

Doing Body, Doing Mind, Doing Self

Vipassana Meditation in Everyday Life

Nasima Selim

Supervisor: Annemiek Richters

Co-reader: Anna Aalten

Amsterdam Master's in Medical Anthropology 2010-11

University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Dedication

For those who *sit* and those who do not

Table of contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	7
<i>Summary</i>	9
<i>Chapter One</i>	13
Following the <i>Sitting</i> Body: An Introduction	
<i>Chapter Two</i>	19
From Nottingham to Pagis: Vipassana as a Research Problem	
<i>Chapter Three</i>	29
My People, My Methods	
<i>Chapter Four</i>	39
<i>Breath, Observe, Forgive</i>: The Reflexive Techniques in <i>Sitting</i>	
<i>Chapter Five</i>	55
Self, Not-self, 'New' Self: Stories of Personhood	
<i>Chapter Six</i>	65
Questioning Evidence, Translating Effects	
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	83
Epistemological Dilemmas and Concluding Remarks	
<i>Epilogue</i>	89
<i>Appendices</i>	91
<i>References</i>	99

Acknowledgements

First, I wish to thank my research informants and the Vipassana Stichting in Amsterdam. There would be no research without their consent and active participation. I express my gratitude to Annemiek Richters, my thesis supervisor. Her guidance tamed my unruly approaches to research, helped me modify the over-ambitious objectives and directed my attention to the pitfalls in fieldwork and writing. Next in the list is Annemarie Mol. Her comments on the first messy draft shaped my later thinking. I received much inspiration from her works, talks and walks. I also thank Sjaak van der Geest and Shahaduz Zaman for being instrumental in my decision to study medical anthropology.

I thank Ria Reis for her initial comments on framing vipassana meditation as a research problem. I also thank Trudie Gerrits for helpful comments on the proposal. I am grateful to Trudy Kanis and Tony Holslag for everything, specially the relaxing tours in and out of the city. Not to mention my AMMA classmates for stimulating discussions, sharing wonderful meals and the pleasures and pains we went through. I thank Julia Challinor for her support during the year.

Outside AMMA, I thank the vipassana scholars, Michal Pagis, Tillo Dilger and Simeon Karsten for their generosity in corresponding with me and sharing their work and insights. I am grateful to AISSR PhD candidates, Malini Sur who directed my attention to the influence of my experience on the analysis, and, Filippo Bertoni for his helpful comments on the final draft. Among friends, I specifically thank Rhona McArthur for reminding me not to work more than is required! I am grateful to Gabi Jaschke who not only helped me with the transcriptions but also suffered my difficult presence in her life while I was writing the thesis.

I am thankful to colleagues in my workplace - the James P Grant School of Public Health at BRAC University (Bangladesh) - for allowing me a study leave for one year. Finally, I must thank Nuffic for the scholarship that made it possible to study medical anthropology and do the research and writing for this thesis.

Nasima Selim
Bijltespad, Amsterdam

Summary

Sitting is a common 'technique of the body'. Everybody sits. There is also *sitting* of a particular kind, offered as a 'universal remedy for universal suffering' - an 'art of living'. This kind of *sitting* goes by the name of *vipassana* meditation (or, just *vipassana*). There are different traditions of *vipassana*. Religious and secular. There are other names. Insight meditation. Mindful meditation. Or, simply mindfulness (training) where *sitting* becomes a form of (psycho) therapy. There are many divisions: popular and clinical. Buddhists *sit*. Those who do not call themselves Buddhists also *sit*. People who suffer *sit*. People who do not suffer also *sit*. The *sitting* happens somewhere: in isolated retreats of silence and in the middle of everyday noise. It happens in a geographical location: in Myanmar and India, North America and Israel, South America, Africa, Australia and also in Europe, in the city of Amsterdam.

Amsterdam is the place where my research happened. My aim was to contribute to the anthropology of body and body practices by producing knowledge on *vipassana* meditation, by not conflating it with other 'eastern' techniques such as yoga. I used both phenomenology and a practice theory framework to investigate the practice in a post-industrial setting. My objective was to follow *vipassana*, the *sitting* meditation, by exploring everyday practices, lived experiences and perceived effects of *vipassana* among its practitioners. The fieldwork was driven by the following research questions: a) How is *vipassana done*? b) What is *vipassana*? What does it become? c) What is it to *sit* in *vipassana*? What are the experiences? d) What are the effects of practicing *vipassana*? e) How are these effects linked to the practice?

For six weeks, I did an exploratory focused ethnography based on interactive in-depth interviews and informal conversations with twelve practitioners, two key informant interviews, participant observation of weekly and monthly group *sittings*, and qualitative content analysis of audiovisual materials. I also reviewed a few *vipassana*-related publications and analysed the auto-ethnographic narratives from a personal diary recording my own practice and experience of *vipassana*.

Three themes emerged from the analysis of my findings. I found out that the reflexive technique (s) of *vipassana* involved simultaneous (re) construction of the body and mind. The *vipassana* practitioners mobilized the technique (s) to deconstruct the notion of a former 'self' into the reconfiguration of personhood. The multiple effects of *vipassana* illustrated the problems of articulating practices and experiences and helped me question the prevailing definition of 'evidence' in understanding *salutogenic* practices. As a scholar-practitioner, I experienced epistemological dilemmas in promoting the *ethnographic evidence* of *vipassana* as a healing practice, and, interpreting *vipassana* with the disciplinary tools of medical anthropology.

Based on the current fieldwork in the post-industrial setting of a cosmopolitan city, this study contributes to the anthropology of body and body practices as well as the current literature on self-care. Future investigation of this *sitting* may produce further knowledge on the global connections of vipassana, comparative studies with other practices of 'family resemblance', and the mixed *effects* they produce.

Chapter One

The journey begins and ends with the body, incorporating on its way the entire universe.

(Kersenboom 1995: 59)

Chapter One

Following the *Sitting* Body: An Introduction

Along the river IJ¹, a wide road goes from the East to the West. It is drizzling lightly since daybreak. I park my bike near the steel pipes in the compound and look around. Claudia has just parked her bike too. It is eight o'clock in the morning. The large steel door is wide open. I hear familiar voices and see the indoor lights. Others are already here. Annelies is directing the arrangements. I say hello and ask what I can do. The phone rings. My friend Neela speaks, "I've accidentally entered the I-J tunnel with my bike...I will be late... Sorry I forgot to bring lunch for both of us." I try to calm her down but my stomach does not listen. It growls. I take a deep breath and try to concentrate on the arrangements. Three other men appear on the scene. With one of them, Stan, I begin to shift the musical instruments that are lying everywhere. It is a music studio rented out for the first Sunday of each month. We prepare its walls (used to the sound of music) for silence. We push the instruments aside, make space and cover the most colorful ones with long white sheets to prevent distractions. One hall room is being prepared to become the 'Meditation Hall'. The other will act as the 'resting room'. In the meditation hall, we are busy setting up the flat square cushions on the floor. Dark blue cushions in neat rows for the women on the right side and light blue cushions for men to the left. In the front, a higher seat with a white sheet is reserved for the 'assistant teacher' facing the 'students'. A few chairs for those who prefer not to *sit* on the floor. A lamp stands by the instructor's seat with a CD player. Two flat cushions lie on both sides. These are for the (assistant) teacher's assistants, the 'managers'. In the 'resting room', a wide curtain divides the men's area from the women. Each section has a row of chairs and a tea table with mugs, tea, sugar cubes and washing bowls. Lotte comes in with a bunch of sheets. We hang them on different places. 'One-day vipassana meditation course' hangs on the front door. The day schedule hangs on the wall (Table 1). Women and men are arriving, half drenched in the rain, to register their names and *sit*. The 'managers', one woman and one man, decide who takes care of the tea and who strikes the gong to let everyone know that it is time. *Sitting* begins at ten. [Daylong vipassana in Amsterdam, Field note, June 5, 2011]

The Vipassana Stichting (Foundation)² in the Netherlands organizes daylong *sittings* for 'old students' in the city of Amsterdam. On the first Sunday of each month, from ten in the morning until five in the evening, women and men come together and *sit* in silence. I joined them in the beginning of this year and soon became a part of the core group that helped in the set up. I came to know that group *sittings* also happened

¹ The river IJ (formerly a bay, now reclaimed from the sea) is Amsterdam's waterfront. The city grew up on its bank and sank, only to rise again (Mak 2001).

² See appendix 1 for a brief history of the vipassana organization in the Netherlands.

during the week, on Mondays and Wednesdays, in two places of Amsterdam, the city where I lived.

Table 1: One day course schedule		
VIPASSANA		
9:30 - 10:00	Registratie	Registration
10:00 - 11:00	Anapana instructive	Anapana instruction
11:00 – 12:00	Groep sitting	Group session
12:00 – 13:00	Vipassana instructies	Vipassana instruction
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch and interviews	Lunch and interviews
13:30 – 13:45	Interviews met de assistant leraar (Interviews with the assistant teacher)	
14:00 – 15:00	Meditatie	Meditation
15:00 – 16:00	Groep sitting	Group session
16:05 – 17:00	Metta Bhavna en Lezing	Metta Bhavna and Discourses
17:00 – 17:30	Opruimen	Clean up
Mogen alle wezens gelukkig zijn! (May all beings be happy!)		

In this daylong *sitting* more women than men came to *sit*. The organizers tell me that it has been a consistent pattern that women attend the day courses in greater numbers compared to men. I steal a long, sharp glance at the list of on-site registration to find out what is happening there. It seems that forty women had been on the list but only twenty-seven of them came. Eleven of the fourteen men appeared for the course. From the list, it is difficult to say where they are coming from and who is who. They are coming from all over the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Flevoland, Gelderland, Noord Holland, Utrecht, Zeeland, and Zuid Holland. I do not even know where some of these places are. It is also difficult to say if they are all Dutch citizens or simply visitors in Amsterdam or the Netherlands. I notice two women of color, Neela and a Thai woman as visible Asians. In their 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s. One woman has snow-white hair. She must be in her seventies. She needs a chair to *sit*. One woman is pregnant but she prefers to *sit* on the flat cushion on the floor. The men are mostly Dutch. I begin to draw this conclusion from their last names. The men are younger, many in their twenties and a few in their 40s and 50s. I am familiar with some of the women (specially the organizers).

The men and women now separate and take their seats in the ‘resting room’. The organizers provide tea and coffee. The practitioners bring their own vegetarian lunch and meditation accessories, e.g., smaller cushions, blankets, shawls, kneeling stools etc. Some are already quiet and the others engage in hushed chats. The silence will break soon.

A minute before ten o'clock the gong rings. Slowly the men stand in a file and enter the meditation hall. The instructor is already there, sitting with her eyes closed. The women also stand in a file and one by one takes their place in the hall on the right side. I do not see Annelies. I find Claudia sitting on the front row. I sit a few places beside her. Neela has finally made it. She takes a seat at one of the back rows. The snow-white haired woman sits quietly on a chair. The rest of us use the smaller cushions and blankets. *Sitting* begins.

The *sitting* techniques vary. The most common position is the cross-legged (known as the Burmese position) and *sitting* on the knees (the kneeling position), followed by the half-lotus position. I shift from the cross-legged to the half-lotus position. I wonder if anyone in the hall is *sitting* in a full-lotus position (Figure 1). It is difficult without training (as in yoga *asana*, the specific body postures).



Cross-legged (Burmese position): Commonly adopted posture



Kneeling position with a cushion (some use a stool)



Half-lotus position

Full-lotus position

Figure 1: Various *sitting* postures in vipassana³

³ Taking photographs was not possible during the *sittings* in Amsterdam. I took note of the various postures and searched for corresponding images in the internet using <http://image.google.com>. The *sitting* postures in vipassana are similar to the images I found in other meditation related blogs and websites and inserted in this text (Synbuddhismus 2010; Die Spirituelle Dimension 2010; Buddha Dharma Education Association, 2011).

The female manager is the last one to enter the hall and she closes the door softly behind her. The instructor dims the lamp beside her and turns on the CD. A deep sonorous male voice resonates with the silence of the hall. *Sitting* continues.

The day course ends with the helpers taking off the white sheets, returning the flat cushions to the storage space, and making the place look like the way it did before. Stan helps me put back the musical instruments to their original arrangements. There is a *Dana* box (donation) in front of the exit. Most of the participants put in folded notes of ten, twenty Euros. Some pay by credit cards. I put in a five-Euro note. I notice that even the ‘assistant teacher’ donates. I wonder how the vipassana economy⁴ runs and sustains itself.

The first daylong *sitting* I attended was in January this year. It is only in June that I follow the procedures with the dual intention of a scholar-practitioner⁵. Frequent trips to the toilets (where I jotted down keywords) affect my *sitting* practice in the one-day course. Because, once the *sitting* starts, no one must speak, read, write, or receive phone calls⁶. So I hide what I do, juggling the *sitting* with the ‘forbidden’ recording of the event in my quiet corner in the toilet. This prevents me to be on time and I am usually the last student to enter the meditation hall, way past the gong rings. The organizers, fortunately, are patient with my frequent delays.

But enough descriptions for now. We have a glimpse of the *sitting*, or rather, the *context* – of what is exterior to it. Before I move towards the interior of the *sitting* – the techniques and the ‘experience-near’ accounts – there are conventions to follow. In the next chapter, I shift from an ‘experience-near’ description of the *sitting* practice in its social universe to the formulation of vipassana meditation as a research problem. To *situate* the practice with the help of texts that circulate in the academic world and address questions such as, *why vipassana? why is it important to know?*

⁴ *Dana* (voluntary donation) is collected at the end of the residential and daylong courses. The weekly group sittings are offered free of charge. ‘Old students’ often offer donations. The neighbouring vipassana organizations (in other European countries) help each other out. The organization also takes bank loans if needed.

⁵ I use the term, *scholar-practitioner*, to refer to the dual engagement with the subject matter of one’s research, as a critical scholar and an active practitioner of what one studies. Others who did the same include M. Pagis (vipassana), M. Singleton (yoga), J.K. Samudra (*silat* martial art) and B.R. Smith (yoga). Samudra (2008) and Smith (2007) specifically focus on how their practice influence research and vice versa.

⁶ The participants can speak to the organizers if needed. The organizers talk among themselves to keep things going. Otherwise, *silence* rules.

Chapter Two

Even if [s]he is fond of quoting appropriate texts, the thoughtless [wo] man who does not put them into practice...is like a cowherd counting other people's cows.

(Dhammapada: 19)

Chapter Two

From Nottingham to Pagis: Vipassana as a Research Problem

A Historical Anecdote

Though training in *samadhi*⁷ may take place in a Buddhist context, it is not in itself necessarily Buddhist. It is merely a means, though an exacting and essential one, whereby the student learns, in the words of the Teacher, to "put a ring through the nose of the bull of consciousness," and so harness that wayward will-o'-the-wisp, the faculty of attention. *Panna*, wisdom or insight, is the product of Vipassana, or Buddhist meditation properly so called (Nottingham 1958:2).

This early reference to vipassana meditation dates back to the late fifties. In 1958, Dr. Elizabeth K. Nottingham, an American Professor of Sociology wrote a brief description of vipassana meditation after her visit to U Ba Khin's⁸ International Meditation Centre in post-independent Burma, now Myanmar (Nottingham 1958). Much later, the centre published those seven typed pages on its internet site. We have reasons to be sceptic about this text and its authenticity. However, my concern in looking through this historical text is not so much to cite the contents of what this American scholar said about vipassana but how her comments were placed and to what effects. I read the positioning of this text as symptomatic of an age where 'traditions' can no longer be upheld by their 'traditional' custodians but require approval from their modern counterparts, in this case, a scholar of social science.

Why do I begin to *situate* vipassana meditation with a text the origin and authenticity of which is suspect? Publications in peer-reviewed English-language journals may be considered the most authentic and useful theorization of an empirical phenomenon. However, they are not the only places where texts, especially those relevant to my project, happen. More often than not, vipassana discourses are circulating in the virtual space or other 'authentic' or 'suspect' texts like Nottingham's. Qualification of text depends on where I am sitting: In a vipassana centre or an academic department? At the outset of my quest to find 'authentic' texts on vipassana meditation, I therefore raise the issue how the above-mentioned, dubious, and

⁷ *Samadhi*, according to Nottingham, is "concentration, a mental discipline that has much in common with *yoga*" (1958:2). See appendix 2 for the glossary of vipassana terms.

⁸ Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899-1971) was a lay teacher of vipassana meditation in colonial Burma and S.N. Goenka (1924-) was his student. In 1969, Goenka returned from Myanmar to India to found the vipassana meditation organisation that spread worldwide since the 1980s. *Sayagyi* is a Burmese title that means "respected teacher" (Confalonierie 1999).

accidental text focused my attention on the many uses by the social science scholar and her practice. We experience and write but our productions produce multiple effects. What is at stake for us and our scholarly audience is not necessarily similar to what is at stake for the subjects of our investigation (or, exploration). For me, a student anthropologist, Nottingham's (1958) text is therefore a historical signpost, a reminder, a cautionary note.

What is important for my project is to pay attention to the selections of literature that focus specifically on the practice of contemporary and *secularized* vipassana meditation, the methods and theoretical concepts I find relevant to this focus. In the following sections, I briefly discuss what is known about vipassana and what is important to know to approach the *sitting* body in vipassana, followed by the justification of choosing vipassana as a research problem and its legitimacy as a subject matter of medical anthropology.

What We Already Know

Vipassana meditation (commonly known as vipassana) is a *sitting* practice in silence, following one's breath and body sensations with equanimity, and, cultivating compassion. The official discourse of the vipassana organization draws inspiration from the key figure in Buddhism, Gautama the Buddha. The meditation technique is a modification of the monastic practice of vipassana in Theravada Buddhism and practiced by non-Buddhists (Pagis 2008). This secularised form of vipassana was popularised by the Indian lay teacher S.N. Goenka (1924-) in the tradition of a Burmese lay teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899-1971). One can also practice while walking, eating, lying down or parallel to other activities, alone or in groups. However, vipassana in the Goenka tradition focuses on the *sitting* as the quintessential practice. Following an initial ten-day retreat, known as a residential course, the 'students' are instructed to practice twice daily and encouraged to *sit* with others. Anyone who has participated in a residential course is then considered an 'old student' and has access to the weekly or monthly group sittings and other courses. During the residential courses and everyday life, vipassana practitioners are instructed to follow *sila*, the five moral precepts (abstinence from lying, stealing, killing, sexual misconduct and intoxicants). With the term 'practitioners' I refer to everyone who practices vipassana, i.e., the 'new students' (attending their first ten-day residential course) and the 'old students' (who attended at least one ten-day residential course), the instructors (known as 'assistant teachers' to the master teacher, S.N. Goenka) and the organizers ('old students' with a long history of practicing vipassana). The instructors and the organizers are members of the voluntary vipassana organization in charge of the residential courses, day courses and group sittings in each geographical location.

Since the 1980s, the practice has spread worldwide and more than a hundred centres currently offer vipassana courses⁹. Pagis (2008), an Israeli sociologist, has conducted the first multi-sited ethnographic study of the popular practice of vipassana (as taught by Goenka) for her doctoral dissertation. Her pioneering work provides a comprehensive description based on her own experience in meditation centres and interviews with practitioners at their home. Goenka's vipassana has also been investigated by religious studies scholars in Germany (Neubert 2008), Israel (Loss 2010) and sociologists in Britain (Brown and Leledaki 2010) who critically analysed the secular identity of vipassana meditation and the western adoption of such 'eastern movement forms'. Pagis illustrates how the *secularized* vipassana meditation in the Goenka tradition is practiced widely by people who do not identify themselves as Buddhists. Detige (2009) similarly argues that the rejection by the contemporary vipassana movement of the label 'religion' and the refusal to be categorised under 'Buddhism',¹⁰ distanced the contemporary vipassana movement from the regional traditions of Buddhism (for example, the Theravada tradition) and also from the western/orientalist construct of 'religion'.

Systematic reviews of clinical studies have found that vipassana meditation (also known as insight/mindful meditation) reduces stress and cultivates 'mindfulness', a 'nonjudgmental awareness of the present' (Chiesa 2010; Germer, Siegel and Fulton 2005). Some of these clinical studies are criticised for not paying sufficient attention to randomization as well as self-reporting and selection biases. Yet the authors suggest that the practice seems to offer considerable benefits for individuals dealing with substance abuse and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. The practice also seems to increase self-esteem and helps the subjects (without any significant health problem) to develop greater tolerance of common stressors in life.

