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**Considering Oppression Through a Buddhist Lens: Conceit of Self and the Comparing
Mind**

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Dr. Melissa Jean, Dr. Andrew Olendzki

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the individuals who have participated in the Introduction to Mindfulness programs I began offering in early 2018. Their insights, comments, questions, feedback, and encouragement to develop further programming have been most helpful. I am grateful to my first Insight Dialogue partner, Linda, with whom I learned so much, and to my more recent study partner, Diane, with whom I continue to learn. Many thanks to Doug for thoughtfully and critically reading multiple drafts of this work in progress. Finally, I am thankful for curiosity and for the freedom to pursue it.

Abstract

This thesis explores Buddhist concepts of conceit of self and the comparing mind and the impact they have on an individual's interaction with the wider world, specifically in relation to behavior that could unknowingly contribute to oppression. It asks if discussion, dialogue, and mindfulness practice around concepts of conceit of self and the comparing mind could help to illuminate and evaluate bias and reduce prejudice, discrimination, and oppression. Dharma talks and articles about conceit of self and the comparing mind are engaging and relatable (Baraz, 2011; Bradshaw, 2016; Feldman, 2008; Fulton, 2018), as are Buddhist informed social justice views that include these concepts (Manuel, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). This thesis argues that awareness of conceit of self and the comparing mind, along with the intention to foster and practice an attitude of curiosity toward the self and interdependence with others, will increase personal, interpersonal, and societal harmony and decrease oppression. This thesis includes a facilitator's guide for a course offering called "The Self and Comparison." The guide contains a program description and lesson plans, suggested resources and practice assignments for participants, and sample proposal, promotional, and evaluation notes. The goal of the program is to increase individual awareness of the self and comparison in an environment similar to the third space written about by Williams et al. (2016), incorporating mindfulness meditation in a group setting. This Creative Project aims to increase awareness of conceit of self and the comparing mind and to provide opportunities for the facilitator and participants to foster and practice an attitude of curiosity toward the self and interdependence with others.

Keywords: mindfulness, meditation, *māna*, conceit of self, oppression

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Considering Oppression Through a Buddhist Lens: Conceit of Self and the Comparing Mind

This thesis explores Buddhist concepts of conceit of self and the comparing mind, and the impact they have on an individual's interaction with the wider world, specifically in relation to behavior that could unknowingly contribute to oppression. It asks if discussion, dialogue, and mindfulness practice around concepts of conceit of self and the comparing mind could help to illuminate and evaluate bias and reduce prejudice, discrimination and oppression. When I have engaged in conversation about these concepts with others—using primarily non-Buddhist language—there is immediate recognition of both the tendency we have to compare ourselves to others and the perils of doing so. The rich stories we share and the enthusiasm with which we speak lead me to believe that these topics are worthy of attention and deeper understanding. Dharma talks and articles about conceit of self and the comparing mind are engaging and relatable (Baraz, 2011; Bradshaw, 2016; Feldman, 2008; Fulton, 2018) as are Buddhist informed social justice views that include these concepts (Manuel, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). I am interested in engaging in dialogue with the general public around these ideas, especially around the connection or linkage between one's personal and interpersonal relationship with self and its relationship generally and broadly to the structural foundations of oppression. I argue that awareness of conceit of self and the comparing mind, and intention to foster and practice an attitude of curiosity toward the self and interdependence with others will increase personal, interpersonal, and societal harmony and decrease oppression.

Definitions of Prejudice, Discrimination, and Oppression

This paper examines concepts of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression in an effort to contextualize the process by which individual biases can be externalized and systematized. These

terms are defined here to provide a common understanding and facilitate discussion throughout this paper. Prejudice refers to “a feeling of like or dislike for someone or something especially when it is not reasonable or logical” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Discrimination is “the practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from other people or groups of people” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Discrimination occurs when individuals not only feel prejudice (either positive or negative) but act upon it. Nieto et al. (2014) define oppression as “(1) the overvaluing of some groups (and overvaluing everything associated with those groups) and the undervaluing of some groups (and undervaluing everything associated with those groups) [and] (2) unnecessary suffering caused by social inequality” (p. 43). These appraisals are fixed within social systems (Nieto et al., 2014). Additionally, oppression “is crosscutting, systematic, constant, and pervasive. It’s both external and internal” (p. 81). It is important to note that prejudice is internal bias, discrimination is external bias, and oppression occurs when discrimination becomes systemic. Oppression can take the form of ageism (Applewhite, 2019), racism, sexism (DiAngelo, 2018) and other identity-based oppression such as that based on gender, disability, religion, or sexual identity (Nieto et al., 2014).

Notes on “We/us” language

I have carefully considered the use of “we/us” language throughout this thesis. I have struggled to discern and examine any “in-group/out-group” thinking and revise language accordingly. I have made every effort to limit “we/us” language. Remaining “we/us” language is either part of a direct quote from other works or deliberately chosen by me, often to provide continuity in pronouns before or after a direct quote, or within and adjacent to paraphrased material. My intention is that each “we” and “us” included is meant to apply universally to every reader, indeed to every human being, although I acknowledge that I cannot be certain of how the

language I choose will be received. My hope is that what remains is a judicious use of “we/us” language that allows the topic to be personally felt by each reader. Additionally, I urge readers to use Siddhattha Gotama’s advice to test teachings for ourselves when reading and considering the contents of this thesis.

Author’s Personal Experience

I am drawn to this work by a strong personal sense that concepts of the conceit of self and comparison to others that lead to oppression are so pervasive that they exist unrecognized, only recognized in the abstract, or as concepts outside of the self. Through attention to these concepts, I wish to bring awareness to thoughts of superiority, inferiority, and equality and respond with compassion and courage to examine internally held bias. I wish to act consciously and in congruence with my intentions.

Additionally, I am drawn to this work out of curiosity. I am a white female born in 1963. My ancestors are Greek and Scandinavian. I grew up in the northeastern United States in a predominately white suburban area. My parents are older than the parents of many of my peers and they grew up during the depression. Social changes that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s affected me through my interaction with the wider world rather than through my immediate family. I remember bias and prejudice being discussed, for example, in my high school church youth group, but I did not have a clear understanding of it. I remember feeling some guilt about white privilege and not knowing how to respond. In my high school graduating class of about 150, I believe there were two students of African American descent. I was in classes with and became friends with one of these students.

When my friend invited me to go with her to an event at Boston University where both of us planned to apply, we went together even though I had not heard about the event. It turned out

to be an event tailored for African American high school students. I remember feeling different as the only white person in the room. I recall those in charge not being sure what to do with me and feeling grateful they decided I could stay, especially since my friend and I had travelled into the city together.

My daughters have also grown up in the northeast in a suburb with a little more diversity than I experienced. Our family has hosted exchange students from Germany, Hong Kong, Spain, and Egypt. My older daughter studied for four years in the United Arab Emirates at a university with an international student body and faculty and spent semesters in Ghana and Costa Rica. My younger daughter is an undergraduate student in the United States at a college with a high level of diversity. Once my older daughter told me that she woke up in Ghana and forgot where she was; we talked about how the only real constant we have is the “self.” All we ever know we have is our embodied self. How can we awaken in this life without deeply pondering our embodied nature?

The Literature Review supporting this work follows in the next section.

Literature Review

It is fascinating to contemplate the relationship between one’s inner and outer world and how the quality of one’s internal and interpersonal relationships might contribute to justice in the world. This review explores conceit of self, the comparing mind, and the separate self as described in Buddhism and situated in Buddhist literature and dharma talks, in order to examine the energy individuals contribute to their immediate environment and beyond. Next, integrated concepts of intersectionality, kyriarchy, and rankism—all of which explore discrimination and oppression—are outlined and discussed. Then, various Buddhist-informed social justice views are considered. This review concludes with thoughts about how inner and outer growth are

related and how individuals can understand personal interaction in ways that reflect the justice they hope to create in society. This review illustrates that connections between personal, interpersonal, and societal forces are worthy of attention and consideration and perhaps deserve a wider audience beyond Buddhism and academia.

Conceit of Self, the Comparing Mind, and the Separate Self

Related concepts of *māna*, the comparing mind, and the separate self are discussed individually below. Because these concepts are interconnected, there is some overlap between sections.

Conceit of Self

Conceit of self, or *māna* in Pali, is considered one of the last impediments to full awakening (Feldman, 2008; Fulton, 2018). Conceit of self “manifests in the feelings of being better than, worse than, and equal to another” (Feldman, 2008). It is comparing.

Most people understand the English word conceit as “excessive pride in oneself” (Oxford English and Spanish Dictionary, n.d.). This interpretation makes it tempting to exempt one’s own self from personal consideration of the concept because it associates conceit with qualities generally seen as negative, such as vanity or narcissism. However, as described above, in Buddhist language conceit includes a full range of feelings including better than, worse than, and equal to. This broad and comprehensive term encourages in depth consideration of conceit and its nuanced nature. With compassionate awareness, this understanding can allow us to see ourselves in the concept, and to be curious about its effect on our relationships.

In a dharma talk about *māna*, Rebecca Bradshaw (2016) speaks about superiority conceit, inferiority conceit, and equality conceit. She emphasizes that measuring oneself in comparison to others perpetuates the contracting delusion of an independent, permanent, and separate self that

can feel like a prison for the mind and body. Bradshaw (2016) states that superiority conceit, or feeling “better than” others, may manifest as a protective hardness of heart that shields fears of inferiority. She says it is important to distinguish superiority conceit from a wholesome open-hearted acknowledgement of one’s developing strengths, which is healthy and does not involve comparison with others. Inferiority conceit occurs when one feels “less than” others, or not good enough. There is a diminished sense of being seen and heard (Bradshaw, 2016). Equality conceit or being “equal to” others can seem positive but is problematic because of its inherent separation in which “. . . there’s still a sense of self that is arising; there’s still the comparison . . .”

(Bradshaw, 2016, 47:05). Additionally, there is “the possibility that when we look at ourselves as equal to others that we’re not really being authentic, that we’re valuing ourselves in relationship to what others think of us rather than really trusting ourselves and our unique path” (47:30). With an ongoing practice we see our own lives and the lives of others more clearly (2016).

Superiority conceit can manifest as culturally conditioned superiority in areas such as race, class, and nationality, creating an inflated feeling of “better than” (Bradshaw, 2016). Additionally, superiority conceit shows up in the dominant cultural values of a country (2016). Bradshaw (2016) names individualism and independence as values that carry a lot of weight and have become standard and often unquestioned in the United States. However, “. . . what can happen is that other values such as interdependence [and] community, might be undervalued” (30:26). Diverse communities allow individuals the valuable opportunity to learn from and cultivate values that may not be dominant in any given culture (2016).

Bradshaw (2016) outlines several approaches individuals can take to lessen identification with conceit of self when it arises. One can name thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to. Conceit can be recognized as “just a thought” to let go of. It can help to recall the impermanence

of any condition. Finally, we can feel the suffering caused by the conceit (2016). All of these strategies involve breaking the conditioned habit of *māna*.

