

Towards a Psychological Understanding of Unconditional Love

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Abstract

This thesis sought to develop a psychological understanding of unconditional love (UL). Despite the prevalence of UL and its associated benefits across different cultures and traditions, and within accounts of various expansive altered states of consciousness, there is currently no psychological construct of UL. This research specifically sought to understand what the triggers, characteristics and impacts of UL are, whether there is a relationship between UL and awakening experiences, and whether experiences of UL can be fully accounted for through physicalist conceptualisations of consciousness.

Two qualitative studies were conducted within a paradigm of transcendental phenomenology. Study 1 employed thematic analysis (TA). Across a pilot and full study, 42 written accounts of UL experiences were collected from 31 members of the general public. Results revealed two discrete forms of UL, each demonstrating distinct profiles concerning their contexts, triggers, characteristics, and impacts. Relational unconditional love (RUL) required a subject and an object and thus arose solely within relational contexts. It was accessible within normal states of consciousness. Transpersonal unconditional love (TUL) was not relationally bound and did not require an object. It appeared to be a subtype of awakening experience.

Study 2 utilised an IPA methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants to further explore TUL. Results confirmed the profile of TUL established in Study 1. In both studies, it appeared that TUL may be one of several unconditional positive states human beings are capable of, alongside unconditional joy and peace. Unconditional positive states appear to arise concurrently with extreme connectedness or oneness (which are features of awakening experiences). They may be experiences or features of an all-pervasive non-localised consciousness. As connectedness is negatively correlated with depression and anxiety, it may be a mechanism through which TUL experiences appeared to ameliorate psychopathologies such as depression, anxiety, and addiction.

Conceptions of unconditional positive states as experiences of extreme connectedness and non-localised consciousness have implications for the hard problem of consciousness, as well as for personal and interpersonal wellbeing. Future studies could explore: the seemingly bidirectional relationship between RUL and TUL; other unconditional positive states, their relationship with connectedness and their impact on mental health; and whether the results of this thesis remain consistent across different samples, including cohorts of more diverse spiritual orientation.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	II
TABLE OF CONTENTS	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT	2
1.2 EPISTEMOLOGY AND RESEARCH PARADIGM	3
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	6
1.4 MY RELATIONSHIP WITH UNCONDITIONAL LOVE	7
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE.....	9
2.2 UNCONDITIONAL LOVE IN VEDĀNTA	12
2.3 UNCONDITIONAL LOVE IN BUDDHISM	18
2.4 UNCONDITIONAL LOVE IN THE TAO.....	21
2.5 UNCONDITIONAL LOVE IN WESTERN MYSTICISM	23
CHAPTER 3: EXPANSIVE ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS (EASCS)	31
3.1 EXPANSIVE ALTERED STATES AND THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS.....	32
3.2 STUDIES OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES	33
3.3 PEAK EXPERIENCES	37
3.4 AWAKENING EXPERIENCES.....	38
3.5 PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCES	44
3.6 SPIRITUAL CRISIS.....	50
3.7 NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES (NDEs)	51
3.8 CONCLUSION	57
CHAPTER 4: LOVE IN PSYCHOLOGY	58
4.1 FEELING UNCONDITIONALLY LOVED	59
4.2 COMPASSION	60
4.3 UNLIMITED LOVE.....	67
CHAPTER 5: STUDY ONE: ACCOUNTS OF UL FROM THE GENERAL PUBLIC.....	72
5.1 PILOT	72
5.2 PARADIGM AND METHOD	73
5.3 RESULTS.....	74
5.4 DISCUSSION	85

CHAPTER 6: STUDY TWO	109
6.1 METHOD	109
6.2 RESULTS	113
6.3 DISCUSSION	147
6.4 LIMITATIONS	199
6.5 CONCLUSION	200
CHAPTER 7: GENERAL DISCUSSION	203
7.1 A PRELIMINARY PROFILE OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE	204
7.2 UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AS A FORM OF AWAKENING EXPERIENCE	204
7.3 UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND ONTOLOGIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS	204
7.4 UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE STATES	205
7.5 ACCESS TO UNCONDITIONAL LOVE	206
7.6 PERSONAL REFLECTION	207
7.7 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	209
7.8 INTERDISCIPLINARY CONTRIBUTIONS	211
7.9 CONCLUSION	212
REFERENCES	213
APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT SUMMARIES, STUDY TWO	0
E.1 MICHAEL	0
E.2 KARLIE	1
E.3 AMARDEEP	5
E.4 JOY	6
E.5 SAGE	8
E.6 ANDAL	10

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Chapter 1: Introduction

At the time of writing, the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society (BPS) listed unconditional love (UL) as one of the desirable outcomes of transpersonal consciousness. It proposed that the objective of transpersonal psychology is to explore “those areas of the human mind which search for higher meanings in life and which move beyond the limited boundaries of the ego to access an enhanced capacity for wisdom, creativity, unconditional love and compassion” (British Psychological Society, 2019). Within religious, mystical and philosophical literature, UL has been connected to outcomes such as virtuous living (Frankl, 1984/2013; Post, 2003; Templeton, 1999, 2000; The Holy Bible: KJV), overcoming psychological pain (Dalai Lama & Chan, 2004; Durga, 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Templeton, 2000; The Holy Bible: KJV) harmonious interpersonal relationships (Dalai Lama & Chan, 2004; Durga, 2013a; Ferrini, 1994; Templeton, 2000), wellbeing and happiness (Dalai Lama & Chan, 2012; Easwaran, 2007), the cultivation of peace between different nations and faiths (King, 1990; Templeton, 1999, 2000), awakening and enlightenment (Durga, 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Ferrini, 1994; Makransky, 2012), and the self-transcendent experience of a sense of unity underlying all things (Barks, 2010; Belzen & Geels, 2003; Cartright, 2015; Dass, 2010; Durga, 2016; Taylor, 2018; Templeton, 1999, 2000). This appears to imply that UL is an important positive psychological attribute; potentially a key objective in transpersonal development. However, despite the apparent importance of UL, there is a paucity of psychological literature on the topic – a paucity so great that UL has not been defined nor satisfactorily studied within a psychological framework. As a result, the presumed benefits of the psychological state of UL are as yet conjectural.

In the current age of secularism, religion has lost the authority to prescribe values, virtues and aspirations towards a life well lived. Science has come to the fore in its place, and psychology - the scientific understanding of human mind and behaviour – has, at least to some extent, superseded what was formerly the role of religion: to create guidelines for individual and collective flourishing. It could be said that there have been many positive elements to this movement from religion to secularism. For example, secularism has encouraged greater freedom of thought and self-expression compared to the many prohibitions of thought and behaviour perpetuated by religious dogmas. However, rules, restrictions, and judgements aside, religion and spirituality have in many cases offered humanity an array of useful strengths or virtues (Selvam, 2017). They have also historically offered a set of practices and disciplines that provide pathways into peak states of consciousness, often bestowing greater peace, strength, comfort, love, joy, compassion, inspiration, and connection (Happold, 1990; James, 1902/1928; Newberg, 2016; Taylor, 2017). As our societal structures move away from organised religion and into a more scientific worldview, it is important that we do not lose that which may enrich our individual and collective psychological health, wellbeing, and happiness, or those elements that connect us to ourselves, each other and whatever might exist beyond our separate selves.

Transpersonal Psychology offers a discipline through which the enriching experiences and benefits of transpersonal consciousness can be understood and cultivated independently of any religious dogma or paradigm. The American Psychological Society (2018) states that transpersonal psychology focuses upon “the nature, varieties, causes, and effects of “higher” states of consciousness and transcendental experiences”. As UL is associated with awakening, bliss and oneness in various spiritual literature and anecdotal accounts (Durga, 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Ferrini, 1994; Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2017; Tolle, 1997/2010; Spira, 2016), it appears to fit into this domain. It is likely a significant transpersonal experience, that can arise both within and outside of pre-existing religious or spiritual paradigms. Thus, the development of a coherent psychological construct of UL would represent a useful contribution to transpersonal psychology, opening a rich field of possible future research as to the nature and benefits of UL as a transpersonal quality of consciousness.

UL is similarly relevant to the domain of positive psychology. Positive psychology is “a field of psychological theory and research that focuses on the psychological states (e.g., contentment, joy), individual traits or character strengths (e.g., intimacy, integrity, altruism, wisdom), and social institutions that enhance subjective well-being and make life most worth living” (American Psychological Association, 2018). Within this remit, it is also interested in the scientific investigation of how theories, practices and values from spiritual and philosophical domains can promote positive psychological attributes (Selvam, 2017). As evidenced above, UL is a positive state that is anecdotally connected with the development of various character strengths as well as increases in subjective wellbeing. Due to the lack of pre-existing psychological construct of UL, these connections have not previously been explored within the field of positive psychology. The extent of positive outcomes anecdotally associated with UL combined with the broad range of philosophies and religions that consider UL a central aspiration, suggest that the development of a coherent psychological understanding of UL may contribute to both transpersonal and positive psychology.

1.1 Research Significance and Impact

This thesis establishes an initial psychological construct of UL, offering a foundational framework for further interdisciplinary exploration. Its relevance spans the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, theology, and consciousness studies. Within the domain of psychology, this research makes particular contributions to the fields of transpersonal psychology, positive psychology, the psychology of emotion, and the psychology of relationships. Of relevance to the philosophy of religion, this exploration connects with questions regarding the existence of a perennial philosophy, phenomenology, or common core to spiritual and religious experience. Pertaining to the science of consciousness, the study of UL intersects with ongoing debates regarding the underlying nature of consciousness and the mechanisms that underpin subjective experience.

Beyond academic contexts, this research offers insights for individuals interested in altered states of consciousness, spirituality and personal development, or the nature of love as it exists in transpersonal and relational contexts. My intention is that as the academic understanding of UL increases, it may become more accessible to people of diverse cultural, spiritual, and non-spiritual backgrounds, and that related interventions may be developed to promote greater altruism, tolerance, wellbeing, and beneficial transpersonal experiences in consciousness.

1.2 Epistemology and Research Paradigm

I have taken a critical realist approach to this research. Critical realism is an epistemological stance that posits that whilst phenomena exist independently of perception, our comprehension of them is mediated by pre-existing conceptual frameworks and subjective interpretation (Bhaskar, 1975). In this view, phenomena have an objective reality to them, but can only be experienced and described through a subjective lens. Thus, any understanding formed of an abstract phenomenon (such as UL) can only reflect that phenomenon. It cannot encapsulate it with exactitude because it cannot be free of subjectivity.

In keeping with critical realism, I have adopted a research paradigm of transcendental phenomenology (Husserl, 1983). The purpose of this thesis is to cultivate the beginning of a broad psychological understanding of UL and its potential importance to human wellbeing. Phenomenology is a research paradigm that allows the essential features of a phenomenon to be identified, such that it is distinguishable from similar phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p.8). This will be useful in the cultivation of an initial psychological understanding of UL; a phenomenon that is as yet unexplored within psychological literature.

Whilst traditional phenomenology suggests that the objective reality of a phenomenon is unknowable (prioritising subjective experience over any ontological claims) transcendental phenomenology posits that subjective consciousness can facilitate connection with deeper, potentially objective, ontological structures of a phenomenon (Husserl, 1983). It acknowledges that such underlying, ontological structures are unlikely to be completely knowable, but posits that they may be partially accessed through phenomenological inquiry (Edie, 1987). Thus, transcendental phenomenology allows researchers to develop conceptualisations of objective phenomena grounded in elements of subjective experience.

I have thus selected transcendental phenomenology because it enables me to acknowledge the subjectivity inherent in individual understandings of UL, but also to draw on those subjective interpretations to identify experiential structures of UL that may represent ontologically essential features. Using this paradigm, I aim to develop an epistemologically grounded conceptualisation of UL as an ontologically real phenomenon that is accessed and shaped through subjective consciousness. This initial conceptualisation can then be refined, expanded, and further researched within the field of psychology.

1.2.1 Truth and Representation within Critical Realism and Transcendental Phenomenology

Adopting a transcendental phenomenological research paradigm within an epistemology of critical realism impacts the extent to which subjective accounts of UL can contribute to an objective understanding of UL, and thus, the relationship that findings from this research have with truth. As outlined in section 1.2, critical realism posits that objective truth exists but can only be approximated through subjective understanding. Within transcendental phenomenology, whilst the subjectivity of participant narratives, and the mediating roles of language and interpretation are acknowledged, such accounts are considered to offer phenomenological glimpses of ontological truths that pertain beyond the personal realm. In this way, the truth available through transcendental phenomenology is not black and white but nuanced; blending the innate inconsistencies of subjectivity with the assumption that that subjectivity connects us to an underlying ontological reality. To mitigate any distorting factors of subjectivity in this paradigm, accounts are systematically triangulated, with each other, and with broader literature. This isolates and reveals those features of a phenomenon that occur across diverse experiential manifestations, suggesting they may be essential qualities.

In this research, I engage with subjective reports of UL not only as individual experiences, but as phenomenological windows into a potentially ontological reality of UL. While the findings of this research will not constitute definitive proof of UL as an objective or 'true' reality, they will offer an initial phenomenological foundation for identifying its underlying experiential features, or the essential aspects of UL as it manifests within human consciousness.

1.2.2 A Concept and a Construct of Unconditional Love

As has been stated, the purpose of this thesis is to develop a psychological understanding of UL. This will involve identifying a coherent concept of UL, and then beginning to formulate a psychological construct that can be operationalised in future research. Gerring (1999) asserts that a well-defined concept provides enough information to identify a complex phenomenon through a concise representation. He proposes that distilling a complex but related array of characteristics into a unified concept not only enhances the clarity and ease with which it can be discussed, but also the depth with which it can be understood. This supports my intention for this research: that the formulation of a coherent psychological construct of UL will enable the phenomenon to be better understood, to receive more psychological research, and thus, potentially to become a more accessible state of consciousness to those who may benefit from it.

It is important to clarify the difference between a concept and a construct. Gerring (1999) emphasises that "concept formation refers to the choice of terms, attributes and entities to be defined, not the indicators used to find them" (p.378). He further posits that a "differentiated concept" (1999, p.378) is one that can

be operationalised. In contrast, Bhattacharjee (2012) terms an operationalised concept as a construct. That is, a construct is a concept that has an operational definition which enables empirical measurement.

Neither concepts nor constructs are entirely universal or context-free. In alignment with both critical realism and transcendental phenomenology, concepts and constructs are formulated through subjective interpretation. Further, their meaning is shaped by the epistemological frameworks and disciplines within which they are utilised. Concepts are often considered to be broader and more abstract, providing flexible frameworks that can be utilised for understanding phenomena across different disciplines. In contrast, constructs are more specifically bound by the epistemological frameworks within which they were formulated, the context and disciplines in which they are applied, and the ways in which they are measured. For example, the concept of UL may be understood differently in the contexts of spirituality, psychology, and popular culture. However, I intend that this thesis will be the beginning of the development of a construct of UL that can be operationalised for use within a psychological framework.

Thus, in this thesis, I have two goals. First, in alignment with Gerring (1999), I seek to clarify the concept of UL to be operationalised. This will distinguish the UL concept of interest as gleaned from mystical literature and first-hand accounts of UL outlined in the literature review from other understandings of UL in popular culture. Second, in accordance with Bhattacharjee (2012), I seek to begin to operationalise this concept of UL into a construct, so it can be explored more effectively and systematically in future psychological research.

In accordance with transcendental phenomenology, my initial operationalisation of a psychological construct of UL will be informed by the subjective accounts of participants. Specifically, it will focus on their perception of what lead to their UL experiences, the characteristics of UL, and how such experiences impacted their psychological health and well-being. These early operationalising features of UL, drawn from transcendental phenomenological inquiry with characteristically small sample sizes, will serve as a foundational framework rather than a generalisable model of UL. However, my intention is that this initial construct may form a starting point for future research (employing larger sample sizes and diverse research paradigms) to explore the prevalence of certain elements of UL experiences within the general population.

1.2.3 Emotion and Unconditional Positive States

Central to the development of both the concept and construct of UL is its differentiation from traditional understandings of emotion. As outlined in Chapter Two, texts and accounts from diverse spiritual traditions assert a distinction between emotion and unconditional positive states, including both UL and unconditional joy. They posit that such states are unconditional because they are not contingent upon external, causal factors. By contrast, emotion is generally understood to arise as a reaction or response to

stimulus. As this differentiation will be discussed throughout this thesis, it is necessary to first establish a working definition of emotion.

Consistent with the distinction drawn in spiritual literature, both general and psychological definitions of emotions emphasise their contingency on external factors. The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, n.d.) defines an emotion as “any strong mental or instinctive feeling, as pleasure, grief, hope, fear, etc., deriving... from one's circumstances, mood, or relationship with others.” Similarly, the Merriam Webster Dictionary defines an emotion as “a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioural changes in the body” (n.d.). The two factors common to both definitions are the subjective, feeling aspect of emotion, and the necessity of some stimulus or object toward which that internal, subjective feeling is directed, or due to which it has arisen.

Psychological literature similarly defines emotion as requiring some antecedent stimulus. Ekman (1992, p.175) suggested that emotions have “distinctive universals in antecedent events”. Some years later, Izard defined an emotion as “a set of neural, bodily/ expressive, and feeling/motivational components generated... when ongoing affective-cognitive processes interact with the sensing or perception of an ecologically valid stimulus” (2007, p.261-262). Both Ekman and Izard's definitions emphasize the necessity of an antecedent event to trigger an emotional response. Ekman (1992) even proposed that it may be possible to determine the type of antecedent event that had triggered an emotion by witnessing how the emotion is expressed, further highlighting the hypothesized indivisibility of emotion and trigger. Conversely, as will be explored in Chapter Two, whilst unconditional positive states described within many spiritual traditions appear to comprise an inner, subjective feeling component (for example of joy or love), they are not dependent upon any external trigger (such as one's circumstances or relationships) but are described as self-arising, or as a permanent ground of being that can be accessed through spiritual practice (Easwaran, 2007; Happold, 1990; Templeton, 2000; Tolle, 2010).

1.3 Research Questions

Using a critical realist epistemology, and a research paradigm of transcendental phenomenology, this thesis seeks:

1. To explore the triggers or onset factors of UL experiences, the characteristics of such experiences, and the psychological impact they have on wellbeing.
2. To discover what relationship might exist between UL experiences and awakening experiences (the latter of which will be outlined in Section 3.4).
3. To understand the potential mechanisms of UL experiences with reference to materialist and non-materialist theories of consciousness.

1.4 My Relationship with Unconditional Love

I began practicing elements of UL semi-consciously to navigate the challenges brought by my parents' divorce. At two years old I had two different homes, which by the time I was five, contained two completely contrasting families. The value systems of these families were almost diametrically opposed. If Dad thought one thing was good, Mum thought the other. Yet, I felt profound love for and from them both. I felt one with both of them, and that both of these apparently opposing ways of life were paradoxically "right" even though it seemed that one being right should cancel out the other. I could feel that each parent was on the right path for them, and that each was giving me the diverse ingredients I needed to become the person I would be. This engendered a contemplation of the idea that the truth was big enough for many expressions, and that love could exist and be felt in all of them.

I began to study spirituality as a child, following along with my mother's exploration of multifaith mysticism. I started to experience unconditional love, joy and bliss semi-regularly; particularly through devotional music and practice. As my mother began to develop and teach her own work, I attended all of her classes. Many of her practices were about how to rediscover the divine (often equated with a universal oneness of love) hiding in everything. This included how to restore difficult relationships to love, how to find love and purpose in challenging work situations; how to open your consciousness to love or the divine in general, and ultimately how to discover that *you are that*. Teachers from different schools and traditions around the world would come and teach in our home, adding different nuances or experiences to this foundational framework.

In the spiritual paradigm I was learning, "love" and "the divine" were often used interchangeably and were seen as a permanent, universal ground of being. This was not only a concept, but a reality that I regularly experienced through group and individual practices, and through interactions with teachers from various traditions who embodied a palpable energy of love and bliss. I applied the various principles and techniques of bringing love as a spiritual, transformational practice to as much of my life as I could. I was also fortunate in that I began to teach these tools, and to offer group sessions in which states of UL and bliss were regularly accessed. This enhanced and enriched my understanding, and as a consequence, I often felt connected to a gentle underlying sense of love that pervaded my consciousness and perceptions, if to varying degrees.

In this ongoing exploration of UL, there were many peak experiences. Two stand out as formative experiences that have influenced this research. In 2013 I met a Himalayan Saint in Varanasi. He seemed to embody unconditional love and bliss. At the end of a Satsang he facilitated for us, he hugged me. It was like being hugged by an oceanic universe of love. I felt completely safe, completely supported and like there was no more need for any fear; as if I was home, and one with all that is. In the following days, I was ill with bronchitis. I felt so sick. My body ached, my nose was running, my throat was sore, and I was coughing constantly. My friends were all with us in India, on a retreat my mother was running, and I was

not able to participate because of my illness. Yet, confined to my hotel room, there was a deep sense of joy bubbling within me. It had nothing to do with my situation, but later, I realised that it may have been a residual sense of connection with the blessing and love from that Himalayan Saint. I have subsequently spent months of my life with him, both at his ashram in India and in Australia, and had many similar experiences of UL and joy, which felt as if they were bestowed from or through his consciousness.

Another peak experience of UL came through the breakup of a six-year relationship. My ex-partner and I had shared the same spiritual path. After I returned to Australia from America, where we had been living together, we had a Skype call, in which we did an energy process of love, forgiveness and setting each other free based on the tools we had been taught. We both cried with a sense of love and gratitude for each other. I can't speak to his experience, but for me, I was aware of the truth of needing the relationship to end, co-existing with the truth of profound love and gratitude for him and the time we had shared together. After we ended the call, I went running in the forest. Suddenly, my heart felt as if it burst open. I felt one with the universe. The trees, Earth and sky felt alive with love, as if they were singing or humming with it. I felt totally free and liberated, fully myself – reunited with parts of me I never knew existed – and ecstatic about it. I felt as if so many of the faults of my character, and elements of co-dependency that had been at play in that relationship fell away, because suddenly I didn't need them anymore. I was whole because I was one with and supported by the whole universe, and that was the love I had been seeking. The sense of liberation, joy and love lasted to varying degrees for several months, though it was paradoxically interspersed with periods of profound grief about the loss of that relationship. The experience gave me resilience, strength, confidence, and a new understanding of myself and the old patterns that had kept me stuck. It also enhanced the experiences of UL and bliss I had in my normal spiritual practice.

Of course, it wasn't the end of my personal foibles, and I have subsequently had many more experiences where my consciousness has shifted to reveal more that needed cleaning up, and to make way for more joy and love. I hope that will continue throughout my life! However, it was a profound experience that brought UL into focus in a different way. I realised that much of my life had been an exploration of and quest for UL in its various forms. I was suddenly aware of the immense practical benefit I had received from UL, and how incongruous this was with its common conceptualisation as a "fluffy" or romanticised, impractical topic that was disconnected from reality. I began to study UL and its benefits more consciously and specifically, eventually leading to this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I will explore how diverse religious and mystical traditions have understood and promoted UL, and how existing research within psychological literature may be connected to aspects of this phenomenon. UL, as understood by many traditions, is a state of consciousness. It is subjective and ineffable. Yet when described, it appears to have characteristics and benefits that are stable across

scriptural and experiential accounts from diverse belief systems and cultures. In keeping with transcendental phenomenology (Husserl, 1983), this suggests that certain experiential features of UL may be systematically discerned and described. It also suggests that with the appropriate attitudes and practices, UL could be cultivated by people of all walks of life.

Happold (1990) posits:

To arrive at the fullest knowledge and the deepest understanding it is necessary to take into account not our own personal experience only, not merely the experience of our own Western culture, but the total experience of the human race, past and present; not only the experience of the scientist, but also of the poet and the mystic; not only the experience of the world outside, but also of the world within us, the inner as well as the outer experiences of the race. (Happold, 1990, p.27)

For such an ineffable topic as UL, an exploration inclusive of all of these forms of data seems particularly pertinent. It is in this attitude of enquiry that this literature review has been conducted – seeking insight from a mixture of personal experiences, cultural and traditional understandings and objective scientific theories and findings that pertain to UL and its associated themes and ideas.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Spiritual Epistemology and Experience

This literature review draws extensively on texts from diverse spiritual paths and traditions, and on subjective accounts of spiritual experiences. It is therefore important to clarify the epistemological stance through which such accounts and literature will be interpreted. There are several key approaches to the study of spiritual experience and its related ontology. The three classic perspectives include the perennialism of Huxley (1945) and related “common core” concept of Stace (1960), the hierarchy of spiritual experiences proposed by Zaehner (1961), and the social constructivism view outlined by Katz (1978). Taylor (2016) later proposed the more nuanced model of “soft perennialism” or “perennial phenomenology”. I have selected the stance of soft perennialism, as it appears academically the most equipped and robust to meet and encompass evidence from a wide variety of spiritual traditions and extra-traditional expansive experiences.

2.1.1 Perennialism

Perennialism posits that there is likely one fundamental truth that underpins all spirituality and that this truth is simply experienced through the diverse lenses of different spiritual, religious, or personal frameworks (Huxley, 1945). Stace (1960) referred to this fundamental truth as a common or universal core, which he believed was a non-sensuous experience of unity, peace, joy and sacredness. He posited that this was the essential component of every mystical experience, and that such states were the goal of every spiritual path. Stace (1960) held that there are two main types of mystical experiences: extrovertive and introvertive. Both involved this common core of unity or oneness. He believed that introvertive states

were superior in some way to extrovertive states, especially if the extrovertive states involved any form of trance or ecstatic emotional or devotional component.

Stace's perennial perspective has been criticised as being too reductionistic and generalised. Zaehner (1961), and Katz (1978), among other scholars have argued that spiritual paths and their associated experiences are far more diverse than can be reduced into the binary of "introvertive" and "extrovertive". In addition, Katz stressed the lack of awareness of how the imagery, symbology and meaning-making of a particular spiritual path or tradition likely shapes mystical experiences that arise through those contexts (1978). Another potential problem with Stace's (1960) version of perennialism is that it appears to place a superiority on those traditions and experiences that most resemble western spirituality, minimising or dismissing those that reflect the mythology and phenomenology of eastern and indigenous cultures (Ferrer, 2000, Taylor, 2016).

2.1.2 Zaehner's Typology of Mysticism

Zaehner (1961) lamented what he perceived as an oversimplification of spiritual paths and states of consciousness in Stace's model. Instead, he proposed a three-tiered hierarchy of mystical experiences. He posited that these are fundamentally different from each other, and do not share a common core. The first and lowest level of Zaehner's typology of mystical experiences was panentheism; a transcendence of the separate, ego self to experience oneness with all that is, especially nature. The second level was the mysticism of isolation, also termed "monist" mysticism. This, Zaehner considered to involve resting in one's own individual spirit. Zaehner's third level, theistic mysticism, involved a loving union with the aspirant's version of the godhead. The superiority of this state compared to the other two was derived from Zaehner's notion that it arose as a function of divine grace, and as an experience of divinity itself.

Zaehner's writings show a clear leaning towards a Christian cosmology, which accounts for his assumption that the godhead was innately separate from the aspirant until this point of reunification was attained through theistic mystical states. Ferrer (2002) suggested that this bias imposed western values onto eastern and indigenous spiritual models, which innately view the divine as immanent to all of creation. Katz (1978) also critiqued the imposition of Christian ontologies and value systems onto other mystical paths and states in the pursuit of a universal schema of mystical experience.

2.1.3 Social Constructivism

Katz (1978) posited that it is impossible to remove any experience from the social and cultural framework of thoughts and beliefs of the experiencer. Thus, he hypothesised that the content of all mystical experience is predominantly socially constructed. In that way, Christians would experience mystical states that involve some form of union with the personal godhead through the Christ, whilst certain types of Buddhist practitioners would be more likely to experience an empty, voidal pinnacle of their mystical seeking, reflecting their teachings of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), and so forth for other spiritual paths. Each

would experience the character and flavour they did because of what they had been primed to seek and find in their respective mystical practices. To conflate such differences between paths and traditions into a perennial philosophy, or “common core” version of mysticism would in Katz’ view have been reductionistic, denuding each respective tradition of its unique flavour.

However, Taylor (2016, 2017) has pointed out that many individuals have had what he terms awakening experiences outside of any spiritual or religious context. These share many core features (including love) with each other, and with those mystical, spiritual or awakening experiences described within spiritual traditions, suggesting that there may be a common essence or set of characteristics that link such experiences together phenomenologically, despite the differences in social and traditional context in which they arose. This would indicate that whilst social contextualisation as proposed by Katz (1978) likely plays a role in the experience and interpretation of spiritual experiences, it is unlikely to fully account for the whole of such experiences.

Social constructivism, with its focus on cultural and traditional narratives, would not provide a suitable epistemological framework for the study of UL. Instead, UL appears *prima facie* to be one of the phenomenological features of mystical or transpersonal experiences that is less subject to, and may even transcend variations across different religious and spiritual paradigms. As such, an epistemological stance that prioritises phenomenology over conceptual frameworks is required.

2.1.4 Soft Perennialism

Taylor (2016) suggested a soft perennialism or perennial phenomenology as a framework that can accommodate both the rich diversity of different spiritual pathways and experiences, and the significant commonalities between spiritual experiences arising both within and outside of spiritual traditions. Soft perennialism proposes that it is not the forms or content of a spiritual experience that are perennial, but certain phenomenological aspects of the experience, and its psychological impact. Taylor posited that there is no hierarchy of spiritual experiences, nor necessarily any one shared goal, but instead, many potential types of mystical, or what he termed ‘wakeful’ experiences, which are connected by general trends. The key tenet of soft perennialism is that spiritual experiences both inside and outside of spiritual traditions yield shared phenomenological features that are associated with self-transcendence, greater connection and unity, and greater wellbeing and peace.

Soft perennialism is the epistemological stance most conducive to the building of a phenomenological understanding of UL. It differs from Stace’s (1960) perennialism and Zaehner’s (1961) mystical typology in its lack of hierarchy, and the equal significance given to all different types of awakening experience. This enables the development of a construct of UL that is relevant and accessible to people of diverse cultural and traditional backgrounds, both spiritual and non-spiritual. Further, in alignment with transcendental phenomenology, soft perennialism supports the development of a phenomenological construct of UL, drawing from diverse subjective experiences. This is an approach that social constructivism, with its emphasis on shared social meaning-making, would not fully accommodate. Thus, this review of mystical

literature adopts a soft perennialist lens, viewing each path or experience as inherently significant without imposing a hierarchy of superiority. The focus is on revealing core phenomenological or essential elements from each tradition that may be relevant to the experience of UL.

2.2 Unconditional Love in Vedānta

Although my own spiritual practice is multi-faith in nature, it draws significantly from the *Vedāntic* tradition, which offers a particular framework through which UL can be understood. *Vedānta* arose after the *Vedic* period in around 200CE. The Vedic tradition was primarily centred on the relationship between human beings, the Divine and nature. Many of the Vedic deities are embodiments of elements of nature. The practices promoted in this tradition tend to be sacred rituals or “pujas” designed to harmonise the elements of nature and to connect with the gods and goddesses. In contrast, Vedānta (which literally means “the end of the Vedas” (Nagler, 2007, p.298) takes a more mystical approach, emphasizing the Divine as an essence that exists in all things, including the self.

Vedānta proposes that there is a consciousness called *Brahman* which is the primary divinity. Brahman is beyond all things yet comprises and is within everything. Whilst gods and goddesses are still referenced within the *Upanishads* (the primary texts of Vedānta), they appear less as beings in their own right, and more as manifestations of Brahman. Both immanent and transcendent, Brahman is “the essence of every created thing, and the same Reality as our real Self” (Easwaran, 2007, p.22). Taylor describes:

Brahman is not a theistic conception; it has no personality, no form and no control over the events of the world. Brahman is the “spirit supreme” that gave rise to all things in the world, and which all things retain as their essence. It is indestructible and eternal, and has natural qualities of radiance and joy, so that to become aware of brahman means to attain joy... [B]rahman is the essence of our being, in the form of atman, the individual spirit. As a result, we are always essentially one with the universe. (Taylor, 2018, p.43-44)

The practice most promoted in Vedānta is meditation on Brahman, the realisation of which creates a sense of oneness with all things. According to the Vedāntic texts, the realization of Brahman is the “goal toward which evolution moves” (Easwaran, 2007, p.22). Easwaran’s translation of the Upanishads calls Brahman the Lord of Love, which begins to reveal the centrality of love to this ultimate reality.

“Upanishad” literally means “at the feet” (Easwaran, 2007 p.19) and refers to the fact that these texts came originally from the oral tradition. Spiritual seekers would sit at the feet of a teacher who would speak about Brahman and the process of self-illumination from his or her own personal experiences. The student would be required not only to learn the content of these talks, but to realise that essence within his or her own consciousness. This would mean the student would need to re-identify themselves with Brahman in an experiential sense.

2.2.1 Brahman as Love

In the Upanishads, Brahman is often viewed as synonymous with love. Verse seven of the Mandukya Upanishad declares “He is infinite peace and love” (Easwaran, 2007, p.204). The Mundaka Upanishad 2.1.4 describes “the universe is his heart...” (Easwaran, 2007, Pp.188-189), suggesting the limitless love Brahman is capable of.

The love of Brahman encompasses everything in what could be described as an unconditional way. The Shvetashvatar Upanishad 5.4 paints a beautiful image of Brahman extending love throughout the universe. “As the sun shines and fills all space with light... so shines the Lord of Love and fills the hearts of all created beings” (Easwaran, 2007, p.173). In this metaphor, the love extending from Brahman is not personal, in the same way that light from the sun is not personal, but rather a product of its being that extends out unconditionally. It is assumed that the realization of Brahman would be characterized by a similarly unconditional flow or expansion of love.

2.2.2 Unconditional Positive States in Vedānta

Although the topic of this research is UL, in the Upanishads, Brahman itself is unconditioned, and thus gives rise to other unconditional positive states. The chief among these apart from UL is “pure, limitless, unconditional joy” (Easwaran, 2007, p.40), which appears to be a kindred or sister state to UL. Like UL, Unconditional Joy (UJ) is discovered when a seeker realises Brahman and is freed from conditioning and thought. The Tejobindu Upanishad explains:

He is without form and unconditioned. To be united with the Lord of Love is to be freed from all conditioning. This is the state of Self-realization, far beyond the reach of words and thoughts. To be united with the Lord of Love, imperishable, changeless, beyond cause and effect, is to find infinite joy. (Easwaran, 2007, p.284).

Brahman is often described as “*sat-chit-ananda*: absolute reality, pure awareness, unconditioned joy” (Easwaran, 2007, P.41). The Taittiriya Upanishad calls it a “body of joy”, and this joy is conferred on the aspirant as soon as they realise Brahman within themselves. The Katha Upanishad 2.2.12 declares “Eternal joy is theirs who see the Self in their own hearts. To none else does it come!” (Easwaran, 2007, p.88). The Taittiriya Upanishad is particularly focused on the joy of Self Realisation and proclaims “The Self is the source of abiding joy” (Easwaran, 2007, p.239, 11.7.1). Later in the same Upanishad, the realisations of a sage, Bhrigu about joy are revealed: “Bhrigu meditated and found that joy is *Brahman*. From joy are born all creatures, by joy they grow, and to joy they return” (Tattiriya Upanishad 3.6.1 Easwaran, 2007, p.258). In each of these depictions of joy as a characteristic of Brahman, we see that it does not arise in a way that is contingent upon a particular life circumstance, but is instead an essence that is fundamental to the universe and to creation. Rather than being earned or gained, it is realized from within – almost as if it is rediscovered. This appears to be a key element of unconditional states of consciousness.

In the above examples (and throughout the Upanishads) the joy associated with realization of Brahman is not only self-arising, but permanent and inextinguishable. Nagler describes the difference between UJ and pleasure based on this permanence:

The Upanishads make a careful distinction between the terms pleasure and joy. Pleasure, which mainly comes from sense experience, is transitory and actually quite limited. Joy comes from being in harmony with the creative forces of the universe, with one's own destiny, and is permanent – one of the main reasons we can tell it apart from pleasure – and has no limits at all.
(2007, p.241)

Another way to put this could be that joy as described by the Upanishads is not dependent on any external factor, but is an unconditional quality of the Self, and is unlimited because of its lack of dependence on anything external. Thus, unconditional positive states are not viewed as emotions as such, which would arise in response to some relationship, event, or circumstance, but as products of reunion with “the irreducible ground of existence, the essence of everything” (Easwaran, 2007, p.38). In this way, they seem to exist permanently and to be revealed to the adherent in certain peak experiences. They are understood as part of a permanent foundation of Self and of reality that can be accessed at any time by those who have built the appropriate spiritual (or perhaps psychological) muscle through practice to do so.

2.2.3 Unity and Oneness

In addition to UJ and other unconditional positive states, one of the fundamental hallmarks of the realization of Self or Brahman is the experience of unity and oneness. The premise of most if not all of the Upanishads is that human beings exist in an illusion of separation and that Self-realization is the return to union. Shvetashvatara Upanishad 1:4-6 describes: “The individual self goes round and round... believing itself to be a separate creature, until it sees its identity with the Lord of Love and attains immortality in the indivisible whole” (Easwaran, 2007, p.46). The unity feature of Brahman, and thus potentially of UL and UJ gives rise to or facilitates other hallmarks of these unconditional states.

2.2.3.1 Transcending Polarity

Part of unity and oneness as explored in Vedanta is the reunification or transcendence of polarity, which appears connected to UL. Polarity is an experience which is likely to place conditions on love, due to the scope for preferring or expecting one side of a polarity over another. The Upanishads view the Self – which is the essence of all reality – as beyond polarity because it is the substance of everything. Thus, oneness with the true self frees a person from polarity and allows an experience of unity and UL. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.22 explains “The Self is beyond good and evil, beyond all the suffering of the human heart” (Easwaran, 2007, p.111). The Mundaka Upanishad equates the realization of the self as love with non-dual consciousness. It counsels “when you realise that you are the Self, Supreme source of light, supreme source of Love, you transcend the duality of life, and enter into the unitive state” (3.2.1,

Easwaran, 2007, p.192). Thus, within Vedānta, one of the hallmarks of Self-realization is non-dual consciousness, which appears to give rise to, or be one with UL.

Whilst the Self is considered to be beyond duality within the Upanishads, it is still understood that opposite types of experience exist in worldly life. Discovering the true Self empowers a person to experience these polarities but not to be bound or affected by them. The Katha Upanishad offers a metaphor for the untarnishable Self that is not impacted by polarity:

As the sun, who is the eye of the world, cannot be tainted by the defects in our eyes, nor by the objects it looks on, so the one Self, dwelling in all, cannot be tainted by the evils of the world, for this Self transcends all! (11.2.11, Easwaran, 2007, p.42)

Freed from what is perceived as the delusion of duality, the Vedāntic sage is able to view everything as an outpouring of Brahman. Thus, to him or her, everything and everyone is sacred and worthy of love. The Tattiriya Upanishad 1.11.2 implores the seeker “See the divine in your mother, father, teacher and guest...” (Easwaran, 2007, p.251). In 3.10.3, it goes on to describe more physical things to see the divine in. ‘We see the Lord of Love in beast and bird, in starlight and in joy, in sex energy and in the grateful rain, in everything the universe contains’ (Easwaran, 2007, p.260). As everything viewed from a non-dual perspective is seen as sacred, there is nothing which should not be loved, and thus conditions around love are removed.

2.2.4 Permanence

Part of the unconditional nature of UL and UJ appears to arise from the permanence of Brahman. The Chandogya Upanishad succinctly advises: “It is the Infinite that is the source of abiding joy because it is not subject to change. Therefore, seek to know the Infinite” (7.23.1, Easwaran, 2007, p.139). The Shvetashvatara Upanishad 4.7 ascribes all human suffering to an ensnarement in the world of change brought about by forgetting that which is permanent within. “Forgetting our divine origin, we become ensnared in the world of change and bewail our helplessness” (Easwaran, 2007, p.170). Earlier in the Shvetashvatara Upanishad (1.10) change is linked with the illusion of separateness, whereas merging with Brahman is proposed as a way to overcome it. “All is change in the world of the senses, but changeless is the supreme Lord of Love. Meditate on him, be absorbed in him. Wake up from this dream of separateness” (Easwaran, 2007, p.161). In the *Bhagavad Gita*, another central text of Vedānta, the God Krishna educates his disciple Arjuna in how to identify with the part of self that is permanent. He instructs that this will free Arjuna from conditions he may have placed on love, joy and peace:

Focus on going beyond all of nature and all worldly attachments... Focus instead on the Eternal that lies beyond this worldliness. Concentrate on freeing yourself from the tyranny of the so-called pairs of opposites. Release yourself from always trying to evaluate and judge everything. Disentangle from your habit pattern of seeing things as good or bad, loveable or hateful, pleasant or painful, and so forth. The tendency to get trapped in apparent opposites is a common and debilitating malady. Instead, remain tranquil and centered in the Self (Atma). (2:45, Hawley, 2001, P.20)

The links in each of the above citations between pain, change, and separation, and their cure through oneness with the permanent Self may shed light on how states of UJ and UL can arise in the context of painful circumstances, or even independently of any precipitating event. It is possible that this independence on circumstance is due to their existing as part of a permanent, non-local consciousness. This will be explored to a certain extent in connection with research question three, regarding the relationship between UL and materialist and non-materialist theories of consciousness.

2.2.5 Wholeness and Lack of Loss

One of the ways that the permanence of Brahman is important in the cultivation of unconditional positive states, is that it creates an inability to lose that which is loved, allowing patterns of fear and control to be released. In his introduction to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Easwaran describes a scene where a husband is teaching his wife about the merit and strength of love that knows that everything is one and nothing can be lost. ““Whenever we love”, he tells his wife, “we are really responding to the Self within that person. Therefore... if we discover this Self in our own consciousness, there will be no more parting, no more sorrow ever”” (2007, p.96). In the actual *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, chapter 2, verse 4.5, the same husband lists a whole gamut of people and things, including wives, husbands, children, wealth, the universe, gods, creatures, and everything –saying that all these things are loved “not for their own sake, but because the Self lives in them” (Easwaran, 2007, p.100). If one were to love everything with the understanding that it is actually Self, existing permanently within and unable to be removed, it is easy to imagine there would be far less fear of abandonment, death or any kind of pain caused by separation. In this way, love would become more unconditional, because it would be possible to continue loving no matter what form a relationship, or even the recipient of the love took. *Chandogya Upanishad* 8.3.2 offers the confirming reassurance “But all those we love, alive or departed, and all things we desire but do not have, are found when we enter that space within the heart” (Easwaran, 2007, p.143).

2.2.6 Love as the Pathway

In Upanishadic writing, as well as being a product of unification with Brahman, UL is seen as a pathway to that oneness. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* 2.6 implores the reader “Drink deep of divine love, and you will attain the unitive state” (Easwaran, 2007, p.163). *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* 5.13 advises that love directed towards *Brahman* is the pathway to liberation and highlights the importance of purity to be successful on this quest. “Love the Lord and be free... None but the pure in heart can realise him” (Easwaran, 2007, p.175). Thus, love is paradoxically the journey and the destination.

2.2.6.1 *Bhakti* as a Path of Love

Bhakti is the practice of union through spiritual love and devotion, and is considered one of the primary Vedāntic pathways to reunification with *Brahman*. Narada's Bhakti Sutra describes bhakti as *Paramapremarūpa* or the supreme form of love (in Mahony, 2014, p.46). The devotional Tamil text, the Tirumantiram describes the unifying property of bhakti, and the paradox of realising that the divine being loved in the practice of bhakti *is* love itself:

*In truth, it is through bhakti that one knows me,
Who I am and what I am;
And when one knows me in truth,
One enters immediately into my being.
Those who do not yet understand
Think that love and God are two.
They do not understand that love is God.
After truly knowing that love is God,
They remain in the love that is God.*
(257, in Mahony 2014, p.31-32)

This reinforces the concept of love as both the pathway and the destination in the practice of Bhakti and in the reunification with Brahman.

Bhakti can be directed towards a guru or teacher, a deity, or to the divine itself. In this latter form, the practice is concerned with loving the divine that is hidden inside of all things. Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.4 declares "The Lord of Love shines in the hearts of all. Seeing him in all creatures, the wise forget themselves in the service of all" (Easwaran, 2007, p.193).

One of the most common manifestations of bhakti in Hindu practice, is through the guru relationship. In this tradition, the guru is viewed both as the person themselves, revered for their knowledge or wisdom, and also as a portal into connection with Brahman or the infinite divine; which is viewed as the infinite Self. The guru relationship is a paradox. It begins with a sense of awe and reverence to an external or "other" person. Yet, through bhakti or devotion, the devotee has the experience of going 'through' the guru to something beyond. In meeting this, the devotee realises that the limitlessness they experience through the guru relationship is actually the substance of their own being; that there was never any separation between them and the guru, or between them and the universe, because all things are one.

The story of Hanuman, the god most predominantly associated with bhakti, illustrates the paradoxical role of the guru. In one of the central texts of Hinduism – the Ramāyana – Hanuman, a young monkey, meets his guru Ram in the forest. Ram does not think of himself as a guru, (although in the story he is an incarnation of the god called Vishnu) but Hanuman recognises the divine living within Ram as soon as he sees him, and thus begins to follow him. There are many beautiful teachings in the story of Hanuman that are beyond the scope of this research. In illustration of the paradoxical nature of the guru tradition, one day Ram asks Hanuman who Hanuman is. Hanuman replies that when he doesn't know who he is, he

serves Ram, but when he wakes up, he is one with Ram, and there is no separation (Goldman & Sutherland Goldman, 2022). As the guru is considered a representation or access point to the divine as the whole universe, this is Hanuman realising that there is only one self; divinity. This is supported by the central Vedāntic teaching from the Chāndogya Upanisad: “thou art that” (Mahony, 2014, p.15), where “that” refers to the totality of all that is, including the divine. It is through the power of love and devotion that this merging happens, and as the devotee realises that they are one with the guru, they realise they are one with reality or Brahman itself.

2.3 Unconditional Love in Buddhism

Buddhism explores UL less directly than Vedanta. However, its conceptualisation of compassion shares significant thematic parallels with Vedāntic paradigms of UL. Adopting a lens of soft perennialism (Taylor, 2016), this suggests the possibility that the two traditions may describe similar phenomenological experiences, and that the differences may arise in part through each tradition’s distinct linguistic and philosophical frame. This section explores Buddhist conceptualisations of both love and compassion and how they may compare with the Vedāntic understanding of UL as an apparently unconditional positive state.