As a part of qualitative health research, Van der Riet (2010) describes her two and a half days of vipassana practice and how it helps her develop a new relationship with the self while dealing with breast cancer. Although her description of the basic steps in practicing vipassana meditation are quite similar to that of Goenka there are important differences she did not emphasize. Her shorter initiation period and further engagement with a different model of vipassana may be an entirely different practice altogether. It is important that I address this distinction and do not conflate all kinds of vipassana, Buddhist or secular (for example, the 'insight meditation' practiced in Spirit Rock Foundation in North America) as vipassana meditation¹¹. For the purpose of my

⁹ See Dhamma.org (n.d.a) for the full list of centres in different geographical locations.

¹⁰ On June 4, 2011, the BOS (Boeddhistische Omroep Stichting, the Buddhist Broadcasting Foundation) organised the "Change Your Mind Day" in Oosterpark, Amsterdam. Four stalls demonstrated four different types of meditation techniques (including Theravada vipassana) (BOS 2011). The Vipassana Stichting did not participate in this exhibition. The organisation is also not a member of the national association of Buddhist organisations in the Netherlands.

¹¹ See Cook (2010) for a description of monastic vipassana of the Theravada tradition in Thailand and Fronsdal (2002) for secularized traditions of vipassana (insight meditation) in North America.

research, I restrict myself to the vipassana meditation technique popularised by the contemporary global movement led by Goenka.

My effort to find scholarly references to vipassana in the Netherlands produced a limited result. There are Dutch translations of books by practitioners and audiovisual materials on vipassana. A recent work defines vipassana as “insight meditation, part of Theravada Buddhism” [Inzichtsmeditatie, onderdeel van het Theravada boeddhisme] (Kleisen 2010:156). Kleisen is a young documentary filmmaker, journalist and a Buddhist herself. Her work is a collection of short interviews of the young people in the Netherlands who practice a wide variety of Buddhisms. Vipassana meditation is lumped together with other Buddhist practices. I found two unpublished theses on vipassana in Dutch but none of them focuses on the popular practice. Detige (2009) provides a historical overview of different vipassana traditions in the context of modern Buddhism, Goenka tradition being one among many. Karsten (2011) compares Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and the theory of vipassana to argue that both theories focus on the ‘body oriented consciousness’. In their research, Detige and Karsten both depend on textual analysis and secondary literature.

In the next section, I draw from the current theoretical approaches to vipassana and practices of ‘family resemblance’ to formulate the framework of my own research.

Body, Mind and Self: Theoretical Approaches to Vipassana

Pagis (2008) has conducted her fieldwork in Israel and North America. Her main argument hinges on the notion that there is a slow shift in the holistic self-care interest of the practitioners living in post-industrial settings: from a discursive self-reflexivity (e.g., talking cures or psychotherapy) to an increasing interest in embodied practice of self-reflexivity (e.g., yoga, vipassana). She argues that vipassana cultivates ‘embodied self-reflexivity’: instead of engaging in internal conversations (internal chatter), practitioners learn how to reach a new way of relating with their selves by reflecting on their bodies. Following the popular practice of vipassana among selected practitioners in Amsterdam I wished to compare and contrast her findings in another post-industrial setting.

Pagis’ project is firmly placed in classical sociology, investigating “an empirical phenomenon to answer a theoretical question”. The empirical phenomenon is the modern practice of vipassana meditation, a meditation based on Buddhist philosophy. Her theoretical question is anchored in the sociology of the self, asking how sociology can explain processes of self-cultivation, processes that aspire to remove the self from its social contingency and produce a ‘self-dependent self’ (2008:1). In this sociological enterprise, the experiences of practitioners are summarised and theorised to make them accessible to a scholarly audience. The physicality of the practice is indistinct, the sensorial effects unclear. *Self* is constantly evoked at the cost of the problematic of the *body*. In contrast, my proposed project is placed in the experimental trend known as

“sensuous scholarship” in anthropology, whereby I wished to navigate the experiences and practices of vipassana by situating it in the *body* to make it not only *intelligible*, but also *sensible* (Stoller 1997: xviii).

Discussion of the *body* is not fully explored in the current studies on vipassana. When the *body* is discussed it is conflated with *self* (Pagis 2008; Van der Riet 2010), or investigated in special settings and operationalised as ‘mindfulness’ (in clinical studies cited by Chiesa 2010 and Germer, Siegel and Fulton 2005). Pagis’ (2008) interchangeable usage of the terms *body* and *self* obscures the body experience of vipassana. Vipassana instructions talk a lot about the impermanence of self and Pagis (2008) repeatedly invokes the term but does not problematize it enough. *Sitting in vipassana, what can be made intelligible and sensible? Where is the mind that the vipassana instructions talk about? Where is the self that Pagis refers to?*

Pagis (2008) has attended the 10-day retreats, recorded her own experience in a personal diary, and asked questions to her co-participants. Van der Riet (2010) privileges her quest in dealing with breast cancer in her body through a narrative of a fragmented (shortened) vipassana experience. Brown and Leledaki (2010) ask why vipassana (under the blanket term of “Eastern Movement Forms”) is adopted by the Westerners. Fronsdal (2002) asks if ethics was the core of a liberating practice like the vipassana (insight) meditation movement. On the one hand, all these studies offer various ways of approaching vipassana meditation, to talk about *meanings, contexts, and experiences*. The *phenomenological* framework is the usual grid of such analysis.

On the other hand, their descriptions locate the practice either in particular spaces, for example Israel/North America (Pagis), inner life (van der Riet), or ethical-social interactions (Fronsdal). One may question whether it is also productive to frame the site of this practice differently. What would happen if the *body* is conceptualised as the locus of practice? And let the *mind* and the *self* follow? Instead of following the usual engagement with *phenomenological* framework in understanding vipassana, I wish to mobilise a *practice theory* framework to focus on *doing* instead of taking the *being* for granted. Instead of just asking how vipassana is *experienced*, I want to add the question: how vipassana is *done* in practice?

Pagis describes how the popular practice of vipassana varies among its practitioners, but she does not deconstruct the ontology of vipassana. She focuses more on vipassana in the meditation centres, and does not adequately address what vipassana becomes in everyday life. What then is vipassana? Is it enough to say that vipassana is the “modern manifestation” (Pagis 2008: 7) of the “traditional” practice of Vipassana (insight) meditation by Theravada Buddhist monks, practised by non-Buddhists (and Buddhists) in silent retreats of renunciation and embodied reflexivity, aimed at “destabilization of the experience of a permanent, stable self” (p. 7)?

In the current literature, the ontology of vipassana remains unified and taken as matter of fact. What would vipassana be if we investigate its multiple ontologies, “more than one but less than many” (Mol 2002: 55)? Hacking (2002:2) approaches ‘ontology’ in three ways. First, in a “dynamic nominalist” mode to discuss “how our practices of naming interact with the things we name”. Secondly, in a “dialectical realist” mode (“the interactions between what there is (and what comes into being) and our conceptions of it”). Thirdly, to talk about objects (that also include classes, people, ideas and in my case *practice*).

To trace the multiple ontologies, I *frame* vipassana following Hacking and Mol (2002). With this move, the *sitting* body and its corollary practices become the multiple objects of analysis. The *sitting* practices and experiences of the body (or what the body becomes) need to be traced. The practitioners’ conceptions and connections of these practices/experiences with perceived effects need to be explored. My intervention, therefore, is to conduct a *praxiography* of vipassana: an ontological investigation of the vipassana practice in everyday life, privileging the *body* (and let the categories of *mind* and *self* follow) in collecting the “experience-near” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1998) accounts of popular vipassana practice and how such experiences are constituted in practice.

Beyond New Age Religion: Framing Vipassana as a Reflexive Practice of Self-Care

Contemporary meditation practices are (as the sociologists of religion do) framed as ‘new age’ practices, or, ‘secular religion’ (Van Otterloo 1999; Hanegraaff 1999). My point is that the ‘new age’ label in understanding vipassana practice is not productive. This conceptual category does little to illuminate our understanding but fuels our imagination of the perverse practices, group suicides, illicit relationships lumped together under the label of ‘new age’. However, Van Otterloo (1999) also points out that *body* is increasingly at the centre of such practices, “a means to attain a ‘spirituality of the self’” (p. 191). Van der Veer (2007), on the other hand, warns against the naive use of terms like ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ for translating the ‘ancient practices’ of Indian and Chinese origin. He argues that these practices are embedded in the ‘genealogies of modernity’, the participation and interaction of such ‘spiritual’ practices in the ‘secular, modernist cultures’ produces its ‘traditional authenticity’ (p. 317). Neubert (2008) describes the public objection of the vipassana meditation movement against the label of being a ‘religious movement that teaches a certain form of ritual’. He argues that it is not useful to apply the “meta-language terms “ritual” or “religion” to the vipassana practices (or its history) and argues that this ‘polemic differentiation’¹² (rejection of the label of ‘religion’ and ‘rituals’) is a strategy in the “modern” public discourse on religion

¹² Neubert (2008) further postulates that the strategy of such ‘polemic differentiation’ is to avoid being associated with negative connotations of the terms “ritual” and “religion,” for example, irrationality or extreme rigidity. In his opinion, vipassana movement emphasizes on being a ‘scientific’, rational practice that provides a tool for appropriate adaptation to the everyday requirements of modern life.

and ritual. In contrast to the ‘new age’ or ‘religious movement’ framing, following van der Veer (2007), Pagis (2008) and Neubert (2008), I stay close to the technique to consider vipassana meditation as a globalized “technology of the self” (Foucault 1988: 16), a trans-national “technique of the body” (Mauss 1973:70), or simply, a reflexive body practice.

Body practices are formulated as “rituals”, “performances”, and “enactments”. Body is either *read* as analogous to a text, or conceptualised as a *habitus* formed through the culture that is inscribed *on* the body because of embodied practices (Csordas 1993). In his analysis of charismatic healing practices, Csordas (2007) argues in favour of including ‘bodily experiences’. Body is also considered to be *done* through material practices (Mol 2004). How the *body* becomes a contested site of what we *mean*, we *are*, or we *do* is a core debate among the symbolic/interpretive, the phenomenological and practice theories of the body.

There is a growing literature on the anthropology of reflexive body techniques (RBT) that deals with the different translations and articulations of body experiences in narratives and the level of participation by the researchers (Crossley 2005; Samudra 2008; Smith 2007). However, only a few ‘Eastern’ body techniques receive sustained attention by social science scholars, for example, contemporary trans-national yoga (Singleton and Byrne 2008; Singleton 2010). The authors reconstruct yoga as trans-cultural hybrid practices, as reinvented traditions. Singleton’s position as a ‘scholar-practitioner’¹³ informs his analysis of the practice with a more intimate engagement with yoga. Yoga is framed as a widely spread body practice, a traveling technique. Burger (2006), on the other hand, mobilizes the Weberian term ‘salvation good’¹⁴ to argue that modern yoga circulates as a ‘salvation good’ from India to the West in the ‘religious marketplace’, in the ‘situation of global exchange and encounter’. The globalized spread of vipassana seems to follow a somewhat similar trajectory, becoming rapidly popular in post-industrial settings. However, yoga cannot be conflated with vipassana. They are at most body techniques of ‘family resemblance’¹⁵ with considerable differences. Specific research on vipassana meditation therefore adds to the existing academic literature on ‘Eastern’ body techniques.

In transcultural psychology, theorizing the ‘bodily felt’ and ‘discursive level’ of psychotherapeutics involve basic assumptions on the ‘universal aspects of human

¹³ Mark Singleton is a scholar who practiced yoga for more than 15 years.

¹⁴ Burger (2006) explains the Weberian term, “salvation goods”, as “aims (*Heilsziele*) proposed by religions and the means to reach it (*Heilmittel*), [as] factors enabling the explanation and understanding of human actions and social constructions (for sociology), as well as the construction of a comparative understanding of religions (at least their written traditions) according to the underlying world-view they express” (p. 82).

¹⁵ In *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*, Wittgenstein (1953) argues against the essentialist notions of how things are linked (Philipp and Raatzsche 1993: 32). I extend his concept of “family resemblance” to body practices like vipassana meditation and yoga – not to address a common origin but to connect them through the complex, overlapping elements they share – sitting, breathing, and sensing the body among other things.

psychology’ but in practice, culture-specific notions of personhood are frequently elicited and mobilised (Kirmayer 2007: 234-235). Kirmayer argues that each model of psychotherapy depends on certain ‘implicit models of the self’ based on the specific ‘cultural concepts of the person’. The *discursive* level is based on ‘self-reflexive and insightful constructions’ and the *bodily felt meaning* refers to the ‘unconscious and conscious (therapeutic) relationship with the patient’. *Self* is constructed through the *narratives of the self* (Kirmayer 2006). Kirmayer’s specific focus is on the dynamic cultural constructions of selfhood in the context of psychotherapeutics. What happens when a popular practice claims to alleviate ‘suffering’? No longer restricted to a therapeutic encounter or participation in the discursive realm of self-reflexivity – what happens in the silent and embodied sites of vipassana? How is selfhood *done* in this practice? To what effects?

The physiology and neurobiology of body practices investigate the biological material involved in body practices, examining the body we *have*. The clinical studies (such as clinical psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience) operationalize vipassana meditation practices as ‘mindfulness’ to prove/disprove their ‘efficacy’ and ‘effectiveness’. ‘Mindfulness-based therapies’, for example, operate on principles and practices of Buddhistic origin (Germer, Siegel and Fulton 2005). Are these frameworks (social science and medicine) adequate in approaching vipassana? How far do these theoretical approaches take us in exploring a practice that warns against abstractions and disembodied knowledge quests?

Furthermore, vipassana is a low-cost practice of health/well-being in everyday life. An ethnographic study of the *sitting* bodies in vipassana can offer an in-depth understanding of the popular practice, its perceived benefits and unintended effects. In an alternative to disease prevention models, self-care is considered a ‘logical ally’ to health promotion in ‘optimizing healthy related behaviour’ (Dean and Kickbusch 1995). This thesis hopes to add to the current literature on self-care and health promotion by describing how people *do* self-care with vipassana.

Aims and Objectives

My broader aim in this research is to contribute to the anthropology of body and body practices by engaging critically with the issues I raised in the preceding sections. My objective is to follow vipassana, the *sitting* meditation, in Amsterdam, by exploring everyday practices, lived experiences and perceived effects of vipassana among its practitioners. The fieldwork is driven by a set of research questions: a) How is vipassana *done*? b) What is vipassana? What does it become? c) What is it to *sit* in vipassana? What are the experiences? d) What are the effects of practicing vipassana? e) How are these effects linked to the practice? In the next chapter, I detail the methodology of my research – the instruments, informants, location, analytical procedure and ethical issues – with which I try to answer these research questions.

Chapter Three

Words can only describe sensations, not experience it.

(Parks 2010: 179)

Chapter Three

My People, My Methods

During the six-week period of fieldwork, I conducted an exploratory focused ethnography based on twelve interactive in-depth interviews, many informal conversations, two key informant interviews, participant observation of eight group *sittings* and one monthly daylong course, qualitative content analysis of two audiovisual materials, review of a few vipassana-related publications and auto-ethnographic narratives from a personal diary recording my own practice and experience of vipassana.

I detailed my research questions into field observation items and interview inquiries. I asked the vipassana practitioners a few questions. For example, How do you practice vipassana? What happens when you *sit*? What are the *effects* of vipassana in your daily life? How do you link these *effects* to the *sitting* practice? What is vipassana to you? ¹⁶

However, I could not (re) construct vipassana only from the narratives of its practitioners. Vipassana happened somewhere, in a place, at a certain time. Therefore, I traversed the multiple spaces where the *sittings* took place in the course of everyday life. I restricted my travel plans to the everyday sites of vipassana practice, spaces that are more familiar and perhaps closer to where the practitioners live, work or study. The encounters and engagements happened with practitioners who are visitors to Amsterdam (Andrea and Ananya), international student (Paul) and visiting scholar (Neela). Some were Dutch citizens (Adam, Annelies, Hans, Marten, Pieter, and Ruben), or became one (Angel), and others were European Union citizens who lived in the city for years (Claudia, Jannet, Oscar). *My people* included Asians (Ananya and Neela), Africans (Angel) and Europeans; men and women; students and professionals. I tape-recorded each interview and *sat* with everyone except Angel.

Regarding the field observations, I attended daylong *sittings* in the city and I moved around to join the weekly group *sittings*, on Mondays and Wednesdays. I also *sat* at home, alone, and elsewhere with friends and selected informants. In the group *sittings*, my intentions quadrupled. First, I *sat* for myself and enjoyed doing vipassana with fellow practitioners. Second, I watched what happened in these places with my eyes and ears (and other senses) open. Third and more importantly, I made contacts, selected and approached willing informants for research. Finally, I expanded my social universe in the city and made friends. I used 'friendship as method' (Tillmann-Healy 2003).

¹⁶ See appendix 3 for the full list of methods and research instruments.

How to Investigate the Sitting Body in Vipassana?

Methodologically, I was inspired by Kleinman and Kleinman's (1998) "experience-near ethnography" to stay close to the lived and embodied experiences of the practitioners. In my theoretical approach, I privileged *ontology* and *praxis* with a *praxiography* (Mol 2002). It is one challenge to incorporate the micro-practices with the life-stories of practitioners. Quite another challenge to disentangle the social processes and contingent spaces where the practices happened. Given the limited scope of the project I could not attempt an ethnography of the *sitting* body. My research was an ethnographic study mobilising a phenomenological and 'practice theory' approach to describe and analyse what I saw, heard, did and experienced with the practices and practitioners of vipassana.

But how to mobilise methods appropriately? Fleischman (1991), a psychiatrist and vipassana practitioner, argues for a self-referential method. However, it is not sufficient to appease the scholarly audience with my navel-gazing descriptions. My thesis had to employ more rigour and additional *valid* methods. In his analysis of Ashtanga Yoga, Smith (2007) argues that the researcher's own experience and practice must be juxtaposed with other kinds of data collected through other methods, i.e., observations and discussions with other practitioners. He quotes Favret-Saada (1980: 22) to emphasize that there is "no other solution but to practice ... oneself, to become one's own informant, to penetrate one's own amnesia, and try to make explicit what one finds unstateable in oneself".

Auto-ethnographical data, no doubt, adds useful insights to the research enterprise. But does it resolve the dilemma of how to study what somebody else experiences? The problem with such phenomenological assertion is that it assumes a certain *universality of experience*, as if this kind of 'unstateability' is always shared. What if the 'unstateable in oneself' is different for every one? What happens when one informant is able to state what may be 'unstateable' for others? Using my own experience of the practice provided clues to understanding the 'unstateable' in others.

Therefore, following Smith (2007), van der Riet (2010), and Pagis (2008) I considered a close description of my *sitting* experiences useful. Pagis (2008) has done in-depth interviews, follow-up conversations, and participant observation – the standard methods of ethnographic investigation. I used them as well. However, what I missed in Pagis' (2008) otherwise pioneering work on vipassana meditation is that her engagement with the other practitioners sounded distant. This distancing probably came from the traditional question-answer (asking and hearing) or even participation-observation (seeing and hearing) modes that are sensorially limited, embedded in the assumed subject-object duality. My intervention was to engage in what Kersenboom (2001) called 'participant participation' extending the observation from the ears and eyes to other senses, other gestures and postures, emphasizing practice: "No meaning,

no authority without practice. No myth comes true without its rite. Participant participation as a faculty of the researcher, the faculty of his or her voice, constitutes such a rite” (p. 4). I decided to fully participate: to *sit* with the practitioners, not only as a way to establish rapport but also as a method more rigorous.

About my private *sittings*, occasionally I recorded the experiences. It was not possible to do that every day. First, it was during the last few weeks that my *sittings* became regular and I *sat* every day. Second, the process of recalling what happened during each *sitting* often interfered with the immediate effects of the *sitting*. *Sitting* was a personal practice and my aims in *doing* it did not always coincide with the research objectives.

I also listened to the audio CD instructions, went through the contents of vipassana related websites, and read the vipassana books that circulated among ‘my people’. They led me, not only through the memory-maze of their focused life histories, but also through the spaces, objects, sounds, texts, media and additional practices that their lives are enmeshed with.

