

**THE MEANING OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF NONATTACHMENT
FOR LONG-TERM YOGA PRACTITIONERS**

by

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Abstract

Yoga is a popular alternative mental health intervention and an integral component of leading mindfulness-based interventions. Yoga helps with concerns like anxiety and depression (e.g., Field, 2011), but we do not yet understand *how* it helps. With the aim of developing more potent theoretical models of therapeutic yoga, there have been calls in the literature to explore yoga's underlying principles and constructs, and to use qualitative research methods to look at the lived experience of healthy, long-term practitioners (e.g., Field, 2011; Solomonova, 2015). Mindful nonattachment (e.g., Sahdra, Brown, & Shaver, 2010), which is associated with the promotion of psychological freedom, emotion regulation, well-being, and distress tolerance (e.g., Desbordes et al., 2014; Sahdra et al., 2010; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006), is an important underlying construct in yoga and may be a helping factor not only in mindfulness, but across psychotherapeutic modalities. This research project investigates the meaning of the lived experience of nonattachment for four long-term yoga practitioners from Vancouver BC. Using Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, interviews with long-term yoga practitioners were conducted to explore their experience of nonattachment in detail. Six superordinate themes emerged: *a flexible identity in relationship, developing nonattachment moment by moment, how to see things differently, processing lived experience, choosing freedom, and framework for a way of life*. Areas of congruence with the literature and novel findings are discussed in view of the relevant literature on nonattachment and on self-regulatory features of yoga.

Preface

This thesis is an original and independent work by the author. All work, including design, participant recruitment, data collection, transcription, analysis, and manuscript write-up were completed by the author. Dr. Marla Buchanan, the research supervisor, provided editorial assistance and methodological guidance, and Nicole Brand-Cousy contributed as a peer-reviewer.

This research project was approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The certificate number of the ethics certification obtained for this study was H15-00922, using the project title "The Meaning of the Lived Experience of Non-Attachment for Long-Term Yoga Practitioners."

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For CB

Chapter One: Introduction

Yoga is often employed to enhance established treatments for mental health concerns like anxiety and depression, with psychotherapists making referrals to yoga classes, working together with practitioners of yoga therapy, and attempting to integrate yoga training with their therapeutic practice (Forfytlow, 2011). The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health categorizes yoga as a mind and body practice and indicates yoga was one of the most popular complementary health approaches for adults in the United States in 2012, with the number of yoga practitioners almost doubling in the ten years since 2002 (NCCIH, 2015). The NCCIH defines *complementary approach* as a “non-mainstream practice . . . used together with conventional medicine” (paragraph 3).

Yoga is also being deployed as a standardized component of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). Yoga has been characterized as “a means of practicing ‘mindfulness in motion’” (Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, & Sephton, 2009, p. 63) and is an integral component of both mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR: Kabat-Zinn, 1982) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT: Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). MBSR and MBCT are “the two most extensively employed and evaluated MBIs,” and are used to treat conditions including anxiety, depression, stress, chronic pain, and the mental health of cancer patients, according to Gu, Strauss, Bond, and Cavanagh's (2015, p. 2) report on their review and meta-analysis of studies of MBSR and MBCT. The three practices typically comprising MBIs are (a) yoga; (b) body-scan; and (c) seated meditation (Sauer-Zavala, Walsh, Eisenlohr-Moul, & Lykins, 2013). It is worth noting that, in the development of MBSR, the body scan was partly based on a type of yoga meditation (Drummond, 2006; Gilpin, 2008) and, further, that sitting meditation commonly occurs in modern yoga practice. Thus, many MBIs overlap significantly with aspects of yoga

practice. The widespread and growing application of yoga as a therapeutic approach indicates its relevance to counsellors and psychotherapists interested in mind-body and mindfulness approaches to mental health.

Evidence of the mental health benefits of employing yoga therapeutically continues to accumulate. A systematic review of sixteen randomized controlled trials of yoga treatments for psychiatric disorders found evidence to support yoga's role in effectively treating depression and sleep disorders (Balasubramaniam, Telles, & Doraiswamy, 2012). A review of research of the therapeutic effects of yoga postures found yoga contributed to the enhancement of mindfulness, a decrease in anxiety and depression, and a reduction of sleep concerns (Field, 2011). In a review of thirty-five randomized controlled trials and clinical trials of yoga for stress and anxiety, the authors concluded there is sufficient evidence to support yoga as complimentary therapy to drug treatments for reduction in stress and anxiety (Li & Goldsmith, 2012). A study of peer-reviewed research addressing yoga's therapeutic effects on quality of life found indications that yoga can foster well-being and life satisfaction (Woodyard, 2011). Yoga is a component of mindfulness-based interventions like MBSR and MBCT, which have been shown by randomized controlled trials to effectively improve outcomes for conditions including anxiety, depression and relapse, stress, and chronic pain (Gu et al., 2015).

Despite the growing body of literature supporting yoga's therapeutic potential, more research needs to be performed to investigate its essential principles and mechanisms. As it grows in popularity as a therapeutic practice, there are concerns that we do not understand enough about *how* yoga works to influence facets of health (Elwy et al., 2014) and that we lack research into the "potential underlying mechanisms for the effects of yoga" (Field, 2011, p. 1). There are calls in the literature for explorations of foci in yoga other than postures, of aspects of

individual or home practice (Elwy et al., 2014; Forfytlow, 2011), of the core processes and foundations of mindfulness modalities like yoga (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Wells, 2005), and for research to include first-person phenomenological accounts of experienced yoga practitioners (Solomonova, 2015). Following these lines of inquiry will contribute to a current focus in the research to develop “a clear operational definition of yoga-based therapeutic interventions . . . and a comprehensive theoretical framework from which testable hypotheses can be formulated” (Schmalzl, Powers, & Henje Blom, 2015, p. 1).

Researchers aiming to create a comprehensive theoretical model of yoga must contend with the complexity of contemporary yoga practice, which not only includes postures and movements, breathing exercises, and attentional techniques (Schmalzl, Crane-Godreau, & Payne, 2014), but also a fluctuating amalgam of sometimes contradictory philosophies and ideas that, as De Michelis (2008) points out in her summary of modern yoga, “derive primarily from four intellectual traditions: Dharmic religions, Abrahamic religions, modern empirical science, and modern esotericism” (p. 23). Yoga practitioners who engage with traditional teachings undoubtedly encounter the tension between these traditions, and dissonance between traditional and contemporary values. As Burley (2014) argues, when faced with “ostensibly ethically troubling features of traditional yoga orthopraxy” (p. 218) yoga practitioners can react in the following ways: (a) disregard the traditions; (b) select and take only parts of the tradition based on individual desires and beliefs; or (c) reinterpret the traditional ideas, a common occurrence in contemporary yoga (pp. 219-226). Thus, a comprehensive model of yoga will incorporate data in regards to how practitioners of modern yoga are making sense of what De Michelis (2005) describes as “polyvalent teachings which may . . . be ‘read’ and adopted at various levels” (p. 260).

There is also concern in the literature that yoga, and other meditative practices, have often been treated by Western psychologists simply as “therapeutic technique[s]” to be studied (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 227). By evaluating meditative practices solely from a Western psychological perspective, a process of “recontextualization” and “assimilative integration” can occur, thus stripping away distinctive qualities and depth offered by the meditative traditions (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 228). Kabat-Zinn (2003) suggests that when engaging with a meditative tradition for the purpose of bringing it to a clinical setting, it is essential to treat it “much as a respectful anthropologist would treat an encounter with an indigenous culture” (p. 146). Paying attention to contextual aspects of modern yoga, including the shared lived experience of its practitioners, will enable contemporary researchers to formulate a more robust model of therapeutic yoga, leading to more effective programs and interventions.

In addition to assimilation, Walsh and Shapiro (2006) propose three more stages towards integration of meditative and psychological practices: (a) a “pluralism and accommodation” stage, where theoretical material is broadened; (b) an “integrative stage,” where both disciplines increasingly experience reciprocal enhancement; and (c) an “integral” stage, where “enrichment and integration lead to, and are conducted within, an increasingly comprehensive, coherent, and holistic conceptual framework, adequate to both meditative and psychological traditions” (p. 228). Walsh and Shapiro argue that moving towards theoretical integration may require refocusing on concepts considered important by the meditative tradition being studied by taking on an “epistemological pluralism in which basic research on familiar variables continues, complemented by research on classic variables in advanced practitioners” (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 234). They suggest that it is important to look at concepts that can operate at “any level” of a practice and are thus less vulnerable to oversimplification (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 231).

One such central and underlying concept is mindful *nonattachment*, and it presents a relevant line of inquiry for researchers and therapists concerned with the integration of yoga, mindfulness, and psychotherapy. Nonattachment may be loosely defined as a core aspect of mindfulness that involves observing and staying present to the current conditions of one's experience with an abiding sense of well-being, uninterrupted by "the perceived need for things to be other than what they are, including both the desire to acquire or maintain for oneself what is not present (craving) and to remove what is (aversion or hatred)" (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007, pp. 226-227). Nonattachment is a central yogic concept, both in classical texts (Sanskrit: *vairāgya*) and in contemporary settings (Burley, 2014). Nonattachment has been proposed as an underlying change process that contributes to the therapeutic benefits of mindfulness (Brown et al., 2007). Nonattachment is also an important concept in Buddhist psychology; it was recently proposed as a quantifiable psychological construct and found to have positive correlations to "mindfulness, acceptance, non-reactivity, self-compassion, non-contingent happiness, and higher autonomous motivation" (Sahdra et al., 2010, p. 124). Martin (1997), who argues that mindfulness is a variable of several psychotherapeutic modalities, defines mindfulness as "a state of *psychological freedom* that occurs when attention remains quiet and limber, *without attachment* to any particular point of view" (pp. 291-292, italics in original). Bohart (1983) makes a similar common factor argument for a concept he refers to as *detachment*, and which he parallels with free-association and "lifting of repression" (p. 7) in psychoanalysis, with the "phenomenological attitude towards feelings" (p. 11) promoted in humanistic psychotherapy, with Gestalt therapy's emphasis on staying present, and with the objective and non-evaluative attitude encouraged in cognitive-behavioural therapy. Bohart's (1983) description of detachment is synonymous in several ways with nonattachment. No research has been located in the relevant

literature on the experience of nonattachment in yoga practice. Because nonattachment is a core concept in yoga, mindfulness, and psychotherapy, it presents an important line of inquiry in the project of developing a comprehensive model of therapeutic yoga.

Part of the research gap is methodological. Solomonova (2015) argues for the importance of phenomenological investigations of the experience of long-term yoga practitioners, noting the lack of research into the experience and intention in yoga. Yoga research has tended to focus on measuring its beneficial effects, and Solomonova (2015) posits that phenomenological investigations of “healthy individuals involved in a sustained contemplative yoga practice” will expand our understanding of important features of yoga (p. 3). Following this line of inquiry may reveal new categories in yoga research. Long-term yoga practitioners may have augmented capabilities in areas like attention and motivation (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006) and “a ‘heightened richness’ of sensory experience” (Nevrin, 2008, p. 125).

Given that long-term practitioners are likely to have paid attention to the experience of nonattachment across a range of developmental life contexts, they hold a perspective that may help discern between the advantages and disadvantages of a nonattached approach to living, including during aversive experiences. Denckla and Bornstein (2015) recommend more research in this area, stating: “Many coping strategies are neither universally beneficial nor harmful, but rather depend on the context in which they are employed and the intra and interpersonal characteristics of any situation” (p. 151). The experience of nonattachment for long-term practitioners can add a contextual dimension to our understanding of when and how yoga and other mindfulness practices incorporating the tenet of nonattachment may help or hinder clients.

The experience of long-term practitioners is important to consider when attempting to understand nonattachment as it is presented in classical sources, like the *Yogasutra* of Patanjali, a

historical yoga text which De Michelis (2005) indicates has been interpreted as a kind of “DIY manual of practice” (p. 143). In his reinterpretation of the Yogasutra, Remski (2012) argues that using a “hermeneutic” approach to investigate the meaning of the text will contribute to its “demystification” and that “our goal is to understand what this text may have said to its audience at the time, and to investigate how it’s been interpreted and used through the generations, and to explore our many responses to it now as we continue to grow in its light and shadow” (p. 23). Long-term practitioners are likely to have repeatedly engaged with the concepts presented in the Yogasutra (and other yogic texts perceived as authoritative), and can shed light on how they are interpreting and responding to the idea of nonattachment.

Nonattachment, which Desbordes et al. (2014) liken to equanimity, may take significant time to cultivate, so these authors recommend that researchers interested in this area may do well to work with experienced meditators, not only as participants but as “full-fledged collaborators” whose personal experience will contribute “invaluable information” to future studies (p. 368). Existing yoga research has focused more on participants with short term practice experience, and researchers have recommended incorporating long-term practitioners into studies (Forfyflow, 2011; Miyata, Okanoya, & Kawai, 2015). Long-term practitioners embody not only the implementation of yoga methodology, but also an extended immersion in the culture, a grappling with the philosophy, and an experience of the developmental aspect of the practice over time.

Rationale for the Study

This study responds to the call for phenomenological, first-person reporting of the lived experience of various aspects of yoga (Solomonova, 2015). Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research framework (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), participants were invited to provide in-depth accounting of the embodied experience of a central yogic

concept: nonattachment. This investigation is relevant for the field of counselling psychology as nonattachment is thought to help reduce cognitive rigidity (Lamis & Dvorak, 2014), ease personal distress, and increase self-kindness (Sahdra et al., 2010), all of which are goals in psychotherapy. Because nonattachment is potentially invoked in any yoga-based treatment or intervention, it is important to illuminate its meaning in a thorough and nuanced way.

Understanding the meaning of the lived experience of nonattachment will contribute to an assessment of the potential impact of yoga-based treatments. In this way, this qualitative research can contribute to a validation of yoga's efficacy in a therapeutic context (Forfyflow, 2011).

Conducting an investigation of the meaning of nonattachment has the potential to contribute to our understanding of ways in which nonattachment may hinder desired outcomes in clinical situations. Examples of potential contraindications for nonattachment include clients with social phobias (Denckla & Bornstein, 2015); bereaved or grief-stricken clients (Denckla & Bornstein, 2015; Naidu, 2012); extremely anxious clients (de Manincor, Bensoussan, Smith, Fahey, & Bouchier, 2015); psychotic clients (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2014a); and when used as part of a short-term coping strategy (Wells, 2005). Additional contraindications may include pregnant clients, and clients who are victims of oppression or systemic abuse, to name a few.

Shapiro and Walsh (2003) point to a lack of research exploring what a meditative practice can mean for a practitioner's day-to-day lived experience, considered important because the change in awareness cultivated in meditative practice is meant to extend into the practitioner's whole experience of life. Qualitative investigation of nonattachment, a central underlying construct in yoga, will contribute a valuable bottom-up perspective, adding depth to models of therapeutic yoga. Developing a nuanced comprehension of underlying concepts and important

terms will contribute to a broader and richer definition of yoga. Oversimplified definitions “may unwittingly generate less potent theoretical models . . . and therefore only offer symptomatic relief” (Gethin, 2011 as cited in Monteiro, Musten, & Compson, 2015, p. 6).

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this project was to investigate the experience of mindful nonattachment for long-term practitioners of yoga, both in the context of a long-term formal yoga practice, and in the informal practice of their daily lives. The specific research question was “What is the meaning of the lived-experience of nonattachment for participants?”

This research project contributes a phenomenology of what it means to live, long-term, with the concept of yogic nonattachment. Understanding how contemporary yoga practitioners have made sense of a central underlying concept in yoga contributes to a line of inquiry into *how* yoga promotes beneficial therapeutic change. By focusing on the collected knowledge of a group of long-term practitioners, this project adds an exceptional qualitative insider perspective to a primarily quantitative body of research. Lastly, this project’s idiographic focus on the detail of experience was balanced with an interpretative contextualization of the findings in a body of literature on nonattachment, yoga, and counselling psychology. My aim was to contribute to the development of richer and more potent theoretical models of therapeutic yoga, helping to maximize potential benefits and reduce hindering effects.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

The literature review will expand on conceptualizations of nonattachment in the psychological literature and summarize yoga from the perspective of modern yoga scholarship. First, consensus in the literature in regards to nonattachment is presented, followed by a brief discussion of the similarities and differences between contemplative nonattachment and relational attachment, and of the relationship between nonattachment and mindfulness. Secondly, select psychological constructs related to nonattachment are presented. The discussion of nonattachment concludes with a summary of how nonattachment might help therapeutically, with a focus on its role in the promotion of self-regulation. Finally, a description of the origins of modern yoga provides the background for a discussion of how yoga was defined for this study.

Nonattachment

Consensus in the literature. The literature presents some general consensus on the concept of mindful nonattachment. Yoga, and other mindfulness practices, can enable practitioners to progress towards a sense of nonattachment, which may be a stage of, an aspect of, or synonymous with, equanimity (Brown et al., 2007; Desbordes et al., 2014). En route to nonattachment, mindfulness practices promote a perspective shift (Desbordes et al., 2014) or a “rotation in consciousness” (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006, p. 378) often referred to as *disidentification* (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006), a process of “reperceiving” (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 377) the self as separate, or disidentified, from whatever one is aware of. With some perceptual distance, one’s identification with agreeable, disagreeable, and unremarkable aspects of conscious phenomena is eased, enabling a ‘letting go’ of clinging to (or avoidance of) the various aspects of one’s experience, like thoughts, relationships, and even self-concept (Bohart, 1983; Brown et al., 2007; Desbordes et al., 2014; Sahdra et al., 2010). Nonattachment is exemplified,

in part, by an “absence of fixation” and of “defensive avoidance” (Sahdra et al., 2010, pp. 118,121), and is closely related to the mindful attitudes of acceptance and non-judgment (Brown et al., 2007; Desbordes et al., 2014). The wellbeing of someone who is nonattached is steady (Brown et al., 2007), and does not hinge on a “particular state of affairs” (Sahdra et al., 2010, p.118). Nonattachment is associated with a flexibility of mind and freedom to take wider or multiple perspectives, and with the ability to perceive one’s present moment experience with calmness and lucidity (Bohart, 1983; Martin, 1997; Sahdra et al., 2010; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Nonattachment is part of a developmental process, one which occurs naturally across the lifespan (Desbordes et al., 2014; Shapiro et al., 2006) and which is encouraged by any situation requiring “letting go” (Sahdra et al., 2010, p. 117). This process, which can be expedited by mindfulness practices like yoga and meditation, may be a common factor across various psychotherapeutic approaches (Bohart, 1983; Desbordes et al., 2014; Martin, 1997).

Intentionality. There is also some consensus that intentionality is an important element of mindful nonattachment and psychological flexibility. Frewen, Evans, Maraj, Dozois and Partridge (2008), who explore how Mindfulness-Meditation Based Clinical Interventions (MMCI) work in relation to negative cognition, note that MMCI advance an “awareness of negative thoughts in which qualities of acceptance, decentering, and letting-go cultivate one’s inner capacity to reflect upon and influence one’s own cognitive experiences” and argue that this “purposeful orientation” towards mental content improves emotional regulation via psychological “flexibility” (p. 759). In their proposed tri-axiomatic model of mindfulness, Shapiro et al. (2006) submit that three axioms, intention, attitude, and attention, occur and interact simultaneously to enable the process of disidentification, which they call “reperceiving” (p. 377), and which leads to a state where “we are actually able to connect more intimately with

our moment-to-moment experience, allowing it to rise and fall naturally with a sense of non-attachment” (p. 379). Shapiro and colleagues (2006) describe intention as the aim of practice, the *why*, which in the context of mindfulness might range from “self-regulation to self-exploration . . . to self-liberation” (pp. 375-376). They indicate that, because intentions inform the attitudes that, through practice, become patterns, one’s aim might determine whether one cultivates a mindful attitude like acceptance, or a less-mindful attitude like striving. Shapiro and colleagues also suggest intention tends to be neglected in current mindfulness definitions, despite its significance. In his first-person account of meditative experience, Walsh (1977) stresses the importance of intentionality as he describes a progression past mental obstacles toward mental flexibility: “With fewer barriers to its effectiveness there is a sense that simply intending to obtain a goal may be sufficient for the mental machinery to complete the task without additional efforting or strain” (p. 181). Setting an intention for mindfulness practice provides a purposeful structure, while aiming for a quality like ‘letting go’ encourages mental flexibility. Intentionality may enable sustained and effortful practice to co-exist with an attitude of being nonattached to the results.

Nonattachment scale. Sahdra and colleagues (2010), who developed the Nonattachment Scale (NAS) in line with Buddhist definitions, conceptualize nonattachment in the context of meditation practice, both formal and informal, as involving a “persistent and gentle interest in and investigation of one’s experiences,” (p. 117) regardless of how agreeable or disagreeable they are. This experience includes the “arising and falling” (Sahdra et al., 2010, p. 117) of mental representations of the self and the world. Practitioners experience “the consequences of attachment or nonattachment to particular mental representations”: holding on to mental fixations (attachment) contributes to suffering due to the impermanence of all things, while

letting go of fixations (nonattachment) relieves that suffering (Sahdra et al., 2010, p. 117).

Examples of NAS scale items include: (a) “I can accept the flow of events in my life without hanging onto them or pushing them away”; (b) “I can remain open to what life offers me regardless of whether it seems desirable or undesirable at a particular time”; and (c) “I experience and acknowledge grief following significant losses, but do not become overwhelmed, devastated, or incapable of meeting life’s other demands” (Sahdra et al, 2010, p. 120).

Is nonattachment the same as secure attachment? Sahdra et al. (2010), while investigating the Buddhist concept of nonattachment, also compared and contrasted it with the Western psychological construct of relational attachment. They argued that the Buddhist depiction of attachment, which involves “grasping or clinging” and “mental affliction” (Sahdra et al., 2010, p. 116), actually corresponds somewhat with the psychological construct of anxious attachment. They contend that nonattachment in a mature Buddhist practitioner is associated with “great autonomy and deep concern for others” which the authors liken to the “considerable autonomy, self-confidence, and lack of anxious conformity” expected of an adult who experienced secure relational attachments as a child (Sahdra et al., 2010, p. 116). They suggest there is further conceptual similarity found in the correlation between secure attachment and heightened compassion and mindfulness, both of which are also valued in Buddhist practice.

However, Sahdra et al. (2010) believe there is enough divergence between secure attachment and nonattachment to warrant approaching them as different constructs. For example, they point to the “stable working model of [the self] thought to be the basis of secure individuals’ generally positive moods and self-esteem” which, for most people “remain[s] largely unquestioned,” and they contrast that with the Buddhist context, where one’s mental models are intentionally scrutinized and contested (Sahdra et al., 2010, pp. 116-117). Sahdra and colleagues

(2010) argue that, despite its benefits, a model based on a secure relational attachment can become a problem if it fails to align with the changing reality of a situation. The authors also refer to a discrepancy in regards to the Buddhist emphasis on the “domain [of] nonconceptual processing – which has no parallel in attachment theory” (p. 117).

Is nonattachment the same as mindfulness?

Sahdra, Ciarrochi, and Parker (2016) investigated whether nonattachment is a construct distinct from mindfulness by checking the incremental, convergent, and discriminant validity of a 20-item version of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ: Tran, Glück, & Nader, 2013; Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) as it related to an unpublished 7-item version of the NAS (NAS-7, Elphinstone, Sahdra, & Ciarrochi, 2015 as cited in Sahdra et al., 2016). Surveying a representative sample of Americans ($N = 7,884$), Sahdra et al. (2016) used confirmatory factor analyses to study factor structure of various five and six-factor models of nonattachment and mindfulness. They concluded that “nonattachment belongs to the same family of constructs as the five mindfulness facets, but it is empirically distinct from the mindfulness factors” (Sahdra et al., 2016, p. 826). Sahdra and colleagues suggest a mindfulness practice might contribute to the development of nonattachment in the long-term. They speculate that accessing the constructs of nonattachment and mindfulness may each require distinct interventions.

Nonattachment-related constructs. *Disidentification* has been identified by Walsh and Shapiro (2006) as a noteworthy process in meditation, whereby the “refinement of awareness” (p. 231) leads to the attenuation of identifying with the contents of the mind. They indicate that, for experienced practitioners, this means that not only can one disidentify from a troubling thought or emotion, but from the totality of experience, assuming the role of “equanimous”

observer (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 232). In a study utilizing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to detect brain activity associated with a mindfulness state, Ives-Deliperi et al. (2011) looked at experienced adult mindfulness practitioners ($N = 10$) who were scanned while performing a meditation task, and found that “mindfulness meditation has an overall ‘quietening’ effect on brain regions associated with subjective and cognitive appraisal of emotions” (p. 239). The authors concluded their findings “lend support to the theory” that disidentification contributes to the salutary effects associated with mindfulness (Ives-Deliperi et al., 2011, p. 239).

In their proposed mindfulness model, Shapiro et al. (2006) refer to this process, of disidentifying with one’s thoughts and feelings, as *reperceiving*. Defined as “the capacity to dispassionately observe or witness the contents of one’s consciousness” (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 381), reperceiving is likened to other psychological constructs like *decentering*, the capacity “step outside of one’s immediate experience, thereby changing the very nature of that experience” (Safran & Segal, 1990, p. 117 as cited in Shapiro et al., 2006, pp. 377-378). Echoing the aforementioned developmental nature of nonattachment, Shapiro and colleagues suggest reperceiving is a step on a person’s developmental path, which begins in childhood with a perceptual reorientation from subjective to objective. They offer the example of a child, who initially sees his mother as “an extension of his self,” (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 378) but eventually comes to understand that she is actually a separate individual. They go on to suggest that this transformation of understanding unfolds as a part of the developmental process but can be expedited by a meditative or mindfulness practice where one cultivates the ability to watch, with neutrality, one’s own experience, demarcating the observer from that which is observed: “Through reperceiving one realizes, ‘this pain is not me,’ ‘this depression is not me,’ ‘these thoughts are not me,’ as a result of being able to observe them from a meta-perspective” (Shapiro

et al., 2006, p. 378). Shapiro and colleagues indicate that the first example involves the child coming to grasp that he is separate from his external surroundings, while the second involves realizing separateness from one's internal experience of mental events like thoughts and feelings. The authors emphasize that re-perceiving and its associated "sense of non-attachment" should not be mistaken for apathetic detachment because re-perceiving, in fact, "allows one to experience greater richness, texture, and depth" (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 379).

Another related psychological construct is *metacognitive awareness*, described by Teasdale et al. (2002) as a "cognitive set" where, by recognizing thoughts as simply "mental events," (p. 275) one is able to discriminate between thoughts about the self and the truth of identity or experience. The authors differentiate metacognitive awareness from metacognitive knowledge, the latter of which comprises "beliefs about cognitive phenomena stored in memory" (Teasdale et al., 2002, p. 286). The belief that 'I'm a visual learner' is one example of metacognitive knowledge. On the other hand, metacognitive awareness pertains to "actually *experiencing* thoughts *as* thoughts . . . in the moment they occur" as opposed to experiencing them as reflections of truth (Teasdale et al., 2002, p. 286, italics in original). In a series of studies exploring the relationship between metacognitive awareness and depression, Teasdale et al. (2002) compared depressed psychiatric outpatients with non-depressed controls, and compared patients receiving treatment as usual for major depression with patients also receiving MBCT. They found cognitive therapy (CT) and MBCT may decrease depressive relapse by promoting metacognitive awareness. The authors indicate that developing metacognitive awareness does not mean trying to modify one's thoughts and beliefs, but rather involves altering how one relates to them.