Compassion is one of the primary focal points of the Buddhist philosophy. Many different varieties of compassion exist within Buddhist literature. Happold (1990, p.161) describes Buddhist compassion as “loving kindness, benevolence, friendliness and affection... an attitude of mind to be cultivated so that it may influence disposition and action”. Makransky (2012) describes compassion as a type of empathy towards those who are suffering, in which the sufferer is wished freedom from their pain. At face value, compassion as empathy for the suffering of others is not necessarily unconditional as it is directed towards only those who are suffering and only in relation to their pain. However, as Buddhist philosophy includes the doctrine that all beings inherently suffer because they have not attained *nirvana* or liberation, it could be that compassion for those who are suffering is in effect compassion for all.

In both Makransky’s (2012) and Happold’s (1990) definitions (compassion for others’ suffering and a general attitude of benevolence) it appears that separateness is maintained between the one offering compassion and the one receiving compassion, and that in contrast to many depictions of UL experiences, and to Vedāntic understandings, one would not necessarily require a sense of oneness or self-transcendence to express compassion in these forms. However, as one becomes more adept at the practice of compassion within Buddhism, it appears to begin to include more of the hallmarks of oneness and universality associated with UL in other texts. Three examples of compassion that could be paralleled in different ways with UL include *metta*, *bhodichitta*, and *karuna*. These are mentioned in the *Brahma Viharas* or four sublime states of Buddhism, which may also shed light on the characteristics of both UL and UJ.

2.3.1 Metta

In general usage, Metta is a term for loving kindness that appears to refer to benevolence toward creation and all beings (Happold, 1990). The Metta Sutta encourages Buddhist practitioners to cherish all living beings. In parallel with UL, this cherishing is not only considered to be relationally directed (towards others) but also universally directed, as it extends “all around without limit”:

Even as a mother watches over and protects her child, her only child, so with a boundless mind should one cherish all living beings, radiating friendliness over the entire world, above, below, and all around without limit. So let him cultivate a boundless good will towards the entire world, uncramped, free from ill-will or enmity (in Happold, 1990, p.172).

Boundlessness and lack of limitation appear central to the practice of metta, and could be equated with the limitlessness of UL as described in Vedānta.

In the above passage, the boundlessness refers both to mind and good will. The idea of a “boundless mind” may be connected to that of freedom from enmity referenced later in the passage, suggesting that boundlessness cannot be cultivated without some level of purity from negative feeling. Boundlessness of good will appears to reference a lack of restriction around who should be a beneficiary of the good will. Earlier in the Metta Sutta, there is a clear and detailed instruction that no-one should be excluded from the benevolent intention of its prayer: “All beings, whether weak or strong – omitting none- in high, middle or low realms of existence, small or great, visible or invisible, near or far away, born or to be born” (in Happold, 1990, p.172). Perhaps the purity of a boundless mind enables a boundless heart, capable of bestowing good will, friendliness, and cherishing on all beings regardless of their character or circumstance.

Whilst metta parallels the boundless benevolence of UL, it is not clear whether benevolence, friendliness and good will encompass UL in its entirety. For example, it is unclear whether the practice of metta includes the element of oneness – which appears to be a central hallmark of UL in other traditions and scriptures. Perhaps then, metta is not an identical construct to UL, but rather one of the ways UL might express.

2.3.2 Bodhicitta

In Mahayana Buddhism, an advanced level of compassion is often referenced as *Bodhicitta* (Chodron, 2008), literally “awakened consciousness”. Awakened consciousness includes compassion, but it is compassion mixed with wisdom and non-dual awareness (Makransky, 2012). The wisdom and realisation of oneness allows for an unconditional or transpersonal state of compassion as opposed to a relational one. Thus, it is possible that non-dual awareness and compassion combined equate to UL.

2.3.3 Karuna

Karuna is often directly translated as compassion, or willingness to bear the sufferings of others. At face value, *Karuna* appears similar to UL as described or alluded to in other philosophies because of its inherent sense of oneness and endlessness. *Karuna* is described by Happold (1990, p.161) as “the supreme virtue, an inherent spiritual quality” that parallels the Christian notion of *agape*.

The Voice of the Silence discusses compassion in the form of *Karuna*. It says:

Compassion is no attribute. It is the Law of laws – eternal Harmony... a shoreless universal essence... the law of love eternal. The more thou dost become at one with it, thy being melted in its being, the more thy Soul unites with that which IS, the more thou wilt become COMPASSION ABSOLUTE. (in Happold, 1990, p.173)

Words such as “shoreless”, “universal” and “everlasting” depict a limitless quality to this form of compassion which corresponds with that of UL. “Love eternal” could even be synonymous with UL, reflecting the qualities of permanence and endlessness.

Happold described melting into “that which IS” to become one with “compassion absolute.” This melting may reflect the experience of oneness that appears in so many iterations of UL. This limitless vastness contrasts with the concept of compassion as a finite mental attitude cultivated in relation to other beings and their suffering. It seems that similarly to UL, *Karuna* refers not to a relational attitude, but to an all-encompassing state of consciousness. From this description, *Karuna* may be a term that equates to UL.

2.3.4 The Brahma Viharas: Four Sublime States

The Four Sublime States or *Brahma Viharas* of Buddhism include two different forms of compassion, along with joy and equanimity. It could be that all these four states together are part of the fullness of how UL manifests. The four states are benevolence (associated with *metta*, or loving kindness), compassion (associated with *karuna*, the limitless, unconditional form of compassion), sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

The four sublime states each have a practice, and each practice is identical except for the name of the state mentioned. For example, the practice for benevolence reads:

Here, with thoughts of benevolence, one pervades first one direction, then a second direction, then above, then below, then all around. Identifying oneself with all, one pervades the entire universe with thoughts of benevolence, with heart grown great, wide, deep, boundless, purified of ill-will. (Happold, 1990, p.172)

Each of the other practices has the relevant name of the sublime state (compassion, sympathetic joy etc) in place of benevolence. The practice of each state includes four features that appear to be connected to the cultivation of UL: universal benevolent intention, expansiveness, a sense of self as one with all, and a focus on purity.

Another point of interest is that the four Brahma Vihara states are interconnected. In the Upanishads, universal kindness, boundless love, and joy, and overcoming polarity through oneness are all hallmarks of self-realisation. It is interesting that these qualities are linked in both Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. It seems possible that the state of UL either encompasses, leads to or is synchronous in development with all four sublime states, or that they are indivisible. By extension, this appears to connect UL with states of self-realisation or enlightenment.

2.4 Unconditional Love in the Tao

Whilst UL as such is not mentioned within Taoist texts, there are several essential principles, qualities and virtues within Taoism that reflect those arising in conjunction with UL in other traditions. Thus, it could be that, in keeping with an epistemology of perennial phenomenology, Taoism encompasses phenomenological elements of UL though they are referred to by other names. Some of the key Taoist characteristics that could be associated with UL include: the principle of the Tao (a unified whole or oneness that transcends polarity and pervades all things); benevolence and compassion; purity and boundless consciousness; and the necessity of tenderness in the cultivation of strength and empowerment. Within Taoism, the realization of each of these apparently separate components is necessary to reach enlightenment or sage-hood.

2.4.1 Oneness and Boundlessness

One of the fundamental features of the Tao that appears connected with UL is the emphasis on the oneness and wholeness of all things. In Ancient Chinese philosophy, the Tao is the “Primal Meaning and Undivided Unity behind everything” (Happold, 1990, p.46). To be in harmony with the Tao is to be “at one” with nature, both one’s own innermost nature and the “force of nature” we experience everywhere (Hamill, 2007, p.xv). Thus, knowing that everything is one wholeness, and knowing the self to be part of that wholeness, are essential components of the experience of the Tao.

Paralleling the Upanishads, oneness within Taoism arises through a universal oneness that is both immanent and transcendent. Verse 21 refers to the Tao as “all-embracing power” (Hamill, 2007, p.31). Verse 25 describes the Tao as “unchanging, all-pervasive, inexhaustible” and “boundless” (p.35). Thus, attaining or aligning with the Tao may bring boundless consciousness, reflecting the consciousness associated with UL and UJ within Vedanta.

2.4.1.1 Acceptance of all Polarities

One crucial aspect of the concept of unity within Taoism is acceptance of all polarities. Instead of opposite ends of certain spectrums being ascribed the values of “good” or “bad,” they are considered indispensable

parts of the one whole. The primary icon of Taoism, the yin and yang symbol, reflects the centrality of unity within polarity to Taoism. Hamill describes the symbol as “waxing and waning moons: in darkness, light, in light, darkness” (2007, p.xv). Instead of being two separate and opposing phenomena, darkness and light are simply contrasting phases in one cycle. Verse 23 of the Tao te Ching describes that when a seeker becomes realized in the Tao, they can welcome all polarities indiscriminately: “The power is such that with each gain, we welcome gain, with each loss, we welcome loss” (Hamill, 2007, p.33). Similarly, UL in other traditions is depicted as unconditional because it does not alter or discriminate based on polarity.

The importance of oneness even between seemingly contradictory forces is illustrated in the plethora of paradoxes in the Tao te Ching. Many of them concern the necessity of cultivating soft qualities such as tenderness, compassion, and innocence, to attain robust ones, such as strength, courage, and empowerment, which again has relevance to UL. Verse 52 advises “holding tenderness is called strength. Use this light to return to enlightenment” (Hamill, 2007, p.75). Verse 67 offers a strict admonition against forgetting the importance of compassion in the pursuit of courage. “Compassion empowers courage... These days people renounce compassion, wanting courage.... Compassion is victorious in battle, enduring in defense” (Hamill, 2007, p.99). In both examples, the reader is advised that true strength and resilience cannot be cultivated without compassion or tenderness. Whilst these characteristics may appear to be opposites, the Tao views them as indivisible and necessary to each other.

Of course, there are versions of compassion and tenderness that may not engender strength: perhaps if they arose at the expense of authenticity, if they were expressed through excessive self-denial, or if they resulted in an inappropriate smothering or rescuing of another person. However, the Tao te Ching posits in these passages that there is a higher form of compassion that engenders both tenderness and strength simultaneously. Perhaps UL, like the Tao, is not expressed in versions of compassion that are weak or self-denying, but only through wise and balanced compassion that arises from oneness and is one with strength.

2.4.2 Benevolence

Benevolence, selflessness, and compassion are encouraged throughout the Tao te Ching.

Verse eight suggests that benevolence and compassion should be extended to all, without judgement: “It’s best to be like water, nurturing the ten thousand things without competing, flowing into places people scorn” (Hamill, 2007, p.11). This description of nurture reflects a love that is not precious or contingent upon opinions of others, but instead flows everywhere and to everyone. Verse 27 connects this unconditional benevolence or compassion to enlightenment. “Extending compassion to all life, rejecting none. This is enlightened practice” (Hamill, 2007, p.39). Again, this parallels teachings about UL or benevolence as expressions of enlightenment in both Vedānta and Buddhism.

2.5 Unconditional Love in Western Mysticism

Vedānta, Buddhism, and Taoism each engage with UL in distinct ways. Whilst Taoism does not specifically prioritise love, features of the Tao itself and of the Taoist conceptualisation of enlightenment appear phenomenologically similar to descriptions of UL and compassion in Buddhism and Vedānta. There appears to be a convergence between these three Eastern traditions regarding their shared emphasis on oneness, the transcendence of separate identity, and the overcoming of polarity. Western mystical traditions similarly prioritise the importance of unitive states, and consider UL to be a common feature or product of such experiences. This reinforces a potential phenomenological consistency across conceptualisations of love and unity in different traditional contexts. Whilst worldviews and prescribed practices diverge, it may be that there is a consistent experiential core that characterises UL as an ontological phenomenon that transcends traditional and cultural frameworks.

The prominent mystical author Evelyn Underhill posited that love is one of the perennial elements of all mystical traditions. She wrote “The jewels of mystical literature glow with this intimate and impassioned love of the Absolute; which transcends the dogmatic language in which it is clothed and becomes applicable to mystics of every race and creed” (Underhill, 1911/2002, p.86). This passage suggests that it is love which moves the pursuit of mystical objectives out of the realm of theory and into the realm of essential experience; which can be accessed by people from any path. This supports the possibility of creating a phenomenological framework of UL that may be reflective of subjective experience across different cultural beliefs, perspectives, and practices.

Mysticism is not bound to one particular religious tradition. It is a way of engaging with spirituality that focuses on union, and on cultivating experiential rather than theoretical understanding of non-physical realities (Underhill, 1911/2002). Underhill described “Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in a greater or lesser degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment” (in Happold, 1990, p.38). This process of attaining union is connected with love in two primary ways. In some depictions, love is a method through which states of unity are accessed. In others, love appears to be a primary characteristic of that attainment.

2.5.1 Love as a Pathway to Union

As mentioned above, one of the central goals of mysticism is union. Through reunification with an essential ground of being, comes the discovery that although creation appears to be made of various polarities, there is “a hidden unity beneath the battle, transcending all created opposites” (Underhill, 1911/2002, p.38). However, the consensus is that this unity cannot be perceived through sensory perception or discursive thought. Instead, it is experienced through love. Templeton explained that love is both a vehicle for connecting with the fundamental oneness of all things, and at the same time, might be that universal essence itself: “Sometimes, love gains great heights, seeing all things as originating from

one universal source and, therefore, feels a sense of profound unity and kinship with them. From this viewpoint, love is intuitively perceived as a cosmic principle” (2000, p.11).

One of the polarities that is reunited through love in the mystical traditions is that of Divinity and humanity. According to F. C. Happold (1990, p.37), theologians from medieval times described mystical theology as “a stretching out of the soul into God through the urge of love”, or as “an experimental knowledge of God through unifying love”. This is similar to the bhakti tradition of Vedānta, in which love is a method of reunifying the individual self with Brahman, considered the underlying essence of all beings and things.

The Christian theologian and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin observed that love is the “only force that can make things one without destroying them” (in Templeton, 2000, p.7). This is because from a mystical perspective, love unifies the individual consciousness with the essence or force that pervades all things. Thus, it is not a literal movement from separation to union, but a remembering that the separation that is habitually experienced is not as real as the fundamental oneness hidden within it.

2.5.2 Love as the Manifestation of Mystical Unity

Happold divides mysticism into two major types: “the mysticism of love and union” and “the mysticism of knowledge and understanding” (1990, p.40). In the mysticism of love and union (described above) the predominant urge is to reunify with “Nature or God” (Happold, 1990, p.40) and thus recover from separation and loneliness. As has been explored, this reunification occurs through love. In the mysticism of knowledge and understanding, the primary urge is towards understanding the self and the universe and how they fit together. However, it is possible that whilst love may not be a central component of the path of knowledge and understanding, it may manifest as part of the expression or experience of the unity that is attained through it.

It is possible that when knowledge and understanding about the self and the universe is attained, love is discovered as part of the mystical idea of the permanent ground of being (sometimes referred to in western mysticism as God or the Divine, but other times in less theistic terms). Templeton explains “within this amazing and sometimes fascinating diversity can be found an equally amazing unity, the basis of which is “love”” (Templeton, 1999).

In his description of the experience of a mystic in the state of epiphany, knowledge and revelation, Richard M. Bucke depicts a realization of love as the foundational essence of reality:

Like a flash there is presented to his consciousness a conception (a vision) of the meaning and drift of the universe... He sees that the life which is in man is eternal... that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love... (In Happold, 1990, p.55).

In this and other accounts, the realisation of the fundamentality of love is perceived as a realisation of the truth of the universe. In keeping with the idea of a perennial phenomenology (Taylor, 2016) this common

experience in western mysticism reflects the permanence of love as an underlying substrate of reality depicted in Vedānta.

2.5.3 Unconditionality

In the western mystical tradition, as in Vedānta, love is unconditional when it exists independently of the entanglements of normal thought and emotion. In both traditions, this freedom arises because of the indivisibility of love and a divine presence or essence that is both immanent and transcendent. The German-Dutch Christian mystic Thomas À Kempis made a celebration of this unconditional, mystical form of love:

How great a thing is Love, great above all other goods: for alone it makes all that is heavy light, and bears evenly all that is uneven...Love would be aloft, nor will it be kept back by any lower thing. Love would be free, and estranged from all worldly affection, that its inward sight be not hindered: that it may not be entangled by any temporal comfort, nor succumb to any tribulation. Nought is sweeter than love, nought stronger, nought higher, nought wider: there is no more joyous, fuller, better thing in heaven or earth. For love is born of God and cannot rest save in God, above all created things. (In Underhill, 1911/2002, p.87)

This description of love as a mystical experience which softens troubles by bearing “evenly all that is uneven” implies that it is the constancy of love that makes it unconditional.

À Kempis paints love as beyond all other metrics, appearing infinite in its nature. He associates it with the highest or fullest joy (reflecting the association between UJ and UL in vedānta, arising because they are both characteristics of *Brahman*). He appears to posit that these limitless and unconditional qualities of love arise because of the indivisibility of love and God.

Contemporary mysticism also explores love and joy as permanent, unconditional states or features of the underlying true self. Eckhart Tolle discusses the experience of love, peace and joy that are not emotions, but unconditional features of reality, existing beyond the duality of mind and emotion:

Love, joy and peace are deep states of Being, or rather three aspects of the state of inner connectedness with Being. As such, they have no opposite. This is because they arise from beyond the mind. Emotions, on the other hand, being part of the dualistic mind, are subject to the law of opposites. (2010, p.29)

The contemporary non-duality teacher Rupert Spira’s (2016) *The Art of Peace and Happiness* describes unconditional positive states that are connected to and experienced through the unconditioned self. Spira writes “Causeless joy, imperturbable peace, love that knows no opposite, and freedom at the heart of all experience...this is your ever-present nature under all circumstances.” Both depictions reflect the mystical concept that positive states - without opposite and without cause - are unconditional because they are part of the constant underlying nature of the self.

2.5.3.1 Unconditional Joy

Although many accounts of awakening or mystical experiences describe perceptions of the universe as love, or a sense of being embraced by love, there are also many accounts of such experiences which do not reference love, but instead mention joy and light or illumination. An account from Warner Allen (in Happold, 1990, p.39) describes the peak of his own mystical experience of God as “Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy!” Templeton, a predominantly Christian theologian, investor and philanthropist has also associated UL with UJ. He wrote:

Unlimited love loves simply for the sake of loving. It doesn't seem concerned with what or whom it loves, nor with whether or not love is returned. Like the sun, its joy is manifest in the shining forth of its nature. (Templeton, 2000, p.3)

As in the *Vedāntic* tradition, it seems that UJ and UL are both characteristics of that permanent and all-pervasive ground of reality that is accessible in mystical states.

2.5.4 Unconditional Love in Mystical Christianity

Mystical Christianity is a prominent branch of western mysticism. All forms of Christianity emphasize love because of the centrality of love to the teachings of Jesus. For example, in Matthew 22:36-40, Jesus is asked:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: ““Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (New International Bible, 1773/1984)

Through a non-mystical lens, this would be interpreted as a relational kind of love, respect and care for God and for neighbours. However, read through a mystical worldview, with its inherent assumption that love is a way of rediscovering unity, a commandment to love God is a commandment to reunify with Him, and to love others as the self may be a reminder of the same self that underlies all beings. This is not the traditional interpretation of the Bible, but it is a possible mystical interpretation.

1 John 4:16 declares “And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017). This statement is very similar to mysticism at large in that there is love that flows from the divine to the seeker, the seeker accesses God by “dwelling” in love, which might be attained through practices of worship and devotion, and God comes to be present with the seeker when they approach God in love. God coming toward the seeker may be analogous to the mystic experiencing a state of oneness with the fundamental essence or reality of all things. Templeton posited “God’s unlimited love may be the basic reality from which all else is only fleeting perceptions by humans and other transient creatures” (2000, p.3).

In other parts of the Bible, the instruction is not only to love God, but to love one another, because love is born of God. Thus, loving others is a way of expressing God in daily life. 1 John 4: 7-8 informs the reader that God is love, and recommends a practice of love to reconnect with Him. It implores “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love” (King James Bible, 1769/2017). Verses 4:11-12 then suggest that loving others is a way to express God in daily life. They instruct “Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us” (King James Bible, 1769/2017).

The UL experiences of Christian mystics tend to reflect those of non-denominational mystics, except that terms such as God and Christ replace references to a non-anthropomorphised oneness, source or fundamental ground of being. Paul Ferrini is a contemporary Christian mystic who has written several books about UL. His concept of Real Love parallels the unity of Brahman and the western mystical concept in which the oneness underlying all things is a manifestation of love. As he explains, “Real love ends your experience of the conditional world. When you experience it, you no longer feel separate from others. You open to a larger reality that includes the well being of others. Judgement falls away and acceptance rules” (1994, p.35).

Ferrini’s concept of love supports the idea of unconditional positive states which exist beyond or transpersonally to the individual human psyche. He posits “Real love does not change. It exists independently of the form through which it expresses” (p.34). This suggests a constant UL that exists beyond any human psychology, and that is accessed rather than created through our individual consciousness.

However, there are those in Christian mysticism which do not promote love as an expression of unity but as an experience of inherent otherness. Theologist Cole-Turner (2024, p.5) purports “For the mystic in theistic traditions like Christianity... the goal of the mystical life is not monistic union, but a felt sense of the presence of the sacred.” He describes that presence as “a most intimate relationship... a felt loving closeness with the divine.” Cole-Turner believes that the divine remains ontologically distinct from everything else. He distinguishes: “Monistic union implies oneness. Theistic presence involves love, which even at its most intimate intensity always implies otherness” (2024, p.5). As mentioned, this is in divergence with the experiences and writings of many other Christian mystics but should be considered as a different experience of mystical love.

2.5.5 Unconditional Love in Kabbalah

Kabbalah, the mystical tradition arising within Judaism, is another system that has had a substantial impact on western mysticism. Kabbalah is a complex and intricate cosmology and system for awakening. It is beyond the scope of this section to describe it in its entirety. Thus, this small synopsis will focus

mainly on UL in the tree of life, one of the central Kabbalistic frameworks. It will particularly explore three of the *sephira* of the tree of life: *Tipharet*, *Chesed* and *Gevurah*, as they pertain to UL.

The tree of life is comprised of ten sephira, which are hubs of different potencies or intelligences that make up a human being, and which are viewed as emanations from a divine formlessness called *En Soph* (Ginsberg, 1925/2015). Each sephiroth governs a particular area of human psychology and experience (Ben Shimon Halevi, 1972; Ginsberg, 1925/2015). They are represented as circles, which are mainly arranged in triads across the three pillars of the tree.

Each pillar on the tree of life has its own character (Ginsberg, 1925/2015; Fortune, 1935/2022; ben Shimon Halevi, 1972). On the left is the pillar of form, rigour, or judgement. On the right is the pillar of force, flow or mercy. In the centre is the unifying pillar; the pillar of balance, equilibrium or mildness. The middle pillar is where the topmost and bottommost sephira sit, representing the divine (*Kether*) and the earth (*Malkhut*) respectively. The sephiroth that is the heart or balance point of the tree, *Tipharet*, sits at the centre of this middle pillar, directly between heaven and earth. It is the point of reunion of all polarity within the tree, paralleling descriptions of UL transcending polarity. Tipharet is often connected to the Mystical Christ and is considered to represent a more transpersonal aspect of identity than the other sephira (Fortune, 1935/2022). Fortune describes Tipharet as “the highest sphere to which normal human consciousness can rise”, connecting it to awakening experiences (as will be addressed in Section 4.4), which often involve UL.

When the three pillars are in balance, tipharet activates and there is strength, harmony, beauty, love, and capacity for alignment with other levels of consciousness (which are beyond the scope of this section, but which include the soul and divine realms). When either the pillar of force or the pillar of form dominates in human expression, that harmony is jeopardised. Imbalances arise which impact both the sephira and the connections between them. Ultimately, such imbalance impacts the flow (called the lightning bolt) of energy or consciousness that comes down the tree of life from higher aspects of self (Fortune, 1935/2022; Ben Shimon Halevi, 1972). If UL is a transpersonal experience of a non-localised consciousness beyond the separate self (Templeton, 2001; Easwaran, 2007; Sorokin, 1954/2002), such imbalances would likely interfere with the capacity to connect with or experience it.

Despite these apparent overlaps between tipharet and UL, *chesed* is the sephiroth that is most popularly connected to UL. Chesed sits next to and slightly above tipharet upon the pillar of flow, and is the sephiroth of limitless expansiveness. Love in chesed would be experienced literally with no boundaries and no conditions, in keeping with the absolute freedom inherent to that sephiroth (Fortune, 1935/2022; Ginsberg, 1925/2015; Ben Shimon Halevi, 1972). Ben Shimon Halevi associates chesed with the first love of new attraction; the honeymoon expansiveness of love that wears rose coloured glasses. He also associates it with the expansive love of peak experiences, which is kindred to UL in the current research. However, chesed is one side of a polarity. Thus, given the extent to which UL has been associated with balance,

unity and wholeness in other traditions and accounts (Easwaran, 2007; Hamill, 2007; Underhill, year), it is unlikely that chesed could fully account for or encompass UL by merit of expansiveness alone.

The sephiroth that balances chesed is *gevurah*. Sitting on the pillar of form or contraction, *gevurah* encompasses restriction and discipline. Chesed and *gevurah* could be understood as representing 'yes' and 'no' respectively. Chesed is limitlessness. *Gevurah* is boundary. Chesed without *gevurah* can give rise to an unbalanced love that may be connected with addiction or people pleasing (Eve, 2020). Meanwhile, *gevurah* without chesed may stifle love in rules and restriction. Tipharet, described above, is the balance point between *gevurah* and chesed. When *gevurah* and chesed are healthy and balanced, tipharet activates, and is able to connect with higher consciousness and radiate love (Fortune, 1925/2015).

Thus, tipharet appears the sephiroth most connected to UL. It reflects the perfect balance of chesed and *gevurah*, is the unification of the polarities on the tree, and when enlivened, it creates a soulful and transpersonal capacity to connect with and radiate higher consciousness, including love (Fortune, 1925/2015; Ben Shimon Halevi, 1972). However, tipharet is one part of a triad, and consequently, *gevurah* and chesed each have their part to play in creating the balanced circumstances in which UL can be accessed.

2.5.6 Unconditional Positive States and Mystical Cosmology

Many of the traditions described in this review of mystical literature have a cosmology that includes an ultimate, universal absolute layer of reality that embodies constant love, bliss and joy (Raina, 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Hamill, 2007; Underhill, 1911/2002; Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2018; Tolle, 1997/2010; Durga, 2016; Spira, 2016). This ultimate, unconditional layer of consciousness is both the ultimate reality, and the essence of an individual's being. In these models, human beings primarily identify with lower aspects of their being, such as the impermanent mind, emotions, and physical body. They are separated from the constant bliss, joy and love of the absolute infinite by their thoughts, emotions and the blockages in their consciousness which distract them from that true potential. The object of the spiritual path in all of these traditions, is to let go of the over-identification with egoic structures, held in the lower aspects of being, and re-identify with that ultimate truth and oneness, characterised in part by the unconditional positive states of love, joy and bliss.

Interestingly, the realm of truth and oneness is one that is not bound by time or space (Raina, 2016). This is reminiscent of how both time and space often disappear in high intensity awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017). Taylor suggests that such experiences may be moments of contact with a fundamental ground of reality, which he describes as "spirit-force" (2018). In such experiences, there is usually a mechanism (either psychological pain, spiritual practice, or physiological manipulations such as deprivation or chemical alteration of brain states) that dissolves egoic structures, making room for the

experience of oneness, or what Taylor terms “spirit-force” through awakening experiences. Indian psychologist Kiran Kumar explains a similar mechanism of accessing *ananda* or bliss: “happiness, joy, and wellbeing are those moments when there is unobstructed manifestation of ananda, which is our original nature. It is the opaqueness of our mental faculties that obstructs the manifestation of ananda” (2002, p.4).

This idea of multiple layers of consciousness makes some sense of Sorokin (author of *The Ways and Power of Love*, 1954/2002) and Templeton’s (2000) concept of transpersonal limitless love. Unlimited love, equated with divinity, is perhaps not accessible in normal states because of the many layers of consciousness between the normal human experience and that unconditioned love and bliss. However, in moments of great clarity or surrender, when the habitual noise of the other dimensions of consciousness quietens down, that infinite, transpersonal love can be received and expressed through the lower layers in the form of service, kindness, and genuine care for all beings. This will be explored in Chapter 3 from a psychological perspective, in terms of expansive, altered states of consciousness.

Chapter 3: Expansive Altered States of Consciousness (EASCs)

Non-ordinary or altered states of consciousness (ASCs) are described as “a qualitative alteration in the overall pattern of mental functioning, such that the experiencer feels his consciousness is radically different from the way it functions ordinarily” (Tart, 1975, p.208). There are several ways in which non-ordinary or altered states of consciousness arise. Vaitl et al. (2012) organise their onset into five categories: pathological (for example, through brain damage or epilepsy), pharmacological (through ingesting brain-altering substances), physical or physiological (for example attained through sexual experience, fasting, physical deprivation or pharmaceutical intervention), psychological (attained through meditative practice, music, or hypnosis) or spontaneous (including near death experiences). Taylor (2012; 2015) and Corneille and Luke (2021) concur with these types of onset in relation to awakening experiences, but have elaborated on spiritual methodologies as a separate category distinct from general psychological factors. James (1902/1928) and Hardy (1979) only describe altered states in respect of religious and spiritual experiences, leading them to posit that everyone has some innate spiritual nature within even if it is not consciously recognised. However, Maslow (1962) and Taylor (2012) stress that such states can occur in all kinds of context, not solely spiritual.

This section will focus specifically on expansive altered states of consciousness (EASCs), such as mystical, psychedelic, awakening and near-death experiences, within which UL is often mentioned. Such experiences are expansive because they have the quality of an awareness beyond that of daily consciousness (Tart, 1975; Taylor, 2017), which may include heightened perception, heightened emotion, or a transpersonal experience of oneness beyond the separate self (Taylor, 2012; Corneille & Luke, 2021; Tart, 1975; Stace, 1960). As mentioned, EASCs are not only accessible for those on spiritual paths, or through chemically induced brain alterations, but can arise spontaneously within the general population, and usually have profound meaning and impact (Taylor, 2012; Maslow, 1962; James, 1902/1928). Accounts of UL experiences from mystical literature include many of the features associated with EASCs. They particularly overlap with awakening experiences (Taylor 2012, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Corneille & Luke, 2021). Thus, one of the points of interest in this research is whether UL experiences are a subtype of EASC; specifically of awakening experience.

William James, commonly recognised as the father of American psychology, highlighted the importance of EASCs in *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (1902/1928). He explained that “our normal, waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different” (1902/1928, p.388). He felt that such non-ordinary states of consciousness should not be ignored by psychology simply because they are irrational. James was a pragmatist, meaning that he was

not interested in EASCs for any value they had in determining the true nature of reality, but simply in respect of the many documented benefits they brought those who experienced them (1902/1928).

Tart concurred that the experience of ASCs should not be ignored. He proposed that ASCs may be a valid way of observing certain phenomena that are not available to normal states of consciousness. He alludes to UL and oneness as such phenomena:

So perhaps ideas like "we are all one" or "love pervades the entire universe" cannot be adequately comprehended in the ordinary d-SoC [discrete state of consciousness], no matter how hard we try, although they may appropriately affect our thoughts and actions in the ordinary d-SoC if we have first experienced them, understood them, in the appropriate d-ASC. (Tart, 1975, p.219)

Tart made no definite propositions as to whether states and perceptions of oneness, UL and other phenomena observed in ASCs represented absolute truth. He considered that altered states represented a specific way of experiencing and observing reality, and that their data should not be automatically rejected for being attained in a non-rational state of mind.

Another reason to take note of experiences attained in EASCs is that qualitative data from EASCs of different onset, and diverse cultural, religious and historical context, tend to corroborate each other in certain essential factors (Taylor, 2017a, 2017, 2018; Happold, 1990; Kotler & Wheal, 2017). This corroboration suggests a perennial phenomenology (Taylor, 2016) in which the inner mystical, awakening or EASC experiences attained are phenomenologically more alike than not, although the forms, structures and beliefs of religious and spiritual paths may differ. As discussed earlier in this literature review, this is one of the reasons UL appears worthy of psychological study: because it is a common feature of EASCs attained in a wide variety of spiritual and geographical contexts, and because of the benefits such experiences seem to bring.

3.1 Expansive Altered States and the Nature of Consciousness

EASCs are key phenomena of interest in the debate about the nature of consciousness itself - specifically, whether consciousness is produced by the brain, is "rooted in a non-local space" (Van Lommel, p.2011), or is the prima materia of creation, either in the form of information (Koch, 2017) or as an energy or spirit-force (Taylor, 2018). While physicalist models provide a robust framework for understanding many aspects of consciousness and cognition, anomalies consistently observed in near-death and other EASCs invite the consideration of non-local and potentially non-material mechanisms that may explain such phenomena. The subjective content of many EASCs, including mystical, religious, awakening, psychedelic, and near-death experiences, involves a sense of one's own consciousness existing outside of the body, or of encountering a consciousness that does not appear to be generated from within (Happold, 1990; Fox, 2014; Taylor, 2017). UL is often experienced as an energy that meets, embraces, or surrounds a person (Fox, 2014) or as a substrate of reality that can be reconnected to and

merged with (Templeton, 2000; Taylor, 2017, 2018). Thus, the question of whether consciousness can exist in a non-localised form is relevant to the nature of UL.

As will be explored below, the subjective experience of consciousness (and thus UL) that arises in many EASCs could be explained by physicalist scientists as neurochemically induced hallucination (Koch, 2017; Kotler & Wheal, 2017; Persinger & Murphy, 2016). However, some EASCs, such as near-death experiences, which appear to occur in the absence of neurological activity, suggest the possibility that brain-dependent explanations of consciousness and its associated phenomenology (including UL states) may be insufficient. This allows the possibility that consciousness may not be dependent on the physicality of the brain. The possibility of non-local or brain-independent consciousness suggests that non-local love – love that is not dependent on neurological processes and can exist without a relational object – is also possible.

3.2 Studies of Mystical Experiences

James (1902/1928), Stace (1960) and Hardy (1979) focused on ASCs as religious and mystical experiences, which often include UL. They posited that as people of non-mystical backgrounds had such experiences, there was likely a spiritual or mystical core in every human being. These authors described qualitative nuances relevant to exploring the characteristics of UL experiences.

James identified four major qualities of mystical or religious experiences, which by extension may be associated with UL. The first was ineffability, which often means that one who has had a religious or mystical experience finds it difficult to use language to explain it to someone who has not. This presaged Tart's (1975) theory that certain phenomena experienced in ASCs cannot be understood from a non-altered state unless they have been experienced first-hand. The second of James' (1902/1928) characteristics was a noetic quality, that differentiates religious experiences from an outpouring of emotion. James held that religious experiences usually impart insight "into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James, 1902/1928, p.380). James' third characteristic was transiency, meaning that religious experiences tend to last for minutes, to at most several hours. His fourth quality was passivity. Whilst the practitioner often undergoes particular practices, such as controlling the mind in meditation or prayer prior to the religious experience taking place, when it arises, the mechanism of onset is experienced as outside of the self; as if a person is "held by a superior power" (James, 1902/1928, p.381). This is often the case with UL experiences (Fox, 2014; Moorjani, 2012; Happold, 1990).

Stace (1960) added six important characteristics to James' (1902/1928) definition of mystical experiences. The first was the centrality of a sense of oneness. He asserted that in mystical experience, the "nuclear point, around which all other common characteristics revolve, is the apprehension of a unity taken to be in some way basic to the universe" (p.67). Stace wrote that in the mystical state, oneness is not experienced as a subjective perception, but as an objective reality that appears as real as data observed through the

physical senses. He discussed how the mystic is aware of the apparent multiplicity of objects, but nonetheless experiences a oneness that appears to pervade them (p.79).

To the central feature of oneness, Stace added the qualities of paradoxicality, timelessness, and sacredness, which all echo accounts of UL experiences (Taylor, 2017; Happold, 1990; Fox, 2014). Stace also highlighted the affective characters of “bliss, beatitude [and] joy” (1960, p.68), which, as mentioned in Chapter 3, could be sister states of UL, in that they may be concurrent characteristics of the same non-localised consciousness.

Stace (1960) stressed in response to James (1902/1928) that although mystical experiences are transient, they instil lasting changes in the mystic’s behaviours and attitudes. These changes have been more thoroughly researched in Taylor’s (2012, 2017) work on awakening experiences, which will be explored below. All of the features of mystical and religious experiences described by James and Stace are likely to either characterise or accompany the experience of UL.

3.2.1 Alister Hardy and the Religious Experience Research Unit

Sir Alister Hardy, a marine biologist with an interest in spiritual awareness, believed that such awareness was common to all people, regardless of religiosity, age or race (Hardy, 1979). He believed that all people could have spiritual experiences, even if they were not of a spiritual outlook, and that those experiences were of “evolutionary value”. Hardy founded the Religious Experience Research Centre, originally at Oxford, and now based in the University of Wales. It is a database and research hub hosting thousands of accounts of religious experiences.

A search of “love” in the database of spiritual experiences returns an overwhelming number of entries, suggesting UL is a common feature of religious experiences. Mark Fox analysed 150 of these accounts for his 2014 book *The Fifth Love*. Most accounts involved the experiencer feeling unconditionally loved by some transpersonal or transcendent force, or by the world or universe itself. Many UL experiences arose spontaneously, often in the throes of psychological trauma, but without being initiated by particular spiritual practices, fitting with Taylor’s (2012) findings on awakening experiences. For example, one participant recounted:

I was extremely immature and fearful...I threw myself face down among the long, dried-up Autumn grasses. I wept a little, but I can’t remember that I prayed. After a little while, I became conscious of a mysterious change in my natural surroundings. It was as though the grasses rustling about my ears, the trees bending over me, the cool wind, even the lowering clouds, became personified, bending over and touching me in tender concern. I was wrapped round in brightness and love. Gradually the vivid impression faded and I was left with the chill Autumn evening and my own unchanged troubles. But I was different. I walked back to face what awaited me with confident courage and the sure knowledge that I was not alone. (Fox, 2014, p.8)

Many of James' (1902/1928) qualities of religious experience are present in this depiction of UL. The situation appeared to arise without being sought, exemplifying James' idea of passivity. It was also transient. Perhaps most significantly here, there was indescribable noetic insight that enabled this person to engage with their unchanged life in a different, more empowered way.

This transformative noetic quality was common to many of Fox's gathered examples of transpersonal love experiences. Although the distressing circumstances that gave rise to the UL experience didn't change, the person's attitude and relationship towards it was transformed. They became more resilient, happier, or more capable of facing their reality. For example, one woman described being recently widowed, and experiencing trepidation and sadness entering the flat she had occupied with her late husband after his death:

After three or four days I went in again. The same unbearable agony as I entered – then suddenly it happened. I can only describe it in my very simple way – that it was as if I had been enfolded in the love of God. I had this sense of unbelievable bliss and indescribable rapture. That morning I did not want to leave my flat – the experience I had, brought me a tremendous joy and comfort, that was not of this world. (Fox, 2014, p.10)

The above two examples meet James' (1902/1928) criteria for passivity – being lifted unexpectedly into love – but in the context of psychological distress. In other examples, the experiences appeared to be truly spontaneous. One woman had visited her daughter in boarding school during the day and was lying in bed in a hotel she described as exceptionally normal when:

The most extraordinary things started. The sensation was as if without any pain, I had a deep cut across my chest on a level with my heart, and into this cut poured light, which ran through every inch of my body and mind, until I was irradiated with it; like an electric current I was full of it and it poured out from me. This is I thought the power that made miracles...

Then I tried to analyse this extraordinary current of energy, and realised immediately that I knew what it was – this was the power of love as I had never imagined that it could exist. As it flowed in I was filled not with a feeling of elation but joy. In this new state I was unworried, fully alive and fully at peace, because this was the culmination, the limit of anything one could desire. It was complete, my body was full of joy, my fingers my hands and my skin every part of my body, and my mind, and my spirit.

I wondered how soon this would fade, but quite unworried as the memory could not go, and it was sufficient, and I was grateful if this should be the only time in my life that I would know perfection. But it did not fade, and I lay awake amazed that it should continue.

As I lay I looked at old knowledge from my point of view, and a lot that I had not understood made sense. (in Fox, 2014, p.12)

In this account, the experience of transpersonal love was connected, or even equated with a sense of unconditional joy. This supports the idea of positive emotional qualities being associated with religious experiences (Stace, 1960). It also supports the idea of related unconditional positive states – of which both UL and UJ are exemplars. As has been mentioned, the Upanishads frequently discuss UJ, often describing it as bliss or ananda, and considering it a parallel manifestation of oneness with Brahman, alongside UL (Easwaran, 2007).

Fox notes that in his study of these love-centric religious experiences, many of them occur spontaneously, without the rigorous preparation and practice associated with such experiences on the mystical path. He comments that the love described by mystical writers is often two-directional: both received from the Divine and part of the propulsion of the aspirant towards divinity. Fox commented that in his selection, the love seemed one-directional; received from the Divine, when the aspirant was not seeking to receive it (2014, p.24). This suggested to Fox that such experiences of love can and do occur to any kind of person, not solely mystics, corroborating Taylor's (2012) research on awakening experiences.

Fox notes that many accounts of love describe it as originating from outside the self or from God. He wonders if such experiences may be evidence of "'other worlds' and 'transcendent realities'" (Fox, 2014, p.12). This contrasts to some extent with some other mystical conceptions, in which apparently external forces of love, truth and divinity are not separate entities, but either part of the self, or an underlying universal substance from which the self has taken its being (Taylor, 2018; Templeton, 2000; Easwaran, 2007).

As explored below, Taylor (2012; 2015; 2017; 2018) suggests that perhaps awakening experiences - which often include such experiences of apparently non-localised love - arise when psychological energy is liberated. This is posited to occur when egoic processes are silenced, either through spiritual practice, the experience of trauma or turmoil, or other means. The liberated psychological energy then allows a connection with a transcendent energy or oneness. The overwhelming or embracing nature of that oneness may be experienced by some as God or Divinity, however, it may also be experienced as energy, or, as is conceptualised by many of the mystical traditions described above, as the fundamental oneness of all things, and thus a deeper part of self.

In conclusion, Hardy (1979) and others associated UL experiences with religious experiences. However, some of the experiences in Fox's collection and elsewhere (Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2017) arose outside of a religious paradigm. Thus, it seems that UL should not be bound to an association with religiosity. Further, a purely religious interpretation of UL experiences may attribute them to a relational experience with a particular version of divine entity. Whilst this may sometimes be the case, the connection between non-localised love and non-localised consciousness suggests that UL does not have to exist relationally,

even with divine entities, but may exist as an underlying fabric of the universe (and the self) that is rediscovered when the bounds of rational consciousness are weakened in certain EASCs.

3.3 Peak Experiences

A less religiocentric exploration of EASCs was conducted by Maslow (1962). He identified what he called “peak experiences”, which did not have to arise within a spiritual or religious context. All EASCs would be examples of peak experiences. Maslow described them as:

[M]oments... of pure, positive happiness when all doubts, all fears, all inhibitions, all tensions, all weaknesses, were left behind... All separateness and distance from the world disappeared...they felt one with the world, fused with it, really belonging in it and to it, instead of being outside looking in. (Maslow, 1962, p.9)

This fusion with and belonging in the world may be a secular way of representing the experience that mystics would describe as identification with an underlying oneness that pervades all things. Further, “pure, positive happiness” appears analogous to the concept of UJ described above. It is unlikely that UL would arise in all peak experiences, however, it appears to be one of many forms such experiences can take.

3.3.1 Impact of Peak Experiences

Maslow conducted a study of those individuals he perceived to be “the finest, healthiest people, the best specimens of mankind” (1962, p.9), and found that such people reported having had peak experiences. His criteria for what made a person exceptionally functioning (aside from peak experiences) were that they were highly authentic in their self-expression, that they were creatively engaged, had deep, meaningful relationships and connections with others, and demonstrated ethical clarity; a commitment to personal values. Maslow posited that those people he considered supernormal through these criteria had perhaps become so because of the peak experiences they described (1962).

Maslow’s appraisal of supernormal individuals was not based in empirical research, but in qualitative and theoretical observations and hypotheses. These were often derived from Maslow’s interpretations of biographical texts, or from his own experiences of people who appeared highly functional. The subjective nature of this exploration, along with the lack of causality or directionality in the relationship between peak experiences and Maslow’s other criteria for superlative human functioning, requires that Maslow’s conclusions be interpreted with appropriate circumspection. Yet Maslow is not alone in associating peak experiences with psychological flourishing.

Bertrand Russell commented that mystical experience (which, in this context, would likely be considered a form of peak experience) is “the inspirer of whatever is best in man” (in Stace, 1960, p.13). In a similar, though more recent finding, Kegan (1994) reported that the small percentage of adults who demonstrate qualities of wisdom and psychological flexibility tend to have had EASCs. Kegan conceived of

psychological flexibility as mental adaptability to new ideas and circumstances, the ability to understand and integrate multiple perspectives (as opposed to adhering to a single worldview) and the capacity to engage with uncertainty, complexity, and nuance without reverting to unhelpful self-protective structures. Psychological flexibility and its associated benefits will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.5.3.

In addition to the problem of subjectivity in Maslow's concept of self-actualisation, Koltko-Rivera (2006) and Wahba and Bridwell (1976) express concern about potential elitism, exclusivity, and the implied conditional valuing of human beings. Certainly, Maslow's term "best specimens of mankind" (1962, p.9) does nothing to assuage this concern. Tay and Diener (2011) raise the related consideration that Maslow's hierarchy may privilege those who have access to the resources required to attain the various needs on the way to self-actualisation (such as safety and security). Additionally, they suggest that Maslow's concept of self-actualisation has a strong bias towards western values - which emphasise individual attainment - compared to eastern value-systems which tend to emphasise collective wellbeing.

Whilst Maslow's updated hierarchy of needs does suggest that the realisation of self-actualisation requires the meeting of prerequisite needs along the way (1962), in his 1971 paper, he conceded that peak experiences could be attained by people at any level of the hierarchy, not only by those who have attained self-actualisation. Awakening literature (explored more fully in section 3.4) similarly suggests that people of all levels of wealth and social status can attain spontaneous EASCs and their beneficial impact (Taylor, 2017). That is, it does not seem that needs for safety and security must be met for EASCs to be attained. In contrast, people often report awakening experiences arising in instances where they feel they have lost everything or have reached a rock bottom moment in their lives, and thus the lower needs in Maslow's hierarchy are in jeopardy.

