, but the path really quickly also became about serving others. I would say that's another very significant change that happened in me from this practice. I just care deeply about other people's happiness and I want to help other people. My prayer is often "Please Allah, align me with people who I can help, so I can bring ease to the world." I see now that I have a great capacity to help people and to bless people and so if I am just all full of myself all of the time, I can't even see these people. This practice has given me tools to stay awake and attentive to the moment so that I will notice. The fruit of the Sufi path is service to others, with no catch. It's not that we try to get people to become Sufi, or that we even talk about Allah. It's just that we try to feed

people the honey of the heart. It is important to say that I want to be guided to how I really am made to help people and not settling for a false sense of service, because there are ways in which we are really designed to help, and there are plenty of people that I cannot help.

The last sentence of this statement noted the difference between helpful service and unhelpful attempts at fixing the problems of others. Interviews often illustrated this difference by noting the importance of holding a compassionate, or at the very least, a contemplative space for others as the best way to help. This is similar to what participants have stated that they do for themselves while engaged in their given practice. The following quote illustrates the way that participants connected compassion for themselves with the cultivation of compassion for others:

We all suffer and were all in anguish and my job is to protect myself, but also if there is something that I can do to relieve their anxiety, than I want to do that, as long as it does not threaten me in any way. Compassion is love and codependency is pity, and when we do that were not really helping anybody. I think that I do see people suffering now, all around me, in a way that four years ago I didn't.

In discussion of offering compassion and support to others in their struggle, one participant noted that this is an foundational piece of his life, stating, "I think that we are all parts of one body, and it's like I can either be a cancer cell or I can be a life giving healthy cell that helps other cells." This perspective on life, and the interconnection of all human beings as similar to, or connected to the self, was repeatedly illustrated throughout interviewees' discussions of their practice.

Relief from Suffering: Ways of Being with What Is

Participants consistently noted the ways that their practice has impacted the experience of suffering in their lives. Major themes were the experience of suffering as the initial impetus to engage in a daily practice, the development of an ability to sit with

one's own suffering and to make choices in the midst of suffering, and the melting of dualistic perceptions that may lead to suffering. Participants also noted the ways that their practice has helped them to develop an internal loving presence in relationship to their suffering, and has strengthened their sense of resilience, decreasing the duration of experiences of intense emotional suffering.

Suffering and Stress as the Initial Impetus to Practice

Many interviewees stated that their desire to decrease their experiences of stress and suffering led them to commit to a daily contemplative practice. Participants frequently noted that something in the practice seemed to make them feel better, and that this is what initially drew them into their particular tradition. Participants stated that, prior to their exposure to contemplative practice, they had a feeling that relief from suffering was somehow possible.

Participants often described their practice as a way for them to take care of the parts of themselves that are experiencing suffering. One participant made the following statement that enveloped many of these overarching themes.

I began with it as a stress reduction technique. I had heard about it and I was doing well at that point, but I just felt like there was an element of struggle and I felt like it didn't make sense that it had to be that way. So, I tried meditating and I just took to it right away and I've done it ever since.

This belief in the possibility of modifying one's own relationship to, or experience of suffering appears to be integral to engagement in a daily contemplative practice.

Cultivating an Ability to Sit with the Discomfort and Make Choices in the Midst of Suffering

Participants consistently noted the ways that their practice has helped them to develop an ability to sit with uncomfortable internal affect that may arise during their practice, as well as throughout their daily lives. Interviewees also discussed an ability to identify and make choices about the ways that they would like to interact with their own feelings and with the given situation. One participant stated,

The big thing for me is that I'm less anxious, I worry less, I can be more compassionate towards myself, I think that's a really big one, and that ability to pause before I say or do something. This has all developed gradually over a period of time.

Another participant discussed the importance of cultivating internal stillness as a way to create a sense of space from the suffering. He noted that, from this sense of spaciousness, he is able to identify his choices in relationship to his emotional reactivity. He articulated this process in the following way:

The cultivating of stillness is to give your self space. To practice giving yourself space in the midst of, you could say chaos, or being in motion, or caught up, giving you a space there so that you can stop and see and say, "what do I want to do now?" I would say that a lot of the times I'm like, "Hell, I wanna suffer" and then I just go on. So it doesn't mean that by having stillness that you will be doing the next skillful thing. It means that you give yourself the chance to stop and see and then say, "What would you like to do next?" It's not a guarantee that by doing this you will be more skillful, absolutely not.

This development of an ability to honor and accept one's one role in the choices made around their suffering appeared to be integral to a strengthened sense of peace and empowerment, despite one's given emotional state.

Across traditions and contemplative practices, practitioners discussed the development of an ability to sit with discomfort and difficult feelings without attempting to distract oneself or run from the discomfort, but rather to examine what the feelings are.