Friendship as Method

I started *befriending* vipassana practitioners before I began the formal fieldwork. For research, I mobilized purposive techniques, snowball and convenience sampling to select the practitioners. I found in my selection novices/newcomers, serious and long-term practitioners, the experts (instructors) and organizers, experimenters, drop-outs, and a research student of vipassana. As I said, I chose ‘friendship as method’ (Tillmann-Healy 2003) but my methods also fostered friendship. Some of my informants were friends before, like Ananya, Andrea and Neela. Some become close friends in the process, for example, Jannet. Ananya and Andrea were my friends and newcomers to vipassana. They stayed in my house and our conversations ranged from taped interviews to informal conversations (and *sitting* together), followed up through e-mails and google chats. Jannet and Neela lived in Amsterdam. I met them repeatedly over dinner, lunch and sometimes breakfast.

The rest of ‘my people’ were those whom I met frequently in the group sittings and requested for a formal interview. Especially with the male practitioners, friendship did not happen. Some became close acquaintances like Hans. He had studied anthropology. I borrowed books from him and he sent me articles. We *sat* and talked in his house followed by dinner. When I spread the word (“I am looking for people to talk about vipassana”) a few practitioners took initiative to find more people. In my attempt to talk to the men about vipassana I wrote to John. He is the boyfriend of a friend of Ananya (they met each other in a ten-day residential vipassana course). I got an enthusiastic e-mail from Oscar and I met him for the first time near the Dam square. He

later invited me to his house. *Sitting* together and research happened with dinner. Through him, I met Marten. I interviewed him in his apartment.

Claudia, Paul and Adam were frequent participants of the group *sittings*. Access to them was easy. We had already been familiar with each other in the shared silence of our *sittings* and the brief chats that preceded or followed the *sitting*. Claudia invited me for breakfast. We began the day with *sitting*, then ate and continued talking. Paul came to my house and we *sat* over coffee. Appointments with Adam took a long time to work out. One of the few mistakes that I made was to interview Adam in the instructor's place after the group *sit*. This was a wrong choice of place but I learned a few things. For example, how the place (instructor's house) inhibited Adam from talking freely about past meditation practices and other techniques¹⁷.

The initial (and only) conversation with Angel filled me with sadness. I met Angel in her house before she left Amsterdam for a holiday in Germany. She was the only 'drop-out' I could find. After more than twenty years of *sitting*, she broke off with vipassana and now practiced her own, and more flexible technique of meditation. In the course of my fieldwork, I met a fellow student, another vipassana scholar, Ruben. After a group *sitting*, we exchanged notes on our research object (vipassana meditation) and respective disciplines (philosophy and medical anthropology). I followed this up with him later in my house. That discussion led to more questions, contradictions and dilemmas.

A Note on Gate-Keepers

The gate-keepers and key-informants are the instructors and organizers of vipassana *sittings*. The 'assistant teachers'(AT) are serious and long-term meditators, having proved themselves through successful completion of many residential courses (ten-day and longer), voluntary service to the daily administration of the organization, regular daily practice, adherence to the five moral precepts (*sila*), and *no* engagement with other meditation or energy-based techniques¹⁸. The founder (S.N.Goenka) of vipassana organizations endorses his 'assistant teachers' to use his taped instructions and teach the vipassana techniques in the Netherlands (as elsewhere in the rest of the world). I interviewed Pieter, an 'assistant teacher', in his house followed by a group *sitting*. I also interviewed Annelies, a serious meditator with long-term engagement with the organization, before a group *sitting*.

¹⁷ Vipassana instruction is non-equivocal about this. Practitioners are advised *not* to practice any other meditation technique except vipassana. But all kinds of sports, physical exercise and yoga are considered beneficial.

¹⁸ Pieter describes three kinds of *competing* techniques, a) physical, b) meditation, and c) 'energy-field' techniques, for example, Reiki healing. Vipassana students should avoid other meditation and energy-field techniques (Interview June 27, 2011). Claudia also excluded Qi-gong practices.

Locality in a Transnational Practice: The Question of Space

The quintessential space of vipassana meditation for many of my informants is the nearest residential centre (*Dhamma Pajjota*) in Belgium, right across the border with the Netherlands. Or, at least, the rented space in the Netherlands where twice a year, ten-day residential courses are organized. During conversations, practitioners made frequent references to the residential centers where each practitioner went through the *initiation rite* of the first (and subsequent) ten-day courses, not just in the Netherlands or in nearby Belgium but in the rest of the world¹⁹. But my aim was follow vipassana in everyday life. I decided to stick to the *sites* of the *sittings* closer to this life - the weekly and monthly gatherings in the city, and not the isolated silent retreats away from home. I also did not dwell too much on *sittings* that happened in other places or in other times unless the practitioners considered it important. Following the 'true' aim of the *sitting* technique, I tried to stay in the present, in time and space.

The geographical location of my research enterprise was Amsterdam but my research informants were not necessarily Dutch. I *sat* and talked with the vipassana instructors and practitioners irrespective of their nationality/ethnicity. In choosing the location or informants, my aim was not to delineate the *cultural contexts of vipassana* by situating it in a particular setting among a group of practitioners of certain origin. My objective was to situate *vipassana in the site (s) of practice*, to investigate what it is to *sit/breathe* in vipassana and *sense* the body (mind and self), and to what effects.

I myself had heard about vipassana in Dhaka, got my instructions in a centre by the river Ganges in West Bengal and found its practitioners in Amsterdam. Vipassana is a travelling technique and I considered its sites as "moving target[s]" (Kirmayer 2006:138) in our "runaway world" (Giddens 2000:13). Amsterdam or Dhaka, for my inquiry, it mattered more where bodies and their practices went, not where they came from. If there was a culture involved, it was the transnational body *culture* of vipassana, shared by its inhabitants - the multivocal, multipraxis practitioners of multiple origins.

Data Analysis

After completing fieldwork, I organised and coded the transcribed data manually. The analysis followed an iterative process. First, I used a couple of a-priori master codes and sub-codes to label sections of texts. For example, daily practice, experience, body, mind, effects, reasons for vipassana etc. I formulated these initial

¹⁹ My informants/fellow practitioners *sat* in the residential centres and group sittings in different parts of the world, in South and South-East Asia (Gujarat, Maharashtra and West Bengal in India; Bangkok, Thailand), Pacific region (New Zealand), Europe (Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain), and Africa.

codes from my research questions. Later I combed the data to look for grounded codes that emerged from the text. For example, *sila* (moral precept) and self are two codes that I did not include in my initial coding of the text. I revised my master codes accordingly and compiled the selected texts under the new master codes and sub-codes. I compared and contrasted the interview narratives as well as triangulated these narratives with observation records, informal conversations, the audio transcripts and excerpts from my personal diary. In several drafts of the thesis, I shifted and re-organized the data, went back and forth between the text and the transcripts/observations.

Emerging Themes

Through the iterative process of analysis, several themes emerged. I connected them by mobilising the relevant theoretical notions to come up with the thesis arguments. Through a detailed analysis of the reflexive technique (s) of vipassana what gradually emerged is that the technique (s) involve (s) simultaneous (re) construction of not only the body but also the mind. Although my initial research questions focused on 'body practice' and 'bodily experience' my informants persistently illustrated how the practice is mobilized to deconstruct the notion of a former 'self' into the reconfiguration of personhood, a 'new' self. A closer investigation of the multiple effects of vipassana illustrated the intended as well as the unintended effects. In addition, how the practitioners linked these effects to practice/experience offered useful ways to critically examine the definitions and roles of 'evidence' in understanding *salutogenic* practices. During the analysis, I consistently faced the epistemological dilemma of understanding an embodied practice (that privileges *praxis*), with the social science tools (that emphasize abstracted knowledge).

Ethical Considerations

I briefly explained the aim of my research before taking verbal informed consent from my informants. I used pseudonyms consistently to maintain confidentiality. I also delinked data from the identity and changed some factual details to keep the anonymity of each informant. I conducted each joint sitting and interview in the home of the practitioner or my own where privacy was ensured. For participant observation in the group and monthly sittings, I had earlier informed the organizers. During the informal conversations, I frequently reminded the practitioners that our discussions were part of the research.

It was important to share my practice and experiences with my informants. However, I was careful not to influence their narratives with my accounts. To minimize such influence, I shared my experience only towards the end of each interview and briefly. Building friendship created a bond of trust through which I hoped to gain more insight into the everyday practices and experiences of my informants. However, the stakes of friendship in research are high and the demands can be intense (Tillmann-Healy 2003). Mobilising friendship as a methodological approach often created a

tension of obligation between my position as a friend and as a researcher. A few informants asked for the final draft of this thesis to comment on how I used their narratives and suggested changes. I exchanged several e-mails to ensure that I addressed their concerns adequately. I made efforts to make this tension a creative and productive one, making my moves explicit and documenting what happened in the process of building such friendships and how this process influenced my data.

A Note on Self-Reflexivity

In the wake of a life crisis, I registered for a ten-day residential course of vipassana meditation in India last year. My personal interest in vipassana resonated with the anthropological interest in body and body practices. I was aware that sharing the experience of vipassana with the informants could have positive as well as negative effects in research (Mogendorff 2007). This proved true. On the one hand, I established contact with my informants with considerable ease. No one questioned my participation in the group sittings or felt suspicious about my presence. My practice improved considerably. I learned how to *sit* straight and regularly. On the other hand, the epistemological challenge was to keep the critical distance necessary to create an intersubjective but rigorous account of vipassana. I did not intend to make this thesis a propaganda tool for vipassana meditation. I also made efforts to stay close to the practice/experience as they happened. My anxiety about how the gatekeepers would treat this thesis caused some disturbances. Eventually I learned to let them go. I write this section to be explicit about my personal interest in the topic and a few challenges I faced in the course of fieldwork.

Chapter Four

Mind: Hullo! Where have you sprung from?

Body: What – you again? I am Body; you can call me Soma if you like. Who are you?

Mind: Call me Psyche – Psyche–Soma.

Body: Soma–Psyche

Mind: We must be related

Body: Never – not if I can help it.

Mind: Oh, come. Not as bad as that, is it?

(Bion, 1979, p. 433)

Chapter Four

Breathe, Observe, Forgive

The Reflexive Techniques in *Sitting*

Catching the Butterfly [Breath]

I close my eyes and look for my breath. Where is it? My focus immediately shifts to my navel, in the belly. It is easier to track my breathing in the belly. I sense the belly is going up when I breathe in. It goes down when I breathe out. No wonder they call meditation ‘navel-gazing’ [smile]. I cannot sense the touch of my breath. I breathe forcefully and push myself to find my breath. Suddenly I remember the story about *catching the butterfly* (“If you run after the butterfly, you will never catch it. Sit still and the butterfly might just sit on your head”). That is a good thought [smile again]. I adjust the folded pillow under my tailbone, straighten my back and head, trying hard not to make them rigid, gently cup my knees with my palms and *sit* still. My eyes are closed. Looking for my breath feels like following a butterfly. It runs here and there somewhere in my body. I remember a faint voice, “Be gentle with yourself. Stop pushing so hard!” I stop. Suddenly there is a rush of warmth at the edge of my nostrils. The butterfly breath sits on the small dip on my upper lip. I am excited and happy, like a child. [Excerpt from personal diary, June 20, 2011]

Climbing the [Body] Mountain

Three weeks earlier, I was on holidays in Morocco. It was a tough mountain tour. Climbing thousands of meters...[Vipassana was] just as stressful...like climbing the mountain...following steps...just go...just go....don't think. [Claudia described her initial struggle in doing vipassana, Interview in her house, June 4, 2011]

Energy Flowing Out

Metta is energy. I focus on the energy in my body. I try to let it flow out of my body... positive energy flow out into the world. [Paul described how it feels to generate compassion, Interview excerpt, May 19, 2011]

Before my fieldwork, I assumed that *body* must be the foremost site of vipassana practice. It turned out that “*body* [in vipassana] is just a tool to *purify the mind*” (Pieter and Adam). In other words, vipassana is considered a “technique of

disciplining the *mind* (using the *body*)” (Marten). This is what I heard repeatedly and it reminded me of the official discourse of vipassana. I probed deeper to find out that opinions were sometimes divided among the practitioners, between the experts (instructors), long-term meditators and the novices. My initial question, how vipassana is *done*, became more specific and closer to the practice. I asked them: What is vipassana? How do you practice vipassana? What is the *site* of the practice? What are its techniques? These descriptive questions led me to the analytical question: How are *body* and *mind done* in vipassana? In this chapter, I attempt tentative answers to these questions.

Mauss (1973) considers *sitting* among the other ‘techniques of rest’ as opposed to the ‘techniques of activity’. He writes, “Rest can be perfect rest or a mere suspension of activity: lying down, sitting, squatting etc” (1973: 81). The body, à la Mauss, is the “first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means” (1973:75). I argue that *sitting* can also be a ‘technique of *intense* activity’, and, thereby turns into a ‘reflexive technique of the body’ (following the coinage by Crossley 2005). Anthropologists of the body have questioned the given, *naturalness* of the body. Body is not just an object or means that we *have* or treat as a symbol and *read* as a meaning producing substance. According to certain ‘practice theories’, the body is also *done*, performed and enacted (Mol 2002, 2004).

However, the practice theorists of the body have not paid much attention to how the mind is *done*, performed and enacted. My research on this particular kind of *sitting* offers this opportunity. Vipassana meditation is not just a ‘reflexive technique of the body’ (and technique of activity) that involves *doing* the body. The practice also involves *doing* the mind. The sensuous description of the *sitting* body-mind, that my informants (and I) *do* in every *sitting* (alone or together) illustrate how body-mind is indeed *done* in this context. But before we mobilise theoretical categories, let us engage with the technique (s) of vipassana. How is vipassana *done*? How do practitioners practice it? What happens when they *do* vipassana?

The Sound of Silence

Vipassana meditation in the Goenka tradition emphasizes three basic techniques known in *Pali* language as *ānāpāna-sati* (awareness of respiration), *vipassanā-bhāvanā* (the systematic development of insight through the meditation technique of observing the reality of oneself by observing sensations within the body) and *mettā-bhāvanā* (the systematic cultivation of *mettā*, i.e., selfless love and goodwill) (Hart 1987: 159, 161, 164).

In vipassana, *sitting* begins with *listening* to the voice of the teacher, S.N. Goenka. The simultaneous act of *listening* and *sitting* continues in the shared space of group *sittings* and daylong courses and the private space of individual *sittings*. In the

ten-day initiation course and all organized public *sittings*, the instructors play the taped instructions from an audio CD and manage the schedule. In daily life, not all practitioners play the CD for their daily sitting but they remember the instructions.

In this section, I present excerpts from two audio CD instructions for an hour of vipassana *sitting* in daily life. First, a brief version from the CD that Claudia gave me. This has minimal instructions with long pause of silence in between. I add to that excerpts from a detailed version I found in the CD I bought last year after my first ten-day course in *Dhamma Ganga* (West Bengal, India). I play this CD to guide my own practice. My informants use other CDs. At times, they like to *sit* in complete silence, closing doors and shutters, drawing curtains, switching off televisions and cell phones, taking out the wires of the house phones. For some, the voice of the teacher breaks the silence they consider to be a prerequisite for the *sitting*. They also plan their *sittings*. For some, the daily *sittings* are non-negotiable. In most of their apartments I noticed a permanent cushion in one corner of the room with a smaller cushion on top of it with a blanket around it. These objects were crumpled in particular configurations that came with the weight of the *sitting* body every day. For others, *sitting* was occasionally cancelled for the weekend or when there was a visitor in the house. For those who lived with companions, the daily *sitting* hour was spent in a separate room or *sitting* with their companion (when the companion was also a practitioner) in the same room. The practitioners tried to reduce interferences and distractions in many different ways. With more or less success private space and silence was managed.

What about the duration of *sitting*? Often, as in my case, the hour was not an hour but half of it, or forty-five minutes, cut short by thoughts and research plans. For my informants, it also varied. *Sitting* through the hour seemed longer at times and at other times less so. Most practitioners told me, “Each *sitting* is different”. How is it possible to take account of the *sitting* that is different, each time?

I was perplexed by this question. Then I realized that although the *sitting* could be different each time, the instruction was not. There are many versions of audio instructions but they all have a defined structure that is *not* different, each time. The day course and longer residential courses used an elaborate version of this structured instruction. The longer versions are not publicly distributed, and I used what *is* available. Each time I turned on the audio CD there was a moment of silence. Then came a voice:

[A Hindi chant²⁰ is repeated three times and ends with a pause]

Goenka begins to speak to the students in English. The voice continues:

²⁰ See appendix 4a for the full transcript and English translation.

[***anapana***]

Start with the awareness of respiration.

Awareness of incoming breath, outgoing breath.

The awareness of sensation on the area below the nostrils, above the upper lip.

Remain very alert, very attentive...

[The audio CD runs for about ten minutes for *anapana* during each hour of sitting]

To calm down the mind, practice *anapana*...

Observe the incoming breath as incoming breath, the outgoing breath as outgoing breath...As it comes in naturally, as it goes out naturally.

[A long pause]

[***vipassana***]

Now start practicing *vipassana*. Keep moving...From head to feet, from feet to head...Whatever sensations you may experience on the way, keep on understanding the characteristic of every sensation. The characteristic of every sensation is – *anicca*...impermanence...

[pause]

[In another audio CD, a detailed instruction on *vipassana*]

Start on the top of the head and keep moving down...to the tips of the toes. Then from the tips of the toes to the top of the head. Keep on moving in both directions and see that you pass your attention through each and every part of the body, feeling different sensations on the way and maintaining perfect equanimity...with the understanding of the law of impermanence: *anicca*...Don't give any evaluation to the sensations. Otherwise there is a danger of you generating *sankharas* of craving or aversion. You have to come out of this mad habit pattern. No more craving, no more aversion...

The entire physical structure, the entire mental structure and all the resultant *vedana* - sensations because of the contact of the two [the physical and the mental structure]. The sensations that arise because of the contact of mind and matter. All these are

impermanent...Keep on understanding this reality at the experiential level. Keep on strengthening your *panna*. Keep on strengthening your wisdom of the law of impermanence. Keep on strengthening your equanimity...

[pause]

[A Pali chant²¹ is repeated three times]

[*metta bhavana*]

We shall now practice *metta bhavana* for a few minutes. You may relax yourself and practice *metta bhavana* for a few minutes.

[pause]

May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be liberated...from all their miseries, all their bondages, all their *sankharas*. May all enjoy peace and harmony...

Be happy, be peaceful, be liberated...

Bhabatu sabba mangalam

[repeated three times]

Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!

[Voice instruction ends with chanting]

The Technique (s) of Vipassana

After *sitting* and *listening*, the practitioners follow the breath (anapana), observe the body sensations (vipassana) and cultivate compassion through forgiveness (*metta bhavana*). They follow the techniques step-by-step. Obviously, vipassana meditation is a *sitting* technique, of the body, in rest and activity (as stated above). The practitioners describe it also as a 'technique of the mind'. Pagis (2009), following Mead (1934) and

²¹ See appendix 4b for the full transcript and English translation.

Merleau-Ponty (2002)²², calls it a practice of 'embodied self-reflexivity'. Following Crossley (2005), I frame it as a 'reflexive technique of the body and mind'.

In the first chapter, I briefly described the multiple ways *sitting* is enacted in vipassana meditation: alone, alone together, in the group sittings with a small number of people, or in a more formalized one-day course with a large number of people who are mostly strangers to each other. The limitation of my text is that it does not offer the audience a glimpse into the residential courses. Yet this is where the vipassana practitioners were initiated. The place where they were instructed to return at least once a year, if not more. During the residential courses, the five *sila* (moral precepts) are rigorously applied. When the participants return to everyday life, there is a thread of continuity in daily life by practicing it every day and attending weekly group sittings and monthly day courses. Some hold on to it, some do not. Most practitioners prefer vipassana as a private practice and do not consider themselves as part of a closed community.

Practices/Practitioners: The Novices, Experts, Experimenters and Drop-outs

I asked the practitioners to describe their practices and experiences. Novices and experts differed, for obvious reasons. The newcomers were very enthusiastic to talk about it and the experts, specially the instructors kept insisting on the *practice* and discouraged talking about *experience*. My friend Jannet (whose practice is irregular) said, "It is because the practice is still new and fresh [for the novice]. For those who have done it for years, it is routine. Maybe they are not so excited to talk about it!"