Cognitive defusion is another construct that has parallels with nonattachment. In their review of the functioning of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, and Lillis (2006) indicate cognitive defusion is one of the six principles of ACT, and that it comprises various techniques aimed at “creating contexts” that contribute to a reduction in the “unhelpful functions” of mental events rather than by trying to change the thoughts themselves (p. 8). Hayes and colleagues provide several examples of techniques, which include dispassionate observation of troubling thoughts, verbal repetition of negative thoughts to reduce their potency, or externalization thoughts by attributing them with physical characteristics. Defusion often leads to “a decrease in believability of, or attachment to, private events” (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9). In ACT, defusion works in conjunction with principles like acceptance, being present, and seeing the “self as context” in order to enable awareness “of one’s own flow of experiences without attachment” (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 9).

Decentering is a process that overlaps with the concept of nonattachment. As described by Hayes-Skelton and Graham (2013), decentering refers to the change that occurs when a person shifts from closely identifying with aspects of experience to viewing them from the perspective of someone outside looking in. When experiences can be perceived simply as “objective events” then reactivity to those experiences may be reduced (Herbert/Cardaciotto model as cited in Hayes-Skelton & Graham, 2013, p. 319). In their cross-sectional study of relationships amid mindfulness, decentering, cognitive reappraisal, and social anxiety, Hayes-Skelton and Graham surveyed students from an American university ($N = 1097$) and analyzed responses to questionnaires using structural equation modeling. Study results indicated mindfulness and cognitive reappraisal both had a positive relationship to decentering and a negative relationship to social anxiety, and that decentering may be a common factor in the

relationship between social anxiety and mindfulness. It is relevant to note that the constructs of *decentering*, *defusion*, and *reperceiving* are apparently so closely related that the authors intermix the terms variously, referring to “decentering (reperceiving)” and “decentering (defusion),” (Hayes-Skelton & Graham, 2013, pp. 319,326) for example.

How nonattachment may help. Nonattachment (and closely related constructs like adaptive detachment, self-detachment, disidentification, equanimity, reperceiving, metacognitive awareness, and decentering) may be implicated in the promotion of emotional and self-regulation (Desbordes et al., 2014; Frewen et al., 2008; Greenberg & Meiran, 2014; Schmalzl et al., 2015; Shapiro et al., 2006); as well as eudemonia (Grossman, 2015); perceived personal competence (Ying, 2008; Ying, 2009); values clarification (Shapiro et al., 2006); adaptive psychosocial functioning (Denckla & Bornstein, 2015; Fresco et al., 2007; Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015; Sahdra et al., 2010); psychological freedom or flexibility (Desbordes et al., 2014; Frewen et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2015; Martin, 1997; Nevrin, 2008; Shapiro et al., 2006; Walsh, 1977; Wells, 2005); distress tolerance via exposure (Shapiro et al., 2006); pain management (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2013; Walsh, 1977); a decrease in rumination (Lamis & Dvorak, 2014); and a decrease in depressive symptoms (Ying, 2008; Ying, 2009).

As a notable component of modern yoga-based practice (Burley, 2014), nonattachment may contribute to yoga’s hypothesized self-regulatory effects. Metacognitive awareness, a concept closely related to nonattachment, is a prominent aspect of the category of *attention*, one of the three main categories of yoga-based practice, along with movement and breath, described by Schmalzl et al. (2015). They speculated benefits of metacognitive awareness in the context of a yoga practice involve (a) the progressive reduction of “identification” with “negative self-referential thoughts” through a non-interpretative observing of thoughts and feelings, and (b) the

advancement of an equanimous and non-reactive state in regards to experience (Schmalzl et al., 2015, p. 9). They suggest this likely involves “brain circuitry implicated in emotional regulation such as the limbic system, the AAC and prefrontal regions” (Schmalzl et al., 2015, p. 13). This quality of awareness employed in concert with regulated breathing while engaged with the controlled stressors of yoga postures enables practitioners to formulate “strategies for dealing with stressful experiences while cultivating an internal sense of calmness” (Schmalzl et al., 2015, p. 14).

Similarly, Gard, Nogle, Park, Vago, and Wilson (2014) listed meta-awareness in yoga, which they likened to the nonattachment-related concept of decentering, as a potential top-down self-regulatory process. They argue that meta-awareness “allow[s] individuals to clearly compare their current status *vis à vis* their goals and to make any necessary behavioral adjustments” (Gard et al., 2014, p. 7). They hypothesized that meta-awareness involves communication between brain networks, enabling integration on several levels of information processing. Gard and colleagues further suggest that, by nonjudgmentally witnessing their own experience without trying to change it, practitioners are engaging in “a form of self-regulation” (Gard et al., 2014, p. 7). Desbordes and colleagues (2014) liken nonattachment to equanimity, which they refer to as an exposure-based method of emotional regulation. They propose that, in mindfulness practice, by turning towards and paying attention to the bodily sensation of emotion, practitioners lessen their own reactivity which contributes to the inhibition of dysfunctional cycles of behaviour.

Yoga

Origins of modern yoga. According to De Michelis (2008), yoga, whose “precise historical origins” remain unknown, comprises “a very diverse array of theories and practices” and has existed as a system for at least two and a half millennia (p. 17). During this time, the

practice of yoga has responded to and incorporated aspects of a range of historical and cultural perspectives, leading to the genesis of numerous variations in the practice. De Michelis (2008) points to the “Sanskritic cultural mould” and to an “ongoing dialogue between . . . Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism” as foundational aspects of yoga (p. 17). De Michelis (2008) argues that although modern yoga, which is well established in global urban contexts, may owe a debt to pre-modern yoga systems, “early forms of Modern Yoga were largely born of symbiotic relations between Indian nationalism, Western occultism, neo-Vedantic philosophy and . . . systems of modern physical culture” (p. 20). In her book exploring yoga as a modern phenomenon, De Michelis (2005) proposes a “typology of modern yoga” which includes the following four categories: (a) a denominational type which orbits the teachings of a particular teacher or school; (b) a psychosomatic type concerned with practice and rooted in “experiential epistemology”; (c) a postural type emphasizing “physical practices”; and (d) a meditational type where the emphasis leans more toward “mental practices” (p. 188). She indicates there is correspondence among the four categories, emphasizing an especially high level of congruence between postural and meditational yoga. Contemporary exemplars of postural yoga include Iyengar Yoga and Jois’s Ashtanga Yoga, while Chinmoy and “some modern Buddhist groups” exemplify the meditational type (De Michelis, 2005, p. 188).

Yoga defined for the current study. According to Gard et al. (2014), postural and meditational yoga are of particular relevance to therapeutic applications of yoga because they are very influential types of modern practice and because they stress self-regulation practices. Gard and colleagues, who propose a framework to make sense of yoga’s self-regulatory mechanisms, state that most modern yoga practices can be captured by a combination of the following categories: (a) ethics; (b) postures; (c) breath regulation; and (d) meditation. For the current

study, I adopt this four-category operational definition of yoga practice, with one modification: I expand the ethics category to include study of any yogic texts. Gard et al. (2014) define the ethics category as comprising the first two of “eight limbs of Patanjali’s *Raja* yoga,” and consisting of five “moral observances” (Sanskrit: *yamas*) and five “self-disciplines” (Sanskrit: *niyamas*) (p. 3). Although the text referred to by the authors (Vivekananda, 2011) includes a prominent translation of the *Yogasutra* and is, according to De Michelis (2004), a popular and influential yoga text, the ethics category is arguably too narrow to capture the experiential complexity of this aspect of modern yoga practice, as interpretations of the *Yogasutra* are manifold. Further, the *Yogasutra* is but one of several texts that are positioned as authoritative in yoga; other examples include the *Bhagavadgita*, and *Hathapradipika* (Burley, 2014). Thus, I expand this category to “study of texts and/or ethics,” aiming to capture the personal variation likely to occur in individual interpretation of yoga teachings.

A priority in IPA research design is to work with a homogeneous group (Smith et al., 2009). The yoga lineage with which I am most familiar, and from which I recruited all participants for this study, is called Vijnana Yoga. The Sanskrit term *vijnana* has been translated as “deep understanding” (Sen-Gupta, 2012, p. 3). Vijnana Yoga is a system of yoga comprising “four main practices” (Sen-Gupta, 2013, p. 9). The first practice is concerned with postures and, specifically, with the application of various principles to postures, including “relaxing the body,” “quieting the mind,” and “breathing” (pp. 46-49). Sen-Gupta (2013) refers to the second practice as “just sitting” (p. 9). The third practice is “Pranayama,” involving various exercises in breath control and retention, and the fourth practice is described as “the study of yogic texts” (Sen-Gupta, 2013, p. 9). These four practices align with the four categories of practice being used as the operational definition of yoga for the current study which were mentioned above. Although

this phenomenological study is idiographic in nature and is not aiming to make widely generalizable claims, it is relevant to point out that participants engaged with a yoga lineage likely holding broad similarities to many popular forms of yoga practiced globally today.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The aim of this study was to deepen our understanding of the meaning of the lived experience of nonattachment for long-term yoga practitioners. To investigate the concept of nonattachment, I chose to spotlight the “emic (insider or native) perspective” (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 228) of the long-term yoga practitioner. Participants who have engaged with principles and practices of yoga over an extended period are likely to have had meaningful and rich experiences of nonattachment. This project was centered around the question: *What is the meaning of the lived experience of nonattachment for long-term yoga practitioners?* I approached the question with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research design.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In this study, I investigated participants’ experience using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework described by Smith et al. (2009). Yoga practitioners engage in complex and varying combinations of meditation, movement, and breathwork (Schmalzl et al., 2014). Yoga philosophy and scripture may present values that conflict with those in the present day socio-cultural context, and practitioners who choose to engage with yoga philosophy must choose how to interpret the messages contained in the teachings (Burley, 2014). Thus, in the project of broadening our understanding of nonattachment, the made-meaning of participant experiences of nonattachment, both in the context of their yoga practices and in the greater context of their lives, presents a relevant line of questioning. Shonin and Van Gordon (2015) argued that “IPA is a suitable method for analysing meditational experiences because IPA lends itself to a rich construction of the meaning of meditators’ experiences by researchers who are themselves experienced in meditation” (p. 901). Similarly, I believe IPA was an appropriate approach to investigate the

experiences of yoga practitioners, as it provided a framework to enable the co-construction of meaning between participants, who dynamically interpret and integrate yoga teachings, and me, the researcher, who also has experience in contemplative yoga.

Philosophy. IPA, a method of investigating lived experience, is grounded in the philosophical theory of phenomenology (Smith et al., 2009). As these authors explain, Husserl, who was an early articulator of phenomenological principles, described a shift from the *natural attitude* of our daily experience to a *phenomenological attitude*, where the attention is angled inside, toward our perception of experience. Smith and colleagues (2009) note that Heidegger, who studied under Husserl, developed the idea that worldly existence is “always perspectival, always temporal, and always ‘in-relation-to’ something” (p. 18) and, thus, the decoding of how people make meaning is important to phenomenological investigation. Also of relevance, Smith et al. (2009) point out that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological investigation of human experience did so through the lens of the body, our instrument of interacting with the world as *body-subjects*, and they conclude that the role of our bodily experience, including physiological sensation, is considered significant when investigating how we know and relate to the world. Smith et al. (2009) point out that Sartre expanded Heidegger’s focus on lived experience, “developing the point in the context of personal and social relationships, so that we are better able to conceive of our experiences as contingent upon the presence – and absence – of our relationships to other people” (p. 20).

In his discussion of existentialism as it relates to phenomenology, Langdridge (2007) notes that phenomenological studies are primarily concerned with conducting a thorough inquiry into what Husserl referred to as the *lifeworld (lebenswelt)*, a term which Langdridge defines as “the world as concretely lived” (p. 23). Langdridge points out that the research focus is on

eliciting an in-depth idiographic report of participants' lived experience, and what meaning the selected experience has for them. In IPA, there is also emphasis on a *double hermeneutic*: while a participant is attempting to understand a particular experience, the investigator is trying to understand the participant (Smith et al., 2009). Another variation of a double hermeneutic, pointed to by Smith et al. (2009), is the hermeneutic pairing of empathy and suspicion: "the former approach attempts to reconstruct the original experience in its own terms; the latter uses theoretical perspectives from outside . . . to shed light on the phenomenon" (p. 36). Smith and colleagues (2009) recommend that IPA research occupy a balanced position between trying to understand the participant's perspective, and asking questions to illuminate other perspectives and possible lines of inquiry.

Participants. As Langdridge (2007) indicates, IPA is more concerned with eliciting idiographic depth and detail from a specific group than it is about making generalizable statements and, as such, relatively small sample sizes are often used. Langdridge (2007) suggests five or six participants as typical for student studies, while Smith et al. (2009) indicate three to six participants will likely yield sufficient data to explore convergence and divergence between participants while not overloading the researcher. This study aimed for four to six participants and four participants were recruited to participate.

As participants are part of a relatively small community of yoga practitioners, demographic details are presented as approximations to protect their identities. All participants were women ranging in age from approximately forty to sixty-five. As some participants requested their ethnicity remain confidential, participant ethnicities are not listed here. Upon request, each participant provided an alias to use in the research results: Toni, Guinevere, Selina and Rachel. Participants reported their experience as yoga practitioners ranging between eighteen

and forty-three years. Three participants are married or common law and three participants have children. In addition to various other listed occupations, all participants indicated they are self-employed as yoga teachers and/or therapists.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. As the aim was to investigate the phenomenon using a homogeneous sample, participants were recruited by means of purposive sampling (Langdrige, 2007). Inclusion criteria for this study were: (a) Participants must have practiced yoga in a dedicated fashion for a minimum of ten years; (b) The yoga practiced included, at some time and in some form, physical postures, breathwork, meditation and/or mindfulness, study of yogic texts and/or ethics, and teachings from the Vijnana yoga lineage; (c) Participants must have had a meaningful experience of nonattachment they were willing to discuss; (d) Participants must have been 19 years of age or older; and (e) Participants must have been available via email for a member check following the interview. The first two inclusion criteria were designed to ensure that participants were long-term practitioners of yoga, and that the style of yoga practiced falls into the categories modern yoga, defined in this paper as some combination of the first four listed aspects. The fifth aspect, of having included teachings from the Vijnana yoga lineage, contributed to the homogeneity of the group, and represents the practice of yoga with which I am most familiar. The third inclusion criterion ensured participants could speak in depth about the meaning of their experience of nonattachment. The fourth inclusion criterion ensured participants had reached the age of majority in British Columbia. The fifth inclusion criterion was to confirm participants' willingness to participate in member checks to confirm validity of data transcription and analysis.

No one was deemed unable to safely and fully engage with the interview process and no one was excluded from this study. Exclusion criteria were: (a) Those currently experiencing

mental health symptoms that would obstruct, or otherwise prevent engagement in, the interview process (e.g., psychosis, violent behaviour, severe emotional volatility); or (b) Those visibly intoxicated at time of interview.

Purposive convenience and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited via purposive convenience sampling, and snowball sampling. Through my involvement with various yoga communities, I was aware of several people whom I suspected could meet the criteria for inclusion or might know other potential participants. I provided study information (Appendix A) to several people and that information was, in-turn, forwarded on to several more people. From a pool of approximately fifteen potential participants, four people expressed interest in participating in the study. No additional recruitment procedures were needed. The invitation to participate (Appendix A) contained an advisory about limits of confidentiality when communicating via email.

Screening interview. Four potential participants were assessed for meeting the inclusion criteria in an initial screening interview (see Appendix B). All four were screened in, and were invited to become participants. All four responded that they were interested in participating, and main interviews were scheduled. Main interviews were to take place at a quiet location convenient to the participant; one participant was interviewed at her home; the other three at yoga studios/spaces. Following the main interviews, participants were each gifted a \$20 gift certificate to a bookstore as a token of gratitude for their participation.

Situating the researcher. I, the investigator, am completing a Master of Arts in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. I have been practicing mindful yoga, on a daily basis, for eight years, and I have been registered as a teacher with Yoga Alliance since 2013. I have taught yoga in class and workshop format, and have designed and run mindful

yoga workshops. As a student of counselling psychology, I am interested in the therapeutic potential of yoga and other mindfulness-based practices. As a client of psychotherapy and student of yoga, I have experienced first-hand the complementary nature of these modalities, as well as the confusion of engaging in the mysterious and sometimes contradictory set of practices and tenets that comprise modern yoga. My training and experience in yoga has informed my opinion that interpretation and meaning-making is essential to the contemporary yoga practitioner, and that taking the perspectives of contemporary practitioners into account is an important line of inquiry in an investigation of what contemporary yoga is and how it works. I believe a comprehensive model of modern yoga will present an invaluable resource for counselling psychologists interested in mindfulness, body-centered approaches, self-regulation, ritual, and spirituality. Further, I believe that a comprehensive yoga model will help triangulate between neuroscience, yoga outcome research, yoga philosophy, and qualitative investigation of experience. The experience of having completed the current study has reaffirmed these beliefs.

Data collection. Data collection comprised four steps: (a) discussing and acquiring a participant's informed consent; (b) filling out a demographics form; (c) recording a face-to-face interview; and (d) conducting a member check of the thematic analysis. Prior to beginning the interviews, participants and I discussed the study's requirements and objectives, the potential risks and benefits of being a participant, confidentiality and its standard limits, and participants' right to leave the study at any stage, without explanation (see Appendix E). Following that, informed consent was obtained and participants were asked to fill out a demographics form (see Appendix D). The demographics form indicated any question could be left unanswered and reiterated that identifying information would be kept confidential.

Interviews. Participants were interviewed face-to-face, and the interviews were recorded for transcription. I, the investigator, took handwritten notes during and/or immediately following the interview to record impressions of the participant and interview (Smith et al., 2009). Some questions were based on a pre-determined interview protocol (see Appendix C). All participants were asked an open-ended question about the meaning of their experience of nonattachment. Following the standard opening question, the interviews took a conversational approach and followed the direction established by each participant. The interview schedule contained some semi-structured, open-ended questions, which were periodically employed to keep the conversation focused on topic or to explore a particular topic in more depth. Interviews ranged in duration from two to three and one half hours.

Member check. Following the interview and analysis process, participants were contacted by email to conduct a member check. Each participant received a draft of Chapter Four containing the thematic analysis. They were invited to report on whether the analysis correctly reflected their lived experience of nonattachment, and to indicate whether they had any suggestions for changes or additions. They were also invited to comment on whether they felt the analysis adequately protected their identities. Finally, they were asked if they thought the research had value to the fields of counselling psychology and yoga therapeutics. Two participants requested no changes or additions, one participant made a clarification which has been added to the appropriate passage in Chapter Four, and one participant provided no response.

Data management. Audio recordings of the interviews were stored as digital files. I, the primary researcher, transcribed audio recordings verbatim. To protect participant confidentiality, participants were represented by a random number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) in research notes and transcripts, and are represented by first name aliases in Chapter Four. Upon

my request for first name aliases that are not known to others and could not be used to identify the participants, they provided me with the names Guinevere, Selina, Rachel, and Toni. Research materials were stored in a locked filing cabinet and, upon completion of the project, raw data will be stored as electronic files in a locked filing cabinet in the Principal Investigator's (Dr. Marla Buchanan) research lab. All electronic files are encrypted and password protected. Consent forms, which contain participant names, are stored separately from other research materials so that names cannot be associated with respective data sets.

Data analysis. There is not one correct analytic approach in IPA as much as there is an “analytic focus,” careful attention of the researcher towards the participants’ experiential sense-making process, involving a close reading of participant reports and “identification of emergent patterns” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). However, Smith et al. (2009) describe a six-step progression which they recommend as a guide for first-time qualitative researchers unfamiliar with the “multi-directional” (p. 81) analytic procedures: (a) a slow and repeated reading of the interview transcript while listening to the audio source recording; (b) investigative note taking, with comments staying “close to the participant’s explicit meaning” (p. 83) and concerned with a description of what was said, how it was said (e.g., repetitions, pauses, etc.), and what broader ideas might be implied; (c) searching for themes, whereby the researcher interprets what was said; (d) the development of connections between themes (e.g., by bundling related themes, investigating theme functions and contexts, etc.); (e) repeating the previous steps with each transcript; and (f) searching for systems across interviews, which can bridge the content of interviews with theory “as one recognizes . . . that themes or superordinate themes which are particular to individual cases also represent instances of higher order concepts which the cases therefore share” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 101). At this stage, Finlay (2011) recommends adding

layers to the analysis “by utilizing metaphors and temporal referents, and by importing other theories as a lens through which to view the analysis” (p. 142).

Trustworthiness. In her exploration of the trustworthiness or credibility of qualitative research in the field of counselling psychology, Morrow (2005) describes four criteria relevant to qualitative research models: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility pertains to how thorough and precise the research process is, and to how effectively the research describes this to the audience (Morrow, 2005). This study took the following steps towards credibility, as suggested by Morrow (2005): (a) using a peer reviewer to evaluate the thematic analysis in light of the audit trail; (b) engaging in writing exercises to stimulate researcher reflexivity; (c) using member checks following initial analysis; and (d) striving for full descriptions which “involve detailed, rich descriptions not only of participants’ experiences of phenomena but also of the contexts in which those experiences occur” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). According to Smith et al. (2009), sensitivity to context, an important principle for assessing IPA research, can be demonstrated by supporting research assertions with numerous relevant direct quotes from participant interviews. This approach was taken with the current study.

Transferability speaks to the range of generalizability of the research conclusions to the reader’s frame of reference (Morrow, 2005). As recommended by Morrow (2005), this study strove to provide the reader with clear and transparent reporting of the researcher, the research context and processes, and endeavored to present the research results in such a way so as “not to imply that the findings can be generalized to other populations or settings” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252).

Dependability is concerned with the consistency, transparency, and repeatability of the research process (Morrow, 2005). To realize adequate dependability, this study adopted Morrow's (2005) recommendations of (a) recording the evolution of the research design; (b) producing a detailed audit trail of research tasks, of events that shaped the processes of data collection and analysis, and of emerging themes; and (c) having a peer-reviewer examine and provide feedback on the audit trail. The peer-reviewer determined that the findings were "credible" and that the research process was "logical, systematic/methodical and transparent" (Brand-Cousy, personal communication, February 28, 2017). Writing about validity in phenomenological research, Langdridge (2007) argues for the importance of a lucid, comprehensible argument, one which presents "the most probable (i.e. persuasive) interpretation of the data" (p. 157), because it is crucial that other researchers understand and interact with our research. I strove to achieve such a coherency by staying near to the data and by taking a thorough and comprehensive approach to the analysis.

Confirmability is interested in the inherent lack of pure objectivity in research and the researcher's ability to "adequately tie together the data, analytic processes, and findings in such a way that the reader is able to confirm the adequacy of the finding" (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). To achieve confirmability, Morrow (2005) recommends similar procedures to those described under dependability. As mentioned above, I kept a detailed audit trail, I participated in periodic reflexivity exercises in order to negotiate issues related to subjectivity, and I solicited peer review and feedback. Further, my experience with an evolving understanding of the meaning of nonattachment agreed with Morrow's (2005) argument that "a greater grounding in the literature militates against bias by expanding the researcher's understanding of multiple ways of viewing the phenomenon" (p. 254). Before beginning the literature review, my assumption was that there

are two contradictory interpretations of nonattachment. Conducting the initial literature review introduced me to several unfamiliar interpretations. This experience brought awareness to one of my own assumptions, reinforcing to me the importance of prioritizing the meaning found in the raw data first, and making transparent the process of my interpretation of said data. However, during the data collection and analysis phase of the project (February 2016 to January 2017), I suspended my engagement with the nonattachment literature and tried to adopt a *beginner's mind* stance toward the experiences of participants as I immersed myself in the transcripts. At those moments during the interviews when I noticed myself jumping to conclusions about terms that felt familiar from the literature (e.g., "identification"), I made a point to ask open-ended questions about what those terms meant for participants (e.g., "Can you say a little more about . . . 'identify with?"). During this period, I also suspended my participation in workshops and classes related to Vijnana yoga in order to reposition myself outside the group's experience.

Ethics. Because of the open-ended character of the qualitative interview process, informed consent was an important consideration for this project. The purpose of this study was explained to participants and their informed consent sought before the interview process began. Prior to the interview, participants were told that open-ended interviews can move in unpredictable directions, and were reminded that they could, at any point, leave the research process without explanation. No problematic issues came up during the research process requiring the renegotiation of participant consent.

Open-ended interviews have the potential to elicit data of a personal nature, so participant confidentiality was considered a priority for this study. Participants were advised of the standard limits of confidentiality (serious risk of harm to self or others, abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, or subpoena from a court of law). Participants were also advised of measures used to

protect their identities. These steps included: (a) identifying participants by randomly assigned number only in raw data and by their provided first name aliases in the analysis chapter, and changing identifying details (e.g., proper names, demographic information) in the analysis chapter; (b) consent forms and research data were stored apart from each other in a locked filing cabinet; (c) electronic copies of data were encrypted and password protected; and (d) five years following the completion of the research project, all paper copies of data will be secure shredded and data will be erased using a minimum three-pass overwrite software. In the event that storage media fails during that five-year period, electronic media will be destroyed by pulverization.

Although the anticipated risks associated with participating in this research project were low, participants were advised of the following possible risks: (a) a shift in understanding of the meaning of nonattachment in one's lived experience; (b) the possible recollection of challenging or unpleasant life experiences; and (c) the unanticipated declaration of personal information in the interview process. Participants were made aware of the availability of the research supervisor, Dr. Marla Buchanan, who is a trained counsellor, to consult with should any concerns come up. Alternately, a list of reduced-rate counselling resources could be made available to participants (Appendix F). No one requested the list. Participants were advised of potential benefits, which were: (a) the opportunity to reflect on and speak in depth about the experience of nonattachment; and (b) the chance to contribute to a deepening of understanding in the area of yoga and mindfulness as it relates to counselling psychology.

Chapter Four: Results

This chapter presents an analysis of data collected from participant interviews. First, a summary of each of the four participants provides a general snapshot of the people involved. This is followed by a discussion of participants' conceptualization of nonattachment, including general indicators of both what nonattachment is, and of what it is not. This background and conceptual information provide a frame of reference from which to explore the in-depth discussion that follows, and to introduce some of the key ideas and terms that reappear throughout the chapter. Following the introduction of the participants and of the concept of nonattachment, emergent themes are considered in detail. These themes were developed through a process involving multiple readings, notation, and a thorough investigation of the language and content in the interview transcripts. Six superordinate themes and several sub-themes emerged across the group and are presented in detail. As recommended by Smith et al. (2009), analytic comments are interspersed with participant quotes with the aim of striking a balance between the specific personal experiences of participants and more general interpretative claims of me, the researcher.