Kotler and Wheal (2017) conducted an analysis of research on EASCs or peak experiences, which they collectively call "ecstasis." Their exploration appears to confirm that such experiences can have ongoing benefits on the human psyche. However, similarly to awakening literature, their message is not that those who have had peak experiences are superior to those who have not, but instead that such experiences are available to all, and often lead to gains in mental health, access to inspiration, and psychological flourishing. They attest: "researchers are using peak experiences to cure trauma in terminal patients and survivors of abuse and war... [A]ltered states don't just make us feel better for a moment, they can actually further our development over a lifetime" (P.67). As it is assumed that UL is a type of peak experience or EASC, it is likely that even if it is only experienced for a short duration, it may lead to similar long-term positive shifts.

3.4 Awakening Experiences

The type of EASC that seems to best fit UL experiences is Taylor's (2010; 2012; 2017) conceptualisation of awakening experiences. Unlike James' (1902) and Hardy's (1979) concepts of religious and mystical

experiences, awakening experiences are not restricted to those arising in spiritual or mystical contexts, or to those subsequently given mystical significance. Taylor (2012; 2015) and Taylor and Egeto-Szabo (2017) stress that people of no spiritual background often report experiences of the same psychological qualities and impacts as those of spiritual adherents.

An awakening experience is described as:

[A] temporary expansion and intensification of awareness, in which our state of being, our vision of the world and our relationship to it are transformed, bringing a sense of clarity, revelation and wellbeing. We perceive a sense of harmony and meaning, and transcend our normal sense of separateness from the world, experiencing a sense of connection and even unity. (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017)

UL is not specifically mentioned in this definition. Yet as referenced in other sections, many accounts of EASCs that would fit under the umbrella of “awakening experiences” describe a sense of overwhelming love, or of the universe being made of love (Taylor, 2017; Hardy, 1979; Fox, 2014; Happold, 1990). Thus, the association warrants further exploration.

Although similarly not limited to religious experiences, awakening experiences do not appear to encompass all of the forms of Maslow’s peak experiences (1962). Many peak experiences as described by Maslow share features with awakening experiences, including heightened perception, and an increased sense of connectedness with all things. However, other peak experiences - such as exhilaration arising from accomplishment - may not fit the criteria of awakening experiences, as they may intensify rather than reduce the sense of the separate ego-self. This identification tends to be reduced in awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017).

Awakening experiences do, however, include those states of ego-dissolution, oneness and heightened perception that can be induced through plant medicine and psychedelics (Taylor, 2017), within which UL experiences have anecdotally been reported. The fact that UL experiences and awakening experiences are associated with EASCs of such similar criteria suggests they may be analogous. However, UL is not mentioned in all accounts of awakening. Thus, it may be an even more specific subset of awakening altered states of consciousness.

3.4.1 Unconditional Love and Awakening Experiences

Theoretically, there appears to be a close relationship between UL and awakening experiences. In many spiritual traditions, UL is recognized as a pathway to enlightenment (Dass, 2010), which Taylor would view as an ongoing state of wakefulness, or as a primary shift (2013; 2017). UL is also seen as an experience or capacity that arises as a product of awakening, or as a characteristic of the state of unity with the indivisible One (Makransky, 2012; Easwaran, 2007). Further, various mystical literature describes

how the UL of awakened individuals can assist the awakening of others (Dass, 2010; Durga, 2016, Makransky, 2012, Matsu-Pissot, 2008).

Taylor (2012; 2017) and Taylor and Egeto-Szabo (2017) discuss love as a feature of medium-intensity awakening experiences. This love is unconditional in some respects. It is extended to all beings, based on the felt sense that all beings are manifestations of the same indivisible reality (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). However, it is still love requiring an object (all beings), rather than universal, object-less UL. Object-free UL, or the experience of the universe and self as made from love, is mentioned in some reports of high-intensity awakening experiences, but it is not part of the criteria for such experiences (Taylor, 2017). Perhaps just as there are different levels of intensity of awakening experience, which have different characteristics, there may be different manifestations of UL.

Literature on awakening addresses other elements that seem associated with UL, such as forgiveness and compassion. These, alongside love itself, are often felt during awakening experiences. They are also part of the after-effect of awakening experiences, growing stronger as habitual attitudes and behaviours (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Corneille & Luke, 2021).

Taylor references mystical practices of love as potential triggers of awakening experiences. Such practices include *bhakti* (devotional love as expressed in Hinduism), and the Kabbalistic and Mystical Christian idea of merging with or cleaving to the divine through love (2017). As understood within their respective traditions, these forms of love unify a person with the divine, and in some instances, this brings them into full awakening.

The omission of love from some accounts of awakening experiences may be because it is not always the most prominent feature. As Newberg and Waldman, (2018) reflect:

An individual who had an intense sense of oneness with God may focus the entire narrative on the experience of the connection with God. The person may have also had an intense experience of love, but may not have related this emotional experience due to the intensity of the other element.

For example, Dr. R. M. Bucke had a mystical experience at the age of 35. He described: “there came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe” (in Happold, 1990, p.55). Bucke did not directly discuss love as a feature of this awakening experience, which focuses on joy and illumination (described in other parts of this research as sister unconditional positive states of consciousness). However, in a later description of mystical epiphanies in his book *Cosmic Consciousness* he described the realization that “the foundation principle of the world is what we call love” (in Happold, 1990, p.55). This suggests that although love was not the primary feature of his experience, he connected to it as a substrate of reality, rather than simply an emotion, through his experience.

Another possibility is that UL does not arise in all awakening experiences; that it is a characteristic only of certain types of awakening experience. It could be a subtype of awakening experiences; characterised by an overwhelming sense of self-transcendent love and oneness. As a subtype of awakening experience, UL experiences would likely have similar triggers or onset to awakening experiences in general. They would also have similar characteristics, although with the addition of intense love, and perhaps other associated features that are only present in connection with that love. It would be interesting to explore whether awakening experiences featuring UL have the same impact as general awakening experiences, or whether there are love-specific after-effects.

3.4.2 Triggers of Awakening Experiences

If UL experiences are a subset of awakening experience, they are likely to have similar onset. Taylor's 2012 study found that around 78% of awakening experiences occurred outside of spiritual practice. Almost a quarter (23.6%) arose accidentally in response to psychological turmoil. 18% arose in association with nature, and only 13% arose as an impact of meditation – the same number as arose through engagement with the arts. In a follow-up study by Taylor and Egeto-Szabo (2017), 32% of participants attained their awakening experience through spiritual practice (reading spiritual literature, practicing yoga or meditation, or prayer). 65% of experiences arose through non-spiritual triggers, which included psychological turmoil, love, relaxation or nature. Across various studies of awakening experience, psychological turmoil has consistently featured as one of the most common causes (Taylor 2012, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Corneille & Luke, 2021). UL experiences may correspondingly be triggered by a range of spiritual and non-spiritual factors.

3.4.2.1 Intensification and Stilling of Life Energy

Taylor (2005) posits that although there are many apparent manifestations of the onset of awakening experiences, they have in common a liberation of psychical energy through either the stilling of the mind or the destruction of egoic identity constructs. The theory suggests that the ego normally consumes substantial energy to maintain its habitual thought chatter. When this is stilled, for example through meditation or spiritual practice, this energy is available for presence and perception, leading to the heightened and enlivened sensitivities found in awakening states.

Taylor's (2005) concept of "intensification and stilling of life energy" (ISLE) reflects Tart's (1975) discussion of psychological energy:

Attention/awareness acts as psychological energy in this sense. Most techniques for controlling the mind are ways of deploying attention/awareness energy and other kinds of energies so as to activate desired structures (traits, skills, attitudes) and deactivate undesired structures. (Tart, 1975, p.1)

The concept of intensification and stilling of life energy also has similarities with the neurological theories of ecstasis proposed by Kotler and Wheal (2017). Ecstasis, particularly in its feature of selflessness, is

correlated with hypofrontality, which is the deactivation of sections of the prefrontal cortex; a part of the brain usually associated with mind chatter and self-consciousness. Kotler and Wheal posit that the quieting of this part of the brain and its associated mental experience (which may be referred to as ego in certain traditions) allows energy to be used by other parts of the brain, enabling enhanced perception, recall, understanding and the capacity to connect or synthesize seemingly divergent concepts into new insight and inspiration. This hypofrontality is often associated with deactivation of areas of the parietal lobe, which reduces the distinction between self and other and can allow for experiences of oneness (Newberg & Iversen, 2003). The state that accompanies these neurological patterns of deactivation is very similar to Taylor's conception of awakening in that it contains a sense of connectedness, aliveness, positive affect, and inspiration (Kotler & Wheal, 2017). De Costa's (2017) neurological conceptualisation of awakening experiences reflects similar ideas. He posits that the cognitive, sensory and perceptual layers of information processing are removed, leading to a primal state of awareness that gives rise to awakening experiences. Each of these neurological theories echoes the idea of mental or neurological energy being removed from certain everyday processes and thus being available to enhance other potentialities of experience.

3.4.3 Characteristics of Awakening Experiences

As has been mentioned, it is hypothesised that UL experiences will demonstrate similar characteristics to awakening experiences, plus additional features pertaining to love. Taylor and Egeto-Szabo (2017) found that the main characteristics of awakening experiences are "positive affective states (e.g., peace, joy, appreciation), intensified perception, love and compassion, a transcendence of separateness (or sense of connection or unity), a sense of revelation (or "deeper knowing") and inner quietness" (p.13). It is likely that the term "love" in this list of characteristics referred to a combination of increased love for others, and a sense of love as a universal force, the latter of which is more reflective of UL in the current study.

Taylor divides awakening experiences into three levels of intensity, each of which have varying characteristics. A low intensity awakening experience may include a sense of "aliveness" (Taylor, 2012), with an enhanced beauty and richness in ordinary perception. A medium intensity awakening experience may include a sense that all things are connected or pervaded with a unified spirit-force:

The individual may feel part of this oneness, realizing that he or she is not a separate and isolated ego. He or she may feel a strong sense of compassion and love for others, recognising that other individuals are part of the same spiritual ground as them. (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017, p.47)

Many medium-intensity experiences of awakening do not feature love of any kind, but focus instead on joy or liberation from suffering. For example, a participant in Taylor and Egeto-Szabo's (2017) study reported an overwhelming sense of joy and a reminder that goodness exists in the world:

...I was filled with joy, then moved to tears, then back to joy... At one point I was aware of a small shift inside of me, an awareness that I had found something good and that there could be other

experiences in life that could be like this. I knew that a door had been opened, just a little and that now I could have more of this in my life. (p.52)

As has been explored in other sections, UJ appears to be a kindred state to UL, and both are likely the products of unity experiences. However, it is evidently possible to experience one without the other. The above excerpt could not be said to be a UL experience, confirming that UL is not a feature of all medium intensity awakening experiences.

A high intensity awakening experience is a state of total ego-dissolution, where both the sense of self and the surrounding material world dissolves into bliss and oneness with the universe (Taylor, 2012). It is expected that a universal sense of UL would be experienced in many such cases, as has been described in several accounts of awakening. However, in the mystical traditions, the state of universal oneness and ego-dissolution is often described in terms of either love, bliss, joy or emptiness (Happold, 1990; Hardy, 1979; James, 1902/1928; Stace, 1960). Similarly, high-intensity awakening states can be described with reference to any of these experiences, and may or may not refer to UL. For example, one participant in Taylor and Egeto-Szabo's study described:

The feeling extended to inanimate objects; the path, lampposts, buildings, cars, sounds of music; everything was made of the same stuff and the only word I could find to describe it was love. Everything was made of love. I felt immersed in a sea of love where everyone and everything were made of this same 'energy'; I was no longer a separate 'ego' but was consumed by this energy of love. Everything became One and I was outside of time. (in Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017, p.55)

In contrast, another participant described his ego-self totally dissolving, but did not mention love. "I opened up, literally, from my perspective. I came out of myself. I expanded infinitely. I disappeared. It didn't last long but it was the most powerful experience I've ever had" (in Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017, p.55). The fact that not all high or medium intensity awakening experiences are characterised by UL supports the idea that UL experiences are a subset of awakening experiences.

High intensity awakening experiences have been found to be less common than other awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012; Taylor 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). Similarly, universal forms of UL, in which the self dissolves into a oneness of love, are likely to be rarer than other love experiences. Love for all beings and things as might arise in a medium intensity awakening experience is expected to be a slightly more frequent occurrence. UL for a particular person, as may arise in a low-level awakening experience, or a normal state of consciousness, is expected to be the most frequent.

3.4.4 Impact or After-Effects of Awakening Experiences

Awakening experiences lead to one of two categories of after-effect: a primary shift or a secondary shift (Taylor, 2013). It is therefore possible that the impact of UL may similarly take two forms. Awakening experiences are characterised by a dissolution of the normal self-structure, and an opening to a more

expansive reality (Taylor, 2013). In many awakening experiences, this self-structure reasserts itself once the awakening experience passes. In some situations, termed by Taylor as a primary shift, the original self-system is replaced by one that incorporates the characteristics of the awakening experience itself, such as enhanced peace, joy, love, and an identification with oneness rather than separation (Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). This primary shift is associated with the concept of enlightenment.

The secondary shift is less transformative to a person's identity. It is more of a change in values and perspective (Taylor, 2013). Examples might be that a person becomes more altruistic, less materialistic, develops belief in realities beyond the physical dimension, such as the afterlife, and has a change in overall attitude (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). This secondary shift can be dramatic even though the sense of identity remains consistent. The change in attitudes, perceptions, and values can lead to a whole different way of relating to decisions and relationships, and thus drastically alter a person's trajectory and happiness. Common after-effects of the secondary shift include greater confidence, trust, peace and optimism, and a newfound desire for spiritual seeking (Taylor, 2013).

Whilst most awakening experiences have been associated with positive after-effects, some appear to have a negative impact (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). Mild negative after-effects of awakening experiences are commonly associated with a dissatisfaction with the normal negative egoic patterns once a person has experienced a state beyond them. More extreme forms of negative after-effect might be termed spiritual crisis (Grof & Grof, 2017), in which there is a state of confusion and distress following the disruption of a previous self-structure that is not replaced with a coherent new self-structure. It is therefore possible that UL experiences may lead to both kinds of negative after-effect. It would be interesting to explore whether the incidence of negative impact arise in similar proportion to general awakening experiences.

In conclusion, it seems that UL is intrinsically connected to awakening experiences, and to the process of awakening. However, this relationship has not yet been specifically explored within psychological literature - possibly because the field of psychology currently has no unified construct of UL. The exploration of this relationship between UL and awakening experiences forms research question 2.

3.5 Psychedelic Experiences

Certain psychedelic states are frequently considered to be substance-assisted mystical or peak experiences (Huxley, 1968; Luke, 2013; Richards, 2015). Since 2018, when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) designated psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy as a "breakthrough therapy" for treatment-resistant depression (Aday, Davoli & Bloesch, 2019), psychedelic interventions have begun to have more credibility in medical and pharmaceutical research, leading to an increase in scientific investigation. Given the parallels between mystical and psychedelic states (Huxley, 1968; Luke, 2013; Richards, 2015) this has meant that certain subjective features of mystical experiences have received

new scientific attention through the more experimentally controllable avenue of psychedelic research. Although the potential relationship between UL and psychedelic experiences has not been empirically established (perhaps due to the lack of psychological definition of UL) findings from psychedelic research may be transferable to elements of UL experiences and their potential psychological benefits.

3.5.1 Impact of Psychedelic Experiences

Psychedelics have shown positive results in treating anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, (Close et al., 2020) and anhedonia (Carhart-Harris et al., 2016), and in reducing substance dependence, particularly for alcohol, nicotine, and opioids (Craste, & Cooke, 2022; Kałużna, Schlosser; Sekula et al., 2024). They have also been found to increase general psychological wellbeing (MacLean, Johnson & Griffiths, 2011; Pollan, 2018), and to enhance imagination, emotional sensitivity, cognitive flexibility and prosocial behaviour (Close et al, 2020; Jungaberle et al., 2018).

Whilst these findings are promising, Thomson and Thomacos (2025) point out that many papers on the benefits of psychedelic experiences do not sufficiently discuss the adverse psychological effects experienced by their participants. In a study by Marrocu et al. (2024), 16% of participants experienced significantly decreased mental health after psychedelic use. Marrocu et al. (2024) further found that for those with histories of personality disorders, the risk of negative psychological responses to psychedelic experiences was elevated by 400%. In addition to the potentially under-explored negative impacts of psychedelic experiences, there is currently an absence of longitudinal follow-up to determine whether the benefits attained through psychedelic experiences are long lasting (Close et al, 2020; Jungaberle et al., 2018). Yet, psychedelic research is still in its relative infancy. Thus, the absence of longitudinal studies on the benefits of psychedelic experiences does not rule out that such long-term benefits may exist.

It could be that it is possible to attain similar psychological benefits with reduced risk through substance-free EASCs; including substance-free experiences of UL. In this vein, Sekula et al. (2024) compared transcendental meditation and psychedelic assisted psychotherapy for the reduction of substance misuse. They found that both interventions were effective, but that psychedelic assisted psychotherapy was associated with a higher potential for “adverse events” (p.157). These were often minor but could be fatal. Whilst UL was not a part of their exploration, it appears to arise in certain forms of substance-free EASC (Fox, 2014; Happold, 1990; Hardy, 1979; Taylor, 2017). Thus, it could be of interest to explore the beneficial and detrimental impacts of substance-free UL experiences on mental health as compared to the impact of psychedelic experiences. Given that UL does not yet have a consistent definition within psychological literature, the current endeavour of establishing a coherent psychological construct of UL is a necessary prerequisite for this type of comparative analysis.

3.5.2 Mechanisms of Psychedelic Impact Relevant to Unconditional Love

Two primary features of psychedelic experiences are posited to promote the array of positive clinical benefits they have been associated with. These are ego-dissolution and connectedness (Kałużna et al., 2022), both of which are related to UL. Ego-dissolution is in turn associated with enhanced psychological flexibility (Bryan et al., 2015; Close et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2022) which is considered a mechanism through which many of the other psychological benefits of psychedelic experiences arise. As UL experiences are likely a subset of awakening experience - which share features with psychedelic experiences - they may share some of the mechanisms that lead to similar psychedelic benefits.

3.5.2.1 Connectedness

One commonly reported characteristic of psychedelic experiences is a sense of connectedness, or interconnectedness. Sometimes this pertains to connection or oneness with other human beings, as in *communitas* (Kettner et al., 2021; Turner, Abrahams & Harris 1969/2017). Other times, it is reported in relation to animals and plant-life (Irvine et al., 2023; Luke, 2013), evoking the indigenous perception of the natural world as sentient and animate (Taylor, 2018). In its more universal form, connectedness can refer to a sense of wonder at and oneness with the universe at large (Swan, 2010). This all-encompassing form of connectedness has been referred to in the literature as “oceanic boundlessness” (Dittrich, 1998), unitive experience (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017) and oneness (Hayes et al., 2020), all of which reflect qualities associated with UL and awakening experiences (Easwaran, 2007; Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2017).

Often, the sense of connectedness is accompanied by ego-dissolution. This is described by Kałużna et al. as a “reduction of self-referential awareness which can occur in various altered states of consciousness” (2022, p.112). Intense mystical and awakening states share this feature of ego-dissolution with psychedelic experiences (Stace, 1960; Taylor, 2017). In various texts from the wisdom traditions, UL experiences are associated with a sense of union with the divine or the beyond. This involves an ego-dissolution, in which all things are incorporated into the usually finite and separate self-construct (Easwaran, 2007; Happold, 1990).

Although connectedness is a feature of both awakening and psychedelic experiences, it has received more scientific attention within the area of psychedelic research. This is likely because (as mentioned above) the chemical basis of psychedelic experiences makes them easier to induce on demand and thus study experimentally. Watts et al (2022) created the Watts Connectedness Scale, which sought to measure their construct of connection with one’s own self (body, senses and emotions); others (including friends, family and community); nature; global humanity; meaning and purpose. Whilst concerns have been raised that these different types of connectedness make the construct ambiguous and thus difficult to compare across studies (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017), Watts et al. (2022) posited that the seemingly separate experiences of connection with self, other, nature and the world may be manifestations of a global factor of connectedness.

Watts et al. (2022) discuss a host of studies on connectedness arising in non-psychedelic contexts, including nature noticing, mindfulness and loving-kindness meditation. These practices are similar to certain substance-free triggers of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017). The increase in connectedness in these non-psychedelic contexts is associated with the same augmentations in flourishing and psychological wellbeing as psychedelically induced connectedness (outlined below). Similar effects may be expected as the result of UL experiences.

3.5.2.1 Connectedness and Unconditional Positive States

The construct of connectedness as studied by Watts et al. (2022) correlated positively with flourishing and wellbeing, and negatively with anxiety and experiential avoidance (Watts et al., 2022). These findings were based on self-report data and thus may be influenced by subjective biases. However, they nonetheless speak to increases in participants' subjective experience of their psychological wellbeing, which warrants further study using more objective measures.

The increases in psychological wellbeing and decreases in anxiety found by Watts et al. (2022) are corroborated in other studies. Lee and Robbins (1998) found that social connectedness was negatively correlated with trait (though not state) anxiety and positively correlated with self-esteem. More recently, Nisbet and Zelenski (2013) found correlations between nature relatedness, subjective wellbeing, and pro-environmental behaviour. Whilst a Rahe and Jansen (2023) found that social connectedness and self-love had a stronger impact on flourishing and mental health than nature connectedness, Nisbet and Zelenski (2014) found that nature connectedness had a significant impact on mental health when other factors of connectedness were controlled for.

In contrast, disconnection is associated in the literature with depression, psychopathologies, and a lack in pro-social attitudes and behaviours (Taylor, 2023; Watts et al., 2022). Some studies of psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy have found that participants noticed an increase in generalised connectedness (across domains of self, others and the world) that corresponded with a decrease in depressive symptoms (Carhart-Harris et al., 2017). As the sense of connectedness faded with time, so too did the decrease in depression.

Whilst the causal relationship between connectedness and depression was not definitively established, the correlational evidence was strong. An alternative explanation could be that the neurochemical effects (especially on serotonin receptors) of the psilocybin impacted mood directly, decreasing depression, and that this neurochemical impact on mood faded in a similar timeframe as the increased connectedness. Carhart-Harris et al. (2017) suggested that whilst connectedness may not account for the entire beneficial impact of psychedelically assisted therapies on depression scores, it may be a significant mediator of the relationship, augmenting improvements in mental health.

Whilst requiring further empirical research, these findings on connectedness and disconnectedness, and their relationship to mental health may elucidate potential mechanisms of unconditional positive and unconditional negative states. One of the features that (through this literature review at least) appears to separate UL from other kinds of love is the experience of oneness, or extreme connectedness with all things. As has been explored, UJ similarly appears to arise concurrently with a sense of unity (Easwaran, 2007; Hawley, 2011). Both unconditional positive states appear to be the product of, or inextricably associated with, extreme connectedness or oneness.

In contrast, as per the above discussion, disconnectedness appears to be strongly correlated with depression and anxiety, which could be interpreted as unconditional negative states. In their most intense forms, depression and anxiety are not contingent on external conditions, and are non-responsive to ordinarily happy and safe environmental cues. This is unlike normal emotions, which, as discussed in section 1.2.3, are usually contingent upon some external circumstance (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000; Ekman, 1992; Izard, 2007). If unconditional positive states are correlated with high levels of oneness or connectedness and unconditional negative states are associated with high levels of disconnectedness, it could be that unconditional positive and unconditional negative states of consciousness are partially definable through their polarisation along this continuum of connectedness.

3.5.3 Psychological Flexibility and Ego Dissolution

The other aspect of psychedelic experience associated with ongoing beneficial transformation is the construct of psychological flexibility (Bryan, et al., 2015; Close et al., 2020; Watts et al., 2022). Watts et al. define psychological flexibility as:

[A]ccessing a 'larger' self rather than a smaller egoic self... the ability to engage effectively with one's senses and feelings in order to be guided towards value-led actions, rather than being trapped by habitual and unhelpful patterns of thinking. (Watts et al, 2022).

Psychological flexibility as described here reflects certain aspects of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017) and is considered a product of ego-dissolution, which is common to such experiences (Corneille & Luke, 2021; Taylor, 2017). As UL is likely a subset of awakening experience, it may also involve elements of ego dissolution and thus promote increased psychological flexibility.

The construct of psychological flexibility is associated with reductions in depression and increases in wellbeing and quality of life (Close et al., 2020). It has also been found to predict trait resilience, with those higher in psychological flexibility reporting less severe PTSD from combat situations (Bryan et al., 2015). In a meta-analysis of 11 studies, Zhao et al., (2023) found that ACT both increased psychological flexibility and decreased depression scores. They suggested that the amelioration of depression was in part due to increased psychological flexibility, which was the directly intended objective of the ACT intervention. Zhao et al., (2023) found that the increases in psychological flexibility and decreases in

depression sustained over a three-month period, though further longitudinal studies would be required to ascertain if such benefits diminish over longer periods of time.

In outlining the benefits of this operationalisation of psychological flexibility, Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson (2011) characterise its opposite construct: mental inflexibility. This, they posit, has two major features: cognitive fusion and experience avoidance. Cognitive fusion refers to being too attached to one's own thoughts. One considers that there is a right way to be in any given situation, and instead of simply being, mentally analyses whether or not they are successfully fitting that criteria, and whether other people are relating with them in a way that confirms their inner self-structure. Cognitive fusion is associated with chronic self-consciousness and related psychological and social suffering. It seems that the experiences of ego-dissolution and connectedness disrupt self-conscious self-awareness, thus promoting a greater ease of psychological flexibility. The sense of self is suddenly characterised by wholeness with everything, which by nature excludes comparison.

The construct of experience avoidance refers to an over-identification with a person's self-schema (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2011), and the consequent avoidance of experiences that would threaten that identity. The self-schema in question could involve negative traits, pathologies or diagnoses. These negative self-attributions are clung to as cherished fundamentals of the person's identity, and as reasons why certain states of flourishing are inaccessible. In contrast, the self-schema may include positive traits: capacities, successes, strengths and heroism. In either case, experiences which would involve stepping outside of the self-schema (for example, in the first case, opportunities for success and happiness, and in the second, situations with the potential for vulnerability or failure) are avoided because they would interfere with the schema in question. Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson explain "when you are too busy being who your mind says you are, stepping outside your normal habits becomes impossible, even when it would clearly be useful to do so" (2011, p.22). They go on to describe the consequence that "behaviour comes to be more under "aversive control" rather than "appetitive control"—more dominated by avoidance and escape than natural attraction" (p.23).

Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson (2011) attribute most psychological malaise, including depression, anxiety, addiction and compulsion, to manifestations of their constructs of cognitive fusion and experience avoidance. Psychedelics are thought to "disrupt dysfunctional adaptive mechanisms... via reopening a window of high plasticity or flexibility in which aberrant psychological biases and habits can be relaxed and potentially revised" (Close et al, 2020). This is may be in part because of the capacity of psychedelic states to produce experiences of ego-dissolution and connectedness (Kałużna et al., 2022).

Awakening experiences are also characterised by a disruption of self-construct (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). In what Taylor (2017) terms a primary shift, this disruption is sustained, and the old self-system is replaced with a new, more wakeful one, creating an enduring alteration in identity. In a secondary shift, the disruption of the self-construct caused by the awakening experience eventually fades

and the old identity is restored, but there are lingering beneficial after-effects (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). As a subtype of awakening experience, UL experiences are likely to involve some level of disruption to the self-system. This suggests it may lead to similar benefits of psychological flexibility: a reduction in ego-fusion and experience avoidance, and a concurrent decrease in psychological malaise.

However, the long-term benefits of ego-dissolution are debated. Letheby (2021) suggests that they are at best transient unless the experience of ego-dissolution is integrated through some form of therapy or self-reflective process. Yaden et al. (2020) concur, positing that whilst ego-dissolution is associated with positive psychological change, there is not enough longitudinal evidence to suggest that it facilitates long-term transformation. Sanders et al. (2022) found that individuals frequently revert to their baseline psychological health once the ecstasis of the ego-dissolution has faded.

Carhart Harris et al., (2018) and Grof (2000) caution that in addition to its benefits, ego-dissolution can have negative psychological impacts, including destabilisation and confusion, particularly when there are pre-existing mental health conditions. Grof & Grof (2017) and Taylor (2017) discuss similar difficulties surrounding awakening and mystical forms of EASCs (outlined in section 3.6). The research on ego-dissolution through both psychedelic and awakening experiences suggests that ego-dissolution is only psychologically beneficial if it is integrated in a safe way. As has been mentioned, high intensity forms of EASC involving UL would likely involve ego-dissolution, and may similarly require careful integration, perhaps through therapy or involvement in a supportive community (Grof & Grof, 2017) in order for the potential benefits of such experiences to be realised with minimal detrimental effect.

3.6 Spiritual Crisis

As mentioned above, higher states of consciousness are not always positive in their impact. They can lead to a paradigmatic shock as the experiencer has a completely new sense of their self, the universe and the relationship between them (Grof & Grof, 2017, Taylor, 2017). This experience of inner disorientation, or physical or emotional distress following an EASC or awakening experience is often mis-pathologized as a kind of psychosis such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia (Corneille & Luke, 2021). However, there are certain distinct features of what has come to be known as spiritual crisis or emergency (Grof & Grof, 2017). When properly understood and diagnosed, such maladaptation to spiritual awakenings (usually of the spontaneous kind) can be utilised as powerful positive transition points in the lives of those who experience them; not only restoring them to the level of wellbeing they had before, but assisting them to cultivate new levels of happiness and contentment (Grof & Grof, 2017; Taylor, 2017).

Whilst UL is, on face value, a positive experience, it is possible that as with other EASCs, it may still entail a substantial shift in paradigm which may cause shock or a sense of dissolution. Such a negative reaction would perhaps be more likely if the experience was spontaneous or unexpected, and if the experiencer did not have anyone with whom they could safely discuss and integrate their experience (Grof & Grof,

2017; Taylor, 2017). It will be of interest in this research to explore whether participants report negative impacts of UL, and whether these share the symptoms of spiritual crisis, or shock from ego-dissolution.

3.7 Near-Death Experiences (NDEs)

In mystical literature, UL, like consciousness, is depicted as existing beyond the brain. It is often perceived either as, or as a characteristic of, an underlying essence of reality (Easwaran, 2007; Mahony, 2014; Taylor, 2018; Underhill, 1911/2002). Research pertaining to near-death experiences (NDEs; in which people have vibrant experiences in consciousness during a time where their brain shows no measurable activity) raises scientific questions regarding the nature of consciousness that echo these mystical depictions.

An NDE or near-death experience is an altered state that arises during times of reversible physiological death (cardiac arrest), or in situations such as accidents and acute illness in which a person believes they will die (Greyson, 2014). Only between 11 and 25% of people who have near death occurrences (leading to cardiac arrest and the cessation of neurological activity) report the rich conscious experience of NDEs (Parnia & Fenwick, 2002; Sartori, 2006). Yet, even with this low rate, it was estimated in 2011 that around 4% of the global population had experienced an NDE. NDEs share many of the self-transcendent characteristics of mystical experiences, with the common addition of tunnels of light, boundary or point-of-no-return experiences and life-reviews (Greyson, 2014). Although UL does not feature in the official characteristics of an NDE (Greyson, 1983), NDEs are commonly anecdotally associated with UL experiences (Alexander, 2012; Greyson, 2006; Holden, 2009; Moorjani, 2012).

Many anecdotal accounts of NDEs suggest that they are experiences of consciousness existing beyond the brain (Alexander, 2012; Moorjani, 2012). The scientific community continue to debate this. Some studies and researchers have suggested that NDEs are caused by neurobiological or psychological factors (Blackmore, 1996; Lake, 2017). However, other academics argue that such physicalist theories are inconsistent and inconclusive at best, and that NDEs are likely experiences of a brain-independent consciousness (Greyson, 2011; Van Lommel, 2011). These arguments will be explored more fully in Section 3.7.3. If NDEs are experiences of brain-independent consciousness, it would allow room for the possibility that UL, commonly experienced as transcending the separate self, and frequently reported in association with NDEs (Alexander, 2012; Moorjani, 2012) may also be non-localised and both body- and brain- independent. This would reflect the contemplations of Sorokin (1954/2002) and Templeton (2000) that posit unlimited love to be a substance or resource stemming from beyond the human experience. Further, it would fit with Taylor's panspiritism (2018) and the cosmologies of many of the major mystical and indigenous traditions (Ben Shimon Halevi, 1972; Durga, 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Taylor, 2018), in which consciousness is believed to exist beyond the brain.

3.7.1 Definition and Characteristics of NDEs

Greyson defines NDEs as “profound psychological events with transcendental and mystical elements, typically occurring to individuals close to death or in situations of intense physical or emotional danger” (2000, p.315). The term “near death experience” was coined by cardiologist Raymond Moody in 1975. Prior to this, such experiences had been reported across different times, cultures, ages, and religious affiliation, but had not received scientific attention as a unified phenomenon of interest (Greyson, 2014). In the intervening half century, NDEs have come under more rigorous scientific inquiry and have brought the scientific assumption of brain-dependent consciousness under question (Van Lommel, 2011).

There are seven central features of NDEs in scientific literature. The first is out of body experiences. These often include being able to accurately observe the physical body, other people, and the events taking place during the period of clinical death (Blackmore, 1996; Holden, 2009; Moody, 1975; Parnia & Fenwick, 2002; Van Lommel, 2011). The second is bright light, or a tunnel of light (Greyson, 1983; Moody, 1975). The third is a life review, in which time and space is apparently removed or suspended (Greyson, 1983; Moody, 1975; Van Lommel, 2011). The fourth is meeting with deceased relatives or spiritual beings with whom there is often telepathic communication that overcomes any language barriers that existed in life (Moody, 1975; Parnia & Fenwick, 2002; Van Lommel, 2011). The sixth is reaching a boundary or point of no return (Greyson, 2006; Moody, 1975). The seventh is a conscious return to the body, which can be experienced as limiting compared to the freedom from pain experienced during the NDE (Van Lommel, 2011).

Religious belief has been found not to impact the occurrence of NDEs (Greyson, 2014). Yet, as has been mentioned, NDEs share many features with mystical experiences (James 1902/1928; Stace 1960), features that are also associated in mystical literature with UL experiences (outlined in section 3.2-3.4). These include “a sense of cosmic unity or oneness, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, noetic quality or intuitive illumination, paradoxicality, ineffability, transiency, and persistent positive aftereffects” (Greyson, 2006, p.393).

3.7.2 NDEs and Unconditional Love

UL arises in various depictions of NDEs, both scientific (Tassell-Matamua & Steadman, 2015) and anecdotal (Alexander, 2012; Kaiser, n.d.; Moorjani, 2012). Holden posits that people commonly return from NDEs believing that human life is for “developing the capacity to love and acquir[e] knowledge” (2009, p.188). Greyson includes increases in love, and even unconditional love, in his catalogue of shifts in consciousness frequently attained through NDEs:

NDEs lead to a shift from ego-centered to other-centered consciousness, disposition to love unconditionally, heightened empathy, decreased interest in status symbols and material possessions, reduced fear of death, and deepened spiritual consciousness. Many experiencers become more empathic and spiritually oriented and express the beliefs that death is not fearsome,

that life continues beyond, that love is more important than material possessions, and that everything happens for a reason. (2006, p.393)

However, despite these brief references in academic studies on NDEs, love has not been included as a classical indicative feature of such experiences.

In contrast, anecdotal accounts of NDEs frequently cite UL as one of the most important aspects of the experience and its mechanism of transformation. For example, Debra Kaiser (n.d.) recounted her NDE in a public online article, and described UL as a central part of it:

In this pulsing brilliance, there was such a soft gentleness. I felt profound, exquisite LOVE. A joining and remembrance of being this Love, this true and perfect essence. I was and am that. All was perfect and whole. It felt unceasing and limitless. The indescribable, effulgent Love was what I was. And I was at peace. Complete peace. There were no thoughts, only blissful, peaceful silence and contentment beyond words. Only oneness prevailed.

...I felt I understood it all. There was so much information, but it was all inside of me. The experience was about Love, an unconditional love that transcends words. A Love so magnificent and perfect. And that grand Love resides within us all, equally. One human body could not carry nor sustain the magnitude of its unlimited power. We all share it equally. Love of this magnitude is truly indescribable in words. It is an otherworldly realm of indescribable radiance. Our purpose is to remember this Love, and help one another remember.

This excerpt reflects themes of oneness connected with UL in mystical literature (Easwaran, 2007; Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2018). It also features the idea of UL as a consciousness that exists beyond and independent to the limited ego-self and the brain. In this report, the fundamental love (similar to Brahman in the Vedāntic tradition) appears to be remembered rather than discovered, and to simultaneously exist within the universe and the self.

UL was also experienced by Anita Moorjani during her NDE after a four-year battle with cancer:

I then had the sense of being encompassed by something that I can only describe as pure, unconditional love, but even the word love doesn't do it justice. It was the deepest kind of caring, and I'd never experienced it before. It was beyond any physical form of affection that we can imagine, and it was unconditional – this was mine, regardless of what I'd ever done. I didn't have to do anything or behave a certain way to deserve it. This love was for me, no matter what! I felt completely bathed and renewed in this energy, and it made me feel as though I belonged, as though I'd finally arrived after all those years of struggle, pain, anxiety, and fear. I had finally come home. (Moorjani, 2012, p.6)

Salient about this description is the sense of being encompassed by something beyond the self; and of the experience being beyond any prior physical expression of love or care. It also carries the features mentioned by Matsu-Pissot (2008) of a sense of feeling loved without any contingencies.

Eben Alexander, a (formerly physicalist) neuroscientist experienced an NDE-inducing coma as the result of meningitis. He describes many awe-inspiring features of this experience, including passing through celestial landscapes and hearing music. However, he stresses in his book that love was the most meaningful and transformational component. He declares:

If I had to boil this entire message down to one sentence, it would run this way: You are loved.

And if I had to boil it down further, to just one word, it would (of course) be, simply: Love.

... This is the reality of realities, the incomprehensibly glorious truth of truths that lives and breathes at the core of everything that exists or that ever will exist, and no remotely accurate understanding of who and what we are can be achieved by anyone who does not know it, and embody it in all of their actions.

(Alexander, 2022, p.71)

Alexander's portrayal of love not only suggests that it is beyond the localised consciousness of an individual brain but depicts it as a foundational element of the universe. Again, this ties UL to theories of consciousness transcending the brain, such as panpsychism (Koch, 2017), and panspiritism (Taylor, 2018). Both theories posit that consciousness rather than matter may be the foundational basis of reality. However, panspiritism considers consciousness to be a benevolent force, integral to all mystical traditions. In contrast, panpsychism hypothesizes that consciousness may be a fundamental informational structure, which exists beyond the brain, but does not require a mystical or spiritual paradigmatic frame.

As mentioned above, despite the many anecdotal references to UL in NDEs, the relationship has not received significant academic attention. Perhaps UL has not been included as a primary characteristic of NDEs because of the lack of well-defined construct of UL within psychological literature. Without such a construct, researchers may not have considered taking note of participants' depictions of UL and may have missed an element that could be present but unreported. As UL becomes better understood within the field of psychology, it may be of interest to research in what proportion of core NDEs UL plays a substantial role.

It could also be that UL is not uniquely included as a characteristic of NDEs because it has been grouped into the NDE characteristic of positive mood (Greyson, 2006). Whilst love in normal usage is a positive emotion, most of the mystical writings on UL experiences describe them as beyond both emotion and thought (Easwaran, 2007; Happold, 1990). As explored in section 1.2.3, psychological definitions of emotions suggest they are contingent on external stimuli. This contrasts with UL, which appears in mystical and NDE literature to be experienced in the absence of such stimuli, suggesting that UL does not satisfactorily fit into the category of positive mood. Further, the impact of feeling either unconditionally

loved, made from UL, or part of a universe that is UL, may have a different and more enduring psychological impact than a transient experience of positive emotion.

Unconditional joy (UJ, which I hypothesise is a sister state to UL) is another unconditional positive state accessible through NDEs that may be included in the 'positive mood' category, but is unlikely to be an emotion. Kaiser wrote of her NDE:

We could pass right through one another, and when we did, we felt a ripple of heightened intensity above our already sustained joy. As I glided slowly along, my "hand" would pass through the flowers and meld with and become them, and there would be that same ripple of joy. As I passed another, our thoughts communicated instantly. We had a sense of seeing into and becoming each other. We knew we were all one another. We felt an ecstatic joy that never stopped. It would build and intensify, ebb, and flow, yet it never stopped. I want to use the word "orgasmic," but not in the sense we experience on earth. It was simple; it was Love, completely pure and unceasing Love.
(n.d)

Here, unconditional, or pervasive joy is equated with unconditional or unceasing love. These two states are both associated with an implied sense of oneness, where Kaiser felt no distinction between herself and others she encountered. This is reminiscent of a reconnection with Brahman in the Upanishads: a oneness beyond apparent multiplicity connects the seeker automatically with causeless joy, bliss, and love, which are experienced as the true ground of being (Easwaran, 2007). Whilst it is possible to characterise this as positive mood, it seems that the experience may transcend the normal meaning of that term.

3.7.3 NDEs and Non-Localised Consciousness

Whilst many religious and mystical experiences involve the perception of some form of consciousness apparently external to the physical brain (such as encounters with unconditionally loving disembodied entities, or a sense of UL, UJ, or bliss as an all-pervading fabric of the universe), these are often dismissed as hallucinations created by patterns of neurological activation. In an NDE, when the brain is not demonstrating any clinical activity, such experiences are not able to be explained as neurological hallucinations so easily. Instead, they may provide evidence of brain-independent consciousness. This is currently one of the most significant arguments for the existence of non-localised consciousness (Taylor, 2018; Van Lommel, 2011; Greyson, 2011) of which it is possible that UL is a part.

Physicalist theories around the causation of NDEs include: expectation, palliatively administered drugs, endorphins, lack of oxygen or the retention of carbon dioxide, residual activation of the temporal lobes, and the activation of dynamically interconnected neural networks directly before clinical death occurs (Blackmore, 1996; Lake, 2017). However, such explanations are not congruent with, or sufficient to explain all cases of NDEs. Thus, so far, physicalist theories of the potential mechanisms of NDEs are inconclusive.

For example, if expectation alone were the cause of NDEs, religious individuals should have a higher incidence of NDE, but they do not (Greyson, 2014). If drug-induced, this would not account for NDEs arising in natural settings without medical intervention (e.g., mountaineering accidents, Blackmore, 1996). Anoxia, or the deprivation of oxygen has been another proposed causal factor of NDEs, as it can in some cases cause the rich experiences in consciousness that characterise NDEs (Blackmore, 1996). However, not all NDEs include anoxia (French, 2005). If activation in the temporal lobe is the cause, this activation would likely be measurable, and should reflect other cases of temporal lobe activation. However, whilst temporal lobe activation has been associated with expansive altered states, such as in temporal lobe epilepsy (You et al., 2023) it is more commonly associated with negative mood and behavioural outbursts (Taylor, 2018), which contrasts with the positive mood most commonly associated with NDEs (Greyson, 1983) and NDE cases are partly defined by a lack of measurable brain activity, including in the temporal lobes.

Lake's (2017) research concerns the possibility of a flair in the activation of various connected neural networks immediately before cardiac arrest. He posits that this burst of activity could cause a hallucination experienced as an NDE. This could then be encoded into memory in a way that makes it seem subjectively to the patient that they have had a full experience in consciousness during their period of clinical death, as opposed to a wave of neural activity in the seconds before that period. A chief argument against this mechanism is the prevalence and consistency of accounts of veridical perception in NDE participants (Holden, 2009). Veridical perception is the perception by the patient, usually visual, and often from above, of what is occurring to and around their own body, during their period of clinical death. Patients frequently and accurately report details and events that they were apparently not conscious for (Greyson, 2000; Van Lommel, 2001). Such perceptions would not be explicable through bursts of dynamically connected brain activity in the instants before clinical death, as this would precede the events that NDE patients can sometimes so accurately describe.

Non-physicalist theories concerning the occurrence of NDEs include the possibility of consciousness transcending the brain (Greyson, 2011; Taylor, 2018; Van Lommel, 2011). Van Lommel has described an NDE as "an unforgettable confrontation with unlimited dimensions in our consciousness" (2011, p.22), and has written extensively about how qualia-rich NDEs (which by nature occur in the apparent absence of neurological activity) conflict with the commonly held scientific paradigm of physicalism. Greyson has summarised:

The paradoxical occurrence of a heightened, lucid awareness, and logical thought processes during a period of impaired cerebral perfusion raises particular perplexing questions for our current understanding of consciousness, and its relation to brain function. A clear sensorium and complex perceptual processes during a period of apparent clinical death challenges the concept that consciousness is localized exclusively in the brain. (2003, in Van Lommel, 2011, p.22)

Ultimately, the study of NDEs provides an evidence-based legitimacy to the possibility that consciousness, and thus by extension, UL, can exist beyond the brain. This is a fundamental component of how UL may be different from love as it exists in its emotional, relational form. If consciousness, and thus UL, can exist independently of the brain, it makes sense of the many mystical accounts of love without object; of being embraced by, or merging into a universal oneness of love that is experienced as a oneness of all things (Fox, 2014). It also makes sense of a love that exists independently of human beings; a love that does not begin or end with human emotion, but instead is discovered or reconnected with in certain states of consciousness (Mahony, 2014). Whilst possibilities of non-localised consciousness are described conceptually in research on other altered states (such as mystical, awakening, and psychedelic experiences) the apparent absence of neurological activity connected with NDEs brings a heightened sense of plausibility to these ideas that are otherwise far removed from the current scientific paradigm of physicalism.

3.8 Conclusion

UL appears to be a state that is accessible as part of certain forms of EASC, with an impact that remains in normal states of consciousness. Whilst it shares features with religious and mystical experiences, and certain peak and psychedelic experiences, the form of EASC most aligned with UL as described both anecdotally (Alexander, 2016; Moorjani, 2016) and in the wisdom traditions (Easwaran, 2007; Happold, 1990) appears to be awakening experiences, of which UL experiences may be a subtype. Thus, the onset, characteristic and impact factors of UL experiences are likely to parallel those of awakening experiences, with the addition of love-specific features.