The novices: Andrea, Ananya, Neela, Oscar and me – we are newcomers to the practice. Ananya did her first ten-day course last December, Andrea and Oscar in March this year. Although I did my first course last year, I am still learning. Oscar is a daily *sitter*. Andrea *sits* several times during the week. Ananya occasionally *sits*. I *sit* at least once during the day. Neela's initiation course was about five years ago but she has not been a regular *sitter*. Vipassana is not a daily practice for her. In the last five years, she did not repeat the advisable yearly course. In daily life, her practice focuses

²² Mead (1934) separates self and body to define self-reflexivity as a discursive act, an "internal conversation". He argues that the immediacy of experience is the first semiotic act (p. 135). Merleau-Ponty (2002:432) on the other hand argues for a pre-objective (not pre-cultural) somatic self that is in contact with direct experience, "a being which immediately recognizes itself". Following Merleau-Ponty, Pagis (2008) considers the somatic self as a non-verbal and embodied self-consciousness. She resolves her dilemma with Mead's *discursive* self-reflexivity, the primacy of language, by arguing that the immediate experience of the "I" is a different self-awareness, a somatic one, which she calls an *embodied* self-reflexivity (pp.112-115). She presents recent findings from neuroscience to support the phenomenological stance. Pagis is in agreement with Merleau-Ponty's claim that body is a 'natural self' and she argues that the "body is a natural source for information about the self, in order to use it as the main source for conscious self-reflexivity [through] extensive training" (2008:115). Conceptualising body as a 'natural self' makes both *body* and the *self* obscure.

on introspection and practice of compassion taking time away from social engagements.

Experts and serious practitioners: The long-term meditators experienced so many *sittings* that I realized how hard it was to summarize their experiences. We talked mostly about the *sitting* that we just did on the day of the interview. My experience of the joint sitting with the more serious meditators was different than others. I learned to *sit* still for the whole hour because they hardly moved. Adam (five years), Paul (eight years) and Annelies (twelve years) are all serious meditators. Adam hardly missed any group sitting. Paul and Annelies were involved in the organization and *served* in residential courses many times in the past years. Claudia practices twice every day for the last five years. Hans is the 'oldest' practitioner who continued practice for more than fifteen years. These advanced meditators went through many ten-day courses and they are focused to move to the next level, *doing* longer courses in complete silence. Hans completed his 20-day residential course last year and aims higher. Claudia is planning one for next summer. Annelies is doing her first 30-day residential course this August.

The main expert (instructor) did not talk much about his own struggles, but he listened to the struggles of the students and gave advice on how to master the techniques of vipassana. No matter how difficult a question I asked Pieter, he responded with a calm, relaxed smile. He talked about the importance of *sila* as a grounding moral practice that helps the practitioner to meditate. But he kept insisting that one has to do it twice daily and do at least one ten-day course in the year. In response to my question: How do I know if I will get benefit from it? He said: "You will. Keep trying, keep trying!"

The experimenters and drop-out: There are other kinds of practitioners that I met whom I label as either 'experimenters' or 'drop-out'. After prolonged engagement with vipassana, they either left the practice or combined vipassana meditation with other techniques. Vipassana instructors warn the practitioners against mixing techniques. Physical exercise and yoga are permissible, but visualization meditations and 'energy-field' techniques (for example, reiki) are forbidden.

I consider Marten, Ruben, Jannet and myself as the experimenters. This summer, Jannet goes for another (Buddhist) meditation retreat. Vipassana is not enough for her. She yearns for a 'community'. Vipassana is too individualistic for her need to belong. Angel enrolled for a vipassana course in Africa about twenty-two years ago. Two years ago, she stopped and now she practices and teaches her own meditation technique. A filmmaker, sculptress and a 'free-spirit', Angel does not like the rigid structure of vipassana. She gave it up. Ruben found Reiki a powerful technique and now his interest in Reiki is clashing with his focus on vipassana. Marten's interest in meditation in general started with the first ten-day vipassana course. However, after seven years and a leg injury due to prolonged sitting in one of the residential courses,

Marten comes to the conclusion that “vipassana is just one of the meditation techniques”. What he especially likes is the *anapana*. Although he practiced other techniques (for example, yoga and tantra), beginning the day with vipassana meditation is a good start for him.

In the past year, I had practiced Zen and ‘visualization’ meditation. I was not convinced why I should not practice other meditation techniques. What I realize now is that it is important to master one technique before moving on to another. Sticking only to vipassana improved my *sitting* and the many benefits I expected from it. However, these variations in practice against the prohibition raise questions: Do ‘mixing techniques’ work better for some and not for others? How does one integrate vipassana with other meditation technique? Why yoga is permitted and Reiki or Qi-Gong is not? These are important questions but I could not explore them in the limited scope of my fieldwork.

Seeing Things as They Really Are? What is Choiceless Observation²³?

The vipassana theory (*pariyatti*) invites us to a practice (*patipatti*) aimed at “seeing things as they really are”. Their ontological stance comes with the epistemology of ‘embodied reflexivity’, following the body (breath in *anapana* and sensations in *vipassana*). But it does not stop there. In my first reading, if following the breath and body sensations are about ‘seeing things as they really are’ (in this case, the ‘natural’ breath and ‘impermanent’ sensations), *metta* is all about *doing*. Cultivating forgiveness and loving-kindness for all beings is an effort to develop the *parami* (quality) of compassion, of *metta*. “*Metta* is the most metaphysical category in the vipassana teaching” (Claudia). Therefore, not only are we following breath (as it comes in and goes out) and body sensations (as they arise and pass), we are invoking our *feelings*, of a specific kind. A point to note: practitioners are instructed to follow the steps in a particular order. Following the breath, we are to practice concentration and awareness; following the body sensations, awareness and equanimity. Toward the end of each hour of *sitting*, we are supposed to generate compassion.

How do we do that? In the longer discourses, Goenka elaborates that generating *metta* is not always possible unless one has a ‘purified mind’ and is in a state of forgiveness. Therefore *metta* follows the practice of *anapana* and *vipassana* through which concentration, awareness, equanimity prepare the body/mind and enable it to practice compassion (Neela emphasized this point and I recall from my own 10-day course). Goenka’s advice is to retain the ‘good vibration’ of the pleasant body sensations and offer it to all beings as an extension of ‘goodwill’.

²³ Goenka says, “It is a choiceless observation...you are learning to be aware and not react, to feel whatever is happening at the physical level and to maintain equanimity” (Hart 1987: 18).

However, with my second reading of these techniques, I sense there is a lot more going on than just “seeing things as they really are”. Following a particular ‘practice theory’ framework, I interpret these techniques as *doing*, as enactment. The *doing* starts with *sitting* in a certain position, closing one’s eyes in a quiet corner, on a cushion or chair, with or without turning on the audio instruction of Goenka, turning off the cell-phone but setting up an alarm to record time, setting aside an hour (or less) in the daily (or weekly) schedule, and preparing a situation at home (or arriving at the site of group *sit*) to *sit*. Only then the *sitting* begins. One tries not to move and follow the standard instructions: *anapana*, *vipassana*, *metta*. Advanced practitioners usually *sit* still, complete their hourly sitting diligently and get up at the end of the hour. Novices on the other hand are restless. That is understandable. They find reasons not to follow the exact instructions. Sometimes they complete the hour, sometimes they do not.

The question is what this *doing* involves? The body is obviously *done*. Following the breath as it comes in and goes out – where is voluntary action in that? The human body breathes *naturally*. Yet to follow the *natural* breath, one has to *sit* still and make an effort *not* to interfere. This effort to *not* interfere **is** *doing*. Following the body sensations from head to toe and toe to head as they arise and pass, there is ‘intentionality’ in that. Do sensations happen anyway or our focus *makes* them observable or emphasized? Andrea said, “I feel a rush of blood flow in the part of the body where I focus my attention”. Focusing exclusive attention on a particular body part, what does it do?

Listening to the Body/Painting the Body

Andrea described the feeling of body sensations more as ‘listening to the body’ or ‘painting from inside’. The body she was sensing was not just there but the flow of attention that she was spreading step-by-step was sensing/doing and listening/painting at the same time:

It is taking myself into the centre. It is like listening to my self...I had the feeling I am standing in front of a huge canvas and I am painting myself. I was going through my body and feeling [from] inside: oh, there is a sensation! Ah, there is a sensation! Oh, that is interesting! It was like painting myself from inside.
[Interview in my house, May 7, 2011]

Andrea differentiates the sensation felt in vipassana from everyday feelings of sensations. The concentration on each part made her *feel* her body differently. She experiences *change* in her body sensation, in the quality of the sensation. It is a flow of *change* that she embodies in vipassana:

I feel my skin from inside. I feel the sensations of hot and cold and the wind passing...The point for me is to distinguish different parts of the body. That is [different from] the normal feeling of the body. I always feel my body. But [it is] not concentrated, distinguishing different parts...the sensation changes... the quality also changes. [Interview in my house; May 7, 2011]

Pain and pleasure immediately draw our attention to body parts. In sickness, bodily hurt, sex, exercise, or dance and other 'reflexive techniques of body' (Crossley 2005) attention moves to a spot or runs through the body. In *vipassana*, what else happens in the body? Thoughts come and interfere with the practice of body scan, and what does the practitioner do with thoughts?

I follow the thought, but I let the thought go and I come back to the body. Exactly where [the body part] I left...I move [my attention]. I don't remain confined to [one] body part. Parts of pleasure, parts of pain. Whether it's pleasure or pain, I let it go." [Neela explained to me how she struggles with thoughts during *vipassana*. Interview in her house, April 21, 2011].

Body process and body parts are obviously involved. What about the *mind*? In the longer discourses, Goenka calls *vipassana* a "process of purification of the mind". How is the mind purified? A more important question: What is this *mind* that the practitioner is purifying? The informants' responses vary.

Some consider *vipassana* as a 'technique of the mind using the body' (Marten is a clinical psychologist and explains to me how body and mind are connected, how brain is implicated). Adam and Oscar say the same thing. Andrea differs. She tells me that *vipassana* taught her to 'return to the body' again and again. Jannet focuses on certain other aspects, considering *vipassana* as a tool for changing one's perspectives, to "see the reality as it is as opposed to how you want to see it. It ...changes the perception and how we perceive reality. Which in turn makes things so much easier!" [Jannet, Interview excerpt, May 29, 2011]

So far, I only focused on how 'following the body' is *doing* and not *doing* the body. Focusing attention is *doing*, following is an action. If attention is an activity of the mind (as it is in traditional 'Western' psychology), it is ambiguous in the *vipassana* pedagogy. In Buddhist psychology (that is where Goenka gets his ideas from), how is *mind* invoked?

When Neela tells me how she makes an analogy of breath with 'human action' and 'cleansing the mind' I sense how every practitioner of *vipassana* begins to *do* the

mind. She says, "Breathing in and Breathing out. I draw a parallel between that and hearing, absorbing, taking in negativity [in daily action] and getting it out". Body process *becomes* a process of 'cleansing the mind' of negative (hurtful/distressful) thoughts. Neela calls it verbal harm: "I cushion myself by my breath. So I am not affected by others. I also minimize the verbal harm I am capable to do to others." Thus the focus on the body process of breathing becomes a 'way of life'. This is how Neela mobilizes vipassana in her day to day life.

Body-Brain Connections

Jannet considers vipassana as a 'concentration' exercise that leads to the awareness of how the 'body is reacting':

Basically it is **physical concentration**. You breathe and concentrate on your breath. That helps your brain to focus...With vipassana...the awareness part is when you go through your body and you are just aware of how your **body is reacting**. [Interview in Jannet's house, May 29, 2011, emphasis mine]

She elaborates on the connection between body and brain: what comes first, and what comes next. Her initial thought was following the basic education in biology and psychology, the primary 'reflex arc': the brain reacts to a sensory input and then sends motor impulses to the body to react. In vipasana practice, she formulates this connection differently. She feels different, by practicing and *doing* her mind differently:

What I thought was you reacted to something with your brain and your body reacted afterwards. But with Goenka [vipassana], I found out it is the other way round. So your body reacts emotionally and then your brain actually takes that on board. You can make a choice. [Interview in Jannet's house, May 29, 2011]

When I asked her to give a concrete example, she explained it in terms of an increased level of awareness, and she turned to other ways of formulation:

You don't make me angry, I make myself angry about what you are doing and also my body will react before my head. I can actually decide not to react angry. I did not think that was possible. I actually thought it was a total, automatic reaction...Not that I don't get angry, not that I don't get mad or sad. But, at least I know what process I am going through. [Interview in Jannet's house, May 29, 2011]

Adam was not comfortable with the question *how* but he was convinced of the body-mind connection. In vipassana, body is a means, a tool but it is the *mind* that the practitioner aims to cultivate, to open, to *relax*. Vipassana happens or is *done* in the body but it is the mind that is affected. In his words:

[vipassana is a] practice of the mind using the body... **Body and mind are linked. How they are linked, I don't know...**mind is manifested in body itself...if your mind is tense, your body is also tense...if your body is open your mind is also open. If you open your body...it can also open your mind.

[Interview at the 'assistant teacher's' house, June 6, 2011; emphasis mine]

Andrea notices the way her 'mental conditions' affect her *sitting*. What is interesting in her formulation is that although the *sitting* has all kinds of effects including relaxation, a relaxed state of mind also influences the quality of her *sitting* body:

Mental conditions are influencing. If I am very nervous I have more problems to sit longer. When I am already relaxed then it is easier to sit longer. [Interview in my house, May 7, 2011]

Ruben formulated the technique as a 'basic practice' without theoretical jargon. He mobilised his understanding of 'phenomenology' and 'vipassana' in conceptualising the world as the world of 'subjective experience' and he found vipassana to be a tool to get rid of old habits:

In vipassana you are trying to see all your concrete habits in an abstract way, like don't get lost in your old habits, don't get attached. Because if you acknowledge that these objects in the world are only there because of your encounters and experiences, you can release the habits, the tension in your body. That is what I experience in Vipassana. [Interview in my house, June 7, 2011]

Doing/Experiencing

Body and *mind* are enacted/done in vipassana but what about the experience? With excerpts from the informant narratives I illustrated what happened in vipassana, and how. The question is, if *being* or *experiencing* also involves *doing* – is it productive to talk about *being* versus *doing*? Or, do 'experience' and 'practice' go together and it is only in our categorical understanding that we tend to separate them emphasizing one at the cost of another?

This research does not claim to resolve this dilemma. For now, my focus is on less modest claims. If such *enactments* and *experiences* of the *sitting* involve and (re) construct the body and mind of the practitioners, what sense do the practitioners make of it? How do the technique(s) affect their 'personhood' or sense of 'self'? What is the 'self' that is destabilized and how? Do practitioners move towards the Buddhist notion of 'not-self' or towards a reconfiguration of the self? In the next chapter, I wrestle with these questions.

Chapter Five

Selves are multiple and fractured rather than unitary, mobile rather than stable, porous rather than enclosed, externally constituted rather than internal or "inner" natural essences.

(Keller 2007:353-354)

Chapter Five

Self, Not-self, 'New' Self: Stories of Personhood

A young executive looks for a way to mend his broken heart. An Indian woman seeks a way to compassion. An Welsh migrant is curious to have time for herself. A married woman searches for a place to come to terms with her impending divorce. A priest looks for a (spiritual) practice in her daily life. A Dutch man travels to India not knowing what he is searching for. A young woman in Africa finds a place to sit after suffering sexual violence. An atheist seeks relief from depression in Buddhist notions. A woman leaves her job, her country to arrive at a sitting in the other hemisphere. A young man goes away to mourn the loss of a close friend. Finally, a researcher resolves the dilemma of thinking versus doing a technique.

My informants and I decided to *sit* in our first ten-day initiation course in vipassana for various reasons. Most were driven by a recent (or impending) loss of intimate relationships, death of dear ones, suffering from depression and worries of life, lack of direction, general dissatisfaction with their lives, and for some the first *sitting* was situated in their quest for meaning in silence and a no-nonsense (non-cultic, non-Hippie) 'spiritual' practice from the East.

I did not focus my initial research questions on *why* the practitioners go for the first *sitting* or *why* they continue to *sit* in daily life. I was interested in *what* the practitioners *do* with the techniques, and its *effects*. I had considered the *why* question of secondary importance. During the fieldwork, however, I could not avoid giving these questions considerable attention. *Why* and *how* we began to *sit* came up in every conversation, even when I did not directly ask. The more I tried to draw my informants to the practice – the techniques of vipassana, the body, mind or body/mind configurations – the more they shifted my attention towards their life-situations, when-why-how they arrived at their first ten-day course, what happened as a result of that, and how the process continued in their everyday life. Each of my informants was eager to tell me his/her 'vipassana story': what happened before vipassana, what happened afterwards and what continued to happen.

Soon I realized how body, mind or body/mind were *etic* categories that I sometimes forced on the informants. To get closer to what and how they *do* in vipassana I was not letting myself get interested in why they did it in the first place. I eventually realised the *why* question was more important to them and the responses to this *why* question made this practice meaningful in their lives. *Self* was what they considered a meta-category that held their *body* and *mind* together in a cohesive unity. Following their narratives, it was evident that each informant mobilized his/her *sitting* practice not only as an instrumental and concrete 'reflexive technique of the body (and mind)' but as a more abstract and (often) metaphysical 'reflexive technology of the self'.

In this chapter, I (re) present the narratives of vipassana practitioners to illustrate how the practice is mobilized to deconstruct the notion of a former 'self' not into the 'not-self' (in Buddhism or vipassana pedagogy) but into the reconfiguration of personhood.

Vipassana as a Reflexive Technology of the Self

Foucault defined the 'technologies of the self' as a 'matrix of practical reason', "which permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (1988: 18). He argued that such technologies imply "certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes" (Foucault 1988:18).

He mentioned other technologies, that of production, sign systems and power, to argue that these four types of technologies "hardly ever function separately" (p. 18). Moving away from his earlier emphasis on the 'technology of domination and power', Foucault focused more on the "history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of the self" (p.19). He discussed these technologies (of the self) in the context of certain practices of late antiquity, which he categorised as self-care practices, i.e., "to take care of yourself", or, "the concern with self" and he set them apart from knowledge practices related to the principle of "Know thyself". He argued that the Western philosophical tradition privileged 'knowledge' over 'care'. His project was historical. He discussed certain 'technologies of the self' embedded in the Greco-Roman philosophy in the first two centuries A.D. and Christian spirituality and the monastic principles of late Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries.

However, his approach to practices provides a robust framework to discuss the contemporary *sitting* practice of vipassana meditation in the time of globalization. In our current historical epoch, the West and the East has mingled considerably. The flux and fusion of ideologies and practices render the subjectivities/mentalities amenable by vipassana, a contemporary globalized 'technology of the self'. Yet, if we follow Foucault, how far does his framework help us to understand the practice of vipassana?

In the last chapter, I illustrated that vipassana meditation involves a certain numbers of operations on the bodies (and minds), management of thoughts and living situations. What I did not discuss however was that other than the immediate techniques (sitting in silence, anapana, vipassana and metta alone/together) there are other life-practices involved in vipassana. The immediate techniques and the corresponding practices comprise vipassana meditation, designated as the 'art of living'.

An Art of Living

In the language of vipassana texts written and recorded by practitioners, we find that it has its own theory (*pariyatti*) in conjunction to the privileged status it claims for practice (*patipatti*) (Given-Wilson 1998: ix)²⁴. In formal group sittings, the recorded instructions from Goenka guide the practitioners. These instructions have a theory of suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*) and not-self (*anatta*), the three basic elements of the *real*. The vipassana theory (*pariyatti*) offers a 'universal remedy for universal suffering' with a structured practice (*patipatti*). The theory claims that transcendence from everyday suffering and dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) is possible through the realization of not-self (*anatta*) manifested in the changing nature of the self and realization of the impermanence (*anicca*) in the body characterized by the incessant flow of breathing in and out, the arising and passing of sensations and thoughts (Fleischman 1991; Hart 1991& 1987).