The Comparing Mind

In a dharma talk about the comparing mind, James Baraz (2011) speaks about comparing oneself to others or to one's own self in the past. He emphasizes that social situations provide opportunities for self-observation and growth. During retreat, for example, one might compare portion sizes, notice when and by whom silverware is dropped, or observe the relative ease with which others appear to be practicing meditation. As Bradshaw (2016) did earlier, Baraz (2011) emphasizes the value of watching the mind and nonjudgmentally noticing comparing thoughts while they occur. He states that we do not control or invite our thoughts, yet awareness of our thoughts *as thoughts* allows us to respond mindfully. Baraz (2011) offers a translation of some words of the Buddha:

One who thinks oneself equal to others, or superior, or inferior, for that very reason disputes, but one who is unmoved under those three conditions, for that person the notions equal, superior, and inferior do not exist. For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world, annoying people. (5:12)

According to Baraz (2011), conceit of self is rooted in fear and a sense of unworthiness. Baraz (2011) relates an experience he witnessed in 1979 during which the Dalai Lama was asked for advice about unworthiness and self-hatred. In essence, the Dalai Lama replied, with great compassion, "What makes you think that everything else belongs in the fabric of life and somehow, you're not good enough, that you're a mistake?" (Baraz, 2011, 23:09). The idea that

everything and everyone belongs and has value is supported in the material reviewed in this paper. With the proper attitude, view, and practice we can recognize our own and every other person's individual talents, abilities, and essence and see these as unique contributions to the whole of society. Baraz (2011) describes life's play of consciousness and asks,

How can you compare what's coming through you, the pure awareness that can come through you, or the unconditional love that comes through you, with somebody else's? Can you say, 'My unconditional love is better than his'? It doesn't make any sense. 'My pure awareness is better than theirs.' It's not yours to begin with. But you can celebrate it. You can uncover what obscures it. It's just a play of consciousness moving through us.
(56:03)

With these words, Baraz (2011) illustrates that, seen from the perspective of the whole, the comparing mind serves to separate us unnecessarily. As we will discuss later, it is our embodied state, with physical needs, that makes us most efficient and likely to survive when we adopt individual roles and responsibilities. We exist within the duality of our independence and the sense of interdependence inherent in impermanent individual roles.

The Separate Self

Luis Gómez (1993) writes that conceit of self, not the confusion of the world, is the cause of suffering. Letting go of the [separate] self "that is not there to begin with" (p. 191) means accepting the world as it is, which also means letting others reveal themselves (1993). Charles Fink (2015) argues that "the self-illusion is the conscious manifestation of clinging" (p. 15) and writes that upādāna (or clinging) is a "two-sided coin" (p. 16). Phenomenologically, or in direct experience, we have the illusion of self, whereas metaphysically, or in the abstract, our consciousness is required to support our physical bodies (Fink, 2015). If it is this separate self,

supported by clinging, that leads to suffering, examining views of self as these views affect us individually and as a society, and considering ways in which we are interdependent, could relieve suffering. In the next paragraph, the Buddhist word *manas*, described as “one of the three primary words for mind” (Olendzki, 2016) and as “a sense base for mind consciousness” (Nhat Hanh, 2006), is utilized to explore the separate self. The word *manas* must be distinguished from and not be confused with the Pali word *māna* which we have been discussing and which refers specifically to conceit of self.

A review of Choi and Black (2008), describing *manas* as “the sense of separate self, which is what [*manas*] brings” (p. 73), explores the extent to which our reality is determined by the ideologies we are immersed in, often through identification with the dominant culture. We may be unconscious of the basis of our own reality. Depending on these ideologies and identification with a particular culture, our sense of this separate self—and of our preoccupation with the position of this self relative to others (better than, worse than, or equal to)—may keep us from awareness of our interdependence or interconnectedness. Choi and Black (2008) reason that since we are all made up of nonself elements, in a sense we are “...all the same. Just the details are different” (p. 75). If we exaggerate our differences, we make ourselves miserable with conflict and endanger ourselves and all that exists (2008). And “all we get from that is a feeling of being much more special than we and others actually are” (p. 75). Are our perceived differences reflective of the traits we manifest, which may relate to the “details” mentioned above? Or are roles reflective of our circumstances, of the causes and conditions that have shaped our individual lives? Wanting to be “special” or wanting others to be “special” serves separation, by being, respectively, “better than” others or “worse than” others. Rather than

believing everyone has a contribution to make, we may believe that only those who are “special” are worthy of making contributions. According to Nhat Hanh (2006):

. . . manas is unaware of nonself. It continues to believe in the idea of a permanent, eternal self, and so it is always separating and discriminating between what is self and what is not self. The only way to help manas stop grasping at the notions of self and not-self is for us to practice deep looking into the impermanent and interdependent nature of reality. (p. 99)

It seems that the approaches suggested by Bradshaw (2016), and outlined above, are relevant here as well: name and recognize thoughts as “just thoughts,” realize their impermanence, and acknowledge the suffering they cause.

As I will discuss later, comparison used to determine who is best qualified to take on a task or leadership role is necessary and healthy. It is also complex and dependent upon the goals of the organization. When comparing becomes connected to self-worth or is used in an attempt to demean, inflate, or deny a person’s intrinsic value, it becomes destructive and discriminatory.

Integrated Concepts of Discrimination and Oppression

The sections below describe intersectionality, kyriarchy, and rank systems. Each section outlines a way of organizing thinking about difference, power, and oppression. These different ways of thinking complement each other and illustrate the nuance and complexity of human interaction. This is especially true when one considers both unconscious and conscious behavior at multiple levels (personal, interpersonal, and societal). It is also true when systematic and institutional influences are in play, as they are in policy making.

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality helps to understand how different types of discrimination interact with each other. Intersectionality is defined as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage” (Oxford English and Spanish Dictionary, n.d.). Additionally, as Luft (2009) noted, “Intersectionality ‘denotes the various ways in which [social forces] interact to shape the multiple dimensions (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 358)’ of experience” (p. 102). In her TED talk titled “The Urgency of Intersectionality,” Crenshaw (2016), who is widely credited with coining the term, describes employment discrimination against an African American woman named Emma DeGraffenreid as occurring at the “intersection” of her race and her gender. The company in question hired African American men to work in industrial and maintenance jobs and white women to work in the front office and secretarial area but refused to hire an African American woman. Since the company hired both Blacks and women, they claimed they did not discriminate (TEDWomen, 2016). As Crenshaw describes in her talk, this case was thrown out because it was determined that by considering both Emma’s race and gender, she would receive preferential treatment.

Intersectionality is important when considering whether discrimination and the oppression that follows is experienced differently by members of a group. For example, while white women and women of color may both experience gender-based discrimination, they will not have identical experiences, because it is possible the women of color also experience racism, while the white women will not. Therefore, white women and women of color do not necessarily have the same priorities regarding the discrimination they experience, and each may find it

difficult to understand and empathize with the situation of the other. Additionally, other types of discrimination such as classism may be a factor (Dill, 2009). According to Dill (2009), in her foundational and classic paper originally published in 1983, “Inclusion of the concept of class permits a broader perspective on the similarities and differences between black and white women than does a purely racial analysis” (p. 30). Studying individual women’s lives is helpful, yet self-perception is problematic because “most people view their lives as a whole and do not explain their daily experiences or world view in terms of the differential effects of their racial group, class position, or gender” (Dill, 2009, p. 32). However, for the purpose of analysis and understanding the experience of individual women, intersectionality helps increase awareness of the overlapping nature of discrimination and oppression.

In a paper addressing intersectionality, Rachel Luft (2009) expresses concern that when applied wholesale to the social world, intersectionality can “inadvertently contribute to flattening the very differences intersectional approaches intend to recognize. Flattening, in turn, impedes intersectional social change” (p. 100). Luft states that this is particularly true when gender and race are considered at the same time and the importance of race is de-emphasized. This can be due to the idea, developed following the civil rights movement, that it is not appropriate to “see color” (Luft, 2009). Regarding the logic of single-issue politics, Luft (2009) writes:

I . . . [suggest] that interventions that happen through macro, impersonal, or noninteractive mediums—text, policy, mass-movement building—usually need intersectionality (especially when centered on gender). Those that create introductory, interactive experiences—the classroom, a workshop, some coalitions—must selectively navigate intersectional and single-issue approaches (especially when dealing with race).
(p. 109)

Luft (2009) further writes that once “introductory, interactive experiences” introduce and bring about commitment to anti-racism, it is possible to embrace intersectionality. The following studies use an intersectional approach to explore privilege and essentialist assumptions and illustrate the intersectional perspective.

A qualitative, exploratory case study of two white family therapy educators was conducted to examine their understanding of issues of privilege and “analyze the complexities of micro- and macro- systems relative to interconnected social positions of race, class, gender, age, professional role, and sexual orientation” (Hernandez-Wolfe & McDowell, 2013, p. 1). The article states that “privilege is usually invisible to the individual graced with it, and it is exercised unknowingly and assumed to be a natural right” (Hernandez-Wolfe & McDowell, 2013, p. 2). The first participant, Elizabeth, at 55 years old, had been in the upper-middle class all her life. She embraced her lesbian identity during her 20s and was in a long-term relationship with an African American female. The second participant, Josh, was 40 years old and grew up in an upper-working class neighborhood and at the time of the study was considered upper-middle class. Josh identified as heterosexual and was married with three children. The process by which the participants’ consciousness of their own power advantages awakened with time and experience was described in the study. Both Elizabeth and Josh “experienced increased dissonance as they became more aware of their unearned social privileges” (p. 11) and “it was the recognition that their privilege is directly related to another’s lack of privilege that moved them beyond white liberalism into significant moral dilemmas” (p. 11). This study illustrates how people may benefit from privilege without realizing it.

Using a strategy of self-storytelling, Mahalingam and Reid (2007), created an exchange program in which seven African American undergraduate college students travelled to India to

interact with seven Dalit (formerly treated as “untouchable”) Indian women. The Dalit Indian women were “all feminist activists, ranging from a college student to a university professor, a community organizer to a government administrator” (Mahalingam & Reid, 2007, p. 256). One theme that emerged during the two-week exchange is the development of moral certainty, defined by Mahalingam and Reid (2007) as “the understanding of social injustice, especially social injustice directed unfairly at a particular group” (p. 260). This understanding that the way one is being treated is unfair and based on stereotype (such as ethnic membership) seems to be an important precondition to taking action and leads to “a stance of self-empowerment” (p. 260). As described earlier in this section, this understanding can be difficult to achieve with a focus on one’s individual life (Dill, 2009); this is important to note, given the importance of empowerment. Highlighting the society-wide reach of injustice, Mahalingam and Reid (2007) state, “While accepting personal responsibility to develop strategies for resistance, there was simultaneously the recognition that the real problem was systemic, institutional, and national in scope. Thus, there was the broad realization that personal resistance could only offer limited success” (p. 261). An aim of the project was to facilitate experience that would challenge essentialist assumptions; for example, one cannot assume certain attributes relate to race, culture, or gender. This statement relates to the concept of rankism discussed later. A critical look at essentialist assumptions increases awareness of the destructive nature of stereotype.

Understanding intersectionality reinforces the idea that injustice must be understood and addressed in its many forms. Kyriarchy is a related term that also considers multiple forms of injustice operating simultaneously.

Kyriarchy

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, currently Krister Stendahl Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School, has focused her many years of work on biblical interpretation and feminist theology. She introduced the term kyriarchy, derived from the Greek word *kyrios*, to describe a “system of domination and exploitation [that] is not just patriarchal. . . that is, it is defined not only by gender but also by race, class, ethnicity, imperialism, and age” (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2016, p. 2). As discussed above in the section about intersectionality, gender is only one of a number of structures that influence the distribution of power and wealth. Schüssler Fiorenza (2016) writes that structures of intersectionality “are often seen as working alongside each other but have not been theoretically integrated to perform a critical intersectional kyriarchal analysis” (p. 50); thus, she introduced the neologism kyriarchy to replace patriarchy and emphasize that domination itself is intersectional. According to Schüssler Fiorenza (2016), “. . . rather than identifying kyriarchal domination in dualistic terms with the binaries of male over female, white over black, Western over-colonized peoples, it is best to understand it as an intersectional pyramidal system . . .” (p. 56). In this system, those with power are concentrated at the top of the pyramid while those who are dominated are at the bottom (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2016).