Recent research on the impact of psychedelically attained EASCs, along with literature on awakening experiences, suggest that connectedness and ego-dissolution may be central factors in the mechanism through which such experiences have a positive psychological impact. This may pertain to UL. Regarding causal factors, whilst there are neurological factors involved in EASCs that are likely at play in experiences of UL (Kotler & Wheal, 2017; Newberg, 2015; Persinger & Murphy, 2016), research on NDEs suggests the possibility that such neurological activity may be correlated with rather than causal to those experiences.

As James (1902/1928) and Tart (1975) have pointed out, although EASCs do not obey the rules of rational consciousness, they appear to have significant meaning and benefit. Unconditional positive states of consciousness such as UL and UJ, appear to be exemplars of such non-rational, beneficial states, worthy of psychological investigation.

Chapter 4: Love in Psychology

Psychology explores various types of love, including romantic love (Aron et al., 2005; Aron et al., 2006; Bartels & Zeki, 2000; De Boer, et al., 2012; Sternberg & Barnes, 1988), maternal and parental love (Assor & Tal, 2012; Atzil et al., 2011; Noriuchi et al., 2008) and altruistic love (Post, 2003; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). These types of love all exist within certain boundaries; specifically, those of the relationship context in which they subsist. Maternal, parental and romantic love are most commonly explained as driven by biological imperatives, attachment, and the reward system of the brain (Aron et al., 2005; Atzil, Hendler & Feldman, 2011; De Boer et al., 2012; Fisher et al., 2005). In contrast, UL is generally considered to have universal application (Belzen & Geels, 2003; Cartright, 2015) and to be object-independent (Easwaran, 2007; Durga, 2016; Underhill, 1911/2002) and thus it presumably transcends biological imperatives and emotional bonds.

Altruistic love and unlimited love (described in section 4.3) may be closer to UL. They are both characterized by compassion or care for others (including unknown others) and pro-social actions (Post, 2003; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Whilst extending to a greater number of beneficiaries than the relational forms of love outlined above, altruistic and unlimited love still require an object or recipient. Conversely, UL as described in various mystical writings can be experienced with no object or specific beneficiary: as a state of being rather than solely a relational attitude.

Some non-relational psychological theories consider love to be an emotion (Shaver, Morgan, & Wu, 1996). However, mystical literature often describes UL experiences as existing beyond emotion. Instead, it is often viewed as a hallmark of connection with an ultimate ground of being (Barks, 2010; Cartwright, 2015; Dass, 2010; Durga, 2016; Happold, 1990, reviewed in Chapter 3).

One neuroimaging study purported to explore UL (Beauregard et al., 2009). Participants demonstrated a distinct pattern of neurological activation whilst cultivating a feeling of UL for mentally disabled people they saw in photographs. However, the potential usefulness of this research to the understanding of UL is unclear, due to ambiguity as to whether UL was actually the measured psychological state. UL is usually depicted as a pervasive state of consciousness, often linked to awakening (Easwaran, 2007; Makransky, 2012; Taylor, 2017). This makes it unlikely that it would be accessible on command within a random sample of the general population. Perhaps the measured brain activity was connected to a related experience such as compassion, altruistic or unlimited love, each of which can be cultivated for specific individuals in a normal state of consciousness (Hoffman, Grossman & Hinton, 2011; Oman & Meyer, 2013; Post, 2003).

A small amount of research (outlined below) has been conducted on the relational experience of receiving UL (Glick, 1983; Hawka, 1985; Matsu-Pissot, 2008; Monrich, 1985). Whilst an important aspect of UL as a whole, receiving UL still appears to have an innately relationship-based setting and context. UL as

explored in this research likely does include such experiences, but also transpersonal states, involving oneness or self-transcendence (Daniels, 2005/2021).

Thus, whilst the full construct of UL is not accounted for within psychological literature, there are certainly love-related psychological constructs to which it may be intrinsically connected. Such elements include feeling unconditionally loved (Matsu-Pissot, 2008) compassion (Cassell, 2009), compassionate love (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005), global compassion (Ekman, 2015; Ekman & Ekman, 2017), self-compassion (Neff & Germer, 2017), altruism (Post, Underwood, Schloss & Hurlbut, 2002), and unlimited love (Post, 2003). In this chapter, I will explore these constructs and how they may be related to UL.

4.1 Feeling Unconditionally Loved

A small body of research on the experience of receiving varieties of love, including unconditional has been conducted by Glick (1983), Hawka (1985), Matsu-Pissot (2008) and Monnich (1985). These few studies mostly focused on feeling loved by a spiritual teacher or mentor although Hawka (1985) investigated feeling loved by co-workers and a private sense of being loved by God. These examples are of relational forms of UL, as the love was from a particular person or entity rather than deriving from a sense of oneness with all beings. Yet they have relevance for this literature review, as the experiences had a meaningful impact on participants, who identified them as UL experiences. Furthermore, it is possible (as was found by Matsu-Pissot, 2008) that feeling unconditionally loved by an individual may act as a catalyst or preparatory context, making it more likely that people subsequently experience a transpersonal form of UL that includes a oneness with all things.

Hawka's (1985) study found that people felt unconditionally loved when they felt accepted, recognised, acknowledged and loved without any sense of obligation. The receipt of this form of UL led to a greater sense of resilience and self-efficacy, the attainment of new awareness, greater freedom, openness and empowerment, and a shift in self-image. Monrich (1985) researched love (not necessarily unconditional) in the teacher-student relationship and found that it was characterised by the receipt of support and encouragement from the teacher. This is not dissimilar to the construct of unconditional positive regard (UPR, Farber et al., 2018; Rogers, 1957). Monrich (1985) found that this experience of love that paralleled UPR led to greater courage, the ability to overcome personal challenges, greater self-acceptance, and increased self-confidence. Glick (1983) studied the transformative power of the guru-disciple relationship. He found that love was the most important aspect of this relationship and that the sense of being loved unconditionally by the guru brought the most substantial positive change.

Matsu-Pissot conducted a more recent study on feeling unconditionally loved by a perceived spiritual teacher (2008). UL in this case was defined as "the experience of being loved and accepted by someone one recognizes as a spiritual teacher without the possibility that that love and acceptance will be withdrawn due to something one might or might not say or do" (2008, p.324). His participants were of

Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Sufi, Buddhist and non-denominational backgrounds. Features of the teacher's behaviour or attitude towards the students included nurturing qualities (which when necessary involved boundaries) and an encouragement of the student to discover and express their own truth, even if it was different to the teacher's.

Features of the participant's experiences of receiving UL in this form fit into three main categories. The first were psychologically therapeutic benefits, including: a more authentic self-relationship and a shift in relationship with others and with the world. The second were transpersonal elements, including: a sense of awe, increased commitment to or understanding of the sacred, and a dawning awareness of UL existing both within self and reality. The third, was a sense of the UL persisting even after the direct moments of contact with the teacher were over (Matsu-Pissot, 2008).

The receipt of UL was not always described as a pleasant experience, as it often brought to the surface elements of the participants' psyche that needed healing and were an ordeal to face. However, Matsu-Pissot explained that the resource of UL and the sense of authentic identity it brought often provided the strength to meet such challenges (2008). He found that recipients of UL were able to cultivate more awareness of their faults, have the courage to face these faults, and become willing to surrender unhelpful attitudes, perspectives and behaviours.

Interestingly, the change in self-relationship brought about by receiving RUL led not only to a new capacity to love others, but also in many cases to a transpersonal experience of UL: "Many co-participants came to the realization that UL is a quality that is inherent in or organic to our being-in-the-world" (Matsu-Pissot, 2008, p.330-331). Matsu-Pissot described many transpersonal features relayed to him by participants, including "oneness, union, expansion, harmony, perfection, infinity, universality, timelessness, and awakening of the soul" (2008, p.329). Each of these parallel experiences of awakening (Taylor, 2017), religious (Hardy, 1975; James, 1902) and psychedelic experiences (Stace, 1960). Thus, relational experiences of UL may be one of the ways in which universal UL experiences arise. Participants also reported a greater tendency towards altruism, and increased self-efficacy, gratitude, belonging, equality, faith, trust or appreciation as a result of feeling unconditionally loved.

4.2 Compassion

Compassion appears to be intrinsically connected to UL. Many compassion practices from spiritual traditions involve cultivating a sense of connectedness to and loving kindness for all beings (Hoffmann et al., 2011; Makransky, 2012). According to Ekman and Ekman, "Compassion is part of a core belief system in all Abrahamic religions, Buddhism, Confucianism, and humanism" (2017, p.42). Much of the psychological understanding of the notion of compassion is drawn from the Buddhist tradition, in which it is seen as "loving kindness, benevolence, friendliness and affection" (Happold, 1990, p.161) that is either

directed towards those who suffer (Makransky, 2012) or in all directions and to all beings (Metta Sutta, in Happold, 1990).

The primary difference between compassion and UL, is that compassion within both Buddhism and psychology is primarily defined as empathy for the suffering of others and a desire to alleviate that suffering (Cassell, 2009; Dutton, et al., 2014; Ekman & Ekman, 2017; Goertz et al., 2010; Makransky, 2012; Oman & Meyer, 2013). Wispé (1991) suggests that to have compassion for others, a person needs to open their consciousness to another's experience of suffering with full presence. Once this presence is attained, kindness, empathy and the desire to assist the other person to overcome their suffering can arise. Ekman and Ekman (2017) go as far as to say that "compassion of any kind will not occur unless the compassionate person accurately recognizes that someone is suffering now or is likely to suffer in the future" (p.44).

The above concept contrasts with depictions of UL, in which there is a sense of causelessness. Instead of arising for a particular reason or in response to a particular situation, UL appears to arise as if it is a foundation of reality that has always existed but is just now suddenly being experienced (Easwaran, 2007; Taylor, 2017; Tolle, 2010; Spira, 2016). This is part of what makes it an unconditional state: it is not limited to particular circumstances or relationships in which it can arise.

4.2.1 Compassion and Self-Transcendence

Stellar et al. (2017) describe compassion as a self-transcendent emotion. They define this as an emotion in which the attention is on the needs and feelings of others, rather than on the needs and emotions of the self. In contrast, UL is self-transcendent because it often transcends identification with a separate self in favour of a sense of oneness with all things. Again, the other-focus of compassion here separates it from UL as explored in the current study, as the latter is not object-dependent.

UL is therefore not identical to the psychological construct of compassion. However, compassion may be part of the impact of UL; how behaviours change after the peak or awakening experience of UL passes. Further, although the constructs are different, there is likely enough similarity that the psychological benefits derived from compassion (outlined below) may also result from UL.

4.2.2 Global Compassion

Ekman (2015) coined the term Global Compassion, to refer to "a concern to alleviate the suffering of anyone, regardless of their nationality, language, culture, or religion" (Ekman & Ekman, 2017). At a simplistic level, Ekman and Ekman (2017) describe this trait as compassion that is felt and expressed for people beyond a person's familiars, relatives and friends. However, they also associate it with a broader

socio-political context, in which the world is interconnected, and the difficulties facing one nation often have ramifications (such as for example refugee migration, the impact of climate change on crops and housing) that will eventually impact others. They posit that a cultivation of global compassion should be the goal for all human beings as a potential attitude to adopt when attempting to solve such geo-political problems.

Ekman & Ekman hypothesise that only certain individuals may have “the suffering of all people, not just family members, in their emotional alert database” (2017, p.48). Alternatively, they speculate that all human beings may be capable of this, but that global compassion requires somehow being awakened or “switched on.” They (particularly Paul) suggest that an awakening of this inner capacity for interest in the suffering of all beings might be caused by a national trauma, a personally emotional trauma, or an “inspirational encounter” with someone who already possesses global compassion (p.48). These factors are reminiscent of those that lead to awakening experiences (Taylor 2012; Corneille & Luke, 2021), and fit with Taylor’s (2012; 2015) findings that increases in compassion are often experienced following an awakening experience.

Global compassion differs from UL due to its being a response to the suffering of others, and its dependence on a subject-object relationship. Yet, as UL is closely related to compassion, and is likely a feature of certain awakening experiences (which have been shown to increase compassion), UL experiences may promote global compassion. This is likely to take place through the mechanism of a more prevalent sense of oneness with others and thus enhanced empathy and care for their current or future suffering.

4.2.3 Impact of Compassion

In general, research on compassion suggests that it decreases anxiety and depression and increases wellbeing and satisfaction with life. Kirby (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of compassion-based interventions and found they tend to yield moderate effect sizes for both the alleviation of suffering (including depression, anxiety and psychological distress) and the increase of life satisfaction and wellbeing. Kirby et al., (2017) conducted a similar meta-analysis yielding similar findings. However, many of the original studies analysed in both meta-analyses featured sample sizes too small to ensure the generalizability of findings. Further, in numerous cases, the specific mechanisms within each compassion intervention responsible for positive psychological effects remained undefined. Despite these limitations, the observed improvements to mental health in the analysed RCTs were of moderate effect size and statistically significant, supporting the validity of compassion-based interventions as beneficial for mental health.

Ekman (2015) suggests that one of the benefits of compassion is compassionate joy, an intrinsic internal response to the practice of compassionate action. This may be connected to UJ, as discussed in Chapter 3. While there is a shortage of longitudinal research on whether compassion leads to sustained increases

in joy over time, existing studies suggest that compassion can enhance short-term feelings of joy (Ekman & Halpern, 2015). Additionally, Ekman & Ekman's (2017) exploration of global compassion noted that compassionate engagement may contribute to an expanded emotional experience beyond mere suffering alleviation. However, further research is needed to establish the precise mechanisms through which compassion fosters long-term emotional resilience and whether joy remains a consistent psychological outcome of compassion-based interventions.

Compassion is also linked to benefits in interpersonal relationships. Klimecki (2019) found that empathy and compassion are associated with pro-social behaviour in relationships and a commitment to reconciliation during conflict. While many conflicts involve additional factors, such as deep-seated emotional trauma or structural inequalities, that compassion alone may not resolve, Klimecki's findings suggest that increases in compassion can enhance an individual's attitude toward reconciliation, willingness to engage in resolution, and overall likelihood of successfully addressing conflict. Ekman & Ekman (2017) suggest that one's self-image is enhanced through acting compassionately. If others become aware of the act of compassion, it may also increase a person's social regard. Stellar et al. (2017) posit that compassion, in addition to other positive, self-transcendent states, such as awe and gratitude, are part of an evolutionary mechanism to foster connection with others and ensure the prosocial behaviours required for survival and reproduction, thus enhancing interpersonal relationships. This may be a biologically deterministic oversimplification, overlooking cultural, social, religious and philosophical influences on the cultivation of compassion. Nonetheless, the combined evidence does suggest that compassion plays a role in social connectedness and cohesion.

Sprecher and Fehr also found that compassionate love was correlated highly with pro-social behaviour. Compared to empathy, which has been correlated with prosocial support to others in short-term scenarios (Dovidio & Penner, 2001), they posited that compassionate love promotes more enduring altruistic tendencies. It would be interesting to explore whether experiences of UL are associated with prosocial behaviour. On the one hand, one could expect that an increase in love and oneness towards all beings would naturally inspire a desire to help all beings, as they are viewed as part of the self. On the other hand, as UL often brings a sense of wonder and wholeness (even in the face of difficulty and adversity), it is possible that this sense of the universe's pre-existing perfection might preclude the desire to change or help anything.

In addition to research on the benefits of cultivating compassion, research also supports the benefits of receiving compassion. Lilius et al. (2008) found that receiving compassion has a beneficial effect in the workplace, decreasing anxiety, increasing positive emotions, and increasing the recipient's sense of capability. This appears congruent with reported benefits of receiving UPR (Bozarth, 2013; Farber et al., 2019). It is possible that receiving or connecting with UL may yield similar psychological benefits through the acceptance of one's own flaws.

There are detriments associated with the practice of compassion in the literature. Halifax (2011) found that if a person is attempting to be compassionate in a dire situation, they may develop moral stress, from having good intentions but not being able to facilitate change. They may also develop secondary trauma, from extended exposure to and identification with the suffering of others. Halpern (2003) similarly found that compassion can lead to empathic distress, in which a person is unable to distinguish their own suffering from that of the other.

UL is likely to yield similar benefits to compassion. However, the detriments of overidentification with, or stress at not being able to alleviate the pain and suffering of others may be avoided for two reasons. Firstly, UL is not contingent on the suffering of others. Secondly, UL is described as embracing and co-existing with polarity, which is part of what makes it unconditional (Durga, 2013; 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Tolle, 2010).

4.2.4 Self-Compassion

Self-Compassion researchers Neff and Germer (2017) state that self-compassion is the ability to turn compassion inward. Inwardly directed compassion can be cultivated in respect of any suffering – whether derived from some external, uncontrollable event, or from internal insecurity, failure, guilt or shame. Neff and Germer describe self-compassion as being:

Open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness... offering nonjudgmental understanding to one's pain, inadequacies and failures, so that one's experience is seen as part of the larger human experience. (2017, p.2)

Neff (2003a) posits that self-compassion has three main components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Each of these elements are likely related to the construct of UL, as explored below. Neff and Germer (2017) amalgamate the three elements of self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness as “loving, connected presence”, which reflects the qualities of UL reported by Matsu-Pissot (2008). If self-compassion is loving connected presence directed towards the self, this may equate to a self-directed form of UL. However, there are still *a priori* some differences between the two constructs. These are primarily that self-compassion is considered to be an attitude directed towards the suffering of the self, is specifically for the self as opposed to all beings and things, and is most often cultivated in normal rather than altered states of consciousness.

4.2.4.1 Self-Kindness

Self-kindness is the first of the three components of self-compassion identified by Neff (2003a). It consists of offering the same compassionate understanding and support to ourselves that we would offer to a friend or loved one. It is characterised by warmth, encouragement, benevolence and “unconditional acceptance” of ourselves (Neff & Germer, 2017, p.3). “People who are self-kind view their worth as

unconditional... Self-kindness involves affirming, even after failure, that one's self deserves love, happiness, and affection" (Barnard & Curry, 2011). Unconditional acceptance appears particularly connected to UL. Certainly, self-acceptance (regardless of faults) and acceptance of whatever circumstance a person finds themselves in, is common in mystical reports of UL (Fox, 2014; Taylor, 2018), as is the unconditional acceptance of others exactly as they are. Whilst self-kindness does not encompass the self-transcendent or universal elements of UL as described in mystical literature (Easwaran, 2007; Fox, 2014), it may arise through or be enhanced by experiences of UL.

4.2.4.2 Common Humanity

The second feature of self-compassion, common humanity, is the belief that although we may be suffering, this suffering does not make us separate from those who appear to be experiencing success or joy (Neff, 2003a). It is the awareness that all human beings are flawed and experience pain, and thus that even when we suffer, we are still connected to the common human experience.

Oneness and connection appear to be inextricable elements of UL. However, the connectedness of common humanity is based in the shared experience of suffering and imperfection. In contrast, UL as described in connection with mystical traditions and experiences (Easwaran, 2007; Taylor, 2017) appears to be based on a sense of oneness as the nature of reality, irrespective of pain or pleasure. Further, common humanity as described by Neff (2003a, 2003b) appears to be a cognitive construct. It is a self-reminder that when suffering, we are not the only ones, and thus not as uniquely flawed as our ego may tell us we are. This contrasts with the embodied state of connectedness reported in psychedelic and mystical experiences, the epitome of which is oneness with all (Watts et al., 2022). Watts et al.'s construct of connectedness as a felt sense (rather than contingent on the idea of shared suffering) corresponds more directly with mystical descriptions of UL experiences.

However, self-compassion may increase the likelihood of other experiences of connectedness. Neff attributes many of the benefits of self-compassion to its capacity to move an individual beyond "the pitfalls of a separate self-concept" (Neff, 2008). This suggests that the practice of self-compassion may reduce cognitive ego-boundaries, leading to more opportunity for connectedness, and perhaps oneness experiences which may include UL.

4.2.4.3 Mindfulness

The final factor of self-compassion is mindfulness. Mindfulness is "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145). In relation to self-compassion, mindfulness is required to enable people to be present to and aware of their own suffering (Neff, 2003b). It is only once this awareness is established that compassion for one's suffering can be applied. Mindfulness also ensures that whilst people can become aware of their suffering, they do not become identified with it. They

understand that their failure or pain is something they are experiencing transiently and does not define them. Depictions of UL in mystical literature share this sense of identification beyond pain, which allows all experiences to be accepted (Easwaran, 2007). However, UL is often associated with richer sensations of love, not only acceptance (Fox, 2014; Mahony, 2014; Underhill, 1911/2002).

Mindfulness is a practice sometimes associated with triggering awakening experiences (Tolle, 1997/2010). Thus, it may also trigger UL experiences. Spira (2016) frequently describes unconditional positive states, for example of love, joy and freedom, that are contactable through a deep identification with one's own awareness, which is a form of mindfulness. Further, the vividness and presence often associated with mindfulness are hallmarks of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017), of which UL experiences may be a subtype. Therefore, similarly to compassionate love, mindfulness may be both a characteristic and an antecedent of states of UL.

4.2.4.4 Benefits of Self-Compassion

Self-Compassion has been associated with a wide range of psychological, physical, and interpersonal benefits, both through self-report and more objective measures of physiological and psychological states (Neff & Germer, 2017). High trait self-compassion has been correlated with high subjective wellbeing, self-efficacy, motivation, life-satisfaction, optimism, curiosity, wisdom, extroversion, conscientiousness, emotional intelligence, intellectual flexibility and improved physiological responses to stress (Friis et al., 2015; Heffernan et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2011; Neff et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2008; Neff & Germer, 2013). In terms of decreasing negative mental health, self-compassion was inversely correlated with (and often found to decrease) rumination, fear of failure, stress, anxiety, depression, burn-out, shame and body shame (Albertson et al., 2015; Daye et al., 2014; Diedrich et al., 2014; Eriksson et al., 2018; Neff, 2003b; Smeets et al., 2014). Further, a 2012 meta-analysis of twenty studies (Macbeth & Gumley) found a large effect size in the inverse correlation between self-compassion, depression and anxiety, suggesting that self-compassion could have a protective effect against psychopathologies.

Cha et al., (2023) point out that overlaps between the criteria of certain measurements of self-compassion, and of its psychological outcomes may make their association less meaningful. For example, each of the three elements of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, has a corresponding negative measurement: self-harshness, isolation and rumination. These three negative traits overlap with diagnostic criteria for depression and anxiety and are component features of several other negative psychological states (such as shame). Thus, any decrease in self-harshness, isolation and rumination will result in both a higher self-compassion score and a lower depression score, but this may only be a correlational occurrence. However, Takahashi et al. (2019), Macbeth and Gumley (2012) and numerous studies cited in a review by Neff and Germer (2017) found that decreases in depression and anxiety through self-compassion interventions were significant even when overlapping measurement factors were controlled for, suggesting there is likely some benefit beyond the natural inverse correlation between the constructs of interest.

In addition to the mediation of depression and anxiety, self-compassion appears to have a beneficial impact on those suffering from various forms of trauma. Hiraoka et al (2015) found that self-compassion predicted less PTSD in veterans who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Further, interventions to augment self-compassion decreased levels of PTSD over time. Vettese et al. (2011) found that self-compassion mediated emotional dysregulation stemming from childhood abuse and trauma. This suggests that practices that increase self-compassion would decrease the symptoms of such childhood maltreatment, including self-criticism, shame, substance abuse and depression. Whilst a larger sample size would be required to determine the generalisability of Vettese et al.'s (2011) findings, and no longitudinal studies have yet been conducted to assess how sustaining the benefits are, even this initial finding suggests the power of self-compassion in overturning apparently concretised or set negative psychological experiences.

Aside from psychological benefits, the interpersonal impact of self-compassion has also been widely studied. Neff and Beretvas (2013) found that those higher in self-compassion were more emotionally connected to and accepting of their partners, and more supporting of autonomy. They were also less aggressive, controlling or detached. Yarnell and Neff (2013) found that levels of self-compassion led to greater likelihood of compromise (as opposed to subordination or self-prioritization) in interpersonal conflict. This compromise usually came with greater authenticity, less emotional turmoil, and higher reported wellbeing in the relationship in question. Howell et al. (2011) also found that those high in self-compassion had a higher proclivity to apologise and repair relationships if damage had taken place. This vast array of powerful impacts of self-compassion on mental health and relationships suggest that if self-compassion is part of or a result of UL experiences, the latter are likely to produce similarly beneficial effects.

4.3 Unlimited Love

Unlimited love is ostensibly one of the closest psychological constructs to UL. Likened to agape, though deliberately less tied to Christian literature, it is a love that is experienced for every other being regardless of personal connection. In that way, it is “unlimited in its extensivity” (Oman & Meyer, 2013, p.1). Post and the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love (IRUL, founded in 2001), offer the following definition of unlimited love:

...to affectively affirm as well as to unselfishly delight in the well-being of others, and to engage in acts of care and service on their behalf; unlimited love extends this love to all others without exception, in an enduring and constant way. Widely considered the highest form of virtue, unlimited love is often deemed a Creative Presence underlying and integral to all of reality: participation in unlimited love constitutes the fullest experience of spirituality. Unlimited love may result in new relationships, and deep community may emerge around helping behaviour, but this is secondary. Even if connections and relations do not emerge, love endures. (Post, 2003, p.vii).

Although this definition considers unlimited love to be a presence that underlies reality, the operationalisation of the concept within the remit of scientific enquiry has focused primarily on the “acts of care and service” element of the definition, as will be explored below.

4.3.1 Contrasting Unconditional and Unlimited Love

At face value, the terms “unlimited love” (Post, 2003) and “unconditional love” (UL) are similar. Moreover, they arise from a similar ontological stance, in which love is perceived as a possible conception of the underlying nature of reality. However, upon closer inspection, the constructs are distinct in two major ways, described below. Both delineations are properties of the fact that UL appears to arise as or as part of a wakeful state of consciousness, whereas unlimited love is experienced within a normal state of consciousness.

Firstly, unlimited love has largely been operationalised as loving and benevolent attitudes, feelings and actions extended to other beings (Oman & Meyer, 2013; Post, 2003). UL is not dependent on other-focused affect, attitudes or actions, but instead can exist object-independently. Secondly, UL, like many mystical and awakening states, can be experienced passively. It can involve a sense of receiving or being lifted into that state of consciousness (Happold, 1990; James, 1902; Taylor, 2017). Conversely, unlimited love is characterised by doing and feeling.

Whilst unconditional and unlimited love do not appear to be the same construct, there is still a probable relationship between the two. Unlimited love as outlined by Post (2003) may be one of the ways that people express UL once they have experienced it. It may also be an attitudinal stance that is adopted as part of integrating the unified, peak experience of UL into daily life. If people were already practicing unlimited love, awakening experiences of UL may make its altruistic emotions and actions more effortless.

4.3.1.1 Extensity and Relationality

One of the main similarities between unconditional and unlimited love is the extensity of love (Oman & Meyer, 2013; Post, 2003; Sorokin, 1954/2002). In both constructs, love is felt for all people and beings. However, although UL can arise in the presence of others, can be felt towards others, and is often felt for all beings, it can equally arise when the experiencer is alone and not contemplating any other being (Fox, 2014; James, 1902; Mahony, 2014; Taylor, 2017). It is an all-pervasive experience that usually brings a sense of interconnectedness or oneness with all of creation, or the sense that the whole universe consists of the vast love they are experiencing. Thus, the love is not relational or other-focused, but arises from the sense that love is fundamental, including everyone and everything. In unlimited love, love is felt relationally between a subject and an object, even if the object is the entire global population.

4.3.1.2 Unlimited Love, Unconditional Love, and Altruism

There are substantial similarities between the operationalisation of unlimited love and the construct of altruism. Indeed, the first book published by the IRUL (Institute for Research on Unlimited Love) was *Altruism and Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy and Religion in Dialogue* (Post et al., 2002). Oman & Meyer (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of the empirical research on unlimited love, funded through grants from the IRUL. They reported that “the UL-related constructs of interest varied widely, ranging from laboratory-based altruistic monetary gifts to maternal caring behaviours, performing volunteer work, and consoling behaviours by chimpanzees” (p.iii). As pointed out by Fox (2014), these examples of unlimited love all involve actions towards others, which reflects the concept of altruism. The major difference between the traditional concept of altruism and that of unlimited love is that altruism can be practiced without any compassionate feeling or inner experience (Oman & Meyer, 2013).

UL is distinct from both altruistic love and unconditional love. The feeling of love is always present in UL. It is an all-encompassing experience rather than an ideal that can be adopted through a rational, cognitive decision alone. Further, as previously mentioned, it lacks an other-focused requirement and can exist as a state of being rather than as a set of actions, emotions or attitudes. Many of the wisdom texts and accounts of awakening experiences suggest that in peak moments of UL or oneness, there is an absence of both thought and emotion, often leading to a sense of ineffability (Stace, 1960; Taylor, 2017). In ineffable experiences, neither the rational quality of altruism nor the other-focused emotion of unconditional love would be possible.

4.3.2 Near-Unlimited Love

Post (2003) and Oman and Meyer (2013) posit that total or infinite unlimited love is a rare state of consciousness, as it would involve a constancy of love and compassion toward all beings at all times. However, they state that there are non-infinite, “near-unlimited” versions of the construct that tend towards its more perfect form; for example, the ability to cultivate altruistic and compassionate love for a growing number of people outside of one’s family, social circle, faith or race (Oman & Meyer, 2013, p.5). This has overlapping elements with Ekman’s (2014) concept of Global Compassion (described above). However, as pointed out by Oman and Meyer (2013), and upheld in Ekman’s definition of the construct, compassion requires a response to the suffering of others, whilst unlimited love (like UL) is not contingent upon suffering. Post (2003), and Oman and Meyer (2013) posit that there are benefits for both the practitioner of unlimited love and the beneficiaries of that love even when the state is not complete in its extensity or constancy.

4.3.2.1 Unconditional Love Resourcing Unlimited Love

Sorokin (1954/2002), Templeton (2000) and Post (2003) reflect that as human beings are finite, the human capacity for love must similarly be finite. These writers point out that certain exemplars of unlimited love, saints such as St Francis of Assisi and Mother Theresa, have described their love to be flowing through them from something beyond themselves. This has in some instances been experienced as God or the Divine, and in other cases, as a universal presence not connected to theism (Sorokin, 1954/2002). Sorokin described:

[T]he supreme altruists of the most different nations and periods unanimously state that in doing their acts of sublime love they act as a mere instrument of the supraconscious, called by different names: God... Tao, the Great Reason, the Oversoul... Brahma... Chit... (1954/2002, p.127)

Oman and Meyer discuss how connection with a “higher power” can resource the expression of Post’s (2003) unlimited love:

In as much as human beings are viewed as essentially finite creatures – a common perspective in both science and theology – then “unlimited love” per se, as unlimited, can only reside in such a trans-human “higher power,” although human beings might serve as finite channels for its infinite love. (2013, p.59)

This suggests that whilst the human capacity for love is finite, we may possess the ability to open to an infinite source of love (potentially UL), and to become an expression of that love. This may then manifest itself as limitlessly loving attitudes and actions towards others, as described in the scientific operationalisation of Post’s (2003) unlimited love.

The limitless, infinite source of love appears in this conception as a non-localised form of consciousness, contingent with UL as depicted in the mystical traditions (Easwaran, 2007; Underhill, 1902/2011), and as accessed through awakening experiences and other EASCs (Alexander, 2022; Moorjani, 2022; Taylor, 2017). However, apart from a brief phrase in its definition calling unlimited love a “Creative Presence underlying and integral to all of reality” (Post, 2003, p.vii), it seems unlimited love has been mainly operationalised and studied as loving expressions and attitudes, which are expressed in normal states of consciousness. Thus, the mechanism connecting transpersonal elements of UL with physical expressions is overlooked. This may be because scientific conceptions of awakening states of consciousness are not considered or included.

Informed by the review of mystical literature and EASCs in Chapters 3 and 4, this thesis explores UL firstly as a non-localised state of consciousness experienced in EASCs. It considers the potential expression of UL as benevolent or altruistic actions and attitudes one of several potential manifestations or impacts of UL. Further, UL experiences – peak or awakening moments of connection with the non-localised consciousness of UL – appear to have characteristics not accounted for in Post’s (2003) construct of unlimited love. Thus, unlimited love as operationalised by Post (2003) and the research explored by Oman and Meyer, (2013) may be one of the ways in which experiences of UL express, or part

of how the peak experience of UL is integrated, but does not fully encompass UL as explored in this thesis.

4.3.3 Impact of Unlimited Love

Although unlimited love and UL are not the same construct, understanding the impact of unlimited love may assist in the understanding of UL. As Oman and Meyer (2013, p.24) point out, the difficulty of finding participants who are exemplars of unlimited love has meant that studies on the impact of unlimited love were more likely exploring unlimited love-related constructs, such as empathy or altruism. Nonetheless, their meta-analysis revealed many positive effects, such as improved wellbeing, reductions in fear and PTSD, and increases in gratitude and volunteering.

The benevolent behavioural and attitudinal features associated with unlimited love are common after-effects of awakening experiences as empirically studied (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017) and as anecdotally described (James, 1902; Happold, 1990; Stace, 1960). Altruistic actions and attitudes (which strongly reflect unlimited love) have also been associated with triggering or inciting greater wakefulness (Taylor, 2024), of which UL is sometimes a part. Thus, whilst UL and unlimited love are not the same construct, they may have a bidirectional relationship with each other which will be better understood through this research.

Chapter 5: Study One: Accounts of UL from the General Public

5.1 Pilot

A pilot study (Included in Appendix A) was conducted to explore whether the research questionnaire (see Appendix B.3) was useful in eliciting descriptions of apposite types of UL experiences. It was set within a paradigm of transcendental phenomenology (outlined in section 1.2), and involved a thematic analysis (TA, Braun & Clark, 2012) of written accounts of UL. These ranged from a paragraph to a page in length. Seven participants' accounts were included, which appeared sufficient for a pilot exploration of the usefulness of the research questionnaire, administered through Google Forms.

Results of the pilot study were unexpected, as participant accounts included both relational and transpersonal experiences of unconditional love (RUL and TUL respectively). RUL involved love without conditions for one person, as opposed to for all beings and things. In this pilot, RUL was triggered by moments of intense emotion in relationships, such as birth, the immanent death of a loved one, and breakup. They were also triggered by moments of deep presence and connection. There were only two examples of TUL. One was triggered through prayer and gratitude, and the other had spontaneous onset.

RUL and TUL shared the characteristics of love, tenderness, and benevolence. TUL had additional characteristics of connectedness and awe. RUL had additional characteristics of forgiveness and acceptance. RUL was sometimes reported as existing concurrently with heartache or boundaries towards the object of love. This was part of why those participants considered the love to be unconditional.

RUL and TUL were both considered extremely significant experiences for participants. In terms of their impact, those reporting RUL mainly spoke of how they were able to be present with and love the object of their RUL through difficulties, illness and challenging moments in their relationship. One reported a negative impact of not feeling able to move on from the relationship in which her RUL had arisen because of her assumption that such a significant love was irreplaceable. Future studies of RUL could explore whether it can in some circumstances be related to, co-arise with, or be confused with co-dependency. Participants who reported TUL experienced increases in character strengths, self-love and their awareness of oneness.

The different focal points, triggers, characteristics and impacts of RUL and TUL confirmed that they are likely distinct forms of UL. RUL has been termed "relational" because it describes a form of UL that exists solely within the container of a particular relationship. "Transpersonal" was the selected designation for

the more universal form of UL, as such experiences appeared to draw participants out of their separate self and into some form of either oneness or connectedness. This reflects Daniels' definition of "transpersonal" as pertaining to those "experiences, processes and events in which the normal, limiting sense of self is transcended, and in which there is a feeling of connection to a larger, more meaningful reality" (2005/2021, p.11). Transpersonal unconditional love experiences, as described by participants, were more reflective of UL as presented in the mystical literature outlined in Chapter 3.

The conclusion of the Pilot Study, further outlining the distinction between RUL and TUL was as follows:

This pilot study demonstrated that the research question pertaining to the nature of UL is viable and likely to yield significant findings. Through the paradigm of transcendental phenomenology, subjective accounts of UL were analysed as phenomenological access points to UL as an objective, ontological phenomenon. This analysis suggested that there may be two forms of UL: relational UL (RUL) and transpersonal UL (TUL). Although instances of RUL demonstrated love without expectations, there was still a prerequisite of a personal connection between the lover and the beloved. In contrast, TUL was extended to all, without any pre-conditions (such as a personal connection) and involved a sense of oneness or self-expansion. In that way, TUL appeared to be connected with awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012), whilst RUL appeared to exist in normative states of consciousness (Tart, 1975).

Both RUL and TUL appeared to have a profound impact on the person who experienced them. Both are worthy of psychological study to further explore what benefits they may bring. Yet it will be important to distinguish these two forms, as it is likely that each will yield different types of personal and interpersonal impact, and that they may be accessed in slightly different ways. Of further merit to investigate might be whether there is any causal or triggering relationship between RUL and TUL.

5.2 Paradigm and Method

As in the pilot study, I applied a paradigm of transcendental phenomenology for Study One, in accordance with Husserl (1983). As outlined in Section 1.2, transcendental phenomenology is an ideal paradigm for developing an initial, ontological framework of UL that is grounded in the lived experiences of participants (Edie, 1987). In this study, subjective accounts of UL are systematically triangulated to build a preliminary framework of its core experiential features (Edie, 1987; Moustakas, 1994).

Given the apparent suitability of the thematic analysis (TA) methodology and questionnaire used in the pilot study, this full version of study one followed the same methodology, outlined in Appendix A. The only methodological difference was that themes were analysed manually, without the assistance of the

software Quirkos. Participant selection had been a limitation in the pilot study. Participants had mainly been invited via my Facebook page. This resulted in a sample that were more likely to identify as “spiritual”. In the present study, recruitment was expanded to include invitations advertised through my supervisor’s network (with a common interest in awakening experiences), the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society, and an Australian-based spiritual charity. Whilst this broadened the participant pool, it still attracted a majority of spiritually-identifying participants.

Ethical considerations were consistent with the pilot study. The same participant information, consent and debrief forms were utilised, and administered concurrently with the questionnaire itself (See Appendix B) through a Google Form. This study was conducted under the same ethical approval attained on the 12th of September, 2019.

5.3 Results

27 participants responded to the survey on UL experiences (see Appendix B). Two of this number were excluded on the basis that they did not discuss the topic of UL directly and were uncontactable for further discussion or involvement. One more was excluded because their response seemed to show a misunderstanding of the question. This left 24 participants between the ages of 27 and 82. Of these, 29% were male and 71% were female. 23 participants identified as “spiritual” and the 24th as “agnostic”. Responses ranged in length from a couple of sentences, to (in one case) 20 pages, but were usually two or three paragraphs. As some participants described more than one account of UL, 32 specific UL experiences were collected, which, alongside the analysis of 10 experiences from the seven accounts of the pilot study, seemed sufficient for this research.

5.3.1 Context/ Predisposing Factors

As in the pilot study, events participants associated with precipitating their UL experience were delineated into two separate categories: context and triggers. In the current study, factors that seemed to be contextual in some accounts of UL were direct triggers in others. For this reason, some themes appear in both the ‘context’ and ‘triggers’ tables (1 and 2 respectively).

In their study of awakening experiences, Taylor and Egeto-Szabo (2017) split contextual factors into the categories of “spiritual” and “non-spiritual”, with non-spiritual representing the context of normal daily life. “Spiritual” versus “non-spiritual” is a meaningful distinction when studying awakening experiences, (so often associated with spirituality). It has been included here as TUL experiences are likely a type of

awakening experience. The present study also explored whether UL experiences arose within or outside of a relational context.

Table 1 displays contexts differentially for transpersonal and relational UL. Where a response included accounts of both kinds of love and the context was relevant to both, it was counted in both columns. Where a response included accounts of both kinds of love, but the context only pertained to one, the example was only mentioned in one column.

Table 1

Context for Unconditional Love Experiences

Context themes	# in TUL	# in RUL
Nature	3	0
Pain (Physical or Psychological)	6	6
Spiritual practice or study	7	2
Relational	2	8
Other/unknown	0	1

In some cases, it appeared there was more than one contextual factor involved. For example, P25 recounted:

I was in love... I knew the experience was beyond anything I had ever encountered. It was almost palpable and effected people I was with... One day, this man and I were walking through some woods and suddenly I wasn't there. I was the tree, I was love, that's all there was. It seemed to be a long time but in fact, probably seconds.

This appears to be a TUL experience, with a spontaneous onset. The context could be considered to be the romantic situation of being with the man she loved, or it could be being in nature. It is most probably a mixture of the two.

P20 also had several potential contextual factors, including recently losing her mother, being on a spiritual pilgrimage, and being in a beautiful natural context. Like P25, the onset of P20's TUL experience also appeared to be spontaneous.

I went on... spiritual pilgrimage... in order to connect with the archetype of the Great Mother four years after my own mother's passing. Her death had left a huge void and so I went in search of a deeper more tangible relationship with the mother of us all. After a powerful sojourn in Ireland exploring sacred sites of the Goddess, I journeyed to the small isle of Iona in the Hebrides... On my 2nd day there, I was out walking a road on the far side of the isle when suddenly I stopped as a feeling of such complete unconditional love and oneness came over me as was never experienced

before. It was as if I suddenly was utterly merged with everything I beheld- the blades of grass, soft sloping hills...

Again, it is likely that in this case the mix of contextual factors contributed to a state of consciousness that was conducive of a TUL experience.

5.3.2 Trigger/Catalyst

In many cases, participants wrote of several different factors that may have combined to trigger their UL experiences. Each factor has been extracted separately. Also, several participants wrote of more than one experience of UL, each with separate triggers. As a result, the number of occurrences of triggers listed in Table 2 is greater than the number of participants. As in the context section, if participants mentioned both forms of UL, they were only counted under the type of love the trigger was in respect of. In some cases, they were counted twice as the trigger appeared connected to the onset of both forms of UL.

P6, P7, P18 and P23 mentioned experiencing UL in the context of connection with dogs. This could potentially be categorised as examples of encounters with nature triggering UL. However, these experiences were often characterised by unconditional acceptance, non-judgement and presence, which were features of RUL in the pilot study. P16 recounted “No matter my mood, my mistakes, or my successes, I was lovable in her eyes. I never had to earn her love it simply arrived each and every moment we had together. Simple. Pure. Us.”

These factors of feeling unconditionally loved and accepted by dogs corresponded with other accounts of feeling unconditionally loved by people. For example, P23 described a relationship with an elderly neighbour/surrogate grandmother. He shared “I felt acceptance and approval from X, she genuinely loved me just as I was and offered words of encouragement, admiration and affection. X seemed genuinely interested in my opinions.” Given the similarities in the accounts, with characteristic themes (mentioned below) of being seen, accepted and loved without needing to change, connection with dogs has been included in the “Relational Connection” superordinate theme.

Table 2

Triggers of Unconditional Love Experiences

Superordinate Themes (with subordinate themes indented)	# in UUL	# in RUL
Relational Connection	3	8
Break Up	0	2

Romance	0	1
Dogs	0	4
Parental love for child	3	1
Kindly Elder	0	1
Service	0	1
Spontaneous/Grace	5	0
Spiritual Practice (e.g., meditation, spiritual music, clearing old paradigms, mediumship)	8	1
Nature	3	0
Unknown/Other (including positive emotion, psychological pain, psychedelics, dance/embodiment)	7	1

As with the context category, it was sometimes unclear as to what of several possible factors may have triggered the experience. P3 had an experience that may be considered spontaneous, but may be considered to be triggered by nature:

I was sitting on a cliff top, on my own, enjoying the warmth of the day. I was not actively meditating. Suddenly, I was enveloped in unconditional love, a bliss, that no words can describe. I was part of the sky, the land, the sea, a part of everything, and it was part of me. Something that I had been part of for eons.

P18 had an experience he considered to have arisen spontaneously or as an expression of grace. However, it could also have been triggered by an intense moment of psychological turmoil:

I had reached my limit of spiritual and emotional loss. I was medicating myself with cocaine and alcohol. Married with my wife who was pregnant of our 3rd child, life still felt meaningless... I reached a point of total devastation and implosion... I sincerely asked myself why God was so difficult to understand. I felt hopeless. In that instant, I felt a tremor that filled my body from head to toe. It was overwhelming. It lasted no more than 5 seconds. I knew it was a Power greater than myself. To me, it was the presence of God. I laid back and felt the tremor again. I had a sense of awe and some fear to witness such force. In both cases, a white light filled the room.

P16 described a TUL experience that could have been triggered by the positive emotions of learning she was pregnant when she had not thought that was possible, or by the love she had for her unborn child:

My husband and I found out... that I had gotten pregnant. I remember in the midst of the excitement, fear, and love it was as if this golden thread was being sewn from my heart into my uterus in a spherical manner and it was just bliss. I was one with the universe, of the universe, and creating the universe all at the same time.

In contrast, P17 gives an account of the fear of maternal rejection triggering an altered state of UL when she was a young girl:

My mother told her she did hope she would have a little boy, for little boys were so much easier!! The bottom dropped out of my world—"Mummy doesn't love little girls" was my thought. At that moment of huge distress I was enveloped in a cloud (could not see out) and felt the most intense Love. I remember chuckling and feeling more than happy.

P23 was clear that nature had triggered his UL experience:

The most intense time was when I was walking in the Pyrenees Mountains in France and Spain. I spent one day walking by myself, the mountain tops were capped with snow and it was pristine. I felt such a state of happiness and bliss. I felt very connected to the earth and to the divine. It was unlike any previous experience I had had in nature. With this deep connection, I also felt love. Love to the earth. Love to the divine. And also, loved by the earth and loved by the divine.

P12 describes regular UL experiences that she attains through spiritual practice:

The energy that I call Divine energy is that flow of unconditional love that flows in, around and through all. There are times when I connect more fully with this: through music and singing to God and through transcendent meditation experiences and, most fully, when these two experiences are combined. Sometimes I feel like my heart is so open and love flowing so much that my physical chest can feel a stretch like it's opening more than it ever has and it almost hurts my chest. At these times I feel what I would describe as "expanded" and like there is no separation from me and everything else. I feel like I'm not really in my body, but "out there" in the flow of love, I am that love and so is everyone else.