In practice (*patipatti*), therefore, the practitioners should undergo three kinds of trainings in everyday life. These are: a) *Sila* (moral precepts), b) *Samadhi* (concentration) and c) *Panna* (wisdom). The immediate techniques in the *sitting* train the practitioner in the practice of *samadhi* and *panna* with the focus on breath (*anapana*) and observation of body sensations (*vipassana*). The third training is in *sila* or practicing the moral precepts that provide an ethical ground for daily life. Through these trainings the 'students' are supposed to realise the laws of the inner and the external reality: the laws of 'universal suffering' (*dukkha*) as a (universal) 'reality of life', change or impermanence (*anicca*) as the (universal) 'nature of reality', and not-self (*anatta*) as the (universal) 'nature of one's being'. By focusing attention on the breath as it comes and goes, one focuses on the body/mind and prepares it for vipassana (insight). By feeling the incessant sensations in the body without judging whether it is pleasant or painful, one learns equanimity and realises that nothing is permanent: everything changes. By keeping good vibrations in the body, one generates compassion for oneself and the others. These qualities (*parami*), together with *sila* and *servig* constitute 'the art of living', a 'universal remedy for universal suffering': a technique applicable to all human beings irrespective of their gender, age, ethnicity; and, irrespective of which group they belong to in terms of nationality, sect, or religion.

For instructors and organisers as well as the more serious practitioners, *sila* or the moral precepts in vipassana are practices that strengthen the *sitting* meditation and ensure the intended effects of vipassana. Except the ten-day meditation courses and organized *sittings*, such moral precepts or life-style instructions are not strictly enforced

²⁴ Pariyatti, a US based organization, publicizes textual and audiovisual resources on vipassana, drawing its name from a S.N. Goenka quote: "*pariyatti* (theory) and *patipatti* (practice) must go together. Together they are like two wheels of a cart and both must be equal in size and strength if the cart is to move smoothly" (Pariyatti.org 2011).

on all practitioners. *Sila* involves the five Buddhist principles of not killing animals (i.e., adopting a vegetarian diet), not lying and stealing (linked to right livelihood and right speech), avoiding sexual misconduct (i.e., staying monogamous), and abstinence from drugs or other intoxicants (i.e., alcohol, marijuana etc.). The instructors and organisers consider *sila* as an important criterion for advancement in the path of vipassana. *Sitting* twice a day for one hour and attending at least one residential ten-day course are the minimum criteria for a good practice.

What lies beyond *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna* in the theory and practice of vipassana is voluntary *service*. The third technique in vipassana *sitting*, the cultivation of compassion and loving-kindness (*metta*) takes place not only in the engendering of forgiveness within oneself but encouraged to be practiced in acting as *servers* to help setting up organized *sittings* or getting involved in the multifarious activities of the organization and its many committees.

My informants mobilize the techniques of *sitting* (anapana, vipassana and metta) as well as the moral and practical technologies such as *sila* and *service* to a varying degree. The experts and serious practitioners stay close to the formal organizational framework. Their proximity to the pedagogic source renders them to follow the *sila* and *service* more rigorously. One may expect the novices and experimenters to be less rigid and less regular in the *sittings*. However, this is not completely true. Oscar for example, maintains the disciplining of the self through *sitting* twice during the day but does not give much importance to moral precepts. Eating meat is a habit for him and he does not associate it with killing animals. Giving *service* is also not always corollary to strict adherence to the *sila*.

Jannet over the years has *served* on many *sittings*. She is not so focused on maintaining *sila* either. For example, she cracks a joke about being Welsh and drinking alcohol. She drinks wine and does not think it is necessary to give it up. Some of the practitioners evidently have a different take on *sila*. In principle, they do not always argue with the moral precepts and buy time, saying, “not now, in the future”. Adam, the young Dutch man who almost never misses a group *sitting* considers himself to be on the way. Although he likes wine and has not yet managed to *sit* more than once a day, he aims higher. He considers the *sila* and two daily *sittings* quite important. But he thinks he will advance gradually on the path. In the next few years, he hopes to *sit* two times a day, give up drinking and go vegetarian.

Rode Draad (The Red Thread)

Paul and Jannet both used the Dutch expression *rode draad* when they talked about vipassana. The *Rode Draad* connotes a central theme, a plot that runs throughout their life, connecting all the parts. Paul, the 38-year-old Belgian ‘student’ had suffered from depression and questioned the meaning of life. He was raised as an

atheist and he missed a belief-system to guide him in times of distress. Organized religion did not interest him in his search for purpose in life (that included formal comparative study of religion). Since 2003, Vipassana meditation became his 'red thread' that provided his *self* with a sense of purpose, a tool to guide his *self* in the 'right path'. In his words:

[*Rode draad* is a] metaphor for the body. Like the complete artery system or vein system connecting all parts of the body. They are feeding your body with oxygen and take out the filth. They are connecting everything. The red thread [is like that]. Something that connects all aspects of your life,..., gives you direction and purpose. So now vipassana is the **red thread** for me [connecting every part, giving direction].

Before, I was like a ship in the ocean and I was floating. There was no direction. Because of vipassana I have some direction...It has given me the right path. [Interview in my house, May 19, 2011; emphasis added]

Paul does not consider himself a Buddhist. Neither does any of my informants. Neubert (2008) argued that the contemporary vipassana movement rejected the label 'religion' and 'ritual' to protect itself from the negative associations with these terms, for example, extreme rigidity and sectarianism. Pagis (2008) finds similar emphasis by vipassana practitioners in the post-industrial settings of Israel and North America. For Paul, 'not-self' notion in Buddhism makes philosophical sense but he recognized that it was a belief-system that provides him the rationale for the vipassana practice. He said:

I connect to Buddhist philosophy. They don't see a soul or self somewhere. I think it is an important belief to have if you want to practice this. Otherwise it would be difficult to continue...

You need to de-condition yourself. All this conditioning with education...you build a self, life, I am Paul. I have this history. It becomes yourself. It is constructed. With vipassana you try to deconstruct it. If you do vipassana but you do not believe it [the notion of *anatta*, not-self] then it would be difficult to continue. [Interview, May 19, 2011; italics added]

Durchhalten (to hold on) and *Houvast* (something to hold onto)

Andrea, the 50-year old German visitor, used the German word 'durchhalten' to express what she did with smoking in her life and what she was doing now with vipassana. The biggest change that happened to her life (following the decision to get a

divorce) was to stop smoking after fifteen years. In her view, she replaced a negative habit (*smoking*) with a positive practice (*vipassana*) by taking time for herself with a practice of 'time-out', a procedure of *durchhalten* so that she can survive by holding on to vipassana, through the storms and floods of life. In her words:

I felt smoking was the medium for *durchhalten* for me, the medium to bear unbearable situations... It helped because I felt like drowning and it was like a post to hold...When I feel I want to *durchhalten* then I want to smoke. Now it doesn't fulfil its function. Even during smoking I felt I wanted to *durchhalten*...

When I was in Vipassana [ten-day course] I didn't feel like smoking. So, why should I do something I neither need nor does it help - just because I did it and because there is an illusion attached that it will help? [Interview in my house, May 7, 2011]

Hans, the 52-year-old Dutch man and a meditator for fifteen years uses a similar expression, *houvast* (holdfast) to describe the symbolic role of vipassana in holding his sense of self together, keeping him on the path. In that, his expression is quite similar to Paul:

[vipassana] keeps me a bit on the road, on the path. Life is very distracting. You can choose so many directions. What to read, what to see, which people to meet...Life can be quite confusing.

[Interview in Hans' house, May 27, 2011]

Towards a New 'Self-dependent Self'?

The foundational focus of the vipassana pedagogy is on being present to the moment, as it caters to a notion of the 'not-self': that there is no reified 'self' to discover in its objective reality or to construct with one's subjectivity. But how do we know there is in fact no *self*? It is an epistemological question to which the vipassana response would be: 'knowledge is not abstract but embodied' (Pagis 2010a). Therefore, the *real, concrete* way one knows whether or not there is a *self* is through practice. Through the quintessential practice of meditation, by *sitting* and concentrating on one's breath and body sensations, by being aware of what is going on in the present.

However, what exactly happens in the conceptualization of self? Vipassana theory caters to a 'not-self' but is it so? Or does it involve not only *doing* the body and mind but also involves *doing* a self?

Hutton (1988) writes on the 'diametrically opposed' methods with which Foucault and Freud approached the 'mind': Freud provides a method for investigating the 'internal' workings of the psyche (to discover the truths about one's self) while Foucault seeks to show how the method itself is an ancient technique of *self* fashioning that shapes the mind 'externally'. Palmer (1998: 408) similarly notes Foucault's position on Truth as "not to decipher what we 'really' are, but to strive to cultivate what we might become". Cultivating is about *doing* the self, not *having* a reified self or *being* in a certain way.

The self that the initiate carries and brings to the residential courses is destabilized of course. Through the various processes of maintaining disciplines and following the techniques in *sitting* the practitioner is initiated into novel considerations of what the self is or can be. The vipassana discourses provide a framework for the 'not-self' but what the practitioners return with is a sense of 'self' different from the 'self' they brought to the retreat. Once they practiced the techniques and experienced the *doing* of their body and mind, they incorporate these new "ways of being" in their personhood. The concept of *self* was not annihilated but a renewed sense of *self* was born. For some, it is a more authentic *self* they were searching for, the embodied *self* that now emerged from the practice. However, on close reading of their narratives it is clear that it is an enacted self, a self-made self. In the *sittings* in everyday life, this new self is maintained through the continuation of techniques, as well as in maintaining *sila* and engaging in 'dhamma' *service* to varying degrees. For some, attending the group *sittings* during the week add to such disciplining (and the making) of this new personhood.

It remains a question whether the concept of 'not-self' is a more attractive notion than the cultivation of a *self*? Whether it is considered more appropriate to hold onto, a fluid and dynamic explanation of inner working than any of the substantive, reified concepts of 'self' available in the Western world? The tripartite structure of Freud (id, ego, superego as structures of the psyche-self) or the conditioned reductive notions of *self* according to the Cognitive-Behaviourists (Pavlov's conditioning)? What about the subjective/constructed notion of 'self' (attributed to Foucault by Hutton 1988)? Which of these notions lead us anywhere towards alleviation from distress? Suffering exists and therefore people seek to "feel better". Telling people stories about the objective notions of a reified self may or may not help in a situation where the personal and collective life-worlds of individuals are rapidly changing. Perhaps, individuals are finding consolation in the idea that there is no longer a *self* to hold onto. Or, if they do not let go of the notion of *self*, is it the notion of a renewed *self* that can be managed and cultivated with continuous practice that lead them out of suffering?

In this chapter and the last, I illustrated that vipassana practice involves the mobilization of multiple reflexive techniques of body (and mind) and technologies of the self. The question is, to what effects? A detailed discussion on the multiple effects of

vipassana is required to discuss the effects of *doing* the body, mind and self with vipassana. On the one hand, this will address the linguistic problems of articulating body (mind) practices and experiences, of the strategies that link practices to effects. On the other hand and more importantly, it will enable us to critically examine the definition and role of 'evidence' in understanding *salutogenic* practices. In the following chapter, I turn my attention to these two issues.

Chapter Six

Upon "I know that there is my hand" there may follow the question "How do you know?" and the answer to that presupposes that this can be known in that way. So, instead of "I know that here is my hand", one might say "Here is my hand", and then add how one knows.

(Wittgenstein 1969: 40)

The problem of evidence is in essence a problem of speech in relation to experience.

(Csordas 2004: 479)

Chapter Six

Questioning Evidence, Translating effects

*It is a bit like **physical training**. You do not do it all the time but slowly you see the change in your body. Practice vipassana daily, regularly and you will notice the change in your habits.* [Interview with the ‘assistant teacher’ in daylong course, June 5, 2011, emphasis added.]

What are the effects of practicing vipassana? How are these effects linked to the practice? How do the practitioners know these effects are the results of their practice? In response to these questions, my informants often struggled with articulation. Some were more eloquent than others. What I mentioned in the excerpt above was part of a detailed conversation with an instructor during the day-long course. In the following sections, I will present some of the *effects* as described by my research informants. The question is, can these effects be considered ‘evidence’ that vipassana works?

The Everyday ‘Evidence’: Effects of Vipassana in Daily Life

NS: Vipassana helps in being awareness...of the present...makes me accept whatever is happening, to let go etc...but I also want to be able to do things, visualize, plan.

J: Why are you expecting a car to fly? You will not take a car and make it fly to Bangladesh?

[Jannet (J) explained to me (NS) that the *effects* of vipassana on increasing awareness, equanimity and compassion are important qualities to deal with everyday stress but we should consider other techniques, for example, ‘personal coaching’, ‘career counseling’ or even ‘psychotherapy’ for dealing with problems that require planning, and visualization for achieving future success.]

What are the effects of practicing vipassana? The informants varied in their responses. They described the intended and unintended effects. What emerges from their narratives is that vipassana is not a panacea for every problem in life, contrary to what it claims, ‘an universal remedy for universal suffering’. It may be a ‘remedy’ for particular kinds of suffering. Jannet’s shooting reply and comments made by Claudia as well as Marten (“vipassana is only one way of meditating”) resonate in my head.

Claudia showed me a book with the quotation that Buddha taught 40 different meditation techniques and vipassana was just one of them. *Samatha*, commonly known as concentration meditation is another among many (Goleman 1977). I discussed the same confusion with Ruben during our discussion on the comparison of ‘western’ philosophical frameworks with the theory of vipassana in the Goenka tradition as ‘body oriented consciousness’. We expressed skepticism about the ‘universal’ claims of vipassana. Such discussions did not occur only among novices or experimenters. Serious meditators also reflected on the possibility of getting the maximum benefit from a rigorous self-disciplined practice of *sitting* twice every day for an hour and consistently attending ten-day courses for years. However, advanced practitioners and experts advised me to be patient: “It will come with practice, in time!” (Pieter, Interview, June 26, 2011). True to my *novice* impatience and uncertainty, I doubted and asked again: “How do I know these effects [staying equanimous to life events, not giving in to destructive craving habits or avoiding pain] will happen?” “How do I know these effects are due to vipassana?”

Practicing the technique and maintaining the moral precepts is perhaps easy during the ten-day residential courses where we go through voluntary isolation and follow the rigorous schedule. But how does vipassana practice ‘hold up’ in the ‘real world’, the everyday life outside the retreat setting, the ‘labscape’ of a residential course in vipassana (Pagis 2010a: 16)? My query is more in agreement with Treya Killam Wilber²⁵ who commented in her memoir, “I wonder how this will hold up in the real world?” (Wilber 1993:95). In my engagement with the vipassana practitioners, I restricted myself to discussion of vipassana in everyday life. However, everyone kept referring back to the residential courses, and without exception, the first course, the *initiation ritual*. For all of them, and me as well, the first ten-day residential course clearly demarcated a break, an opening and the everyday practice as continuation.

Vipassana as ‘Self-therapy’: Effects on Mental Health

Paul (38-year-old Belgian, a serious practitioner) emphasized the effect of vipassana in his life on his mental health. Vipassana helped him in dealing with his depressive thoughts, and provided him with a sense of purpose in the bigger sense. His response to my question was simple: “How do I connect it? Before I did it [vipassana] I was depressed. I did not have a real purpose in life.” (May 19, 2011). Presently, after eight years of practice he has no problem linking the effects to his practice. For him the before/after effect is obvious. Although the instructor insisted on vipassana as a

²⁵ Treya Killam Wilber is the deceased wife of psychologist/philosopher Ken Wilber. Treya died after a prolonged struggle with breast cancer. She went through repeated ten-day courses and practiced vipassana in daily life to deal with chronic pain and her impending death. Later, her husband published a poignant memoir based on her journal entries. See Wilber (1993) for more.

practice for 'healthy people'²⁶, to steer clear of any medico-legal responsibility, Paul was unequivocal on the therapeutic benefits of vipassana. In addition, 'mindfulness' therapy too could be beneficial. In his opinion, mindfulness "takes inspiration from vipassana", and, therefore, "it would be better...instead of giving people Prozac [anti-depressant] maybe try to do some mindfulness or something [vipassana]."

Hans (52-year-old Dutch man, a serious practitioner) had similar troubles in life and benefitted from vipassana but his emphasis was on the preventive aspect of the practice as well as the control over his repetitive thoughts. He had suffered from major depressive episodes and went through psychotherapy and anti-depressants for some time. For him, vipassana was 'self therapy'. Hans consistently practiced vipassana for fifteen years and he was convinced of its therapeutic benefits. How did he connect the effects? Hans struggled to articulate:

[Vipassana] gave me something. It worked for me. I cannot really explain it...[after the first course] I was curious. What would happen if I continue this?...[I practice] every day two hours. There have been periods I was less confident, less sure about the **effects**. Life continues...you meet people...things go right, things go wrong, Sometimes small crisis, big crisis. I have discovered that it [vipassana] prevents me from falling back too deep...It helps me not to glide back to some kind of crisis....

I am a bit neurotic. Meditation seems to control that a bit. I know how to stop that neurotic behavior...[vipassana] helps me to control that kind of neurotic behavior [thinking too much about unimportant details, repetitive thoughts without consequence]...It seems to focus your mind...focus your attention...your breath or your sensations. It gives you some guideline to control your mind a bit. [Interview in Hans' house, May 27, 2011]

Angel (44-year-old woman from Africa, now a Dutch citizen) too considered that vipassana was 'therapy' for her. Her life story is replete with trauma of all kinds, ranging from child abuse to sexual violence. Vipassana, for twenty-two years, was 'therapy' for her until she decided to give it up and chose a more flexible meditation technique. For her, *doing* meditation in general had healing effects on her wounded self. The effects were not specifically the results of vipassana.

²⁶ The 'universal suffering' probably means the everyday suffering that results from the regular stress we go through in the course of daily life, for example, missing a train, preparing for an interview or examination, or, a state of being, for example, worrying about the future or regretting past actions. It is different from 'catastrophic suffering' manifested in mental health problems such as depression, anxiety where suffering continues.

Angel's comments made me reflect: Are these *effects* the general effects of *doing* meditation, or, are they specific to vipassana? Goleman (1977) classified meditation of Buddhist origin in two main categories, concentration (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*). He argued that each technique had its specific effects. I could not explore this issue further. Comparative studies on the *effects* of different types of meditation techniques on its practitioners are required to address this question adequately.

Vipassana as Behavioural De-Tox: Effects on Smoking and other Craving

Annelies (48-year old Dutch woman, a serious practitioner) and Andrea (50-year old German woman, a novice) gave up smoking after their first ten-day *sitting* and continued their lives as non-smokers. Spending ten days in abstinence from tobacco helped Andrea to go through the initial difficulties and strengthened her volition to stop smoking. For Annelies, it was the technique of body scan that made her question the craving itself. Instead of going for a cigarette, she searched in her body (mind): "Where is the craving? Where is it?" The focus on her breath and body sensations distracted her and the initial craving would always pass. Since her first ten-day course twelve years ago, Annelies never smoked a single cigarette. Returning to daily life, both Annelies and Andrea practiced regular *sitting* and occasional contemplation on *sila* to maintain their non-smoking status.

Marten (28-year-old student of clinical psychology, an experimenter) labeled vipassana as a "behavioural de-tox" (detoxification for addictive behavior). His description of *effects* referred to the daily meditation as an effective tool to focus the mind, increase the willpower and helping the self to 'sit through the impulses'. This is how vipassana helps the practitioner to get rid of the destructive and impulsive habit patterns in dealing with 'food, sex, drinking, drugs'. Marten lumped the destructive patterns in binge-eating, compulsive sex, excessive drinking and addictive drugs as (unhealthy) 'cravings' and explained the effects of vipassana:

Meditation daily gives me focus and it works pretty well against the habit formation of craving and staying more focused in your mind ...staying in the present moment...disciplining the mind...not go with thoughts...[you] increase your willpower by doing meditation... because...every time there is intentional focus the brain brings the attention back...doing it again and again, the mind quiets down...

By disciplining it, by constantly bringing it back you **sit through impulses**, you sit through tiredness, you sit through boredom, and it makes you stronger every time. [Interview in Marten's apartment, May 10, 2011, emphasis mine]

Vipassana as Tool for Relaxation and Focused Attention

Oscar (28-year-old German man, novice) and Adam (29-year-old Dutch man, serious practitioner) both described 'relaxation' and 'focused attention' as the main *effects* of vipassana. Oscar elaborated:

I am more relaxed. Mentally relaxed in a way that I don't get upset so quickly. For example, at work if there is someone who doesn't do what I want or takes too long I used to get really agitated. I might not say something, but inside I had the feeling of being agitated. That doesn't happen anymore...I am focusing on one thing at a time and when I am doing it I am not thinking of all the other stuff.