It was repeatedly stated that, through the process of sitting with one's difficult feelings, individuals gain the ability to get to the core beliefs that may be the cause of their suffering. One Buddhist practitioner made the following statement in regards to this process:

To develop real patience, I think that you have to have the ability to sit with discomfort and those yuck feelings and not run from them. It is the ability to sit with and sort of examine what you are feeling. That's a meditation practice that we are taught. If you are angry and you can catch the anger, or feeling any emotion that may make us uncomfortable, or bring up aversions that we have, or pride, or jealousy. If we can sit with [those emotions] without having to distract yourself, or to harm yourself or someone else. To have the ability not to call that person up and yell at them or fight, but just to be silent, and to feel yourself, to just feel your feelings and just stay with the discomfort and know that just like everything else, it changes and it goes away. Were just like these energy conduits, but we don't stop for long enough to feel what's really going on. And so if you develop the capacity to just sit there and actually feel what you're feeling instead of running away from it all the time, that's a meditation. That's another mindfulness meditation right there. You then have the ability to realize that your fears are actually just thoughts you're making up. They're not based in the present moment. They're in the future always.

It appears that, through observing one's own discomfort, individuals come to realize the beliefs that are causing them to suffer, and the choices that they have in relationship to those beliefs.

The Melting of Duality

Participants reflected on the ways that their dualistic perceptions of good and bad tended to diminish as a result of their daily practice. This theme is relevant to practitioner's experiences of suffering because the perception of suffering as a negative, or undesirable occurrence is perceived to multiply one's experience of suffering. One Buddhist practitioner articulated the melting of duality in the following statement:

Everything is the path. There isn't anything that isn't the path. So whatever your circumstance, that's what you're working with. You may choose

to leave it, or you may choose to stay, but whatever it is, it's still the path. There's not, "This is better," or "That's worse."

Many participants shared in an experience that their practice has helped to transform the ways that craving, desire, and aversion inform their behavioral and emotional responses. The overarching sentiment, across traditions, was that practitioners were able to move from feelings of victimization to an experience of feeling compelled to hold a compassionate space for the experience of suffering within themselves, as well as within others. One interviewee stated,

You turn your victimization into something positive. In that way, you can actually use something uncomfortable that you couldn't get away from as a way to accept being uncomfortable and to carry on . . . You use your suffering for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The ability to shift one's perception of a circumstance from a victimizing experience to an empowering experience was a theme that repeatedly arose throughout all of the interviews.

The perspective of the self as a container of the suffering appeared to enable participants to perceive their difficult circumstances as a part of a greater experience, or meaning. Participants consistently discussed their practice as a tool for transforming their own suffering into an opportunity for personal growth. In this way, practitioners, bypass perceptions of an emotion as negative or positive, and rather engage with that emotion as a way to nurture their practice. A Sufi participant discussed the ways that these principals play out in his own life:

Allah sends us calamities for our own learning. The Sufi learns to recognize that God is not absent when some kind of misfortune befalls us. It is all by divine permission. We stop wishing for something other than the life that we have, and we begin to say Alhumdoulilah (thank God) for the life that we have. God has never left. That eye, that careful, watching presence, is always there,

orchestrating events toward my spiritual development. We begin to see everything as part of that great university, including the difficult pieces.

In this statement, the interviewee notes a third way of viewing one's circumstances, rather than labeling something as simply positive or negative.

Being a Loving Presence in Relationship to Suffering

One participant discussed the ways that her practice has increased her capacity to tend to her feelings in a loving way, to calm herself down, and to be less overcome by her emotions. Another interviewee talked about working to be the embodiment of the light in relationship to emotional darkness, or being water in relationship to emotional fire as a way to tend to experiences of suffering:

How do you battle darkness? You be light. That's it. When I was coming out of being really sick, I was seeing, "Wow, there are a lot of people who live in that kind of internal inferno." So I was thinking, if you are living in that kind of inferno, how can I as a healer, even bring the concept of water to somebody when their lived experience is in this inferno, they would not even understand the concept. It came to me that I can be the water, and through that, there is the me, not having to change anything except myself. How do you create what you want instead of fighting against something that you don't like? When we spend our energy creating what we want, the other thing does not matter. I am trying to spend more of my process going in the direction of wholeness. Let me give up the illusions about what I thought happiness was, and let me really search for meaning about my life. My practice is how I was able to notice the presence of water in my pain and confusion.

This statement describes how this individual was able to access an aspect of himself that could be a loving, or balancing presence in the midst of his own suffering and/or the suffering of others.

Another participant articulated a similar process of accessing a loving presence within himself as a way to be with, tend to, or hold space for emotions that could potentially cause suffering:

We've always been taught, on my path, to essentially host whatever comes with love. There is a beautiful poem by Rumi about life as a guesthouse and there is always a new visitor coming. Sometimes it's an angry visitor, sometimes it is an anxious visitor, sometimes it is a scared visitor. As these states come to me, I recognize that they are like a visitation and they have something to teach me. You might say that the jewel of presence in the heart is that we are able to remember that there is a host also. So that we don't get caught up in saying, "Oh, I'm a horrible this," or, "I'm such a that."