In an interview with Judith Plaskow following receipt of the American Academy of Religion’s Martin Marty Award for the Public Understanding of Religion, Schüssler Fiorenza concludes by responding to a request for advice for current graduate students. Schüssler Fiorenza emphasizes the necessity of cultivating a personal vision and developing one’s own voice, “learn[ing] the theoretical languages of the academy but also [to] transform them” (Plaskow & Schüssler Fiorenza, 2013, p.185). This includes consideration of the challenges of study in institutions and subject areas shaped by “elite white men” (p. 186). Speaking about her own

position in academia, and “from the sociopolitical location of resident aliens, as both insider and outsider—insider by virtue of residence or patriarchal affiliation to a male genius or institution; outsider in terms of language, experience, culture, and history” (p. 186), Schüssler Fiorenza (2013), states, “I propose therefore that the metaphor of resident alien is an apt figure also for a feminist movement and politics of liberation within the academy and organized religion” (p. 186). A “resident alien” is able to listen deeply and think critically to understand the perspective that is not her own and utilize rhetoric to effectively express her own perspective clearly and persuasively to those who do not fully understand it.

We now turn from the systemic structure of kyriarchy to an exploration of rank and rankism.

Rank and Rankism

In his 2005 book *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, Jon Kabat-Zinn refers to Robert W. Fuller’s work on rankism and connects it to Buddhist teachings on emptiness and the concept of self. This section includes the definition of rankism, rationale for its inclusion in this review, and the ways it manifests.

Rankism is “abuse of power inherent in rank” (Fuller, 2003, p. 143). According to Fuller (2007), “rankism occurs when those with authority use the power of their position to secure unwarranted advantages or benefits for themselves at the expense of others” (p. 8). Naming the concept of rankism enables it to be recognized, examined, and seen as detrimental to society (Fuller 2003, 2007). “Afflicting primarily those of low rank...rankism takes a wide variety of forms, including maltreatment, discrimination, disrespect, discourtesy, disdain, derision, and condescension” (Fuller, 2003, p. 98). It includes but is not limited to racism, sexism, and ageism, and can be viewed as bringing together many fragmented prejudices into one integrated

concept. Fuller suggests that rankism can help people understand misguided or intentional justification of the mistreatment of others, and it may be beneficial to address the larger root issue of this power dynamic in addition to each individual manifestation of the larger issue.

During the 1960s, Fuller, a white male, volunteered to teach science to students who had dropped out of a predominately black high school. This experience led Fuller, a college professor at the time, to think carefully about students' needs for recognition, attention, and respect. The students discussed race and social justice. Fuller became involved in higher education reform and served as president of Oberlin College from 1970-1974. Fuller (2003) writes:

In 1970 every college campus in the country was in turmoil over issues of race, gender, and student autonomy, all against the backdrop of the war in Vietnam. It was in dealing with racial integration and the changing status of women that I began to understand the pivotal role of power differences in sanctioning prejudice and sustaining discrimination.
(p. 71)

Regarding his own journey, Fuller (2003) writes, "It was not until I had left the presidency [of Oberlin College, in 1974] and had become a target of this kind of discrimination myself that I was able to identify it" (p. 2). Fuller (2003) refers to the reduction of recognition, attention, and respect that he experienced without the "protection of title and status" (p. 2).

Fuller (2003) develops awareness of his own unearned privilege and tries to make sense of the personal and structural nature of oppression. His ideas support the position that issues of comparison including superiority, inferiority, and equality are relevant to everyone, not just those whose identities are considered likely to experience discrimination or oppression. Through his ability to cultivate awareness of and compassion for his own and other's experience, Fuller is

able to contemplate discrimination and oppression on a personal, interpersonal, and societal level. His contribution supplements and complements the work of others.

Those who experience abuse of power attached to rank may perpetuate the abuse against others whom they have influence over, for example in employer/employee, manager/worker, parent/child, child/child, or relationships with significant others. It may be tempting to think that the problem of rankism could be solved by the elimination of rank in the workplace, the family, or in society. However, *when applied fairly, consistently, and with organizational goals in mind*, rank signifies knowledge and expertise, and is a valid and valuable means to add structure and efficiency to all types of organizations. Most of us have innumerable roles that differ depending on the setting we are in, and we experience various positions or ranks or levels of power depending on what we are doing, giving us the opportunity to observe our relative strengths, weaknesses, and abilities, and those of others. According to Fuller (2003), rank earned through ability deserves power in specific settings. Differences of power and rank are not inherently problematic, just as physical differences such as those of gender or color are not. Abuse of rank and extending privilege of rank beyond the area of expertise is the problem (2003). A phenomenological study examined incivility in nursing education using the concept of rankism; the author emphasizes that dignity comes before learning; energy spent guarding one's dignity reduces the amount of attention one can use to learn and develop needed skills (Clark, 2008).

It is important to discuss power within a hierarchy and for those of differing rank to interact with honesty and dignity. Fuller (2003) writes, "Rank and dignity are independent in principle, and must be disconnected in practice" (p. 153). This implies recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of each individual, regardless of any other defining characteristic. Results from a quantitative study utilizing data gathered through a national random telephone

survey to examine the relationship of self-esteem to the perceived perceptions of others indicate “self-esteem is lower when people perceive that others view them in terms of . . . roles and statuses” (Jaret, Reitzes, & Shapkina, 2005, p. 412). Reduced self-esteem seems to come from feeling viewed as filling a role or representing a certain group with shared attributes.

In a paragraph about how sympathy—or pity—can impede compassion, Manuel (2015) writes “. . . to walk the path of compassion and wisdom is to carry no harmful distinctions within our personal lives or between ourselves and others. Distinctions exist, and there are times when discrimination is needed, but need we make harmful distinctions?” (p. 87). We are not the same, yet we have “multiplicity in oneness.”

Rank is impermanent; it is temporary by nature. The value of professional designations changes, as does the need for certain types of expertise. Elective office is temporary, and human beings have different levels of need depending on age, health, and status based on cultural perceptions of their identity. While rank is fleeting, inherent value is not.

There is no limit to the supply of recognition. When recognition is mutually given and received, it leaves both parties in a better situation than before the interaction. As Fuller (2003) writes, “Recognizing another person or another nation does not reduce the recognition they give you” (p. 128). Fuller (2003) connects the human need to contribute with the need to be recognized for our contributions. Inherent in this connection is the truth that every human being, including ourselves, has a unique contribution to make (2003).

I was interested to read the following, in a July 2013 blog post, which so clearly makes a connection to mindfulness studies:

Autonomous, stand-alone selfhood is an illusion. Not only are we not better than anyone else, our selves are so entangled and enmeshed with other selves as to make individual

selves indistinguishable. Separate selves, like superior selves, are a dangerous delusion.

(Fuller, 2013)

Possibly, rankism can be understood as involving clinging to a permanent separate self. Once it is clear that we are not so permanent and separate, we are free to experience more of the present moment. The next section describes views of social justice informed by Buddhism.

Buddhist Informed Social Justice Views

This section describes the work of several modern Buddhist writers who examine questions of awakening and liberation along with social justice, identity, power, and oppression.

The Third Space

In the book, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*, Williams et al. (2016) write of the need to seek transformation from outside the constructs of racism, classism, and other forms of oppression. They urge those in social justice work to “observe the construct that we’re in instead of trying to tinker with it right away with the same blind spots that we came to the problem with” (p. xx). There is a “third space” that can be occupied when seekers pursue liberation through both an inner and outer path; this “radical dharma” (p. xxiii) is liberation not just for self and not just for others, but for all beings (2016).

From within the “third space” we know our own suffering, and this helps us have compassion for others who also suffer (Williams et al., 2016). In addition, “Understanding that part of our capacity to make change outside in a way that’s actually generative comes from having done work inside so we can actually have empowerment that doesn’t have to do with external conditions” (p. 53). In this work of healing and liberation, one’s whole self, and the whole selves of others, are welcomed, yet with the spacious awareness that “attachment to identity is another way in which we are fixated on . . . [a] sense of self” (p. 46). Finally, Williams

et al. (2016) note the difficulty in acknowledging that “the one who hurts and oppresses is in just as much need of healing [as those who have been hurt and oppressed]” (p. 63). Williams et al. (2016) raise the possibility of the extraordinary freedom and empowerment that is possible through letting go of anxiety, and ask, “. . . what would it look like to cut off our attachment, that hardwired sense of obligation to staying stressed?” (p. 86). As Buddhist practitioners and leaders of color, Williams et al. (2016) write with engaging honesty about their own dharma journeys, and their journeys within the radical dharma to which they are committed, in which love is aimed not just personally but also towards society.

Multiplicity in Oneness and The Body as Nature

I recall a conversation at an interfaith panel meeting I attended, during which one of the speakers opined that there is some selfishness in the cries of a baby, who ultimately will learn that at times it is necessary to delay their own needs. I spoke from the audience to say that as a parent, I had come to believe that my baby’s cries were an expression of the discomfort and uncertainty of separation—an unfamiliar experience for a newborn whose lived experience before birth has been one of constant connection and interdependence. In Zenju Earthlyn Manuel’s 2015 book, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, and Gender*, I read with interest the observation that human beings are carried away from our true essence just after being born. She writes that we assimilate into the norms and structures around us in order to survive. However, “as we grow older . . . our own true nature calls to us,” (p. 5) and we suffer as we become aware of what we have lost. According to Manuel (2015), “In attending to such suffering, we start down many paths in order to recover the connectedness we lost upon entering the world” (p. 5). Such paths may include social activism and spiritual exploration (2015).

Readers are invited to “explore awakening within the challenges of race, sexuality, and gender” (Manuel, 2015, p. 9) rather than believe that these lived identities must be put aside in order to experience oneness. Manuel (2015) adds that although race, sexuality and gender are most dominant in her own personal experience, “the ideas in . . . [her] book can be extended to class, physical ability, age, and any other modes of embodiment in relation to which there has been long-held mistreatment and/or systemic oppression” (p. 9). Manuel’s approach of awakening through lived experience, that is, *through* the suffering experienced during one’s physical embodiment in this imperfect world, has been fruitful for her and makes sense given that our lives are inherently embodied and relational. To consider embodied differences unimportant or inconsequential seems like disregarding “the elephant in the room” when one considers the body-based forms of oppression listed above. Manuel (2015) emphasizes that oppression wounds both the oppressor and those who are oppressed and that “when individuals in our society speak or act out of hatred against a whole group of people based solely on superficial appearance, it is a reflection of the mental state of our whole society” (p. 24). All of us have healing to do.

Manuel (2015) embraces “the way of tenderness,” (p. 31) which she defines as “. . . acknowledgement—acknowledging and honoring all life and all that is in the world, fully, with heart and body” (p. 31). And through tenderness, she develops themes of “multiplicity in oneness” (p. 35) and “body as nature” (p. 75). Manuel (2015) writes that we “share the same life-source as a flower or a bee” (p. 40), yet there is “multiplicity in oneness” (p. 40) in the forms that manifest. Moreover, there is multiplicity throughout the continuum on which each of us fall, within race, sexuality, and gender, rather than only the binary notions of black/white, heterosexual/homosexual, or female/male. This multiplicity in oneness also occurs with class,

physical ability, age, and other manners of embodiment. When one considers the “body as nature,” Manuel (2015) writes, the variety in our embodiments is “a natural identity that exists alongside contingent sociopolitical and emotional ones” (p. 33). If all identity is natural, all embodiments can be honored with tenderness.