As will become evident later in the chapter, participants emphasize the importance of present moment experience. To reflect that in the text of the thematic analysis, I write about the participant discussions in this chapter using the present tense. Please note, the following conventions are used in participant quotes: (a) ellipses indicate the removal of extraneous words to improve readability; (b) in-quote italics denote words audibly emphasized by a participant during the course of the interview; (c) in-quote square brackets signal a change or addition to the text to assist legibility or to protect participant confidentiality (e.g., pronoun, verb tense, proper

names); and (d) in-quote parentheses are used to indicate non-verbal expressions relevant to the text (e.g., gesture, movement).

Participants

Guinevere's experience of nonattachment hinges on the intention of being a "full participant" in the moment, by observing experience without becoming wrapped up in stories, judgments, or concerns for outcome. For her, this involves developing tolerance for the range of pleasant and unpleasant life experiences, cultivating the ability to remain still and present, and making ethical decisions. A transformational experience of nonattachment for Guinevere occurred during an extended stay at a meditation colony where she, with the help of her teacher, worked to observe, let go, and make sense of the confusing, painful, and "incredibly destructive" experiences of her turbulent childhood. Processing those experiences was essential to enabling her to "live . . . a full life," one where she finds meaning in helping others. A major attachment she continues to try to let go of is a "scarcity complex," involving a concern that she won't have "enough" to survive. She associates nonattachment with a sense of "stillness" and "ease" in body and mind. She "fell in love" with Vijnana yoga for its bottom-up approach to quieting the mind by relaxing the body. Through yoga practice, she works to bring a meditative state of presence into every aspect of her life. She endeavors to find "clarity," and to understand and process experience, not just in the past but as it happens in the moment, so that she can respond in an effective and ethical way. Over time and through practice, her experience of nonattachment has shifted from a theoretical awareness of the concept to an "experiential" and "nonverbal" one.

Rachel was exposed to the concept of nonattachment as a child via her mother's interest in "Buddhist practice and ideology" and later in life through involvement in "spiritual communities." These experiences led her to associate nonattachment with "an emotional out.

Like a flatness. A disconnection.” However, her understanding of nonattachment has decidedly changed. Having initially perceived nonattachment as “an excuse” to “pull back” and “not be responsible,” she reflected on her own experience and realized that, for her, it meant to take responsibility and increase connection. She says that, for her, nonattachment is a process of freeing herself from attachment to her own point of view, from “buying [her] own story,” and thus from being constrained by her own reactivity. Taking a skeptical attitude toward the “meaning that [she] infused” into experience, she inquires into alternate ways of seeing things. This “flexibility” of nonattachment empowers her to “decrease suffering and increase connection” in situations of relational conflict where she can let go of her attachment to “being right.” For Rachel, her introduction to yoga was a pivotal experience in which she shifted her self-concept in a meaningful way. Her involvement with the yoga community contributed to her healing from an assault and “helped to shape [her] identity in a way that was really, really positive.” Rachel works as a yoga therapist with a clinical population, a career that has significant meaning to her because it is a “place where social work and somatic therapy [meet],” enabling her to contribute positively to other people’s lives.

For Selina, the experience of nonattachment involves gradual changes in the way she relates to her attachments. Examples of changes include no longer feeling as “stuck” or “mired” in depressive states, feeling less of a need to “control,” and no longer feeling like “everything I thought, I believed.” An example of a strong attachment for Selina is a fear of “not being worthy or of abandonment.” In the face of difficult circumstances and emotions, Selina now feels less reactive and more empowered to choose her responses, having learned to “witness” her own experience including “that part [that] gets attached a lot.” She relates nonattachment with a state of “rest” where she can observe nondefensively and nonjudgmentally. Selina’s experience of

raising children involved learning to let go of her desire to control, and led to an increase in a sense of closeness and authenticity in the relationships. Vijnana Yoga is a fundamental part of Selina's way of life. She believes that intentionally being "present in the body" in yoga practice can lead to the "unfolding" of nonattachment. She further believes that experiences can be "held" in the tissues of the body. She has felt dramatic movements of energy as her body releases blocks. For Selina, nonattachment is "interwoven" with a spiritual sense of "grace"; she trusts she is being guided by "something bigger." Through meditation, she aims to reduce the influence of her ego, and to become a like "a vessel" for a higher purpose. She says: "It's non-doership. It's Karma yoga. We're no longer the one that's doing."

Toni states that nonattachment is a later stage on her lifelong journey toward self-realization. She says that, prior to this stage, she needed to become conscious of the "wound" of her childhood, which originated in lessons she received from her family of origin and in trauma she suffered at a young age. This wounding "conditioned" her to subordinate herself and to hide. Through yoga, meditation, and other practices, she learned to observe herself "acting out of a wound." She developed "the pause," a state of watchful presence, from which she can "take the time to respond from choice rather than react from ignorance." She felt empowered when she realized she could choose to accept the consequences of being attached: "I have recognized and agreed to the places where I am attached. And I'm in the dance *all* the time, of nonattachment." Toni embraces suffering, believing it is "the essential passage to wake up from ignorance to awareness." Toni recalls several profound moments in her life that contributed to the meaning of nonattachment for her, including two near-death experiences. Deeply spiritual from a young age, Toni's love and trust in "something universal" buoys her in stormy times: "So in a dark moment, you go to the lifeline. You go to the euphoric connection to a God consciousness, or a divine

consciousness.” At this point in Toni’s life, letting go of attachments is a priority for her, as is helping others: “we’re not here *for* the self, we are in the actualization of the self, to be in service.” She believes that to understand nonattachment, one must first understand impermanence:

it’s not what happens, it’s what we do with what happens. It’s not what happens. What happens is so transitory. In love, out of love. With money, no money. With food, no food. It’s just transitory . . . what are we doing with what is happening is what’s of value to my life now.

Concept of Nonattachment

Taken together, participant descriptions of nonattachment reveal a broad concept encompassing a process, a state, a learnable skill, actions, and a lived experience. For example, participants describe nonattachment as a state that can be cultivated, evidenced by Selina’s query “how do you cultivate nonattachment?” and Rachel’s assertion that yoga practice is, among other things, “a vehicle . . . for cultivating nonattachment.” Indications of a process of nonattachment include Rachel’s statement that “nonattachment for me is this ongoing process of questioning whether or not what arises is really the only option,” and Selina’s referral to her “movement from attachment toward nonattachment.” Speaking about changes she has noticed in herself, Rachel reports a skill component to nonattachment:

the big difference is that ability to not be too attached to the meaning that I put into things. Or at least have the ability to act in the face of it in a way that’s more compassionate and more conducive to connection.

Participants use several action terms related to nonattachment. One example is letting go, as Toni asks rhetorically: “Well, letting go . . . is really just . . . another phrase for nonattachment really, isn’t it?” Rachel provides a second example of an action term: “Detaching from a point of view.” In a third example of an action facet, Guinevere refers to the absence of the act of attaching: “I have to honour that as appropriate in that moment . . . and not, not attach a story or a judgment or

whatever to that.” A final aspect of the concept of nonattachment is the lived experience. For example, Toni refers to a theory of nonattachment that may describe a kind of lived experience of present moment: “I think that, the very word, or the *theory* of nonattachment is what pre-exists the moment before you let go, into present moment.” She also emphasizes the importance of the lived experiencing: “You cannot just be in a *theory* of nonattachment. You have to *live* your attachments. You have to *realize* your attachments. You have to realize you have *choice* around your attachments.” In this next example, Guinevere describes nonattachment as an arrival in the present moment, and notes felt qualities to the experience: “I think . . . when we get to this place of, this place of being present, it feels *good*. You know? There’s a sense of joy and ease that comes then.”

What nonattachment is not. In outlining the participants’ conceptualization of nonattachment, it is helpful to also consider what they believe it is not. Perhaps the most obvious antithesis to nonattachment is the term’s suffix: attachment. As Selina states: “I would start by saying, you know, what [nonattachment] is not. And that’s attachment.” Participant responses correspond with the semantic implication of *nonattachment* in that the prefix *non* refers to an attenuation or absence of attachment. The following examples of participant descriptions of attachment support the notion it is comparable to nonattachment in that it is a broad concept comprising facets like (a) a state: “I feel attachment as grasping” (Selina); an action: (b) “I find it tiresome. To carry that *stuff* with me” (Guinevere); (c) a process: “So what is, what we’re attached to as a way of getting stuck *in* whatever that life cycle is, or event is” (Toni), and (d) a lived experience: “[attachment is] something that is very familiar. It arises. It has, like, an emotion, a physiology to it. It’s got a whole sort of landscape to it. It’s an emotion in and of itself.” (Rachel)

Participants often describe their experience of nonattachment by depicting their relationship to their attachments. Paying attention to what participants say they are attached to contributes to an understanding of what nonattachment means for them. Participants list numerous examples of attachments, with some representative examples as follows. One could be “really attached to this identity” (Selina), “attached to my role” (Toni), could “attach a story or a judgment” (Guinevere), could be “attached to your point of view” (Rachel), or “attached to being right” (Rachel). Having an attachment could mean “you want a particular outcome” (Selina), or could be something that “we’ve set as our *goal*” (Guinevere). Conversely, attachment could be represented by a resistance to change: “I only want it this way. I don’t want it to be different” (Toni). One could be attached in relationship, like Selina, who lists her children as her “biggest attachment, probably,” or Toni, who says she is attached to the people in her life: “I don’t take . . . that contact, all those farewells lightly. They’re my life force.” Toni provides examples of hypothetical attachments that are rooted in desire: “I’m attached to building *this* empire, I’m attached to owning that particular model of that vehicle. I’m attached to being recognized. I’m attached to being thin.” A helpful perspective considers both attachment and nonattachment as two sides of the same coin. This chapter takes the approach of tracking participant experiences of both attachment and nonattachment.

Three participants further describe the concept of nonattachment by contrasting it with other concepts. For example, Selina distinguishes nonattachment from indifference:

indifference is different than nonattachment Because indifference almost means like you don't care. It does mean you don't care, in *my* lexicon. Nonattachment, it doesn't mean you don't care It means you don't need to *control*.

In a second example, Rachel differentiates nonattachment from irresponsibility: “Now that doesn’t mean not being committed to something. Right? Or not being responsible. It’s the

opposite.” In a third example, Guinevere clarifies that nonattachment “doesn’t mean that I don’t participate in the moment. I think that’s the other part of nonattachment . . . to actually be fully engaged in each moment.”

Global Theme Framework

Analysis of participant interviews reveals six superordinate themes, each encompassing respective sub-themes. The superordinate themes are *a flexible identity in relationship; developing nonattachment, moment by moment; how to see things differently; processing lived experience; choosing freedom; and framework for a way of life*. Table 1 presents the global theme framework, including all superordinate themes and sub-themes.

Table 1: Global Theme Framework

<p><u>1. Flexible Identity in Relationship</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Attachment to Story b. Parts of Self c. Flexibility and Openness d. Relating to Self and Other
<p><u>2. Developing Nonattachment, Moment by Moment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ongoing Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Frustration ii) Changes over time b. Living Moment to Moment c. Looking Back, Looking Ahead <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Past experiences of transformation and transcendence ii) Nonattachment to outcome
<p><u>3. How to See Things Differently</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Intentionality b. Letting Go c. Presence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Tolerance for discomfort and self-acceptance ii) Non-doing place d. Shifting Perspective <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Observing ii) Modulating meaning iii) Sensing iv) Skeptical inquiry

<p><u>4. Processing Lived Experience</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Embodied Experience b. Yoga as Mind-Body Practice c. Processing and Integration d. Spiritual Body and Interconnection
<p><u>5. Choosing Freedom</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Attached to Safety and Security b. Freedom <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Choice ii) Changing suffering iii) Empowerment and purpose
<p><u>6. Framework for a Way of Life</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Systems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Yoga and Buddhism ii) Psychology b. Ethics and Values c. Important Tensions d. Overlap of Formal and Informal Practice

Theme One: A Flexible Identity in Relationship

An experience shared by participants is an awareness of relationship to identity, ranging from attached to nonattached. At the attached end of the spectrum, one’s sense of identity involves attachment to a story, or to a set of assumptions and beliefs about the self and the world. A story can have wide implications for how one interprets and responds to one’s experience. This was the case for Rachel who felt attached to beliefs like: “The world’s not safe. I’m a bad person. I’m not loveable It’s all that attachment to that story of self. And then everything is correlate in the world to that story that you’re attached to about yourself.” Attachment to story is the focus of the first sub-theme. At the other end of the continuum is a sense of identity less attached to any given story and marked by flexibility and openness to experience. Participant experiences involve perceiving the self as comprising multiple and sometimes contradictory parts and can

involve the acceptance of these parts into an integrated whole. This will be unpacked in the second sub-theme. Flexibility and openness are explored in the third sub-theme. Finally, the fourth sub-theme covers relationships and will explore the implications of nonattachment and identity in how participants relate to themselves and to others.

Attachment to story. Each participant, at some point, uses the term *story* to refer to her interpretation of experience. Stories reveal how participants are making sense of themselves in the context of their experience. Selina draws a clear connection between story, identity, and attachment when she refers to the part of herself that:

believes . . . that clings to this story, of “this is who I am,” and wants this to be like solid, this being, like I'm pointing to myself, (pats hands on chest) this body, this story, these roles to be who I am. That one, that part gets attached a lot.

In the above case, she relates attachment to a story with a fundamental need to make sense of her experience and to confirm her own existence. Attachment to story is also illustrated by Rachel, for whom an “old story” is one that “has power in the sense that it’s a default. You know, I’ll go there (snaps fingers) very quickly.” For her, attachment to story is signaled by the fact that the story has persisted long enough to become habitual. Toni explains that an attachment to a repeating story can be problematic if that story inadequately reflects or even distorts reality:

You have to pay attention to where you are stuck. In ideas. Like the habits and cycles of your mind. And so . . . when you realize you have choice around believing your mind, right? Or *not*. Sometimes it’s just a *goddamn story* that you’ve been telling yourself for so long, you know, you *believe your own stories*.

Guinevere explains her understanding of story using the analogy of forming a first impression. Part of her experience of meeting someone for the first time is trying to make sense of the accompanying visceral felt sense of that person. She explains that, regardless of whether such an experience might warrant a deeper investigation, there tends to be an automatic meaning-making process that kicks in:

We meet someone, and I don't know about you, but sometimes it's like "I don't like that person at all." I have no idea, necessarily, why. So it doesn't have to be even previous knowledge. It can be just in this moment. There's just this *aversion*. And so you go: "Wow, what's that about?" Right? (laughing) And then, you know, rather than saying: "What's that about?" I think, often we . . . not often, but maybe what we *do* at times is then develop a story. "I don't like him, so mm." (laughing) You know? And so this whole situation is created, and in a moment, in a mere few seconds.

Participants describe how their process of meaning-making informs their sense of identity. Selina refers to the close link between experience and a sense of self as *identification*. She defines identification as a lack of differentiation between the self and one's internal experience: "And that's what I mean by identification. That thought comes up, and that's who I am." In a similar vein, Toni refers to the challenge of distinguishing between the self and external circumstance: "We place such an enormous emphasis on what's happening. As if our identity is what's happening." Through yoga practice, Selina developed a stable sense of identity that was independent of, or not attached to, her moment-to-moment experience:

And I think . . . the identifying is . . . like "I believe that that's true," and now with a practice, if those things come up, I don't have to believe it's true. And that's what I mean by "identification." It's like, well, it might be true in the *moment*, that I *feel that way*, but it's not *who* I am.

That sense of "who I am" has implications beyond feelings about self, as identity affects the whole experience of life. Rachel describes how the story she had identified with as a young adult impacted her experience of life, noting that being introduced to yoga practice interrupted that narrative:

the way that I was identifying was as a drug user and a drinker and a smoker and, you know, like a bad girl who didn't care. You know? Didn't care about herself, and didn't give a shit about other people, and just wanted to party. That was sort of the persona and that's the way that it was going. That's the life that was getting created. You know, I was getting fired from jobs, I had no career direction . . . I was like "there's no way I would ever have the confidence to go back to school. I hadn't even graduated from high school, but that's a different story. It just wasn't going that way. And the yoga practice came in and it was like suddenly I got to know myself as a different person.

Lessons in meaning-making come early in life and bring consequences. For Toni, some toxic early teachings contributed to what she describes as the “wound” of her childhood, and had a negative impact on her sense of self. One lesson, for example, was that “men were educated and women became mothers.” Having internalized that idea, she drew early conclusions about herself, conclusions which she believes inhibited her from pursuing higher education at that time:

And to try and fill the hole, given you’ve made these decisions about yourself, myself . . . I’ve already at that sort of teenage time figure[ed] out where, like the direction of my life. So the decisions of my life had me move away from things like . . . any kind of academic pursuit. I’d already made decisions about myself pre-highschool. About things like that.

Given the potential consequences of identifying with a story, and understanding how deeply rooted these stories can be, it is not surprising that Guinevere experiences a deep sense of satisfaction at having developed an ability to recognize and let go of attachment to story:

Guinevere: I find that . . . it makes my days more fulfilling.

Interviewer: What does? What makes your days more fulfilling?

Guinevere: When . . . I’m *clear* about letting go of my stories, or my . . . tendency to stories. My tendency to attach to a situation, or *all* those things. I feel much better in myself.

Parts of self. Participants all refer to various parts of self. For example, Selina associates experiences like having a name, life roles, and a physical body with a part of herself she refers to as “the attached self.” She describes that part as motivated by desire: “That part of the self wants to be this or that. Doesn’t want this or that. That’s the part that gets attached. That’s the part that reacts.” She describes another part of self, a detached observer, who is less caught up in the experience of identity: “What I’m calling ‘the witness’ is that part of the self that isn’t really attached. It just watches.” Toni reports a similar conceptualization of the self, consisting of both observer and observed. Her report includes a distinction between what, in her experience, is and is not part of her “true nature”:

it was the very beginning of touching my true nature. So I was both myself and in the observation of my acting out of a wound. I was myself, and then I was in the observation of how I would be in a pattern of thinking or behaviour that was not myself.

Two participants associate attachments with aspects of self that are difficult to look at, like behaviours, qualities, or aversive experiences. For example, Rachel equates the polarity of attachment and nonattachment to the difference between seeing the self as entirely bad and seeing the self composed of several parts, some good, some bad. A nonattached perspective is one that accepts a negative trait as simply a part of a greater, more complex whole:

For me, self-compassion plays into attachment and nonattachment in the sense that . . . I think I have more capacity to look at those responses and those ways of being and those thought processes that aren't very pretty. You know, not very flattering. Like, those places where I can be really small. And nasty. And really just be with those and not be . . . attached to those sort of ways of being, as being the totality of who I am. Like knowing that I have a capacity to *be* that way and that that's okay.

Similarly, Guinevere cites her “scarcity complex” as an illustration of an especially strong attachment. While she describes it as a “useless burden to carry,” she also demonstrates acceptance toward it, stating that “it’s a part of what I’ve carried with me. It’s part of who I’ve been.” Guinevere describes the process of investigating her attachments, which are rooted in a “very tumultuous, very dysfunctional childhood.” She says it is important to come to terms with early experiences and accept them as a part of her:

We need to say . . . “what needs to happen for that to complete itself in a way that I can be *with* it. And, *allow* whatever that is to become part of me in a constructive manner.” Because it is *part* of who we are.

Flexibility and openness. As discussed above, participants say attachment to a particular story or set of beliefs can be problematic, especially if those beliefs include negative self-appraisals, limiting ideas, or if they contradict the reality of a situation. Conversely, participants associate nonattachment with openness and flexibility in regards to identity, intention, and meaning. For example, Selina remarks that being a yoga teacher is an important aspect of her

identity. She was recently injured and discusses the implications of having physical limitations. She indicates that, despite not being able to fulfill some parts of the teaching role, like demonstrating certain yoga postures, nonattachment to her identity enables her to adapt to the situation and “recogniz[e] the positives, or . . . the growth that is coming out of that” rather than be dragged down by negative self-talk:

I think if we're really attached to our *identity*, which we all are to some extent, then it's, it's easier to just spiral down into anger or criticism or complaint, or “not good enough.” Because suddenly . . . this image of who we are has shifted. And *especially* when it's, you know, going away from that ideal, and if you're going to give . . . a hierarchy to it, and [be] less *able* to fulfill that ideal. But also, I suppose the opposite too, if you're more able, it's also, the building of this identity as being *good enough*.

While drafting this chapter, my interpretation of this excerpt read “The last line suggests she is not advocating for complete detachment from ideas about the self, but rather for striking a balance between a stability and adaptability.” During the member check, Selina provided the following clarification as a response to my interpretation:

I do believe that we become attached to any identity whether “good enough” (or better than or not good enough). So again, the paradox: we can live in oneness [or] duality. I live mostly in duality, with a faith in Oneness underlying all. So [I] would advocate for nonattachment, even to the “good enough” identity, as part of one’s spiritual practice, but also for knowing that, being human, we . . . do cling to [this] idea of “good enough,” “not good enough,” “better or worse.” All the time. The practice then is to let it go, or to be with the experience until it shifts. So, then it depends on one’s intention (Selina, personal communication, February 26, 2017).

Selina offers another example whereby “if my identity were ‘I’m a nice person’ and this person over here did something like ‘you’re shit,’” then an attached condition marked by inflexibility of identity could lead to a downward emotional spiral “because this person basically is tearing down my idea of who I am.” While nonattachment is indicative of flexibility, attachment is associated with a lack thereof. Rachel suggests there may be a correlation between having very strong attachment to story and depression, noting the clinical population she works

with is marked by an impaired psychological flexibility. She observes that, in the case of depression, these clients feel trapped in “a larger cycle of suffering” and that it is “very difficult” for them to look at their experience from any other perspective:

sometimes it seems like a pathological thing. Like with the people that I’m working with. It’s like, they can’t get that they’re creating the meaning. They just can’t see it. It’s like, “No, I am, this is, this is happening to me.” And it can only be interpreted in one way. Rather than, this is *happening*, and because of some different factors and, you know, a particular perspective, I’ve got it like this is what it means. But maybe it doesn’t really mean this. It’s like there isn’t a lot of flexibility in the thinking.

Guinevere implies that a contributing factor to the nature of one’s relationship to the transience of “life’s circumstances” is informed by one’s currently held purpose or objective. Speaking about the “fluidity” necessary to sustain a present state from moment-to-moment, she suggests that the ability to perpetually attune and adapt to the flow of changing circumstance can thwart collisions between a rigidly held intention and contradictory realities:

I think we have to be fluid enough to be present to these moments . . . and I think sometimes even being present in a moment like that, without a conscious decision, our intention shifts, sometimes happens of its own volition. It just happens because we realize something in us shifts sufficiently, where we have that sense of “Oh. Mm. No. I am not going to drive my car down the street in reverse.”

Perhaps nonattachment represents an attempt to maintain harmony between identity and circumstance by allowing self-concept to bend in response to the ever-shifting conditions of life.

Participants associate nonattachment with an attitude of openness, toward both inner and outer experience. Selina describes the experience of nonattachment “as . . . allowing to happen what just needs to happen through you.” Guinevere presents a similar notion, stating “I think being present means that we open to whatever comes *through* us, right?” While describing the withdrawn feeling of being attached, Rachel notes: “Moving into a place where I get to shift that attachment usually has me want to be more engaged with people. It’s more open, it’s more expansive.” Toni explains how letting go has become a top priority for her at this stage of her

life, and that if she could, she would experience everything without holding on to anything: “To live a liberated life, where I was absolutely, truly free, then I would *allow* everything in, and I *allow* everything to go out.”

Relating to self and other. A fourth emerging sub-theme pertains to how participants relate, both to themselves and to others. Participants associate nonattachment’s role in relating to the self with an accepting and trusting attitude. For example, Selina’s ability to perform yoga postures, an important aspect of her role as a yoga teacher, has been limited by an injury. Her flexibility toward the meaning of identity is characterized by acceptance and self-care. This compassionate stance is an alternative to fixating on the discrepancy between reality and the ideal:

Right, and so with nonattachment, when I can’t do the postures, I mean, I can’t even demo everything when I’m teaching right now. I don’t waste any time . . . with the commentary If it comes up, it’s like “oh” and then I move on. Whereas . . . instead of bemoaning the fact that I can't do these things, obviously I'm aware that I can't do them, but I'm investing my energy in taking care of myself, and being present. And I'm recognizing the positives, or . . . the growth that is coming out of that. Whereas, I think if we're really attached to this identity of, in this case, being able to do the poses . . . then there's a lot more suffering.

In another example of developing an accepting and trusting relationship with the self, Toni describes a writing practice she engaged in during her twenties, in which her “conditioned self” would write questions in regards to her struggles with roles and identity, and her “true self” would respond in a supportive way:

And she would write back to me. And she would write back the most extraordinary, loving . . . letters of encouragement . . . like: “Keep going, it’s all gonna be okay.” She was my wise woman. And she became like my best friend, for years. And, I knew that if I stayed in touch with her, I would realize her. Like, I would arrive to her. And so there were periods that that relationship felt *intensely* essential. Like, my only *honest* relationship. It’s where I told the truth. It’s where I celebrated. It’s where I cried. It’s where I spoke about a misery that I would never speak about in my real world.

Further, Toni acknowledges, without demonizing, the part of herself who automatically believes her own thoughts: “I have a choice of recognizing these are *thoughts*, and for the part of me that *believes* my thoughts, it’s just the believer of thoughts. That doesn’t make anything true. It’s just thoughts.” In a third example, Rachel notes nonattachment has contributed to a change in her self-concept. She now has more of an awareness and acceptance of her shortcomings, and a willingness to be accountable for her actions: “It means that I am a real jerk (laughing), and I mess up a lot, and I’m willing to clean it up and take responsibility for it.” She likens nonattachment to seeing the whole, complex picture of the self, comprised of various positive and negative aspects, and to being compassionate toward all parts: “I can encompass that [negative side] and I can also be very generous and very loving and all of these other things. But I don’t feel like I need to push that stuff aside.” For Guinevere, relating to herself involves reckoning with her past experiences. She speaks of the importance of recognizing and making sense of difficult and confusing events in order to accept and integrate those experiences as a part of her identity, and to grow:

We need to say “Okay, what about this? What about that? How, you know, how can I? Where? What needs to happen? For that to complete itself in a way that I can be *with* it. And, *allow* whatever that is to become part of me in a constructive manner.” Because it is *part* of who we are.

Similar themes of trust and acceptance emerge in participants’ discussions of the role of nonattachment in relating to and connecting with others. For Toni, nonattachment in relationship is represented by a shift away from attempts to control the parameters of a relationship, and a move toward trust and acceptance:

my present day relationship is morphing into a new form where my old self would have tried to control the form. I would have manipulated, orchestrated, seduced, done whatever I could have done to manipulate a different outcome. And now I just trust.