The idea is to remember is that the core of us is love and that is the host, the idea is to lovingly host. Of course, some states are harder to deal with than others, so there are tools directly from the tradition . . . I am not trying to become something other than human. My spiritual path is about becoming more human, and so that means I say yes to the full spectrum of the human experience. My spiritual path is certainly not about trying to banish all of that vulnerable terrain from my experience. My own most powerful tool is to welcome it, to know in my heart that the wounds, and the anger and vulnerability are okay and beautiful. A lot of the ideas of enlightenment are about going beyond all of that, where you wouldn't suffer anymore. I don't believe that.

On my path, I find that the most enlightened people that I have met cry quite easily, and they're deeply moved by things, and they're deeply vulnerable. My own path is, in some ways, about honoring the idea that the jewel is what shines out in all of us. None of that diminishes the jewel of the human heart, the radiance of God that is there . . . As soon as I was able to say that to myself, then I was able to extend that to other people also. These experiences are difficult, they don't put us in our ease, or in our bliss, and I'm not saying that I want people to suffer. But we are already suffering, so rather than trying to turn it off; I want to affirm that that's a part of God too. That doesn't close the door to love.

This idea of there being a host, or an internal loving presence that is a part of every human, or a sacred, medicinal quality to suffering, was a recurrent theme in the discussion of suffering throughout all of the interviews for this study.

Resilience: A Decrease in the Intensity and Duration of the Suffering

Participants consistently noted the ways that their practice has resulted in a strengthened sense of resilience and a reduction in overall intensity and duration of emotional pain. One participant articulated this in the following way:

It doesn't mean that I still don't feel pain and suffer, but it dissolves more quickly than it used to. It's like something's got it's hand on your brain and its just clamped down and you can't possibly escape it, it's sort of like now it can clamp, but it can kind of let go. You're still riding the waves, whether it's calm or tumultuous, but you are not drowning. You've got your head above water.

This individual was able to articulate an experience of “riding the waves” rather than “drowning.” Noting that pain and suffering continues to occur in her life, but recognizing her ability to be with those feelings, rather than being overcome by her feelings.

Another participant spoke about this phenomenon as in the following way:

There was no radical transformation, and I certainly still have triggering and I create suffering for myself still, but it feels like it doesn't last as long. I think I am able to intervene and modulate and work with myself. Stressful things do happen in my life, but it doesn't bring me to a place of negativity and hopelessness and all that deep suffering. I don't take myself so deep into it anymore and I can bring myself a resiliency. I feel more resilient and it feels easier to be alive and sort of happier to be myself.

This statement again illustrates an ability to intervene before, or shortly after being brought into a deep sense of emotional suffering. Other participants also discussed the result that this ability to intervene internally has had on their lives. One practitioner stated,

I don't need drugs or alcohol anymore. I don't feel as angry as I used to. I used to get into a lot of fights when I was younger, I do not need that anymore. I have resolved a lot of family karma issues with myself, I feel fairly satisfied with that. There are some issues that I don't think I will ever be totally satisfied with, or are ever going to be completely worked out, I don't know how to do it, or I know how but I don't feel like it right now.

My goal was to feel good a little bit every day, because I think that makes a huge difference. Being out of pain for a moment or a few moments helps me to

handle a lot more. I am sure that there are unresolved issues, I am not completely realized yet, but for now, whatever it is that I'm doing has changed me.

The above statement articulates the practitioner's ability to notice, and focus upon the moments when he is feeling good, and to allow that experience to affect the way that he relates to his pain. Another participant discussed the tools that she uses in her practice and her resulting experience of increased emotional resilience in the following way,

Anxiety and depression are much less frequent and strong now. I use affirmations to remember that what I am feeling right now is okay, and to remember that it's not the truth, it's an illusion. I will go to prayer or meditation, or I will call a prayer partner to go into prayer around something... to remember the truth. I am very fortunate to be surrounded by a community that I can call upon to remind me what is true.

Throughout all interviews, there was a general sentiment that honoring the value of ones personal feelings and the feelings of others may allow emotional processes to take their course more rapidly and with less resistance.

Dropping the Story: Encompassing Non-Conceptual Experiences

Throughout the interview process, participants frequently struggled to articulate and apply non-conceptual experiences to conceptual frameworks. Individuals being interviewed often spoke about a realm outside of time and space. When asked to consider why they believe that their contemplative practice works, interviewees consistently responded that they did not know why their practice worked for them, and that they were not sure that a similar practice would work for others in the same ways that it has worked for them.

Attempting to Discuss Non-Conceptual Experiences

Many participants discussed an experience of recognition, expansion, or stillness at fleeting moments during their practice. When I asked one Buddhist participant if she thought that experience was an experience of the mind, or something else, she responded, “I don’t go there, because any time you go there, it’s more concepts.” When I asked another interviewee about his beliefs regarding the forces that direct his experience, he stated, “It’s not that everything is out of our control and it’s not that everything is in our control. Even framing things in that way just misses it. It’s not even about that at all.”