Identity often becomes the basis for judging self or others to be superior or inferior (Manuel, 2015). This is counter to the way of tenderness. Rather, we could consider identity as part of the multiplicity in oneness and part of nature’s expression. Manuel (2015) writes, “Our incarnations in bodies are fixed but our identities are as fluid as water” (p. 94). As internal and external conditions change, one realizes the impermanence of what once seemed inevitable. However, “There is nothing wrong with identity in itself. Rather, the distortions—superior and inferior—that we place on it is what causes suffering” (p. 96). We know that suffering exists and is caused by delusion. Manuel (2015) offers these hopeful, compassionate, and practical words:

We are more willing to explore and engage our various embodiments when we understand them to be paths to transformation. If we do not anchor our inquiry into life within the undeniable, physical reality in which we live, spiritual awakening will remain far too abstract. (p. 123)

And if we put aside and refuse to pay deep attention to our suffering and the suffering of others, we will close ourselves off to the awakening we seek.

Review Summary

This review explored Buddhist concepts of conceit of self, the comparing mind, and the separate self, and the suffering that can arise from feelings of superiority, inferiority, and equality comparisons. Next, the forces of intersectionality, kyriarchy, and rankism were examined, each being an alternate lens illustrating comparison writ large, with the purpose of

securing power and privilege for some groups and denying power and privilege to others. Social justice views informed by Buddhism were considered. Williams et al. (2016) wrote of pursuit of liberation through both an inner and outer path and the value of exploring oppressive structures with the awareness that we all suffer within them. Manuel (2015) emphasized that oppression wounds both the oppressor and those who are oppressed. Her work values the exploration of embodied identity as it leads to liberation.

When conceit of self is present, suffering increases for everyone, and oppressive forces rely on unhealthy comparison. It follows that increased awareness and practice with the Buddhist concepts discussed here have potential to illuminate and motivate reduction of the personal and interpersonal suffering that comes from conceit of self. The social justice views discussed support this as they emphasize an inner and outer embodied path toward liberation for all who seek it. Discussion about attention to this awareness and practice follows.

Discussion

A central idea in the material reviewed for this thesis is that human beings move towards awakening together through embodied relationship. This section describes my area of interest in this process and how it relates to research reviewed in this paper. In addition, this section includes the rationale that supports the development of the creative project that follows as one means to bridge the personal and the structural.

Throughout reading and researching for this work, I have been struck by the need for the spaciousness to explore one's own liberation and also pursue justice in the world. As Williams et al. (2016) write, ". . . when I am able to show up for my own suffering, I can also show up to yours" (p. 71). Some of us have been taught that we must choose our own needs or the needs of others but not both. It is possible to become overwhelmed by either. Perhaps it is in the "third

space” written about by Williams et al. (2016), “neither contained by a dharma written in scripture nor apart from it” (p. xxix) where we can find the “way of tenderness” that Manuel (2015) describes, along with the compassion to fully pay attention and inhabit that space. Williams et al. (2016) write about “a field of play in which everything is allowed to happen: examination, experimentation, failure—lots of joyous failure . . .” (p. xxix). It is this space, in the midst of all that is, and in the present moment, that I am most interested in exploring.

With the creative project included in this thesis, it is my hope that this space might provide the room to play with the concept of conceit of self and observe what changes with attention, dialogue, and personal practice. There are several reasons to consider focus on conceit of self at this point in time (2020, during the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic, and an intense period of attention to racial oppression, both in the United States where I live and globally). In the following paragraphs, I will describe the reasons I consider this project to be valuable on a personal and societal level and also the gap I believe this project fills.

It is said that conceit of self is the last impediment to fall before full awakening. On the one hand, knowing this reduces pressure to achieve full mastery. On the other hand, if something is difficult, it is beneficial to address it gently over a long period of time so that insight and understanding can gradually increase. As discussed in the opening paragraphs of this thesis, what most people recognize as “comparing” is a common phenomenon, sometimes seen as problematic and other times seen as normal and necessary. It takes attention and effort to appreciate the nuance involved. For these reasons—the universal and persistent nature of comparison and its complexity—it seems a worthwhile and accessible object of attention even for beginning meditators.

Much attention is given to the benefits of mindful presence that come from meditation practice. These benefits are known to help those who commit their time and energy to social justice work.

Based on his research, Kendi (2019) describes “the source of racist ideas” (p. 230) as “not ignorance and hate, but self-interest” (p. 230). Kendi had invested time and energy in the solution of education to address ignorance and hate and solve racism—becoming a college professor for this reason; he initially resisted the conclusion that self-interest was the source of racist ideas. His experience supporting his wife through cancer treatment led Kendi to compare easing her cancer-related symptoms to educating to reduce ignorance and hate. He saw treating the cancer itself as more similar to changing racist policy. He came to see even more clearly that policy formed through self-interest is at the root of racist ideas. Kendi (2019) writes:

The history of racist ideas is the history of powerful policymakers erecting racist policies out of self-interest, then producing racist ideas to defend and rationalize the inequitable effects of their policies, while everyday people consume those racist ideas, which in turn sparks ignorance and hate. (p. 230)

Because of this realization, Kendi shifted to a focus on policy change. In 2017 Kendi founded the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University in Washington DC and this year became the founding director of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University. Kendi’s focus on policy change makes sense. Education to change policy that communicates with a wide audience—such as that provided by Kendi’s (2019) bestselling book *How to Be an Antiracist*, can help. I believe that attention on and practice exploring self-interest, such as through the Creative Project focusing on conceit of self included in this thesis, could help increase public support of policy change. When self-interest is examined and seen as separate from ignorance

and hate, it is easier to see it clearly and to see the suffering caused when we willingly disadvantage others to advantage ourselves. The internal bias (or prejudice) required to disadvantage others can set us up to support discriminatory and oppressive policy to further self-interest. Kendi (2019) states that one of the first steps we can take to eliminate racial inequity is to “admit racial inequity is a problem of bad policy, not bad people” (p. 231). This statement powerfully allows inward exploration of policy support without demonizing ourselves for what we don’t know. The “everyday people” referenced in the block quote above can examine conscious and unconscious support for racist policy and choose to be antiracist. Although the portions of Kendi’s work quoted above refer specifically to racism, they also apply to other forms of discrimination and oppression.

Every person can benefit from exploration of identity and the relative value of human beings. In his book *Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community*, Larry Yang (2017) describes his personal journey of belonging and finding a spiritual home through exploration of his identity. He writes of the challenge of growing up in the United States as a gay Chinese man in a “white, heterosexual culture” (p. 5). His personal experience illustrates to a certain degree what he imagines others in adolescence feel, the “tremendous pain in not knowing where I belonged and not feeling that I belonged anywhere with anyone” (p. 4). Although specific identities are different, Yang’s experience is similar in many ways to those described earlier (Manuel, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). Exploration of identity through conceit of self and the comparing mind, as in the Creative Project that follows, is an opportunity for anyone to consider how they relate to themselves and others. Often exploration of one’s identity occurs most intensely when a person sees themselves or others see them as being on the “inferior”

end of comparison. This makes sense because those in dominant groups are less likely to be aware of their privilege. Exploring conceit of self could have benefits for everyone.

Finally, for white people who think they are beyond racism, or resist talking about racism specifically, dialogue about and practice with concepts of conceit of self and comparing could provide insight into dynamics that support oppression. When white fragility, defined as “the defensive reactions so many white people have when our racial worldviews, positions, or advantages are questioned or challenged” (DiAngelo, 2018, August 11, p. 1) is present, dialogue may be a way to open the heart. According to DiAngelo (2018), “*White progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color*” (p. 5). She defines a white progressive in this case as “any white person who thinks he or she is not racist, or is less racist, or in the ‘choir,’ or already ‘gets it’” (p. 5). The intention of dialogue and practice in this project is to benefit all aspects of a person’s relationships—with self, other, and society.

The purpose of this thesis is to increase knowledge and understanding of the interrelated concepts of conceit of self, the general theme of comparison, and oppression. This work will contribute to the field of study by suggesting that examining and understanding the self through Buddhist concepts of conceit of self and the comparing mind has the potential to reduce oppression. In addition, ideas familiar to advocates and those in academia can benefit those in the general public that do not necessarily see themselves as directly involved in social justice work. My project, which is described below, is designed to facilitate increased self-awareness and to explore with others how individual actions and ways of being influence social justice.

The Creative Project that follows is a facilitator’s guide for a course offering called “The Self and Comparison.” The guide includes a program description and lesson plans; suggested resources and practice assignments for participants; and sample proposal, promotional, and

evaluation notes. The goal of the program is to increase individual awareness of the self and comparison in an environment similar to the third space written about by Williams et al. (2016), incorporating mindfulness meditation in a group setting. I very much hope that from this awareness and acceptance we, as individuals, relational beings, and society can consciously choose to value the worth and dignity of each individual and ourselves.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined oppression through a Buddhist lens, exploring conceit of self and the comparing mind, structural forces of oppression, and Buddhist informed social justice views. Throughout the Literature Review, conceit of self and the comparing mind were shown to be relevant and integral to the discussion of structural forces and Buddhist informed social justice views. These concepts are important tools that increase understanding of self and other and point the way forward and outward to one's relationship with the wider world. Conceit of self and the comparing mind are personally applicable concepts, and although most people recognize the tendency to compare themselves to others (and to compare people in general), most do not connect their personal and interpersonal behavior to oppression. Kendi (2019) points out that self-interest (not hate and ignorance) is the root of racist ideas; the way one considers the self and other at the personal level is reflected in society as a whole. The research suggests that practice with these concepts has the potential to increase personal, interpersonal, and societal harmony, and decrease oppression. Additionally, they are important for understanding these structural forces supporting oppression, and they are an integral part of the social justice views. It is unknown what specific impact individuals exploring these concepts will have on large structural oppressive forces however, each person who is able to bring a more settled and equanimous self to interaction in the world will surely make a positive difference. Policy is made

and supported and changed by individuals, even when those individuals work collectively. This Creative Project aims to increase awareness of conceit of self and the comparing mind and to provide opportunities for myself and others to foster and practice an attitude of curiosity toward the self and interdependence with others.

Creative Project

The Self and Comparison Facilitator Guide

Welcome to this facilitator guide for The Self and Comparison. The guide is part of my thesis completed in December 2020, titled *Considering Oppression Through a Buddhist Lens: Conceit of Self and the Comparing Mind*. Those interested in using this facilitator guide to present this program to others should have experience with mindfulness meditation and with the prerequisite material described below. The thesis of which this guide is a part serves as background as does the list of references. A table of contents for the guide follows this introduction. Please review the thesis itself for more complete information.

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Rationale for the Self and Comparison

The purpose of this program is to increase awareness of conceit of self and the comparing mind and foster and practice an attitude of curiosity toward the self and interdependence with others. The overall intention is to contribute to an increase in personal, interpersonal, and societal harmony, and to decrease ways of being that could contribute to oppression. Additional information and analysis are provided in the body of the thesis itself.