[Interview in Oscar's apartment, May 25, 2011]

How did it work? How did he do it? Oscar said:

Focus on my body - on one part of my body...it keeps me busy. If I just focus on my knee for one hour, I would not think about my girlfriend or other stuff. [Interview in Oscar's apartment, May 25, 2011]

Oscar did his first ten-day course following a distressing separation from his girlfriend for nine years. He continues the practice to maintain the relaxation he experienced during the ten days. He is also a regular runner and he thinks vipassana also affected his running activity. He could breathe deeper, and run longer with increased focus on the activity he was involved in.

The Unintended Effects

The vipassana practitioners used their body/mind, the assurance from advanced practitioners and instructors, and waited for the intended effects: the effects they experienced and the effects promised by the teachers. Meanwhile, other things happened around them. Marten, as a young enthusiast injured his legs. The tendinous joint between tibia and fibula became lax. This happened during a prolonged *sitting* in the full-lotus position to which his body was not yet accustomed. As a result, he could not *sit* on the floor in any posture for a long time. Marten's *sitting* was now restricted to doing vipassana either in bed or in a chair.

There were other unintended but *beneficial* effects of vipassana. In Ananya's case, something unexpected happened after the ten-day courses that continued during

her stay in the Netherlands. In my case, besides *sitting* still, I also learned to *shit* properly.

Friendship (and Healing) in the 'Intersubjectivity of Silence'

Ananya, my 31-year-old Indian friend, took a life decision to call off her wedding a few days before the event. In India, she was a social outcaste overnight. Last December, following the advice of a close friend, she decided to *sit* through the ten days.

Friendship was an immediate consequence of spending ten days 'alone in the presence of' (silent) others. On the last (talking) day, the women giggled about the suppressed laughter during the course, the emission of certain body sounds and odors (e.g., farting and swallowing saliva). They gesticulated the comical intonation of the instructor's voice, criticized certain aspects of the retreat and admired some of its surprising benefits.

A smile, a gesture, a giggle, a cough (intended or not) - the involuntary gurgling sounds from hungry stomachs and active intestines – listening to others snore, suppressing burps after a long-awaited meal – hearing the rustling sound of approaching footsteps, the subtle noise of shifting of legs during long hours of sitting – dealing with body odors, appreciating perfumes – having occasional tears and frequent sighs – the incessant thoughts and emotions that could not be shared...all that 'sound and fury' in the *silent* ordeal of ten days created an inter-corporeal bond among these women.

Ananya *followed up* in everyday life the friendships she *made* in silence. With words, laughter, e-mail exchanges that led to further meetings for coffee and lunch, dinner invitations, learning to tango and cooking Indian food, playing truth-telling games²⁷, and shared activities that included occasional *sitting* together for meditation in the following months. A day after her return to everyday life, on the first day of the New Year, Ananya wrote briefly about the meditation experience:

Last ten days in the silent meditation retreat, I found my word-**'Opnieuw Beginnen'**, the Dutch way of saying 'Start Again'. For the meditation students, it meant [that one should] start the process of meditation again and by the last day, most of us started smiling on hearing these very words, relating to them in some strange ways. I am taking these words beyond

²⁷ *Life Game* (also known as *Truth or Dare*) is a parlor game that involves asking each other questions about intimate life issues, e.g., love, relaxation, spirituality, and sex. Each participant is challenged by the others to speak the truth as he or she knows it to be.

meditation now and this is going to be my Mantra for the year ahead. 'Start again' – is a gentle reminder for me who often falls back into the memories of past and completely loses track of the present. [Ananya wrote in her blog, emphasis mine]

What exactly happened with Ananya? What did she find? How did she return to a sense of well-being? Through these *new* friends or a confrontation with her *self* with a newly found meditation technique? Ananya remained steadfast to her commitment to a new way of *being*, and kept in contact with her *new* 'vipassana' friends. Again I cite her words:

I noticed how desperately I seek approval of people around me for my actions...I could clearly see how I created more troubles for myself by trying to do things I did not believe in wholeheartedly...**I am not going to force myself to 'fit' a certain norm in which I absolutely do not fit.** [Excerpt from Ananya's blog, emphasis mine]

Pagis (2010b) argues that social communication is not only discursive but can also happen in the 'intersubjectivity of silence', among a 'community of strangers' in a meditation hall. Following Pagis but taking her argument further, I suggest that in the course of such shared practices a certain kind of *friendship* is born, a sense of belonging is produced in the resonating *silence* of the meditation hall. Friendship is a particular 'technique of belonging' and in the kind of friendship *made* in the 'intersubjectivity of silence', in the meditative space through the shared (and yet not shared) practice of *sitting meditation*, '*alone in the presence of* (silent) others - it is based on a shared focus on *self*. For some of the women Ananya met, the retreat was to have a certain kind of 'experience', for others it was to seek relief from *suffering*, or to cultivate self-awareness. For Ananya, it was friendship more than the technique that she brought back home and continued.

This specific type of friendship, and not familial ties, was a more accessible 'technique of belonging' for Ananya. No longer dependent financially or emotionally on birth family and relatives, and yet not finding her place or emotional support among other women of her generation in her own society she needed to look elsewhere for coping with life events and re-inclusion. Not in romantic love, matrimonial security or existing friendships that she grew up with but through friendships that *happened*, and friendships she consciously *chose*. One may question, is this kind of friendship specific to vipassana? How different is this friendship from other kinds of friendship that *happen* in other circumstances? Or, other shared practices? I leave these questions for future investigation.

Mindful Shitting

In the course of my fieldwork, I myself experienced a surprising and unintended *effect* of vipassana in my life. A few weeks before I consulted the vipassana ‘expert’ (in the day course on June 5) I had a painful episode of constipation. I blamed it on the stresses of fieldwork that made me eat at odd hours and sleep for long. In due time, I consulted the health ‘expert’, the university doctor who prescribed ointments to soften the stool and lubricate the passage. She also advised me, as doctors do, to eat plenty of fibers and vegetables, with regular intervals, in adequate portions. The last piece of her advice was the most crucial. She said, “Do not put pressure when you *sit*, under any circumstance. You put pressure once, and that is enough to cause the damage”. I realized I had an anal fissure, a frighteningly painful condition that would take a long time to heal. The fact that there was a family history of anal conditions did not help matters much.

I stopped the vipassana *sittings* for two weeks. Fieldwork was interrupted. My practice and my research were both in trouble. I woke up with the dread of going to the toilet: “Damned if I do, damned if I don’t”. When I had to *shit*, I went through excruciating pain in my anus. If I did not *shit*, I spent the rest of the day worrying about the added degree of pain that was waiting for me the next day. The pain however taught me to eat right. I started to eat meals at regular intervals, in adequate proportions, with a lot of fibers and vegetables. Yet I did not know how I would prevent myself from *pushing* the hard shit out of my body.

That is when I decided to mobilize the technique by changing the site of my practice. I decided to *sit* through my trouble (I listened to Marten). Since I could not *sit* any more on the cushion, I began to *sit* on the toilet seat every morning, trying not to push. What an effort it was not to make an effort! Finally, the act of not pushing helped the fissure to heal. The health-expert offered the advice but the lesson of not doing had to be an embodied action, an unexpected effect of vipassana.

Linking Effects to the Practice

Some practitioners spoke more elaborately on how they linked the effects to their practice. Andrea was not clear about the cause-effect relationship. She said:

The question is whether vipassana is giving that [realization] or whether it is me having that [realization] and at the same time also doing vipassana out of the same realization. [Interview in my house, May 7, 2011, underline added]

Everyone spoke on the effects and benefits. Why else would they continue to practice? The effects started to manifest within the first 10-day course and continued in

daily life. Yet, how do they know what they know? How could they be sure that the effects they felt were the result of their practice?

Claudia (45-year-old German priest, a serious practitioner) described her surprise to notice the differences. Vipassana not only helped her sleep better, or quiet her mind but was also affecting the *difficult* relationships in her life. Recognizing these *effects* and linking them to her daily practice made her continue:

More and more I realized the course had really changed something in me...I was very quiet. In the first year after the course, I was sleeping very quiet and very good. I had very often this difficulty before...

I do not have a very good relationship with my elder brother...There was always a tension when we saw each other...It was winter and Christmas time. I saw my whole family, also my brother. Suddenly I realized the tension was away. I was able...I was very relaxed sitting with him....very astonishing...I was thinking, "Where is this coming from?"

Just because of vipassana. You are working, you are doing the meditation and you don't know.... in the time you are back in real life... you are doing things in another way, you are not reacting any more....So it really convinced me...Something happening on a deeper level. It was really important for me. This motivated me to go on with the meditation.

[Interview in Claudia's house, June 4, 2011]

When I asked Jannet (49-year-old Welsh woman, an experimenter) to give a concrete example, she related a recent event to make the *effect* explicit, and linked it *indirectly* to her practice:

A friend rang me up with news I did not like. I just felt – onk! I felt my breath became short and a kick in my stomach...That was a total body reaction. Then my head came in afterwards...and said, "Oh yeah! That was a big disappointment. Isn't it?"...I did not hear it [in my head], "That's a big disappointment!" and then reacted that way. It was the other way round...

What am I going to do? I can totally go into this disappointment horse... Instead of riding with it, I actually said to myself, "Jannet, breathe deep!"...Instead of the saying, "I am

disappointed! I am disappointed!” I asked, “What was your expectation? What were you thinking? What is the reality of the situation?”

[At this point I asked her if she thought this awareness came from vipassana]

Oh yeah! I do not know where else I would have learned it.

[Interview in Jannet’s apartment, May 29, 2011]

The interactions between what there is (and what comes into being) and our conceptions of it *make* the ontology of practice multiple (Hacking 2002; Mol 2002). What vipassana was in the ten-day course is no longer the same in everyday life. The technique is the same but the duration, site, context and voluntary efforts differed considerably. To continue the practice daily one needed to be motivated. As Claudia’s quote illustrated, such motivation came from the recognition of *effects*, intended and unintended. The practitioners recognized *effects* and linked the *effects* to the practice in multiple ways. Some are less surprising than others, and some completely unexpected.

The practices of naming interact with the things we name. Andrea was not sure if the *insights* were derived from vipassana or she was doing vipassana because of the *insights*. Cause and effect relationship was no longer conceptualized as linear but each feeding the other in endless loops of exchanges, between the practice leading to effects, effects leading back to the practice. Attributing the effects to the practice was evidently a ‘language game’²⁸ – constructed through telling and re-telling of the vipassana narratives, a ‘truth-game’ we play to continue doing what we *do*. Therefore, what mattered more in these utterances was that the practitioners were willing subjects to attribute the beneficial effects to the practice. Whether or not they *are* in fact linked – can be judged in the context of how we define *evidence*.

²⁸ Csordas (2004) elaborated on the notion of anthropological evidence drawing from the concept of ‘language game’ (Wittgenstein 1969). He argues to “consider the senses in which we can use the notion of evidence in anthropological writing, distinguishing them paradigmatically from uses of the word in ordinary language and other kinds of specialized usage...To determine how different senses of evidence color our understanding of the ethnographic enterprise” (p. 473).

What is evidence? The ethnographic 'evidence' and 'evidence'-based medicine

Ethnographic evidence of 'what works' in alternative medicine includes concepts such as transcendent, transformational experiences; changing lived-body experience; and the gaining of meaning (Barry 2006: 2646).

"Efficacy" refers to "the probability of benefit to individuals in a defined population from a medical technology applied for a given medical problem under ideal conditions of use." (Office of Technology Assessment 1978: 16).

"Effectiveness" has all the attributes of efficacy except one: It reflects performance under ordinary conditions by the average practitioner for the typical patient. In quality-of-care terms, what your doctor or mine does for you or me in the daily course of events is measured in terms of effectiveness. (Brook and Lohr 1985: 711)

Meditation techniques are often categorised under the discipline of 'Complementary and Alternative Medicine' (CAM) (Ghassemi 2005). Following Csordas (2004), it is important to discuss the anthropological 'evidence' of vipassana by defining it in terms of *effects* and not the hegemonic biomedical terms of *efficacy* or *effectiveness*.

Having summarised the multiple ways of *doing* the body, mind and self as well as the description of the multiple *effects* of such enactments, one of the multiple ontologies of vipassana can also *be* a 'healing practice', and incorporated as medicine in the archaic sense, *medicine = healing*²⁹. With this move, the analytical questions that emerged from the narratives become all the more urgent: Do these interpretations of 'everyday effects', as anthropological evidence, count? How do we know if vipassana works or not?

In the clinical trials (the highest standard for producing medical evidence), *evidence* is defined in terms of 'efficacy' and 'effectiveness'. These terms were developed to assess medical technologies (that includes pharmaceutical drugs). Later these 'quality-of-care' terms became 'gold-standards' for assessing all health interventions (Mol 2006). Barry (2006) draws on the phenomenal rise of 'alternative medicine' and its gradual incorporation into the 'mainstream biomedicine' to address the 'question of evidence'. She considers adoption of the 'gold standard' RCT (randomised

²⁹ Etymologically from L. *medicus* "healing" (adj.), from *mederi* "to heal, cure," originally "know the best course for" (Harper 2010).

controlled trial) as legitimization of evidence for alternative medicine 'deeply political'. She illustrated the 'rhetorics embedded in the EBM (evidence-based medicine) phenomenon' and argued that anthropological evidence resonates with the 'philosophy of alternative medicine'. Her proposition was to consider *ethnographic evidence*, albeit 'differently constructed modes of evidence' to expand the definition of 'what works'.

In the next section, I briefly compare Goenka's vipassana and the current rise of Mindfulness Psychotherapy (as 'evidence-based' medicine) to address how *evidence* is constructed in conjunction with how *traditions*, both popular and clinical, are invented and to what effects.

Mindfulness Psychotherapy and Vipassana Meditation

Unlike Goenka's vipassana (a popular practice) *Mindfulness* refers to an abstract paradigmatic concept distilled from many kinds of meditation practices, of Buddhist and non-Buddhist origin. In clinical trials, mindfulness-based interventions are operationalised to test *efficacy* and *effectiveness* as opposed to its multiple *effects* (Chiesa 2010; Germer, Siegel and Fulton 2005). The 'mindfulness' scientists argue that meditation techniques can be *evidence-based*. In fact, *Mindfulness* operationalises meditation technique, and adapts it to make it testable by the 'gold standard' and hence can be part of the EBM politics.

In Goenka's popular movement, vipassana with *sati-paththana* (originally from Theravada Buddhism) is re-constituted as a systematic practice of 'embodied self-reflexivity' (Pagis 2009). However, it is this concept of *sati* (connoting awareness) that scholars have translated as 'mindfulness' in research publications. Mindfulness in psychotherapy is an umbrella term to describe a "theoretical construct" (mindfulness), a "practice of cultivating mindfulness" (such as meditation), and a "psychological process" (being mindful) (Germer, Siegel and Fulton 2005: 6).

Chiesa (2010) summarises the current 'scientific' evidence of vipassana meditation (which he abbreviates as VM). He cites a few hypotheses found in the literature on *how* vipassana improves health, i.e., on what its mechanism of action is. First hypothesis is that the awareness of the present moment without judgment practised in vipassana decreases "ruminative and dichotomous thinking" and thereby aids in re-perceiving reality in a more "flexible and adaptive way". The second hypothesis centres on the increased acceptance, non-judgment, and "acting with awareness" in VM that are repeatedly found to be associated with overall positive clinical outcomes in treating depression, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

When 'mindfulness' is offered as one of the techniques available in the repertoire of a psychotherapist, it is considered psychological medicine or part of

complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). When it is proved by clinical trials, it is evidence-based medicine. How then we think about vipassana, the *sittings* and what they *do* in the lives of its practitioners?

In the current global movement led by S.N. Goenka (1924-) vipassana is a secularized practice. The Buddhist *vipassana* aimed at spiritual liberation has been modified and popularized as simply vipassana, a standardized non-religious meditation technique. In retreats and everyday life, Goenka's vipassana claims to alleviate 'universal suffering' with breath/body awareness in silence, equanimity and compassion. This mind-body practice asserts its effectiveness on being present in the moment: in the continuing efforts to cultivate an awareness of regular breathing and body sensations without craving and without attachment to a particular sensation. Vipassana instructions invite the practitioners to *follow* the body as it *happens*. The practice involves focusing on breath, observing body sensations, managing thoughts and feelings to cultivate compassion. Through this process, practitioners let their body/mind pass into other modes of breathing, sensations and thought-feelings. With the hope that the practitioners will reach an embodied knowledge that the body/mind itself is impermanent (Fleischman 1991). In an ontological 'leap of faith', the practitioners project this realization to life outside, in observing the impermanence of all living beings, inanimate objects and phenomena outside the body/mind.

Prebish and Bauman (2002) consider the global vipassana movement as a latecomer and explain its popularity in the "secularization" (and re-enchantment) of basic Buddhist principles and practices. One may extend their argument further. In the world of psychotherapy, the clinical mindfulness practice is also a recent arrival. Mindfulness therapy may be conceptualised as an operationalized variant of the global vipassana movement, the result of a second degree of secularization and medicalization of the basic Buddhist principles and practices. While the vipassana movement promotes the practice of self-reflexivity in everyday life, mindfulness therapy is offered as a clinical intervention for both the clients and their therapists. The vipassana movement thrives on the global popularity of its prescribed technique, its silent retreats, its physical and moral regulations (e.g., a strict vegetarian diet, avoiding alcohol, smoking and other intoxicants etc.).

However, it is clearly indicated that vipassana is not meant to treat an individual with severe mental health problems (Dhamma.org n.d.b). To the contrary, Mindfulness psychotherapy rests its arguments on the 'scientific' evidence of the *efficacy* and *effectiveness* of using mindfulness – based therapies for mental health problems such as depression and anxiety disorders (Germer, Siegel and Fulton 2005). The everyday 'evidence' of the vipassana *effects* clearly illustrated that vipassana is also mobilised as 'self-therapy' and offers diverse benefits. The question is: Whether this practice lends itself to be studied with clinical trials. Or, should the anthropological *evidence*

(interpretation of the perceived effects) suffice to prove that there are indeed multiple *effects* even if the *efficacy* and *effectiveness* of the practice cannot be measured?

How does vipassana meditation compete with the scientific notions of *evidence*? First and foremost, it does not need to. There is a neat division of labour. Mindfulness therapy takes care of clients/patients with mental health problems. Vipassana movement addresses the individuals without mental health problems (according to the official discourse). Pieter the instructor emphasizes this point repeatedly: “Vipassana is for **healthy people**.” Second, the vipassana movement has its own claims to scientificity. The global movement has established a Vipassana Research Institute. A dedicated website offers publicly available documents by psychiatrists and social scientists on examples such as vipassana’s success with prison inmates and individuals with drug addiction problems (VRI 2010). Here we see the beginning of a divergence from the official discourse of the vipassana.

On the one hand, the vipassana organization claims that vipassana is not for combating severe mental health problems. On the other hand, it celebrates its success in reducing aggression and craving for drugs suggesting that it might be beneficial for certain mental health conditions. The narratives of the practitioners clearly illustrate this point. Such border-crossing is also done by the proponents of mindfulness in psychotherapy. Mindfulness psychotherapy states that its broader aim lies not only in relieving psychological distress but in achieving a holistic sense of well-being akin to spiritual liberation (Germer, Siegel and Fulton 2005). While the vipassana movement is transgressing its boundary from an everyday practice to a gradual claim of its mental health success, mindfulness therapy is also pushing its frontiers to the broader horizon of holistic well-being and not simply as a form of psychotherapy aimed at treating mental health problems.

Invention of traditions: Popular and scientific

Social scientists often suggest that whether it is a popular practice or therapeutic intervention, traditions are always-already “invented” (Giddens 2000:58; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Freud’s ‘original’ psychoanalysis has been articulated as a re-fashioning of ancient forms and techniques of self-care, posited as methods of self-knowledge (Hutton 1988). Mindfulness is based in Buddhist principles of *sati*. Goenka, too, claims that vipassana is the ‘original’ technique of the Buddha.

As students of medical anthropology, we realise that whatever the *actual* validity of such statements and claims may be, each episteme and therapeutic formulation invents and re-invents traditions of care to re-fashion into a culturally acceptable, available and accessible form of therapy. To make it subject to the *proof* of the current (scientific or popular) standards, and henceforth to be *distributed* and *consumed* by the clients (and/or patients). Until now, the discursive self-reflexivity of

psychoanalysis (also known as the talking therapy) and the re-conditioned reflexivity of cognitive-behavioural therapies are the predominant traditions of psychotherapy as models for alleviating psychological distress. Mindfulness is an odd addition within these Western models because of its origin from a tradition of the so-called East. It is understandable why it took such a long time to establish mindfulness as a scientific mode of therapy.