5.3.3 Characteristics

Findings from the pilot study suggested that there are two types of UL; relational (RUL) and transpersonal (TUL). This delineation was supported by comments from several participants in Study 1. For example, P12 consciously distinguished TUL (which she referred to as universal love) from parental love. "It is a different manifestation of unconditional love that I described above concerning my love as a parent - maybe more of an experience of universal unconditional love (God)." In light of the repeated delineation between RUL and TUL, in both the pilot and full study, their characteristics have been explored separately.

In some instances, the distinction between RUL and TUL was clear. In others, it was unclear, as it seemed there was a combination of RUL and TUL, and/or that the experience of RUL love led to the experience of TUL. This abridged excerpt from P25 demonstrates RUL being a contextual or triggering factor for TUL:

I've come to suspect that the whole episode was heavily influenced by the unconditional love I felt for my baby son... But what started as a love for him soon flowed outwards to everyone and everything. Strangers I passed on the street and in the park; I loved them all and they me... There was no me and 'other'. I became one with everything and everyone around me. Time stopped. I had accessed eternity... I (whatever I was at this point) had an intuitive sense that everything in the universe is 'made of love'. Love is the fundamental building block of all life. Everything consists of the molecules of love... And I believe the unconditional love for my son may have triggered the whole thing. (P15)

P25 also mentioned relational love – in her case in the form of romance – as a contextual factor for her TUL experience, as depicted in an excerpt in section 5.2.1.1 above.

5.3.3.1 Transpersonal Unconditional Love Characteristics

In general, as established in the pilot study, love that was experienced with a sense of oneness, interconnectivity with all, self-transcendence or for all beings and things was considered transpersonal unconditional love (TUL, see Table 3), compared to love without expectations for one person, which was considered as relational unconditional love (RUL, see Table 4). In mixed cases, these different types of UL were treated separately even though they arose within the same testimony. As has been mentioned, in some of these examples, the RUL may have been a context or trigger for the TUL.

Table 3

Transpersonal Unconditional Love Characteristics

Superordinate Themes (with subordinate themes indented)	Number of occurrences
Oneness	8
Connection (e.g., with others, earth, body, divine, everything)	5
Love	16
Enveloped/Embraced/Overwhelming/All-encompassing	7
Expansive/limitless/ infinite/ universal	7
Everything Made of.../ All there is	6
Flow of	5
For everyone	3
Intense	3
Within self	2
Positive Emotion	11
Bliss	5
Joy/ happiness	4

Peace	3
Awe/wonder/beauty	3
Wholeness/wellbeing/perfection	2
Self-Transcendence	8
Of physical identity	4
Of thought	5
Ego Dissolution	4
Acceptance/Non-judgement	4
Energy/power	4
Divinity/ God	4
Non-linear Time (eternity or time ceasing to exist)	3

The following excerpts are exemplars of TUL experiences. As they each exhibit several characteristics, they have not been separated into themes. Of special note are the references to oneness, ego dissolution and positive emotions such as joy.

P15 described feeling as though there was nothing in the world but a oneness of love, of which he was a part, witnessing itself in all things:

Indeed, the word 'love' was the only thing that could describe the oneness that I was experiencing in that moment. It was pure consciousness and unconditional love for everyone and everything (that was simply ONE thing)...I've since come to understand that in those 20 or so minutes I experienced consciousness witnessing itself... It was as if I (my ego) had disappeared and a bigger reality or a bigger consciousness was flowing through me... I (whatever I was at this point) had an intuitive sense that everything in the universe is "made of love". Love is the fundamental building block of all life. Everything consists of the molecules of love. (P.15)

P18 had an experience that was of TUL, yet it contained aspects of feeling personally unconditionally loved by the Divine. He shared "When I was touched by this gift of grace, I understood instantly I was accepted unconditionally by a loving Spirit. That I was forgiven for my past."

P20 described a TUL experience in which her ego dissolved into oneness, joy and love:

The personality self I had identified with gracefully dissolved into a fluid set of qualities of being- as if now there were only random attributes of consciousness that could be joyfully observed with no more thought than watching clouds. The love, bliss and expansion were incredible – difficult to do justice to in words. For several hours afterwards it was more like floating above ground than walking. I experienced that I am love and love is all there is.

P26's account covered a number of different prominent characteristics of TUL experiences, such as oneness, love for all beings and things, ego dissolution, lack of judgement and non-linear time:

I experienced disillusion of chronological time, and felt like I experienced all time continuums... I remember looking at everything and everyone, and just having this huge amount of love for them and everything. There was nothing that love wasn't or separate from, it felt like love was experiencing itself as love. I, my personal self wasn't existent, in this space. I remember a thought coming... 'I thought I just had to love one thing, a man, just one being in life, not everything'... The view from unconditional love had no judgment, there was no separation, it was one. I also had this deep knowing in this space, that this love, unconditional love, could heal everything... There was a rebirthing process, that involved death in many forms.

5.3.3.2 Relational Unconditional Love Characteristics

Only 9 participants discussed RUL, and of these, many mentioned such experiences in passing whilst describing experiences of TUL. The list of characteristics in Table 4 may distinguish RUL more clearly from TUL.

Table 4

Relational Unconditional Love Characteristics

Theme	Number of occurrences
Forgiveness, Understanding, Empathy and Compassion	4
Acceptance/ Lack of expectations, attachment or need to earn love	8
Connection: Presence, genuine interest, authenticity, feeling 'seen'	4
Limitless love in respect of one person	2

The following excerpts further exemplify the personal nature of RUL. P9 explained "I felt as if I was 'seen' for the first time ever". P11 described knowing that love would endure even though it would no longer be romantic with her ex-partner. She shared:

I just know, that no matter time or distance. No matter who others we both love, our deepest wishes for one another is to be happy and be loved - and we want this with no conditions no attachments no expectations of being loved back by the other and I know it will remain even if we were not a part of each others life.

P12 described the RUL she had for her son, which co-existed with the need for healthy boundaries. She wrote "There are boundaries that have been needed throughout different stages of his development... but

the boundaries have... not ever affected the deep and... unconditional love that I have for him as his mother.” P21 described feeling RUL for a man he was supporting in his role as a minister. He recalled “I knew so little about him, but I felt for him as perhaps God/Source/Life might have.”

5.3.4 Impact

Interestingly, not all participants mentioned the impact their UL experience had on their lives. They tended to focus more on what was happening in the lead up to the experience, and what the characteristics of the experience itself were. In some cases, there was an implication that the UL experience was an end or a solution to some difficult situation participants had faced prior to it. However, Table 5 only includes explicit mentions of how the UL experience impacted participants’ lives.

Again, the impact of RUL experiences has been separated out from the impact of TUL experiences. However, there is some degree of overlap. Thus, both categories have been presented for comparison in Table 5.

Table 5

Impact of Transpersonal and Relational Unconditional Love

Superordinate Themes (with subordinate themes indented)	# in TUL	# in RUL
Improved Self-Relationship (Including greater self-love and acceptance, worthiness and authenticity)	6	3
Resilience	8	2
Internal resource	6	
Ability to grow through pain and suffering	4	2
New Spiritual or personal development path, curiosity or trust	7	
Positive Affect	6	3
Happiness/joy/fun/bliss	6	
Peace/Wholeness/Wellbeing	4	
Reassurance		3
Improved Interpersonal Relationships (including increased empathy, love, compassion)	5	4
Acceptance of others (Tolerance, Non-judgement, compassion non-expectation, non-attachment)	4	4
Kindness and Altruism	3	
Psychological Growth	8	4
Wisdom/learning/knowing	3	

Freedom from conditioning	3	1
Motivation for change/reconstruction of life	2	1
Psychological healing (e.g., recovery from addiction)	2	2
Negative Impact	2	1
Spiritual Crisis	1	
Feeling easily exploited	1	
Lacking boundaries and not leaving a toxic dynamic		1

5.3.4.1 Examples of the Impact of RUL

For P9, feeling unconditionally loved helped her develop greater resilience in the face of the pain she was experiencing due to physical illness. Although some of the physical symptoms continued, her psychological outlook on them was very different:

Where once I was bitter, critical, angry, hostile, lonely, miserable, depressed, and very unwell, in lots of pain, I now have a new perspective on everything. I have new pain now but it feels like the opposite of the old pain, now it feels like my cells are letting go of all the old pain and readjusting to life without it. I'm learning to love myself with the pain, through the pain, despite the pain, because of the pain, and out of the pain. I'm surprising myself every day with how much more I can love myself and the world and I'm forever grateful for the people who modelled unconditional love for me until I could walk that talk myself.

P11 described feeling unconditionally loved by her partner during a breakup. She described “[A] seed was planted for me to grow the belief that I’m worthy of love and that I contain the love myself.” As her life continued after the breakup, this realisation substantially altered her relationship with herself, others and the world around her.

P10 described a UL that at some points appeared to be transpersonal, and at others appeared to be relational. It seemed from her account that the RUL experience was not healthy for her. However, the TUL had mixed impact, sometimes predisposing her to accept bad behaviours instead of having boundaries, sometimes boosting her self-relationship, assisting her to cope with the toxic relationship dynamic she was in. After she left the relationship, practicing TUL helped soothe the residual shame and pain. She described UL as:

A beautiful thing but also in turn a failing. In my circumstance, it lead me to remain loving and loyal to a man who was unfaithful, prioritised his drug use, abused and gaslight me who's years treatment resulted in my eventual breakdown and subsequent diagnosis of PTSD. Despite that I understood why he did it and could all but feel love and forgiveness to him, enveloping him with acceptance of what he had done. With loving him the expansion of love included... his family, their families, their friends, my family, my friends, people at work, strangers in the street. Love of life in

all entities. And a total awe of life and the natural world. This came with the interconnectivity with all and everyone and at times the innocence of unconditional love and others exploitation of this. Individuals' quirks that were previously annoyances became loveable quirks of the individual. This love also came with an acceptance of myself which I had battled with for most of life- this was dissipated quickly due to the dynamic I was in (P10)

The interplay between relational and transpersonal UL, and between apparently positive and negative impact in this example will be explored in the discussion.

5.3.4.2 Exemplars of the Impact of TUL

P8 initially felt emotional in the days after her experience, but then her spirit soared to a new level of peace and trust. She became more self-accepting and authentic and was able to let go of old conditioning:

After a few days, I talked to a spiritual friend about what had happened. I was then able to accept that it was a glimpse into my true nature and I started to feel more and more emotional over a few days. I cried a lot but wasn't sure why, it felt like a kind of release. Then I felt joyful and kept laughing and crying. After my emotions settled down I felt very spacious and peaceful for a week or two and my mind was a lot quieter. Gradually over a few weeks I returned to how I was before this experience. However, although I can't remember the feeling of love, as it was beyond the mind, it has left me with a much deeper trust in Life/Oneness/Consciousness. I feel that I am more able to see through my conditioning and accept myself, gradually becoming more authentic through this process. (P8)

P11 described discovering an inner resource of love that she could extend towards herself and others, almost suggesting greater capacity for RUL as a result of a TUL experience:

This has opened myself up to see the love that I contain within myself and shown me a way of connection with other people in ways that goes far beyond lust, craving, attachments etc. The true feeling of "being" fully connected to myself and fully connected to the other person. Allowing whatever is to just be without judgement of either your own or the others feelings. This learnings and experiences have been so strong and have opened for the same way of being with myself and with others.

P18 described a total redirection of his life:

It was a life changing experience of conversion. It gave me strength and hope, to reconstruct myself... I have been sober since august 26th 2010. I have closed my law office. I have turned over my life and my will to God. More importantly, I feel a need to help others.

P26 discussed elements of the UL experience that could be described as negative, such as what appeared to be an experience of spiritual crisis in the form of mania that attracted psychiatric intervention. Interestingly, although this must have been a difficult experience, P26 recounted it with lightness of spirit, and the account went on to describe how she regained normal mental health and considered her experience of UL to have been one of the most beneficially transformative of her life. She perceived the resulting shift to be positive and empowering, engendering a greater capacity for empathy and connection and a greater curiosity about universal truth:

This was effectively what led me to going into the mental health ward, as from this place, with all this energy, I didn't need to sleep, and I was slowly not making sense to others around me, as my mind was working at super sonic speed! I was manically trying to write about everything I was witnessing, effectively the nature of reality and the universe itself as unconditional love. However nothing was grounded as I was trying to function from the speed of 'the flow'. I remember telling a psychiatrist that you can cure everything from peace, love and happiness, effectively, unconditional love itself. In this statement, it was as if fundamental science was 'slower' than unconditional love, and love was trying to tell science to hurry along and catch up.

It completely changed my whole life after, there was no way I could return to who I was before. There was a rebirthing process, that involved death in many forms. Fundamental though, it directed me on what I would term as a spiritual path. I found it easier to connect with the part of self in others, which is connected through this unconditional love, and therefore could empathise with other peoples experiences. It ignited a curiosity in me into the universe and realms of reality beyond my own limits of personal self.

5.4 Discussion

Following on from the pilot, this study sought to explore relational and transpersonal unconditional love experiences (RUL and TUL respectively). It was particularly interested in their predisposing or contextual factors, triggers, characteristics, and impacts, how they compare with each other, and how they compare with awakening experiences. As anticipated from the pilot study, the two constructs of UL were clearly distinguishable in participant responses. Overall, TUL experiences shared an abundance of features from every category with awakening experiences (Corneille & Luke, 2021; Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). This supported the hypothesis that TUL experiences are a subtype of awakening experience. In further similarity to awakening experiences, TUL experiences could be divided by intensity.

RUL experiences were divided into two types. One type was experienced as a way of relating to another person within a relationship context. It involved presence, acceptance, compassion and a sense of loving or valuing the other as their authentic self. This type of RUL shared many of its features and impacts with UPR (Rogers, 1957), though was not bound by a therapeutic relationship. The other type of RUL was an expansive and enduring sense that no matter what happened to the other person, whether a participant

would ever see the object of their love again, they would love them. It reflected Gibran's statement "Love possesses not, nor would it be possessed; for love is sufficient unto Love" (Gibran, 1992, p.16). This freeing form of love often arose in break up situations, where the relinquishing of a formal sense of entitlement to the other person's love allowed the dawn of a love that transcended relational contracts.

The expansive and present forms of RUL could ostensibly co-exist. Both are reflected in the famous verses on love from 1 Corinthians, 13:5-8, These verses contain the warmth and kindness of the presence form of RUL alongside the unendingness and truth of the free, expansive form:

Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes. Love never comes to an end.

In this study, all but one of the participants described either one type or the other of RUL. Interestingly, the presence and acceptance-focused form of RUL was usually described by the recipient of the love, whilst the expansive form was usually described by the lover. The two forms of RUL had different benefits as well as different characteristics, a finding that was not anticipated from the results of the pilot study.

5.4.1 Context

As many participants cited more than one contextual factor, whilst some only cited one, it seems that the relationship between context and experience may be nonlinear. Rather than directly causing an experience, contextual factors may contribute to a person being in an apposite psychological or energetic state for a UL experience to occur. In some cases, one contextual factor was sufficient. For example, P18 was experiencing substantial psychological turmoil and addiction. He described that when he reached a moment of peak desperation, there was an intervention of grace which caused his UL experience. In this case, psychological turmoil was considered the contextual factor, and spontaneous grace the trigger. In other cases, more than one contextual factor appeared to be involved. For example, participant 20 had recently lost her mother, who she was very close to. This contextual element was considered psychological pain. In addition to this, she was in a place she considered sacred to the Divine Mother, upon which her spirituality focused, and she was in a beautiful part of nature. This constituted both a spiritual and a natural setting. For her too, the experience arose seemingly spontaneously in this mix of these three contextual situations. It would be interesting for future research to explore the mechanism by which contextual factors prepare a person for a TUL experience.

RUL and TUL had substantially different contextual profiles. TUL contextual factors correlated largely with those associated with awakening experiences, such as psychological or physical pain, spiritual practice or study, and nature, with only two relational contexts mentioned. In contrast, RUL had a high incidence of relationship contexts and pain as predisposing factors, but only two accounts of spiritual practice

contributing to the experience. These divergent profiles confirm that TUL and RUL are either different phenomena, or different parts of UL.

5.4.1.1 Psychological Pain or Spiritual Practice

In Transpersonal Unconditional Love. The two most common contextual factors for TUL were pain (psychological or physical) and spiritual practice. All participants in the current study identified as spiritual and incorporated regular practice into their lives. This allowed for a greater likelihood of spiritual practice causing their TUL experience.

Pain and spiritual practice, alongside nature, were also prevalent contexts and triggers for awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). Taylor has posited that both may lead to awakening experiences through a mechanism of the intensification and stilling of life energy (ISLE, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). Spiritual practices are designed to focus the consciousness in a way that withdraws psychological energy from many of the normal processes of thought chatter and of action (Kotler & Wheal, 2017; Taylor, 2017). Taylor suggests that the psychological energy this liberates allows or engenders the heightened perception and positive emotion of an awakening experience. The theory of ISLE posits that psychological pain may cause a similar effect (Taylor, 2017). Part of the ego structure (which requires significant energy to maintain) may be humbled, exhausted, released or destroyed by physical or emotional trauma, allowing for the consciousness energy normally engaged in its processes to be utilised in an awakening experience. If TUL is a subtype of awakening experience, it is unsurprising that it may share ISLE as a contextual or trigger factor, occurring through psychological turmoil or spiritual practice.

In Relational Unconditional Love. Psychological pain was mentioned by six participants who gave examples of RUL. In some cases, this was given not so much as a causal factor as a “before” profile, to highlight the positive changes brought about by feeling unconditionally loved. In other cases, the pain, for example of breakup, was part of how the participant realised their UL for their ex-partner.

Spiritual practice was only mentioned by two participants recounting RUL experiences. In one case, it was through spiritual practice that the participant communed with her mother, who had passed on. Through this communion she felt UL from her mother. Since she experienced this as coming from her mother, and not as a oneness or interconnectedness, this experience was grouped into the RUL category, and spiritual practice was considered a central contextual feature. In another case, a priest was overcome by UL for a man he was caring for who had contracted the AIDS virus. The priest felt that his love for the patient was augmented by God’s love for him. That is, the RUL had elements of a love that felt like it was coming from somewhere beyond himself, or that, as posited by both Sorokin (1954/2002) and Templeton (2000), the RUL was resourced by TUL. It is assumed that the priest’s attitude and practice of prayer and devotion allowed him to access that TUL, which in turn supported the RUL. This suggests that whilst the

pilot study found that RUL experiences may on occasion be contextual factors for TUL experiences, the relationship may be bidirectional.

5.4.1.2 Relationships

The next most commonly arising contextual factor was relationships. This was largely accounted for by the eight RUL experiences which were naturally defined by their relational context. However, two experiences of TUL also had relational contexts. P25 described the uniqueness of her love for her boyfriend, who she was walking with at the time of her TUL experience, before going on to depict the experience itself, suggesting her assumption that those two elements were connected. P17 described feeling hurt and frightened by something her mother had said, just before a seemingly spontaneous experience of TUL that directly comforted her fear. This context was counted in the “pain” category as well as that of relationships.

Relationships were present, but not a prevalent contextual factor for awakening experiences. For example, in a sample group of 90 participants, only five mentioned love as a context in Taylor and Egeto-Szabo’s (2017) study. In contrast, results from the pilot study (Appendix A) suggested that RUL may lead to TUL experiences, either as contextual or triggering factors. This was supported in the above accounts from Study One.

5.4.1.3 Nature

It was sometimes difficult to distinguish whether nature was a trigger or a contextual factor for UL experiences. In some cases, it appeared that it was both. Several of the participants who mentioned nature in reference to their experiences described those experiences as spontaneous. In these cases, nature was considered a trigger. However, in some accounts, there were other factors, such as spiritual practices or relational dynamics that were also in play, in which cases nature was interpreted as a contextual factor. For this reason, a fuller discussion of nature occurs in Section 5.4.2.3 below.

5.4.2 Triggers

Triggers were considered to be those elements that immediately precipitated UL experiences. In the absence of a trigger, the experience was considered spontaneously arising. In such cases, greater attention was paid to contextual factors, which appeared to have prepared the participant for the spontaneous onset of their experience.

5.4.2.1 Spiritual Practice

Spiritual practice was the most commonly cited trigger of TUL experiences. In contrast with spiritual practice as a contextual factor (where some participants had partaken in spiritual practice prior to their TUL experience), in the triggers category, the TUL arose during particular spiritual practices. Several specific techniques were mentioned, such as participating in spiritual music, meditation, and group healing processes. These are likely to be a small subset of many spiritual practices that may trigger TUL experiences. Future research on which practices are most likely to trigger TUL might make TUL more available to those who seek to experience it.

As mentioned above, spiritual practice has been associated with the onset of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017). Participants mentioned spiritual practice as a trigger of TUL experiences but not RUL experiences (with the exception of the participant who connected with her deceased mother through meditation). This again supports the theory that TUL experiences are a subtype of awakening experience, whilst RUL experiences are not so intrinsically connected with awakened states.

5.4.2.2 Relational Connection

The second most cited trigger was relationships, which were mentioned in connection with eleven experiences. Again, all RUL participants cited relational triggers. These included love in romantic, family, service, and neighbourly contexts, and in four cases, love felt from dogs, discussed below. Three participants who had TUL experiences also described relational triggers. Each of the three relational triggers of TUL were connected to the love participants had for their children. In moments of feeling how much they loved their child, each participant felt expanded into a sense of love that included all things or made them feel one with the universe. These examples of parental love triggering TUL reinforce the hypothesis from the pilot study that RUL experiences may be preparatory factors for TUL.

In each case of parental love triggering TUL, it appeared that the participant was overwhelmed by the love they felt for their child and that the vastness of that love transferred it from a personal, relational experience to a universal experience of oneness. From the perspective of ISLE (Taylor, 2017) it could be that the intensity of the feeling of love these parents had for their children completely stilled their minds, allowing a flow of consciousness energy that became an awakening experience. Perhaps because love was the predominant emotion in the moment the awakening experience arose, it became the specific, UL form of awakening experience that this study is calling TUL.

Matsu-Pissot (2008) found that the experience of being unconditionally loved by a spiritual teacher or mentor could lead to states of TUL. In the current study, these parental examples were experiences of

loving rather than of being loved. This suggests that both directions of RUL (both being loved and loving) can contribute to future TUL experiences.

Love For and From Dogs. One surprising subordinate theme was RUL experiences arising in relationships with dogs. Dogs were mentioned as a trigger for RUL four times; equal to the number of mentions of parental love for a child. It was suggested that perhaps these canine triggers should be assigned to the 'nature' superordinate theme. However, RUL experiences involving dogs had the same characteristics as those arising in human dynamics. These included feelings of receiving non-judgemental acceptance, presence, and a feeling in the recipient of not having to earn love. Thus, they were assigned to the relational connection subordinate theme. Of note, all UL experiences arising through relationship with dogs were of RUL rather than TUL in the current study, and were consistent with several major hallmarks of UPR (Rogers, 1957).

Jenkins et al., (2014) conducted a study exploring whether the therapeutic benefit of dogs in animal assisted therapy is connected to dogs demonstrating Rogerian qualities of non-judgement and affection. In this study, animal assisted therapy dogs were rated highly by 312 middle school students on the three Rogerian traits of regard, empathy, and congruence. In a similar study of animal assisted therapy, Freisen reported "children seem to perceive them [therapy dogs] as non-judgemental participants who are outside of the complications and expectations of human relationships" (2010, p.261). In other words, dogs and their affection are not conditioned in the same way that most human love is conditioned, and this often has a beneficial impact on clients of animal assisted therapy. Given these studies, it does not seem too farfetched to associate the UL participants felt from their dogs with UPR. It would be interesting for future research to explore the impact of these innate Rogerian qualities in dog-relationships outside of therapy.

Romantic Love and Love from an Elder. The RUL arising in romantic love and love from a kind elder had similar profiles for participants, even though they occurred within different relational dynamics. These forms of UL did not appear to have a sudden onset but were more gradual and enduring. Both exhibited characteristics that could be compared to UPR (Rogers, 1957): participants felt seen, heard, unconditionally accepted, and loved exactly as they were. In all cases, this had a profoundly healing and calming effect. In the romantic case, it was associated with deep psychological transformation, including the cultivation of a deeper sense of safety, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. All benefits mentioned are associated with UPR (Ganley, 1989). The characteristics and impact of these experiences will be discussed in more detail below.

Breakup. There were two cases of breakup-triggered RUL experiences. They were similar in that each participant had ideally wanted their romantic relationships to continue. However, they both discovered that once their respective relationships ended, the love for their ex-partners changed. They each reported that they had held their ex-partners in certain conditions and expectations during their romantic relationships. Once these were released, the love they felt for them became expansive and unconditional. P11 was

surprised to find that she felt unconditional love from her ex as well as for him after the breakup. She commented that she knew that the love between them would endure regardless of whether they remained in each other's lives.

Both participants felt changed by their breakups and their shifts from romantic love to RUL. They reported feeling freer in themselves, beginning quests of personal development, and becoming more authentic and boundless in the way they loved themselves and others. In some ways, these impacts are more reflective of the impacts of TUL than RUL. It may be of interest to explore whether the two forms of RUL have different relationships with TUL, and whether the expansive form of RUL might trigger TUL experiences.

5.4.2.3 Nature

Four participants described a natural setting in which their experience took place, or a moment of profound emotion whilst observing nature. Nature has often been associated with spirituality and inspiration (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999). Hardy (1979) found that over 12% of thousands of religious experiences he analysed from the Religious Experiences Research Unit were triggered by experiences with nature, whilst 18% of cases in Taylor's (2012) study of awakening experiences appeared to be caused by contact with nature.

Taylor (2005) has discussed that time in nature may create the appropriate inner state for an awakening experience to occur because its beauty distracts attention from other sources of information. In the appreciation of nature, the mind and the chatter of the ego often stills, potentially freeing psychological energy to more fully experience and appreciate reality. Taylor posits that a deep inner essence of bliss, peace and love may be an innate part of the fullness of reality when perceived through a clear mind. In the current study, nature was only mentioned as a contextual feature by participants describing TUL experiences, and not RUL. This is consistent with nature being a common context or trigger factor in awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017).

For P23, nature was clearly the trigger of the UL experience as opposed to a contextual factor. P23 stressed a sense of connectedness. He said he felt connected with the sky, the mountains, and the divine and it brought a sense of profound bliss, happiness, and UL. As has been mentioned in section 3.5.2, connectedness has been associated with ego-dissolution (Kałużna et al., 2022), which in turn is a feature of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017). Further, I posit in this thesis that extremes at either end of a continuum of connectedness may be causally related to extremes of positive versus negative unconditional states. Depression and anxiety have been found to correlate with a sense of disconnection (Taylor, 2023; Watts et. al., 2022), whilst UL and UJ are commonly anecdotally associated with connectedness and oneness (Easwaran, 2007; Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2018, 2023). Perhaps in cases

where nature triggers UL experiences, it does so via the mechanism of increasing the sense of connection or connectedness.

5.4.3 Characteristics

In accordance with results from the pilot study, transpersonal and relational UL experiences were clearly distinct from each other in their characteristics throughout participant responses. In the current study, 18 participants reported at least one TUL experience and 12 reported at least one RUL experience. Seven participants reported examples of both kinds, and so were counted in both categories.

As expected, there were two primary distinguishing features of TUL. Firstly, the love either extended to all beings and things, or was experienced as a oneness or energy that was bigger than the participant. This is in contrast with the experience of love as an emotion to or from a person or group of people. Secondly, TUL experiences shared most of their properties with awakening experiences, supporting the idea that they are a sub-type of awakening experience.

In contrast, RUL did not share characteristics with awakening experiences. As discussed above, it appeared there were two types of RUL. One was largely characterised by features similar to Rogerian (1957) UPR, including acceptance, presence, compassion, empathy and a sense of being valued for one's innate worth (Farber, Suzuki & Lynch, 2018). The other type of RUL was characterised by a sense of overwhelming, indefatigable love, though in respect of one person rather than for all things. This love was experienced as something that would never end, regardless of the other person's behaviours, or even whether the participant saw the object of their love again. Whilst it seems possible that both kinds of RUL could be experienced simultaneously, the expansive and enduring form of RUL was distinct from the Rogerian kind of RUL in that it didn't require engagement with the other person for it to be felt and expressed.

5.4.3.1 Transpersonal Unconditional Love

As anticipated, TUL shared a variety of characteristics with awakening and mystical experiences (James, 1902/1928; Stace, 1960; Taylor, 2017). Such features included oneness, connection, positive emotion, self-transcendence, ineffability, and non-linear time. Of course, the element that caused the experiences to be characterised as UL rather than general awakening experiences was all-pervading love. In some cases, love was experienced as embracing the participant, as in accounts from Fox (2014). In some, it appeared as a flow, or an expansiveness. Three participants experienced love for all beings, whilst six perceived that everything, including themselves, was made from love, and love was a universal substance. Those participants who didn't report feeling the love either for all beings and things, or as the

substance of the universe usually described an experience of objectless love, as though the love was independent to them, as opposed to an internally arising emotion. Two participants discovered through experiencing a love that appeared to exist externally to themselves, that that same love existed within them. This reflects the mystical understanding of the apparent multiplicity of reality being underpinned by a shared essence, substance, or self, which has often been described as love (Happold, 1990; Underhill, 1911/2002, 1914/2006; Taylor, 2018; Templeton, 1999). Four participants perceived TUL either as, or coming from God or a higher power than themselves. This will be discussed in more detail in Section 6.3.2.3.

Transpersonal Unconditional Love as Non-Localised Consciousness. The experiences of love described above differ from understandings of love experienced in normal states of consciousness, in which love is described as an emotion (Oman & Meyer, 2013; Shaver et al., 1996) and/or as a relational experience (Aron et al., 2005; Assor & Tal, 2012; Bartels & Zeki, 2000; Noriuchi et al., 2008; Sternberg & Barnes, 1988). Both love as an emotion and relational love could be accounted for in traditional, materialistic paradigms as being chemically derived (Aron et al., 2005; Atzil, et al., 2011; De Boer et al., 2012; Fisher et al., 2005). In contrast, as mentioned, participants described TUL as a substance or energy that was bigger than themselves. It either enveloped them, appeared to be underpinning reality, or was part of a unity of all things. These perceptions too, could be interpreted neurologically. They may be seen as symptoms of de-activation of the parietal lobes; decreasing the sense of boundary between self and other, and creating the experience of unity (D'Aquili & Newberg, 2000; Kotler & Wheal, 2017). A sense of non-localised love could also be related to activation of the right temporal lobe, which has been associated with the experience of "sensed presence" or a non-physical, sentient consciousness outside of the self (Persinger & Healy, 2002).

However, as mentioned in the literature review, similar experiences of unity, and of UL as a potential ground of being are described in accounts of NDEs, in which there is no apparent or measurable brain activation to cause such perceptions (Greyson, 2000, 2011; Van Lommel, 2011). This leaves open the possibility that such phenomena may not be derived from physical processes. Rather, they may be experiences of discrete non-physical realities as hypothesised by Fox (2014), or of non-localised consciousness, as described by Taylor (2018).

If TUL is not always a product of neurological processes, it may itself be a form of non-localised consciousness. This would be corroborated by an array of subjective accounts of mystical, awakening and near-death experiences (Alexander, 2012; Happold, 1990; Hardy, 1979; Moorjani, 2012). It would also parallel concepts of spirit-force (Taylor, 2018), Brahman (Easwaran, 2007), Dharmakaya (Suzuki, 2000), and the Divine or Plenum Void (Durga, 2016; Laszlow, 2016), each of which posit a oneness that underlies reality and is characterised by love as well as bliss, joy and peace.

Positive Emotion. Positive emotion was a characteristic mentioned by 11 of the 18 participants reporting a TUL experience. These emotions were not necessarily about or contingent upon anything external but appeared in most cases to arise spontaneously with the experience of TUL. This fits the concept of unconditional experiences of positive emotion that coalesced through the literature review.

As mentioned throughout this thesis, it is possible that UL is one of several unconditional positive states, including UJ. Unconditional positive states could be characteristics of experiences of a non-localised consciousness paralleling the concepts of Brahman (Easwaran, 2007) and spirit-force (Taylor, 2018). This primal oneness is described in mystical literature to be a deeper, transpersonal dimension – both of the self and of the universe – that is accessed in awakening and mystical experiences (Easwaran, 2007; Mahony, 2014; Taylor, 2017; Underhill, 1911/2002).

The exploration and understanding of unconditional positive states of consciousness may shed more light on unconditional negative states of consciousness such as depression and anxiety, which can appear to exist independently of external stimulus. As explored in the literature review, it seems that a continuum of connectedness may separate unconditional positive states from unconditional negative ones.

Unconditional negative states are frequently characterised by extreme disconnection (Choi et al., 2020; Hayes et al, 2020; Klussman et al., 2020; Taylor, 2023; Watts et. al., 2022). Conversely, the prevalence of the characteristics of oneness (8 participants) and connectedness (5 participants) in addition to the 11 counts of apparently unconditional positive emotion in the current study suggests a potential correlation between unconditional positive states and connectedness. This reflects certain mystical literature (Easwaran, 2007; Mahony, 2014; Tolle, 2010) and accounts of mystical experiences (Happold, 1990; Hardy, 1979; Underhill, 1911/2002) in which oneness and positive emotions arise concurrently. Future research could shed more light on this emerging concept of unconditional positive states, including which positive states may be experienced unconditionally, and how frequently such states coincide with experiences of oneness or connectedness.

Levels of Intensity of Transpersonal Unconditional Love Experiences. Whilst, as explored in the literature review, awakening experiences have three levels of intensity: low, medium, and high (Taylor, 2017), it seems from this sample that TUL experiences arise in the high and medium ranges of awakening experiences. In a high intensity awakening experience, the ego is dissolved to the point that a person feels completely one with an underlying substrate of reality. This is most commonly experienced as love, bliss, peace, or joy, reflecting the unconditional positive states discussed above (Taylor, 2018; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Underhill, 1911/2002). Examples of high intensity TUL experiences were similarly characterised by a sense of ego-dissolution. P26 described “my personal self wasn’t existent, in this space”. P20 recounted “The personality self I had identified with gracefully dissolved into a fluid set of qualities of being- as if now there were only random attributes of consciousness that could be joyfully observed with no more thought than watching clouds”. P25 recalled “suddenly I wasn’t there. I was the tree, I was love, that’s all there was.” High intensity awakening experiences are less common than other forms

(Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). Similarly, high intensity TUL experiences, reported by seven of the 19 TUL-reporting participants, were less common than medium intensity experiences.

In a medium level awakening experience, there is a sense of interconnectedness. That is, an awareness of some fabric of reality that underlies ones' own being, and that of the universe. However, one maintains one's own identity whilst experiencing that interconnectedness (Taylor, 2017). In the current sample, this appeared a common way to experience TUL, with love as that fabric of interconnectivity. For example, P23's account demonstrated an experience of love and bliss, but without any sense of dissolving. As described above, P23 was awed by the beauty of nature, felt a sense of connectedness to the mountains and the sky, and experienced a vast bliss and love. His use of the term "connected" as opposed to oneness seems to parallel accounts of medium intensity awakening experiences, where there is an understanding of interconnectedness, but not a dissolving into oneness (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017).

Another example of medium intensity awakening was from P22. She recalled:

It was like an angelic presence came and lifted my arms up to the sky, I was surrounded by a bright white light and I felt what I can only describe as pure unconditional love within me and all around me. I felt like I was floating and there was no other feeling except this strong unconditional love all around me and within me.

Again, there were many elements of awakening experiences in this account, but despite this and the strong love, the ego did not dissolve, suggesting a medium-intensity experience.

Taylor (2017) describes that in a low intensity awakening experience, perceptions become more vivid, and there is a heightened sense of aliveness and beauty to reality. Usually, if these features were described in the current study, they were accompanied by characteristics of medium-intensity experiences, such as heightened connectedness with all things, and heightened love and joy. Thus, it seems that TUL arises in medium and high-intensity awakening experiences.

The two participants who demonstrated the expansive form of RUL exhibited benefits that were similar to those associated with TUL, but didn't give enough information to determine whether these experiences led to or were part of some form of awakening state. However, it is possible that a low intensity awakening experience may accompany some instances of the expansive form of RUL, potentially making them low-intensity TUL experiences. It is conceivable that the psychological upheaval of a breakup (the context for both expansive RUL experiences reported in this study) may trigger ISLE (Taylor, 2017, described above) resulting in heightened perception and aliveness. This would accompany the heightened sense of love intrinsic to expansive RUL, which participants suggested resulted from former relational conditions and expectations on that love being removed. Future research could focus on this expansive form of RUL and its association with both TUL and general awakening experiences. If they are connected, it would suggest more of a continuum between the seemingly separate categories of RUL (which in general, appears to

arise in normal states of consciousness) and TUL, (which appears to be a subtype of awakening experience).

5.4.3.2 Relational Unconditional Love

It appeared from participant responses that like TUL, RUL had two distinct manifestations. One form of RUL was characterised by acceptance, compassion and presence in a particular interaction or relationship. The other was an expansive, enduring, and unalterable sense of love that was felt independently of the recipient's actions or behaviours. This second form often involved forgiveness or an all-forgiving capacity.

Both identified forms of RUL correspond with Sorokin's assertion that love is freedom. He claims:

To love anything is to act freely, without compulsion or coercion. And vice versa: to be free means to do what one loves to do. In this sense, love and true freedom are synonyms; love is the loftiest form of freedom. Compulsion and coercion are the negation of love. Where there is love, there is no coercion. Where there is coercion, there is no love. (Sorokin, 1954/2002 p.39-40)

Freedom manifests in the two distinct forms of RUL in different ways. In the limitless, expansive form of RUL, the recipient has the freedom to leave a relationship, or to pursue their own separate path and still be loved. In the acceptance and presence form of RUL, recipients of the love are free to be as they are, and to have their own learning journey; to make mistakes and still be loved.

Relational Unconditional Love (RUL) and Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR). RUL shared many of its qualities with UPR (Rogers, 1957) in which a psychotherapeutic client is treated with compassion, empathy and presence, and made to feel that they are worthy, regardless of mistakes they may have made. They are considered innately valuable regardless of the merit of their attitudes, opinions or behaviours. In UPR, a therapist "communicates warmth without restriction. There is a deep respect for the patient's worth as a person and his rights as a free individual" (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967, p. 66). Many participants explained that the benefits they received from RUL were connected to receiving this feeling of acceptance and warmth, either through direct communication or through presence. This will be explored in Section 5.4.4.2.

5.4.4 Impact

Not every participant discussed the impact of their UL experience. Most were more descriptive of the onset, triggers, and characteristics of their experiences. However, overall, there were more reports of positive impact from TUL than RUL. The difference in reporting of benefits for TUL and RUL was substantially more than the difference in number of participants reporting each type of UL.

In general, the benefits of TUL were comparable with those of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017), whilst those of RUL were comparable with UPR (Rogers, 1957). Reports of RUL that revolved around an infinite sense of love for one person showed different benefits to UPR, strengthening the idea that these two forms of RUL are distinct from each other. However, there were only three participants in this study who reported the expansive RUL experience. Specifically tailored research could conduct a more thorough exploration of these two forms of RUL and the benefits they bring.

5.4.4.1 Impact of Transpersonal Unconditional Love

Psychological Growth and Resilience. One of the two most cited impacts of TUL, mentioned by eight of the 18 TUL reporting participants, was psychological growth. This included gains in wisdom and learning, feeling free of old conditioning, having new motivation to change, and in more extreme cases, recovering from psychological ills such as addiction and depression. These benefits parallel those that have been associated with awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017). In both the current study and Taylor's research, TUL and awakening experiences respectively were not found to be dependent on any pre-existing elevation in consciousness (such as any predisposition towards happiness, positivity, or spiritual aptitude). Instead, they were accessed, either deliberately or accidentally, by people of diverse psychological and spiritual backgrounds. It may be useful for future research to explore what types of situations, techniques and experiences are most conducive of the experience of TUL for individuals experiencing psychological malaise. Additionally, studies could focus on whether, and how frequently TUL experiences might mitigate or ameliorate psychological conditions, and how long any such benefits may last.

The other most cited benefit of TUL was resilience. This was separated into two subtypes. Some participants felt they had a new internal resource of UL or strength after their TUL experience that they could draw on in times of difficulty. Others found a new ability to grow through pain and suffering. Growth through pain and suffering reflects post-traumatic growth (PTG) (Addington et al., 2004; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). PTG is a process where, in the face of those factors that would ordinarily promote post-traumatic stress, a person develops higher levels of adaptation, self-awareness or psychological functioning than they had prior to dealing with the adversity they faced (Michael & Cooper, 2013). Examples of psychological flourishing flowing from PTG may include improved relationships and self-concept, increased confidence and self-efficacy, greater meaning and purpose, and a stronger sense of spirituality (Addington et al., 2016; Taylor, 2013).

In some cases, awakening experiences may form part of the mechanism through which post-traumatic growth is attained. Taylor (2012; 2017) has found that awakening experiences are often triggered by psychological turmoil or trauma. The sudden shift in consciousness attained through the awakening experience promotes a new perspective on the turmoil that triggered that experience. In turn, this helps

people to plant the roots of their identity in an internal ground that feels more fundamental, and is thus less impacted by the disruption caused to the ego by the turmoil or trauma.

Taylor (2013) differentiates PTG from awakening experiences in that the latter are often sudden and temporary, whilst PTG is gradual. Additionally, whilst turmoil, trauma, and pain are common triggers of awakening experiences, such experiences also arise from a wide array of other antecedent factors. Nonetheless, there are cases in which people experience a primary shift, or wholesale transformation of their identity following an awakening experience caused by turmoil. These transformations exhibit many similar features to that of PTG (Taylor, 2012). Results of this study corroborate the apparent relationship between PTG and awakening experiences.

In the current study, participants found their TUL experiences meant they were better able to deal with past turmoil (in some cases, the turmoil that triggered their experiences). However, they also found that they were better psychologically equipped in times of adversity that arose after their experiences. Spiritual development has been cited as one of the factors that predicts the transformation of post-traumatic stress into post-traumatic growth (Henson, Truchot, & Canevello, 2021). In the current study, TUL experiences often inculcated a greater sense of spiritual seeking and spiritual connection, which has also been a common impact of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012b). An enhanced sense of spirituality and the perspectives it brings could be part of how TUL experiences assisted participants to grow through the new challenges they encountered after the initial experience of TUL.

Taylor (2012, 2013, 2017) discusses that in awakening states the egoic self-system, comprised of attachments, and frameworks of identity, either recedes into abeyance (in temporary awakening experiences) or is effectively destroyed (resulting in permanent wakefulness). During the time that the ego is less in operation, another part of self is experienced. This part of self is not dependant on the attachments and identities upon which the ego rests. Often people feel deep safety, peace, love, and happiness during times where their ego-identification is diminished. TUL, which appears to be a subtype of awakening experience, likely has a similar mechanism of accessing a deeper, more permanent part of the psyche, (or perhaps, as discussed above, the oneness of Brahman or spirit-force). Perhaps, if turmoil occurs after such experiences, the threat of ego-disruption is less destabilising because of an embodied knowledge of the self being more than solely the ego. The enhanced sense of safety and psychological resource that is not dependent on egoic attachments and identifications may better promote psychological growth through times of difficulty.

Positive Affect. Increases in positive emotion were cited as an impact for six participants following their TUL experiences. Awakening experiences have also been found to result in increased positive affect (Taylor, 2017). According to Seligman (2011), positive emotions are a key hallmark of psychological flourishing. Increases in positive affect following TUL, in addition to the results concerning psychological growth outlined above, suggest that experiences of TUL could be useful in overcoming or mitigating

malaises related to anhedonia and negative emotion (such as depression) and cultivating enhanced psychological wellbeing. These potential benefits parallel those associated with connectedness (Watts et al., 2022), which appears to be a central component of TUL experiences.

Future studies could explore how much of the sense of oneness or connectedness remains after a TUL experience, and whether this is correlated with the persistence of any positive emotions arising from TUL. Watts et al. (2022) created the Watts Connectedness Scale to explore how long the heightened sense of connectedness lasted after the acute or temporally bound psychedelic experience that triggered it. They posited that many of the other benefits from the psychedelic experience stemmed from heightened connectedness, such as reduced symptoms of depression. They found that as the sense of connectedness faded, symptoms of depression began to reassert themselves. As oneness or connectedness may be part of the mechanism through which positive states are more prominent after TUL experiences, a similar exploration of connectedness as an ongoing aftereffect of TUL experiences could be useful.

Newfound Spiritual Path. Seven participants discovered a new hunger and curiosity for spiritual and personal development following their TUL experience. Three participants described gaining a profound sense of trust in a presence beyond themselves, which they felt they had palpably experienced. Others sought to understand their experience and turned to texts and training from different wisdom traditions. All these features have been associated with impacts of awakening experiences (James, 1902/1928; Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). Of those who didn't describe a new spiritual curiosity, many were already on a spiritual path, or had arrived at their experience through spiritual practice. The cultivation of new personal and spiritual development trajectories suggests that TUL may increase eudaimonic happiness, (connected with meaning and richness) in addition to the hedonic happiness of increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Improved Self-Relationship, and Interpersonal Relationships. Improved relationships with self and others were common impacts of TUL experiences and were likely interrelated. Improved self-relationship included subordinate themes of increased self-love, self-acceptance, worthiness and authenticity. Improved interpersonal relationships included increased empathy, love, compassion, acceptance, non-judgement, kindness and altruism. All of these improvements appear intuitively to be the result of an increased capacity for love, directed both towards the self and others. This corresponds with Sorokin (1954/2002) and Templeton's (2000) concept of love as a universal substance, the more of which is accessed, the more of which can be offered.

The improvement of relationships both with self and others from TUL parallels benefits from RUL. It is posited that RUL improves self-relationship via the same mechanism as UPR, in which externally received acceptance, kindness and valuing is mirrored in the internal relationship (Ganley, 1989). TUL is by nature independent of any human relationship through which to feel valued and accepted. However, it seems

many participants felt loved unconditionally by either their conception of the Divine, an energy of love, or the universe at large. Perhaps the psyche internalises non-localised love in the same way as relational love, thus the self-relationship may be benefitted in a parallel way despite the lack of human being reflecting love.