Program Description

This program consists of four approximately 1-hour sessions meeting weekly. Each session is devoted to an aspect of conceit of self and the comparing mind, and mindful small group (dyads/triads/or whole group up to 10 participants) practice with these concepts. Intended participants have an existing meditation practice and basic familiarity with mindfulness.

This offering is designed to be an immediate optional follow-up to an Introduction to Mindfulness program which also consists of four approximately 1-hour sessions. I have offered Introduction to Mindfulness several times through my local library, where I am also an employee, and have had requests to extend the program. The Self and Comparison program is a response to those requests.

Summary of Introduction to Mindfulness Program (prerequisite)

The Introduction to Mindfulness program is intended to provide participants with information and resources to cultivate present moment awareness in their lives and is designed for beginners. Each session features a different type of mindfulness meditation and includes information, practice, and discussion. The general outline for these sessions is as follows:

- Session 1: Introductions. Definition of mindfulness. Developing a personal practice. Meditation using Insight Dialogue Guidelines with focus on the breath. Use of the optional text. Dialogue about intention for upcoming sessions.
- Session 2: Additional definition(s) of mindfulness. Four Noble truths as a framework for cultivating awareness. Mindfulness of the body as a whole.
- Session 3: Meditation in everyday life. Loving Kindness guided meditation. How widely can we extend boundless friendliness?
- Session 4: Walking meditation. Your personal practice going forward.

The optional text I have used for Introduction to Mindfulness is *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment—and Your Life* by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2016). My library purchased multiple copies so that participants can borrow a print copy for the duration of the program. The book is also available online.

During the Introduction to Mindfulness program, participants become familiar with the relational practice of Insight Dialogue (ID) through its use during small and whole group dialogue. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a comprehensive description of the practice of ID. The book *Insight Dialogue: The Interpersonal Path to Freedom* by Gregory Kramer (2007) is an excellent resource, as is the website Insight Dialogue Community (2020). The guidelines (in brief) are Pause, Relax, Open, Attune to Emergence, Listen Deeply, and Speak the Truth. Please see the website for complete information. According to Kramer (2007), ID “turns us back to ourselves and to each other as rich sources of wisdom” and “injects peer-to-peer learning into a vast system of traditional, primarily Buddhist, wisdom” (p. 207). During the Self and Comparison program we will continue with the practice of ID, building upon our familiarity. I first practiced ID in Lesley University’s Mindful Communication: The Theory and

Practice of Insight Dialogue (ID) course, and my practice of ID has been influenced by that experience. In this program, emphasis is placed on ID being a meditative practice during which participants practice listening deeply and speaking the truth to themselves and to others. It is a responsive practice drawing on the wisdom of each participant in the present moment; it is not storytelling. Because it can be natural to pause while speaking, it is part of the practice to communicate to your partner or group that you have concluded speaking with “Thank you” or “I pause.”

Sample Program Notes

Description for Proposal

This program consists of four approximately 1-hour sessions meeting weekly. Each session is devoted to an aspect of conceit of self and the comparing mind, and mindful small group (dyads/triads/or whole group up to 10 participants) practice with these concepts. Intended participants have an existing meditation practice and basic familiarity with mindfulness.

This offering is designed to be an immediate optional follow-up to the Introduction to Mindfulness program which is also four approximately 1-hour sessions. I have offered Introduction to Mindfulness several times and have had requests to extend the program. The Self and Comparison program is a response to those requests.

Promotion & Registration

This program is for patrons who have completed the four-session “Introduction to Mindfulness” program offered through Brooks Free Library. Participants in this new program beginning on [date] and running on Saturday mornings for four consecutive weeks from 8:45-9:45 am will explore “The Self and Comparison,” primarily through the relational practice of Insight Dialogue. We will bring mindful and non-judgmental awareness to thoughts of

superiority, inferiority, and equality, and consider how comparison affects our relationships with ourselves and with others. In Buddhism this tendency to compare and separate is called “conceit of self” and is considered one of the last impediments to full awakening. We will approach this topic with curiosity and compassion. There is no text for this program; however, online resources will be suggested to supplement program content. Attendance is free and is limited to 10 participants. This program is offered by Lesley University Mindfulness Studies master’s degree candidate and library staff member, Joanne Clingan. If you are interested in registering for the program, please complete this form (see information below). If you have questions, please email Joanne.

To register, each individual completes an online registration form (I have used Google Forms), providing the following information:

- Name
- Email address
- Have you completed the four session “Introduction to Mindfulness” program offered through Brooks Free Library?
- Please briefly describe what you hope to learn or take away from your participation in this program
- How did you hear about this program?

Language on the form indicates “You will receive an email from Joanne within the next 24 hours confirming your registration status. If this program fills, you will be offered a spot on a wait list.”

Evaluation

In addition to providing feedback during the sessions, participants are encouraged to complete an online evaluation form that is emailed to them after the final session. The purpose of the evaluation is to improve this program and develop future offerings. Completion of the online (Google Forms) evaluation takes about five minutes.

Basic information collected by the form includes the participant's name (optional), number of sessions attended, and their level of effort rated on a five-point Likert scale from poor to excellent. To measure contribution to learning, the participant rates their level of skill/knowledge at the start and end of the program, along with the contribution of the program to their skill/knowledge using the same scale. Next, the participant rates skill and responsiveness of the facilitator with a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Categories measure the facilitator's effectiveness as a presenter/demonstrator, clarity and organization of presentations, how well student interest was stimulated, how effectively class time was used, and to what degree the facilitator was available and helpful. Course content is measured considering clarity of learning objectives, organization and planning, workload, the facilitation of the participation of all students, and the value of optional audio and readings. These open-ended questions/prompts are then included: (1) What aspects of this program were most useful or valuable? (2) What aspects of this program were least useful or valuable? (3) Please share suggestions about how to improve this program. The evaluation closes with questions about interest in follow-up programming and space for expansion of feedback and/or open-ended comments.

This type of evaluation has been very worthwhile for me as a facilitator, providing constructive written feedback about what worked and did not work for each student and giving me the opportunity to objectively reflect upon and improve the course as a whole.

Meeting Space and Class Size Considerations

This program is designed for up to 10 registered participants, seated in chairs arranged in a circle. A small table can be placed in the center of the circle with a meditation bowl on it if desired. This table can also hold a talking stick or microphone.

Lesson Plans

Plans for each week are outlined here. Information for each of the four sessions includes an overview document that outlines major components of each session, estimated time required for each activity, group form, and materials needed. Supporting documentation for major components is below each overview document. Much of the material is scripted and can be adapted as desired. Procedural information is in blue type to separate it from scripted material. Suggested resources and practice assignments are listed at the conclusion of each lesson.

Week 1 - Superiority, Inferiority, & Equality Conceit – Overview Document

Facilitator Needs to Prepare and Bring

- Pre-made reusable nametags for each participant
- Microphone or talking stick
- Meditation bowl or chime
- Insight Dialogue guidelines (see pp. 36-37 for more details) & prompts posted on easel
- Printed slips for each participant with suggested resources and practice following week 1
- This page and Week 1 instruction sheets

	Time	Activity	Group Form	Material
Greeting	5-10 minutes prior to start time	Participants put on nametags, find a seat in the circle, and settle in	All	Pre-made reusable nametags for each participant
Beginning Meditation	1-2 minutes	Arriving, centering	all	Meditation bowl or chime
Introductions/ Check-in	10 minutes		All	
Presentation	10 minutes	Insight Dialogue Guidelines as a framework for this space; testing teachings for ourselves; better than, worse than, equal to	All	Insight Dialogue Guidelines posted on easel
Response	5 minutes	Participants share initial response to presentation	All	Microphone or talking stick
Practice	7 minutes	Guided Better Than Worse Than meditation	All	Meditation bowl or chime
Small Group Dialogue	5-10 minutes	Participants share thoughts and respond to debrief questions about presentation and practice	Dyads or triads	Prompts written on easel
Whole Group Dialogue	5-10 minutes	Same as above	All	Microphone or talking stick
Suggested Audio & Practice	3 minutes	Facilitator shares suggested audio & practice for the week including info about the Dharma Seed app	All	Printed slips for each participant with suggested audio & practice
Closing Meditation	2 minutes		All	

Week 1 – Supporting Documentation***Beginning Meditation***

Today we will begin with a brief meditation (1-2 minutes) with eyes focused on the floor about 3' ahead of you or closed, with focus on the breath, without changing the breath in any way. The invitation is to sit with your feet on the floor, with a posture of “dignity and wakefulness.”

CHIME

As you breathe, put aside outside concerns just during this session, without burying or devaluing these concerns. You may want to imagine physically placing any concerns on an imaginary shelf or in your bag if you brought one. As you breathe, feel yourself in the chair and your feet on the floor, and feel your breath.

CHIME after 1 minute to end the meditation.

Introductions/Check-in

Introductions as needed, although this program is intended as a continuation so introductions may not be needed. Group members are invited to share their reasons for participating and what they hope to gain or learn through participating in this program.

Presentation**Insight Dialogue Guidelines as a Framework for This Space**

In this program we will be using Insight Dialogue Guidelines (refer to easel) as part of our meditations and to guide practice in small groups of two and three. This will be a continuation and a deepening of our practice in the Introduction to Mindfulness program.

Testing Teachings for Ourselves

We will also continue with the practice of testing the concepts presented for ourselves, as advised by the Buddha.

Superiority, Inferiority, Equality

Conceit of self, or *māna* in Pali, is considered one of the last impediments to full awakening (Feldman, 2008; Fulton, 2018). Conceit of self “manifests in the feelings of being better than, worse than, and equal to another” (Feldman, 2008). It is comparing.

In a dharma talk about *māna*, Rebecca Bradshaw (2016) speaks about superiority conceit, inferiority conceit, and equality conceit. She emphasizes that measuring oneself in comparison to others perpetuates the contracting delusion of an independent, permanent, and separate self that can feel like a prison for the mind and body. Bradshaw (2016) states that superiority conceit, or feeling “better than” others, may manifest as a protective hardness of heart that shields fears of inferiority. She says it is important to distinguish superiority conceit from a wholesome open-hearted acknowledgement of one’s developing strengths, which is healthy and does not involve comparison with others. Inferiority conceit occurs when one feels “less than” others, or not good enough. There is a diminished sense of being seen and heard (Bradshaw 2016). Equality conceit or being “equal to” others can seem positive but is problematic because of its inherent separation in which “. . . there’s still a sense of self that is

arising; there's still the comparison . . ." (Bradshaw, 2016, 47:05). Additionally, there is "the possibility that when we look at ourselves as equal to others that we're not really being authentic, that we're valuing ourselves in relationship to what others think of us rather than really trusting ourselves and our unique path" (47:30). With an ongoing practice we see our own lives and the lives of others more clearly (2016).

Superiority conceit can manifest as culturally conditioned superiority in areas such as race, class, and nationality, creating an inflated feeling of "better than" (Bradshaw, 2016). Additionally, superiority conceit shows up in the dominant cultural values of a country (2016). Bradshaw (2016) names individualism and independence as values that carry a lot of weight and have become standard and often unquestioned in the United States. However, ". . . what can happen is that other values such as interdependence [and] community, might be undervalued" (30:26). Diverse communities allow individuals the valuable opportunity to learn from and cultivate values that may not be dominant in any given culture (2016).

Bradshaw (2016) outlines several approaches individuals can take to lessen identification with conceit of self when it arises. One can name thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to. Conceit can be recognized as "just a thought" to let go of. It can help to recall the impermanence of any condition. Finally, we can feel the suffering caused by the conceit (Bradshaw, 2016). All of these strategies involve breaking the conditioned habit of *māna*.