When asked to describe what happens to him when he practices, another participant explained, “It’s hard to describe because it’s not on the superficial level of things. It’s gone far beyond the usual, outer practices of things and gone into the more primordial underground of what the practices are on a personal level for me.” This struggle to verbally articulate the fullness of one’s experience and perceptions of their given practice pointed to non-conceptual aspects of each contemplative practice.

Accessing an Experience beyond Time and Space

When asked about the ways that her practice has informed her sense of who she is in the world, one interviewee responded in the following way:

Who I am, well, that is the question, isn’t it? Hopefully the “who I am” is less and the realization is more, the wisdom is increasing and my personality and belief in who I am in this life, in my body, is less.

Participants repeatedly discussed this interest in letting go of conceptual thinking as a way to access pure energy, or experience. Many interviewees talked about letting the thoughts go and returning to the breath, or “dropping the story line and staying with the underlying experience.” In a discussion about this non-conceptual aspect of contemplative practice, another practitioner stated,

It's an opportunity to come in touch with that space that doesn't have a name or a place... I feel like when I'm on [meditation] retreat there's something beautiful that happens... it's terrifying and it's frustrating, and it's like everything that I feel like can happen to me in life happens while I'm on retreat, but it's just there's a safe container to be in all that stuff.

Many participants noted the importance of, and/or the struggle to integrate their non-conceptual experiences into the conceptual frameworks of daily life. In a discussion regarding the distinction between his experience of conceptual reality and his non-conceptual experiences, one interviewee made the following statement:

In regards to the absolute and the relative things, there are traditions which go inward to find the ultimate source and the divine, and there are traditions that go out to do that. For me, I access different directions at different times. Sometimes meditation and that inward experience is the vehicle which has the most caring capacity. Other times, being out in the nature with my attention and focus outwards and seeing and experiencing the resonance of an outward with an inward, "Here are my thoughts and prayers and I see this effect outside of me," that says to me "Yes, this is correct and this is the acknowledgement from the universe", from something that appears to be external. There is something very special in what we call synchronicity. These are markers that tell me that things are as they should be. This is the way to be, this is the connection, keep going, this is as it should be.

This statement articulated a common theme expressed by practitioners, who stated that they have increased their ability to encompass conceptual and non-conceptual experiences as a result of their practice. These interviewees also noted an increased ability to process experiences without having to define those experiences in conceptual ways. Another participant articulated this point when he stated,

There is a belief that something is either in your head or it's out there physically, but there a third realm that they're missing. It's the energetic realm. If you take an experience and you energize it, put it on an energy level, you can handle it so much better. Like an emotion, turn it into an energy that you can look at, rather than just an idea, or a physical outburst. And a lot of religions and paths work this way. And often with psychology, you can sit there and talk about something, but it never gets resolved because there is an energy stuck somewhere.

An additional participant took this conversation a step further when he discussed his experience of blurring distinctions between what is his practice, or his spiritual life and what is not.

At a certain point you stop making distinctions between what is spiritual life, spiritual practice, and what isn't. The Sufi path is very integrated into the world so that we recognize that there isn't enough time to go analyze our relationship to God only during Zikr or prayer, it has to permeate our entire lives.

The attempt to make distinctions while cultivating a perception of interconnectedness with, and acceptance of all that exists poses a challenge when attempting to conceptualize some aspects of contemplative practice.

Letting Go of Trying to Understand How and Why Contemplative Practice Works

When questioned about what she believes works about her practice, one participant stated, "It isn't really definable, what works, you can't say, 'that will work.' It's not really in that realm of definition. It's not within a conscious, conceptual framework." When asked about how her practice actually changes her perceptions, another participant replied, "I don't know *how* it works, but doing something repetitively over and over, it seems to just wear you down." Another interviewee was asked about what specific aspect(s) of his practice have helped him to heal his suffering and he made the following statement:

Sometimes it doesn't really matter who is choosing or where it comes from. I didn't really do anything; I didn't really get myself better. Whether it's my ancestors, Orisa, the divine in whatever way, creation in whatever way, there is this feeling of grace that I was helped and supported and led to where I am.

Its not about my control of my will, its about whatever this human existence really is, and it can be really personal and not at all personal. When we tap into the universal source, there is this endless river. So the question becomes how to we allow it to move through [us].

This statement points to a non-conceptual energy that moves through all people and notes the choice we have in how we allow that energy to come through in our daily lives. One participant spoke briefly about what he believes happens when contemplative practice brings him an experience of healing:

It's not conceptual, it's energetic. The practice breaks the mind that takes everything and boxes it. You learn to bypass that part of the mind. It's like a hose with lots of kinks in it. You take the kinks out and the water just flows naturally. That's all it is.

This release of conceptual frameworks was a common theme that posed challenges in regards to articulation of what specific aspects of contemplative practice foster experiences of emotional healing.