Improved interpersonal relationships, cited by five participants describing TUL, are also associated with RUL. Perhaps, as discussed by Durga (2016) the fullness associated with TUL means one is not so dependent on external praise or validation. Thus, they would have no need to control or place conditions on anything external to facilitate meeting their own relational needs. It is also likely that temporally bound experiences of TUL increase a person's ongoing capacity for genuine love for others. This would manifest in expressions such as enhanced compassion and non-judgement, allowing RUL to be more easily and authentically practiced, and by consequence, creating greater interpersonal trust and connection. Whilst in the pilot study, it was assumed that RUL experiences could be contextual features contributing to the eventual onset of TUL experiences, it seems there is likely a bidirectional relationship between the two, which could be explored in future research.

Awakening experiences sometimes improve relationships, through a similar mechanism of people becoming more positive, compassionate, forgiving and less driven by egoic attachments and control. However, awakening experiences have also been found to complicate relationships. This is especially the case when people have undergone a significant and unexpected shift in identity through their awakening experience, or where they feel they are not understood by their loved ones when they try to share about their experiences (Taylor, 2017). In the current study, this situation of feeling misunderstood by family and friends following a TUL experience was reported by one participant. P.26 was sectioned during the course of her experience because the new conceptions she had of herself, the world around her, and UL were not understood by her family, or her psychiatrist. However, P.26 recounted that although the difference in paradigm between herself and her loved ones was challenging, she felt more able to empathise with others as a result of her experience. This may be an example of a mixed effect of TUL on relationships. Future studies could focus more on the impacts of TUL on relationships.

Levels of Transformation Through TUL. As with awakening experiences, it seemed there were two levels of psychological transformation that arose through TUL experiences. Taylor (2013; 2017) describes that those who transform through awakening experiences either undergo a primary shift or a secondary shift. In a primary shift, a person feels like they have a new identity characterised by wakeful qualities, such as an ongoing awareness of oneness, or a heightened sense of aliveness. In a secondary shift, there is a change in values and attitudes; perhaps a different 'cognitive map of reality' (Taylor, 2017, p.110) but identity remains consistent.

In the current study, two participants experienced a primary shift after a high intensity awakening experience. P18 went from a life of depression, anxiety, addiction, and despair, to one of purpose and

meaning. He sold his legal practice, recovered fully from addiction, and began living a life dedicated to service. Another, P26 describes:

It completely changed my whole life after, there was no way I could return to who I was before. There was a rebirthing process, that involved death in many forms. Fundamental though, it directed me on what I would term as a spiritual path.

P15 also had a high intensity awakening experience, in which his ego dissolved. However, he did not mention a substantial shift in his identity, and thus appears to have experienced a secondary shift.

Four participants, in addition to those mentioned above (making seven total), experienced a new curiosity or calling to a spiritual path. For four of them, this was a secondary shift. Their identity remained unaltered, but their interests and values had changed. Primary and secondary shifts thus appear to be consistent between UL and awakening experiences.

5.4.4.2 Impact of Relational Unconditional Love

As explored above, it seems that RUL can take two forms; a passionate sense of expansive and enduring love for a particular person (regardless of whether there will be any contact with that person in the future) or presence, compassion, acceptance and attention extended within a relationship. It is possible that these types are not wholly discrete from each other. Giving attention, kindness, and acceptance in the course of an ongoing relationship, might result in feeling an enduring expansive sense of love for that person, and a sense of the love not being contingent on seeing that person again. However, in the current study, participants depicted the two forms of RUL as separate constructs, which appeared to have different impacts upon the givers and the receivers of the RUL.

Interestingly, in both the pilot and the full study, the more expansive RUL was typically described from the perspective of the lover rather than the recipient of the love. It was also mainly reported as benefiting the lover. In one case, expansive RUL was a reciprocal experience, and the participant felt benefited both by the loving and the receiving of love. However, it appears significant that the experience of loving another person, without any expectation of reciprocity, gain, or even seeing them again, appeared to be of benefit to both participants who reported it.

The two participants who mentioned expansive RUL found that loving in this way felt liberating. They felt that they were in some way freed from past preconceived ideas about what love should be. There was also an implied sense that trying to control the other person to be what the participant wanted or could easily love romantically caused the participant as well as their partner to feel bound and the love to be limited. P27 mentioned that loving his ex-partner unconditionally helped him to release old patterns of control that were stressful and draining, and that this brought him greater peace.

In contrast, the perhaps less intense, more grounded form of RUL, including acceptance, presence and attention was often described from the perspective of the recipient of the love. Its benefits largely centred on psychological growth and safety. Reports covered themes including greater motivation for change and psychological healing, finding freedom from conditioning, improved self-relationship, increased sense of security, and increased resilience.

P11 reported that her self-love, and her understanding of love increased through the experience of feeling unconditionally accepted. P9 also cultivated greater self-love and self-acceptance. Additionally, she experienced a new sense of self-efficacy, particularly around her mental health. P9 had had a prolonged battle with depression and suicidal ideation. These troubles resurfaced to some extent after beginning to receive RUL from her new partner, but her attitude to them was different. She was more accepting of herself, and more determined to help herself recover. She felt empowered to seek help, and gradually, (from her perspective due to the impact of RUL on her sense of self-efficacy) she became a person who identified with joy and gratitude rather than with depression. Further, although she continued to struggle with physical ailments that had begun before entering her unconditionally loving and accepting relationship, she experienced greater resilience in the face of the pain they brought.

These benefits are reminiscent of those associated with self-compassion (Germer, 2009; Neff, 2003b). The self-acceptance inherent to self-compassion allows a person to face their struggles honestly, to be courageous enough to receive help for them, and to be more motivated and disciplined in pursuing their goals (Neff & Germer, 2017). Self-compassion has also been linked to greater resilience in the face of chronic pain, and reductions in subjective ratings of pain levels (Kiliç, 2021). It seems in the case of P9, receiving compassion and acceptance from an external source may have led to an inner cultivation of self-compassion and the many benefits it brings.

This is one of the mechanisms through which UPR is said to effect therapeutic change; through the transfer of externally received compassion, acceptance, and valuing to an inner self-relationship (Ganley, 1989). The resulting self-knowledge and self-acceptance is said to create a greater sense of personal freedom to explore what the client really wants, rather than what they have been conditioned to want, and how they might make the required changes to attain their goals. In a completely different context, Matsu-Pissot (2008) found that participants who received UL from a spiritual teacher felt a greater sense of self-acceptance and self-efficacy to move ahead with their goals. Further, receiving compassion in a corporate context has been found to decrease anxiety, whilst increasing self-efficacy and positive emotion (Lilius et al. 2008). It seems likely that the external receipt of RUL may lead to similar benefits.

Aside from psychological growth, the other most commonly cited benefit of RUL was improved interpersonal relationships. Participants specifically mentioned increases in their capacity for acceptance, tolerance, and non-judgement, which allowed them to love more fully and feel closer to important people in their lives. These are key characteristics of RUL. Rogerian traits of empathy, regard, and congruence

are considered significant indicators of the quality of interpersonal relationships, not solely in a therapeutic context (Ganley, 1989).

Whilst psychological growth was mentioned as benefits of both TUL and RUL, the type appears different between the two. The elements of increased wisdom, knowledge and freedom from conditioning mentioned by those discussing TUL were not such strong features of RUL. RUL also did not increase participants' trust or faith or initiate any quest or curiosity about spirituality or personal development.

5.4.4.3 Negative Impacts of Transpersonal and Relational Unconditional Love

There were three negative impacts reported across the categories of transpersonal and relational unconditional love: spiritual crisis, risk of exploitation and remaining in a toxic relationship. They arose from two participant responses. In one response, the negative impact was described in positive terms. It appeared to be considered a valuable part of the experience which ultimately had a beneficial impact on the participant's life. In the other, positive impacts of UL were minimised by what was experienced as its negative impact. However, it is unclear whether the negative impacts described can fully be accounted for as impacts of UL. As this second account involved both relational and transpersonal love, the negative impacts of both are discussed in one section.

Spiritual Crisis. P26 reported that her UL experience involved a state of mania. This has been explored in Section 5.4.3 of this discussion, as the mania appeared concurrent with an extended experience of TUL and thus was addressed as a potential characteristic. She experienced timelessness, perceived a oneness of everything through love and had a palpable understanding that love had the capacity to heal all pain. She tried to explain this to a psychiatrist who perceived these observations as indicative of mental illness and put her in a ward to recover.

It took time to return to a normal state of consciousness, which concerned friends and family. This is a potentially negative impact of the UL experience. However, P26's ultimate sense of the experience and its impact was that it completely changed her sense of self and reality in a positive way that brought new meaning to her life and beauty to her world. Thus, even with negative experiences to be endured along the way, the overall impact of her experience was positive. This mirrors some but not all experiences of spiritual crisis (Grof & Grof, 2017) though it is important to note that in some instances, the negative of the dissociation and breakdown elements of spiritual crisis do not resolve into positive learning and growth, or do so only with appropriate psychotherapeutic help. Similarly, some extreme instances of TUL involving ego-dissolution may encompass negative psychological experiences and may require professional assistance to integrate.

Vulnerability to Exploitation and Toxic Relationships. The negative impacts reported by P10 pertained to both RUL and TUL. She described UL that at some points seemed transpersonal and at others seemed

relational, and felt that both contributed to her remaining in a toxic relationship dynamic. Gilbert (2019) suggests that adult relationships are all conditional. She posits that UL is simply an ideal, and one which may stop people from having appropriate boundaries and walking away from toxic dynamics; not only in romantic situations, but also in family relationships. Other participant accounts suggest that RUL is not just an ideal, but a real experience with particular characteristics and impacts. However, it may be that if a person attempts to practice RUL as an ideal rather than an embodied experience it wouldn't yield the same benefits. Templeton warns "do not confuse sentiment and sympathy with love" (2000, p.9). P10's negative experience may have arisen out of UL, but there may have been other factors involved.

Although P10 did not describe a peak experience of UL, she referred to characteristics synonymous with TUL at a medium intensity awakening experience (Taylor, 2017), such as noticing the faults she had perceived in those around her fading into UL, feeling a sense of interconnectedness with all beings, and experiencing awe at the beauty of life in general. She reported that her experience was triggered by a breakdown, which is also in keeping with the psychological turmoil implicated in the onset of many awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012; 2017).

P10 perceived that the sense of interconnectedness with all people, and her desire to help all people (characteristics of TUL) had left her open to exploitation. She alluded to feeling regularly disrespected by people but loving and forgiving them anyway, which allowed the dynamic to continue. P10 also spoke of loving her husband and his family (in a more relational dynamic) as a potential result of the TUL love she had experienced. She implied that she may not have offered him or his family RUL if she were not in a particular state of mind engendered by TUL. As the method in the current study was textual analysis of very short sections of text, it is not possible to understand other dynamics that may have coloured P10's experience. It could be that, as she says, UL comes with a risk of remaining in unfavourable situations, but it could be that other factors, such as co-dependency may have led to this decision rather than, or in conjunction with UL.

Domestic violence is a grave phenomenon, and it is not my place to interpret a participant's experience of it. However, there were a few variations between P10's account and others in the dataset, which suggests it may not only have been UL causing the negative impact she described. One of the inconsistencies between P10's account and others is that participants both in the pilot and the full study spoke of TUL experiences improving their self-esteem, or as being impossible to attain without self-respect. P10 herself mentioned an increase in self-esteem arising from her TUL experience but reported that this beneficial impact was reversed by the toxic relational dynamic she was part of.

A second inconsistency is that a participant in an analogous abusive romantic situation in the pilot study experienced RUL that involved setting boundaries, ending her relationship, being content that she may or may not ever see her ex again, but knowing she would always love him. This suggests that boundaries are not always incongruent with RUL. Further, as has been explored above, RUL shares most of its

features and benefits with UPR. This is typically utilised in a therapeutic setting, which is governed by certain boundaries (Owen, 1997). If UPR can both exist and lead to therapeutic change in the bounded setting of psychotherapy, it follows that interpersonal forms of RUL should also be able to co-exist with healthy boundaries. This would be an important element of RUL to explore in future research.

P10's account raises important questions regarding RUL and domestic violence. Anecdotally, it is common to hear of women staying in abusive relationships because of their love for their partners. This may constitute RUL, however, it may be an expression of various forms of romantic attachment. A formal grounded theory analysis of 13 qualitative studies of women's responses to violent relationships identified four phases women go through in a typical case of domestic violence (Kearney, 2001). The first of these may be pertinent to the current discussion. In this phase women value their romance so highly that they downplay their partner's violence or accept it as something either normal, or necessary to endure to maintain their relationship. It is unclear whether the valuing of the romantic relationship refers to loving the violent partner so much that their violence is tolerated, or valuing being part of a couple and fearing not being able to find another partner if the relationship ended. It is likely that both factors play a role. Power et al. (2006) found that women often felt a sense of attachment to having a man in their life, and this prevented them from leaving a toxic relationship.

Wallace (2007) draws parallels between domestic violence relationships and Stockholm syndrome: a phenomenon where hostages begin to feel love, affection, and attachment for their captors. Cantor & Price (2007) suggest that a mechanistic factor in Stockholm syndrome, found in most primates, is appeasement. The desire to pacify or placate the aggressor leads to an impulse towards loving actions and attitudes, that are then experienced even by the victim as love. Whilst the victim may feel a sense of love that endures regardless of the actions of their captor, this does not appear to be an example of UL, but of a coping mechanism. Perhaps part of the characteristics of the emerging construct of RUL is that it is not attained under any form of duress, or cultivated for any kind of gain, including survival, or the preservation of a difficult relationship.

Alternatively, perhaps UL is an experience that can be distorted by certain circumstances. Taylor (2017) has found that awakening is a non-linear process. That is, it is possible to have awakening experiences (and even a primary shift and change in identity through such experiences), to have genuine benefit from these, and to still suffer occasionally from mental health challenges, or from distortion. Distorted gurus are an apt illustration of how the ego can reassert itself after awakening experiences, and how, in some cases, certain elements of awakening can co-exist with elements of disconnected or ego-centric function (Durga, 2016; Taylor, 2017).

Many people experience an ongoing, gradual form of awakening (Taylor, 2017). In such forms, experiences of awakening are attained and integrated, creating an enduring sense of wakefulness. However, certain life situations may arise in which a person experiences a phase of disconnection from

the wakefulness they have attained, which may be painful or cause psychological malaises. Often, such experiences lead to new learnings and personal development. Wakefulness can be re-established on the other side of these experiences of disconnection, and can have a more grounded, stable quality that exhibits more depth than the original state of wakefulness. However, in other cases, the wakefulness is not re-established.

It could be that P10 was experiencing a phase that challenged or distorted the TUL she had experienced. It is possible that if a dangerous interpersonal dynamic is encountered after a peak TUL experience, increased love for all beings may merge into an evolutionary impulse to appease the person who represents potential threat. In this case, the impact of UL would express differently to cases where there was no threat. Whilst such manifestations may not represent pure UL, it may be that the heightened sense of connection with others that maintains after UL experiences may lead to particular threat responses that may not otherwise arise. Thus, this would still be considered a potential after-effect of TUL.

In summary, it is unclear whether the negative impact to P10 of remaining in a toxic relationship are manifestations of TUL or RUL. However, it is possible that UL in conjunction with other factors, such as the drive to appease a violent partner, or codependent tendencies may cause it to express in a way that is lacking in appropriate boundaries. Further research on the relationship between UL and boundaries, and between RUL and domestic violence is necessary to understand these potential risks and how they can be mitigated.

5.4.5 Limitations

Although this participant pool was broader than that of the pilot study, all but one participant still identified as spiritual. However, some participants recounted that it was their UL experience which put them on their spiritual path (i.e. that they had previously been agnostic or atheistic), suggesting that UL experiences can occur outside of a spiritual orientation. This parallels awakening experiences, which Taylor (2012) found occur in both secular and spiritual contexts.

The sample size was small in the current study. There was a high level of attrition of those who expressed interest in completing the questionnaire. Further, some responses were not able to be used as they did not have enough detail about the phenomenon in question and the participants could not be contacted. However, many of those who did complete the questionnaire gave more than one example of a UL experience. Thus, although there were 24 participants, they gave 32 accounts of UL experiences. These in addition to the 7 participants in the pilot study, who collectively gave 10 accounts of UL, meant that the analysis was connected to 42 accounts of UL.

5.4.6 Conclusion

This study was successful in developing an early framework of two different forms of UL; RUL and TUL. It describes trends that emerged in these distinct forms of UL through systematic triangulation of participant responses. These trends concerned the contextual and trigger factors connected with the onset of TUL and RUL, their respective characteristics, and the impact they have. As anticipated, TUL resembled awakening experiences, with additional or specific characteristics of love as a sense of interconnectedness, oneness with all, or as a substrate of the universe. This confirmed the notion that TUL is likely a subtype of awakening experience. RUL had two forms; one based in presence and acceptance expressed to another person, and one that was a sense of limitless, expansive and undying affection, no matter where the other person was or what they had done. The grounded, present form appeared to parallel UPR, in both characteristics and impact, but not in onset as it was not therapeutically generated.

All forms of UL were predominantly beneficial to participants. RUL demonstrated benefits in psychological growth and resilience, loving self-relationship, self-efficacy, and interpersonal relationships, echoing the benefits of UPR (Rogers, 1957), self-compassion (Neff & Germer, 2017) and receiving love from a trusted spiritual mentor (Matsu-Pissot, 2008). TUL appeared to produce all of the benefits of RUL, and also, new spiritual curiosity, increased positive emotion, altruism, and wisdom, which have all been associated with awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017, Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017).

Future studies would be useful to further explore the relationship between RUL and UPR; boundaries, particularly regarding toxic interpersonal dynamics; and whether the expansive, limitless form of RUL may be a type of, or a trigger for, awakening experiences. Regarding TUL experiences, further research would be useful to consolidate findings on their triggers, characteristics and impacts, and their relationship with awakening experiences. In the same vein, it would be useful to conduct research on primary and secondary shifts resulting from TUL experiences, and on the type of education or support that might be required to ameliorate the negative experience of spiritual crisis that can arise in certain cases of TUL. The relationship between TUL and RUL may also be of interest in future research. It was expected from the pilot study that RUL may be a contextual factor for TUL experiences, however, findings from the current study suggest they could have a bidirectional relationship.

Another avenue of interest for future study is unconditional positive states. It appears from the current study that they arise as a product of connectedness. Connectedness was related to unconditional positive states at the level of connection between humans, but also at the level of connection with a oneness or essence that underlies all things. Future research could explore unconditional positive states; specifically whether they are always correlated with these heightened experiences of connectedness.

In addition to developing this initial profile of UL in its two forms, this study furthered research question three, concerning whether UL can be fully accounted for through materialist theories of consciousness.

Subjective accounts of UL as an independently existing energy, essence or reality, combined with research discussed in Section 3.7 on NDEs and altered states, suggest the theoretical possibility that UL, specifically TUL, may be a form of non-localised consciousness. This would be of interest for future research from the perspective of cultivating a better understanding of UL. The exploration of TUL as a potential form of non-localised consciousness would also intersect with the larger, interdisciplinary debate about the ontology of consciousness itself.

Chapter 6: Study Two

6.1 Method

6.1.1 Research Paradigm

Study two was designed to specifically investigate the TUL form of UL. As outlined in Section 1.2, I utilised a research paradigm of transcendental phenomenology (Husserl, 1983) within an epistemology of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975) for both Studies One and Two. Sherman (2025) recommends this pairing. He takes a non-physicalist stance, in which he views emotion as an interface between what he considers to be the deep structures of reality, and what we as human beings are able to experience or understand. That is, he sees emotion and experiences in consciousness as a phenomenological bridge or conjunction between subjectivity and ontological reality. The combination of critical realism and transcendental phenomenology aligns well with depictions of UL from mystical traditions, and first-hand accounts of awakening (Easwaran, 2007; Fox, 2014; Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2017) in which people report experiences in subjective consciousness that suggest, or even promote a new belief in some objective reality beyond ordinary perception.

Further, as explored in Chapter 3, UL (and especially TUL) is likely accessed or experienced in certain altered states of consciousness. Tart (1975) reflects that it is impossible to understand altered states of consciousness without dealing with direct, subjective experience. He stresses that the necessarily subjective nature of such data should not decrease its scientific value, particularly as reports of altered states often share key experiential elements. Transcendental phenomenological research both emphasises the importance of individual subjectivity, and allows subjective reports to be cross referenced with each other and other sources, so that such shared key elements can be revealed and systematically studied (Edie, 1987).

6.1.2 Methodology

Study 2 utilised an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, chosen for its dual focus on both the phenomenon of interest, and on participants' interpretations of that phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Qualitative methods, such as IPA, are considered conducive to the study of phenomena that are not yet fully defined (Creswell, 2014). This was useful in the development of a novel psychological construct of TUL.

Qualitative research seeks to “make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3). William James (1902/1928) asserted that religious experiences are significant not necessarily because they reveal objective realities, but because of their importance to, and impact upon, those who experience them. TUL experiences are not all religious

experiences, but there is significant overlap, which highlights the importance of prioritising participants' own interpretations and the benefits they feel themselves to have derived from TUL.

Within traditional phenomenology, IPA treats participant accounts as representative only of their individual experiences, without assuming access to underlying universal structures. However, IPA within a transcendental phenomenological paradigm considers subjective accounts of participants as phenomenological access points, which enable the identification of core experiential structures that may underly UL as an ontologically real phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Sherman, 2025).

This study adopted Moustakas' (1994) approach to IPA within transcendental phenomenology. Subjective accounts were systematically triangulated with each other to reveal key, recurring, experiential elements of TUL. In accordance with IPA, the emphasis was on rich, subjective data collected from a small sample size, allowing for deep idiographic exploration but not broad generalisability. Thus, the resulting findings contribute to the initial conceptualisation of essential features of TUL as an ontological phenomenon, but they do not serve as generalisable claims about how TUL and its impacts are experienced within a wider population. Alongside the findings from Study One, findings from this study contribute to the development of a preliminary phenomenological foundation of TUL that can be refined and expanded upon through future research and inquiry.

6.1.3 Participant Selection

Smith & Osborn (2003, p.56-57) state that there is no "correct" sample size for an IPA study. They posit that one to 15 participants is normal, but five or six is recommended. Seven interviews were conducted in the current study, but one participant subsequently withdrew, leaving a sample size of six. This seemed adequate, particularly following the initial thematic study of written accounts on UL.

One of the principal findings of Study 1 was the distinction between transpersonal and relational experiences of UL (TUL and RUL respectively). The primary experience of interest for Study 2 was TUL. Thus, participants were selected for Study 2 using purposive sampling to ensure participants had had apposite experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Pietkiewicz and Smith suggest that given the small sample sizes of IPA research, purposive sampling is recommended, as it "allows one to find a defined group for whom the research problem has relevance and personal significance" (2014, p.10). They also suggest that IPA samples are usually homogenous, meaning that in the current case, it was appropriate that all participants considered themselves spiritual in some way, even if the form of that spirituality differed. In several cases, I connected with individuals of different spiritual backgrounds and had a preliminary conversation with them to explore whether they had had an experience of TUL. If it seemed their experience fit the criteria, an interview was scheduled. In one case, an interviewee was referred by my supervisor, because the topic of UL had arisen during a prior interview for his own research on awakening experiences.

6.1.4 Ethical Considerations

Interviews were conducted on Zoom and thus posed no safety risk to myself. Participants were issued a participant information letter (Appendix C) via Google Forms, outlining the purpose, and intended procedure of the research and how their data would be stored. They were informed that the interviews were of a personal nature and thus may cause psychological disruption, though given the subject matter, it was unlikely to have a negative impact. They were offered information about where they could seek help should any such psychological turmoil arise. A consent letter (Appendix D) was also included in the form, which they signed prior to the interview. This was administered with several background questions concerning participant demographics.

6.1.5 Procedure

6.1.5.1 Interviews

Seven interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed. As participants were living in Australia, the UK, the USA and India, Zoom was used for six interviews. The seventh participant requested an in-person interview, but subsequently withdrew from the research, stating that the content of their interview was of a sensitive, personal, and spiritual nature that may not be suitable for public consumption. This left six interviewees whose data was included in the research.

Interviews were semi-structured in accordance with Smith and Osborn (2003). There were general topics to explore, and these formed a loose interview schedule. However, the focus was upon establishing and maintaining rapport with participants and being sensitive to what was important to them as they recounted their experiences and the meaning they derived from them (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

In many instances, the interview schedule was not required, as all of the questions or topics of interest were addressed in the course of the conversation. Often, participants volunteered information on unsolicited topics, thus changing the course of the interviews. These participant-led shifts enhanced Husserlian intersubjectivity (Kjosavik et al., 2019), allowing meaning to emerge through relational exchange rather than being dictated by predefined questions. As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2003), additions that emerged through this process were usually valuable to the research.

A prominent example of important contributions arising through intersubjective meaning making was the relationship between UL and boundaries, which was introduced without prompting by several participants. As this topic arose spontaneously in so many interviews, it became an additional question in those interviews where participants did not naturally raise it themselves. This was in keeping with the iterative nature of IPA data collection (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

In accordance with IPA, a double hermeneutic was involved in interpreting participants' accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). That is, attention was paid both to the meaning given to experiences by participants themselves, and to how I understood that meaning making as the researcher. In IPA, a researcher may understand elements of a participants' experience that the participant themselves may not be aware of. This may include noticing certain attitudes conveyed in non-verbal communication through an interview or connecting elements of an account the participant may not have connected themselves (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

As in examples given by Smith and Osborn (2003), sometimes prompts were used that opened avenues of possibility or connection to the interviewee. For example, if a response reminded me of themes from Study One or from the literature review, sometimes a clarifying question would be used to explore whether there was a connection. The participant would answer yes or no and elaborate. I also occasionally highlighted threads the participant had mentioned separately and asked whether they were related. Sometimes, participants agreed with these prompts and added more information to validate a particular understanding. However, participants sometimes disagreed and used the prompt to add entirely different or unexpected information. Thus, these questions did not appear overly leading but rather facilitated intersubjective meaning-making, consistent with Husserl's framework (Kjosavik et al., 2019). I was cautious to be reflexive, writing a reflective journal after every interview to increase awareness of potential areas of bias.

6.1.5.2 Analysis

Thematic Coding and Transcendental Phenomenological Triangulation. IPA is an idiographic research methodology. It emphasises detailed analysis of individual interviews and data before any generalised experiential structures are identified (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2003). In keeping with this methodology, once each semi-structured interview was completed, accounts were first analysed separately and coded for themes. In accordance with Creswell (2014), interview transcriptions were read and re-read several times and initial thoughts were recorded in respect of each participant's account. These initial thoughts were organised into themes with supporting quotes.

Once themes had been identified for each participant, transcendental phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) was implemented to bracket subjective interpretations. Emergent themes were systematically triangulated across participant accounts to identify any potential recurrent experiential structures of UL (Edie, 1987). This is congruent with Pietkiewicz and Smith's assertion that one of the processes of IPA is to "examine similarities and differences between individuals" (2014, p.10).

Final Theme Refinement and Bias Management. Once superordinate and subordinate themes had been identified, each transcript was re-read to ensure all themes had been captured, and that no prime examples of any themes were overlooked. Given the subjectivity of this type of analysis, re-reading with

fresh perspective led to minor refinements that enriched interpretation. Discussions with supervisors provided critical insights for minimising interpretive bias and refining thematic distinctions.

6.2 Results

In this section, I outline the common themes and subthemes that emerged through the six interviews. Whilst traditional IPA favours an ideographic analysis, results for this study have been triangulated and presented by theme to more clearly identify which elements may reflect potentially core experiential features of TUL (Edie, 1987). Personal experience is respected and referenced as much as possible to substantiate each theme. An overview of each participant's account is included in Appendix E to give greater personal context to the results.

As TUL experiences are likely related to awakening experiences, it seemed they may be best explored through a similar framework to that which has been used by Taylor (2017) and Taylor and Egeto-Szabo (2017). Their research focused on the onset or trigger factors, the characteristics, and the impact factors of awakening experiences. Thus, I have used these same overarching categories for the study of TUL.

6.2.1 Triggers

Whilst it might not be possible to guarantee that a person has an experience of TUL, there are commonalities amongst the onset factors participants described. It is important to note that given the IPA nature of the research and consequently limited sample size, this is by no means an exhaustive list of what can trigger a TUL experience. The superordinate and subordinate themes are listed in Table 6 and discussed in detail following the table.

Table 6

Triggers of TUL Experiences

Superordinate Theme	Number of participants	Subordinate Theme	Number of participants
Spiritual Teachers/ Mentors/ Role models	4	Inspiration, Wayshower and guide through embodiment	4
		Workshops and training in theory and practice	3
		Co-regulation/ Vibrational impact	2
Spiritual Practice and Personal Development	6	Practice as a journey to more UL	3
		Service	6
		Bhakti/ Devotion, Mantra, Ritual, Prayer and Surrender	4

		Purification, meditation and mental training	3
		Self-awareness and Accountability	6
Spiritual Community or Environment	3	Connection and Belonging	3
		Sacred space/Field of Love	3
		Practicing UL as a community	3
Connection and Relational Love	4	Forgiveness, Empathy and Compassion	2
		Deliberately seeing people as souls	3
Non-ordinary States of Consciousness	4	NDE	3
		Experience beyond normal perception and paradigm	3
		Unconditional love from non-physical beings	3

6.2.1.1 Spiritual Teachers, Mentors, and Role Models

Four participants talked with great love and gratitude about their teachers inspiring them, showing them that embodying TUL was possible and acting as a living map for accessing that place in consciousness. In Amardeep's words, "what I experienced in the NDE, I felt emanating out of him as a human being... He showed me it was possible... And that inspired me." (Amardeep, p.11-12)

Andal, who is on a path of bhakti that specifically emphasises the guru tradition, expressed with even more devotional awe the gift of having a living embodiment of TUL in her life. She described her teacher as:

[T]he embodiment of unconditional love... unwavering from that state and actually generating that love and sharing it with the universe perpetually...it's gobsmacking... mind blowing... heart opening... the most... amazing gift of this life... He is a living example of what it is to actually completely embody unconditional love... (Andal, p.19)

She discussed how UL is expressed whether a student chooses to adopt the teachings and practices of the teacher or not. This further exemplifies the principle of UL. "So always the master's just giving... and then we can... do it or not do it, but [the master] still loves us anyway. That's the UL part."

Teachings and Practice. Three participants specifically discuss the teachings and practices taught to them by their teacher as keys to accessing and becoming stable in TUL. These provided a new paradigm to explore the possibility for TUL and specific skills to begin to connect with it. For example, although held in the context of spiritual community, the teachings, practices and direct mentorship of her spiritual teacher played a crucial role in assisting Karlie to open her heart. One of the initial breakthrough moments

of TUL described by Karlie involved attending a course in which her teacher led an experiential forgiveness practice. The community, the teachings, the practice and the teacher all contributed to this experience.

Andal describes how the teacher creates community and holds space for everyone to evolve in TUL:

[T]hey're... leading by example... they're building that community to express that way... teaching the teachings... and creating the environment to practice so that you can have those experiences of UL within yourself and also with each other. (Andal, p.14-15)

Amardeep also accessed greater UL through adopting the concepts and practices taught by his teacher, and through direct mentorship, living primarily with his teacher in India for four years (Amardeep, p.13).

Co-regulation and Vibration. Andal and Amardeep discussed that some of the teacher's impact on them arose through more of a "beingness" rather than words or actions. Andal makes sense of this through the concept of energy and vibration, but also refers to the psychological term "co-regulation" to describe her experience:

And for those people who have experienced going before... living masters, there is a palpableness to the expression of love. It's an energy emanating in that field, which... from psychological terms... would be co-regulating people into that state and they're receiving that... energy. (Andal, p.21)

She described a sense of "receiving" from someone more spiritually advanced as a way to evolve her own consciousness. "And so a spiritual master is someone who's actually realized in their own nature. And so ...the best way to become that is to receive that from someone who's already realized in that" (Andal, p.28).

Amardeep experienced this sense of a transference of energy from his grandmother when he was very young. He recalled "[H]er every breath recited mantra and she was blessed with that from her master in India. So I'd always feel that vibration in her" (Amardeep, p.4). It was partially through a sense of this "vibration" transferring to him that his first TUL experience arose.

6.2.1.2 Spiritual Practice and Personal Development

Five out of six participants cited spiritual practice, and/or personal development as a significant factor in connecting with TUL. The participant who didn't mention this as an initial trigger, Michael, had a spontaneous experience of TUL through his NDE. However, he still mentioned certain techniques for embedding or perpetuating the connection to TUL this gave him. Participants often described their spiritual practice not as one discrete tool or focus used in isolation, but as a collection of attitudes, practices, prayers and intentions that wove throughout their lives. Their sense of TUL was as an ever-deepening experience in their consciousness, relationships and projects.

Meditation was mentioned by four out of six participants. However, the meditations had practices or focal points within them – including purification, energy work, self-reflection, mind-training, bhakti, and mantra – that were seen as the more specific catalyst for TUL. Thus, instead of a theme of meditation (which includes all these practices and more), I have categorised them under their more specific headings.

It seems important to note that the personal development aspects mentioned by participants need not necessarily have been accessed in the context of a spiritual path. This included practices of self-awareness, deepening accountability, and mirror and shadow work – all of which exists within secular psychology.

Practice as a Journey to More UL. Regular practice appeared to lay a foundation for ever-increasing access to TUL, both during the practice itself and at unrelated moments. Andal explained the idea of TUL being initiated through practice, but experienced in normal consciousness:

When we do those practices and connect... it doesn't just stay in that moment. We might have some peak experiences in that moment, but we can also have peak experiences outside of that practice because ultimately life is practice and it starts to ignite that spirit, that fire within us where that soul energy, that UL is just present and ready to express... through our life and in our relationships. (Andal, p.35)

Karlie comments on the process of practice making a person gradually more receptive to TUL. She reflects that it “took... a little minute” (Karlie, p.3) of doing the practices before she began to feel TUL. For her, it seemed that the result was cumulative. Once she began to feel it during practice, her commitment to both her practice and TUL increased, and she began to weave both into more and more of her daily life.

Holding an awareness of the journey, and of the ever-growing capacity to experience TUL appeared to be a kind of practice of itself. Participants suggested that it invites the consciousness to open into TUL, and allows for more mundane moments to be experienced with TUL. Sage discussed an intention for her relationship with TUL to be continually expanding. “And then the ongoing journey has been to sort of go ever, ever deeper, wider, higher, multidimensional into those experiences of remembering” (Sage, p.5). For her, ongoing experimentation on how to connect with TUL in more circumstances continued that opening process.

Service. Three participants mentioned service as a significant part of their practice and life-orientation that they felt contributed to experiencing TUL. For Andal and Karlie, service was a way of releasing the separate sense of identity and remembering unity. For Karlie, this was apparent in the restorative justice program she ran in a prison. Serving others in this context not only opened her into TUL, but also unexpectedly led to personal healing through unity. She described realising “Oh, my God, through this exchange of service or love, I'm also receiving the healing...” (Karlie, p.11).

Andal discusses service and sharing love as a deliberate way to overcome the illusion of separation:

And if you don't know, then you can just start practicing love... acts of kindness, start serving... step outside of your own life and your own parameters... if I show love to someone else, it will spark that also inside of me... (Andal, p.33)

For Amardeep, service was an inextricable part of his spiritual path. He didn't talk so much about the direct impact of service, but mentioned it as part of the lifestyle he followed in emulation of his guru, who he felt embodied TUL.

For Michael and Sage, it seemed that service was both an expression of TUL, and a way of enhancing or connecting deeper with the TUL they had access to. For Michael, it seemed that his service was inspired by his previous TUL experience, but it also reminded him of the TUL he had access to, helped him integrate it and stay connected to it:

[A]ll that work... that's... keeping me grounded and helping me to stay connected because ...I'm giving something out to the universe... It's coming from me wanting to give love and to share that love. And so that comes back and that keeps me... afloat. (Michael, p.19-20)

Sage mentioned how she would connect with TUL through service in casual moments. For example, whilst doing the dishes with love at a party. She explained "My washing up at the at the in the sink is ordinary. That can become extraordinary when I do it with love and serving others" (Sage, p. 4).

Devotion: Mantra, Ritual, Prayer and Surrender. The four Participants who spoke of devotion described a variety of devotional techniques, including prayer, worship, puja (ritual), mantra and meditation. Surrender was also discussed – as an intention and outcome of such practices that seemed to accelerate the connection with TUL.

Amardeep discussed love or devotion as a key to all practice – and to making life a practice. He explained that the more you do everything with love, the more the universe – and states of vaster TUL – open up to you:

[W]hatever the creative mystery, whatever this oneness is, it responds to love more than any other emotion... because that's what it is by its own nature. And so then if you pray with love, you meditate with love, you do mantra with love, you do puja with love, you do fasting, detoxing with love, you do yoga with love. You do your dharma duties with your family, with love. If you act in that way, everything in your life will be good and perfect and wholesome. But when you don't, even if you do all those other rituals and other things without love or passion, then they're empty. And then it's like an empty shell and inside is vacant. (Amardeep, p.7)

For Andal, bhakti was the central focus of her practice. She gave an overview of how she felt it worked; how focusing love on something that is apparently outside of the self, activated those same qualities – and love – within. She explained:

[T]hat object of devotion, whoever it is or whatever it is, is... also just a way of revealing that love inside of us... Loving the divine is a very powerful practice because whatever we love, we become, right? So it's merging with that and revealing that within ourself. (Andal, p.25)

She suggested that the practice doesn't necessarily cause the state of TUL, but rather makes her more receptive by opening her heart. "We used bhakti and chanting to... open the heart. And then... the state just came upon me. Guess it just happens" (Andal, p.6).

Karlie used mantra and bhakti practices both in her own practice and in the restorative justice program she ran. She described the mantra practice opening her students to the feeling of love. "[W]e do the whole mantra and... it's like they feel energy. They feel the love... the love is there and the love is real" (Karlie, p.18).

Prayer was mentioned by several participants as a way of building, feeling and utilising the personal connection with and love for the divine that devotion develops. Joy spoke of using prayer in a worship setting to offer love to the divine, and also in her own personal practice, communing and connecting with the divine that she feels unconditionally loved by (p.2). Andal described using prayer to set an intention and ask for an experience of TUL:

You can pray to the universe, pray to the divine, ask within yourself: Okay... Show me a way to connect with this UL inside of me. And... it'll happen, it'll come, it'll flourish. (Andal, p.32)

Karlie had a daily practice of prayer as a tool of surrender: "And so I have a really strong prayer and meditation practice where I'm constantly just surrendering my will and giving it to the divine God, higher power, whatever you want to call that thing" (Karlie, P.12).

Both Karlie and Andal emphasised surrender as an outcome of heart opening (discussed above) and as a key ingredient for accessing TUL. Karlie uses prayer, ritual and meditation to surrender:

So when I'm... doing my puja in the morning... I'm surrendering my heart... I surrender it to X or God... And then I... do a set aside prayer... Please, God, help me set aside everything I think I know and all of my old ideas that I have about every aspect of my life and help my mind, body and soul be open to a new experience. Please guide my thoughts, words and actions. (Karlie, P.13)

There is an element in this surrender of purification and letting go of the grip of the mind, reminiscent of the concept of moving from head to heart mentioned above.

Karlie felt that the "totally personal" relationship with the Divine that she cultivated through bhakti helped her feel safe to surrender (P.13). The trust and faith devotion brings allowed her to relax into love. As she described:

I've been through so many experiences where I've had to surrender and I've built that bridge of trust and connection. Now I know that the divine has got me and I am free to love like that. I am free to be in there with a blazing heart because I am totally... safe in that. (Karlie, p.14)

Purification, Meditation and Mental Training. Andal, Amardeep and Karlie all spoke of purification, though in slightly different ways. Andal described “shedding” out unconscious limitations or restrictions that obscured the bliss, love and unity within. She recalled “There was that period of... processing stuff out and then expanding into the bliss” and thinking “okay, I’m willing to shed some more stuff in my unconsciousness and open into this transcendent, unified state” (Andal, p.11).

This “shedding” and altering of inner programming occurred through specific meditative practices and energy work. Andal recalled a multifaceted process of “[U]sing energy to consciously clear beliefs and... unconscious... programming that was sitting in my field, letting it come up to the consciousness, feeling it and releasing it systematically and using bhakti at the same time....” (Andal, p.32). Karlie achieved a similar “shedding” through a conscious practice of surrendering her “old ideas” (p.13) as expressed in the section on prayer above.

Amardeep spoke of purifying himself and training his mind (often in meditation) in order to evolve and emulate his guru’s state of embodied TUL. Like Karlie and Andal, Amardeep also used meditation as a way to check his state and direct his spiritual practice – allowing him to identify and clear limitations in consciousness that would prevent TUL. He described “I’m... sweeping around and getting the cobwebs off my inner self as much as I can... and not letting anything settle in there” (p.14).

Self-Awareness & Accountability. Six participants mention some form of self-awareness or accountability assisting them to open to more TUL. Whilst for these participants, such personal development processes were often embedded in spiritual practices, they could also exist in a secular context, and thus have been mentioned separately.

Karlie discussed accountability both as a way of accessing more TUL herself, and as something that created love in a group context. In terms of increasing her own access to love, she used a practice of finding some sense of responsibility for whatever dynamic she might have been experiencing rather than blaming others. She reported that she is “*always trying to find my part in things so that I can come back to my own heart*” (Karlie, p.12). In the restorative justice work she facilitates, she spoke about accountability creating a TUL experience, sharing “The people taking accountability... were all in just a field of love” (Karlie, p.6-7).

Mirror and shadow work were methods participants used to take more accountability in their lives. Again, for Karlie this came up a lot with reference to the people she worked with:

"[T]he more I see my own flaws... then it's easy. It's just like, "Oh, yeah, that's me I'm looking at right now"... I'm very much aware that I am them and they are me... And so we are just one in that way." (Karlie, p. 10-11)

Joy deliberately sought to reintegrate her shadow using a psychological process, which she credits with helping her to love herself unconditionally:

I grew to unconditionally love myself. I did... two years of intense shadow work with a Jungian analyst. I looked at all of my disowned parts, all the areas where I disassociated, I'd repressed, brought all of those back into myself, integrated them. (Joy, p.15)

Andal discussed self-reflection not necessarily as a trigger of TUL, but as an ongoing part of opening into more TUL in life:

And sometimes you're really connected in it and that's the lived experience. And, you know, you can hold someone in their shame and you don't have shame for the stuff you've done... And sometimes... you're in the experience of, well, yes, I did judge that person or yes, I am judging myself... So is that utopian? Not probably by most people's standards of utopian, but is it perfect and awesome? Yes, because... it's the reconciling of all that. (Andal, p.15-16)

For Amardeep, self-reflection was a substantial part of his spiritual practice. He shared "I'm always checking every day when I meditate: Is there any other little bits that need pulling into line?" Sage also spoke about self-inquiry as an ongoing process; for her, a way of navigating out of fear and back to love. This appeared to facilitate Sage experiencing TUL more of the time in daily life. She shared:

[I]f that fear arises, I ask myself, why am I feeling this? And often... there really is no need to feel like this... And so it gives me an opportunity to say thank you to that bit of glass. And I don't need to step on you anymore. (Sage, p.23-24)

Michael used self-reflection, particularly in relationships (as discussed below), to overcome blockages such as co-dependency that prevented him from experiencing RUL for those he loved. The insight about co-dependency was generated by his initial TUL experience in his NDE. Subsequently, the practice of continuing to consciously be aware of and release co-dependency within himself enabled him to experience and express more TUL and RUL in daily life.

6.2.1.3 Spiritual Community or Environment

Three participants mentioned the importance of a spiritual school, community or environment in triggering or promoting their TUL experience. The factors they cited were a sense of connection and belonging, shared experience and worldview, a sacred space, and the classroom of striving for UL as a community. Participants also spoke of the importance of the spiritual education that the community was centred around as something that brought them together and gave them a shared framework of relating.

Connection and Belonging. Connection was one of the central mechanisms through which participants experienced spiritual community promoting TUL. Karlie reported “And then there's an opportunity for connection... the things that have... helped me to heal has been, yes, of course, the UL, but the connection, the connection between other amazing souls” (Karlie, p.18). She gave an example of a group witnessing each other's courage, vulnerability and responsibility in the context of a restorative justice program she had facilitated in a prison. She recalled “All you could feel in the room was a field of love” (Karlie, p.7). Karlie, Joy and Andal also spoke of their community as their “tribe” or as having felt like “home”, implying a sense of belonging or safety that allowed for UL.

Sacred Space / Field of Love. Karlie described how communal spiritual practice seemed to create a love that transcended personal relationships and acted more like a field:

They said that when there's blessings... or mantra happening, that it just feels like love and not coming from me specifically, but it just the whole thing feels like love... I think that's because of the connection with all of us in the room that that love comes in like that. (Karlie, p.19)

Joy also described co-creating a sacred space of love with her childhood spiritual community. She recalled “We were... creating our own exquisite way to worship... to bring forth the divine to saturate in God's love together” (Joy, p.3). For both Joy and Karlie, it seems that the community aspect – people joined in intention and practice – was central in cultivating that love experience.

Practicing UL as a Community. Three participants discussed spiritual community creating a learning and practice ground for TUL. Andal explained that spiritual community forms a classroom for practicing UL in real relationships. This involved letting go of judgements and attachments and holding space for each other as community members learned from their mistakes and transformed together:

Lived relationships that hold that space for each other so that you can... practice... having UL... you can see each other as a soul. You can get past behaviours that you would have normally judged in someone else and yourself and someone else will hold you in the same regard where you're unconditionally loved, where you're showing up with the bits of yourself that you previously judged; that you don't like; you're acting out, you're having a process, whatever it is, and just being held in that UL, knowing that it's just a process, you know, for yourself and for others and others doing that for you, that playing out in community, that's sangha... (Andal p.14).

This living classroom of UL was made possible by the courses and spiritual education that the community was based around, which taught the tools that were being collectively implemented.

Joy described unconditionally loving and feeling loved by the community she was part of and how much that meant to her. “So I feel like we... loved each other unconditionally. It was so euphoric to be loved so completely because I didn't feel that in any other area of my life” Joy, p.3.

Karlie discussed how shocking it was to initially find a community in which UL was the norm, when her experience so far had been the opposite. However, it was witnessing people in their experience and

expression of UL and using them as inspiration to adopt the teachings and practices of the school that motivated her in her journey. She recalled “so I started doing the practices and started doing everything that they were doing...” which led her to regular TUL experiences.