The global biomedical hegemony could not possibly accommodate a religious meditation (Theravada vipassana) or even a secularized meditation practice (Goenka's vipassana) although they are *always already* practised and considered beneficial by the practitioners. *Evidence* had to be scientific, validated by the "randomized controlled trials" or other, standard procedures. Kabat-Zinn's vigorous activism and scientific investments since the 1970s would not be fruitful if it had not been followed up by a series of successful clinical experimentation. Since the 1980s, Mindfulness has been reproduced in numerous trials and hundreds of publications. The latest being a peer-reviewed psychology journal, *Mindfulness*, in publication since 2010 by the prestigious Springer company. The journal is dedicated to an interdisciplinary viewpoint, interlinking the Western 'science' and the Eastern 'wisdom' traditions: "*Mindfulness* features diverse viewpoints, including psychology, psychiatry, medicine, neurobiology, psycho-neuroendocrinology, cognitive, behavioral, cultural, philosophy, spirituality, and wisdom traditions" (Springer n.d.). Tacit in this recent development is the fact that, to be subjected to the standards of intervention research, *vipassana* and *sati* had to be distilled and operationalized into a more culturally acceptable, *scientific* notion of mindfulness.

In conclusion

The problem I tried to address in this chapter is twofold. First, the problem is how to connect the practice to the perceived effects in daily life. This brings attention to the second question: what is *evidence* and what holds up as *evidence*? How do we enact *evidence*? We are not convinced if a clinical trial is the best method to know if and how a popular practice works. Yet that is the 'gold-standard' for producing the *evidence* of scientificity. No one except the vipassana practitioners (and family, friends, neighbours, colleagues maybe) know what happens to them as an effect of practicing vipassana. Of course, there are testimonials, books written by serious practitioners (Hart 1991, 1987), and endorsing psychiatrists (Fleischman 1991). I myself experienced the benefits to the extent that it made me curious about how others do it, what happens with them and how they articulate it. The whole field of 'mindfulness' is bent on bridging the psychological science and popular practice together. There is not only science but the politics of 'scientificity' is also involved.

The discussion on *evidence* in this chapter is by no means exhausted. I only traced some of the conflicts between the popular and the clinical, the religious and the

secular, the everyday anthropological versus the *other* scientific 'evidence'. I did not fully discuss let alone resolve them. There is the notion of scientific *evidence* in terms of *efficacy* and *effectiveness* of a health intervention. This constitutes proof that the intervention works. When it comes to recognizing the health *effects* of a popular practice what kind of *evidence* is relevant? Clinical researchers operationalize popular practice into clinical concepts (Mindfulness) to make it testable according to the scientific criteria of evidence. However, anthropological *evidence* on a popular practice formulates it differently. On the one hand, anthropological *evidence* interprets the intended/unintended *effects* in the broader context. On the other hand, anthropological *evidence* with an applied focus provides qualitative data on how such practice may work in real life. In the next chapter, I pay further attention to the latter and briefly address the epistemological dilemmas emerging from this research.

Chapter Seven

Vipassana meditation...the less you talk about it, the more you can obtain good results.

(U Ba Khin 1999:11)

Epistemological Dilemmas and Concluding Remarks

In the previous chapters, I described the reflexive technique (s) of vipassana to argue that it involves simultaneous (re) construction of the body and mind. I (re) presented the narratives of vipassana practitioners to illustrate how the practice is mobilized to deconstruct the notion of a former 'self' into the reconfiguration of personhood, a 'new' self. I further described the multiple effects of vipassana to critically examine the notions of 'evidence' and why standard measurements of *evidence* may not be applicable to this practice. In this concluding chapter, I briefly address the epistemological dilemmas, discuss the contribution of this thesis to current academic literature and raise questions for future investigation.

The first dilemma follows the argument in the last chapter. Following Lambert (2009), I consider this dilemma as inherent in the nature of 'anthropological evidence' as opposed to 'experimental data'. The fact that anthropological evidence 'derives from an intersubjective exchange the conditions for which are never identical' (Descola 2005: 69) makes it difficult to regard its knowledge production as evidence in the sense 'evidence-based medicine' wants it to be. Therefore, promoting *ethnographic evidence* as qualitative data on the *salutogenic* effects of the practice does not provide a clue on how such knowledge can be applicable in real life (for example, in health promotion). Unless I suggest that one should try *vipassana* as a 'universal remedy for universal suffering'. This is tantamount to turn the thesis into a propaganda tool.

The second dilemma is more specific to the problem of attempting an anthropological investigation of vipassana. Houtman concluded that 'academic anthropology was irreconcilable with meditation' (1990:127). His comment refers to the impossibility of participant-observation of a practice that prohibits writing, speaking, reading during the period of meditation. However, anthropology has extended far from relying only on 'participant observation' with multiple methods, for example, 'interactive interviewing'. So an anthropological investigation is not entirely impossible. This however does not resolve the dilemma completely. There are other troubles.

Body (mind) trouble?

Will we continue to "colonize" the flesh, stubbornly subjugating it to the powers of the mind, dragging it into the empire of language? Or will we allow ourselves to be challenged by the inarticulability of the flesh, have it "colonize" us? Will we reduce the body to our categories of thought? Or are we ready to accept that to introduce the body is to make visible the lack in our signifying capacities, to bring in an unsettling surplus to

the structure of meaning, an "excess" that will mess up our narratives by highlighting "the rest of what is"? (Van de Port 2009: 233)

Faced with the mockery of the Candomblé³⁰ priest (who said: "Oh I see! You study the superficial things!"), Van de Port (2009) questioned the anthropological enterprise of articulating what according to the practitioners/experts is not often expressible. He cites one of the Candomblé initiates reflecting on the ethnographies written on the possession cult, "What I read was irrelevant. There is no way to *queimar etapas* [skip stages, i.e., to know things before you are ready to know them]" (p. 232).

On my first meeting with instructor Pieter, I informed him about the research. He smiled and said, "What do you expect to achieve with research? You know what you know with practice. Just practice!" I told organizer Annelies that I was interested in how *body* was experienced in vipassana. She was surprised: "But vipassana is not about that! It is not about body experiences. What kind of questions are you asking?" Before I began to ask my questions, both advised me to reflect on the point of asking such questions. I was initially puzzled and wondered if *research* was indeed useless! However, following Van de Port (2009) I decided for the middle path.

Van de Port asserted that, as anthropologists, "we are in the business of writing, and we will have to make do with the medium we work with. We communicate and engage in critical debate, and cannot withdraw ourselves into the ultimate inarticulability of lived experiences through time" (2009: 233). In this research, I tried to write what can be said and left the *ineffable* unsaid. The vipassana practitioners will probably not gain much from my text. They know what they know with their own practice. The non-practicing audiences do not have access to the technique and they will 'make do' with this text.

In vipassana, *sitting* begins in *silence* but also in *speech*. In the fourth chapter, I detailed the voice instruction and the double practice of *sitting-listening* as dual techniques, of pedagogy and practice. I tried to articulate the *silence*, as well as the difficulties of 'translating the body'. To give words to 'experience' was a central dilemma. Besides, vipassana practice does not encourage talking. The practice is *done* in silence. A practitioner may have questions but it is advised that you ask the instructor during a course, or maybe when you meet him or her in a group sitting, or you can e-mail (as Claudia advised me to do).

There is an added difficulty that involves translation/interpretation of a different kind. What happens when vipassana travels from its multiple sites, in practice and in its representative texts to an academic text, the site of social science practice? My job in

³⁰ Bahian Candomblé is a spirit possession cult in Brazil.

this chapter is to recognise the possible and the incommensurable translations/interpretations of vipassana meditation in the language of the broader audience of social science. To (re) construct the theory and practice of vipassana in its own terms and translate/interpret to contribute to the problems of translation/interpretation of social practices to social science. If medical anthropology is a 'knowledge practice' of theorizing social practices to produce knowledge and vipassana is a practice where knowledge is only corollary to being/doing body/mind and being/doing-in-the-world – then to what extent are the knowledge practices in both traditions similar/different or just incommensurable? What kind of insights can be produced by making vipassana and medical anthropology co-eval in time, space and technique? So that the research is not a 'medical anthropological investigation of vipassana meditation' but an investigation of what it means to do a medical anthropological research on vipassana meditation. How is it at all possible to do so? What do we gain and what do we lose by doing that?

On the one hand, medical anthropology requires me to keep a critical distance from my own practice to deal with bias, and improve the credibility of research. On the other hand, vipassana instructions advise me to be wary of 'abstract concepts' and privilege 'experiential knowledge'. As I move further in the dual mode of being and doing, vipassana and social science – I come to the conclusion that vipassana is not just about 'experiencing' and 'doing' but also abstracting – in its own terms – theoretical points distilled from its practical techniques. They call it *pariyatti* (conceptualization/theories) and the practice/technique is known as *patipatti*. To compare it to social science and medical anthropology specifically, *theory* is mobilised to abstract knowledge from the multiple *practices* – of doing/sensing fieldwork and writing that again is doing/sensing.

Pagis (2010a) used the case study of vipassana meditation to illustrate three elements to position vipassana in a broader frame, a) relativity, b) directionality, and c) mutual influence. Conceptual knowledge (*pariyatti*) is provided with the technique (*patipatti*). In residential courses, this is done by offering instructions at daytime and detailed discussions in the evening. Although emphasis remains on 'mastering the technique'(s). The *relativity*, i.e., the ratio between conceptual and embodied knowledge is tilted towards the former but decreases (during the initial 10-days every evening there is a theoretical discussion and in daily life practice only 'mastering the technique' is advisable). The *directionality* of knowledge is towards embodiment, from abstract concepts. Finally the *mutual influence* of abstract and embodied knowledge, according to Pagis and my findings, is minimal among serious meditators. The embodiment of knowledge does not result in changing the conceptual knowledge of vipassana but vindicates the latter. However, in the case of experimenters (Marten) and in 'mindfulness' practices, it is obvious that certain elements are picked and harnessed, shedding vipassana of its metaphysics, making it amenable to scientific judgments. This is where I differ with Pagis' analysis. She claimed that advanced meditators' practice do

not feedback into new theories of reality, that they only adopted the vipassana theory. However, in minute ways the theories begin to diverge.

The aim of vipassana is to enable practitioners to “see things as they are”, and to “alleviate suffering”. It focuses more on individual body/mind and advises the practitioners to follow certain moral precepts and offer service. In short, vipassana positions itself as an ‘art of living’. The mode of inquiry is ‘embodied self-reflexivity’. There are many actors: the novices, the serious practitioners, the instructors/experts, the organisers/administrators, the experimenters and dropouts. The tradition has one living teacher (Goenka) and the shadow he invokes (Gotama the Buddha). This is where as a student of medical anthropology I experience discomfort. Why should I listen to Goenka and his assistant teachers? The responses I get can be summarised as follows: *You listen to the teaching only if it works for you. “You are your own master”. Try the technique, give it some time and then decide for yourself. Whether to proceed in the path or drop it altogether.*

Medical anthropology is an academic tradition where knowledge of human reality and the social world are produced focusing on certain methods. The discipline’s relationship to ‘truth claims’ is not single but plural. Moderate and humble: without generalization and transcendental but emphasizing localization and staying ‘experience-near’. Authorities are to be cited but emphasis is on the ‘rigor of methods’, ‘sampling’, ‘immersion’, ‘analysis’, ‘representation of voices from the field’. Approaching vipassana with medical anthropological tools, we are already on two different paths. Each tradition has its own claims to epistemology: “how do we know what we know”, ontology “what is the *nature* of a particular social reality/practice”, a logic: “what are the steps/styles of reasoning” and ethos: “what are the standards to follow?”

Towards an Ethnography of the Sitting body: Contributions and Future Aims

In this thesis, I can only raise these questions and cannot claim to resolve these dilemmas. My contribution lies in raising questions, not necessarily answering them. However, nearing the conclusion, I would like to revisit what I promised in the beginning, in the second chapter where I justified vipassana as a research problem.

The aim of this research was to contribute to the anthropology of body and body practices, to produce knowledge on vipassana which is a specific practice of ‘eastern’ origin, and not conflate it with practices of ‘family resemblance’, for example, yoga, which is different from vipassana in multiple ways. It was not my intention to conduct a comparative study of yoga and vipassana but to explore vipassana in its own terms.

Diverging from the usual phenomenological analysis of reflexive techniques, I attempted a double theoretical move to show that *experience* or *being* is also *doing*. In

the third chapter, with my analysis of the techniques I mobilised practice theory and phenomenology to illustrate how body and mind are *done* in vipassana.

The fourth empirical chapter however was an extension of what Pagis (2008) did in two other post-industrial settings, Israel and North America. I only replicated the analytical move of conceptualising vipassana as a globalized 'technology of the self' and illustrated the various ways of *doing* the self in vipassana.

The last chapter was illustrative of the *effects* experienced and formulated by the practitioners. To situate these *effects* to question evidence was in response to my shadow selves, a medical doctor and a public health professional. With this I hope to contribute to the current discussions in the anthropology of evidence, and the literature on how traditions are invented and to what effects.

I raised many questions and discussed only a few. Extending the limited fieldwork in the post-industrial setting in a cosmopolitan city, the future aim is to write the ethnography of this particular kind of *sitting* that involves *doing* on multiple levels. In research, we approach the subjects in many different ways and sitting is a common 'technique of the body'. Everybody sits. There is also *sitting* of a particular kind, offered as a 'universal remedy for universal suffering' - an 'art of living'. As we know, this kind of *sitting* goes by the name of vipassana meditation (or, just vipassana) and the *sitting* happens somewhere.

In fact, several research questions can guide the investigation of this practice in multiple sites. They include: How does vipassana travel globally? How do practitioners accept the culturally exotic terminology of vipassana? How do they articulate the *ineffable* practice of silence in words? How are yoga or similar practices of 'family resemblance' comparable to vipassana? What happens when practitioners mix different techniques? What kinds of effects are produced?

I hope to address some of these questions in the near future. In this thesis, my aim was to illustrate the diverse ways practitioners practice and mobilize a *sitting* technique to *do* the body, mind and self with multiple *effects* on their health and well-being. These findings illustrate the active enactment of what is often considered a *natural given* (body/mind as natural objects) as well as show how a popular practice can be *salutogenic* for the practitioners.

Epilogue

Having written down what I had to say, I try to straighten my back and ask myself, “Where do these formulations lead us? What is at stake and for whom?” There are at least two audiences to this text. The academic examiners will focus on the questions relevant to medical anthropology. I have another set of examiners: my research informants and the Vipassana Stichting in Amsterdam. They are curious to see what I have made of their contributions.

I tried to appease both. On the one hand, I tried to avoid jargon as much as possible to reach the wider audience. On the other hand, I had to *do* social science, part of which involved a certain mastery of its jargons. I fumbled as I negotiated these different languages: the language of social science and the language of vipassana; the language of the body/mind and the “English” language of scholarship; the language of my informants and my own English as a non-native speaker.

I acknowledge that I may not have done justice to everyone I spoke to, or, everything I saw, heard and sensed. Not all conversations during the last few months found their way in the thesis. Yet every person I met and talked within the course of my fieldwork contributed to it. It is my limitation that some voices were subdued and others stood out, that I emphasized certain descriptions and left out others. Given the limited time for fieldwork and writing it down, I had to choose from many different themes. Some may like the choice and others may not. This text is an assemblage of slices, (re) presenting the partial and shifting realities of the *sitting* and those who *sit*.

I do not claim to have written a representative text on vipassana meditation. I am still a novice, having practiced for little more than a year. I may have missed certain nuances that the seasoned practitioners (in vipassana or medical anthropology) would not. I consider the fieldwork and writing of this text as lessons in *doing* medical anthropology. It is an open text ready to be revisited. Suggestions for improvement from all quarters are welcome.

N.S.

Appendices

Appendix 1: A Short History of Vipassana (Source: Key Informant Narratives)

In the 1980s, S.N. Goenka (1924-), the founder of the vipassana organization in India, visited several countries in Europe. The first were France and the United Kingdom. Soon several organizations were formed and retreat centers were established. The oldest vipassana centre for residential courses was founded in the UK about twenty-five years ago, followed by France. In 1985, a couple of Dutch men and women travelled to meet the teacher in France and the UK, but it took another eleven years for the Netherlands to organize residential courses and group sittings. In 1996, a critical mass of 'old students' in the Netherlands, many of them Amsterdammers, joined together to found the Vipassana Stichting. It is a non-profit organization that organizes group sittings in Amsterdam and other cities, as well as residential courses twice a year in a rented location within the Netherlands. In 2000, the Dutch practitioners joined the Belgians to found a residential centre in Belgium close to the border with the Netherlands, within three hours of commuting by train from Amsterdam. The centre, known as *Dhamma Pajjota*, currently runs 10-day, shorter and longer courses for about 90-100 practitioners per course throughout the year. The rented location in the Netherlands runs 10-day courses only during the summer and Christmas holidays.

In 2009, the monthly daylong courses started in Amsterdam. But weekly group sittings in the city were already organized by serious practitioners. The *sites* of group sittings shifted along the movement pattern of the practitioners who organized them. A couple organized the first group *sitting* in the city but they no longer live in the Netherlands. In the last two years, the current group *sittings* take place where they are now: On Mondays *sitting* takes place in a big apartment in one of the busy shopping streets in central Amsterdam. On Wednesdays, the other *sitting* takes place in a quiet neighborhood in the suburbs.

Appendix 2: Glossary of *Vipassana* Terms (Adapted from Hart 1991: 159-164)

<i>Vipassana</i> terms	English translations/descriptions
<i>Anapana</i>	Awareness of respiration
<i>Anatta</i>	Not-self.
<i>Anicca</i>	Impermanent, ephemeral, changing.
<i>Bhavana</i>	Meditation
<i>Dhamma</i>	Law (way) of liberation; teaching of an enlightened person
<i>Dukkha</i>	Suffering, dissatisfaction.
<i>Metta</i>	Selfless love and goodwill. <i>Metta bhavana</i> is a systematic cultivation of <i>metta</i> by a technique of meditation
<i>Panna</i>	Wisdom. The third of the three trainings by which the Noble Eight-fold Path (the core of Buddha's teaching) is practiced. The wisdom (<i>panna</i>) trainings include, a) wisdom gaining from listening to others, b) wisdom gained by intellectual analysis, and c) wisdom developing from direct, personal experience. The last <i>panna</i> is cultivated by the practice of <i>vipassana-bhavana</i> . The other two trainings are <i>Sila</i> and <i>Samadhi</i> .
<i>Parami/Paramita</i>	Virtue; mental quality. The ten <i>parami</i> are: charity (<i>dana</i>), morality (<i>sila</i>), renunciation (<i>nekkhamma</i>), wisdom (<i>panna</i>), effort (<i>viriya</i>), tolerance (<i>khanti</i>), truthfulness (<i>sacca</i>), strong determination (<i>adhissthana</i>), selfless love (<i>metta</i>), and equanimity (<i>upekkha</i>). (Hart 1987: 92)
<i>Samadhi</i>	Concentration, control of one's own mind. The second of the three trainings by which the Noble Eight-fold Path (the core of Buddha's teaching) is practiced. Cultivating <i>Samadhi</i> is as an end in itself. The other two trainings are <i>Sila</i> and <i>Panna</i> .
<i>Sankhara</i>	Mental reaction, mental conditioning. One of the four mental processes, for example, <i>vedana</i> .
<i>Satipatthana</i>	The establishing of awareness. In the <i>satipatthana</i> course, four aspects of awareness are exercised: a) observation of the body, b) observation of the sensations in the body, c) observation of the mind, and d) observation of the contents of the mind.
<i>Sila</i>	Moral precept, morality and purity of vocal and physical actions that cause harm to others and oneself (to abstain from killing, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct and intoxicants). Right speech, right actions and right livelihood constitute the <i>sila</i> . The first of the three trainings through with the Noble Eight-fold Path (the core of Buddha's teaching) is practiced. The other two trainings are <i>Samadhi</i> and <i>Panna</i> .
<i>Vedana</i>	Sensation. One of the four mental processes, for example, <i>sankhara</i> .
<i>Vipassana</i>	Introspection, insight. Specifically insight into the impermanent nature of mind and body. <i>Vipassana bhavana</i> is the systematic development of insight through the meditation technique of observing sensations within the body.