What Keeps People Coming Back?

Many participants in this study reflected on experiences of freedom, of healing, and of facing personal limitations as aspects of their practice that have strengthened their ongoing commitment to performing a daily practice. In her discussion of what has kept her returning to her practice, one participant stated:

Many times it is extremely wonderful and positive and liberating and that sense of home and a sense of taste of the lineage and the blessings, and being in ones own nature. At other times it is really hard and you never know what is going to be there and as karma gets purified, it isn't always a piece of cake. It can be quite difficult to sit there and look at your mind day after day. Its not always pleasant, but I have taken vows that I want to become enlightened for the benefit of myself and for all other sentient beings, so that motivation is what continues to help me move through. My connection to my teachers and my devotion to the practice is why I keep coming back, even if it's hard . . . I keep going . . . because for me, at this point, there is no other choice. I am on the path come hell or high water. There is no possibility of not doing it. Suffering is what brought me to want to practice. Something made me feel better, so I kept coming to it.

Many Interviewees noted the ways that they have come to know themselves more deeply through their newfound tools for self-care. One individual made the following comment in regards to this topic:

The thing that increasingly strikes me is that I know so little of myself really. The more I sit and be with myself, the more of a mystery it actually is because I notice myself responding in ways that I had not acknowledged... the amazing capacity... the mysteriousness of myself. There is also the softening of myself a lot more.

The experience of self-discovery and healing was repeatedly articulated as an inspiration for continuing to engage in a daily practice.

Many participants reflected on the ways that their lives have changed as a result of their practice. One participant noted that the life improvements that he has experienced overall have kept him committed to the minimum of two hours, beginning at four a.m. each day, which he spends in meditation:

Sometimes it will come over me in the middle of the day and its like, “Oh, that’s why I’m doing this” I have to remember when I am feeling so good and there is no reason why. I go through spells where it’s like, “Why am, I doing this? Nothing is happening,” and I start getting restless and then I get a breakthrough where it’s like better than it’s ever been. And I’m like “Wow, I am so glad I am doing this.”

I think that I’m going to live a lot longer that my mom did. I am in communication with my children, and it’s not perfect, that’s for damn sure, but I’m not going to regret that I hit my kids or that I was drunk all the time or that I did not show up here or there. My daughter is safe and has not been molested. That’s doing good for my family. I’m still with my wife after 20 years, and everyone has been divorced in my family over and over again, that’s a success. I work hard and I work a lot to take care of my family.

The quality of endurance and healing exemplified in the above statement was echoed throughout the interviews for this study. Practitioners consistently noted concrete examples of emotional healing in their lives as a result of their daily contemplative practice. Experiences of healing and an increased capacity for self acceptance and self

nurturance were discussed throughout the interviews and were cited as opportunities to aid in the betterment of the world. This perspective was repeatedly cited as the reason that practitioners in this study have remained committed to their daily practice for five or more years.

Summary

This chapter presented findings from eleven of twelve semi-structured interviews with practitioners of daily contemplative practices from various traditions. Findings highlighted the ways that engagement in a daily contemplative practice may increase practitioner's abilities to observe, contain, tend to and regulate experiences of intense internal affect. Practitioners reported various ways that their practice aids them in attempts to contain and regulate their emotions. All participants felt that their daily practice had helped them to deal with intense affect, internally and externally, more effectively.

The following chapter will compare the findings of this study with the current literature highlighted in the literature review chapter of this document. The text will discuss the similarities and differences between contemplative practice and the Internal Family Systems Model of psychotherapy. Chapter V will also discuss the clinical implications that arise from the findings. Lastly, the following chapter will discuss the limitations of this study and will address ideas for further research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The objective of this exploratory study was to examine the ways that various daily contemplative practices may aid practitioners in their ability to contain and regulate varied emotional states. The purpose of this study was to explore whether a consistent daily contemplative practice may serve a similar purpose to the IFS model, which is to foster an internal holding environment in which the relational patterns of the sub-personas may be compassionately observed and potentially re-patterned.

This study found that contemplative practices do appear to nurture the human capacity to develop an internal container, or holding environment, for regulation of varied affective experiences. The study aimed to compare the reported experiences of contemplative practitioners with the model for affect containment and regulation put forth in the Internal Family Systems (IFS) model of psychotherapy. (Schwartz, 1995) This chapter discusses the findings in the following order: key findings, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research, and implications of the findings for clinical psychotherapy.