6.2.1.4 Connection and Relational Love

Three participants mentioned experiences in personal relationships opening their hearts to TUL experiences. This arose through three main mechanisms: forgiveness and deliberately seeing other people as souls.

Forgiveness, Empathy and Compassion. It was a process of personal forgiveness of her father that Karlie felt caused one of her first big experiences of TUL. It occurred in a group forgiveness meditation facilitated by Karlie’s teacher. As described in Appendix E.2, Karlie had a vision of herself and her father crying and forgiving each other. She attested that after that experience, her previously very difficult relationship with her father was substantially transformed and healed. Not only was the interpersonal relationship uplifted, but the resultant heart opening led to more love in all parts of Karlie’s life. She recalled “I really understood... I’ve just done this healing with my dad... and I’ve cleared my heart, my stuff around in my heart with my dad. But then I just did feel like I could access more love.”

Empathy and compassion triggered TUL for Andal, watching a Live Aid Concert as a child:

Seeing... the images of the children for the first time... stirred... compassion and suffering in me, it also stirred this deeper sense of connection with humanity... that unconditionality of love that... I... would do anything for these children in... this outpouring of if I could give them anything, I would... And I and I felt saddened by that but also uplifted into that state of real... soul stirring. (Andal, p.1-2)

Deliberately Seeing People as Souls. Three participants discussed being able to access RUL for others through seeing them as a soul – especially when triggered or challenged. Michael explained:

...You have to recognize that person's soul and go beyond just the physical form... Go beyond that person's personality, their needs and their neediness... their history... their baggage that they've carried with them. And... you'll start to forgive and you'll start to love each other and it will grow and you'll realize that that love is, is, is more powerful. (P.23)

As shared above, the ability to see each other and be seen as a soul was one of the joys Andal identified about being part of a spiritual community. When this soulful identification is there, the faults of self and other are experienced in a new context – as small parts of the whole, more easily able to be forgiven and less impeding of love.

As explored in other sections, Karlie used a similar process to maintain UL for the prisoners she was working with. Experiencing her father as a soul was also central to her process of forgiving him and

inviting UL into that relationship. She recounted “I had this overwhelming feeling of repair and UL that we had just shared at a soul level that would never have been possible any other” (Karlie, p.5).

Non-ordinary States of Consciousness. Four participants discussed non-ordinary states of consciousness which incorporated TUL. These included experiences where the participant had a sense of leaving their physical body, encountering the divine, or interacting with non-physical beings. For Joy, Amardeep and Michael, non-ordinary states arose through NDEs. Joy and Sage also described spontaneous mystical experiences. Prominent features of all of these experiences were an absence of judgement, and a sense of being truly seen, known and loved by the divine or by the non-physical beings that were encountered as will be discussed in the following sections.

Near-Death Experiences.

Michael and Amardeep both had NDEs in which they saw a tunnel of light and experienced TUL. Both perceived the TUL to be the divine. Michael described the tunnel of light and his sense of TUL as an experience of God:

I felt this energy of love that... was becoming more intense... and there ahead of me was this huge tunnel of white light that was coming towards me... and the energy that was coming off that was like the same energy of love. But it was... tenfold. And what I realized, what I was looking at here... was the image of God. (Michael, p.5)

Amardeep described how his NDE experience of TUL changed his paradigm of life and altered his understanding of reality:

I had an NDE in a hospital. I had to be resuscitated and that was the moment I met.. what I can say is unconditional love and the light at the end of the tunnel or, I don't know, the divine. And I came back and then I realized this reality, in my experience at least, was not what people say it is. (Amardeep, p.11)

For Joy, TUL was one of the primary characteristics of her NDE. She shared “I did die. And that is like... being catapulted into a field of unconditional love. In fact, only unconditional love exists” (Joy, p.17).

Unconditional Love from Non-Physical Beings. One of the features of Michael’s NDE was being visited and healed by unconditionally loving non-physical beings:

I felt safe in in the presence of this person... And as time went on, I felt the presence of more people... They got their hands sort of slowly hovering over my body... I knew then that that was UL that was coming... through their hands... (Michael, p.15)

Joy and Michael also felt completely unconditionally loved by God or the Divine during their NDE’s.

Sage and Joy experienced interactions with non-physical beings during mystical experiences when they were young. Joy experienced a visitation from a master who told her she was loved and safe and gave her details about how her life would be. She found this experience and the love that accompanied it

hugely reassuring in the face of the stress of domestic conflicts between her parents. Sage described a visitation from an unidentified non-physical presence:

A discarnate light appeared and I heard a voice... a clairaudient voice. It wasn't outside my head, it was inside. And it was so loving and so kind... And I can't remember what was said. But... I remember the feeling... And it was almost like that was this seed point of remembering. (Sage, p.4)

Such interactions have continued throughout Sage's life.

6.2.2 Characteristics

The characteristics of TUL were what the participant felt or perceived during the experience itself. In some cases, it was difficult to distinguish between trigger, characteristic and impact. For example, in the case of those who felt seen, known and unconditionally loved by a pervasive divine presence in their NDE, that sense of being seen and known was perhaps both trigger and characteristic. Those who had peak TUL experiences often spoke of that love continuing after the experience, making it both a characteristic and an impact. In some instances, something that was a characteristic of TUL in one instance was a trigger or impact in another.

Part of the difficulty of differentiation was the seemingly self-begetting nature of TUL. Participants may have initially had an episode of forgiveness, which opened them into TUL. However, once they felt that TUL, forgiveness became easier in the future (an impact) leading to more TUL. For the purpose of this research, characteristics have been included if they were a feature of the TUL experience even if they also arise in other sections. Table 7 shows the superordinate and subordinate themes of the characteristics of TUL experiences.

Table 7

Characteristics of TUL Experiences

Superordinate Theme	#	Subordinate Theme	#
Oneness	6	Oneness	6
		Interwoven; interconnected; Synergy	5
		Field or ocean of love, oneness or bliss	4
		Universe, everything and everyone as unconditional love	3
		No polarity or separation	3
Wellbeing/ positive emotion	5	Safety, support and perfection	4
		Euphoria	3
Divine/Soul	5	Unconditional love as the Divine or God	4
		Experience of being seen, known and loved by God	2

		Soul and Unconditional Love	4
Beyondness	5	Beyond Body, Mind, Emotions	3
		Awakening, Freedom, Self-Transcendence	2
		Familiarity/Remembering Beyond Experience	3
		Expansive/Limitless/Infinite	3
		Beyond conditions/ Attachments/ Judgements	2
		Paradox: Beyond logic	2
Energy	4	UL as Energy	3

6.2.2.1 Oneness

All six participants reported a sense of unity, or an absence of separation or polarity as part of their TUL experience. Some felt one with the people they were with, some with all of humanity, with nature, with the universe or with all of creation. Andal gave a quintessential quote about her experience of the relationship between TUL and unity:

[Y]ou're in that field of oneness and all you're feeling is love and all you are generating is love. And it's beyond the mind. It's beyond the emotional body. It's beyond even our emotions. It's just a blissful, all-pervading, all-pervasive experience of the ocean of bliss; of love... That's unity. (Andal, p.26)

Michael experienced this for the first time in his NDE: “I felt complete oneness then, and that was something I'd never felt before” (p.15). Amardeep described feeling that he is part of everything: “I know everything is myself and... myself is part of everything; my true self” (Amardeep, p.6).

Karlie discussed unity as a feature of TUL in group healing environments – particularly in the course of restorative justice: “I would say that we were all in total unity and all parts of all people were being healed in that unity... And I was blown away by it, to be honest” (Karlie, p.7). Elements of this are discussed below.

Joy experienced TUL as unity in several forms that are discussed elsewhere. She felt it as interconnectedness, a sense of unity and moving as one in a dance class (which gave rise to UL, p.12). In her NDE, discussed above, she experienced that everything is love, and one through that substance of love (p.17).

Interwoven; Interconnected; Synergy. Five participants discussed some form of interconnection. This could be interconnection with other souls, a sense of consciousness being interwoven as opposed to separate, or a sense of being part of the universe. Amardeep described an interwoven feeling between himself and his grandmother: “There wasn't any boundary between her, myself, the room reality, my

consciousness, her consciousness. It was something very interwoven and very interconnected” (Amardeep, p.5). Joy recounted feeling innately connected with a group she was teaching. She referred to a “web of interconnectedness between all of us... I would feel with absolute clarity and certainty... that we were all souls intimately, divinely connected with this beautiful... web of love” (Joy, p.5). Andal commented that TUL “stirred this deeper sense of connection with humanity” (p.1).

For Michael and Joy, there was a sense of interconnection and oneness with nature. Michael realised “that we're very much a part of that universe. And... as a human race have pretty much forgotten that...” (Michael, p.12). Joy described an experience of unity with nature through TUL: “So it was way more than just loving the land and the land loving me. It was transcendent... I am an intimate part of this. Every breath I breathe, you breathe out. Every breath you exhale, I breathe in” (Joy, p.10). Sage shared her experience of connectedness in a paradoxical way (p.6), discussed under the heading of ‘Beyondness’ below.

Field or Ocean of Love, Oneness, or Bliss. Four participants discussed TUL as a field or an ocean – of love, oneness or bliss. Sage described her overall experience of TUL, saying “because it's like... the ocean for me. The ocean is UL...” (p.1). Andal’s account corroborated this, describing an ocean of unity: “We experience that love and that is a field... we're in that ocean then, so we're in that unity” (p.26). Joy described her NDE as initially being an “experience of being catapulted into a field of UL” (p.17). Karlie spoke of a field of TUL being formed through group process (discussed above). For Andal, the field of love is a way of accessing the rest of her divine connection: “We can connect with that divine energy through that field of UL and be assisted wherever we are” (Andal, p.27).

The Universe, Everyone and Everything as Unconditional Love. Three of the participants’ unity experiences arose from the fact that they experienced everything as love. Therefore, everything was one because it was made from the substance of love. Andal described the process of coming into that experience: “love multiplies love... until... you realize, oh I'm that you're that we're all that” (p.25). Amardeep believes that love encompasses everything. He commented “I don't think there's anything beyond love” (p.3) and later added “There's unconditional everywhere if you choose to see it” (p.4). Joy put her perspective succinctly declaring “In fact, only UL exists” (p.17).

No Polarity or Separation. Three participants found a curious sense of polarity being reunified into a sense of perfection. They described everything as feeling whole, good, and acceptable within TUL. Amardeep explained “Love can hold every emotion inside it. Anger can come from love... Everything comes from love” (p.7). Karlie spoke of a field of TUL embracing both the victim and persecutor ‘parts’ of people participating in a restorative justice process (p.7). Karlie also described inmates she was working with being able to feel a sense of unity even with their prison warders, describing “some of them are so dedicated to their healing, they even experience it with the officers... And there is this unity... and it's kind

of profound” (p.8). For Sage, lack of separation is one of the defining features of TUL. She shared “for me, the word love becomes the word for whole in a relationship where there is no separation” (p.7).

6.2.2.2 Wellbeing and Positive Emotion

Five participants described a sense of wellbeing and positive emotion during their TUL experiences. For four of them, this at least partially manifested as a sense of safety, peace and calm. Three experienced a sense of euphoria, joy or bliss.

Safety, Wellbeing and Perfection. Four participants recounted experiencing a sense of calm, safety, perfection or feeling held in some way during their TUL experience. Michael, recovering from being dragged under a train, reported “I was in... no pain whatsoever and feeling totally calm and safe” (p.3). Karlie also mentioned safety as a feature of TUL, reflecting “...I'm totally safe in that” (p.14). Rather than talking about safety per se, Amardeep recalled a sense of everything being perfect and in harmony (p.5). Joy and Andal both spoke of feeling ‘held’ by TUL.

Euphoria. Three participants discussed an elevated emotional state associated with TUL. Michael expressed “It was just the most amazing feeling” (p.4-5). About one TUL experience, Joy shared “It was so euphoric to be loved so completely” (p.2-3). About another, she recalled “I remembered feeling like there is a whole host of divine beings who have taken up temporary residence inside myself so they could experience the joy that I was experiencing” (p.12). Andal encapsulated the blissful essence of all of her TUL experiences as: “Satcitananda: Truth, consciousness, bliss. Unconditional love is the same state” (p.38). She also discussed a feeling of freedom and joy associated with TUL.

6.2.2.3 God or Soul

Participants often spoke of an experience of God or the divine as TUL – which often surprised their previously more religious image of God, or their rejection of God as a superstitiously devised judgemental figure. Several of them also spoke of a sense of TUL residing within them as a soul, which was linked to an infinite TUL that was the divine.

Unconditional Love as the Divine or God. Four participants spoke of UL being the divine itself. Andal shared “The divine is this UL. The divine is... this energy that is in the form of our soul inside of us and is also everywhere” (Andal, p.7). Joy spoke of experiencing God as TUL in her NDE. She recalled that in that context “...Only UL exists. In fact, the sense of God loving me so completely. That that was all that is... there in that presence. There's no room for anything else” (p.17). Joy went on to describe an almost intimate sense of being seen and known by God, and the resulting fullness or completeness of the love she experienced: “[T]he overarching characteristic was feeling completely known. Completely loved... No particle of me was not known or not loved. It's... all-encompassing” (p.21). This concurs with Amardeep and Michael, who both experienced God as TUL in their NDEs (as described in Section 7.2.1.1.5.1). Michael also stressed the feeling of being unconditionally seen, known and loved by God.

Soul and Unconditional Love. Three participants explored the concept of a relationship between the divine as TUL and the soul. Andal explained:

You know, if we think of unconditional love as that divine energy... that divine energy is... what we experience... inside of us as the soul. But really, that soul is one with the big ocean. It's a drop of the ocean that is one with the ocean. (Andal, p.25)

Amardeep described a similar sense of the soul or essence connecting him with TUL – which for him is the divine. He reflected “for myself, unconditional love is a feeling within our hearts, which comes from our soul... Love is the root of our being. Unconditional love for me in a non-dualistic sense is God itself” (p.1-2).

One of the ways Michael characterised the TUL he received was as love for his soul, as opposed to love for anything he was or anything he had done:

They weren't loving me because they thought I was a... beautiful looking man or what have you. They weren't loving me because they thought that I'd been good to them, ...I was fixing them or, or was any use to them... They just loved the pure essence of me, the pure essence of my soul. (Michael, p.15)

This has inspired Michael's own practice of trying to love others as souls, discussed above.

6.2.2.4 Beyondness

One factor that seemed to distinguish TUL from normal love was a sense of “beyondness”. TUL was portrayed as being beyond limitations, judgements, conditions, and attachments. It was experienced as being beyond words, mind, emotion and sometimes even body. It was said to be beyond the normal construct of self, and beyond logic in that it was often paradoxical.

Beyond Body, Mind, Emotions. Three participants described in different ways how they experienced TUL as beyond body, mind and emotions. Andal directly stated “It's beyond the mind. It's beyond the emotional body. It's beyond even our emotions” (p.26). She reflected that the “beyond the mind” aspect of TUL took some adapting to: “Because clearly these were just all thoughts and what I'm experiencing is something beyond thought” (p.9). Amardeep shared similar perceptions, explaining that the mind is not capable of the TUL experience. He posited “the mind could never really give us that richness. It's a richness that comes from the heart” (p.4). Sage summarised “Don't think you can think UL” (p.2).

Regarding TUL and emotion, Andal distinguished that TUL is “Beyond an emotion... Even though it creates an emotion, the thing that it is, is beyond emotion” (p.23). Sage posited that TUL was beyond the specific emotion of fear. She reflected that in normal consciousness “There's a sort of... love. Fear. Love. fear. Love, fear. So for me, love is... way beyond” (p.6-7).

Sometimes the “beyondness” stretched to a sense of disembodiment. Andal described:

In those deep experiences, you can even not be aware of the body and... not be aware of the mind... The body is... there physically, but... You're not aware of that body, you're not identified with that body, certainly. (p.26)

As explored below, it seemed that participants experienced a different underpinning to a person's identity in these moments; one of freedom or expansion. This is beyond the normal construct of self, based on a combination of mind, body and emotion.

Awakening, Freedom, Something Bigger. Andal and Amardeep both described a sense of awakening, freedom or identification with an essence or force that was bigger than their separate self in their TUL experiences. Andal discussed these three experiences as one, and connected them with a sense of unity:

The stirring of something bigger than yourself inside of you, which is really all around you as well. Connecting with that... being free of the heaviness that was within me still, and that awakening and connection with that heart, its capacity to love unconditionally... to experience that freedom of loving and being in that unity. (Andal, p.6)

Amardeep described TUL as a kind of awakening experience: "It's a feeling or it's a spiritual sensation or a spiritual kind of an awakening we can have" (p.2). Part of the awakening Amardeep mentioned was a sense of aliveness. He described having "Alertness and hearing that don't feel confined to my mind... I'm more in my senses... perceiving everything from a very still place" (p.6). This brought a deepening or "beyondness" to the way he experienced the world around him.

Familiarity. Three participants had a sense of "remembering" TUL – though they hadn't experienced it before. Sage explained "It was almost like that was this seed point of remembering. I'd never really forgotten" (p.4). Andal had a similar experience, expressing: "oh, it's not new territory. It's just remembering" (P.18). For Karlie, it was a sense of homecoming: "What's that? ...that feels like home..." (P.3). For all three, the sense of familiarity was not based in specific memory, but a sense of something essential within that was being rediscovered.

Expansive, Limitless and Infinite. Three participants described TUL as infinite, limitless or expansive. Amardeep and Sage discussed a lack of bounds or divisions on TUL. Sage explained "UL doesn't differentiate. It is literally unconditionally loving... it's not partitioned. It's not compartmentalized. It's not limited. It's unlimited..." (p.7). Amardeep described an infinite awareness inherent to TUL that stemmed from its boundlessness: "Lack of having a boundary makes it infinite in that awareness" (p.4).

Andal spoke about the limitless capacity for TUL to expand:

Just when you think you can't love anymore, your heart cracks open again and you go, "Oh my God... I just couldn't conceive that this much love exists." ...And then it still takes you by surprise 20 years later... you go... I just still can't believe. Like, obviously, conceptually, I believe that it's infinite and it's an ocean and therefore... this experience is going to continue to keep happening.

But when it comes because the felt sense is still new, it's still equally as mind blowing and heart... gobsmacking as ever like, Oh my God... I love more and there's more love... So it's a joy. (p.34)

Beyond Conditions, Attachments, and Judgements. Some of the factors that were seen as potential limiters of love were conditions, attachments and judgements, which were absent in UL. Michael recognised that the love in his NDE was unconditional by its lack of attachments and judgements. He reflected “The reason I said it was UL that was coming through... was because there was no attachment there. They weren't judging me” (p.15). Sage characterised it as a lack of separation: “In that sense, there's no separation... And there's no judgment” (p.1).

Paradox: Beyond Logic. A characteristic of TUL spoken to by Sage and Amardeep was that it is paradoxical; beyond the realm of logic. This emerged in the way they spoke of the spatiality of TUL. Amardeep spoke of a sense of infinity in TUL, but suggested that he was aware of his finite consciousness experiencing it: “In my little bit of that infinity, that's where I'm experiencing this reality from” (p.6). He also posited that TUL is accessible through an “infinite expanse within our chest, within our heart” (p.9) – a space apparently simultaneously infinite but contained inside of us. In a similar vein, Amardeep shared that in his first TUL experience he felt it paradoxically took him “somewhere very far away, but at the same time it magnified this reality” (p.5). Sage shared a similar spatial paradox of the unity of TUL. “I see myself reflected in every aspect of creation. And I see and I feel the universe within me. And yet I'm also very aware that I'm a microcosm of that incredible grandeur” (p.6).

Another aspect of paradox was in unity and diversity, and how TUL could hold apparent opposites within its oneness. Sage explained her perspective that “Unity isn't uniformity. It's radical diversity and... abundance and complexity, but coming from that lived experience of wholeness” (p.6).

For Sage and Amardeep, TUL contained all seeming polarities in its oneness. Amardeep discussed how all emotion, “good” and “bad” was encompassed in TUL: “Love... holds every emotion inside it.”. Sage described that the wholeness of TUL expresses through light and shade, and how she practices acceptance of that without promoting more negativity: “There's so much playing out in terms of the... wholeness... within the light and the shadow of its expression. So it's not about condoning, but nor is it condemning and nor is it colluding” (p.6).

Amardeep and Sage both discerned a paradox of immanence and transcendence, or extraordinary and ordinary in terms of how they experienced TUL states. Amardeep explained “whatever is transcendent is also immanent... It's here, it's permeating everything... I think that in a non-dualistic level we can find... the unconditional right here...” (p.3-4). Sage shared “the supernormal experiences that I've always had aren't peak as such. They're just extraordinary that are ordinary” (p.4).

6.2.2.5 Energy

Three participants described TUL in terms of energy. Karlie recalled “I felt this overwhelming energy. And then I started to understand that that was love” (Karlie, p.2). Michael explained about his NDE “they’re different forms of love. But I felt like they were all condensed into this energy that was coming through” (p.6). Andal was struck by the quantity of TUL energy: “The amount of energy, you know, the amount of UL, the amount of just thickness of that palpable energy that was being generated...” (p.20). TUL energy was sometimes experienced as moving or changing, particularly: “descending” (Andal, p.9), “expanding” (Andal, p.11) or “intensifying” (Michael, p.5).

6.2.3 Impact

Superordinate and subordinate themes of the impacts of TUL experiences are outlined in Table 8, and further elucidated below.

Table 8

Impact of TUL Experiences

Superordinate Theme	#	Subordinate Themes	#
Uplifting personal relationships	6	More love and good will - for self and others	4
		Deeper connection and repairing conflict	3
		Greater empathy, acceptance, forgiveness and spaciousness	5
		Better communication	6
		Less co-dependency, toxicity and shame in relationships (more self-love and self-respect)	3
Personal Healing, Transformation and Evolution	6	Shift in relationship with self and identity	5
		Inner resource of love and resilience	4
		Less negative emotion and self-talk	5
		More positive emotion	6
		Healing pain, depression, anxiety and addiction	3
		Softening of ego/ reduction of flaws	5
		Enhanced values, virtues and character strengths	2
Purpose and Service	6	More wisdom and self-awareness	2
		Purpose	6
		Greater motivation for and joy in service	5
		Greater capacity and impact in purpose and service	4
		Service as an expression of oneness and UL	4

		Not serving from ego (either in success or failure)	4
New understanding of/connection with divinity	5	Changed perception of and relationship with the Divine	5
		Increased motivation for/ Re-adopting spiritual practice	4

6.2.3.1 Uplifting Personal Relationships

One of the most prominent benefits people described following their TUL experiences was an improvement in their relationships with their family members, those close to them, and even with those who had previously been difficult to deal with. They spoke of having more love for themselves and others, of connections deepening and conflicts repairing, of reductions in toxicity or co-dependency in relationships, greater empathy and spaciousness, and better communication.

More Love and Goodwill – For Self and Others. Four participants spoke of experiencing more love in general: for people around them and for themselves. Karlie shared “I just did feel like I could access more love.... And then I could start to feel all that love... I could actually feel that love that was so present” (p.5-6). Later she discussed a permanent capacity to love self and others - almost as a kind of superpower. “After having these experiences of unconditional love, I feel like I could be in any environment with anybody... where they or I have done anything and still feel burning blazing love for them and me” (p.22-23). Joy felt she had greater capacity to hold and give love in a personal relationship: “I do feel like being deeply steeped in unconditional love myself gives me the capacity to provide that for him... I'm feeling more and more that that's present” (p.24).

Andal described her journey of TUL being a never-ending expansion into more love. “I love more and there's more love” (p.34). She excitedly shared about how she was able to love everyone more having experienced TUL, because she suddenly saw everyone as a soul: “Just walking around suddenly celebrating that “Oh my God, everyone's a divine being”... and... wishing that they would know that about themselves” (p.13). Michael and Karlie also described seeing people as souls – particularly when things felt difficult – as a method to come back to TUL. This was included with the triggers of TUL because in a sense, it is a technique to trigger or reconnect with TUL. However, it was because of their prior TUL experiences that they had access to this capacity and perspective, and thus is also an impact of TUL.

Deeper Connection and Repairing Conflict. Three participants mentioned that after their TUL experiences, there was a sense of repair, conflict resolution, greater connection, peace, or shift in interpersonal relationships. Karlie and Andal both experienced longstanding conflict or tension with their families resolving. Karlie’s fraught relationship with her father underwent a so-far permanent repair. She recalled “I had this overwhelming feeling of repair and UL ... from that moment on, our relationship was

different... so we're good today" (Karlíe, p.5). Similarly, Andal reflected "I stopped having so many arguments with my family" (P.17).

Michael spoke about realising through his experience how conditions in relationships stilt love. This realisation transformed his relationships with his family and other significant people in his life:

There are still conditions involved there... You don't escape that with any parent... so I learnt that and... that helped me... with my relationship with them and my brothers and sisters and all the people around me that had been with me for years and even close friends and... ex-lovers (p 15-16).

Greater empathy, acceptance, forgiveness and spaciousness. Five participants had their relationships softened and sweetened through being able to hold greater empathy, forgiveness, acceptance and spaciousness after their TUL experiences. This included less projection, blame, expectations and conditions and more acceptance of themselves and others as they were. Andal described a heightened capacity for acceptance of self and others following TUL experiences:

Yeah, sure, you made a mistake. No worries... this went wrong, no problem. You know, you can be in that kind of truly spacious... state... you can hold someone in their shame and you don't have shame for the stuff you've done.... So learning how to know and feel that we're unconditionally loved in all that and hold others in that as best we can, knowing that we're not going to be perfect. (Andal p.15-16)

Karlíe discussed how a similar spaciousness played out in the restorative justice work she was involved with. She shared "Maybe they don't feel safe enough to do that right now... I have to let go of my expectation and then I can... just see them and love them" (p.10). Forgiveness was also a huge part of Karlíe's initial TUL experience with her dad. Whilst forgiveness triggered that experience, the fact that she was able to maintain it so consistently afterwards may be another impact of TUL. This speaks to the bi-directional relationship between TUL and some of its impacts.

Amardeep spoke about experiencing greater empathy in personal relationships, having "unconditional empathy to see it from their point of view and to see my own flaws or how they see me" (p.18). This reduced his judgement of the other person, and, as mentioned below, allowed him to leave a relationship with peace and respect rather than enmity.

Michael found new love and understanding with ex partners through letting go of conditions. He reflected "I've got a new relationship with them now that is... quite unconditional... I can view them in a completely different way. And that means that they start to view me in a different way also" (p.16).

For Sage, condition-free love included the spaciousness of moving from judgement to discernment. This made relationships gentler: "For me, judging means I'm imposing my sense onto others. But discernment

for me sort of turns that slightly around and can say this doesn't feel right for me" (p.18). This lack of judgement, conditions or expectations changed how people responded to her. She shared "It's very rare now that I meet people that are angry because somehow they don't need to be with me... [W]hen people feel safe, they don't have to fight...they don't have to be anxious or fearful." (p.17-18)

Better Communication. All six participants discussed experiencing more harmonious and skilful communication since their TUL experiences. For some this meant feeling more able to listen to others, and to be heard. Others cultivated greater ease with boundaries, resulting in less passive or aggressive communication and more loving assertiveness and clarity.

Sage remarked that the attitude of love helped people to feel safe to hear what she was saying – and reminded her to focus on hearing them in return:

What I find is that when the energy is loving, then people can hear it much more easily... And I have to be willing to do that too, and hear other people saying to me, "Look, this is my experience, this is my sense", and I have to be receptive. (Sage, P.20)

Joy also reflected that she is better able to resolve any tensions in her personal relationships because of love, leading to faster conflict resolution. She shared "It does feel like we move through things quicker because there is very much that frequency of or that foundation or that container of UL" (p.24).

Andal, Karlie and Amardeep all discuss the importance of healthy, assertive boundaries, and how holding love whilst delivering boundaries has helped them. Andal explained:

So we can still have... boundaries and... standards... but still be totally from that space of UL... having those conversations or setting those boundaries. And it brings a different result. It has a different energy to it and it's healthy (p.36)

Andal shared how she had experienced this transition to healthy boundaries in her own life, due to a healing of general anger through TUL:

Before, if I felt like my boundaries were crossed, I would probably just... have words about it in an unskilful way... or just... get passive aggressive about it... and definitely be... angry at the other person... and generating lots of anger because... that's the state I was in and projecting that onto the situation. And now... that anger is dissipated... It's not there... waiting to be triggered... Through connecting with unconditional love... But if... my boundaries been crossed, then I'd be more likely to be able to... if that anger comes easily, let it pass, and then skilfully... communicate. (p36-37)

Sage discussed offering boundaries from a place not of expectation that the other person will change, but of sharing her own experience. She felt that people soften in the absence of judgement:

"This doesn't feel right for me." And when that conversation happens... what I find is that people can soften because they're not feeling judged. But they are, I hope, invited to... be aware of... how they're behaving and how that might affect other people... (p.19)

Karlie and Amardeep both explored the idea of boundaries and “no” as a form of TUL or divinity. Karlie experienced more love in her restorative justice group as a result of boundaries:

But I have really learned, particularly over the last few months... that... the boundaries are a form of love... And it helps people to feel safe... It actually brings a whole lot more energy of love in... because there's more of a structure and people feel more safe. (p.19-20)

She described how she set loving boundaries by extending love to a person whilst she explained what is true for her in the situation:

Normally setting a loving boundary is... where they can still feel the love... but it's just the way it is... that's the rules and that's just the truth... and I can help you in this way. And I'm sorry I can't help you in that way. (p.20)

Amardeep described realising that “my ‘no’ is a completeness because it allows the light in me not to fade” (p.15). This allowed him to have better boundaries in every area of his life. He explained “no became just as... important as yes” (p. 14).

Less Co-Dependency, Toxicity and Shame, More Self-Love and Self-Respect. Three participants reported overcoming shame and co-dependency in relationships. This led to more love, greater confidence, and in two cases, the ability to say no to unhealthy dynamics. Michael reflected:

I was looking for a lot of reassurance in all forms of love... whether... from my... parents or... in relationships... [W]hen I fell in love... if something... went wrong... and I felt it was my fault, I wasn't very good at recovering from it because I didn't love myself enough.... I suddenly felt, oh, my God, this is me. She's absolutely right. I'm terrible... And so, because I lost faith and belief in myself, then my partner would start to lose faith and belief in me also... [W]hat I realized when I was in this other realm was that that I'd been loved all my life... by my guides and my angels and that... I got so much love to give. And why was I beating myself up so terribly all those years and then allowing others to ultimately lose faith in me as well. (p.12).

As mentioned above, he later described how his relationships have become less co-dependent and less conditional since this shift in his self-love and self-esteem.

Amardeep shared about having the compassion and clarity to understand that a relationship was not right for him. He realised that it was not personal, and didn't mean he or the other party were wrong or needed to be fixed or ashamed. This enabled him to leave the relationship with peace, without judging or blaming himself or the other person:

Through that empathy, I understood we were never compatible. And... that was the moment of the biggest peace that I've ever felt in probably most of my life... So for me, that unconditional act of seeing their point of view, seeing how they see me and how I am as a person and how they were, and the fact that those mechanisms together won't fuse properly... Then I realized, Wow, this is not personal. (p.18)

Karlie shared that prior to her TUL experience, she was in a lot of unhealthy relationships – which she felt she chose because of a sense of separation from love. She implied that this is no longer the case for her since TUL became a feature in her life.

6.2.3.2 Healing, Transformation, Evolution

All participants experienced some form of healing, transformation or evolution through their TUL experience. Varieties included recovering from psychological maladies, such as depression, anxiety or addiction, improvements in self-relationship and uplifted emotional landscape. Participants also mentioned character transformations, including decreased vice and ego, and increased virtue. In Amardeep's words "love is really the panacea of all ills... human kindness, compassion and love" (p.7).

Shift in Relationship with Self and Identity. A large part of the transformation for five participants involved their relationship with themselves or the world around them. Karlie spoke of TUL changing how she felt about herself. "It actually fills me with... purpose and okayness... like I was definitely a person that was... uncomfortable in their own skin... I am not... like that anymore" (p.23).

Much of Michael's transformation through TUL centred on a shift in identity. He spoke about reconnecting with his true essence, and this allowing him to grow in self-love and self-efficacy:

[W]hat I realized as I was peeling away all these layers... was that I'd never loved myself either... And so that's something that I brought back with me... And once I could start loving myself, then then I could start believing in myself. And then and that would help me to turn my life around, which it did. (p.6)

As illustrated in the section on increased capacity for service, below, Michael believes that his transformation in self-love led him to be able to begin his career as an artist, write his book and compose his symphony (p.11).

Andal shared that TUL connected her with a deeper part or "essence" (p.12) of herself: "that love is... so much more powerful than any self-constructed identity... ego identity... it was like just getting back to self... getting back to who I really am" (p.18). This connection with her essence brought her a lot of peace and relief from an inner struggle. She described her surprise at earning a new peaceful identity and reputation within the family, having previously been referred to as the "angry dwarf":

I was almost flabbergasted to hear my dad say, "Oh, you're always the peaceful one." And I was like, Oh my God... yeah, guess that's true now. But... it hadn't been for so many years. And so this identity had shifted. (p.17)

Amardeep also discussed a shift in identity through TUL. He explained that it gave him a sense of freedom: "Because I know everything is my Self and... my Self is part of everything; my true self. And so then that's a very big freedom to have... most of the time" (p.6).

Joy felt a shift in how she valued herself, and as a consequence, in her behaviours. After her TUL experience in her NDE, she made a conscious choice to live from a place of truth rather than any kind of people-pleasing. She recalled “I made the decision that I would only do what I felt called to do. I wasn't going to do anything out of duty or obligation” (p.19).

Inner Resource of Love and Resilience. Four participants felt that the TUL they had experienced never left them. They spoke of it as a resource hidden within them, one which they had discovered during the more acute TUL experience they'd had, but which was subsequently always available. This provided a great deal of comfort, resilience, courage and capacity for kindness in difficult situations.

Michael described how his experience, and its attendant joy and TUL stayed with him even after he returned to consciousness in his mangled body in the hospital bed:

I came crashing straight back into my body, into the hospital, and all the pain came rushing through; all the sound of the hospital and the trauma came rushing back... most people say to me, you must have been really gutted after all that amazingness to come back... but I wasn't because I was still fully charged with all this love that I'd been given...” (p.6)

The inner resource of love not only comforted him, but meant he was able to offer kindness and love to those around him:

[I]t took me a week to tell my parents about the NDE... But my mom said at the end... “David, we know... every time we come to see you, we walk out and we just say that you're glowing and you're like we've never seen you before. And that even though you've got all these tubes and wires coming at you, you're... giving out love and care to us and the nurses and everyone who's around you.” And I didn't realize that, that I was doing that... but other than that, I was feeling great when I was in hospital and I felt safe and I still felt like that energy from that other realm was still flowing through me. (p.7-8)

It wasn't only in the immediate aftermath that this inner resource was a comfort to Michael, but afterwards in the more day-to-day challenges of life. He described one particular challenge he faced long after his NDE, sharing:

I found that really tough... but it didn't matter because I still got this feeling of self-love and self-worth... those two work together and I still maintain those... because obviously... life is full of challenges... and those challenges still come at me really hard from time to time. But I just try and think, “...remember... don't forget... that feeling of self-love that you had when there was no judgment whatsoever (p.11-12).

Joy also used love and her connection with the divine as a sense of resource and resilience recovering from her NDE.

Recovering from surgery...it was pretty much hell. But I just kept reflecting on how it felt to be in God's presence... “Let me dwell in your love forever.” And I got through it. Got home. (p.18)

Karlie felt that a sense of TUL had become part of her inner resource that helped her when she felt lost.

It's everywhere and I'm never without it... And that's a really good thing to remember when... I'm feeling a little lost or whatever, it's like, oh, hang on a minute, I know that that UL is within me and I don't ever have to be separate from it again. And... it doesn't matter where I go that love is going to be there. (p.22-23)

Sage described a constant knowingness that TUL was with her. She shared “every single day, almost all of my life, I've had this knowingness and this this openness to being with all that sentience and being guided by such love” (p.13). She spoke of times in her life where she was less able to feel the love, but said that it never fully left her. “And there were times when that feeling was quite subdued.... Never, ever went away. It was just really on the low burner” (p.2).

Less Negative Emotion and Self-Talk. Five participants described reductions in negative emotions in their lives as a result of TUL. This included decreased fear, anxiety, stress, anger, judgement, self-consciousness and self-sabotage. As mentioned before, Andal had experienced a lot of anger in her life prior to discovering spirituality and TUL. She shared that this fell away as she had more TUL experiences, and how this shift was reflected back to her by her family:

I was known as the angry dwarf in my family, because of this propensity towards, you know, getting revved up about stuff. ... And that whole narrative and that whole perception of me... through no deliberate... thing of... “don't call me the angry dwarf anymore” or... “I'm not angry” or whatever. It just dropped away because I just wasn't that. (p.17)

She added “my behaviour has changed because you can't be in that experience and still be angry with the world and still be blaming everyone” (p.14).

Amardeep commented “I don't do anything with violence or stress. I do everything with a sense of non-violence” (p.6). This is in contrast to describing that previously, he would “be more in ego, more in anger, more in these kind of negative states... they would come and I'd have to try and fight them inside... like a wrestling match” (p.9). He also felt an absence of worry, saying “Everything is good as it is... I don't have anything really to worry about. I have no battles, I have no enemies... I'm in a... sense of equilibrium with everything” (p.6).

Karlie gave a “before” image to contrast with her current consciousness and self-relationship. She shared “[P]re-unconditional love experience there was distrust, pain... disconnection, suffering, lots of suffering, lots of mental torture and anguish” (p.22-23). She explained how this is no longer her reality.

Sage spoke of the relationship between love and fear – how she felt that fear was often an inhibitor of love. Sage discussed how her relationship with herself and with fear is different now that TUL is at the forefront of her way of living:

If that fear arises, I ask myself, why am I feeling this? And often... there really is no need... And so it gives me an opportunity to say thank you to that bit of glass, and I don't need to step on you anymore. (p.23-24)

As mentioned in other sections, Michael discussed realising how the absence of love had caused so many of his core wounds of self-doubt and self-criticism. This allowed him to let go of what he referred to as beating himself up, allowing him to treat himself and others better.

Increased Positive Emotion. All six participants described an increase in positive emotion since their TUL experience. This included more feelings of joy and happiness, more access to love, peace and contentment, or a feeling that everything is perfect as it is. As described in the characteristics section, Karlie spoke about a new sense of safety she felt through her connection with TUL, which made her feel free to be herself and to love more. As she had cultivated an enduring form of TUL, this was both a characteristic and ongoing impact of the experience.

After the TUL experience of Joy's NDE, she began to cherish being alive in a new way:

I'm delighted to be here. More and more I'm discovering man, good choice. This is actually really fun... And I'm actually really glad I'm here. And I'm actually not reluctant anymore. I'm actually really jazzed that that I have this next chapter to live. (p.19)

Michael spoke with similar elation about the newness of being he experienced post TUL. He exclaimed "Immediately when I came back... I felt self-love. I felt great: like I never felt in my life" (Michael, p.8).

Amardeep described how his TUL experiences have brought him deep acceptance and surrender, which created inner calm, peace and a sense that everything is perfect, even if it is not the way he wanted it to be:

I feel like cool and calm and still and that nothing is a problem and that everything is perfect as it is to the extent I don't need to tell myself that ever. I just know that that's the case. (p.7)

As referred to above, the changes in his relationships after his TUL experience have also brought great peace (p.18).

Andal described such a profound shift in her state of being that her partner was worried she was taking illegal substances to be so happy. She recalled "there was such a dramatic transformation in my... state of being and my happiness and my joy... that... in the beginning, he was getting a bit concerned because he thought... "are you on something?" (p.11). Regarding her more recent life circumstance – pursuing TUL and connection with what she experienced as the divine in an ashram in Southern India, she stated "There's nothing that brings me more peace and joy and happiness. So I feel very blessed" (p.19). Sage similarly described the joy of living her life in a way that kept TUL as the central goal. She shared "It really has been an incredible, joyous, enriching way of living" (p.5).

Softening of Ego and Reduction of Flaws. Five participants believed their experience of TUL softened their egos. Andal posited that this was partially due to increased self-love enabling positive inner transformation:

[T]he more we are loved unconditionally, the more space we can hold for ourself... we can show up to those parts that we've been hiding from... if we hold them in love, then we can see them and they will melt away. Whereas if... not, then we're more likely to be having them without knowing.
(p.16)

She suggested that our thoughts are innately different when we are in a different state of consciousness. These different thoughts lead to different actions, and we have more space to choose whether to act on our impulses or not:

[T]hen we can act from that place and think from that place. We access different thoughts. We have the power... to overcome our other conditioning where we might want to react a certain way and then we breathe and don't react that way, or at least, you know, hold back from expressing that reaction if it's there. (p.25)

Sage and Amardeep similarly reflected that their egos are still there as they are part of life, but that they are not as prevalent in guiding their actions. Sage found it was easier for her to notice when she is in her ego, to relax it and to get out of the way through TUL: "It didn't dissolve it but it softened it significantly and that softening I hope has remained" (p.16-17). She described how she can tell if her ego flares up, and that in that moment of awareness, she can consciously soften it. She added with relief that this has become a rare experience. Amardeep believed he had changed his relationship with his ego through TUL enough to change the way he is in the world. He reflected "I'm not saying don't have an ego, but to put it down enough to change my nature" (p.11).

Karlie also spoke about being in a constant relationship with her ego. She surrenders it regularly to the divine in her daily set aside prayer. Whenever conflict arises in her life, she looks inward to see if there is something that can be polished or softened within herself. She shared "I do try to do my own stuff... because that's where the freedom is and the capacity to come back to that love" (p.11).

Michael spoke about a decrease in ego in terms of his career. He avoided arrogance even in the face of unexpected success:

It's not about me thinking... I've just been interviewed by somebody who's really big and... It's nothing to do with that... I mean, obviously I'm human, so I'm not saying... I'm not affected by all these things, of course... but, but it's only a small fraction of my character... it's ultimately it's all about... wanting to give without gain, without me saying, "hi, I'm a really good guy."... It's just knowing that what you give out, you get back. (p.14)

Healing Pain, Depression, Anxiety and Addiction. Three participants experienced the healing of pain, depression, anxiety or addiction through TUL. As mentioned in other sections, Karlie discussed this in a

general way, referring to the monumental shift in her life from pain, depression and addiction to self-love, sobriety and fulfilment. Michael spoke more specifically about his surprise at losing his alcohol addiction without trying. He described an illustrative interaction with his sister:

She said, "Can I ask you how are you getting on not having a drink?" Because I was getting to the stage where I needed a drink, you know... "Are you feeling withdrawal?" I said, "No... I'm not even thinking about it. It doesn't even bother me"... I stopped drinking after that. (p.8)

Andal shared that her undiagnosed depression and social anxiety transformed through TUL: "[G]rowing up experiencing undiagnosed depression and social anxiety to some degree... The thing that changed that dramatically for me was when my heart opened and I felt UL..." (p.32).

Enhanced Values, Virtues and Character Strengths. Andal and Amardeep both spoke of the power of TUL to pull forth the best in people; to enhance their good qualities, and to promote strengths such as kindness, patience, empathy, compassion, humility and non-violence. For Amardeep, this is what makes TUL real in his worldly life rather than just a spiritual experience. He reflected that UL "translates into how we live: our language, our actions... kindness, patience, being able to hear someone else's pain, empathy. So there are many, many other ways that the unconditional can become real in our human experience" (p.2).

Andal shared that through TUL "my behaviours... just so rapidly transformed" (p.13). For her, the mechanism of this was that TUL is the divine, and that when a person grows TUL within, they naturally grow the qualities associated with the divine. Over time this changes their character or identity:

[E]verything that... isn't those divine qualities... is expressed less and everything that is those qualities that we associate with the divine: mercy, compassion, UL, peace, we start to experience more and more. And then then we identify with that. (p.39)

Ambal found that in community, the effect of TUL on improving character is even stronger:

[I]t's like that love is contagious and it pulls forth the soul in everyone, their best self, their shiny self, their unconditionally loving self. And then it is shared with each other... that's just the most beautiful thing to see. (p.40)

More Wisdom and Self-Awareness. One strength in particular that appeared to be enhanced through TUL, was wisdom. This included gains in self-awareness and sense of what is true, and greater discernment around what is false and should be let go. Andal believed that people are less bound by their societal and family conditioning when they are in a state of TUL (p.25). She explained her view that "when you're really... in the experience of it, then the other stuff is obviously not self and not true" (p.39).

Amardeep believed that TUL increased his self-awareness. Specifically, it helped him to discover more about himself and what he really wanted in his life:

And that's allowed me to have very deep individual healing and understand more about myself... what I want from reality, how I feel about things, how do I operate from where I'm sitting within

myself? And so I value that. And I think without this unconditional feeling in the first place, I would be very, very lost. (p.18)

6.2.3.3 Purpose, Service and Effective Action

Purpose. All participants experienced some sense of purpose that emerged through or after their TUL experience, often connected to service. Inspired by her own recovery journey through TUL, Karlie went into the prison system to deliver programs in restorative justice – with TUL as a central tenet. Michael found his vocation as an artist and author sharing about TUL and his NDE through his book, talks and interviews. Amardeep, having experienced the effulgent love and divinity embodied in his guru decided to dedicate his life to service and spiritual practice, helping others to reconnect with that love within, and pursuing ever-more illumination. After an unconditionally loving inner plane visitation, Joy found purpose in the suffering she experienced in childhood, which resulted in greater resilience. She also felt a purposeful call to share that love with others – and has done so in many different forms throughout her life: “I want to bring as much UL, as much light... as is possible. Like it's really my *raison d'etre*” (p.19). Sage shared that it was her experience of TUL and unity mixed with her understanding of science that inspired her to write her books. Andal devoted her life to TUL – in the particular flavour of bhakti. She moved to the ashram of her guru in India, where she plays a big part in perpetuating his impactful seva projects – transforming love into action.

Greater Capacity and Impact in Purpose and Service. Four participants spoke of TUL increasing their capacity for service and purpose-based projects, and/or increasing the impact service had on recipients. Michael was an exemplar of this. As mentioned earlier, after realising he was and always had been unconditionally loved through his TUL experience, he began painting artworks (that at the time of the interview were on display in Washington DC), he wrote a symphony about his NDE experience and wrote a book that led him to become a sought-after guest speaker on radio and television. He described “[O]nce I'd learnt that that self-love, then self-belief came afterwards and that made me believe that I could do these paintings. It made me believe that I could write a piece of music for an orchestra” (p.11).