Selina also describes the progression toward nonattachment in relationship as a relinquishing of controlling behaviours. For example, Selina noticed that controlling behaviour led to disconnection in her relationship with her children: “The more as a parent you try and control your kid, the more they want to rebel. The more they want *away*. And so you don’t *feel* connected.” She indicates that now “I just let my kids be them” and that “we feel close, and I think the ability to *be* close is probably because we can be around each other and be who we want to be from inside.” For Guinevere, the state of nonattached presence helps facilitate connection:

when we’re in the moment, in this place of presence, and awareness . . . that sort of separation *dissolves*. You know? And then . . . when [Sam] says something, or does something, I’m present to it, and therein there’s just a clear connection. I don’t have to make a story about [Sam]. I’m just with [Sam] when he says that. And . . . I’m present to him. Right? And I’m not separate from him, at that time, at that moment.

Rachel reaffirms the above example from the reverse perspective as she explains that *attachment* to a point of view can result in *disconnection* from another:

For instance, I could say I had an argument with a close friend. And decided that she was wrong and I was right. And that I wasn’t going to talk to her anymore. Now it’s clear that there’s a lot of suffering there, right? Like, I don’t get the benefit of her friendship. She doesn’t get the benefit of mine. There’s a level of disconnection there. So we know that there’s some suffering there, right? Like, inherently in that disconnection from another, there’s an element of suffering. But the *payoff* is that I get to be right.

Theme Two: Developing Nonattachment, Moment by Moment

The second superordinate theme examines participant descriptions of nonattachment as an ongoing developmental progression, experienced moment by moment. Generally speaking, participants see themselves as making progressive advancements, away from attachment and toward nonattachment. They see this as a lengthy, if not life-long journey. Building on the sub-theme of flexibility, a continuous effort to openly attend to successive intervals of the present moment corresponds with a flexible approach toward both the meaning of past experience and to

setting intention for the future. While participants have a strong sense of where they came from and where they are going, they also seem willing and able to rewrite their understanding of past events and adapt for the future.

Ongoing Development. Nonattachment is described by participants in the context of a long-term, ongoing developmental process. The process, which involves gradual changes, can be frustrating at times. In an indication of nonattachment's developmental nature, Selina believes her continual yoga practice contributes to progress in that area:

all I can hope is that if I keep practicing . . . that the presence will, the ability to be present, to remain present and to touch that mystery will grow, and with that the nonattachment *unfolds* and then when these big challenges come up in my life, as they will in all of our lives, that the practice has given me enough to handle them with grace.

For Guinevere, the development of nonattachment means letting go more and more. She believes her process of letting go of attachments is far from over; that her capacity to let go will continue to increase: "I feel that I'm still very attached to very many things (laughing). And I don't mind it. But I know, definitely, there is an opportunity over time, and I know that, to let go of more and more things." For Rachel, nonattachment involves a continuous and conscious effort to reduce reactivity in favor of responsiveness: "So, for me, nonattachment is an *ongoing* process. Which is essentially rooted in awareness. It's a conscious process, and it's a choice. And it's *about*, primarily, cultivating a gap between what happens and my response to it." In Toni's experience, nonattachment has become increasingly important in her life as she contemplates her own mortality and her time left:

And the nonattachment piece for me becomes brighter and brighter and brighter as I get, you know, well past the middle of my arc. Like I'm kind of about seven o'clock on my twelve hour clock. And I know how fast the last third has gone, and the last third will go a lot faster. So, I feel [diligent] around not wasting any time, like just being in the reverence of what time is left, and what time is left is *singularly* about letting go.

Frustration. Part of the experience of the ongoing development of nonattachment for participants is that it is a long and slow process. For example, Toni provides a sense of just how long the process might take: “I had to dedicate a chunk of my life to *doing* it, to get out of my way. To get out of my sort of narcissistic habitual cycles of breaking the habits, breaking the cycles of attachment to filling up the empty hole.” Toni acknowledges that, in fact, her project may never be complete: “I recognize it’s never done. It’s never done. There, there’s always places to, to work and to deepen, to surrender, and to let go.” For some, that slow pace of development can be frustrating, especially early on in the process. Selina notes that, in the beginning, she did not feel like progress was being made:

and it feels like the same point. It *feels* like you've done *all* this work and here you are, still reacting . . . especially at the beginning people will be *upset* with themselves for reacting. But if they look back five years, they *will* see that things have changed. But in that instant, a lot of people will just beat themselves up for the reacting in the first place.

In that example, she gives the impression that attachments are neither easily nor quickly undone, and that the work requires repeated effort to achieve gradational results. Similarly, Guinevere refers to a sense of frustration that can occur when trying to attain immediate results:

I think as soon as I say “I’m going to let go of my scarcity complex,” God, pardon my French, *now*, I’m never, it doesn’t work. Like, it’s all ego. You know? It’s like (in a comical voice) “I am doing this.” It’s nonsense . . . all that that would do, I guess, over time, is make me frustrated because it is not happening the way my little ego had decided it would have to happen.

Changes over time. Participants describe some of the developmental changes pertaining to nonattachment they have noticed over time. Some report they can process and make sense of experience more quickly than before. For example, Selina notes that, in her experience over several years, she can notice “sooner” when she is caught in a reactive meaning-making pattern:

Selina: I would say it's experienced as noticing *sooner*.
Interviewer: Mm. Noticing.

Selina: That I'm in the grips of the pattern, for example. Whether it's the pattern of, you know, trying to control or the pattern of not feeling good enough, or any of those. It could be any habitual pattern. So, I mean, at first you don't even know it's a pattern. You're just there. And then, you know it's a pattern and you feel really frustrated because you can't *change* it. But you've recognized it. So recognition is the first thing And then, you know, you stop beating yourself up when you recognize. And then, over the years, the *timeframe* is shorter and shorter and shorter.

She explains that her “movement from attachment toward nonattachment,” over a period of “a long time” involves feeling progressively less attached to reactive thoughts, and being able to more quickly distinguish these thoughts as separate from her identity:

It's not like these thought waves don't come up. They sometimes do, not as frequently, because I'm not like that hamster running around in the wheel so often. But when they come up, I no longer cling to them, and identify with them. Or at least not for as long.

In a similar report, Guinevere describes being confronted by a confusing situation that threatens to overwhelm her and could take days to make sense of. She notes an aim of her practice is to stay present to the experience in the moment, shortening the time it takes to process what is happening and respond to it:

So that when this person, for instance, says something that I don't understand, I can allow for that moment to sink in *now* and look for that processing to happen, a little more quickly, and a little more quickly, and so that . . . these things become seamless, and happen (snaps fingers) in this moment, (snaps fingers) in this moment.

By engaging with nonattachment over time, participants can begin to experience major shifts in perspective. For Toni, part of the developmental progression of nonattachment is coming to recognize attachment “cycles,” and realizing her responsibility in making choices around that:

I was . . . thirty-seven, I started to teach . . . and then I could *see* more clearly the ways in which those cycles of unhealthy desire and the things that I was not facing, which at that point was where I was not taking the *responsibility* for realizing my life, that I had choice around that.

In a second example, Selina describes an ongoing process of developing the capability to perceive more, involving a widening of perspective and an increasingly refined self-awareness:

now it's like there's so much you feel inside that you *didn't* feel before, and you'll *feel* and I will *feel* so much more in the *next* five years. My belief is that as we cultivate that ability to sense on a more and more subtle level, the mind itself is, I will say, becoming purified but able to *see* on more subtle levels what's going on with it, with us And *that's* part of the unfolding of nonattachment. We can see something besides what we used to, or what I used to. I'll speak for myself. I can see that not everything this mind says is true.

In a final example, Rachel has noticed a change in herself in that the flexibility of perspective-shifting she associates with nonattachment is now relevant not only to long-held beliefs like “the world’s not safe,” but to the minutiae of everyday experience:

then I guess what I’ve seen as I’ve gotten older, you know, as years have gone by is that . . . it’s not just on a larger scale. It’s actually a moment-to-moment, minute-to-minute, relationship-to-relationship, conversation-to-conversation experience. So it happens on a larger scale, and it happens on a smaller scale. *And* it’s always happening on the mat.

Living Moment to Moment. As will be discussed under the third superordinate theme, participants work to cultivate a state of open awareness of present moment experience. Given this shared aim, it is not surprising that participants often frame their experience in terms of a succession of moments. For example, Selina practices yoga with a simple intention in regards to awareness: “just to be present . . . and just to be in the moment, I would say.” Guinevere tempers her concerns for the future by focusing on the present moment and taking an incremental approach to working through her yoga practice:

I think one of things we always have to keep in mind is . . . to not worry about the outcome so much, but to do what is right in that time, in that moment. And so in a yoga posture we practice that incremental piece.

Toni also focuses on incremental advancement toward an overarching goal: “That’s *moving* towards, incrementally, taking baby steps, in liberating my life, to freedom.”

Part of the interest in the brief interval of a moment relates to a concern about how quickly the reactive process unfolds, and from an interest in dismantling this process as it

happens. Rachel, who states that “we have emotional responses to life as it arises moment to moment,” advocates vigilantly attending to the task of questioning one’s rapid and automatic meaning making process: “But always bringing awareness, (snaps fingers) always bringing awareness (snaps fingers), you know (snaps fingers) just not buying your own story (snaps fingers) because it happens so fast (snaps fingers) these judgments. (snaps fingers).” Interrupting this automatic and continuous meaning-making, as it happens, is a key factor of nonattachment for Guinevere. She states: “And the practice of nonattachment, what comes with that is not creating a story about each moment.” She further explains:

And so this whole situation is created, and in a moment, in a mere few seconds. And we’re not even often aware that we do it. Right? So, I think . . . part of the practice . . . is to really be *clear* of that sort of stuff. And to try to step back and to stay detached. You know? From . . . that story that you’re tending to develop (snaps fingers). Just like that.

She suggests people have a default and unquestioning attachment to the automatic meaning made in each moment. She recommends becoming aware of what is happening in the moment to detach from it. The idea that meaning can be made, attached to, recognized, and let go of in the brief interval of a moment is captured succinctly in Toni’s paraphrasing of one of her teachers, who told her “as soon as you recognize your attachment, let go.”

Nonattachment to any belief or prescribed meaning in a moment opens up the possibility then for something different. For example, Toni states that “something transformational happens” in the context of yoga practice, where even a momentary experience of detaching from negative beliefs can have healing effects:

the emptiness of self-doubt, unworthiness, unlovable, not enough. Because we’re learning to rest in that pause where . . . we’re not in the insufficiency. Even if we just touch it on the mat Just touch the possibility that we’re not that wound.

In a second example, Rachel remarks that, in the context of an interpersonal conflict, nonattachment to her point of view can quickly deescalate the situation: “I could shift this in a

moment. If I'm willing to take responsibility and shift my point of view on it." For Selina, nonattachment presents the opportunity for a spiritual experience of spontaneous joy or connection in the moment. Selina calls this "flow" and describes the experience as follows:

The crown feels open. The heart feels open. It feels like a connection. Or a union with, with, there's joy. Love. Allowing. And, an otherworldliness or an indescribable-ness. You know, it's like, I'm sure that feeling is . . . best described in poetry. But nothing leaps to mind. But it feels, yeah . . . just, there's a lot of joy, and a lot of love, and it's those moments of . . . just feeling you know, knowing "Oh, I am love." I mean you can say that . . . or you can suddenly be blown away by the feeling of that. And that's grace.

Toni reports a similar experience of spontaneous love: "I have felt instantaneous expressions of love, with a stranger, in a moment, and not even know what their name is. And nor do I need to have any more contact other than the moment."

Looking back, looking ahead. Although participants emphasize living in the moment, it is worth paying attention to how they make sense of past experiences of nonattachment, and how nonattachment factors into their expectations for the future. This fourth sub-theme first explores select participant memories of experiences that appear to contribute to their respective meaning-making processes and following that, discusses nonattachment to outcome as a factor of participant orientation toward the future.

Past experiences of transformation and transcendence. Participants recall various stories from their past to help explain the meaning of nonattachment. These experiences are deeply personal, wide ranging, and specific to each person. However, every participant shared at least one story that was striking in its presentation of a profound experience of transformation or transcendence. As a young child, Toni was spiritually curious and would attend church by herself and in secret before her family woke for breakfast. She describes one of her first experiences of nonattachment:

one particular winter morning I was biking home from church and I was so *moved* by the elements of the universe that I stopped my bike and I burst into tears and the stars were still in the sky, and I felt the most *extraordinary* love, the most *extraordinary rushing* of love into my body. And I never spoke of it, for probably another forty years after that. And I knew it wasn't a church, and I knew it wasn't their god. And I knew that it had something to do with the crisp environment of the night air that I was biking home in, early, early in the morning. And I knew I had been touched by something that was awakening my heart. And I remember the moment as if it was early this morning.

She recalls the experience felt deeply emancipating. Her experience was also a foundational one:

“And the significance of it happening was in some way to prepare me for the rest of my life.” For

Rachel, her experience of being exposed to a yoga community had a transformative effect on the

trajectory of her life, because it loosened her attachment to her identity as a “drug user and a

drinker and a smoker and, you know, like a bad girl who didn't care.” She recalls the period of

change:

And then suddenly you put yourself into a different situation. And you know, you kind of like your teacher, and it seems like the teacher sort of likes you. And there's these other people around who are really supportive and they're kind of into something else. And you know, they welcome you in, and you start trying stuff out and then all of a sudden the story that you have of yourself starts to shift and you can let go of the attachment to the old stories. And then everything in your world starts to be correlate to that new story of self.

She reports the experience “helped [her] to formulate a new story about [her]self.” In a third

example, Guinevere discusses working through her attachments at a meditation colony, recalling

an early morning ritual she took part in with her teacher and rest of the group:

we would go swimming every morning in the ocean. So, we would get up at four in the morning. It would be pitch dark, *freezing* cold, rain or shine. Well, not shine. But rain or no rain. We'd pile in the car, or two cars, and we'd drive the ten minutes to the beach. Look at the water (laughing). *Throw* our clothes on the sand, just run like crazy, and go swimming in this very dark ocean. With no light, *anywhere*. We did that every morning . . . I thought [my teacher] was absolutely bonkers. But, you know as time went on and the more I did it, the more I enjoyed it actually. Even though it was always very cold. But there was also this opportunity to look at how cold you were, right? To be an observer of yourself in that situation.

Her story is remarkable for its visceral depiction of an experience of intentional detachment. It sits in contrast to Selina's story that might best be described as out-of-body. Before becoming involved in yoga, Selina had a profound experience while in sitting practice at a meditation retreat:

it was very visual. And very, it's kind of hard to explain. You know sometimes you hear about people, or you'll even watch from the Hubble space craft, you know, and they go out, and out and out, and you hear people going out into the infinite? I kind of went the *other* way. So, I don't really remember the whole process but suddenly there I *was*, on the level of atoms . . . except I wasn't this *body*, and that the image was of, you know [laughs] just atoms. With the little electrons spinning around them. And, it was quite powerful. In fact, the first time I, but you can't even really talk about it.

For Selina, this marked a pivotal experiencing of interconnection and non-separation, which informed her current understanding of the concept of nonattachment.

Nonattachment to outcome. Participants' future orientation involves striking a balance between setting goals and relinquishing concern over any particular outcome. For them, having an aim is important, but missing the mark should be of little consequence. The process emerges as more important than the destination. As Toni states "The purpose is to be true to *where you are* in your own self-realization. Not to get to the end of the goddamn race." Selina notes that grounding her decisions in yoga practice or meditation can offset the frustration of attachment to a particular outcome that does not come to pass:

And that's also where the nonattachment is. If it comes from that place, that voice, that's not my ego creating it, to me. I might have a different opinion in a year's time (laughs) . . . And then I'm able to act on it, and then when I didn't hear back, *it's okay*. Whereas if my, if I had done it out of the ego place, out of this grasping place with a desire for something to happen, then when I didn't hear back, I would be disappointed.

Guinevere says that while working toward the long-term goal of achieving a difficult posture in her yoga practice, she becomes absorbed in the process. She is less concerned with the eventual outcome to the extent that she is "okay" with the possibility of never meeting that goal:

I mean we can have this overall goal, that I'm going to continue my yoga practice, so that in however many years it's going to take me, I can do a handstand in the middle of the room, right? And that is an intention that I have. But in the meantime, in order for that to happen, I have to pull back, and say "So, first things first. The first intention now is to find my fingertips. (laughing) How do I do that? What with the hands? Or, what with the hips?" . . . I might still have this . . . sense that at some point I'm going to get it, but I don't care when. And maybe I'll never get it, and that's okay too.

Rachel notes that a sense of humour helps to be nonattached to a particular outcome, an approach which has implications for the rest of her life:

Rachel: So, you know, for instance in the first time I tried a headstand. Well, first of all I got the courage to try. Second, maybe I've cultivated the skill to do it. And third, maybe I'm gonna fall over. And I can be really good humoured in that, and not get too attached.

Interviewer: Not get too attached to succeeding.

Rachel: Yeah. And . . . you know, defining success within a yoga practice is actually completely ridiculous. Because really all we're doing is practicing. That's all it is. There's no final performance. And that's life.

However, she acknowledges that in practice she *is* aiming for results: "And the practice is just a vehicle . . . For insight. For growth. For cultivating nonattachment. For cultivating self-confidence. Insight." Toni, for whom nonattachment has become of central importance at this stage of her life, tries to balance honouring the duties in her life and letting go of outcome altogether:

But now I see that [in] what time I have left there's *nothing else to do* but be in the surrender. The letting go . . . There is *nothing to control*. And it's like, there's nothing to save up for (laughing). I mean there were some responsibilities that I have in my life which I get, but in the bigger picture there is no outcome.

Theme Three: How to See Things Differently

Participants describe a mechanism of nonattachment comprised of several interrelated and overlapping components, all contributing to a shift in perceived meaning. Taken together, participant descriptions do not suggest an independent, causal relationship between concepts but rather a reciprocal one, with each component interacting with the others. These components include the act of letting go, the cultivation of the state of presence, and the process of shifting

perspective. Letting go is a transitional action, sometimes intentional, sometimes consequential, and is likened to “surrender” (Toni) and “allowing” (Selina). Things participants might let go of include beliefs, experiences, and ways of seeing. Presence involves a focused, present moment awareness, characterized by a non-goal-oriented stillness, and an approach orientation toward experience. Shifting perspective involves attempts to see things from a new or different perspective, to challenge one’s own assumptions, and to modulate meaning. Interestingly, each concept is described by at least one participant as synonymous, or practically synonymous, with nonattachment. Before exploring the components of letting go, presence, and shifting perspective, the underlying thread of participants’ intentionality is discussed.

Intentionality. As discussed above under the second superordinate theme, although participants set goals for themselves, they endeavor to focus on navigating the experience of the present moment rather than fixating on the outcome. This speaks to their intentionality. In other words, they are purposive in regards to the direction, quality, and meaning of their actions from moment to moment. Selina practices yoga with an intention to stay focused and in the moment: “when I practice I’m . . . always I’m trying to stay as one-pointed as possible . . . Like, just be present.” For Guinevere, being intentional in the moment involves perpetually adapting her purpose: “So the intention, we can reset that all the time, and I think we need to. And I think we need to adjust it to the moment, all the time.” Another example of an intention that emerges for participants is a deliberate attitude of inquiry. Toni says that, although she meets with students under the pretext of learning the postural yoga practice, it is understood that the purpose of the meeting is self-inquiry:

three of them have said this week “Not here for this” as they pat their mat. “Not here for this.” So the exploration is like, “Then, what are we really doing?” Right? So what we’re really doing is everything you and I are talking about. It’s their curiosity about their discovery, about their own liberation.

Similarly, Rachel describes her purpose in practicing yoga, which involves curiosity and development: “And the practice is just a vehicle . . . For insight. For growth. For cultivating nonattachment. For cultivating self-confidence. Insight.”

Letting go. All participants refer to the act of letting go in their descriptions of the experience on nonattachment. As to what they are letting go *of*, it is often a sense of safety or control in terms of something familiar, automatic, or in support of held beliefs. Based on their statements, letting go may only be partially volitional in that it can be difficult or impossible to directly choose to let of a strongly held attachment.

Letting go is closely related to nonattachment, as Toni asks rhetorically: “Well, letting go . . . is really just . . . another phrase for nonattachment really, isn’t it?” She also likens letting go to the surrendering of control: “But now I see that [in] what time I have left there’s *nothing else to do* but be in the surrender. The letting go . . . there is *nothing to control*.” Toni refers to a recent and painful change in a relationship that has her living apart from her long-term partner. She indicates that had this happened earlier in life she would have struggled to let go: “My old self would have tried to control the form. I would have manipulated, orchestrated, seduced, done whatever I could have done to manipulate a different outcome.” In the following excerpt, she equates letting go with a bold relinquishing of the security of the familiar when faced with difficult and changing circumstances:

I think that I had missed the freedom of possibility in my life because I’ve . . . held too tight to the safety of the form. And if I had been braver, if I had been more courageous, I would have been more spontaneous. And I would have let go earlier.

Like Toni, Selina equates letting go with nonattachment. She echoes the above idea that letting go can be represented by a relinquishing of trying to control. In this example, she refers to letting go of trying to control conditions relating to the wellbeing of her children:

I just clung and wanted to control and make everything better. That's attachment. And so, for me, nonattachment is still letting these things come up, still seeing that, you know, maybe one of my kids, and they're my big, kind of, biggest attachment probably, maybe one of my kids is suffering and to let them live their own lives, basically. To watch it, it's not like nonattachment means you don't feel, but it means that I no longer need to make things better. It means that now I can just witness, you know? I can just listen without needing to fix things.

For Selina, letting go included finding a way to change her relationship with the drive to protect her children. In a case where intervening in her children's lives might be inappropriate, she can tolerate her discomfort and can regulate her behaviour accordingly.

Rachel sees letting go of attachment to a perspective or position as means to reduce reactivity in favor of responsiveness. She explains that, in order to promote the sense of mental space necessary to be non-reactive, "you've got to let go of something, whether it's a point of view, or an attachment to being right and that other person being wrong . . . and that's usually the world it lives in." In that example, she pairs letting go with a willingness to experience the uncertainty of not knowing the answer, of not being correct.

In an example of an instance where letting go is described as a volitional act, Guinevere paraphrases a meditation teacher who helped her make sense of difficult childhood events by guiding her to watch her unfolding present moment experience without grasping at it:

And when it comes up we're going to look at it very clearly. But then were going to leave it behind. Like, let's not linger. Let's not hold onto it. Let's just say, "Okay, here is part A of the blob, it's coming forward, this is what it is, look at the pain, look at the emotion, look at . . . the joy, whatever it is that it brings you. And then let it go."

In that example, she describes letting go as a learnable skill: being able to observe experience without becoming overly preoccupied or fixated. Contrast this with Guinevere's later statement that letting go is dependent, at least in part, on a natural cycle:

I find it tiresome. To carry that *stuff* with me. And I think that's one of the reasons I'd like to let go of it. I feel pretty ready. But everything has its own rhythm and its own time.

And I'm on my way I'm much better than I used to be (laughing). I've let quite a bit go. But I have a lot to let go of in that regard. And yeah, you're right. It makes me tired.

Of note, the above analogy of carrying a heavy burden depicts a corporeal aspect to her experience of attachment. In recalling a conversation where she spoke for the first time about one of her "core wounds," Selina describes an experience of letting go of an attachment that involves a marked physical component:

Selina: And that came out as, you know, I was talking and I was crying and every time I breathed it was like (quick inhaled gasp) like *gasping* for air. And, you know, that's just another way of the body expressing that [it's] been held inside for *so long* (makes a holding gesture with her hands) that it does come out physically. I have . . .

Interviewer: And that, sorry to interrupt, but you were making the same holding gesture, or a similar . . .

Selina: Right, because you *hold* it, because you hold it in your *body*, right? And it is . . . this *holding*. And I believe it's a *physical* holding. We feel it in our *fascia*, right? We feel it in our muscles, where we hold. And . . . so the letting *go*, whether it came as this shaking, or that, you know, "hold, hold, hold," and then gasp for air.

Presence. Participants associate nonattachment with an intentional quality of awareness called presence. Selina correlates the skill of sustaining a state of presence with the development of nonattachment: "All I can hope is that if I keep practicing . . . that the presence will, the ability to be present, to remain present and to touch that mystery will grow, and with that the nonattachment *unfolds*." Participants characterize presence as an intentional and focused attending to aspects of present moment experience. For Selina, directing attention to the present implies a corresponding de-emphasis on rumination and worry:

being with whatever comes up, rather than thinking about the past or the future. Does that make sense? It means just being here now rather than worrying about "okay, well if I say this, maybe she'll do this and then that might happen" and It's just being here with somebody. And trying to stay *here*, rather than go off into the future or into the past.

Presence is also characterized by the steadiness of an intentional focus and resolve against distraction. As Toni notes, it is a state "where we're no longer pushed and pulled by life circumstance." Sustaining a state of presence can present a challenge if the moment involves an

uncomfortable or painful experience. As Toni explains, presence involves adopting an accepting, non-interfering attitude toward experience, whether pleasant or harsh:

Presence is the moment with no resistance. The moment with no resistance. So, the moment might be the tears. The moment might be the heartbreak. The moment might be love arising. . . . it's just the moment. So there's no "I don't want this happening, I want *this* happening." There's no push and pull. There's no outcome.

Participants say they develop the ability to be present in yoga and meditation practice.

With its emphasis on attending to bodily sensation, the context of a yoga practice may yield advantages in terms of learning to pay attention to, and tolerate, experience, with the body providing a tangible focal point. Selina explains how presence looks in the context of a postural yoga practice:

just to be there, in the feeling of the body and the breath, and . . . rather than, you know, going off to check my email Because you can practice, and your mind can be all over the place, and that's what I *don't* mean by "one-pointedness." Or you can practice and be more present in the body . . . be present with . . . the touch of the feet on the earth, with the sensations in the body, with the breath, whatever you choose to be.

Guinevere reports a similar experience of presence involving an intentional tracking of changing sensation in relation to the movements of her body in a postural yoga practice:

The intention is always to be in the moment *of*. Right? Okay, so, warrior one, stepping my right foot back, *now*, I'm present to that, *now*. Right? . . . that's my intention. That's where my mind is *now*. And then, you know, the front knee bends. The weight comes down. The hips square.

Rachel describes how being present to experience in a yoga practice presents an opportunity develop self-awareness about the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and the body:

Like, okay, what's present for me here in this particular form? Well, I notice in this form, there's a lot of heat and I get angry. And frustrated. I notice in this particular form I feel relaxed and safe. You know, and just starting to notice how what you're doing with your body impacts your emotional and psychological state.