Key Findings

The majority of the findings highlighted similarities between the ways that daily contemplative practices and the IFS model of psychotherapy support affect containment and regulation. Findings show that daily contemplative practice may facilitate or support similar processes to the IFS method of strengthening an individual's identification with

the true Self, or the compassionate observer, and the recognition of sub-personas, internal objects, or narratives. Additionally, findings illustrated the ways that daily contemplative practices offered practitioners time and space to observe the ways that their sub-personas may interact in patterns that cause emotional suffering and dysregulation. Findings revealed that practitioners of daily contemplative practices strengthened their ability to compassionately observe, tend to, contain, and regulate varied affective states from a compassionate perspective, similar to the perspective of the true Self in the IFS model. (Schwartz, 1995)

Participants consistently noted the ways that their engagement in a daily contemplative practice has helped them to observe their affective states from a viewpoint that is aware of, yet not consumed by emotion. This experience is similar to the development of an internal holding environment, a meta perspective, or a true Self identity in IFS. “The goal [of the IFS model] is to keep the feared feelings and thoughts from spilling over the inner walls so that the system remains safe and the person is able to function in life” (Schwartz, 1995, p. 49). One of the integral concepts of the IFS model is that the emotional container is the true Self and that perceiving ones emotional states from the perspective of the true Self can lead to internal healing, affect containment, and emotional regulation. “It is the Self which has the ability to achieve a meta perspective on one’s own inner predicament and compassionately view the situation of the parts/ sub-selves” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 26).

As a result of their daily contemplative practice, participants noted increased access to compassionate, accepting, and confident aspects of themselves when in difficult emotional situations. This experience reflects aspects of the IFS model that aim to

strengthen one's ability to engage these true Self qualities when in the midst of affective turmoil. Identification with the true Self in IFS and the compassionately observant viewpoint that appears to be cultivated through daily contemplative practice may offer individuals and opportunity to contain, observe, and regulate varied emotional states. Within a clinical setting, psychotherapists may model an external compassionate holding environment that clients can potentially internalize as an additional way to cultivate this true Self identity.

Participants in this study noted a sense of spaciousness that their practice has helped them to cultivate when they are experiencing strong emotions. Schwartz's model (1995) noted that, as individuals access the resources of the true Self, they are able to step back from a feeling of being consumed by intense affective states such as rage, judgment, fear, etc. and can view their emotional responses from a calmer, more balanced standpoint. This commonality between contemplative practice and the IFS model of psychotherapy suggests that the compassionately observant viewpoint, or identification with the true Self, may offer individuals similar tools in affect containment and regulation. Clinicians might therefore consider introducing contemplative tools and encourage clients to prioritize time for inner reflection as ways to cultivate affect regulation and containment.

All participants discussed the ways that their practice has helped them to experience a sense of the sacred, a sense of structure, and/or a sense of deep familiarity with their practice and with the teachings connected to their practice. This experience again relates with the development of the true Self identity in IFS, as the re-discovery of the true Self is said to allow individuals the opportunity access their innate abilities to

value, observe, and tend to internal relational patterns between the sub-personas.

(Schwartz, 2008) Both IFS and the contemplative practices included in this research offer strengths-based methods of intervention, as they are established upon a belief that each individual has a true Self and an ability to compassionately contain, regulate, and tend to challenging internal affective states. As clinicians introduce contemplative methods to their clients, they may offer clients an opportunity to access unidentified, innate internal resources.

Interviewees repeatedly noted the connection between their practice, their emotions, and their somatic experience. The strengthening of the perceived connection between the physical experience, the emotional experience, and the psychological experience was shown to enable practitioners to differentiate between thoughts, feelings and somatic sensations. Working with these connections and differentiations appeared to help participants step out of their identifications with the sub-personas (Schwartz, 2008) and to step into identification with the true Self. Schwartz notes the significance of somatic experiences as ways to access the narratives of one's sub-personas. This is particularly significant to the vast success that Schwartz has had in using the IFS model to individuals who suffer from eating disorders and other anxiety-based diagnoses. (Schwartz, 1995)

All interviewees discussed the ways that their practice has helped them to cultivate compassion for themselves and for others. Participants repeatedly articulated that their practice has helped them to identify internal narratives, or sub-personas that may cause them suffering, and to compassionately witness and make choices in relationship to those sub-personas. For instance, when participants talked about their

strengthened ability to notice and make choices in relation to intense emotional triggers and responses, they were naming the identification of internal narratives that could be seen as similar to sub-personas in IFS. (Schwartz, 1995) Findings showed that, for participants, an increased ability to compassionately relate to one's own sub-personas and emotional responses led to an increased capacity for compassionately relating to the sub-personas, narratives, and emotions of others as well, leading to a strengthened ability to contain and regulate varied affective states.

The concept of the IFS model (Schwartz, 1995) is to apply a family systems approach to shifting the internal relational patterns amongst the sub-personas; this intervention requires external guidance from a trained clinician. Although a strengthened identification with the true Self, or internal container, appears to develop through contemplative practice without any theoretical intervention, interviewees repeatedly noted the importance of external support, particularly when acute affective states arise. Participants consistently acknowledged that access to some perceived external structure, teacher, or tradition was integral in the re-patterning and balancing of internal relational patterns. The external teachings connected with a given practice may offer a theoretical framework to contemplative practitioners similar to the presence of a trained clinician and the application of systems thinking in IFS. More research would be needed in order to assess the outcomes of internal family systems interventions versus contemplative practice traditional teachings as they relate to individuals' abilities to shift internal relational patterns.