Response

Offer participants the opportunity to share initial thoughts or questions about the material just shared; there will be additional opportunity for this after the guided meditation. All whole-group sharing will be done with the microphone which also functions as a talking stick. For most group dialogue we'll pass the microphone around the circle, taking turns speaking, so that all participants have the opportunity to contribute. It is always ok to "pass" the microphone on and not speak.

Practice – Guided Better Than Worse Than Meditation

To listen to the meditation, click [HERE](#).

CHIME.

Please sit comfortably, with a posture of relaxed dignity. I invite you to **pause** and put aside any thoughts for now. And just sit. Close your eyes if you would like and focus on your breath. You can keep your eyes slightly open and downcast if that feels better. And if you want to focus on something other than your breath, I invite you to focus on an object or scene that you find peaceful, such as the beach or outdoors. Put aside thoughts of the past or the future for now, during this meditation. Allow your body and your muscles to **relax**. Relax your facial muscles and any tension that might be in your neck and shoulders, your arms, hands, your abdomen, your lower body, legs, and your feet. Let your body sink into the support of your chair.

PAUSE 30 sec

I invite you to **open** your senses, so you are hearing any background noise just a bit and noticing any scent in the air or any air movement. Even as you are focusing on your breath

or a peaceful scene, be open slightly to what is going on around you while maintaining the focus.

PAUSE 30 sec

Next, I invite you to **attune to whatever is emerging** around you as well as being aware you are attuning to the sense that you're part of it all. Even as you just sit, even as you just be, you are connected to and part of everything. Again, going back to also maintain the focus on your breath, or on the scene, if your mind wanders.

PAUSE 30 sec

Bring to mind an example of feeling better than or worse than from your own life. Some possibilities could be a role you fill particularly well in your professional or personal life. You may think of achievements that you have received praise for. Or you may think of a role that you struggle with or tasks that you grapple with. I'll pause for a moment so you can come up with an example.

PAUSE 30 sec

Imagine yourself on the rung of a ladder. If your example is one of feeling "better than" you'll be at or near the top, with others mostly below you. If your example is "worse than" you'll be positioned at or near the bottom. Look above and below you. This is a wide ladder and notice that the ladder has to be wide because at some points there are a lot of people crowded on the same rung. Notice how you feel about where you're positioned and how crowded your rung is. Assuming that each of us chose a different role or task to focus on, our group here could be represented with a ladder for each of us. If we were to climb on other people's ladders, we would probably have a different position relative to the top or bottom depending on the role or task. How does it feel to consider this? How does it feel to imagine

yourself at the top, middle, or bottom? Please climb down and let's put these ladders to the side. In your mind, find a place to stand with the group, evenly and comfortably spread out from the others. Consider how it feels for you to be off the ladders, standing on solid ground.

PAUSE 30 sec

CHIME

Please take a moment to move your body slightly and feel free to stretch a bit.

Small Group Dialogue

NOTE: Participants will already be familiar with Insight Dialogue guidelines from their participation in the Introduction to Mindfulness Program. Please see Summary of Introduction to Mindfulness Program (prerequisite) on pages 35-37 for more information.

Have participants count off to divide into groups of 2 (with one group of 3 if necessary), moving chairs as needed to allow groups to separate for this exercise. Participants will each have 2 uninterrupted minutes to share any thoughts that came up for them during the meditation with their small group. The 2 minutes may include some silence, which is part of the practice. These are suggested prompts to get started:

How did it feel to notice your position on the ladders in the meditation? How did it feel to step off the ladder?

After each individual has had their initial opportunity to speak and listen, allow for 2-3 additional minutes for sharing within each small group, before moving back to the whole group. Because it can be natural (and generative) to pause while speaking, have participants let their partner or group know that they have finished speaking with "Thank you" or "I pause." Listeners will wait for this before speaking themselves.

Whole Group Dialogue

Let's pass the microphone and please share any thoughts, as you like, that came up during the meditation, or that developed during your small group of 2 or 3. Please speak with your own voice about your own experience. As you did during the small group dialogue, please let the group know when you have finished speaking with "Thank you" or "I pause." It is always ok to "pass" if you like.

Week 1 – Suggested Audio and Practice

- Listen to this talk (about 1 hour), also available through the free Dharma Seed app:
Bradshaw, R. (2016, November 18). Māna: the conceit of I am better than, less than, equal to
[Dharma talk]. <https://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/143/talk/38067/>
- Over the course of the week, name thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to, as frequently as possible. Jot down notes if you think it would be helpful for you. Just notice the thoughts, without judgment.
- Meditate 5-20 minutes, in whatever way you wish, 1-2 times each day.

Closing Meditation

Please return to a posture of dignity and wakefulness, with your eyes closed or your gaze lowered.

CHIME

Please pause and focus on your breath for about a minute.

PAUSE 1 min

As you go about your day and week, please remember to leave in this room and with the group any personal information that has been shared. Please take with you any insights that you have gained. Please feel welcome to bring further insights with you next week. Namaste.

CHIME

Week 2 – The Comparing Mind – Overview Document

Facilitator Needs to Prepare and Bring

- Pre-made reusable nametags for each participant
- Microphone or talking stick
- Meditation bowl or chime
- Insight Dialogue guidelines and prompts for small group dialogue posted on easel
- Printed slips for each participant with suggested resources and practice following week 2
- This page and Week 2 instruction sheets

	Time	Activity	Group Form	Material
Greeting	5-10 minutes prior to start time	Participants put on nametags, find a seat in the circle, and settle in	All	Pre-made reusable nametags for each participant
Beginning Meditation	1-2 minutes	Arriving, centering	All	Meditation bowl or chime
Check-in	5 minutes	Participants invited to share experience/thoughts related to last week/audio/practice	All	Microphone or talking stick
Presentation	3 minutes	The Comparing Mind	All	
Response	5 minutes	Participants share initial response to presentation	All	Microphone or talking stick
Practice	10 minutes	Holding in Two Hands	All	Meditation bowl or chime
Small Group Dialogue	10-15 minutes	Respond to presentation & practice	Dyads or triads	Prompts (see documentation below) on easel.
Whole Group Dialogue	5-10 minutes	Same as above	All	Microphone or talking stick
Suggested Audio and Practice	3 minutes	Facilitator shares suggested audio & practice for the week	All	Printed slips for each participant with suggested audio & practice
Closing Meditation	2 minutes	Loving Kindness	All	

Week 2 – Supporting Documentation***Beginning Meditation***

We will begin with a brief meditation (1-2 minutes) with eyes focused on the floor about 3' ahead of you or closed, with focus on the breath, without changing the breath in any way. The invitation is to sit with your feet on the floor, with a posture of “dignity and wakefulness.”

CHIME

As you breathe, put aside outside concerns just during this session, without burying or devaluing these concerns. You may want to imagine physically placing any concerns on an imaginary shelf, or in your bag if you brought one. As you breathe, feel yourself in the chair and your feet on the floor, and feel your breath.

CHIME after 1 minute to end the meditation.

Check-In (Group Response to Audio/Practice from Week 1)

Invite participants to share their response to the audio and practice from last week, including noticing and naming thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to. Participants pass the microphone around the circle for those who would like to speak.

Presentation – The Comparing Mind

In a dharma talk about the comparing mind, James Baraz (2011) speaks about comparing oneself to others, or to one's own self in the past. He emphasizes that social situations provide opportunities for self-observation and growth. During retreat, for example, one might compare portion sizes, notice when and by whom silverware is dropped, or observe the relative ease with which others appear to be practicing meditation. As Bradshaw (2016) did earlier, Baraz (2011) emphasizes the value of watching the mind and nonjudgmentally noticing comparing thoughts while they occur. He states that we do not control or invite our thoughts yet awareness of our thoughts *as thoughts* allows us to respond mindfully. Baraz (2011) offers a translation of some words of the Buddha:

One who thinks oneself equal to others, or superior, or inferior, for that very reason disputes, but one who is unmoved under those three conditions, for that person the notions equal, superior, and inferior do not exist. For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world, annoying people. (5:12)

According to Baraz (2011), conceit of self is rooted in fear and a sense of unworthiness. Baraz (2011) relates an experience he witnessed in 1979 during which the Dalai Lama was asked for advice about unworthiness and self-hatred. In essence, the Dalai Lama replied, with great compassion, “What makes you think that everything else belongs in the fabric of life and somehow, you're not good enough, that you're a mistake?” (23:09). The idea that everything and everyone belongs and has value is supported. With the proper attitude, view, and practice, we can recognize our own and every other person's individual talents, abilities, and essence

and see these as unique contributions to the whole of society. Baraz (2011) describes life's play of consciousness and asks

How can you compare what's coming through you, the pure awareness that can come through you, or the unconditional love that comes through you, with somebody else's? Can you say, 'My unconditional love is better than his'? It doesn't make any sense. 'My pure awareness is better than theirs.' It's not yours to begin with. But you can celebrate it. You can uncover what obscures it. It's just a play of consciousness moving through us. (56:03)

With these words, Baraz (2011) illustrates that, seen from the perspective of the whole, the comparing mind serves to separate us unnecessarily. As we will discuss later, it is our embodied state, with physical needs, that makes us most efficient and likely to survive when we adopt individual roles and responsibilities. We exist within the duality of our independence and the sense of interdependence inherent in impermanent individual roles.

Response

Offer participants the opportunity to share initial thoughts or questions about the material just shared; there will be additional opportunity for this after the guided meditation. All whole-group sharing will be done with the microphone which also functions as a talking stick. For most group dialogue we'll pass the microphone around the circle, taking turns speaking, so that all participants have the opportunity to contribute. It is always ok to "pass" the microphone on and not speak.

Practice - Holding in Two Hands

To listen to the meditation, click [HERE](#).

The “two hands” part of this meditation was inspired by a practice introduced in Nieto et al. (2014), titled “Truth versus Reality.”

CHIME

Please sit comfortably, with a posture of relaxed dignity. I invite you to **pause** and put aside any thoughts for now. And just sit. Close your eyes if you would like and focus on your breath. You can keep your eyes slightly open and downcast if that feels better. And if you want to focus on something other than your breath, I invite you to focus on an object or scene that you find peaceful such as the beach or outdoors. Put aside thoughts of the past or the future for now, during this meditation. Allow your body and your muscles to **relax**. Relax your facial muscles and any tension that might be in your neck and shoulders, your arms, hands, your abdomen, your lower body, legs, and your feet. Let your body sink into the support of your chair.

PAUSE 30 sec

I invite you to **open** your senses, so you are hearing any background noise just a bit and noticing any scent in the air or any air movement. Even as you are focusing on your breath or a peaceful scene. Just be open slightly to what is going on around you while maintaining the focus.

PAUSE 30 sec

Next I invite you to **attune to whatever is emerging** around you as well as being aware you are attuning to the sense that you are part of it all. Even as you just sit, even as you

just be, you are connected to and part of everything. Return to the focus on your breath, or on the scene, if your mind wanders.