Guinevere aims to carry a meditative state of awareness beyond the setting of a yoga practice into the rest of her life:

And yoga is to come to this place where we always *are* practicing. Whether we're on the mat, or on the cushion, or not. So that there is . . . that seamlessness. That meditation. All the time. That *being present* all the time.

Tolerance for discomfort and self-acceptance. Staying present to experience when it is unpleasant requires an ability to tolerate discomfort. Tolerance enables participants to stay engaged with their experience of themselves and of others, which is important because they value authenticity and interconnection. For Toni, living with discomfort is interwoven with self-acceptance and ethical behaviour, and is important in a life project that prioritizes exploring nonattachment:

my life is a deep, deep study of nonattachment. Because at the end of this, that's all I'll be asked to do. Is to let go of everything. Why *wait*? Why not do it right now? Why not start right now? Why not start just looking at my own unhealthy habits and unhealthy desire to make choices that support the best outcome for all beings? To be uncomfortable in my decisions. And to be okay with being uncomfortable. To be okay with where I feel my attachment. To be okay with being human. To be okay with the places I still need to be invisible.

Citing the example of a “very real heartbreaking experience” of an “evolution” in the relationship with her partner, Toni describes watching and accepting the difficult situation:

And so there's a lot of, like, *heartache* about that. And tears to be shed about that. Because, oh my god, I just want what I had two years ago, and I want you to be back here living here. And that's my attachment. But all the time I'm watching my mind, that's my attachment, that's my attachment, that's the suffering. This is the wishing well. Wishing for something else. I've come back to the pause and rest in the space of presence and accept what it is.

Two participants explain how they came to develop tolerance for experience. For Rachel, observing the relationship between her body, thoughts and emotions in the context of a physical yoga practice contributes to a growing tolerance, not only for a range of her own experiences, but for other people as well:

You know, and just starting to notice how what you're doing with your body impacts your emotional and psychological state. And again, I think that also feeds into that tolerance for one's self. Like that tolerance and compassion for one's self and for others in terms of

understanding that we all hold and are capable of and encompass these different emotions. Sometimes it's fear. Sometimes it's rage. Sometimes it's joy. Sometimes it's tension. Sometimes it's relaxation. We're all moving through it.

She associates her experience of nonattachment with a strong sense of engagement, or “showing up,” which for her involves “learning to sit with uncomfortable emotions, too. Like learning to be with anxiety and get up and function every day.” For Guinevere, spending an extended period in a meditation colony helped her develop a tolerance for uncomfortable aspects of her experience:

And so I learned a great deal about myself, about others, and about observing oneself move through tough things like that. Just being present. To sitting. And not wanting to sit . . . anymore.

She lists the ability to stay present to the ups and downs of moment-to-moment experience as an important factor of nonattachment (along with detaching from meaning), stating “what comes with [the practice of nonattachment] is not creating a story about each moment. Not creating a judgment about each moment. Trying to, you know, escape the moment because it's painful, or keep it going if it feels good.” Selina, while explaining the difference between nonattachment and indifference, provides an example of working with a student who is battling addictions. She notes that, unlike an indifferent approach which might involve an unwillingness or inability to tolerate the difficulty of the student's situation, a nonattached approach includes a capacity to stay attuned to their suffering with compassion and acceptance:

You still *feel* for them . . . but you don't need to control them. And you don't need to put the curtain down. And, at the same time you're able to bear witness without judging them for it. Indifference might mean non-judging. “I don't judge it.” But it just as easily could mean “I turn away from it and I refuse to see it because it's too hard to see.”

Non-doing place. Another described aspect of presence involves non-doing. All participants refer to a space or place in the mind or body, cultivated in yoga practice, where one can rest, pause, or be still and quiet. It is from this place that they can observe experience and

mediate between automatic, patterned reactivity and agentic responsiveness. For example, Guinevere indicates that a practice of being present and nonjudgmental toward experience leads to a “stillness” and “out of that stillness, right action is easier to find.” I later ask her to elaborate:

Interviewer: What for you is the role of stillness in nonattachment?

Guinevere: I think it might be the same thing.

Interviewer: Stillness might be the same thing as nonattachment?

Guinevere: Maybe

Interviewer: Like a synonym?

Guinevere: Yeah. I don't know that you can have one without the other. And that's why I say they might be the same. I think if the mind is sort of running away with itself all the time, then it's very difficult to get any kind of sense of . . . nonattachment. Right?

Because . . . if the mind is quiet, and one of the ways we get that is through quiet body, then it's easier to let go of stuff.

In a second example of a non-doing place, Selina draws a diagram of a line spiraling toward a center point to help illustrate her experience of nonattachment, and indicates one might, at any given moment, find themselves at some point on the line. She associates being on the outer rim of the spiral with “the attached self” and labels the spiral's center as a place where one can “rest” while observing experience in a non-reactive way:

And, at the very *center*, this is where the witness is, and the witness, what I'm calling “the witness” . . . might be at the center, but when you rest here, you're just the whole paper, and . . . there's just this ability to *watch*. And then if I'm resting here I can watch this person and not react. Just let . . . whatever this person needs to do, well, they can do it and I don't need to make it better, I don't need to defend myself, I don't go into criticisms of the other person, and just watch.

Using a strategy of non-doing, Selina can interrupt an attachment-based reactive pattern:

you know I was able to see that: “And there's the grasping, or there's the attachment.” But then to let it go and not act on it. Whereas, you know, some time ago, I may have acted on it. Now I *wait* [laughs], I try and wait and see what will happen.

Like Selina, Toni also refers to state of present-centered non-doing as “rest,” although she distinguishes it from “waiting”:

Toni: I think the rest is the pause. It's learning to have the courage to not *do* anything . . . Until acceptance arises.

Interviewer: So waiting, in maybe . . . an uncomfortable place.

Toni: No, not waiting. Because waiting is the wishing well. I'm waiting for something to happen that's not happening right now. Presence is different. Presence is not waiting.

Toni elaborates on her concept of “the pause,” which she describes as a buffer between circumstance and her reactivity to it. In the “space” of the pause, she can observe her bodily sensations and thoughts, and choose how to respond:

The pause was essential to move me from reactivity to responding. So, before the pause . . . there would be no space between the event occurring and my reactivity to it. Whether that was my thoughts or an acting out, or language I later regretted. The *pause* came from self-reflecting. Not rushing into the next step. Sensing my body. Understanding what is arising from my mind, is this just confirming my position? Is this really a true experience? Or is this more my ego? And then the pause taught me to take the time to respond from choice rather than react from ignorance.

Similarly, Rachel describes a place where she can be nonattached to her immediate cognitive or emotional reaction to an experience: “I’ve been exploring this idea of something occurs and there’s a place in which I can not be attached to the emotion that may arise, or the meaning that I infuse into what arises.” She indicates that her experience of nonattachment is “*about*, primarily, cultivating a gap between what happens and my response to it.” She states that, although every experience will elicit some kind of impulsive reaction, she is interested in: “what comes after the impulse? Do we *act* on it? And really *buy* our own story? Or do we create some distance, you know, detach a bit?” This notion of creating some distance between observing awareness and meaning speaks to the next sub-theme.

Shifting Perspective. A third emerging sub-theme of shifting perspective emerges as part of how participants approach being nonattached. Participants use various techniques to detach perspectives on experience and adopt different ones. One example involves learning to become a witness to their own experience. As participants change their point of view, they experience a modulation of the meaning of their experience. Participants describe shifting their attention

toward bodily sensation as an effective method of perspective shifting. A skeptical attitude toward experience and meaning making helps participants detach from any given point of view.

Observing. Participants describe developing the skill of intentionally observing their internal experience in a way that is decoupled from automatic reactive tendencies. Guinevere states moment-to-moment observation of experience is at the heart of nonattachment: “I think the critical part about nonattachment for me is to remain an observer. What happens in each moment.” She states that although it may not be possible to immediately decide to let go of a major attachment, noticing and watching the experience of the attachment may contribute to its eventual release: “You can’t. There’s no decision to make. All we can do is become aware. And . . . the more we can observe it, the easier over time it is to let go of stuff that we no longer need, really.” She later indicates that “sitting in meditation . . . is where we practice to become a detached observer.” Toni, who also links meditation practice with the ability to observe, describes an experience of watching her thoughts from both a first-person perspective and a third-person perspective. In other words, she was both thinking and watching herself think: “I had started doing longer periods of meditation where . . . my sane self was watching the insanity of my thoughts.” Her use of the descriptors “sane” and “insane” indicate how significantly perspective impacts meaning. The descriptors also suggest she experienced the observing aspect of her awareness to have clearer and less distorted perception than that of the observed aspect.

Two participants describe observing with a nonjudgmental quality. In the following passage, Rachel shares an example of an inner monologue that might take place while observing herself engaging in a routine postural yoga practice:

Alright, let’s just get to the mat and you know, doesn’t matter what happens on the mat, it’s just important to show up and be on the mat. Okay, right? Here I am, I’m on the mat. Start moving. Oh, what I’m doing isn’t good enough. You know? My practice should be

duh duh duh Well, where else do I experience that in my life? Not good enough, not where I should be.

Note there appear to be at least two distinct voices occurring. One voice indicates she is aware of and dissatisfied with her level of performance. Another voice shows she is aware of her own self-judgment and intentionally adopts a curious stance toward the experience. Selina refers to an observing aspect of consciousness as “the witness,” describing it as capacity to watch without getting caught up in her own reactions. In this example, she describes a witness perspective of being aware of both external and internal aspects of experience while regulating her response:

And then if I’m resting here I can watch this person and not react. Just let . . . whatever this person needs to do, well, they can do it and I don’t need to make it better, I don’t need to defend myself, I don’t go into criticisms of the other person, and just watch.

Modulating meaning. As mentioned above, adopting a witness point of view on experience is an intentional modulation of perspective. To shift her perspective, Rachel uses an imaginal technique: “I visualize myself standing back, or standing to the side. And seeing things from a different perspective. Detaching from a point of view. And standing somewhere else to see what’s there.” Rachel explains how a postural yoga session provides an opportunity to experience an embodied perspective shift:

Life looks very different standing on your head. You know? The world occurs in a very different way when you hold a really challenging form for a long period of time and the world looks very different when you’re, you know, reclining on your back.

In that example, she describes a kind of meta-perspective on experience. She is aware of the conditions of her experience, of her perception of those conditions, and of an interactional relationship between the conditions, perception and meaning.

Intentional perspective shifting enables participants to rewrite the meaning of their own experience. Guinevere describes an important experience at a meditation colony where a teacher

helped her look at her own childhood experience “from a distance,” which enabled her to let go and to make sense of it:

And so, it really, with his guidance . . . really made a lot of that stuff . . . clear. You know? I was able to look at it a little bit like, from a distance. Almost like an impartial observer. So that I could step away from being in that emotional, hurtful bubble. Of that experience. Or those experiences. And step outside of that bubble and just look at it . . . And so he helped me tremendously. Not just kind of figuring stuff out, but giving me the tools to let go of some of it.

For her, the experience of learning to shift perspective and meaning was empowering. Toni echoes this when she indicates that she has come to see changing her own perspective as more effective than trying to control circumstances:

Where, in my younger life I would have said I thought I had more control of my life and at this stage of life I recognize I have none. So rather than changing the world, you just focus on changing your own mind.

Toni describes a method of intentionally modulating her perspective, from earlier in her life. She had a regular practice of writing to herself in the voice of her “conditioned self” and responding by writing in the voice of her “true self,” who she depicts as “older, and wiser.” Both aspects of self had a distinct outlook, with the latter providing encouragement and guidance to the former:

And sometimes my, the inquiry was a *complaint*. Like the complaint of life’s circumstances. And I hadn’t found my way into a resolution. And I remember in a piece of writing that she wrote, she was asking “what’s the request?” . . . I wasn’t able to find my request. Like, I was writing my complaint. So there was wisdom in the way that she prompted me deeper and deeper into my own self inquiry.

This methodical practice of “dialoguing with that part of [her]self” represents a creative way to change her point of view. She describes the practice as “intensely essential” at a time when she “was in the *attachment* to trying to fill up the, the hungry ghost place.”

The following excerpt is an example of a participant actively attempting to shift perspective and meaning during the interview itself. Selina reflects on the language she is using to describe an aspect of her identity, considering the consequences it could have on the way she

sees herself. She decides to modify the language and she makes a note to herself to carry this change over in her teaching:

Selina: I also, as you're talking, I want to write this down for me. You know, I'm using the word "small-self," and . . . I think when I'm teaching I want to change that to the word "separate-self."

Interviewer: Separate self.

Selina: Yeah, because "small" implies a hierarchy. And there really isn't a hierarchy. So I'm just gonna write that down. Because I actually really *believe*, that, like I see myself, you know, in the words I've *chosen*, that word "small self" It implies, it actually creates separation.

I believe this short passage is a significant representation of an aspect of her experience of nonattachment, as it accounts for an intentional and flexible engagement with perspective and meaning as they relate to identity. During the interview, Selina observes herself using the term "small-self" and, after brief reflection, determines using the phrase could have consequences in terms of the way she sees herself, and could create separation. This self-reflexive action shows she is watching and reflecting on her own experience in the moment. Her intentional attempt to shift perspective and meaning demonstrates her responsiveness to that experience. Interestingly, and in line with participant experience of engaging with conceptual paradox (discussed further under the sixth superordinate theme), a tension is revealed in this passage as Selina attempts to find a way to conceptualize an experience of separation without simultaneously perpetuating it. Further, her statement that she would like to make a change to her language in teaching suggests she is considering not only how her choice of words affects her own experience, but also the experience of her students. This implies she is guided by ethical principles, foreshadowing the discussion of ethics under the sixth theme.

Later in the interview, Selina continues along this line of inquiry, proposing an alternative to a hierarchical perspective: heterarchy. Selina retrieves the definition and reads it aloud:

Heterarchy: in a group of related items, heterarchy is a state wherein any pair of items is likely to be related in two or more *differing* ways. Whereas hierarchies sort groups into progressively smaller categories and subcategories, heterarchies divide and unite groups variously, according to multiple concerns that emerge or recede from view, according to perspective. Crucially, no one way of dividing a heterarchical system can ever be a totalizing or all-encompassing *view* of the system. Each division is clearly partial and in many cases a partial division leads *us* as perceivers to a feeling of contradiction that invites a new way of dividing things. But of course, the next view is just as partial and temporary. Heterarchy is a name for this state of affairs and the description of heterarchy usually requires ambivalent thought; a willingness to ambulate freely between unrelated perspectives. (Source unknown)

Interestingly, this definition captures several aspects of the experience of nonattachment described by participants, including the possibility of multiple perspectives and the resulting contradiction, the transient nature of perceived experience, and the emphasis on flexibility and willingness to move between different ways of seeing.

Sensing. Another strategy to change perspective is to direct attention toward bodily sensation, an approach endorsed by all participants. As yoga practitioners, the postural practice provides them an opportunity to routinely observe their experience of bodily sensation, and to consider its relationship to thought and emotion, under various controlled conditions. Using the example of practicing a hand-balance from a postural yoga practice, Guinevere describes the initial step in a methodical and progressive approach to developing awareness of her body: “The first thing we need to do is to develop a sense of connection through the hands and the shoulder girdle and openings and all those things.” With a heightened attentiveness to her body’s signals, she can also practice responding to the conditions of her experience, and adjusting her intention moment-by-moment to determine an ideal resting point in that particular form, on that particular day:

what we can do is observe ourselves *with* all that information getting into a posture and then saying “Hah. I think maybe I should stop *right here*. Because my body is in this place where it’s comfortable. But as soon as I push into a deeper connection to this posture, my body’s going to tense up.”

This responsive approach of staying present to messages of the body enables a practitioner to avoid the physical and mental strain that could result from fixating on achieving some preconceived shape with the body. Selina reports a similar interpretation of the Vijnana yoga approach to mindful movement:

[it's] not just moving the body into particular shapes but really going inside and *feeling*. And being, we say, we call it “moving from inside” but being present in the body, *with* the sensations and really trusting the wisdom of the body. So, rather than having to do, for example, the full pose right now, I am doing what my *body* says. Letting my body lead me.

This attentional skill can also be applied outside the arena of formal practice. In an analogous example to the above, Toni indicates directing awareness to the felt sense is a strategy she can use to circumvent reactive behaviour when experiencing a challenging emotion like anger:

Usually I look for the body's sense of it. Rather than my thoughts around it. I try not to engage cognitively in those moments. I try and drop into my body and just stay in the feeling of, and even describe the feeling of to myself.

The attentional shifts of Toni's of “drop[ping] into my body” and Selina's “going inside,” are similar to Guinevere's aforementioned “step[ping] away” and Rachel's aforementioned “standing back” in that they all involve a perspective shift, in a way that has implications for participants' meaning-making processes. For Rachel, this strategy of directing attention to bodily sensation extends to therapeutic applications of yoga. She states that when working with clients, primarily people “who identify themselves as trauma survivors, who often have pretty dysregulated nervous systems,” helping them develop awareness of the body is a first step: “We start out by cultivating interoception, so that you can *tend* to what's happening in your body.” As she worked with clients in this way, her awareness of her own sensory experience evolved and she became increasingly cognizant of the relationship between physical experience, emotion, and

the meaning-making process. This knowledge enabled her to interrupt the sensory overload of a stress response:

And I started noticing that sometimes my body would react to something but I was able to notice it. And think “You’re reacting to this like it’s a threat and your whole body is coming online, in that manner. But the reality is that that’s not what’s going on here. So like, let’s take it down. Rather than being ruled by the physical experience.

In that example, Rachel was able to observe her physiological threat response without getting caught up in the experience, enabling her to better discern between perceived and actual danger.

Of note, she took a questioning stance toward her own meaning making process. This leads to the final component of this theme, skeptical inquiry.

Skeptical inquiry. Three participants indicated part of the meaning of nonattachment for them includes adopting a skeptical attitude toward their own interpretation of experience, especially when the experience is reactive. For example, Selina notes that as she no longer takes negative automatic thoughts at face value: “Where I’m at, at *this* point, is [negative thoughts] still *do* come up, but then I just don’t buy in.” Similarly, Rachel has realized she does not necessarily have to believe, or be attached to, her own thoughts or emotions as they come up in the moment:

I don’t have to *buy* my own story. And I guess that’s to a large extent what I see attachment being. Attachment is buying your own story, and buying the meaning that you infuse into the moment, and even like, really *buying* the emotion that arises.

Rachel displays a skeptical attitude in the following passage where she describes the experience of feeling attached to “being right” in an interpersonal conflict. She shows self-reflexivity in her awareness of a bias in seeking confirmation of her position:

it’s sort of a *defensive* experience. And the thought process around it . . . running through my head, around like, all the ways in which I’m right, and kind of proving that to myself, and all the ways in which that person is wrong. And then sometimes I’ll go out and I’ll find other people. I’ll tell them about it, I’ll gossip about it, so that I can get buy-in from them, that I’m right. You know, sort of set the conversation up that way, and then I get more attached.

Also exhibiting a watchfulness for confirmation bias, Toni notes that a skeptical approach toward her own interpretation of experience played a role in developing a state of quiet awareness she calls “the pause,” which helped her become more responsive and less reactive: “The *pause* came from self-reflecting. Not rushing into the next step. Sensing my body. Understanding what is arising from my mind, is this just confirming my position? Is this really a true experience? Or is this more my ego?”

Theme Four: Processing Lived Experience

The fourth superordinate theme emerges in descriptions of the lived and felt experience of nonattachment. Participants often refer to perceptions of experience in their bodies and minds to describe the meaning of nonattachment. Their descriptions indicate attachment and nonattachment are for them embodied, lived experiences. Participants curiously investigate what they think and feel within the framework of yoga practice. An important aspect of this investigation of their minds and bodies is processing and integrating experience. Participants report experiences related to nonattachment that are both embodied and transcendental, and that revolve around spiritual interconnection.

Embodied experience. Nonattachment and attachment are not simply abstract concepts. To understand them, participants look to their felt sense of physical, emotional, and mental phenomena. For Rachel, the experience of attachment to automatic stories is so potent precisely because it is not limited to the realm of the conceptual and because she feels it in her body: “And [stories and judgments] are so strong . . . like it’s a full body experience every single time, and that’s a very powerful thing.” For Selina, the project of nonattachment is about increasing depth and quality of feeling. She notes the “unfolding of nonattachment” in the context of a postural yoga practice includes a progressive refinement and amplification of felt experience:

The way we practice asana, just really in an *embodied* way, in a way of *honoring*, you know, what's here *now*, cultivates an ability to feel on a more and more subtle level. Like, you remember when you started: "arms are here, legs are here" but now it's like there's so much you feel inside that you *didn't* feel before, and you'll *feel* and I will *feel* so much more in the *next* five years.

Descriptions of the character of the felt experience of attachment and nonattachment indicate both similarities and differences between participants. For Selina, attachment is felt as a desirous "grasping": "And I could *feel* myself - here's the attachment – *grasping* And there was this real sense of grasping. This is attachment. And I feel attachment as grasping. Wanting." She also relates attachment with a feeling of separation, contrasting that with the feeling of closeness she associates with nonattachment:

Because it's when I feel separate. Like that ego self, the ego, or Ahaṁkāra is actually building . . . these walls that make me feel separate. And then, there are times when I feel closer to the center of that spiral, where I feel closer to *everything*. And then there are times where there isn't even a *me* in that kind of "separate self" sort of way.

Similarly, Toni describes having a feeling of interconnection during an early experience of nonattachment: "It was where I experienced no separation. I was not separate *from*. It was beyond feeling accepted because then I would be separate. I wasn't separate." She says a subsequent experience of nonattachment felt like "equanimity or contentment. An arrival. A peacefulness that I couldn't give language to." Toni also links attachment with the desire for a certain set of conditions, saying a progression toward nonattachment involves a tangible experience of impermanence:

So attachment is, for me, a part of the, "Oh, I only want it this way. I don't want it to be different." Which is the path of nonattachment. So firstly, the embodied experience of experiencing how things change. And that nothing, nothing stays the same. Health, wealth, life. Nothing will be the same. And I think that when you really live that, there's no expectation and it reduces the sorrow when things change. It's just: "Oh, things are changing." It's just like "Oh, things are morphing. It's what's happening."

In this passage, Rachel describes the confined and stressful felt “landscape” of attachment, then contrasts that with the more spacious sense of nonattachment:

There’s tension, there’s constriction, there’s heat, there’s anxiety, there’s often some anger. And more of a tendency to isolate. For me anyways. Like, to want to withdraw and isolate. And just hang out and be right and sort of stew. Moving into a place where I get to shift that attachment usually has me want to be more engaged with people. It’s more open, it’s more expansive. Yeah. More engaged, more expansive.

In some cases, participant gestures and body language affirm their verbal descriptions of the felt sense of attachment and nonattachment. In one example, while discussing a particularly strong attachment, I notice Guinevere beginning to yawn and remark on it to her. She describes feeling physically burdened and fatigued: “I find it tiresome. To carry that *stuff* with me. And I think that’s one of the reasons I’d like to let go of it.” This is contrasted with the notable softening in her facial expression as she describes a felt sense of positive emotion and physical emancipation associated with “being present,” an aspect of her experience of nonattachment:

I think . . . when we get to this place of, this place of being present, it feels *good*. You know? There’s a sense of joy and ease that comes then. And so . . . you could do the waltz, or the cha cha cha, or the breakdance. I don’t care. (laughing) But, you know what I mean? . . . you’re in this nice fluid space.

Yoga as mind-body practice. As long-term practitioners of yoga, participants’ experience of nonattachment is understood through the lens of their practice. Participants practice yoga with the purposeful concern of exploring connections between mind and body. They describe an intentional cycling of awareness through various aspects of experience with an emphasis on the relationship between physical sensation and other points of awareness. Participants strive to cultivate a fluidity of mind and body in support of a present-centered and responsive awareness. Rachel states the postural yoga practice is a means to explore the interactional relationship between the thinking, feeling, and sensing aspects of experience:

It's just another tool for increasing awareness of experience. And in that increase of awareness of experience, increasing acceptance for one's own process and, you know, the process of others. I can *move* my body into all these different forms and experience a *massive* range of emotions because there's no separation between the mind and the body so what we do with the body impacts the mind and what we do with the mind impacts the body, and I could just move, like within an hour I can move through this, you know, sort of large landscape.

Toni indicates there are layers to the “work” of nonattachment, which involve addressing “stuckness” in the physical, mental, and emotional domains of experience. She frames postural yoga practice as a means of loosening those attachments:

The *stuckness* is not in our mind, because the mind is not separate from the body. Your body *is* your mind. So whatever is stuck is *stuck*. Physical practice is the practice of getting unstuck. So you can't just get physically unstuck . . . you have to mentally do the work. You have to emotionally *do the work*. You have to pay attention to where you are *stuck*.

The yoga practice described by participants privileges the body as a source of wisdom.

For Guinevere, “honouring the body” in her yoga practice means paying attention and responding to sensation in a way that promotes relaxation in body and mind:

Because, from where I'm at, if we honour the body in this way, then we can stay relaxed. From a physiological perspective. Right? And when, like we said before, when the body is relaxed and at ease, then we can settle. And then the mind can settle and we can be still. And we can be present. Right? At that place in the body, at that moment in time where we need to be present. Make sense? (laughing) It gets a little esoteric I know, but to me that's the yoga practice.

This relaxed state contributes to the responsiveness she associates with nonattachment. The way she relates to an injury in yoga practice indicates what a sensitive response might look like: “We *listen* to the body and we say: ‘Okay, I think my body's telling me something.’ You know? ‘Today, I'm going to lift my arms only to here because my right shoulder's not in a happy place right now.’” Selina's approach to postural yoga is characterized by a reverence for the intelligence of the body,

like, not just moving the body into particular shapes but really going inside and *feeling*. And being, we say, we call it “moving from inside” but being present in the body, *with* the sensations and really trusting the wisdom of the body.

She states this method “cultivates an ability to feel on a more and more subtle level.” Rachel indicates that, for her, the emphasis on bodily knowing in postural yoga is an essential compliment to a conceptual, thinking-based approach to mindfulness:

I don’t think I would have connected to something as much if it had just been an intellectual process. That the physical practice is very important. Because we exist, you know, in this body. . . . There’s a very rich experience to explore there.

Processing and integration. In examining participants’ descriptions of the embodied experience of nonattachment, a third sub-theme emerges regarding the processing and integration of life events. Approached from this perspective, attachment is represented by a delay or lag in processing experience, and by an experience of being “stuck.” On the other hand, nonattachment is associated with the resolution or processing of an event to the extent that one no longer feels held back, so change or growth can occur. Participants describe mental, emotional, and physical aspects of processing and integration.