Participants consistently articulated the ways that daily contemplative practice has offered them relief from emotional pain. Similarly to the IFS model, the goal was not to

change the internal personas, narratives, objects and relational systems, but rather to witness, value, and tend to the internal narrative and the resulting affective experience.

The IFS perspective submits that all of the sub-personas; the Managers, Firefighters, and Exiles, have intrinsic value and were established as a way to protect the individual from painful experiences (Schwartz, 2008).

Schwartz (1994) has taught that the sub-personas become entrenched and maladaptive because they are often being ignored. The theory is that emotional pain is caused by the sub-personas, as they act out in order to get attention and to do their job of protecting the psyche. If this is the case, then once an individual takes the time to compassionately listen to, value, and learn from the sub-personas, they can use the information stored within each narrative, rather than attempting to block out the wounded internal voices that are causing emotional pain and dysregulation. This process appears to take place within the IFS model and was also illustrated in the interviews with practitioners of a daily contemplative practice. Clinical psychotherapy can also offer individuals the opportunity to de-pathologize the sub-personas and to relate to their internal narrative in new ways.

Interviewees repeatedly noted the challenge of articulating the non-conceptual experiences connected with their daily practice. This was often described as a strengthened ability to let go of reactive mental narratives and to allow for an experience that is completely informed by the moment, by God, or by the higher Self. This reduction of conceptual thinking appears to occur within IFS (Schwartz, 2008) in the ways that the true Self witnesses, values, and tends to the sub-personas, or narratives, which are based

in the past and/or the future, before asking them to step down so that the true self can lead the consciousness, moment by moment.

Schwartz (1994) postulated that the sub-personas are based on narratives, which are informed by past experiences, and that when the sub-personas are leading the psyche, the individual is unable to trust in and to experience the present moment. In IFS, as the internal interactive patterning shifts, the true Self is able to lead the psyche and to open to the present moment. When the true Self is leading the psyche, the internal narratives about past and future diminish, and life becomes less conceptual and more experiential.

This study's findings on varied daily contemplative practices and the research on IFS (Schwartz, 1994, 1995, 2008) showed that when individuals take time out each day to compassionately observe and tend to their internal emotional triggers and responses, they begin to strengthen their identity as the container for their emotions, rather than over-identifying with one particular affective state. This compassionate observance can be supported and guided by therapists within sessions and as an adjunct to clinical treatment.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the limited number of participants in this study, findings offer more depth and less breadth regarding the commonalities across varied contemplative practices and the similarities between these commonalities and the Internal Family Systems approach to psychotherapy. A limited number of traditions and contemplative practices are represented in this study. This study examined the experiences of practitioners who have been engaged in a daily practice from five to twenty years. Future studies might seek

increased specificity regarding the range of time that participants were engaged in a given practice.

The findings of this study suggest that external support and guidance is critical when individuals experience emotional triggers that they do not have the tools to contain and regulate. Future studies might examine affect regulation tools gained through contemplative practice in conjunction with psychotherapy versus contemplative practice as an intervention in lieu of clinical psychotherapy. This might include an examination of the efficacy of contemplative practice with and without any external guidance. Future research may also benefit from the use of brain scans as a way to scientifically determine the physical changes that occur in the brain when contemplative practice and IFS are introduced as tools for affect containment and regulation.

Implications

Daily contemplative practices can clearly enrich psychotherapeutic interventions as an adjunct to clinical treatment. Important aspects of daily contemplative practice across traditions include taking time out each day to observe and care for one's internal emotional states. This act is shown to enrich one's identity as the container for their emotions and to decrease experiences of feeling overwhelmed by temporary affective states. The tools for affect containment and regulation that are offered by contemplative practice can serve clients throughout their lives and these tools can be utilized inside and outside of the clinical setting.

This study revealed that affect regulation and containment tools gained through contemplative practices are not tradition specific. This suggests that therapists can work with clients to create personalized practices, which offer opportunities for identifying

internal relational patterns and for compassionately working to contain and tend to difficult affective experiences. In instances of acute crisis, clients may be unable to contain or regulate their emotional responses. In these cases, therapists might act as an external reflection of the true Self, compassionately holding, observing, and tending to the experience of the activated sub-persona. Schwartz noted the importance of this modeling as a way to teach skills that clients may later internalize and apply. (1995)

Vast opportunities for growth may arise when contemplative practice is integrated with psychotherapy. It appears that the IFS model (Schwartz, 1995) has incorporated many elements of contemplative practice into psychotherapy with great success. All participants in this study stated that a daily contemplative practice helped them to observe, identify, and tend to difficult internal affect. The Internal Family Systems model of psychotherapy also supports individuals in the containment and regulation of their emotions from the perspective of the true Self, which acts as the internal container for the sub-personas and for varied emotional states. Therapists have the opportunity to guide and fortify their clients' development of this internal container, or true Self identity, by guiding and supporting the development of an authentic contemplative practice that allows for time and space to compassionately observe and care for internal narratives, and the resulting affective experiences.