PAUSE 30 sec

Please rest both hands, palms up, on your knees or your lap. Raise one hand a few inches, still palm up, and hold with certainty the fact that you are a unique individual human being, inhabiting your physical body and capable of independent motion and free will. You have visible physical characteristics, and less visible abilities and attributes, that distinguish you from others. Lower this hand and raise your other hand, still palm up, a few inches. In this other hand hold the reality that you are not alone, and that you depend on others for companionship and so much more, including many of your material needs such as food and clothing. Your experience on this earth would be very different if you were truly alone. In fact, you could not exist without others—would not have been born on this earth without others. While you likely appreciate your autonomy, your life is affected by others in multiple ways. You can now rest both hands on your lap. During this meditation we'll keep in mind this visual of our two hands, with compassion for our individual selves in one hand, and for the ways our lives intersect with the lives of others in the other hand. We'll hold each truth with curiosity, with a solid yet flexible and gentle grip. We do not need to choose or place greater value on one hand or the other.

PAUSE 30 sec

Raise the “first” hand from earlier, just a few inches, with your palm up. This hand represents independence, so highly valued in certain cultures. Support this hand from underneath with your other hand, which represents interdependence. Consider whether the independence you exhibit relies on the support of others. Are you (or were you) able to work

while another family member or organization cares for your children? Do you rely on others for emotional support? Do your achievements come with acknowledgement that others contributed to your success? Do you depend on the availability of goods and services provided by others to live?

PAUSE 30 sec

Please lower both hands, then raise your other hand from earlier. This hand represents interdependence, the many ways that each human being *depends* on other human beings for both physical and emotional needs. Support this hand with the hand representing independence. Consider what if anything interdependence requires of *you*. Do you care for loved ones, perhaps a child, an older relative, a neighbor, or someone who is ill? Do your decisions include reflection on the effect your actions may have upon others? Do you produce a product, provide a service, or does your way of being in the world support or enhance the lives of others? What feelings come up for you as you reflect upon the ways that you are able to support others?

PAUSE 30 sec

Please lower both hands and take a few moments to reflect on any thoughts or feelings this meditation brings up for you.

PAUSE 30 sec

CHIME

Please take a moment to move your body slightly and feel free to stretch a bit.

Small Group Dialogue

Have participants count off to divide into groups of two (with one group of three if necessary), moving chairs as needed to allow groups to separate for this exercise. Participants will each have one minute to share any thoughts that came up for them during the meditation with their small group, using these suggested prompts (written on the easel) if desired:

What thoughts and feelings came up for you as you considered ways that you are independent *and* ways that you rely on others? How did it feel consider both at the same time?

After each individual has had their initial opportunity to speak and listen, allow for 2-3 additional minutes for taking turns sharing within each small group, before moving back to the whole group. Remind the group that because it can be natural (and generative) to pause while speaking, participants will let their partner(s) know that they have finished speaking with “Thank you” or “I pause.” Listeners will wait for this before speaking themselves.

Whole Group Dialogue

Let’s pass the microphone and please share any thoughts, as you like, that came up during the meditation, or that developed during your small group of two or three. Please speak with your own voice about your own experience. As in the small group dialogue, please let the group know when you have finished speaking with “Thank you” or “I pause.” It is always ok to “pass” if you like.

Week 2 Suggested Audio and Practice Assignment for Participants

- Listen to this talk (about 1 hour), also available through the free Dharma Seed app:

Baraz, J. (2011, September 14). The comparing mind [Dharma talk].

<https://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/86/talk/13890/>

- Over the course of the week, continue to name thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to, as frequently as possible. Jot down notes if you think it would be helpful for you. With compassion towards yourself, recognize these thoughts as “just thoughts” and let them go, without judgment.
- Meditate 5-20 minutes, in whatever way you wish, 1-2 times each day.

Closing Meditation

Please return to a posture of dignity and wakefulness, with your eyes closed or your gaze lowered. Today we’ll close with a loving kindness meditation. [Participants are familiar with this meditation, which was introduced and discussed in Introduction to Mindfulness.](#)

CHIME

Please pause and focus on your breath for about a minute.

PAUSE 1 min

May we be safe in the midst of this

May we be happy in the midst of this

May we be healthy in the midst of this

May we be at ease in the midst of this

Namaste.

CHIME

Week 3 – Our Response to Suffering - Overview Document

Facilitator Needs to Prepare and Bring

- Pre-made reusable nametags for each participant
- Microphone or talking stick
- Meditation bowl or chime
- Easel with paper and markers
- Printed slips for each participant with suggested resources and practice following week 3
- This page and Week 3 instruction sheets

	Time	Activity	Group Form	Material
Greeting	5-10 minutes prior to start time	Participants put on nametags, find a seat in the circle, and settle in	All	Pre-made reusable nametags for each participant
Beginning Meditation	6 minutes	Coming into the Room	All	
Check-in	5-10 minutes	Participants share experience/thoughts re last week, audio, & practice	All	Microphone or talking stick
Presentation	8 minutes	Our Response to Suffering	All	
Response	5-10 minutes	Participants share & write thoughts/questions on easel to consider during dialogue	All	Microphone or talking stick, easel w/paper and markers
Practice	2-3 minutes	ID	All	
Small Group Dialogue	5-10 minutes	Respond to prompts	Dyads or triads	
Whole Group Dialogue	5-10 minutes	Same as above	All	Microphone or talking stick
Suggested Resources and Practice	3 minutes	Facilitator shares suggested resources & practice for the week	All	Printed slips for each participant with suggested resources & practice
Closing Meditation	2 minutes		All	

Week 3 – Supporting Documentation***Beginning Meditation***

Welcome into this space. Let's begin with a brief meditation. This meditation is from the book *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem (2017):

COMING INTO THE ROOM

Sit comfortably in a chair. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Imagine you're floating in space. Below you, planet Earth turns slowly. Watch it turn for a few seconds.

Slowly descend until the part of the country you're in fills your field of vision. Stay directly above it, like a GPS satellite, so that it doesn't move beneath you.

Keep descending until you're looking down on whatever city, town, mountain, valley, or other area your body is sitting in right now.

Continue your descent until you're looking down at the top of the building you're in. If you're seated outdoors, descend far enough so that you can see your own body below, as if you're viewing it from a helicopter.

Keep dropping slowly and steadily, until you can see your body in detail, as if you're about ten feet above it. Observe your body's posture, any movements it makes, and the clothing it's wearing.

Slowly and smoothly, descend the rest of the way, and slip inside your body. For a few breaths, simply be aware of being in your body. Relax and let the chair support you.

Then notice the sensation of the chair against your legs and thighs.

Then notice how it feels against your back.

Open your eyes. Orient yourself by looking around you, including behind you. Return to the here and now. (p. 156)

Check-In (Group Response to Audio/Practice from Week 2)

Invite participants to share their response to the audio and practice from last week, including noticing and naming thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to, and noticing thoughts as “just thoughts.” Participants pass the microphone around the circle, ok to “pass” on your turn.

Presentation – Our Response to Suffering

During our first week we talked about conceit of self and ways to lessen identification with thoughts of superiority, inferiority, and equality. We’ve practiced naming thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to. We’ve practiced recognizing these thoughts as “just thoughts” that we can let go of. This week we’ll consider the ways that we suffer as a result of the comparisons we and others make, and the compassion we can approach that suffering with. Sometimes facing suffering can be very difficult and we would always want to consider whether or not turning towards a particular suffering is helpful and/or whether we need supportive professional help to do this.

The concept of rank can help us to identify and contemplate the suffering that comes from comparison. Rankism is “abuse of power inherent in rank” (Fuller, 2003, p. 143). According to Fuller (2007), “rankism occurs when those with authority use the power of their position to secure unwarranted advantages or benefits for themselves at the expense of others” (p. 8). An individual’s rank or skill level in comparison to someone else is necessary to consider when certain skills are needed. For example, if I had a heart problem I would want to consult with a cardiologist, since they have specialized knowledge that can help with my heart health. I would place more value on the cardiologist’s assessment of my heart health than what

I hear from other less reliable sources that don't have the same training and expertise. When it comes to treating the heart, the cardiologist has advantage that is warranted. With rankism we are talking about using power to obtain *unwarranted advantages*, for example if the cardiologist expected their professional prestige to extend to local law enforcement excusing their traffic violations. Other examples include a celebrity whose bad treatment of hotel staff is tolerated, a valuable customer whom management allows to behave condescendingly towards a store clerk, or an employee who doesn't voice concerns to their boss for fear of mistreatment. Everyone suffers when people take (*or give others*) unwarranted advantage because of the power they have. Those taking advantage alienate others as they attempt to inflate their own value, possibly trying to cover up fear and insecurity, and making it difficult for them to see the worth of other people. Those who are disadvantaged may have fewer material benefits and receive less respect. One reaction to experiencing the disadvantage of rankism is to perpetuate it against others. I could experience rankism at work and then go home and treat my children badly. The child who has been abused at home could bully another child at school. The graduate student exploited by their professor could go home and mistreat their spouse. This mistreatment can and does go on and on and on. While not referring specifically to rankism, the words of Menakem (2017) describing clean and dirty pain are helpful here as a way to consider what happens when pain from suffering is perpetuated against others:

Clean pain is about choosing integrity over fear. It is about letting go of what is familiar but harmful, finding the best parts of yourself, and making a leap—with no guarantee of safety or praise. This healing does not happen in your head. It happens in

your body. And it is more likely to happen in a body that can stay settled in the midst of conflict and uncertainty. (p. 100)

Relief and a sense of flow and presence can result as the pain is felt and healed. Menakem (2017) describes the opposite:

The alternative paths of avoidance, blame, and denial are paved with dirty pain. When people respond from their most wounded parts and choose dirty pain, they only create more of it, both for themselves and for other people. (p. 166)

Pausing to consider our response to suffering (and get help if we need it) allows time to choose the qualities of any resulting pain.

Besides personal suffering there is collective suffering. One way superiority conceit can show up is as culturally conditioned superiority in areas such as race, class, and nationality (Bradshaw, 2016). Also, superiority conceit shows up in the dominant cultural values of a country (2016). Bradshaw (2016) names individualism and independence as values that carry a lot of weight and have become standard and often unquestioned in the United States. However, “. . . what can happen is that other values such as interdependence [and] community, might be undervalued” (30:26). Diverse communities allow individuals the valuable opportunity to learn from and cultivate values that may not be dominant in any given culture (2016). So where is the suffering in culturally conditioned superiority, and in dominant cultural values? My understanding is that it is in loss of appreciation for others and for those values that are important but not dominant. It can be in an unbalanced self, and possibly belief in the idea that there is only one right way to live and you have to choose one way or the other.

I recall a conversation at an interfaith panel meeting I attended several years ago, during which one of the speakers talked about the selfishness in the cries of a baby, who

ultimately will learn that at times it is necessary to delay their own needs. I spoke from the audience to say that as a parent, I had come to believe that my baby's cries were an expression of the discomfort and uncertainty of separation—an unfamiliar experience for a newborn whose lived experience before birth has been one of constant connection and interdependence. In Zenju Earthlyn Manuel's 2015 book, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality, and Gender*, I read with interest the observation that human beings are carried away from our true essence just after being born. She writes that we assimilate into the norms and structures around us in order to survive. However, "as we grow older . . . our own true nature calls to us," (Manuel, 2015, p. 5) and we suffer as we become aware of what we have lost. According to Manuel (2015), "In attending to such suffering, we start down many paths in order to recover the connectedness we lost upon entering the world" (p. 5). These paths may include social activism and spiritual exploration (2015).

Response

Invite participants to share initial thoughts or questions about the material just shared. Write (or ask a participant to write) these thoughts/questions on the easel to be considered during dialogue later. Please speak from your personal experience. Some ideas: What might be undervalued when independence is highly valued? What might be undervalued when connection and interdependence is highly valued?