In the following example, attachment is represented by feeling “stuck” in a pattern of negative beliefs about the self, with the processing of that early experience is enabled by a reduction of identification or attachment to those thoughts. Selina recalls that during a conflict with her partner she reacted by withdrawing and she noticed thoughts in regards to negative beliefs about her own self-worth. She explains that a “fear of abandonment” may have been at the root of the experience, noting “we only really process the emotions we’re ready and willing to process. And usually they come from somewhere . . . and at the time I would have never really realized *that*.” This indicates a view that processing involves meaning-making and requires a kind of readiness. She says that, in the past, her flight response would have lasted much longer

than it does now: “In that state of withdrawing or the curtain is down, whereas before that would have lasted for days or weeks or, you know . . . twenty or thirty years ago, that would last for months.” She attributes this change to an ability to resist identifying with negative thoughts about herself: “Now at least when that comes up I no longer think that. I don't get stuck in it. And that *stuck in it* comes from identifying with it, I think.”

In a second example, Rachel states “*yoga practice* sets the stage for something else to occur, like some psychological and emotional processing to occur.” She describes a profound transformation in regards to the experience of her body, her emotions, and her understanding of the world. She says yoga helped her establish a sense of safety and self-regulate in the years following an assault:

I was engaged in a lot of drug use, and alcohol use and smoking cigarettes and just a lot of unhealthy sort of outlets for regulation. And so *certainly*, you know, at the beginning of the journey yoga played a big role in helping to regulate my nervous system, helping to support me feeling *safe* again in the world, feel *confident* again in the world.

She goes on to describe how the supportive and welcoming environment she encountered in yoga encouraged her to explore, leading to a significant shift in the way she saw herself. She experienced this change as letting go of her attachment to negative beliefs about herself and the world that she had held since the assault: “All of a sudden the story that you have of yourself starts to shift and you can let go of the attachment to the old stories. And then everything in your world starts to be correlate to that new story of self.”

In a third example, Guinevere states one of the aims of her practice is to become progressively more efficient at processing experience, thus promoting responsiveness in the moment. She cites the example of an unexpected and jarring event that leaves her in a perplexed state, unable to make sense of what has happened:

for instance, if, let's say there's another person in the room and something happens. And, I'm not quite sure what to do with that. And so then I go home. And it takes me a couple of days to *process* this. Right? . . . And then: "Oh, hm. Okay now, okay now I understand." So I think one of the things that we look to learn is to reduce [the] time of that processing.

Guinevere goes on to describe processing as involving meaning-making and letting go, culminating in an integration of the experience. She reports having had "a very tumultuous, very dysfunctional childhood," one which she had not "ever really had an opportunity to *process*." She says a meaning-making process was essential to process and integrate those early experiences:

the point is that there is memory and there is emotion and there is hurt . . . and there's *confusion*, right? Because as a child, you don't know how to *process*, or how to understand all that. And so, that incomplete thing is what we need to *finish*, right? We need to say "Okay, what about this? What about that? How, you know, how can I? Where? What needs to happen? For that to complete itself in a way that I can be *with* it. And, *allow* whatever that is to become part of me in a constructive manner." Because it is *part* of who we are.

Guinevere recalls it was a meditation teacher who helped her process and integrate her childhood experience by guiding her in making sense of experience and letting go: "And so he helped me tremendously. Not just kind of figuring stuff out, but giving me the tools to let go of some of it."

Toni recalls a period of self-inquiry as a young adult that involved letting go and making sense of the conditioning of her childhood in order to progress toward a more integrated state:

I think that there is . . . a truncated-ness. We're compartmentalized before we are known to ourselves, integrated and returned to our wholeness. And I think it's a turbulent period of deciphering socialized value systems. Figuring out your own value system. Reacquainting yourself with the balance of contact and space, if it has been not harmonized in your young life.

Toni likens the act of letting go with resolving and integrating past experiences. She says the body carries "the stories of whatever you haven't put down. Like whatever you haven't

integrated by resolving.” She cites grief as an example of an unresolved or unintegrated experience that one might be attached to in both mind and body:

you see where the unresolved grief and losses is in the lungs. So . . . what we’re attached to, as a way of getting stuck *in* whatever that life cycle is, or event is The *stuckness* is not in our mind, because the mind is not separate from the body.

Toni lists significant experiences she associates with nonattachment, noting that in each example she felt she was “touching [her] true nature.” She describes a nonattached state as one where two aspects of herself are integrated:

So I was both myself and in the observation of my acting out of a wound. I was myself, and then I was in the observation of how I would be in a pattern of thinking or behaviour that was not myself, but I was always, this sound very dichotomous, but it’s actually how it was. I was myself in my true nature, and I was my conditioned self.

One further example of processing is worth mentioning for its articulation of processing as a physical experience. Selina recalls being surprised by a spontaneous and powerful physical response she felt the first time she told another person about a significant experience she had at a meditation retreat. She now understands the experience as an energetic release: “And that first time I ever spoke to anybody about it, I can remember literally . . . you know this shaking (voice is shaking) that comes from inside.” As Selina recalls the experience of a physical processing I hear an audible trembling in her voice. She continues:

I just think that it was a powerful experience and I think that, you know, those are held as energy in our bodies. And that when we open that, what’s been locked inside, if it’s really powerful . . . it comes out through the system.

Spiritual body and interconnection: Some participant descriptions of nonattachment-related experiences walk the line between being embodied and transcendental. Toni believes self-realization includes perception beyond physical limits: “There’s the desire to *realize* oneself, to fully understand the *nature* of being human and even the nature of things beyond having a body.” When discussing her view of spirituality, Rachel refers to her “energetic body”: “The practices

that I engage in certainly involve and impact my energetic body, and that, you know, there's always an energy associated with emotion and experience." Selina describes an experience that challenges the limits of her physical body. She states that "nonattachment is interwoven with that word 'grace,'" and explains that, for her, a feeling of grace increases as attachments in daily life decrease. She describes this feeling: "And while on one level there's a *boundary* in this skin, there's also *not*. It's *permeable* . . . Like the skin is still there, I'm still *me*. But then there's also this like: 'Well how big is the *me*?' You know: 'How far out?'" Guinevere believes that practicing detachment from stories she holds about others enables her to see their "essential energy" and that being with another person in this way promotes connection: "When we're in the moment, in this place of presence, and awareness . . . that sort of separation *dissolves*."

A sense of interconnection is prominent for the other participants as well. For Toni, an early and profound experience of nonattachment involved a feeling of being "in communion *with*," like she was "utterly alone and, and interconnected to . . . a sublime, supreme, divine contact." Selina associates nonattachment with a spiritual experience of interconnection: "The crown feels open. The heart feels open. It feels like a connection. Or a union with, with, there's joy. Love. Allowing. And an otherworldliness or an indescribable-ness." Rachel's spirituality centers around her interconnection with other people and "something greater":

So, for me, spirituality is an acknowledgment of, and sort of practices that support a connection to something greater than myself, essentially. Which for the most part I see as an energy. And so I believe that I exist on an energetic level to a large extent. And then I'm connected to a larger energetic source, and that this is the same source that runs through all human beings and that we're connected by that.

Theme Five: Choosing Freedom

The fifth superordinate theme emerges from participant discussions of their motivations in adopting a framework for living that includes the concept of nonattachment. This section

begins by exploring some reasons why participants believe they attach, not the least of which is to maintain a sense of safety and security. Following that is an investigation of participants' various motivations to follow a path of nonattachment, captured under the sub-theme freedom. Seeking freedom involves realizing choice, changing the experience of suffering, and empowering the self.

Safety and security. Participants all indicate fear and vulnerability play a role in their experience of attachment, especially in regards to threats to safety. It goes without saying that safety is a reasonable and fundamental human concern. Yet, according to participants, when desire for safety becomes an attachment, it can severely limit enjoyment of life. Toni states “the desire to be safe” is healthy. However, she believes that one can be too attached to the safety of what is known:

I think that I had missed the freedom of possibility in my life because I've . . . held too tight to the safety of the form. And if I had been braver, if I had been more courageous, I would have been more spontaneous. And I would have let go earlier.

For her, to live authentically means to expose herself to the insecurity of not knowing an answer: “The authentic is being courageous enough to be vulnerable, to really commit to living in your beginner mind. So you stay curious.” Rachel believes it is a defensiveness against vulnerability that lies at the heart of her attachment to her point of view, specifically in “the mechanism of wanting to be right.” She explains: “What’s at the source of that is just usually my own insecurity, you know, my own hurt feelings, my own vulnerability. And it comes out in this sort of like puffed up, like, *I gotta be right* thing.”

Two participants believe attachments they experience today are rooted in early childhood experiences, including some involving threats to safety. Guinevere notes that a particularly

strong attachment of hers, a concern that she will not have enough, can be traced back to early experience:

as a result of this ridiculously horrible childhood I had, I have what my husband jokingly calls a scarcity complex. I'm really always worried that there's *not enough* of whatever, right? Not enough this (laughing) not enough that. Not enough clothes. Not enough food. Not enough money. Not enough, whatever. Mostly material things I guess. Or, not actually, not enough love.

Despite having lived with this fear for a long time and feeling "It's part of who I've been" she is confident she will be able to let this fear go one day:

Because there's a part there somewhere in me that knows I don't need it. I'll be just fine without it. I'll probably be better without it (laughing) actually I'm convinced that it's an unnecessary and a very useless burden to carry. Because it's completely useless. Because really all it does is invite worry. Right? That's [when] we get into this worrying mode. That's really what it is. Who needs to worry about anything, actually? It's not going to change anything. It's just going to set up barriers, really.

As a child, Guinevere's need to be safe and loved was presumably obstructed, leading to an understandably heightened concern for her own well-being. However, having become habitual, this worry is a hindrance in her life, an attachment she would like to let go of.

In a second example, Toni suffered trauma as a child that left her with a strong desire to protect herself by surrounding herself with her siblings: "My sense of safety and security came from being *in the middle*." She says letting go of her attachment to that perceived safety was a necessary maturational step:

And, so, I think that the black hole is *terror* of not feeling safe and secure in the group. That was like: "Don't ever do anything that will risk that." Except life's circumstances keep pushing me towards the *leap* of doing that. So, that's the sort of shedding of the armoring of what was making my life feel smaller than it was. And meditation practice was the very first thing all those years ago in my young life that started to *show me* how delusional that was. To show me how *infantile* that was.

To leave her family group meant she had to lower that defensive stance: "I had to leave, so it was like breaking out of armoring, layers and layers and layers and layers of armoring." Toni

developed an attachment that, while rooted in a healthy desire for safety, led to a defensive posture that she experienced as limiting later in life. One of the limitations of a protective stance is a reduction of engagement with life. Rachel discusses how, for her, “showing up” in life is important, even if it means overriding an attachment to security and orienting herself to face difficult experience:

But, again, it’s like, does that mean I’m gonna stop showing up? Like, just because I’m insecure about x-y-z. “What if fail? What if I’m criticized? What if they don’t like me?” Does that mean I’m going to stop showing up? You know, I’m very, very conscious of that in myself I always make a very, very concerted effort to step forward.

The way we perceive something informs how we feel about it. This was the case for Selina. She had an experience she connects to nonattachment that initially invited curiosity, but when interpreted by someone else, provoked a fear response. During a mystifying and long meditation, she experienced a “profound” feeling of non-separateness and of being “closer to everything,” as opposed to feeling “attached and identified.” Following the experience, she remembers feeling curious about what had happened, but in a discussion with a nun from the monastery that openness quickly shifted to fear:

In the conversation, I remember . . . wondering about it. But she turned around . . . I know her intent was good, but she said “Oh, *of course* you were scared. A lot of Westerners are when they find out there’s *no self*” or something like that. And that kind of (laughs) it was almost like it, *planted in me*, fear.

She indicates that conversation provoked a defensive reaction: “Because it *scared me* and I *backed up* (laughs) and I closed down for a little bit.” She believes she carried that experience in her body until years later she shared the story: “And that first time I ever spoke to anybody about it, I can remember literally . . . you know this shaking (voice is shaking) that comes from inside.”

Two participants indicate other things that motivate and fuel attachment. For Rachel, the attachment or “hook” to a particular belief or meaning is compelling because it fits with a story of self, and confirms a previously held belief:

it sort of fits into some old sort of story that you’ve got about your own self-worth or, you know, how certain people treat you, or how you deserve to be treated in romantic relationships, or what happened between your parents, or whatever. There’s something about it that’s a very, very compelling hook.

Selina indicates that being attached to a story stems from a desire for a tangible, knowable identity.

You know, that's when I'm *identified* with this story of this person The one that believes . . . that clings to this story, of “this is who I am,” and wants this to be like *solid*, this being, like I’m pointing to myself, (pats hands on chest) this body, this story, these roles to be who I am. That one, that part gets attached a lot.

Freedom. In contrast to their experience of attachment and insecurity, participants associate nonattachment with a sense of liberation. The pursuit of freedom appears to be a central motivating factor for participants. Rachel, who describes attachment as taking one’s own automatic meaning-making process and the associated emotions at face value, says letting that attachment go is freeing:

There’s some freedom in just not buying your own story. Not really buying that things are black and white. Or that they necessarily mean what you think they mean. Or that the emotion that arises is really the only thing that’s available and is correct.

Relating a story of an early and significant experience of nonattachment, Toni describes the feeling of being released from constraints of conditioned beliefs she had held up to that point:

I recognized I was not *just* the middle child of that family or that child in that private school, or that child in the church. I knew that I was in some way in that moment, was having a first experience of a *freedom*. I wouldn’t have known the word liberation. But maybe I came to understand that later in my life. *I felt free*. I felt free. And, so I felt free of my parents’ belief system. Of a convent belief system.

Guinevere likens the experience of presence with the joyful “fluid space” of dancing. Having let go of concern in regards to a particular outcome, she is free to attend to whatever is occurring in her present field of awareness:

And so, when we are in a place of ease and present to them, we don't have to reach the bloody goal. Who cares? Then there is no goal because all we're doing is being in this moment, in this place, standing on our heads, or walking down the street. And that's a sense of freedom, I suppose.

For Selina, nonattachment is associated with freedom and an attitude of “allowing” (while attachment is associated with an attempt to control and feeling “mired” or “stuck”):

I want to be able to open up and to be free . . . because I feel attachment and control are really, *really* close And that nonattachment and *allowing* what needs to happen are also similar. Attachment leads to the need to control. Nonattachment is experienced as . . . allowing to happen what just needs to happen through you.

Selina, who says she has progressed from more attached to less attached, indicates this change involved a release from feeling “stuck” in depression:

I would get stuck in these, you know, probably what you would call depression for months, and possibly years, I don't remember anymore . . . so this is, you know, twenty, thirty years later. It's not like these thought waves don't come up. They sometimes do, not as frequently, because I'm not like that hamster running around in the wheel so often. But when they come up, I no longer cling to them, and identify with them. Or at least not for as long.

Choice. That sense of freedom is related to an experience of being able to choose. Part of the process of nonattachment for participants is realizing they have a choice in regards to their attachments to seeing things a certain way. Selina posits that the development of nonattachment occurs progressively, as one experiences alternate ways of seeing, feeling, or being:

my thoughts are that the more we can get close to that space that we find in meditation, or in our practice, or you know, when your child is born, or just those timeless moments. The *closer* we can get to that, the *more* we can *touch* that (claps hands together), the nearness to that unknowable state, like the center of that circle, or spiral, then just, it just *unfolds* that, we just *become* less attached, because there's some alternative.

Toni also came to discover she had choice. As she began to practice longer periods of meditation in her 30s, she experienced a paradigm shift from the perspective of someone conditioned by traumatic experiences in childhood to seeing herself as “victim to nothing.” She no longer felt she had to “push something down to bring myself up” and had other options: “So the new paradigm began to give me the experience of choice around unhealthy desire or to choose something else. So that was the beginning of really embodying the nonattachment piece.”

Two participants describe realizing they could choose how they see and interpret experience. For example, Rachel is concerned with uncovering choices in terms of how she experiences her life: “Nonattachment for me is this ongoing process of questioning whether or not what arises is really the only option.” In “recognizing the meaning that [she] infused into” a given situation and knowing “that [she] can infuse *any* meaning into it,” she does not have to be attached to her point of view and can choose an alternate perspective. She credits her yoga practice with empowering her with the knowledge that she can choose to shift her own perspective: “Because I have a practice. That has shown me that it’s just as easy to stand in one point of view as it is in the other. And that I have choice. About where I stand.” In a second example, Guinevere describes how choosing perspective might play out in an encounter with another person. The first option would be to perceive him through the filter of “stories,” while the second option would involve an attempt to bracket that idea of him and see beyond it:

You know, [Sam] is 6’3”, he’s married, he’s got three kids, he can be a total ass when he . . . you know? When he’s had few beers. Those sorts of things. *Or*, you know, I could learn and practice to, to see [Sam] *without* those stories. And just see *him*.

Changing suffering. Although rooted in reasonable needs like safety and security, participants’ experience of attachment is largely described as unpleasant. Participants indicate they are motivated to seek nonattachment in part by the aim of reducing, or changing their

relationship to, suffering. As Rachel states, nonattachment involves “just really noticing when . . . your attachment to a point of view or to a story is creating suffering.” She asks: “So what do I need to let go of, where can I bring nonattachment in order to decrease suffering and increase connection?” Selina also links attachment with suffering: “I think if we're really attached to this identity . . . then there's a lot more suffering.” She correspondingly feels that living in a nonattached way reduces affliction, stating “We feel less suffering.” Guinevere says that, although it wasn't until her twenties in a meditation colony that she “started to get a sense of this concept of nonattachment,” she felt compelled from very young age to seek an alternative to misery:

I think a lot of us, when we go through things, our lives, when we're hurting, when we're suffering, many of us, there's a part of us that *knows* that it can be different. That there is this sense that we're missing something. That we're *not quite understanding it*.

Toni reports that as she increasingly engaged in practices related to yoga and meditation, which included learning to let go of conditioned beliefs and behaviours, she realized she could change her experience of suffering:

I started to create opportunities of retreating and longer periods of meditation and looking at the ways, looking at how I then began to understand the cycles of suffering. That there was *relief* from suffering. That I had choice around cycles of suffering. And that the choices around cycles of suffering came from the courage of being authentic and honest and speaking my experience which is not anyone else's truth. It's simply my experience.

Empowerment and purpose. Related to freedom, choice, and changing their relationship to suffering, participants associate their experience of nonattachment with an increasing sense of empowerment. For example, Rachel speaks about the empowerment of gaining agency in her description of the “landscape” of nonattachment: “There's an experience psychologically of being able to create something rather than being stuck in something and not having any power.

It's more generative." For her, making the responsible and "conscious choice" to let go of her attachment to a point of view empowers her in relationships:

And I guess what I often ask myself, it's like, where can I be responsible for what has occurred here? Where could I take responsibility? And that's a very empowered place to stand. Because what it means is that, what I believe, that I have a lot of power to impact what happens in my relationships.

Similarly, Toni explains that as she developed "the pause," a reflective stillness in which she could detach from and evaluate her experience, she was empowered to "respond from choice rather than react from ignorance." She states: "I became like, *deeply* empowered, in the direction of my life. Like, I am the sole creator of what's in my life. I was victim to nothing. And I found a deep sense of empowerment in that." For Selina, developing the ability to witness her own experience empowered her with an alternative to being reactive, which she previously believed was inseparable from her identity:

So, the identification would be that now I still see it happening, and there still is that *emotional*, or at times, that emotional reaction and that initial identification, but then with the witnessing and the watching . . . and I think also this comes from, you know, having a practice and from touching into that great mystery on a more regular basis. I can see now that it's happening and I can choose something else. Whereas ten years ago, twenty years ago, I couldn't . . . I wanted to choose something else, but I didn't know how.

Likewise, Guinevere notes that learning to "become a detached observer" enabled her to "step away from being in that emotional, hurtful bubble" of traumatic experience, and to make sense of it. The ability to unpack and resolve her past empowered her to fulfill what she sees as her duty to contribute in life:

And the thing is that we *have* to do something with it. If we're to live, you know, a full life, a life where we make a positive contribution and are willing and able to be there for others. All those things. If we don't look at this stuff, we *cannot*, you know, it's not possible. So, it behooves us to find as much clarity about that as we can.

Guinevere's statement above highlights a eudemonic motivation shared by the other participants, where the aims of well-being and contentment are interwoven with the pursuit of

meaning and purpose. For Toni, the experience of nonattachment included learning to observe and be present to her own experience. This enabled her to reject a conditioned sense of purpose, opening the door to exploring what is truly meaningful to her:

coming from the wound of the subservience of the feminine to the masculine in my young life, that purpose of life was to be in the pleasuring of men, in the service of men, in the sexual satisfaction of men, in the feeding of men, in the laundering of men, that pause taught me not to push something down to bring myself up. I didn't need to do that, to all of those experiences with men. I just need to *realize* my own self-worth. My own sense of purpose.

Selina credits feeling empowered with a sense of purpose to her nonattached way of life:

It's just a great way to live. We feel as though we can contribute in some way to the world. We feel purpose. We feel joy. We feel love. We feel less suffering. And we feel, as though, just by being *who we are*, somehow, in some way, other people also benefit, and step closer to who they are.

Similarly, for Rachel, meaning and purpose are found at the intersection between her personal experiences with yoga and transmitting what she has learned in a career helping others:

what's happening on the mat *has* to make sense to my outside world, and you know, my way of being in the world. And it's the same with, you know, my expression of yoga as a career. I'm not interested in being an aerobics instructor. You know, I'm not interested in teaching yoga for people to simply have exercise. I'm interested in sharing you know, these practices and theories so that people can use the practice in their lives. To make a difference in their lives.

Theme Six: Framework for a Way of Life

For participants, nonattachment is an integrated component of a framework for a way of life comprising systems of thought like yoga, Buddhism, and psychology. The framework also incorporates ethical principles and values. Nonattachment informs, and is informed by, aspects of this framework variously. An important emerging sub-theme is that of participants' relationship with conceptual tension embedded in the framework. Participants acknowledge, reflect on, and engage with tensions surrounding interpretations of and inherent in the concept of nonattachment. Participants also discuss the emerging sub-theme of the overlap between formal

and informal practice, providing insight into how participants adapt principles into their lives. Participants explore how nonattachment is both contained within a limited framework of formal yoga and meditation practice and extends to the expansive framework of the informal practice of everyday life.

Major systems. An emerging sub-theme addresses various systems of thought relevant to participants' experience of nonattachment as part of a framework for a way of life. Although interviews reveal several identifiable systems of thought, it is apparent that yoga, Buddhism and psychology are of particular relevance.

Yoga and Buddhism. Participants' descriptions of their experience of nonattachment indicate yoga and Buddhist philosophy are important components of their framework of understanding. For example, yoga is central to Selina's way of life: "Because my life is pretty much *framed* in yoga, yoga is the way I live my life, it is an integral part of who I am, I associate, sort of, my movement from attachment towards nonattachment." She indicates yoga philosophy contributes to her understanding of nonattachment: "I study the texts . . . and I talk about them, and I love to share them, because they give me a language in a community to basically conceptualize these things." Selina refers to the paired concepts of "nonattachment, and practice . . . from the Yoga Sutras," providing an example of one such text. Buddhism played an influential role in Rachel's early life, and she describes herself "as someone who has been exposed to, in particular, you know, certainly growing up, from my mother, Buddhist practice and ideology." Similarly, Guinevere recalls:

My grandmother had a Buddha on her mantelpiece. I don't know that she even understood why it was there. She might have. But there was something about that Buddha that I knew, as a three-year-old, was (laughing) very important. You know? And I now have that Buddha in my bedroom

Adding a layer of complexity to the framework, teachings from various systems are rendered via interpretation (and often translation), meaning participants must contend with an opaqueness of meaning. Guinevere indicates a concern with how an interpretation of a classical text can be problematic:

you know, we read yogic texts, we read books on meditation, texts, you know, of the Buddha's words. All these things. The Bible . . . it's often in those texts that we get this sense that . . . we need to *always* be kind, always this, always that, always positive. And I think that's a misinterpretation.

Similarly, Toni takes issue with an interpretation of the concept of desire:

I think desire has got a bit of a bad rap. Like, desire in some Buddhist traditions is seen *just* as craving. You know, so if we could learn to live between the worlds of aversion and craving . . . we're in this equanimous possibility. And I think for the most part it's not really a *lived* experience, it's . . . just more yoga rhetoric, kind of, bullshit.

Toni recalls the pivotal experience of hearing twentieth century philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti's unusual interpretation of living with the concept of attachment. His particular illustration had greater significance for her than other readings, deepening her understanding of the idea:

And [Krishnamurti] said "I'm attached, but I *know* I'm attached, and I know the attachment will be the source of suffering, but I've agreed to it. And I don't want it any other way." And that was, instead of the sort of the rhetoric around these words, like, you know, these Buddhist words and these dharmic words, and these yoga references, it actually became something really real for me.

The commerce of yoga adds a layer to the complexity of interpreting yoga systems. Toni expresses her dismay at an incongruence of values within the framework of modern yoga with regards to its commercialization:

I don't tell people that I do yoga when people don't know me, they say "what do you do?" I never say "yoga." I'm not proud of what's happening out there commercially. I'm not proud of it. I feel *sad* by what's happened.

Psychology. Psychological concepts also play a role for three participants in their framework of understanding. Both Toni and Rachel indicate they have been clients in

psychotherapy. Rachel notes one of the techniques she uses to let go of, or change, her perspective “probably arose from that therapeutic process.” In explaining the progression of her understanding of nonattachment, Toni refers several times to a “great little tool,” a competence model called The Stages of Learning. Some participants refer to psychopathology to understand their experience. For example, having worked in addictions, Rachel is careful to distinguish her experience of anxiety from that of someone who meets criteria for a clinical diagnosis:

Now I don't want to be, be dishonouring of the experience of people who have really debilitating anxiety, do you know what I mean? Like, this is very much my personal experience and I've never been *diagnosed with* an anxiety disorder or something like that. I don't know what it's like to be in that place.

Selina considers a period of depression as an important factor in her experience of feeling trapped in a false belief of worthlessness: “Well, the, blocked, the not really letting myself know who I am, and basically depression is, I mean I was never diagnosed, but if I look at where I was, it may have been clinical depression.”

Ethics and values. All participants mention the importance of ethical principles like truth, autonomy, and non-harm in their experience of nonattachment. For example, Toni indicates she prioritizes the principle of truth over possible consequences: “So telling the truth means that people will suffer, you will suffer, and the *integrity* . . . for me is to be honest. Regardless of the outcome.” In a second example, Selina mentions an important pivot in her relationship with her son was a shift away from controlling behaviour, revealing how, for her, nonattachment is braided with the principle of autonomy: “I had to stop wanting him to be a certain way, and just really *letting* him be who he was.” Non-harm is a third example of an ethical principle adopted by participants; as Guinevere asks rhetorically: “A part of our practice is non-harming, right?” Rachel proposes her effort to maintain the moment-to-moment awareness required to detach from a reactive meaning-making process is guided by an ethic of non-harm: “If we don't bring a

certain level of consciousness and awareness to life we have the potential to be really destructive to ourselves and to the people around us.” She paints a picture of a scenario where nonattachment could lead to harm: “Not present, not responsible. And potentially causing a lot of harm. You know, like I’m just gonna do my thing and then not be responsible for how it lands, because, you know . . . I’m just being.” In a similar example of non-harm’s role in her experience of nonattachment, Toni’s report of endeavoring to stay present to a challenging experience, like anger, frames it as an ethical act: “So then I just stay with the feeling, the felt sense in my body of the emotion and so there’s no acting out of the emotion that could create harm for anyone.”