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Appendix A

Human Subjects Review Board Approval

Letter



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February 27, 2010

Jessica Prodis

Dear Jessica,

You revised materials have been reviewed and they are fine. We are glad to give final approval to your very interesting study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ann Hartman, D.S.W.".

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mary Beth Averill, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Greetings,

My name is Jessica Prodis and I am a candidate for a Master's degree in social work from the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA. I am writing to you in hopes that you may be able to assist me with the research that I am conducting for my Master's thesis.

My research is examining the ways that daily contemplative practices affect the emotional experiences of practitioners. I am looking to interview people who have been engaged in a daily contemplative practice for five or more years. For the purposes of this research, contemplative practices are defined as a customary activity performed with the intention to cultivate an individual's personal capacity for reflective attention and insight.

Attached, you will find a flyer about this study. If you know of people who may be good candidates for this research, please forward them the flyer or my contact information.

Thank you for your time.
Have a beautiful day,

Jessica Prodis
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Appendix C

Have you been engaged in a daily contemplative practice* for five or more years?

Are you interested in sharing the ways that this practice has changed your life?

Would you be willing to engage in a 45-75 minute interview for a Master's thesis project focused on the ways that contemplative practice affects our emotional experiences?

If you are interested in being a part of this important research, please contact Jessica:

XXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXX

- **For the purposes of this research, contemplative practices are defined as a customary activity performed with the intention to cultivate your personal capacity for reflective attention and insight.**

Dear Participant:

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. My name is Jessica Prodis and I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA. This study involves research examining various daily contemplative practices. The purpose of my research is to identify ways that contemplative practices may help people to regulate their emotions and to handle their feelings in ways that support the well being of themselves and others. Data collected in this recorded interview will be used in my MSW thesis and in other possible presentations and publications.

I am asking you to participate in this study because you have indicated that you are 18 or older, read and speak English, and have been engaged in a contemplative practice at least four times a week for the past 5 years. As a participant in my research, you will partake in a one on one interview with me that will take 45-75 minutes. I will record the interview and it will be transcribed by me at a later time. The interview questions will focus on your contemplative practice. The interview will look at the ways that your experience of contemplative practice supports your ability to cope with and regulate your emotional states.

The interview process may present possible risks of emotional stress or discomfort if you have experiences that relate to your practice which are difficult for you to talk about. However, you are not required to answer every question, and may choose not to answer any of the questions if you wish. A list of referral resources for counseling services is included with this form.

You also may benefit from this study, as you will have the opportunity to reflect upon the ways that your practice supports your emotional well-being, and information about your tradition will be distributed to other practicing and non-practicing individuals. Involvement may give you an opportunity to contribute to the larger body of knowledge on contemplative practice and clinical social work. I am unable to offer financial compensation for participants in this study.

I will protect your confidentiality by conducting and transcribing the interviews myself. All personal identifiers will be deleted during the transcription process. All information gathered will be stored in a secure location for a period of three years as required by Federal guidelines. Data stored electronically will be password protected. There will be no additional data handlers. In publications and presentations, the data will be presented as a whole and when brief illustrative quotes or vignettes are used, they will be carefully disguised. Should I need the materials beyond the three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer questions or to withdraw from the study at any time until April 15, 2010, when the report will be written. Should you choose to withdraw, all materials pertaining to you will be immediately destroyed. In order to withdraw from this study, you will need to contact Jessica Prodis by phone or email a written request for withdrawal. A letter confirming the withdrawal of your information will be sent to you. You may contact me at any point if you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study; you may also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review

Committee at (413) 585-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Thank you for your participation,
Jessica Prodis

Please keep a copy of this form of your records

Appendix E

Mental Health Referral List

Resources for Counseling Services

Open Door Psychotherapy
www.OpenDoorPsychotherapy.com
Santa Cruz, CA (831) 454-8270

San Francisco Psychotherapy
www.childandadulttherapy.com
Santa Cruz, CA (415) 673-7597

Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center, Santa Cruz, CA
www.scccc.org
Santa Cruz, CA (831) 469-1700

www.NetworkTherapy.com

www.find-a-therapist.com

www.therapistlocator.net

www.goodtherapy.org

www.findcounseling.com

Appendix F

Interview Guide

Section 1: Demographics

What is your gender?

What is your age?

What is your highest level of education?

What is your religious background?

Section 2: Semi-structured interview questions

Tell me about your contemplative practice... How often do you perform this practice?

How long does this practice take?

There will then be follow up questions about their story.

How has your life changed, if at all, as a result of your practice?

How has your practice changed or affected the ways that you deal with your feelings?

How has your practice changed or affected the ways that you deal with the feelings of others?

How has your practice changed your sense of self?

How has your practice affected the ways that you perceive and respond to experiences that are emotionally triggering for you?