All whole group sharing will be done with the microphone, which also functions as a talking stick. For most group dialogue we'll pass the microphone around the circle, taking turns speaking, so that all participants have the opportunity to contribute. It is always ok to "pass" the microphone on and not speak.

Practice**CHIME**

Please sit comfortably, with a posture of relaxed dignity. I invite you to **pause**. Please close your eyes or keep them slightly open. Allow your body and your muscles to **relax**. Let your body sink into the support of your chair.

PAUSE 30 sec

I invite you to **open** your senses. Be open slightly to what is going on around you while continuing to relax the body.

PAUSE 30 sec

Attune to whatever is emerging around you as well as being aware that you're part of it all and part of everything. Next we will practice the steps **listen deeply** and **speak the truth**.

PAUSE 30 sec**CHIME**

Please take a moment to move your body slightly and feel free to stretch a bit. Notice that we went through the steps of Insight Dialogue more quickly than we have in other weeks. When the guidelines are familiar, your mind and body can develop the habit of calling upon them more quickly and in everyday situations.

Small Group Dialogue

Have participants count off to divide into groups of 2 (with one group of 3 if necessary), moving chairs as needed to allow groups to separate for this exercise. Participants will each have 2-3 minutes to share using what has been written earlier on the easel as prompts with their small group.

After each individual has had their initial opportunity to speak and listen, allow 2-3 additional minutes for taking turns sharing within each small group, using “Thank you” and “I pause” to let their partner or group know they’ve finished speaking, before moving back to the whole group.

Whole Group Dialogue

Let’s pass the microphone and please share any thoughts, as you like, that came up during the meditation, or that developed during your small group of 2 or 3. Please speak with your own voice about your own experience, and let the group know when you have finished speaking with “Thank you” or “I pause.” It is always ok to “pass” on your turn if you like.

Week 3 Suggested Resources and Practice Assignment for Participants

- Read:

Feldman, C. (2008, Fall). Long journey to a bow. *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*.
<https://tricycle.org/magazine/long-journey-bow/>

Fulton, P. (2018). Māna: Conceits of the self. *Insight Journal*.
<https://www.buddhisticquiry.org/article/mana-conceits-of-the-self/>

- Listen to this talk - OPTIONAL! (about 50 minutes), also available through the free Dharma Seed app:

Feldman, C. (2009, January 2). Journey to a Bow [Dharma Talk].
<https://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/44/talk/10808/>

- Over the course of the week, continue to name thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to, as frequently as possible. Jot down notes if you think it would be helpful for you. With compassion towards yourself, recognize these thoughts as “just thoughts” and let them go, without judgment. Notice any suffering that you may feel.
- Meditate 5-20 minutes, in whatever way you wish, 1-2 times each day.

Closing Meditation

Please return to a posture of dignity and wakefulness, with your eyes closed or your gaze lowered. Just like last week, we'll close with a loving kindness meditation.

CHIME

Please pause and focus on your breath for about a minute.

PAUSE 1 min

May we be safe in the midst of this

May we be happy in the midst of this

May we be healthy in the midst of this

May we be at ease in the midst of this

Namaste.

CHIME

Week 4 – Curiosity and Compassion in all Directions – Overview Document

Facilitator Needs to Prepare and Bring

- Pre-made reusable nametags for each participant
- Microphone or talking stick
- Meditation bowl or chime
- Easel with quote by Thich Nhat Hanh from today’s Presentation section, extra paper, and markers
- This page and Week 4 instruction sheets

	Time	Activity	Group Form	Material
Greeting	5-10 minutes prior to start time	Participants put on nametags, find a seat in the circle, and settle in	All	Pre-made nametags for each participant
Beginning Meditation	3 minutes	Arriving, centering	All	Meditation bowl or chime
Check-in	5-10 minutes	Participants share experience/thoughts related to last week, resources & practice	All	Microphone or talking stick
Presentation	3 minutes	Curiosity and Compassion in all Directions	All	Easel with quote
Response	5-10 minutes	Participants share & write thoughts/questions on easel to consider during dialogue	All	Microphone or talking stick, easel w/paper and markers
Practice	3 minutes	ID	All	
Small Group Dialogue	5-10 minutes	Respond to prompts	Dyads or triads	
Whole Group Dialogue	5-10 minutes	Ubuntu practice	All	Microphone or talking stick
Going Forward & Request for Feedback	5 minutes		All	
Closing Meditation	2 minutes		All	

Week 4 – Supporting Documentation***Beginning Meditation*****CHIME**

Please join me and sit with your feet on the floor, with a posture of “dignity and wakefulness,” with your eyes closed or downcast. Bring a sense of arriving to your mind and body. I invite you to do this in a way that feels right to you: it can be through breathing into an increased sense of settledness, grounding by “Coming into the Room,” as we did last week, or through the Insight Dialogue guidelines of pause-relax-open-attune to emergence-listen deeply-speak the truth.

We’ll sit silently for a few minutes.

CHIME after 2 minutes to end the meditation.

Check-In (Group Response to Resources/Practice from Week 3)

Invite participants to share their response to the reading, audio, and practice from last week, including noticing and naming thoughts as better than, less than, or equal to, noticing thoughts as “just thoughts,” and noticing any suffering connected to these thoughts.

Participants pass the microphone around the circle; it is ok to “pass” the microphone on and not speak.

Presentation – Curiosity and Compassion in all Directions

I've been interested in comparison for a long time. I want to share a personal story. My family visited my older daughter while she completed a college semester abroad. While visiting we attended an academic conference with her. During a session discussing regional differences, I witnessed conceit of self, in the form of disrespect and condescension, in the comments of attendees seated near me during the session. This could have happened anywhere. I use this example because, as an outsider, perhaps with beginner's mind and with no knowledge of the regional differences being discussed, I was paying attention to everything and I had no preconceptions. I believe I recognized the universal tendency to rank (in this case between regions within the country), and the judgment that can come with ranking behavior. My daughter, who at the time of the conference had been in the country for three months and was a student of some of the faculty, confirmed later that there are indeed regional differences that cause misunderstanding between people, and the comments we overheard made sense to her. The understanding that this kind of comparison is universal was illustrated for me at this conference. I believe that mindful attunement to self and others reduces the tendency to disrespect others and instead approach them with curiosity and kindness. Without the disrespect and condescension that comes with conceit of self, there is more clarity and energy to see things as they are and address feelings, beliefs, and problems constructively.

I hope that through the material we have explored together in this program all of us have a greater sense of how feelings of being better than, worse than, or equal to others affect our lives and the lives of those we interact with. As we've discussed, the tendency to compare and separate ourselves from others is considered one of the last impediments to full awakening in Buddhism. We would not want to feel pressure to eliminate unhealthy comparison, but

motivation to investigate and understand it. If something is difficult, and we believe it is problematic and want to make changes, it is beneficial to address it gently over a long period of time so that insight and understanding can gradually increase. It takes attention and effort to appreciate the nuance involved since what most people recognize as “comparing” is a common phenomenon, sometimes seen as problematic and other times seen as normal and necessary. For these reasons—the universal and persistent nature of comparison and its complexity—it seems a worthwhile and accessible object of attention even for beginning meditators, to be approached with curiosity and compassion.

The role of suffering and pain in this exploration of conceit of self, when one is ready to consider it, strikes me as key. It has been said that knowing our own suffering helps us have compassion for others who also suffer (Williams et al., 2016). Nhat Hanh (2009) writes:

There is a lot that needs to be done in society—work against war, social injustice, and so on. But first we have to come back to our own territory and make sure that peace and harmony are reigning there. Until we do that, we cannot do anything for society.

Let us begin immediately. (p. 65)

When I first read this quote, I wondered about how sure Nhat Hanh means us to be about peace and harmony reigning and if he is stating that this work that needs to be done in society must be delayed. But from reading his surrounding words I believe he is writing about peace and harmony in the moment, consciously and mindfully cultivated. Doing work in society without compassionate attention to “our own territory” would not be effective. We’ll consider this quote later together.

Response

Invite the whole group to share initial thoughts or questions about the material just shared, speaking from personal experience whenever possible. Write (or ask a participant to write) these thoughts/questions on the easel to be considered during dialogue later. One idea is to respond to the Thich Nhat Hanh quote from above.

Use the microphone/talking stick, pass it around the circle, taking turns speaking, so that all participants have the opportunity to contribute. It is always ok to “pass” the microphone on and not speak.

Practice**CHIME**

Please sit comfortably, with a posture of relaxed dignity. I invite you to **pause**. Please close your eyes or keep them slightly open. Allow your body and your muscles to **relax**. Let your body sink into the support of your chair.

PAUSE 30 sec

I invite you to **open** your senses. Be open slightly to what is going on around you while continuing to relax the body.

PAUSE 30 sec

Attune to whatever is emerging around you as well as being aware that you are part of it all and part of everything.

PAUSE 30 sec**CHIME**

Please take a moment to move your body slightly and feel free to stretch a bit. As we move into small group dialogue bring the qualities of this meditation, along with a willingness to listen deeply and speak the truth, with you into the dialogue.

Small Group Dialogue

Have participants divide into groups of two (with one group of three if necessary), this time partnering with those seated closest to them (i.e., one & two form the first group, two & three the second group, etc... moving chairs as needed to allow groups to separate for this exercise. Participants will each have 2-3 minutes to speak uninterrupted using what has been written earlier on the easel as prompts with their small group.

After each individual has had their initial opportunity to speak and listen, allow for 2-3 additional minutes for taking turns sharing (again indicating when they have finished speaking with “Thank you” and “I pause) within each small group, before moving back into the larger circle but facing their small group partner(s) for one more exercise.

Whole Group Dialogue

Begin the whole group dialogue with a small group closing exercise with small group partner(s). This practice is from the book *The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness* by Rhonda V. Magee (2019):

UBUNTU PRACTICE

Inspired by the South African philosophy of *ubuntu*, this is a practice for two people. Sit or stand facing each other. Take a breath and ground yourself before resting your gaze gently on the face of the other. Silently call to mind the definition of *ubuntu*—“I am here because you are, and because you are, I am.” And repeat it inwardly, directing it at your partner. Take a deep breath and continue, reciting the following phrase inwardly: “Just like me, this person wants to be free. And their freedom is connected with mine.” As you sit in silence together, reflect on the possibility that liberation for each of you exists through connections like this one. When you are ready, close by offering any appreciations that have arisen to your partner. (p. 173)

Have everyone adjust chairs to return to the whole group circle. Pass the microphone and invite participants to share appreciation and thoughts that came up during the meditation or that developed during small groups, speaking with their own voice about their own experience. Since this is the last session, also invite comments/feedback about experience with this program.

Going Forward and Request for Feedback

Thank everyone for their presence and participation throughout the program. Let participants know about evaluations and feedback opportunities. A brief (5-10 minutes to complete) online feedback form (see information on page 39) will be emailed to everyone and will be used to develop and improve this program and future programs. Any and all feedback is welcome! A reading list (drawn primarily from the References section of the thesis and customized based on the experience of the group) in addition to a listing of local meditation and mindfulness resources, would also be offered for those who are interested.

Closing Meditation

Please return to a posture of dignity and wakefulness, with your eyes closed or your gaze lowered. We'll close with a loving kindness meditation. I want to thank each of you for contributing to this program and for exploring the self and comparison with me and in this group.

CHIME

Please pause and focus on your breath for about a minute.

PAUSE 1 min

May we be safe in the midst of this

May we be happy in the midst of this

May we be healthy in the midst of this

May we be at ease in the midst of this

Namaste.

CHIME

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