Appendix 3: List of Methods and Research Instruments

Appendix 3a: List of Methods

Method (s)	Tool (s)	Number/Items	Location (s)	Duration
Interactive interviews	Interactive interview guide	12 (twelve) informants	Informant's house/my house in Amsterdam	2-3 hours including the <i>sitting</i>
Informal conversation	-	Friends (Andrea, Ananya, Jannet and Neela)	a) Various locations in Amsterdam b) E-mail and google chats	From few minutes to a couple of hours
Key informant interview	Key informant interview guide	2 (two) key informants	Key informant's house in Amsterdam	1-2 hours
Participant observation	Participant observation checklist	8 (eight) weekly group sittings	Respective sites in Amsterdam	1.5-2 hours (1 hour sitting)
		1 (one) monthly sittings [the preceding three sittings were not part of the formal fieldwork]	Respective site in Amsterdam	10 hours (8 a.m. - 6 p.m.)
Qualitative content analysis	Content analysis checklist	2 (two) audio CDs; selected contents from vipassana-related websites (www.dhamma.org; nl.dhamma.org; www.vridhamma.org);	One CD was collected from an informant and the other I had in my possession	1 hour each
Review	Review guide	vipassana-related texts by practitioners (Fleischman 1991; Hart 1991, 1987; Givsen-Wilson 1998)	I borrowed a few titles from my informants and bought the rest	-
Personal diary	Personal diary items	15 (fifteen) entries	At home, group sittings and the day-long course	-

Appendix 3b: Interactive Interview Guide for the Vipassana Practitioners

[I explained the aim of my research and took verbal informed consent]

A. Background: Please tell me a bit about your background.

[I asked most informants at various points during the interview questions regarding family and work situation, religious background, history of health problems or life crises. I also took note of gender, age, and ethnicity. During the formal interviews with my friends, I did not ask them background questions (since I already had the information). With them, I started with the first interview question directly relevant to my research]

B. Interview questions

1. Ontology (Starting question)

- a) If I did not know anything about vipassana, what would you tell me about it?
- b) What is vipassana?
- c) What kind of practice is vipassana?

2. Praxiography

- a) How do you practice vipassana in daily life?
- b) How often? Where? Alone, with others?
- c) Do you practice the five moral precepts (*sila*)?
- d) Are you involved with any other practice (for example yoga) or other meditation technique?
- e) Related to vipassana, what are some of the things you do other than just *sitting*? (e.g., reading vipassana books, accessing websites, serving, organizing, listening to CDs etc.)

3. Phenomenological

- a) What happens when you practice vipassana?
- b) Where does it happen? (Body/ mind?)

4. *Focused life history* (relating life events to the beginning of vipassana)

[When I asked the background questions, a few informants narrated a brief life history linking it to vipassana]

- a) How did you start vipassana?
- b) What made you do it?
- c) What makes you continue?

4. *Effects and articulation*

- a) What are the effects of vipassana in your daily life?
- b) Do you notice any effect on your health? Your sense of well-being?
- c) How do you link these effects to the practice of vipassana?

6. *Phenomenological/Praxiographic questions* (after the joint sitting)

- a) What happened?
- b) What did you do? How did you feel?

7. *Critical question*

- a) What do you not like about vipassana?
- b) What are the side effects of vipassana?

8. *Final question*

- a) Do you wish to add something more to this discussion?
- b) Do you have any question for me?

Appendix 3c: Key Informant Interview Guide

[I explained the aim of my research and took verbal informed consent. I also asked the background questions during various points of the interview following the items I mentioned in appendix 3b.]

A. General questions regarding their involvement with the vipassana organization

- 1. How long have you been involved with the voluntary organization?

2. What are your roles in the organization?
3. What makes you get involved with the organization?
4. How and when were you first exposed to vipassana?
5. How long have you been practicing?
6. How many courses have you taken?
7. Have you served in courses?

B. History and context of vipassana in the Netherlands

1. How did vipassana start in the Netherlands?
2. How does the voluntary organisation work?
3. How does the organisation manage its expenses?

C. About vipassana practitioners

1. How often do you meet other vipassana practitioners?
2. Do you feel you are part of a community?
3. Do you think there are more women than men who practice vipassana?

D. Final questions

1. Do you wish to add something to this discussion on vipassana?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 3d: Participant Observation Checklist (weekly and monthly sittings)

1. Process of gaining access and getting permission from the organisers
2. Role of researcher
3. Settings: Site and location, where and which time of the day
4. Organization: How is it organised? What are the sitting arrangements? What is the schedule?
5. Actors: Who is present? Who are participating and how? (Description in terms of gender, age group, ethnicity, roles as much as possible)
6. Activities: What are the different activities before, during and after the sittings?
7. Interactions: How do the actors (instructors, practitioners, organisers) interact?
8. Space: What kind of space is selected? How space is used?
9. Time: How long does it take? How is time organised?
10. Objects: What are the objects used in the sitting? How are the objects handled (e.g., food and beverage, cushions, blankets etc.)?
11. Sound and other senses: What kind of silence is produced during the sitting?
12. Body techniques and hierarchies: What kinds of postures are adopted? Who sits where and how?
13. Personal reflections: How does it make me feel? How does research process interfere with my own *sitting*?

Appendix 3e: Checklist for Qualitative Content Analysis (of audio CDs and vipassana websites) and Review Guide (vipassana texts by practitioners)

1. What is vipassana?
2. What is the aim of vipassana?
3. What are the techniques?
4. How should one practice vipassana?
5. What are the effects of practicing vipassana?

6. What is the theory behind the technique?
7. What is the historical background of the practice?

Appendix 3f: Personal Diary Items (recording my vipassana practice and experience)

1. Settings: (alone in my room, group sittings, sittings with friends and informants)
2. Routine of practice: Daily/ irregular, timing and schedule
3. Experiences: Focusing on what happens in the body during the sitting
4. Effects: Recording immediate and past effects of vipassana
5. Articulation: How do I connect the practice and experience to the effects?
6. Additional reflections on the unintended effects

Appendix 4: Full transcript of chants and English translations

Appendix 4a: A Hindi invocation that precedes each sitting (No English translation is provided in the audio CD) (VRI 2006:66-67)

Hindi chant

Ananta pūṇa mayī,
 Ananta guṇamayī
 Buddha kī nirvāṇa-dhātu,
 Dharama- dhātu, bodhi- dhātu.
 Śṭṣa para jāge pratikṣaṇa,
 hṛdaya meṅ jāge pratikṣaṇa,
 aṅga- aṅga jāge pratikṣaṇa.

English translation

Source of infinite merit
 Of infinite virtues,
 [is] the Buddha's element of *nibbāna*,
 Of Dhamma, of enlightenment!
 May it arise on the [top of the] head every moment, in
 the heart every moment,
 In every part of the body every moment.

Appendix 4b: The Pali chant in the end of each *vipassana* sitting (VRI 2006:68-69)

Pali chant

Sabbesu cakkavālesu
 Yakkha deva ca brahmunno;
 Yam amhehi katam punnam
 Sabba-sampatti sadhakam.
 Sabbe tam anumoditva
 Samagga sasane rata
 Pamadarihita hontu
 Arakkhasu visesato.
 Punna-bhagamidam c'annam,
 Samam dadama karitam
 Anumdantu tam sabbe
 Medini thatu sakkhike.

English translation

In all the world systems
 May the *yakkhas*, *devas* and *brahmas*
 Rejoice in this merit done by us,
 Which is productive of all prosperity.
 May they all,
 Unitedly devoted to the teaching,
 Be without negligence
 Especially in giving protection.
 The merit gained now and previously
 We share equally [with them],
 May they all accept with joy
 And may the earth stand witness.

References

- Barry, Christine Ann
2006 The Role of Evidence in Alternative Medicine: Contrasting Biomedical and Anthropological Approaches. *Social Science & Medicine* 62: 2646-2657.
- Bion, W.R.
1979. The Dawn of Oblivion. *In A Memoir of the Future*. Pp. 429-576. London: Karnac.
- Boeddistische Omroep Stichting (BOS)
2011 Change Your Mind Day: Maak Kennis met Mediteren in het Oosterpark. <http://www.changeyourmindday.nl>, accessed July 30, 2011.
- Brook, Robert H., and Kathleen N. Lohr
1985 Efficacy, Effectiveness, Variations, and Quality: Boundary-Crossing Research. *Medical Care*, 23 (5):710-722.
- Brown, David and Aspasia Leledaki
2010 Eastern Movement Forms as Body-self Transforming Cultural Practices in the West: Towards a Sociological Perspective. *Cultural Sociology* 4 (1): 123-154.
- Buddha Dharma Education Association
2011 Sitting Meditaion Postures. <http://www.buddhanet.net/postures.htm>, accessed July 21, 2011.
- Burger, Maya
2006 What Price Salvation? The Exchange of Salvation Goods between India and the West. *Social Compass* 53(1): 81-95.
- Chiesa, Alberto
2010 Vipassana Meditation: Systematic Review of Current Evidence. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 16 (1): 37-46.
- Confalonierie, Pierluigi (ed.)
1999 The Clock of Vipassana Has Struck: The Teachings and Writings of Sayagyi U Ba Khin with Commentary by S.N.Goenka. Washington: Vipassana Research Publications.
- Cook, Joanne
2010 Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crossley, Nick
2005 Mapping Reflexive Body Techniques: On Body Modification and Maintenance. *Body & Society* 11 (1): 1-35. doi: 10.1177/1357034X05049848.
- Csordas, Thomas J.
2007 Global Religion and the Re-enchantment of the World: The Case of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. *Anthropological Theory* 7 (3): 295-314.
2004 Evidence of and for what? *Anthropological Theory* 4(4): 473-480.
1993 Somatic Modes of Attention. *Cultural Anthropology* 8 (2): 135 – 156.
- Dean, Kathryn, and Ilona Kickbusch
1995 Health related Behaviour in Health Promotion: Utilizing the Concept of Self Care. *Health Promotion International* 10 (1): 35-40.
- Descola, Philippe
2005 On Anthropological Knowledge. *Social Anthropology* 13 (1): 65-73.
- Detige, Tillo
2009 'Modern Boeddhisme & De Vipassanā Meditatie Tradities [Modern Buddhism and the Vipassana Meditation Traditions]. Unpublished M.A. thesis, Department of Oriental Languages and Cultures, University of Ghent.

- Dhammapada
N.d. The Pairs. <http://viewonbuddhism.org/resources/dhammapada.html>, accessed August 2, 2011.
- Dhamma.org
N.d.a. Alphabetical List of Course Schedules. <http://www.dhamma.org/en/alphalist.shtml>, accessed April 2, 2011
N.d.b. Introduction to the Technique. <http://www.dhamma.org/en/code.shtml>, accessed May 3, 2011.
- Die Spirituelle Dimension
2010 Sitzen. <http://s-dimension.ch/sitzen.png>, accessed August 2, 2010.
- Favret-Saada, Jeanne
1980 *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Fleischman, Paul R.
1991 *Vipassana Meditation: Healing the Healer and The Experience of Impermanence*. Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute.
- Foucault, Michel
1988 *Technologies of the Self*. In *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, eds. Pp. 16-49. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Fronsdal, Gil
2002 *Virtues without Rules: Ethics in the Insight Meditation Movement*. In Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, eds. *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*. Pp. 285-308. Berkeley: University California Press.
- Germer, Christopher K., Siegel, Ronald D., & Paul R. Fulton
2005 *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Ghassemi, Jeffrey
2005 *Finding the Evidence in CAM: A Student's Perspective*. *eCAM* 2 (3): 395-397. doi:10.1093/ecam/neh111.
- Giddens, Anthony
2000 *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*. New York: Routledge.
- Given-Wilson, Patrick
1998 *Introduction*. In *Satipatthana Sutta Discourses* by S.N.Goenka. Pp.i-xii. Seattle: Vipassana Research Publications.
- Goleman, Daniel
1977 *The Varieties of the Meditative Experience*. New York: E.P.Dutton.
- Hacking, Ian
2002 *Historical Ontology*. In *Historical Ontology*. Pp. 1-26. Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J.
1999 *New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian's Perspective*. *Social Compass* 46(2): 145-160.
- Harper, Douglas
2010 *Medical*. In *Online Etymology Dictionary*. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=medical>, accessed July 29, 2011.

- Hart, William (ed.)
 1991 The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as taught by S.N.Goenka. Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute.
 1987 The Discourse Summaries: Talks from a Ten-day Course in Vipassana Meditation. Igatpuri Vipassana Research Institute.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. And Terence O. Ranger
 1983 The Invention of Tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Houtman, Gustaff
 1990 Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma. Ph.D. Dissertation, The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- Hutton, Patrick H.
 1988 Foucault, Freud, and the Technologies of the Self. *In* Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, eds. Pp 121-144. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- Karsten, Franciscus Simeon
 2011 Fenomenologie van de Meditatie: Een Onderzoek naar Merleau-Ponty en Vipassana Meditatie [Phenomenology of Meditation: A Study of Merleau-Pony and Vipassana Meditation]. Unpublished B.A. thesis, Department of Philosophy, University of Amsterdam.
- Keller, Evelyn Fox
 2007 Whole Bodies, Whole Persons? Cultural Studies, Psychoanalysis and Biology. *In* Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations. Joao Biehl, Byron Good and Arthur Kleinman, eds. Pp. 352-361. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kersenboom, Saskia
 2001 The Faculty of the Voice. <http://www.parampara.nl/faculty/text.htm>, accessed May 4, 2011.
 1995 Word, Sound, Image: The Life of the Tamil Text. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Kirmayer, Laurence J.
 2007 Psychotherapy and the Cultural Concept of the Person. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 44 (2):232-257.
 2006 Beyond the 'New Cross-cultural Psychiatry': Cultural Biology, Discursive Psychology and the Ironies of Globalization. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 43 (1): 126-144.
- Kleinman, Arthur and Joan Kleinman
 1998 Suffering and its Professional Transformation: Toward an Ethnography of Interpersonal Experience. *In* The Art of Medical Anthropology. Sjaak van der Geest and S. Rienks, eds. Pp. 199-214. Amsterdam: Spinhuis.
- Kleisen, Anne
 2010 Ja, Ik Zit! Jonge Boeddhisten over Relaties, Seks, Werk en andere Aardse Zaken [Yes, I Sit: Young Buddhists about Relationship, Sex, Work and other Earthly Matters]. Rotterdam: Asoka.
- Lambert, Helen
 2009 Evidentiary Truths? The Evidence of Anthropology through the Anthropology of Medical Evidence. *Anthropology Today* 25(1): 16-20.
- Loss, Joseph
 2010 Buddha-Dhamma in Israel: Explicit Non-Religious and Implicit Non-Secular Localization of Religion. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13 (4): 84-105.

- Mak, Geert
2001 Amsterdam: A Brief Life of the City. Philipp Blom, trans. London: Vintage Books.
- Mauss, Marcel
1973[1935] Techniques of the body. *Economy and Society* 2 (1): 70-88. doi: 10.1080/03085147300000003.
- Mead, George H.
1934 Mind Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice
2002 [1945] Phenomenology of Perception. London: Routledge.
- Mogendorff, Karen
2007 Looking in a Mirror: Creating Space to Explore Identities as Persons with Impairments. *Medische Anthropologie* 19 (2): 269-287.
- Mol, Annemarie
2002 Doing Theory. *In* The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice. Pp.151-184. Durham: Duke University Press.
2004 Embodied Action, Enacted Bodies: The Example of Hypoglycemia. *Body & Society* 10 (2-3): 43-62.
2006 Proving or Improving: On Health Care Research as a Form of Self-Reflection. *Qualitative Health Research*. 16(3): 405-414. doi: 10.1177/1049732305285856.
- Neubert, Frank
2008 Ritualdiskurs, Ritualkritik, und Meditationspraxis: Das Beispiel von Vipassana nach S.N.Goenka im "Westen" [Ritual Discourse, Ritual Critique, and Meditation Practice: The Case of S.N. Goenka's Vipassana in the "West"]. *Numen* 55 (4): 411-439.
- Nottingham, Elizabeth K.
1958 Buddhist Meditation in Burma.
<http://enlight.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JRAN/an140555.pdf>, accessed April 2, 2011.
- Office of Technology Assessment
1978 Assessing the Efficacy and Safety of Medical Technologies. Washing-ton, DC: Congress of the United States, Office of Technology Assessment, OTA-H-75.
- Pagis, Michal
2010a From Abstract Concepts to Experiential Knowledge: Embodying Enlightenment in a Meditation Centre. *Qualitative Sociology*. DOI 10.1007/s11133-010-9169-6.
2010b Producing Intersubjectivity in Silence: An Ethnographic Study of Meditation Practice. *Ethnography* 11(2):309-328.
2009 Embodied Self-Reflexivity. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 72 (3): 265-283.
2008 Cultivating Selves: Vipassana Meditation and the Microsociology of Experience. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago.
- Palmer, Daniel E.
1998 On Refusing Who We Are: Foucault's Critique of the Epistemic Subject. *Philosophy Today* 42 (4): 402-410.
- Parks, Tim
2010 Teach Us to Sit Still: A Sceptic's Search for Health and Healing. London: Harvill Secker.
- Pariyatti.org
2011 Pariyatti: Supporting the Path to Liberation. <http://www.pariyatti.org>, accessed July 21, 2011.

- Philipp, Peter, and Richard Raatzsch
 1993 Essays on Wittgenstein. Working Papers from the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen No. 6. Bergen: University of Bergen.
<http://wab.aksis.uib.no/wpno6.pdf>, accessed April 2, 2011.
- Prebish, Charles S. and Martin Bauman, eds.
 2002 *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Samudra, Jaida Kim
 2008 Memory in our Body: Thick Participation and the Translation of Kinesthetic Experience. *American Ethnologist* 35(4): 665-681. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00104.x.
- Singleton, Mark
 2010 Introduction. *In Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. Pp. 3-24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Singleton Mark, and Jean Byrne
 2008 Introduction. *In Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, eds. Pp.1-14. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Benjamin Richard
 2007 Body, Mind and Spirit? Towards an Analysis of the Practice of Yoga. *Body & Society* 13 (2): 25-46. doi: 10.1177/1357034X07077771.
- Springer
 N.d. Mindfulness. <http://www.springer.com/psychology/journal/12671>
- Stoller, Paul
 1997 Prologue: The Scholar's Body. *In Sensuous Scholarship*. Pp. ix – xviii. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Synbuddhismus
 2010 Stilles-sitzen. <http://synbuddhismus.blogspot.com/2010/12/stilles-sitzen.html>, accessed August 2, 2011.
- Tillmann-Healy, Lisa M.
 2003 Friendship as Method. *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (5): 729 -749. doi: 10.1177/1077800403254894.
- U Ba Khin, Sayagyi
 1999 Editor's preface. *In The Clock of Vipassana Has Struck: The Teachings and Writings of Sayagyi U Ba Khin with Commentary by S.N.Goenka*. Pierluigi Confalonierie, ed. Pp. 11-15. Washington: Vipassana Research Publications.
- Van de Port, Mattijs
 2009 Body Trouble. *Material Religion* 5(2): 232-233. doi: 10.2752/174322009X12448040551800.
- Van der Riet, Pamela
 2011 Vipassana Meditation: One Woman's Narrative. *Collegian: Journal of the Royal College of Nursing Australia* 18 (1): 36-42. doi:10.1016/j.colegn.2010.10.002.
- Van der Veer, Peter
 2007 Global Breathing: Religious Utopias in India and China. *Anthropological Theory* 7(3): 315-328.
- Van Otterloo, Anneke H.
 1999 Selfspirituality and the Body: New Age Centres in the Netherlands since the 1960s. *Social Compass* 46 (2): 191-202.

Vipassana Research Institute (VRI)

2010 Publications and Research Papers.

<http://www.vridhamma.org/Research.aspx>, accessed April 2, 2011.

2006 *The Gem Set in Gold: A Manual of Pariyatti Containing the Pali and Hindi chanting from a Ten-day Course of Vipassana Meditation as taught by Acharya S.N. Goenka.* Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Publications.

Wilber, Ken

1993 *Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber.* Boston: Shambhala Publications.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig

1969 Proposition 40. In *On Certainty.* G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, eds. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, Translation. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<http://budni.by.ru/oncertainty.html>, accessed July 28, 2011.

1953 *Philosophical Investigations.* E. Anscombe, Translation. Oxford: Blackwell.