The principle of service is significant for all participants and, based on their descriptions, contributes to their sense of purpose. Selina speaks about the aspect of faith in her experience of nonattachment, and having trust in “something bigger” that is guiding her to “where I need to go to serve.” Rachel chose yoga as a career so that she could be in a role of helping others: “I’m interested in sharing you know, these practices and theories so that people can use the practice in their lives. To make a difference in their lives.” Guinevere states that a “full life” is one “where we make a positive contribution and are willing and able to be there for others.” Toni describes service as a pinnacle of the self-actualization process:

I think that when we recognize we’re not here for the self, we are in the actualization of the self, to be in service To be in service is . . . to have realized your own states of arrogance, ignorance, and ego so that you are acting from a place of generosity, curiosity, wonder of being human, privilege of being human, and love for all beings, that what you do in your life is for the purpose of the wellbeing of all beings.

As indicated above, ethical principles underpin the meaning of nonattachment for participants. In turn, the development of nonattachment may expedite ethical action. Early in her discussion of the meaning of nonattachment for her, Guinevere explains how nonattachment could facilitate ethical behaviour:

So, really it, to me, it's about just letting whatever comes, letting it come. And being in it, as it comes. Fully. A full participant. And without concern of an outcome. Or a reward And one of the results of that is that there's a stillness and out of that stillness, right action is easier to find.

Rachel echoes that idea, suggesting nonattachment directly advances ethical behaviour, when she asks: "So what do I need to let go of, where can I bring nonattachment in order to decrease suffering and increase connection?"

Participants' experience of nonattachment is also framed by their values. Among a range of values revealed, participants all prize authenticity and connection in interpersonal relationships. Further, participants point to a correlation between nonattachment and fulfillment of the qualities these values represent. For example, while discussing her "path of nonattachment," Toni states it is moving her toward a quality she esteems, that of authenticity in relationship: "you arrive at something that is more *authentic*, really more authentic. Not just the talk of authenticity but you're in the real conversation of your life, and the other." She also prizes connection with others: "I want to move towards the things that have real *value* to me. Which is contact." Similarly, Rachel discusses changes she has seen in herself related to nonattachment, remarking that she noticed a shift in "the ability to act in the face of [attachment] in a way that's more compassionate and more conducive to connection." In a third example, Selina believes nonattachment contributed to positive changes in regards to authenticity in her relationship with her children:

I would say we have a *good* relationship now for parent and child. And, as I do with my [eldest child], and I guess I just let my kids be them there probably *are* expectations, but we feel close, and I think the ability to *be* close is probably because we can be around each other and be who we want to be from inside. Each of us.

In an example comparable to the above, Guinevere notices that staying detached from her stories about another person actualizes the value of authentic interpersonal connection:

when we're in the moment, in this place of presence, and awareness . . . that sort of separation *dissolves*. You know? And then . . . when [Sam] says something, or does something, I'm present to it, and therein there's just a clear connection. I don't have to make a story about [Sam]. I'm just with [Sam] when he says that. And . . . I'm present to him. Right? And I'm not separate from him, at that time, at that moment.

Important tensions. As discussed above, participants' experience involves the task of synthesizing the concept of nonattachment with various systems of understanding including yoga philosophy, psychology, and ethics. It is not surprising that that part of this experience involves contending with conceptual tensions. Participant reports of experience in this regard indicate an awareness of, tolerance for, and engagement with such polarities.

Part of the meaning of the experience of nonattachment is coming to terms with the paradoxical nature of the concept itself. For example, Selina refers to the difficult experience "when you know [nonattachment] is possible and you're not experiencing it." She elaborates, relating a conversation between her students: "And this *frustration*, as one of them pointed out to another, is actually attachment to nonattachment." This tension comes up again in Guinevere's discussion of the relationship between nonattachment and outcome-orientation in yoga practice:

Interviewer: So it sounds like you're saying that when it comes to . . . yoga postures . . . if you're approaching them with like a "I have to . . . do this a certain way," kind of reaching for something, that has . . . a detrimental effect on your ability to be nonattached.

Guinevere: No, but you can't let go then, I mean, can you? As long as you are striving for the perfect posture, to stay with the yoga analogy, as long as you are *striving* for this perfection of a handstand or a shoulder stand, or whatever, you can't let go. Because you're striving.

A similar problem is represented by the question "How does one *do* nonattachment?" As mentioned under the third superordinate theme, participants engage in various strategies to cultivate nonattachment, of which non-doing is an important sub-theme. Stillness and presence seem like appropriate tactics given the experience presented by some participants that trying to

do nonattachment is a paradoxical exercise in self-defeat. For example, Selina implies that direct, intentional access to nonattachment is impossible when she states:

Because, I mean, say you just had a fight with someone, someone really close to you. I couldn't just say to you: (in a comical voice) "Oh, you should be nonattached." In that *moment*? You're a yogi, you might think: "Oh, wouldn't it be *great* if I were nonattached?" But can you do that? Can you *make* that nonattachment happen?

Guinevere echoes that statement, indicating that trying to let go of a major attachment will lead to frustration:

I think as soon as I say "I'm going to let go of my scarcity complex," God, pardon my French, *now*, I'm never, it doesn't work. Like, it's all ego. You know? It's like (in a comical voice) "I am doing this." It's nonsense . . . all that that would do, I guess, overtime, is make me frustrated because it's not happening the way my little ego had decided it would have to happen.

Participants engage with that conceptual tension in various ways. Selina suggests that, rather than trying to make nonattachment happen, simply being proximal to a profound state of being, or "that space that we find in meditation, or in our practice, or you know, when your child is born, or just those timeless moments" can manifest it. She explains: "the *more* we can *touch* that (claps hands together), the nearness to that unknowable state . . . then just, it just *unfolds* that, we just *become* less attached, because there's some alternative." Her words seem to indicate that while nonattachment is very important to her, she has found a way to approach it indirectly by cultivating conditions favorable to its expansion. For Toni, nonattachment is a top priority at this point in her life, but her language in the following statement suggests she perceives letting go as a life theme rather than a goal: "I feel [diligent] around not wasting any time, like just being in the reverence of what time is left, and what time is left is *singularly* about letting go." In a similar attitude toward outcome, Rachel illustrates the absurdity of measuring achievement in yoga practice, emphasizing instead the importance of process: "Defining success within a yoga practice is actually completely ridiculous. Because really all we're doing is practicing. That's all

it is. There's no final performance. And that's life." Guinevere also prioritizes the journey over the destination, explaining: "We need to be very *clear* of the tools that we *need* to get somewhere," and later "I think one of things we always have to keep in mind is . . . to not worry about the outcome so much, but to do what is right in that time, in that moment."

Another tension described by some participants pertains to a conflict of desire. While all participants indicate wanting to intentionally progress away from attachment toward nonattachment, they also describe an experience of negotiating between that wish and a conflicting desire to be attached. As mentioned under the fifth superordinate theme, attachment may be motivated by reasonable desire for safety and security, while nonattachment may be motivated by a conflicting wish for freedom. Rachel puts it simply when she states there is both a cost and reward for attaching to certain point of view: "There's a payoff for me in buying my own story. I get something out of seeing life this way and believing that it arises this way. *Even if* it appears that it's causing me some pain." Toni notes a key developmental stage in her experience of nonattachment was the notion that she could choose to surrender to the cost of her attachments: "And I agree to the consequences. And the consequences of the attachment in this moment is whatever. Suffering, joy, heartache. I agree. I agree. I agree. I agree."

As mentioned earlier in this section, participant values interact with the concept of nonattachment in their world view. Value systems promoted by a traditional source authority may conflict with contemporary values. For example, Rachel points out significant value differences associated with the concept nonattachment as she understood it "growing up, from my mother, Buddhist practice and ideology, and then coming into spiritual communities," and with her current understanding of nonattachment:

There often seemed to be an expression of nonattachment which was a way of not being responsible, and not being connected, and just being very internal. And not of this world.

But not in a way that was really . . . Like, as an *excuse*, as a way to pull back, as a way to not be responsible for what's happening on the planet. As a way to not be responsible for what happens in your interpersonal relationships. You know, just go, and sit, and meditate, and don't get attached, don't get attached.

This may indicate an effort on her part to reconcile value systems in a complex framework of understanding that includes various interpretations of esoteric texts situated against contemporary values. Her statement implies that, in the absence of guiding ethical principles, nonattachment can manifest problematically. That being said, Rachel also demonstrates a tolerance for duality as she expresses her growing appreciation for human contradiction:

I just see more and more . . . that I and everybody else on the planet contain a lot of contradiction and a lot of polarity. We're not just good. You know? We're not always pleasant. (laughing) We are very, very, very complex. And that's a good thing. You know? We don't want to be flat.

Toni also expresses a perception, if not an acceptance, of an inherent human duality: "The dichotomy of my humanness is that the light is always balanced with the shadow."

Such a perspective on experience, a way of being where incongruity is expected and even celebrated, seems in line with the flexible and fluid approach participants have demonstrated toward meaning and identity. In a closing pair of examples, Toni presents two opposing meanings of the term *empty*: (a) in the context of describing attachments as a response to a hollow sense of inadequacy, "the emptiness of self-doubt, unworthiness, unlovable, not enough"; and (b) in the context of describing the shedding of roles in a yoga practice, to become "just that empty being exploring that possibility, moment to moment." In the first example, "empty" represents a sense of worthlessness, while in the second example its usage is much more hopeful. This apparent tolerance for multiple and contradictory meanings represents an aspect of participants' experience, where mental flexibility and the willingness to hold multiple viewpoints are reciprocally bound to various tensions related to nonattachment.

Overlap of formal and informal practice. The meaning of nonattachment is interwoven not only with formal yoga and meditation practice, but extends to all aspects of everyday life. Participants demonstrate an awareness of the relationship between formal practice and the rest of their lives. Guinevere notes that her work with the concept of nonattachment does not conclude at the end of a formal practice. Rather she aims for it to dovetail in a “seamless” way with other aspects of her life:

we go: “I’m going to do my three hours of yoga practice” or whatever that is. “And then I’m doing something *else*.” You know, “I’m going to look after my kids, and dat dat dah.” But really . . . there’s no difference between sitting in meditation, which is where we practice to become a detached observer. Right? That’s one of the things that we try for during our meditation practice. But . . . to just bring all of that *off* the mat . . . and . . . for that to be seamless.

Toni makes a distinction between yoga practice and the rest of her life in that the formal practice enables her to shed her roles. However, she also indicates the transformational effects of formal practice extend to encompass her “whole” life:

It’s a way in. It’s the most extraordinary way in . . . for me the mat practice is like . . . you come through the door . . . you’re not a role, you’re just in your black stretchy clothes. You’re not any of the things you’ve accumulated. You’re not the divorce or the happiness or the in love. You’re just that empty being exploring that possibility, moment to moment. And something happens to the whole of your life when you practice.

Selina says she practices yoga in the hopes that it will prepare her to face the critical tests of her life with a quality of grace, a term she links with nonattachment:

all I can hope is that if I keep practicing . . . that the presence will, the ability to be present, to remain present and to touch that mystery will grow, and with that the nonattachment unfolds and then when these big challenges come up in my life, as they will in all of our lives, that the practice has given me enough to handle them with grace. And when I say grace that . . . has in it for me, like, nonattachment is interwoven with that word “grace.”

For Rachel, paying attention to the parallels between her experience in practice and the rest of her life is a method of self-inquiry that provides her with helpful knowledge about patterns of thought and behaviour she may be attached to. Here she describes that process of observation:

Mostly how what I'm experiencing in the practice translates out into my life. You know? So, what's the emotion? What's the experience? And where else does that happen? "Here I am, I'm on the mat. Start moving. Oh, what I'm doing isn't good enough." You know? "My practice should be duh duh duh duh duh. Well, where else do I experience that in my life? Not good enough, not where I should be." You know what I mean? "So what am I going to do with my body here in response to that? Well, I'm going to be really soft and compassionate with myself." And again, I just think it's . . . a metaphor. It's just a story. Like, whatever's happening on the mat is just a metaphor for life.

Participant experiences described above suggest not only a formal and informal practice of observing one's experience in a yoga setting and in everyday life respectively, but a third kind of meta-practice, involving observing the relationship between the formal and informal spheres.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The discussion of the research findings begins by describing points of congruence between participant experiences and the current literature, including similarities with the nonattachment scale (NAS), similarities with the construct of equanimity, nonattachment as a metamechanism of mindfulness, and nonattachment as a factor of a self-regulation practice. Then the discussion shifts to novel findings from the current study, including the embodied experience of nonattachment in yoga and the prominence of paradoxical tensions in participants' reports. Following that, implications for counselling psychology practice are discussed, as are study limitations and strengths. The discussion section concludes with recommendations for future research.

Congruence with the Current Literature

Similarity with nonattachment scale. Participant responses from the current study agreed in several ways with the operationalization of *attachment* for the Nonattachment Scale (NAS) proposed by Sahdra et al. (2010), who were advised by eighteen authorities on Buddhist teachings in defining the construct(s). For example, Sahdra et al.'s (2010) reference to “a sense of ownership of persons or things” (p. 118) is similar to two participants' association of attachment with attempts to control in relationship, be it by trying to control other people or by “control[ing] the form” of the relationship; Sahdra et al. (2010) refer to a characteristic “clinging” (p. 118) and, equally, two participants referred to “clinging” or “holding” on to beliefs or known situations; all participants in the current study expressed a relationship between defensiveness and attachment, whether to protect a “vulnerability” or an “insecurity,” to defend against “scarcity,” or as a response to a conditioned or habitual fear, which is not unlike Sahdra et al.'s (2010) linking of attachment with “defensive avoidance” and “anxiety about gaining,

escaping, or being able to avoid” (p. 118); most participants related attachment to a preoccupation with circumstances, like achieving a particular outcome or resisting change, reflecting Sahdra et al.’s (2010) statement that an attached person’s “sense of well-being is contingent . . . on a particular state of affairs” (p. 118); Sahdra et al. (2010) refer to the feeling of being “stuck or fixated on ideas, images, or sensory objects” (p. 118) while, comparably, all participants from the current study described a phenomenological experience of attachment as feeling “stuck” or weighed down, and connected attachment with a fixation on thoughts, ideas, or “stories”; and, finally, Sahdra et al. (2010) indicate that attachment involves swinging “between self-aggrandizement and self-degradation” (p. 118) which corresponds with most participants from the current study describing attachment as involving self-degrading beliefs about being “bad” or “unworthy,” and most participants associating attachment with concepts related to self-aggrandizement like “arrogance,” inflated “ego,” and “being right.”

Given the extent to which descriptions of attachments provided by participants in the current study are congruent with the NAS operationalization of Buddhist attachment, it is not surprising to also find similarities in their respective portrayals of *nonattachment*. For example, Sahdra et al. (2010) propose that nonattachment involves “psychological flexibility” and “nonreactivity” (p. 118) and, likewise, all participants in the current study associated nonattachment with a “flexibility,” “fluidity,” or “openness,” and with non-reactivity; Sahdra et al. (2010) link nonattachment with “more quickly recovering from upsets” (p. 118) and, in the current study, half the participants connected nonattachment with being able to process confusing or difficult experiences more efficiently; most participants in the current study described situations in which being nonattached meant they could support the autonomy of others, which is much like Sahdra et al.’s (2010) assertion that nonattachment involves “supporting others’

capacity to choose” (p. 118); Sahdra et al. (2010) refer to “a sense of ease” (p. 118) and, similarly, participants all related nonattachment with feelings of “ease,” “joy,” “resting,” or “no push and pull”; and, lastly, most participants clarified misconceptions about nonattachment, indicating that it is not like “indifference,” irresponsibility, or disengagement but, rather, that it involves being “responsible,” and “a full participant,” statements which are analogous to Sahdra et al.’s (2010) indication that “rather than being aloof, indifferent, uncaring, or unengaged . . . the nonattached individual genuinely cares about, is engaged in, and responsive to the present situation without falling into self-aggrandizement or self-degradation” (p. 118).

Similarity with equanimity. Desbordes et al. (2014), argued that some components captured under the umbrella concept of mindfulness, recognizable by their shared quality of “an attitude of openness and acceptance,” (p. 357) may point to a related but distinct concept called *equanimity*. They offer a definition of the Buddhist concept of equanimity: “An even-minded mental state or dispositional tendency toward all experiences or objects, regardless of their affective valence (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral) or source” (Desbordes et al., 2014, p. 357). Desbordes and colleagues indicate their definition of equanimity overlaps with the concept of nonattachment. In fact, when considering various potential measures of equanimity, the authors concluded the operationalization of nonattachment from the NAS “corresponds well to the Buddhist definition of equanimity” and that “many of [the scale]’s items would be well-suited to assess the subjective aspects of equanimity” (Desbordes et al., 2014, p. 365).

Desbordes et al.’s (2014) discussion of the construct of equanimity is reflected in several ways by participant descriptions of nonattachment from the current study. For example, Desbordes et al. (2014) suggested that equanimity can take a long time to develop and that its elusive nature may contribute to novice practitioners feeling disheartened by their own reactivity.

This is echoed by the current study in participants' statements that nonattachment is developed very gradually over a long period, and in half the participants' reported experiences of frustration early in the developmental process, a time when, as Selina stated, people "just beat themselves up for the reacting." In a second example of similarity, Desbordes et al. (2014) distinguished equanimity's "sense of [temporal] detachment" (p. 358) from indifference, from lack of care, and from "suppressing emotions" (p. 359). Similarly, participants from the current study clearly differentiate nonattachment from "indifference," from not caring, from irresponsibility, and from lack of engagement. In a third example of overlap, Desbordes et al. (2014) proposed "equanimity affects the time course of emotional and physiological response to a stressor" (p. 361) and that equanimity is expressed as a faster recovery from emotional reactions. This notion is echoed in the current study by participants' statements associating nonattachment with the ability to reduce emotional reactivity, to shorten the time it takes to "process" challenging or overwhelming experience, and to recover from such experiences more efficiently.

Metamechanism of mindfulness. In a description of their mindfulness model, Shapiro and Carlson (2009) proposed that mindfulness outcomes are influenced by *reperceiving*, a "metamechanism of action" involving a developmental perspective shift whereby one "is able to disidentify from the contents of consciousness . . . and view his or her moment-by-moment experience with greater clarity and objectivity" (p. 94). In their model, reperceiving encapsulates four other mechanisms: (a) "self-regulation and self-management," a process in which reactivity and habitual responses are reduced and the ability to tolerate experience is increased by "intentionally cultivating nonjudgmental *attention*" (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 99, italics in original); (b) "values clarification," where practitioners can "separate from" conditioned values and identify "what is meaningful for them" (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 99); (c) "cognitive,

emotional, and behavioral flexibility,” where re-perceiving contributes to a reduction of rigidity, an increase in responsiveness, and “freedom of choice” in relation to circumstances (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 100); and (d) “exposure,” where a reduction in reactivity contributes to an increased tolerance for exposure to, and a decreased “habitual tendency to avoid or deny,” disagreeable aspects of experience (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, p. 101).

All components of Shapiro and Carlson’s (2009) model are paralleled in the current study by participant experiences related to nonattachment. The metamechanism of re-perceiving is reflected in all participants’ association of attachment with “identification” or with believing one’s own thoughts or “stories,” and of nonattachment with being able to “step back” and “observe” or “witness” one’s own experience with “clarity.” The four additional mechanisms mentioned above are respectively echoed in participant statements in regards to nonattachment: all participants indicate that it involves a lessening of reactivity in favor of responsiveness; that letting go of “conditioned” beliefs or stories can reveal what is “true” or meaningful, or enable one to “infuse any meaning” into experience; that nonattachment involves a “flexibility” or “fluidity” in terms of responsiveness to experience and an increasing sense of “choice” and “freedom”; and that participants intentionally orient themselves towards unpleasant aspects of experience, building tolerance and acceptance.

Factor of a self-regulation practice. In their proposed theoretical model, Gard and colleagues (2014) describe yoga as a system of practice, comprising “both bottom-up and top-down” processes, that advances self-regulation “via an ethically motivated monitoring and control process that involves initiation and maintenance of behavioral change as well as inhibiting undesired output by both higher-level and lower-level brain networks in the face of stress-related physical or emotional challenge” (p. 14). Their model includes top-down factors

such as the cultivation of a steady, concentrated awareness leading to a flexible “ability to sustain attention on meaningful information and disregard irrelevant information from the external and internal environment” (Gard et al., 2014, pp. 5-6); and the tactics of “cognitive reappraisal” or equanimous “non-appraisal,” which contribute to “emotional stability and rapid recovery from perturbation” (p. 8).

These top-down factors are reflected in participant descriptions from the current study. Participants all associated nonattachment with the ability to stay “present” to their experience of emotion or sensation, free from feeling “pushed and pulled” by circumstances, from feeling “ruled” by the body’s stress response, or from “thinking about the past or the future”; participants all referred to the experience of learning to redefine the meaning of events in their lives by “stepp[ing] outside,” “detach[ing] from a point of view,” “changing your own mind,” or simply by “just watch[ing]”; and participants all referred to a non-doing place from which they could observe experience, and which was characterized by non-judgment, non-reaction, stillness, or curiosity. Most participants remarked on an increased capacity to process or recover from overwhelming experiences.

The nonattachment-related concept of meta-awareness is another top-down self-regulatory factor proposed by Gard et al. (2014). They note that “mindfulness practice encourages practitioners to take a meta-cognitive view of their experience, to notice the experience without judging it or modifying it and is thus, a form of self-regulation” (Gard et al., 2014, p. 7). This conceptualization of meta-awareness is reflected in the current study by reports from all participants of letting go of “stories” about the self or “detaching from a point of view,” and gaining perspective on experience by stepping back or “standing to the side” and observing their own thoughts and meaning-making processes. Participants link nonattachment with being

able to observe experience without “buying your own story,” “without needing to fix” or trying to “control the form,” or without “creating a judgment about each moment.”

Participant experiences are also in line with Gard and colleagues’ (2014) proposal that yoga impacts self-regulation by contributing to changes in behaviour. They argue this regulatory function “occur[s] via continual adjustment and guidance of one’s behavior . . . in pursuit of ethically motivated actions associated with self-care, health-promoting behavior, and pro-social interactions” (p. 8). Participants from the current study, who prize ethical principles like truth, autonomy, non-harm, and service, expressed a correlation between nonattachment, ethical conduct, and pro-social behaviours. For example, three participants felt empowered to act ethically, or in service of others, by cultivating nonattachment to their beliefs, identity, and outcomes.

Participant experiences of nonattachment reflect some of yoga’s proposed bottom-up self-regulatory factors as described in the literature. For example, Gard and colleagues (2014) speculated that, through repeated exposure to the controlled stress of an embodied yoga practice, yoga practitioners are learning to self-regulate “through parasympathetic control” by building up a greater tolerance for “physical stress” and its accompanying “emotional reactivity” (pp. 9-10). Practitioners can develop the ability to “stay relaxed with less effort, and facilitate recovery of bodily systems under stress,” contributing to a quieting of the mind (Gard et al., 2014, p. 10). This is echoed by three participant descriptions from the current study of “honouring” the “wisdom” or “rich experience” of the body, so that, as Guinevere said, the “mind can settle”; by all participants’ indications that learning to tolerate discomfort was a part of cultivating a state of nonattached presence, and by Rachel’s statement that “notic[ing] how what you’re doing with your body impacts your emotional and psychological state . . . feeds into that tolerance for one’s

self,”; and by most participants’ reports that they associate progression in nonattachment with an increased ability to process or pick up following a jarring experience.

In a second example of bottom-up regulation, Schmalzl and colleagues (2015) referred to the prevalent notion that “we ‘hold’ tension in our muscular system, and that the accumulation of both physical and emotional stress over time manifests as stiffness and blockages in our muscles, joints and connective tissue,” that postural yoga practice often targets those blockages by orienting attention towards them, supported by intentional breathing, and that diminishing “experiential avoidance” may contribute to “psychological flexibility” (p. 7). This is echoed in various participant statements, including references to the direct relationship between attachments in the mind and body, to the holding of unprocessed experience in the body, to the felt experience of attachment as tension and constriction, and in Toni’s reference to the necessity of paying attention to “where you are stuck” in both mind and body to “[get] unstuck.”

Novel Findings

Nonattachment in yoga involves an embodied experience. One novel finding of the study is the extent to which participants describe the experience of nonattachment as an embodied one. Conceptualizations of nonattachment in the psychological literature that do focus on a felt or bodily sense tend to focus on cognitive appraisals of those feelings as opposed to the feelings themselves. For example, the NAS measure of nonattachment developed by Sahdra and colleagues (2010) contains items like “I can remain open to thoughts and feelings that come into my mind, even if they are negative or painful” or “I am often preoccupied by threats or fears” (p. 120). These items illustrate the scale’s approach of targeting how respondents make sense of or relate to their thoughts and emotions. As mentioned earlier, results of the current study appear to support the operationalization of nonattachment in the NAS. However, results additionally

indicate embodied experiencing is a relevant line of further inquiry. Participants in the current study vividly described a felt aspect to attachment and nonattachment, using terms like “heat,” “tension,” “tiresome,” “stuck,” “relaxed,” and “fluid.” Further, participant descriptions of “listening to,” “honoring,” “trusting,” and “going inside” the body suggest that paying attention to the felt-sense of the body is a significant factor of their experience of nonattachment. Toni referred to attachments that exist as “unresolved” experiences in the tissues and organs of the body, and Selina referred to experiences of letting go involving notable somatic features like “shaking.”

This underlines a salient difference between contemplative practices focused on seated meditation, like those derived from Buddhist models, and those that are movement based like modern postural yoga. Development of the NAS involved drawing from various Buddhist sources, including ancient texts and contemporary thinkers and writers, to operationalize nonattachment (Sahdra et al., 2010). Although Buddhism is also an important part of the fabric of contemporary yoga practice (De Michelis, 2008), modern yoga’s prioritization of movement, sensation, and the body marks a point of divergence between the two frameworks. As Schmalzl et al. (2014) assert, the contemplative science literature concerned with a “non-dualistic view of the mind and body” (p. 1) stands to gain from increased research into the nature of movement-based mindfulness practices like yoga. They argue that, although movement, sensation, and the body are of concern to all contemplative practices, embodied movement-based systems like yoga are of consequence because they “may involve additional distinct mechanisms” of contemplation and “may offer a more efficient form of practice than seated meditation when it comes to cultivating bodily awareness and the sense of self” (Schmalzl et al., 2014, p. 3). Given the similarities and differences between processes in yoga and in Buddhist-inspired mindfulness, the

definition of underlying constructs like nonattachment may vary across systems. The fact that participants in this study indicate a notable embodied aspect to the experience of nonattachment is one indication of a possible difference. A comprehensive model of yoga will account for this.

Paradoxical tensions. Although the psychological literature reviewed for this study does contain some discussion of conceptual tensions related to nonattachment it is worth noting the extent to which participants in the current study indicated awareness of, and engagement with, ambiguity and contradiction. An illustrative example from the mindfulness literature concerns the tension that results from repurposing tenets of a wisdom tradition for application in a therapeutic context (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Difficulties might arise when a concept like nonattachment, which is, as Burley (2014) indicated “a prominent theme in many religious traditions,” (p. 204) gets decontextualized to be included as component of a brief therapeutic intervention involving the specific goals of clients and clinicians. In this example, Kabat-Zinn (2003) points to the tension between the mindful “orientation of nonstriving, nondoing, and letting go” and the therapeutic goals and desired outcomes that are part of the MBSR program (p. 150). He argues this tension can only be resolved by an instructor who embodies the teaching material through having their own dedicated mindfulness practice. Although Kabat-Zinn (2003) does not explain exactly *how* to resolve the tension, he does imply contending with it is a part of the mindfulness practice: “It can be done only if one feels a deep experience-based confidence in the practice and an equally deep humility in offering it to others, developed through one’s own intimate engagement and struggles with it” (p. 150). While I agree that an instructor who has an ongoing personal engagement with a contemplative practice and its challenges is better positioned to deal with paradoxical complexity, it may be the case that deeper scrutiny into the

experience and meaning made of conceptual tensions will yield helpful insights into the mechanics of nonattachment.

Participants described many relevant experiences ranging from the frustration of “attachment to nonattachment,” through the recognition of the absurdity of “defining success within a yoga practice,” to the acknowledgement and acceptance of the complex and often contradictory nature of the self. In a compelling example, Toni’s realization that she could “agree to the consequences” of her attachments and choose wholeheartedly to be attached is suggestive of a paradox of finding liberation through surrender. This example also points to a tension of opposites that runs as an undercurrent of many participant experiences: that the project of nonattachment is, in large part, about one’s *attachments* and how one relates to and experiences them and, thus, is an ongoing investigation of meaning. On one hand, participants described feeling liberated from habitual, conditioned meaning-making by disentangling themselves from personal narratives and developing a spacious, non-conceptual frame of reference through mediation and movement. And on the other hand, participant efforts in regards to nonattachment seem to be rewarded by experiences of finding meaning where previously there was confusion, of making sense of themselves and their purpose, and of writing new personal narratives. Participants’ apparent shared tolerance for ambiguity may be correlated in some way to their prolonged engagement with difficult concepts like nonattachment.

Implications for Counselling Psychology Practice.

Nonattachment is a prominent component of contemplative practices like yoga and mindfulness meditation and, as Martin (1997) argued, it is also a fundamental feature of various psychotherapeutic orientations. This means nonattachment is a potentially fruitful area of investigation for researchers, clinicians, and clients interested in the application of yoga (or

another mindfulness practice) as a therapeutic approach. Martin (1997) posited that developing attentional nonattachment is akin to liberating the psyche from a limited, automatic perception of the self and others, and that this ability is the “cornerstone of successful therapy from many schools” (p. 293). Indeed, as mentioned above, participant reports from the current study support a relationship between the development of nonattachment and an increase in their ability to adopt different perspectives, as well as a sense of mental freedom and spaciousness. As Martin (1997) indicated, learning to recognize and switch between ways of seeing things can be facilitated by skills and approaches, like the cognitive-behavioural technique of tracking automatic thoughts, to name one example. Participants from the current study described numerous approaches that help them change perspective, approaches which could inform therapists in the development of future programs. Examples of participant techniques include adopting a witness perspective in a meditation context, compassionately observing inner monologue during practice, literally changing perspective by repositioning the body, observing how changes to form in a physical yoga practice contribute to shifts in physiological, emotional, and cognitive experience, writing as multiple parts of self, and directing attention to the felt space of the body, to name a few. Additionally, but no less important, are participant discussions pertaining to other mechanisms of nonattachment, including intentionality, letting go, and presence, and how these mechanisms interact with and support conscious attempts to alter perspective. The interactions of these various factors may hold a key to further understanding nonattachment and how it functions in the context of yoga practice.

Letting go is a concept that has relevance for therapists and researchers interested in nonattachment. Sahdra et al. (2010) indicate that “any kind of ‘practice’ - be it contemplative, spiritual, artistic, psychotherapeutic, or any mundane activity - that involves ‘letting go’ of

fixations may promote nonattachment” (p. 117). The current study provides some insight into what is involved in letting go, an action that may only sometimes be accessible by direct intention. Participant descriptions of letting go depict it both as a voluntary and involuntary act. This makes it comparable in some ways to falling asleep. We choose when to go to bed, but not the moment we fall asleep or wake up. We can intentionally create conditions favorable to sleep and waking, like closing the blinds, lying in a comfortable position, and to wake up, like setting an alarm and so on. However, as anyone who has ever experienced insomnia can attest, the elusive nature of sleep can be a deeply frustrating experience, where seemingly the harder one tries to find it, the more difficult it becomes. Similarly, participants in the current study indicate both that letting go is a choice and that trying to let go can be an exercise in futility. It follows that attachments to some ideas, points of view, or relationships might be easier to let go of than others. For example, letting go of a position held in an argument may be as simple as hearing a more convincing argument and making the decision to change perspective. On the other hand, letting go of conditions or beliefs associated with safety, survival, or identity would likely pose more of a challenge. Given the reportedly slow pace of nonattachment development and the frustration that can occur, practitioners interested in incorporating ideas of nonattachment in their work with clients, especially those clients inclined toward negative conceptualizations of the self, may want to avoid using language to suggest nonattachment is a simple undertaking (e.g., “try to let go of something you don’t need anymore...”). It may be helpful to discuss, with clients, gradations of attachments, to normalize that some attachments may be impossible to let go of, and to establish that, like falling asleep, effort might best be spent in creating conditions favorable to letting go. According to participant responses from the current study, the project of

creating such favorable conditions could involve practicing changing perspective, observing experience, being still and quiet, and attending to bodily experience, to name a few.

Limitations and Strengths

This study's aim was to broaden a line of inquiry into the concept of mindful nonattachment by investigating the lived experience of four long-term yoga practitioners. Given the type of research question, the sample, and the qualitative methodology used, this study was limited by the fact that the results cannot be generalized to a clinical population, and cannot be used to draw wide conclusions about the concept of nonattachment. This is expected in IPA where, as Langdridge (2007) states, "studies are . . . *idiographic* . . . there will be little attempt to generalize beyond this particular sample," and where the goal is "to develop detailed descriptions of the experience of a small number of people who all share that experience" of a particular phenomenon (p. 58, italics in original). Thus, the study results were confined to my interpretation of the meaning of the experience of the four participants. Further, the findings are limited to a privileged socioeconomic and cultural perspective and can only be weighed against a comparable context. The research methodology used in this study recommends a homogeneous sample (Smith et al., 2009). Although the sample was homogeneous in that all participants were women, all lived in Western Canada, all were yoga teachers, and all had exposure to Vijnana yoga teachings, there were also some notable differences between participants. Participant ages and years of experience practicing yoga were not uniform, and their personal yoga practices differed. Finally, given the fact that participants were likely motivated to take part in the research by a particular interest in the research question, this study cannot account for the experience of practitioners who may consider nonattachment unimportant or irrelevant.

This study's strength is rooted in the depth of its investigation of the meaning of the lived experience of its participants. By using open-ended interviews, conducting multiple readings of the text, inviting member-checks of the data, compiling a thorough audit trail, and drawing heavily on direct participant quotes in the analysis, this study offers a coherent and detailed representation of participants' experiences of nonattachment. As the peer-reviewer tasked with reviewing the audit trail indicated: "The findings as you've described them are credible, that the process you went through was logical, systematic/methodical and transparent. I also think that just reading the findings chapter, it's very obvious that you stayed close to the data by the ample direct quotation that you used" (Brand-Cousy, personal communication, February 28, 2017).

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is needed to disentangle nonattachment from mindfulness, and from other related constructs like equanimity. The relationship between nonattachment and mindfulness, as defined in the psychological literature, is unclear. For example, nonattachment is essential to Martin's (1997) definition of mindfulness as "a state of *psychological freedom* that occurs when attention remains quiet and limber, *without attachment* to any particular point of view," (pp. 291-292, italics in original), while in Shapiro et al.'s (2006) three-axiom mindfulness model, the metamechanism of re-perceiving, characterized by "a sense of nonattachment" (p. 379), is arrived at by "intentionally . . . attending . . . with openness and non-judgmentalness" (p. 377). Sahdra et al. (2016) argued that while the psychological constructs of mindfulness and nonattachment are related in several ways, they are distinguishable enough that "different interventions may be needed to target them" (p. 827). As discussed above, equanimity is a construct so similar to nonattachment that Desbordes et al. (2014) theorized it can be measured, to an extent, by Sahdra et al.'s (2010) nonattachment scale (NAS). Despite this close similarity,

Desbordes et al. (2014) also argued that the conflation of nonattachment (and other terms like accepting and non-judging) with equanimity leads to misconception in the literature.

Clarifying definitions of mindfulness and related constructs like nonattachment is necessary to achieve accuracy in measurement and to create precise models of change. Future research could explore nonattachment and related concepts by triangulating yoga, Buddhist philosophy, and Western definitions, and by accounting for the experiences of, and expert opinions from, senior teachers, scholars, practitioners, and psychologists. Studies investigating the semantics and pragmatics of language use in the context of yoga and meditation practice could help delineate concepts. Based on the current study, examples of terms of interest related to nonattachment include “letting go” and “presence,” to name a few.

More research is needed to establish contraindications. The anecdotal evidence from the current study suggests some possible contraindications to working with nonattachment. For example, people who do not feel safe in their bodies may not be ready to observe their own experience to the extent required for a nonattached stance, at least until they develop a level of comfort maintaining sustained inward-focused attention. Because the experience of nonattachment can invoke challenging existential questioning (e.g., “no self”), psychosis may be another contraindication. In their review of the evidence of treating psychosis with mindfulness, Shonin, Van Gordon, and Griffiths (2014b) remark: “Given that this subtle process [of meditation] can be extremely challenging and confusing even for people of ‘healthy’ clinical status, the question arises whether it is prudent to utilise a meditation-based recovery model for people with psychosis” (p. 124). They recommend that “explicitly analytical/insight-based . . . meditation techniques” not be used therapeutically in cases of psychosis, to avoid “inducing psychotic episodes” (Shonin et al., 2014b, p. 127). Given that three participants in the current

study associated exposure to such meditation techniques with the experience of nonattachment, more research in this area is recommended.

In light of participants' discussions of varying possible interpretations and misconceptions of nonattachment, people with a tendency toward emotional detachment or social isolation may interpret nonattachment as a support for those tendencies; this is complicated by Remski's (2012) argument that the classical "ascetic" yoga text, the *Yogasutra* of Patanjali, (which provides teachings on the concept of nonattachment) originally contained a "message of social disengagement" (p. 18). Given factors of participants' experience including parts of self and flexibility of meaning, nonattachment may be contraindicated by dissociative disorders involving depersonalization, derealization, or fragmentation of identity. Of course, the opposite may prove to be true, seeing that participants also associate nonattachment with integrative and clarifying experiences. Further research would be required to make any determination. Finally, in their Delphi method study of the opinions of eighteen yoga teachers ($n = 18$) from four countries, de Manincor et al. (2015) found "general consensus" among participants that practices including unfocused meditation, very deep contemplation, and practices involving "difficult and complex instructions" (p. 7) are inappropriate for people with strong anxiety. Because these descriptions overlap with some aspects of participant experiences of nonattachment from the current study, it may be beneficial to investigate severe anxiety as a possible contraindication.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in the Study



a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Invitation to the Study

Study Title: The Meaning of the Lived Experience of Nonattachment for Long-Term Yoga Practitioners

Purpose: I invite you to participate in a study about how long-term yoga practitioners experience nonattachment. There is a growing interest in yoga as a therapeutic method in the treatment of mental health, and evidence suggests yoga is an effective treatment for conditions like depression and anxiety. However, there is concern that we do not understand enough about *how* yoga works, and little research has been conducted into the various components and underlying processes of contemporary yoga practice. Nonattachment is a concept that is considered an important underpinning in pre-modern and contemporary yoga, and may be a central factor in a change process common to many psychotherapeutic modalities. To date, very little research has been done on nonattachment, or on the lived experience of long-term yoga practitioners.

The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning of the lived experience of nonattachment for long-term yoga practitioners. It is expected that participant accounts will deepen our theoretical and practical understanding of how nonattachment in yoga may or may not be helping in a therapeutic context, leading to theoretical and practical implications for practicing therapists and researchers interested in yoga as a therapeutic method.

Participant Eligibility

You are eligible to be a research participant for this study if:

- You have practiced yoga in a dedicated fashion for ten years or longer
- The yoga you practice included at some time and in some form:
 - Physical postures or bodywork
 - Breathwork
 - Meditation and/or mindfulness
 - Reading of yoga texts and/or ethics (e.g, Yogasutra, Baghavadgita, Hathayogapradipika; Yamas / Niyamas)
 - Teachings from the Vijnana yoga lineage
- You are 19 years of age or older
- You have had a meaningful experience of nonattachment that you would be willing to discuss in an interview
- You will be available for a ½ hour follow-up by phone and/or email for up to eight months following the interview (likely to occur 2 to 4 months following the interview)

Study Procedures: If you choose to participate in the study, you will be invited to write a brief reflection on your yoga practice and/or nonattachment (optional). Following that, you will be invited to speak about your experiences in a one-on-one interview lasting about 1.5 hours. You will be contacted once more, when analysis of the interviews has been completed. This follow-up is to check whether or not the researcher's transcription and analysis represents your experience, and to provide you with an opportunity to change or add information. The total time commitment is estimated at 3-4 hours. Following the interview you will receive a \$20 gift card to a coffee shop or bookstore of your choice, in appreciation of your participation in the study.

Dissemination of information, consent and right to withdraw: An analysis of the interviews, which will explore emerging themes related to the lived experience of nonattachment, will be included in a final research essay. This essay will be submitted as part of the thesis requirement of my degree program. The research findings may also be published in journals and magazines, and may be presented at meetings and conferences. **The identities of all participants will be kept strictly confidential; participant identities will not appear on any document.** Consent to participate in this study is completely voluntary and participants can stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any interview question. Participants are also free to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.

Contact Information: If you are interested in participating in this study, or have any questions about this study, please contact Andrew Herfst (Co-Investigator) at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxx@xxx. This research is being conducted as part of the thesis requirement of his Masters degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. You may also contact Dr. Marla Buchanan (Principal Investigator), Professor, Counselling Psychology Program at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxx@xxx

Email Disclaimer: Due to the non-secure nature of email, confidentiality of communication by email cannot be ensured. Please use discretion when sending information that is personal and/or sensitive in nature. For the most confidential communication, please use the phone number provided directly above.

Appendix B: Screening Interview Protocol

Participant Screening Questions

If a potential participant contacts me and is interested in the study, I will begin by thanking them for their interest, and answer any initial questions they may have. I will inform them that the decision to participate is entirely up to them, and that they are free to opt out of participating following the screening questions. I will then start by explaining that in order to participate in the study, it is important that I ask them a few questions to determine their eligibility. I will briefly describe the purpose of the study, and explain confidentiality, including the standard limits of confidentiality (i.e. duty to report serious threat of harm to self or others, to protect a vulnerable child or adult, court-ordered subpoena). I will indicate to the participant that they can refuse to answer any question and / or can end the conversation at any time. Once the potential participant consents to the screening process, I will move to the following questions:

- How long have you practiced yoga?
- What has your yoga practice consisted of?
- Do you think you have had a meaningful experience of nonattachment, and if so, are you willing to share your experience with me in a one-on-one interview that will be tape recorded?
- The initial interview will take place in a quiet location of your choosing. Alternatively, we can meet at a private room on the UBC Vancouver campus. Following the initial interview, I will contact you again by email and/or phone, once to provide you with an analysis of the interview, to inquire whether you feel it is accurate and complete. Do you feel willing and able to participate based on the commitment described above?
- Are you currently experiencing any stress or conditions that could make it difficult to talk about your experiences at this time?
- What interests you about participating in this study?
- Do you have any questions for me?
- *(If participant is screened in, and is interested in participating in the study)* I would like to gain a thorough understanding of your lived experience of nonattachment. I want to clarify that this research is interested in your personal experience of nonattachment, whatever that means to you. This might include both pleasant and challenging aspects of experience. In preparation for this interview, I invite you to write a brief description of your current yoga practice, and to journal or make some notes about your experience of nonattachment. This written component is optional. Participants in this kind of research often find it helpful to prepare some ideas before the interview. Visual images, like drawings or photographs can also be helpful in representing aspects of experience that are challenging to put into words. You are invited to bring this written component with you to the interview, if you feel comfortable sharing it.

If a potential participant does not meet screening criteria: I will conclude the interview immediately, and will explain the situation as follows:

"I really appreciate your interest in this project and the time you have taken to speak with me. Unfortunately, based on what you have said so far, it appears you do not meet the criteria for taking part in the study. Specifically, we are looking to speak with people who (*insert criterion not met by respondent*), and it sounds like you do not meet that criterion. Is there anything you would like to add that might speak to how you do meet this criterion?"

"Although we cannot invite you to participate in this research project, I am able to send you a list of reduced-rate counselling services if you are interested in speaking with a counsellor. (*Will send Appendix F if requested.*)

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

All participants will first be asked:

“I am interested in your personal experience nonattachment. Can you tell me, in your own words, and in as much detail as you like, what nonattachment means to you?”

If participant is uncertain about how to answer the main question, or discussion strays from the lived experience of nonattachment, participants may be asked questions from the semi-structured questions below:

- “Would you share an example, from your daily life, of an experience of nonattachment?”
- “Can you tell me what role nonattachment plays in your life right now?”
- “What is the role of intentionality in your experience of nonattachment, if any?”
- “Can you tell me about the role nonattachment plays in your interpersonal relationships? Can you think of a specific example?”
- “What, if anything, do you find helpful or beneficial about nonattachment?”
- “What, if anything, do you find difficult or challenging about nonattachment.”
- “Has your experience of nonattachment changed over time?”
- “Can you describe a situation in your life where you felt strongly attached? How about where you felt clearly nonattached?”

When the participant has concluded sharing their experience, I may proceed with follow-up questions to deepen particular aspects of their account and/or to confirm whether I have understood them. I will conclude the interview asking whether the participant has anything further to share, and then check in with them regarding how they felt about the interview.

Appendix D: Demographics Form

Participant Demographics Form

Please answer the following questions by filling in the blanks provided or circling answers where appropriate. You may leave any question unanswered. **Your identity will be kept strictly confidential.**

1. Age: _____

2. City you live in: _____

3. Gender: _____

4. Ethnicity: _____

5. Marital Status: _____

6. Children: _____

7. Education completed:

a. Elementary

b. High School

c. Post-secondary diploma

d. Undergraduate degree

e. Graduate degree

f. Other: _____

8. Brief summary of career history:

Appendix E: Consent Form



a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Title of Study: The Meaning of the Lived Experience of Nonattachment for Long Term Yoga Practitioners

Principle Investigator: Dr. Marla Buchanan, Professor, Ph.D.; Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education; Faculty of Education; University of British Columbia (UBC); Office telephone: xxx-xxx-xxxx; E-mail: xxx@xxx

Co-Investigator: Andrew Herfst, M.A. Student, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education; Faculty of Education; UBC
Contact Information: xxx-xxx-xxxx or e-mail: xxx@xxx

This research is part of Andrew Herfst's thesis requirement for completing a Master of Arts (M.A.) in the Counselling Psychology Program. Upon completion, the thesis will be a public document that can be viewed through the UBC library.

Why are we doing this research? There is a growing interest in yoga as a therapeutic method in the treatment of mental health, and evidence suggests yoga is an effective treatment for conditions like depression and anxiety. However, there is concern that we do not understand enough about *how* yoga works, and little research has been conducted into the various components and underlying processes of contemporary yoga practice. Nonattachment is a concept that is considered an important underpinning in pre-modern and contemporary yoga, and may be a central factor in a change process common to many psychotherapeutic modalities.

What happens if you agree to participate? If you choose accept the invitation to participate, you will be asked to complete a brief demographics form, an optional written description of your yoga practice, and then engage in an open-ended interview. You will be invited to talk about your personal, lived experience of nonattachment. The interview will last approximately 1.5 hours, and you get to choose what you would like to share. The researcher may ask you to elaborate and/or ask some follow-up questions, which you may choose to respond to depending on your level of comfort. Approximately two to four months following this first interview you will be contacted by email to provide you with a summary of the analysis of your interview, at which time you will have an opportunity to comment, and request changes or additions.

Study Results: The interviews will be analyzed and collated for a final research essay that will be submitted to complete the educational requirements of the co-investigator. The information

may also be shared at meetings and conferences and may be published in academic journals or magazines for other people to read. Your name will not be shared in the essay, nor in any presentation or publication.

Potential Risks: Although the anticipated risks associated with participating in this project are considered low, please be aware of the following potential risks: (a) a new or changed awareness with regards to the meaning of nonattachment in one's lived experience; (b) the possible recollection of challenging or unpleasant life experiences; and (c) the unanticipated disclosure of sensitive personal information during the interview process. If you would like further support for anything that comes up during the research process, we can provide you with a list of relevant external community agencies and services. The research supervisor, Dr. Marla Buchanan, is a counsellor and is available to speak with you following the interview. In addition, you have the right to choose not to answer any question, to take breaks, and to end the interview at any time.

Potential Benefits: (a) the opportunity to think and speak in depth about your experience of nonattachment; and (b) the chance to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the area of yoga and mindfulness as it relates to the field of counselling psychology.

Confidentiality: Participant confidentiality is a priority. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Audio recordings, consent forms, and notes referring to participant data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the Principal Investigator's (Dr. Marla Buchanan) research lab. Electronic files related to participant data will be encrypted and password protected. Participants will be referred to in research materials, transcriptions, and in the final report by their interview number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.). UBC's policy is to destroy all data five years following completion of the study: paper materials will be secure shredded, and electronic files will be erased using 3-pass overwrite software. In the event of a media failure, storage media will be destroyed by pulverization. The only people with access to the data will be Andrew Herfst (the co-Investigator), Dr. Marla Buchanan (the Principal Investigator), and Nicole Brand-Cousy (a graduate student at UBC who will conduct a peer review of the research).

With your consent, any artwork or other visual images you bring with you to or create during the interview will be photographed and stored as a digital file as described above. This is optional.

There are three exceptional circumstances in which confidentiality of your identity cannot be maintained: (a) if there is a reasonable cause to believe that a child or vulnerable adult is being abused and is in need of protection; (b) if a participant is at serious risk of suicide and/or other serious harm to self, or if the participant presents a clear and imminent threat to someone else or society at large; and (c) if the researcher receives a court-ordered subpoena to disclose research data. Interventions may include, but are not limited to: emergency services, reporting to the Ministry of Child and Family Development, and counselling support services.

Remuneration or Compensation: As compensation for your time spent participating in this study, you will receive a \$20 gift card to a local coffee shop or bookstore upon completion of the first interview.

Contact for information about the study: If at any point before, during, or after the study you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the principal investigator or co-investigator (contact information above).

Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study? If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Consent and the Right to Withdraw: Consent to be part of this research study is completely voluntary. You can choose to withdraw at any time with no explanation and with no consequences. You have the right not to answer any questions you do not want to answer, and can take a break at any time during the interview.

Signature:

Your signature below indicates that:

1. You understand the information provided for the study "The Meaning of the Lived Experience of Nonattachment for Long Term Yoga Practitioners"
2. You have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
3. You consent to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of the Investigator: "These are the terms under which I will conduct research."

Appendix F: Supportive Community Resources

Supportive Community Resources

If additional support is required following the interview, Dr. Marla Buchanan, the research supervisor, is a trained counsellor and is available to speak to you over the phone or face to face.

Contact information for Dr. Marla Buchanan:
Office telephone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
E-mail: xxx@xxx.xxx

Free or Reduced-Cost Counselling

Family Services of Greater Vancouver, Counselling Program - 604-874-2938

<http://www.fsgv.ca>

Counselling fees based on household income. Offices in Vancouver, Richmond, Burnaby, New Westminster and Surrey.

Family Services of the North Shore - 604-988-5281

<http://www.familyservices.bc.ca>

Sliding scale fees.

Oak Counselling - 604-266-5611

<http://oakcounselling.org/>

Individual, couples and family counselling; reduced fee.

Adler Centre - Counselling Clinic - 604-742-1818

<http://www.adlercentre.ca/clinic.html>

Sliding scale individual and couples counselling provided by supervised graduate students in a Counselling Psychology Program.

Scarfe Counselling - UBC - 604-827-1523

<http://ccps.educ.ubc.ca/counselling-centres/scarfe-free-counselling-clinic/>

Free individual counselling provided by supervised graduate students in a Counselling Psychology program. Runs from September – April.

UBC Psychology Clinic - 604-822-3005

<http://clinic.psych.ubc.ca/>

Reduced rate counselling services provided by supervised doctoral student interns, \$10-\$40 per hour.

New Westminster UBC Counselling Centre - 604-525-6651

<http://ccps.educ.ubc.ca/counselling-centres/new-westminster-ubc-counselling-centre/>

Free individual counselling provided by supervised graduate students in a Counselling Psychology program.

Simon Fraser University - Counselling Clinics

Surrey Clinic - 604-587-7320 - <http://www.sfu.ca/education/centres-offices/sfu-surrey-counselling-centre.html>

Burnaby Clinic- 778-782-4720 -
http://members.psyc.sfu.ca/cpc/mandate_and_activities
Free or sliding scale counselling provided by supervised graduate students in a Counselling Psychology program.

Jewish Family Services - 604-637-3309
<http://jfsa.ca/counselling/>
Sliding scale counselling services.

SUCCESS - Individual and Family Counselling Program - 604-408-7266
<http://www.successbc.ca/eng/services/family-youth/counselling-service/611->

Counselling services provided in Korean, Mandarin, Cantonese and English. Focus on the experience of new immigrants. Counselling offered in Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean and English.

Living Systems Counselling - 604-926-5496, ext. "0"
<http://www.livingsystems.ca/counselling/locations-fees-services#Counselling>
Individual, couple and family counselling using Bowen Family Systems Therapy. Lower cost counselling provided by supervised interns.

Qmunity - Free Counselling Program - 604-684-5307
<http://qmunity.ca/get-support/counselling/>
Counselling services being provided for the GLBTQ communities.

Crisis Support

Anywhere in BC: 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)
Vancouver: 604-872-3311
Sunshine Coast/Sea to Sky: 1-866-661-3311
Vancouver Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789
Fraser Health Crisis Line: 604-951-8855; 1-877-820-74444