Joy spoke with humility about how TUL inspires and empowers her work as a successful leadership coach and consultant:

I have to genuinely, sincerely begin with unconditionally loving them first... Same with the coaching I do. Same with the leadership development programs I design and deliver. I recognize that I have to fall in love with each person for the genius, for the mastery to be invoked... Otherwise it's not there. (p.6)

Karlie shared that working within a prison in restorative justice requires TUL to be effective. She shared “I’ve seen people go in and do that to do prison work. And if, if there’s no UL, the guys feel it and it just doesn’t work... It ought to be love” (Karlie, p.16). To this, she added:

They just don’t want... people coming in, trying to change them. It’s like we should only ever be bringing the love in and then let the love do what the love wants to do... And then they can... take what they want and they can leave the rest and they don’t have to adopt anything they don’t want to adopt. (p.17)

It is clear from the response to Karlie’s service, that she embodies this principle. At the time of the interview, 50 of the inmates were voluntarily doing a 9-day disciplined spiritual practice with her, involving twice-daily mantra and ceremony.

Andal spoke about how when you have the mindset that service is an expression of love, you overcome any self-doubt or perfectionism and you’re more able to take action. She portrayed this transition in her thinking from:

I have to be perfect, I have to be get it all right, or have it all together in order to go and serve or give... But actually... no... I can love right now. I can give right now... even if I feel crap today, even if I’ve got it all going on. (P.33)

She also described the extraordinary charitable work of her guru which she believes was made possible because of his steadfast realisation of TUL:

There’s schools being built. There’s hospitals being built. There’s feeding people. There’s crisis relief for floods, for COVID. There’s nursery school, there’s... a 100% recycling program... that’s won awards for... zero waste in serving hundreds of thousands of people daily... The local hills that were deforested for firewood over hundreds of years have now been reforested over the last 20 years... There’s empowering women’s projects... clothing people, providing... food and all of these things for the needy... 70% of the children going to the schools are first generation learners. So breaking that poverty cycle... in the rural regions and providing education that now will change the future for generations to come. There’s so many projects, you know, just wow. (P.22)

Greater Motivation for and Joy in Service. Five participants experienced greater motivation for service, and a greater sense of joy and satisfaction in the act of giving and serving. Andal spoke of that motivation to serve in her first TUL experience as a young child: “Really being deeply moved to take action... this heart opening... sense of we got to... love these people. We got to help these people... this overflowing of love” (p.2). She shared a particular moment of peak TUL that occurred later in life whilst giving food to children in India, which involved an “effervescent joy of sharing unconditional love” (p.35).

Karlie shared with joy about the service work she had been doing in prisons. “We’ve been doing lots of really amazing things there for the last six years. And I just feel totally blessed that I’m... there and get to do that” (p.15). As illustrated by some of her interview, working in the prison was not always easy, which heightens her perception that the receipt and expression of UL has brought joy to that process.

Both Joy and Michael spoke of happiness and contentment in expressing love in service. Michael discussed how he doesn't mind what level of success comes to him because he's so content with service itself. "It may just continue as a ripple, which is fine by me because ultimately... it makes me happy... because I'm giving out and receiving" (p.20). Joy shared her delight in passing on the TUL that she has received: "It's one thing to receive it... But to be able to hold it and give it, oh, I don't know anything more sublime" (Joy, p.5). Sage shared the importance she felt of TUL translating into service or action of some kind. She offered "What's really important, is to ground in this Earth walk... how I can serve the greater good, the good of the whole?" (p.5).

Service as an Expression of Oneness and UL. Four participants explained that their desire to serve felt like a way to express TUL and wholeness with the universe. Andal remarked "I just keep trying to serve so that I can express that love and serve that love" (p.21). For Sage, serving TUL manifested as a central motivating question through her life: "How can I serve the... wholeness" (p.6).

Joy felt more happiness in sharing love than in receiving it. She shared "It's one thing to experience it... I love it. It's one thing to receive it. It's a pearl. But to be able to hold it and give it, oh, I don't know anything more sublime." Describing her new, joyful appreciation for life on Earth after her NDE, she explained that sharing what she experienced as god's love is her reason for being (p.19). Michael experienced a desire to offer the love he was experiencing to others: "I'd come back feeling self-love, and all I wanted to do was give love out to others" (p.8). This desire to share the wholeness of the universe made Michael less self-conscious as he explored his creative pursuits.

Not Serving From Ego. Four participants spoke about experiencing a reduction in egoic involvement, self-consciousness, self-righteousness, and self-sabotage in the way they were able to serve since TUL became a feature of their lives. Andal believed this diminished ego may be due to a new sense of self that includes everyone:

[B]ut the 'you' is everyone... you are less controlling and attached to the agenda of the ego because... you genuinely want the best... for the... big self which you can see as everyone involved... So there's that just natural goodwill. (p.38)

She discovered a sense of freedom in service as the self-consciousness of the ego fell away:

[B]ecause it's just from that freedom... it's about the joy of giving, not about, 'Oh my God... am I good enough or will they like me or have I done it right?' all that stuff... it's just... the joy of really giving... and sharing of ourselves. (p.34-35)

Another way Andal's ego's relationship with service changed was that when she was younger, she described being almost militant in her expression of trying to change the society she lived in. Now, she says she's realised, "Oh, we can create transformation through UL as well" (p.13). Whilst still aware of

injustices, she shared that she felt less angst, and more capacity to take action to change what needed to be changed from a place of love.

Michael spoke at length about how his ego had been changed by TUL, and love for self. He shared that he would have expected fear, self-consciousness, or potentially arrogance in the face of the new opportunities in his life, but they did not arise. He felt instead he was simply sharing what he had to give:

Every single interview and talk and podcast I've done... it's not ego based. It's not me saying, "Yeah, wow... I've just spoke to a million people last week" ... I did a coast-to-coast station in the US and that was huge... And my friends were saying, "God, how did you do it? I couldn't do that." And... I didn't even think about it... I'd done one the day before, and I was speaking to probably about two men and a dog... But it was exactly the same energy where I just went on there and I just spoke from the same place and there was no sense of, "I'm... great look at me now... I'm on coast-to-coast radio"... And what I'm realizing is it's not about that. It's about... me giving out something to the universe. (p.13)

Sage put it a different way, saying that her job was to “show up and get out of the way” (p.16). This implied a sense of being the mouthpiece or vehicle of something beyond the separate self.

Karlie shared how letting go of the egoic tendency to rescue allowed her to become an instrument for TUL. She felt this was more effective in making whatever change needed to occur.

[I]f you feel like you have to change this person, then you're immediately on the wrong foot... And there can't be that beautiful, UL that has the capacity to transform everything that needs to be transformed... I really found that to be a really powerful experience in the last couple of years... you just take the love and that's it (p.17-18).

6.2.3.4 New understanding of or connection with Divinity

Five participants alluded to how TUL allowed their relationship with spirituality and their version of the divine to be renewed, transformed, enriched or made more authentic. For some, this involved a substantial shift – perhaps from atheism or a rejection of religious dogma, to the discovery of a new form of spirituality arising from the felt sense of TUL. For others, it was more subtle – more TUL meant less shame and fear, which allowed them to feel closer to and more authentic with the divine as they knew it. Whilst it doesn't appear that a conception of the divine is necessary to experience TUL, every participant in this study spoke of the divine and becoming closer to it through TUL.

Changed Perception of, and Relationship With the Divine. Five participants found that their understanding of or relationship with the divine was different before and after their TUL experiences. Michael had rejected religion earlier in his life because he found it to be full of judgement (p.18). Through his NDE, he was shocked to experience the divine as completely non-judgemental TUL.

[T]hat was the most profound part of the whole experience because... because it was God in the form of all creation, I realized now the importance of how much love is coming from that... And so that's something I've carried with me... my faith is really, really powerful now. (p.17)

As a rational psychologist, Andal was uncomfortable with the term God, and considered religion to be the “opiate for the masses” (p.8). However, through her increasingly frequent TUL experiences, her relationship with divinity shifted:

...[C]oncept of God that I wasn't comfortable with, and yet I was having these other experiences of... opening and UL and freedom from the limitations of the self... I came to... conceive the divine, as... this energy that is in the form of our soul inside of us and is also everywhere... (p.7)

Andal began to embrace various forms of the divine that she would previously have seen as religious – but she did this because she could feel something within her responding to them; not because of any externally imposed dogma.

Karlie was not spiritual or religious at all prior to beginning her journey of recovery. However, in her interview she spoke a lot about surrendering to her Guru in India, to God and to a higher power, and about the trust she has in the Divine (p.13). It seemed that the transition from atheism to devotion arose through beginning to learn and participate in spiritual practices and having palpable experiences of TUL (Karlie, p.3). Now Karlie reported that she feels her relationship with the Divine is “totally personal” through her bhakti practice (p.13).

Amardeep had grown up in a religious family, but was surrounded by secular friends. This created a lot of confusion, which he tried to solve with his mind. He recalled “there was a certain point that I gave up. And I didn't believe in anything because I was so confused... it was very nihilistic... very empty, and I couldn't find anything to fill that space” (Amardeep, p.10-11). In Amardeep's NDE, he experienced what he could only call the Divine. This was not a rational concept, but something he felt. He spoke at length in the interview about how words couldn't describe it (p.11). It was undeniable, pervasive and inextricably linked with TUL. In this new relationship with the Divine, it was not something outside of himself, but something that was part of him, that flowed through him, and that was TUL. He explained “Love is the root of our... being. UL for me in a non-dualistic sense is God itself. It's something that can flow through us that flows through nature, compassion.” (p.2)

Joy had an unquenchable and very conscious thirst for divine connection from birth. She was raised in a multifaith Christian way that supported that. However, it seemed that the more TUL she experienced – the pinnacle being her NDE – the less bound she was by any shame or dogma that may have caused her to feel separate from the divine she craved, which enabled more of a sense of oneness with that divinity (p.17).

Increased Motivation for or Re-Adoption of Spiritual Practice. For four participants, discovering or rediscovering a connection with the divine either motivated them toward spiritual practice, or caused them to re-adopt practices they had discarded. After Amardeep's NDE, experiencing the divine as TUL, and connection with his guru in India, he re-adopted practices from his family religion, but with a newfound personal relationship to divinity and spirituality (p.11). These practices have become a central feature of his life and work.

Prior to her TUL experiences there was an absence of any kind of spirituality in Karlie's life. When she found her first spiritual school, she said it was experiential elements, such as the love and energy that kept her going back. She gradually began to adopt spiritual practices because they made her feel "better". In her interview, Karlie often spoke passionately about her daily practice of surrendering and praying to the Divine, regular ritual, and service, suggesting that her spiritual practice is now a core part of her identity.

Andal found that the TUL she experienced during her practice became irresistible. Following its call, she went to spiritual classes every weekend for "a year or more" (p.12). She went deeper and deeper with her faith and practice, and eventually moved to southern India, where practice and sharing that practice and connection with others is now the central focus of her life.

Michael shared that since his NDE he meditates more, and has often sought healing from energy practitioners. These elements were not part of his life prior to his NDE. However, the main shift in his practice appeared to be in his daily life – as he now strives consciously to share the love he has received with others, and to love people as they are. He shared that this keeps him "afloat" (p.18) rather like spiritual practice.

6.3 Discussion

Study two was undertaken specifically to explore TUL forms of UL. It brought a different type of TUL into focus: TUL as an ongoing and ever-increasing attitude or state. Mahony, author of *Exquisite Love* posits that opening into love "may be like the sudden opening of a thundercloud followed by the rush of rain, or... may open gently, like a sprouting seed" (2014, p.33). The TUL explored in Study One fits the first, more sudden form. Examples in Study Two included both the sudden and gradual or enduring forms of TUL.

Andal, Amardeep, Sage and Karlie demonstrated characteristics of TUL that reflected what Taylor (2017) has termed gradual awakening in addition to, and augmented by, their peak moments of TUL. These gradual, ongoing experiences were still distinct from RUL because the love did not require any specific object, and thus remained transpersonal. The continued similarities between TUL and awakening

experiences in their more enduring forms strengthens the probability that TUL is a subset of awakening experience.

In some cases, it was difficult to distinguish between the onset factors, characteristics and impacts of temporally bound, peak TUL experiences and more ongoing TUL. In many cases, once a participant had had an awakening experience of TUL, they began to live in a way that sought to maintain that sense of connection, to deepen or enrich it, and to embed it in their day-to-day lives. Thus, the difficulty in discerning their respective features is likely because apart from their onset, and perhaps intensity, they are the same phenomenon being experienced in different ways. Elements of both have been included in the results and discussion, and commentary has been made where necessary if a feature pertains more to one than another form of TUL.

6.3.1 Triggers

6.3.1.1 Triggers of TUL vs Awakening Experiences

The triggers of TUL experiences differed in some ways from those of awakening experiences. Whilst some elements that triggered awakening experiences, such as spiritual practice, also triggered TUL, they were represented in substantially different proportions. Other triggers significant in studies of awakening experiences, such as psychological turmoil, were not as apparent in relation to TUL in Study 2. Meanwhile, although connection and relational love are seldom reported as triggers of awakening experiences, they were mentioned by 3 out of 6 participants in the current study.

Psychological Turmoil. Several studies have found psychological turmoil to be one of the most common triggers for awakening experiences (Taylor 2012; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Corneille & Luke, 2021). In the current study, participants mentioned psychological turmoil as a background or contextual factor, but more to highlight the difference UL has made in their lives, helping them to transform or overcome that pain. Only one participant mentioned psychological pain as a direct trigger of part of their experience, however this aspect was not central to their overall account, and thus, was not included in this analysis.

6.3.1.2 Teacher, Practice, Community: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha

There were three superordinate trigger themes related to spirituality: teacher, practice, and community. These appeared to trigger TUL via slightly different mechanisms. These three themes are reminiscent of the three jewels or refuges of *Buddha*, *Dharma* and *Sangha*, central to the process of enlightenment within the Buddhist tradition (Bombrich, 1996; Dorje & Lingpa, 2010; Yen, 2007). Buddha, dharma, and sangha loosely translate to “teacher”, “path” and “community”. Whilst each term refers to its own important element of the ingredients for enlightenment, the three are seen as interdependent (Gombrich, 1996) and

to contain and support each other (Yen, 2007). In the current study the themes of spiritual teacher or mentor, spiritual practice and spiritual community are viewed similarly. They were each considered significant triggers, which may have different mechanisms of promoting TUL experiences. Nonetheless, in many cases, they appeared to be inextricably linked and interdependent.

6.3.1.3 Spiritual Teachers, Mentors or Role Models

Four participants discussed the impact of a spiritual teacher in cultivating TUL experiences. Andal, Karlie and Amardeep mentioned the wisdom of their teachers and their respective teachings as having enormous value on their path, and assisting them to attain TUL through practices and skills. Yet, this was only one small element of how they perceived the teacher to assist them in attaining TUL. In addition, they stressed the importance, and the awe they felt at receiving love from the teacher and witnessing the teacher embody TUL. They also mentioned a sense of a transfer of energy from the teacher, in which simple proximity to the teacher and their capacity for TUL promoted it within their students. One explanation might pertain to co-regulation or synchrony. Another suggests that TUL might be a non-localised consciousness that can be experienced and transferred as an energy. These elements will be explored below.

Bhakti. Bhakti, the practice of devotion for a teacher or deity is outlined with reference to the Upanishads and the Ramāyana in Section 2.2. The tradition is essentially based on the principle that oneness is the hidden or forgotten essence of all beings, and that the innately unifying quality of devotional love helps the devotee to remember this oneness. As illustrated in the story of Hanuman in Section 2.2.6.1, at first, a devotee feels great awe, reverence, and love for the object of their devotion. However, as they enter a mystical or awakened state through that practice of love, they find that love, the lover and the beloved are one; that the guru is actually the Self (not the individuated, personality self, but the universal Self), and that the Self encompasses not only that dyad of guru and disciple, but the whole universe (Durga, 2016; Goldman & Sutherland Goldman, 2022; Vanamali, 2010). In this way, they experience the oneness associated with high-intensity awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017).

Andal reported, “It seems like we're loving something outside of ourselves, but that same unconditional love resides in ourselves in the form of the soul. So really, that object of devotion, whoever it is or whatever it is, is just a way of revealing that love inside of us.” This is reflected not only in bhakti and the story of Hanuman above, but also in Christian mysticism. Conveying the sentiment he feels from Jesus, Ferrini has stated, “I am the door to love without conditions. When you walk through, you too will be the door” (1994, p.604). The mechanism of this teaching in both eastern and western conceptions is that love is the unifier, and that to fall in love with the divine is to realise that it is our own nature.

Risks of the Guru Relationship. Unfortunately, the guru tradition (one of the expressions of bhakti) has associated risks. As explained by Taylor (2017) and Kotler and Wheal (2017), sometimes awakening experiences lead to the negative outcome of a messiah complex. In this manifestation, a person

experiences themselves to be one with everything, as is common in awakening experiences, but then, upon returning to normal consciousness, misattributes that experience to their own ego rather than an interconnectedness of all things. That is, they believe themselves to be uniquely enlightened, and thus superior to other beings. If such people set themselves up as gurus, they can begin to attract followers who believe that they are singularly enlightened, but in fact, they had a temporally bound awakening experience and then returned to normal consciousness.

Taylor's (2017) work on awakening suggests that it is possible to attain an ongoing state of wakefulness. The mystical texts of many traditions (Dass, 2010; Durga, 2016, Easwaran, 2007; Hawley, 2001; The Holy Bible: KJV) speak of such beings and how they appear able to positively influence the state of others, appearing to impart experiences of oneness, UL, and bliss. However, even ongoing wakefulness does not entail a perfect overcoming of the ego. As Taylor (2017) discusses, it is easy for such people to end up holding substantial power, and as a result, to slip into egoic modes of conduct, which may lead to unethical, unjust, or abusive behaviour. There are many well-documented cases of this, such as that of Rajneesh, popularly known as Osho (Goldman, 2014).

The other major risk of the guru tradition pertains to the way people psychologically engage with the guru, sometimes putting them on a pedestal and seeing them as God, rather than as realised representatives of the divinity accessible to all beings. Taylor describes "followers of guru-centred spiritual traditions sometimes see the guru in quasi-divine terms, projecting notions of perfection and omnipotence onto them and using their worship and faith as a way of escaping from their own psychological issues" (2017, p.61). In some instances, it is likely that temporary experiences of TUL and other unconditionally positive states that devotees attain through their relationship with their guru may paradoxically exacerbate their co-dependency on the guru, similarly to how addicts can become dependent on drugs for access to ecstatic states and the resultant cessation of pain. Future research might explore any relationship between accessing TUL through the guru tradition and co-dependency.

Coregulation, Synchrony, and Transference. Andal and Amardeep both discussed a sense of TUL being transferred to them from the teacher. Andal suggested this may have occurred through the mechanism of coregulation. There are many references in mystical literature, both ancient and modern, to a teacher or guru's TUL affecting others (Dass, 2010; Durga, 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Makransky, 2012). The Katha Upanishad states that one who is realised can "help others through spiritual Osmosis to realize the Self themselves" (1.2:8, in Easwaran, 2007, p.76). Durga has stated that, "Energetic transference is achieved through the receptivity and love that exists between Master and student". She posits that this transfer occurs through the mechanism of the energy body (2016, p.62). Such explanations imply that TUL is a form of non-localised consciousness, perhaps existing as energy (accounts of which are explored below). Similarly, Ekman & Ekman have suggested that one of the ways an individual can enhance their capacity for global compassion is to spend time with a teacher who is realised in this capacity (2017).

Coregulation has a variety of definitions depending on the field in which the literature is applied. In early education and the study of parent-child dyads, it is a term applied to the way a caregiver responds to a child's perceptions of and feelings about the world they are experiencing. The feedback a child receives from their guardian becomes internalised and shapes their own capacity for self-regulation (Bornstein, & Esposito 2023).

A similar mechanism promotes therapeutic change in person-centred therapy. The patient begins to internalise the coregulation – the unconditional care, value and acceptance – they receive from their therapist, which they may not have received in their childhood (Ganley, 1989). This begins to change the way they regulate their own emotions, impacting self-regulation, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, similarly to how coregulation from parents alters how a child self-regulates in that parent's absence (Feldman, 2015).

Matsu-Pissot (2008) found that his participants demonstrated such benefits from their relationships with spiritual teachers and mentors. They began to internalise the love, presence and care they received from the mentor and to genuinely experience that love for themselves. This often led to TUL-type experiences. Similarly, Andal found that the love she received from her teacher helped her to love herself and cultivate a greater capacity for love in general. This suggests perhaps the RUL and UPR experienced in a teacher-student relationship may be a catalyst for TUL.

However, Andal commented that even witnessing the way the teacher expressed love and compassion for other community members enhanced her own love and compassion for her peers. Koole and Tshacher, (2016) have discussed two forms of regulation, explicit and implicit. In explicit regulation, a person deliberately takes steps to regulate and change their own emotional state. In implicit emotion regulation, conscious intentions are not required, but emotion and behaviour nonetheless change as a result of the experience of co-regulation. Examples may be when children begin to be anxious in similar situations to their primary caregiver, such as when they are running late. They learn implicitly to replicate how their caregiver feels in certain situations. It could be that this implicit form of coregulation is involved in Andal noticing herself feeling more love for others in a way that reflects what she has witnessed in her guru.

Another potential mechanism for this shift might be synchrony. In the process of psychotherapy, or the therapeutic alliance, a therapist and client tend to synchronise with each other. Koole and Tschacher suggest that in most interactions (not only therapeutic), people “spontaneously synchronise their neural, perceptual, affective, physiological and behavioural responses” (2016, p.4). Synchrony is more likely when people like each other or wish to develop a positive relationship with each other (Julien et al., 2000; Miles et al, 2011).

Synchrony and coregulation operate via two components (Bornstein, & Esposito 2023). One is comprised of consciously accessible elements including behaviour, emotion, and cognition. The other is comprised

of less consciously governed biological factors such as the hormonal and nervous systems. Perhaps in the case of Andal feeling the same feelings of TUL that her teacher felt, she was in the semi-conscious process of synchrony with her teacher, for whom she experienced bhakti or devotional love, and thus upon whom her attention was often focused in a positive way. Perhaps, as discussed in section 6.3.2.5, TUL is a type of energy that can be transferred or shared between individuals.

6.3.1.4 Spiritual Practice and Personal Development

All six participants cited spiritual practice or personal development as part of the instigation of their TUL experiences, or as part of living a life that tends more and more towards TUL. So many different practices were mentioned that it is beyond the scope of this discussion to address them all. Categories included: purification, meditation, and mental mastery; bhakti and devotion; service; and self-awareness and accountability.

Practice as a Journey. Three participants spoke of their spiritual and personal development practice as promoting not only transient experiences of TUL, but an ongoing connection with or expansion into TUL as a way of life. Once peak experiences of love had occurred, participants often used deliberate practices either to reconnect with that love or to keep their heart open to its flow. Mahony, author of *Exquisite Love*, has discussed the importance of practice in growing one's capacity for love, even after peak experiences of TUL:

[T]ransformation begins with and is supported throughout by our openness to the benevolent grace that is the nature of divine Love. Then, it takes conscious, intentional commitment and practice on our parts to refine, strengthen and purify our hearts. This is to say, it takes spiritual discipline to elevate our love. (Mahony, 2014, P.8)

Several participants spoke of how their practice held them steadfast in their commitment to TUL and oneness despite the vicissitudes they encountered in their lives. This sense of being held by practice reflects the Dharma jewel of Buddhism. In *Sanskrit*, Dharma literally translates as “to hold” (Dorje & Lingpa, 2010, p.109). Dharma is equated with the spiritual path and its regular practices, which hold participants on their way to their goal. As mentioned above, within Buddhism, the three jewels or refuges of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are interconnected with each other. However, there were a few cases where participants described practice in the absence of a teacher (buddha) or community (sangha), and still felt it assisted them into TUL.

Purification, Meditation, and Mental Training. Three participants spoke of the importance of purification, meditation, and mental training on their path. This type of mental and emotional self-control is recommended by many mystical traditions as a method of accessing unconditional states of love and joy. The Mundaka Upanishad counsels that “by truth, meditation, and self-control, one can enter into this state of joy, and see the Self shining in a pure heart” (3.1.5, in Easwaran, 2007, p.193). The Tattiriya

Upanishad 1.6.1 echoes that through exerting discipline and even rulership over the senses, the unconditional states of joy and peace emerge: “Thus one becomes king of his own life, ruler of his passions, senses and intellect. He is united with the Lord of Love who is truth, peace and immortality, the source of joy” (Easwaran, 2007, p. 248).

Karlie, Andal and Amardeep all spoke of practices in which they deliberately focused on releasing the conscious and unconscious blockages and programming that would hold them back from purity and obscure TUL. Karlie and Andal both recalled this form of clearing being instrumental in their early experiences of TUL, and all three discussed how purification was an important part of their ongoing practice of making themselves consistently available to TUL.

In reflection of this, Dorje and Lingpa posit that the purpose of the Dharma (spiritual path and practice) is to remove “the twin veils of defiled emotion and cognitive obscuration” (2010, p.109) so that enlightenment can be attained. This purification appears to lead to a sense of limitlessness or boundlessness, which allows for more love. The Metta Sutta suggests that love, friendliness, and goodwill can be extended in all directions when one has a “boundless mind” (in Happold, 1990, p.172). In Taoism, verse 28 of the Tao te Ching advises “Be the world’s exemplar, never deviating, perpetually returning to boundless consciousness” (Hamill, 2007, p.41). This boundlessness suggests a freedom from impurity and restriction.

Happold references several different phases in the mystical quest. In the phase of “purgation” the objective is to renounce sense perception, to cleanse old ways of perceiving and being, and to release the controlling objectives of the ego so that new understandings can be revealed. Several of the later phases involve different levels of love, implying that love is more easily accessible and able to be practiced after purification. Similarly, Nicholas of Cusa spoke of ‘*docta ignorantia*’ or learned ignorance as a way of perceiving reality through other means than the intellect. He says that this learned ignorance can take the practitioner to deeper truth (in Happold, 1990, p.61). The idea in both descriptions is that the true mystical experience of unity (and thus potentially TUL) is found when not seeing reality through conditioned lenses. This clarity arises through the discipline of purification, meditation, and mental mastery.

In the Hindu tradition, the term *vāsanā* is used to describe flavours of obscuration within the conscious and unconscious mind that prevent contact with *Brahman* and TUL. Mahony has described *vāsanās* as:

[P]atterns of thought and emotion that are pressed into our minds, affecting our understanding of ourselves, of others and of the world. They are psychological lenses that bend and distort our ability to see things clearly and accurately, and can be so deeply impressed in our minds that we may not even be conscious of them. (Mahony, 2014, p.47)

In the face of these mental programs, it seems there is no room for TUL. All three participants’ accounts reflected freeing their consciousness from such psychological lenses.

Bhakti and Devotion. Four participants mentioned bhakti or devotional spiritual practice. This was in some cases distinct from bhakti in the presence of the teacher. Bhakti is discussed to some extent in Section 6.3.1.3 on the teacher, and in Section 2.2.6.1 of the literature review. Narada's Bhakti Sutra recommends bhakti as sufficient for the attainment of enlightenment, declaring "Accordingly, those who yearn for liberation should embrace this [love] alone" (Sutra 34, In Mahony, p.265).

A notion of love that unifies the individual with the underlying oneness of reality is common to many traditions. Underhill described the process of devotional love as a way of wilfully propelling oneself towards divine union: "mystic Love is a total dedication of the will; the deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul towards its Source" (in Fox, 2014, p.23). The English devotional mystic Walter Hilton declared, "Perfect love maketh God and the soul to be as if they both together were but one thing" (in Underhill, 1911/2002, P.87). If God is considered one with love in this conception, then the practice of devotional love unifies a practitioner with TUL as a non-localised consciousness.

Participants described their bhakti practices in forms of worship, mantra, meditation, surrender and *puja* (devotional ceremony). As mentioned above, Andal spoke of how these practices, in which love is often focused on an object, person, symbol or on one's own conception of divinity, unifies the aspirant with that divinity, and reveals greater love inside the self. She felt that this experience of love within was equivalent to an experience of divinity within, causing the devotee to wake up to a sense of oneness with the divine itself. Mahony describes the purpose of bhakti yoga similarly, explaining "Love is the means to union" (2014, p.32).

If the subject matter of this research was different, bhakti might be grouped with other spiritual practices of meditation. For example, it appears that a practice of bhakti shares elements with Taylor's ISLE process (Taylor, 2017). The Bhakti Sutra instructs that in the practice of *bhakti*, "one becomes ecstatic, one becomes stilled, one comes to delight in the Self" (In Mahony, 2014, P.260). This parallels the idea that spiritual practice stills the mind and senses, leading to a surge of enhanced perception of the world, and a perception of the self that includes all things, which are experienced with enhanced wonder (Taylor, 2017). However, given the direct focal point of love, bhakti practices warrant their own category in the study of TUL.

Amardeep explained this heightened significance of bhakti to TUL, sharing his opinion that "whatever the creative mystery, whatever this oneness is, it responds to love more than any other emotion... because that's what it is by its own nature." It could be that approaching the non-localised consciousness of spirit-force or Brahman through an attitude of love makes connection with that consciousness more likely to be experienced as love. This may be one way to attain a TUL specific awakening experience as opposed to a more general one, which may be more characterised by joy, peace or bliss (Taylor, 2017).

Amardeep discussed that Bhakti could be woven into daily life; through any activity practiced with love. He also felt that if one practiced other forms of meditation, mental discipline, or purification without love, “it’s like an empty shell... inside its vacant”. This corresponds with 1 Corinthians, which decrees that spiritual powers in the absence of love are valueless:

If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

(Christian Standard Bible, 13:1-3)

Durga (2016) describes the path of devotion as a way of “coating our consciousness in love” suggesting the benefit of this practice for cultivating an enduring form of TUL, or love that exists without object. This would be an apt portrayal of how these three participants described their daily practice of bhakti and the impact it had on their lives.

Surrender. Karlie frequently mentioned a devotional practice of surrender helping her to feel TUL. Part of this appeared to be a process of letting go of any preconceived ideas, habits, or impulse towards control or ego that would preclude her from experiencing love. Part of it was surrendering to trust that whatever unfolded was what was supposed to happen. Narada’s *Bhakti Sutra* suggests that a sense of unity (created through bhakti) with something beyond the physical allows greater safety: “There should be no anxiety in relinquishing [the ways of the] world because one dedicates the world, oneself and one’s sacred activities [to God]” (Sutra 62, in Mahony, 2014, p.271). The implication is that “God” will take care of what is surrendered to it through bhakti or love. The bhakti of Karlie’s relationship with her guru appeared to make her feel safe to let go of egoic structures and open into a sense of oneness with what she termed the Divine, or a higher power. This in turn helped her to experience and express more TUL in her life.

Surrender is a key element of the 12-step or recovery program, which Karlie was part of prior to discovering her spiritual path. She commented that she found this practice and the surrender of her devotional path to “weave beautifully together”. At one level, surrender in Alcoholics Anonymous and Twelve Step Facilitation pertains to surrendering to the process required for abstinence, and a “willingness to take action” in accordance with that surrender (Nowinski, 2012, p.194). This may include attendance at meetings or therapy, availability to talk with one’s mentor, and even the courage and vulnerability to admit to having an addiction. However, steps two and three of the 12-step process reflect a surrender that is more in keeping with a devotional practice; putting faith in a higher power. They read: “We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood him*” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p.59, italics theirs). This emphasis on a personal understanding of God enabled people to choose any symbol, deity, faith, or even principle that felt sacred to them.

The practice of surrender to a higher power is considered to be a way of reducing self-centredness, facilitating a type of awakening (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001; Nowinski, 2012). Awakening in this context is characterised by a transition from self-centredness and materialism to community-mindedness. It would be interesting to conduct future research on experiences of TUL amongst those who found awakening through a 12-step program, to explore whether there is a common relationship between TUL experiences and abstinence, and whether that relationship is uni- or bidirectional.

Service. All six participants mentioned that service assisted them to reduce their egoic identity and to experience more TUL. For two participants, this resulted in TUL in the form of awakening experiences. For all six, service was a way of making UL an everyday part of their lives.

Taylor describes the bi-directional relationship between service and wakefulness. He explains: “In addition to being one of the fruits of awakening, service is a spiritual practice in itself. Service helps us to transcend separateness. It softens our ego boundaries and connects us with others and with the world itself” (Taylor, 2024, p.74). In keeping with this, five participants found they had an increased desire and capacity for service as a result of their TUL experience, which will be discussed in Section 6.3.3.4 on the impact of TUL.

As discussed in Section 4.3, part of Post’s construct of unlimited love is “To affectively affirm as well as to unselfishly delight in the well-being of others, and to engage in acts of care and service on their behalf...” (Post, 2003, p.vii). Post asserts that unlimited love as described here is a “Creative Presence, underlying and integral to all of reality.” The construct of TUL in the current study similarly posits that TUL is a non-localised consciousness, or one of the characteristics of such a consciousness, that underlies reality. However, in the current conception, the attitudes and actions that define Post’s unlimited love are seen not as the substance of TUL itself, but as manifestations of it. Post posits that participation in unlimited love “constitutes the fullest experience of spirituality”. Participation in TUL in the current study is considered to be a similarly fulsome spiritual experience, however, in TUL, this participation is not only associated with acts of service, but also with states of devotion, unity, and wakefulness. EASCs, such as awakening and mystical experiences, which by nature involve unity and TUL do not appear to be part of the operationalisation of unlimited love.

Self-Awareness and Accountability. Every participant mentioned some form of self-awareness and accountability opening them into TUL. In most cases, this was connected to the gradual and ongoing state of TUL. That is, once participants had had a TUL experience, they used an ongoing process of self-reflection to ensure they would not block the flow of that non-localised TUL they had gained access to.

Joy described the process of reconciling her shadow as something that contributed to unconditional self-love, which appeared similar to RUL but for the self. She explored this through a process of Jungian psychology. The theory of shadow, according to Jung, is that as human beings we have a persona, which

we want to present to the world, and within which we do not express those elements of ourselves we are ashamed of. These repressed parts of ourselves remain in our shadow. Although repressed, they are not gone, and sometimes arise unexpectedly in the face of certain triggers (Perry & Tower, 2023; Jung, 2012). When we are only able to love our persona and not our shadow, there is an unconscious knowledge that part of the self is rejected. This can lead to maladaptive behaviours in relationships, work, and other areas of life. By re-embracing those rejected parts of self, we attain wholeness. For Joy, this was experienced as UL for herself.

For Karlie, shadow work involved a remembering of unity. Whenever she was triggered by another person's behaviour, she told herself "Oh, yeah, that's me I'm looking at right now..." This not only softened her heart, allowing her to be more understanding, accepting, and loving of the other person, but also enabled her to bring that part of her own shadow into the light and to love herself more; a process which broke down elements of the separateness usually maintained by the ego. As awakening experiences are often characterised by a decreased sense of separation, this process of mirror and shadow work may make a person more prepared to open into their characteristic oneness; and perhaps to experience TUL.

Durga has connected the re-embracing of the shadow with the capacity to experience more love for others, the self and ultimately to reconnect with the unifying essence of the universe. She describes the mechanism of shadow, explaining "Because it is disowned from 'in here' we project it outwards, where it has to be mirrored back to us by others" (2016, p.96). However, she echoes teachings from many mystical traditions described in Chapter 3, stating that the perception of separation, often referred to as the illusion of multiplicity (Underhill, 1911/2002), is only real to the ego. If there is a true Self that is an underlying substance of everything, human beings cannot be one with everything except those manifestations of that Self which they judge.

In this conception, by enabling a person to re-embrace and learn to love what they have disowned into their shadow, they experience more love for themselves and more love for the person who triggered them. They may also access a deeper, stronger sense of oneness, of which TUL appears to be an emergent quality. This appears congruent with the many shadow-embracing experiences described by Karlie that helped her to remain connected to an ongoing sense of TUL.

Andal also discussed living with compassionate awareness of her own mistakes. This allowed her to be more understanding of the mistakes of others. In addition to similarities with shadow work, both Andal and Karlie's accounts reflect Brown's (2015) research on the power of vulnerability and embracing imperfection, and Neff and Germer's (2017) research on self-compassion in which the ability to witness, own and love one's flaws supports transformation. One of the three core components of self-compassion is common humanity; the idea that a person is not the only one who is flawed in a particular way, but part of a whole human family of imperfect people. Andal and Karlie appeared to experience this realisation,

and the expansion out of egoic separation it brought, but they both conceptualised it through a mystical lens more kindred to Durga's idea of shadow work as a path to oneness (2016). Brown has termed a capacity for vulnerability and the embrace of one's own imperfections 'wholeheartedness', because it enables people to greet life with more authenticity, joy, and love for themselves and those around them (2015). This appeared to be the case for both Andal and Karlie, and to reflect ongoing TUL.

6.3.1.5 Spiritual Community, School or Environment

Three participants spoke of the power and safety of community in which to experience and work towards TUL. In some cases, TUL appeared to be an emergent property of communal practice, seeming to envelop the community as a whole in a non-localised presence. Subordinate themes of spiritual community that contributed to TUL included a sense of connection and belonging, a sacred space or field of love, and practicing TUL within a community. Green and Shellenberger (1993) discuss ways in which community promotes the cultivation of love:

The importance to humans of participating in a group in which unconditional love goes hand in hand with sharing and problem solving... people learn that they are not alone and the barriers that prevent social connectedness are dissolved. In a sense, support groups promote agape and koinonia--altruistic love in a loving and forgiving community. (p.41)

Whilst it appeared from participant responses that community had a unique nurturing impact on TUL experiences, its effect (in the majority of cases) appeared interdependent with the teacher and with the teachings or way of life the community was centred around. This reflected the interconnectedness of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (Yen, 2007).

Practicing TUL. Andal discussed the benefit of a spiritual community for practicing UL with others. She shared that people in most groups naturally have tendencies, behaviours and unrefined parts of their ego that may trigger judgement. She described how through the communal quest for spiritual development, (and a process that appeared to reflect Durga's (2016) mystical concept of reunification of the shadow into oneness) these judgements are overcome. She shared from her personal experience that she had frequently felt her community offering her the same acceptance she was cultivating for others in times when she once would have judged certain behaviours. She perceived that this practice strengthened her overall capacity for love, as she discovered that more and more things she would have previously judged began to fit into the experience of love.

Yen (2007) discusses the diversity of people and behaviours encountered in a sangha, and counsels acceptance. He proposes that "in our hearts, we should not entertain ideas of the virtuous and the non-virtuous, and criticize others" but that the sangha should represent harmony (2007). Whilst this is not a reference to love per se, it is an example of spiritual community being an opportunity to become more accepting, and by extension, to expand the locus of love.

Joy spoke of the euphoria of feeling unconditionally loved by her community. The way she described this was reminiscent of the impact of UPR (Rogers, 1952) in that she felt known in her entirety, accepted, and loved as she was. This is also reflective of Andal's account of receiving acceptance from her community for that which she might judge within herself. Perhaps UPR is at play in community dynamics where RUL becomes established.

The way Karlie described the experience of love in community was not so much about feeling loved herself, but witnessing and experiencing a transpersonal or non-relational love that was outside of her normal paradigm, and seemed to pervade community dynamics. She commented that at first, she didn't know whether to trust it, but that over time, she began to feel that love and to blossom into it, inspired by the many examples of love she saw in other community members. This parallels some conceptions of sangha, in which there is a high prevalence of awakened ones (Yen, 2007); those who have already realised the dharma and are able to hold or support other community members as they discover and embody it for themselves.

Space or Field of UL. Karlie and Joy both described participating in or leading group practices in which the love in the group was not relational, but felt more like a field that embraced everyone. This appeared to be a potential example of love in a non-localised form. Karlie described "it just feels like love... not coming from me specifically... just the whole thing feels like love". Joy interpreted a similar phenomenon as God's love, that would come in response to the worship she and her childhood peers would conduct. She talked with relish about this love appearing to "saturate" them. Fox (2014) has also interpreted the non-localised love experienced by his participants as coming from God, a deity, or a realm beyond the physical.

Another explanation of this sense of love-saturation is that perhaps practices of mantra, meditation, blessings, and worship that were occurring in each of these accounts were causing a group awakening experience. Taylor (2018) posits that awakening experiences may be moments of contact with what he calls spirit-force; a non-localised consciousness that is characterised by bliss, love, joy, and peace and may be the fundamental nature of reality. Depending on one's religious beliefs, this could be interpreted as God, or the divine, or as a non-localised experience of TUL and oneness.

Group liminal states (which may sometimes express as awakening experiences, and thus trigger the TUL experiences Joy and Karlie described) have been termed "communitas" by Turner (1969). Communitas arises through certain group practices which decrease the self-other boundary, leading to a liminal experience of unity (Turner, 1969; Kettner et al., 2021). Turner describes communitas as "a transformative experience that goes to the heart of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared" (1969, p.138). This "root" of oneness could in other contexts be interpreted as Brahman (Easwaran, 2007), spirit-force (Taylor, 2018), or any of the other mystical conceptions of an underlying unity discussed in Chapter 2.

Turner explains that “the bonds of *communitas* are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I-Thou... relationships” (Turner, 1969, p.273). The unity that Karlie described frequently feeling with her community, who in this case were inmates in a high-security prison for whom she was facilitating meditation and restorative justice, is reminiscent of these equalitarian features of *communitas*. Karlie recalled feeling that the ‘field’ experiences she shared with her group were the product of a deep sense of connection they felt for and with each other. *Communitas* has been connected to the experience of identity fusion; where the boundaries between self and other blur, and identity moves from a self-concept to a collective concept, reflecting the unity associated with such TUL experiences.

Communitas (Turner, 1969) has been likened to what Durkheim (1912) termed “collective effervescence”. Olaveson describes collective effervescence as a state of “intense emotion and excitement, and a bond of community and unity among participants, such that they feel morally strengthened” (2001, p.101). Joy’s experience, in which she described vast joy and love worshipping the divine with her friends, appeared reminiscent of this intense excitement and unity. The idea of the community experience providing moral strength supports some of Andal’s comments about how the practice, the community, and the teacher where she lives in Southern India create an atmosphere of love that inspires love and loving action in community members. Elements of unity and morality-strengthening in *communitas* may make it easier for community members to follow the dharma of their chosen path, and thus to attain the states of TUL it promises.

Kettner et al (2021) found that the positive impact attained through psychedelic experiences sustained longer when that experience occurred during a group ceremonial setting. Given the similarities in altered state between psychedelics and mystical experiences or awakening states (the research on awakening states includes states induced by psychedelics, Taylor, 2017), it is likely that the benefits of TUL may also sustain longer when they occur within a group. It is possible too, that membership of a like-minded community after the experience may assist with the integration of TUL and its benefits in daily life. Further research on the relationship between TUL and its endurance when attained within and outside of group practice may be of interest in future explorations.

6.3.1.6 Connection and Relational Love

Many of the participants who cited connection and relational love as a trigger of TUL experiences found that these catalysts set them on a path of ongoing deepening into TUL in daily life. Sage’s account in particular, was one that suggested ongoing wakefulness (as described by Taylor, 2017) and a consistent deepening and enriching of TUL. She described knowing as a young child that she wasn’t separate, but was part of love: “Although from very early stage, I felt... I was me and I felt differentiated, I didn’t feel separate. And so, I always felt unconditional love”. As she grew through her teens, she experienced some

difficulties in life that caused her to retreat into her mind as a way of protecting herself from vulnerability (which she felt led to pain). This is congruent with Taylor's (2017) depiction of wakefulness that can have phases of diminution through different experiences in life before reasserting itself. She shared that a painful break up on the back of other extreme difficulties she had faced "broke her heart open". She recalled a sense of reconnecting with TUL through this experience, explaining "the flame was turned down... And then when that happened, the flame was progressively turned up". Going through this experience helped her to realign her life with her deep knowing of love and oneness that exists beyond relational connections.

Karlie's forgiveness experience with her dad had elements of both RUL and TUL. It was in some ways a transition from conditional love to UL within a relational context, and thus was an example of RUL. However, it was also an awakening experience, in which Karlie transcended her ego and personality, experiencing both herself and her father as pure souls beyond separate qualities. Thus, it was also an example of TUL. Study 1 suggested that in most cases, RUL is not a form of awakening experience, however it is possible, as in Karlie's case, that certain awakening experiences are triggered by intense moments within relationships, such as this example of forgiveness that led to a transpersonal experience.

These examples from Karlie and Sage appear to confirm and consolidate the evidence from study one, particularly the pilot study, that a transition from conditional to UL in a personal relationship (RUL) can be a contextual or triggering factor for TUL experiences, or a transition to a way of life in which TUL is a central focal point. Given how frequently this has arisen for participants across Study 1 and Study 2, it would be interesting to conduct more research on relational factors as specific triggers of TUL.

Deliberately Seeing People as Souls. Karlie, Michael, and Andal all utilised the practice of witnessing the soul in other beings to preserve their connection with TUL in their daily lives. In some cases, this would remind them of the oneness each had experienced in moments of TUL. Participants would recall their belief that they were a part of that oneness, and so was the person in front of them.

Several mystical traditions promote this practice. The Tattiriya Upanishad 1.11.2 implores the seeker "See the divine in your mother, father, teacher and guest..." (Easwaran, 2007, p.251). Mundaka Upanishad 3.1.4 declares:

The Lord of Love shines in the hearts of all. Seeing him in all creatures, the wise Forget themselves in the service of all. The Lord is their joy, the Lord is their rest; Such as they are the lovers of the Lord. (Easwaran, 2007, p.193)

The Íśa Upanishad recommends this practice as a way of staying connected with Brahman: "Seeing oneself within all beings and all beings within oneself, one never turns from the Lord" (in Mahony, 2014, p.17).

Beyond the Upanishads, Moses ben Jacob Cordovero, a Kabbalistic mystic from the 16th century posited that “it is important to love others because “the other is really oneself”” (in Taylor, 2018, p.205). This reflects the premise of Durga’s (2016) explanation of shadow work as a process that assists people to return to oneness and TUL (explained above). Meister Eckhart believed that the witnessing of the divinity in all is part of the illumined state. He declared ““To know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being” – know it with an invulnerable certainty... is to live at its fullest the Illuminated Life, enjoying “all creatures in God and God in all creatures”” (In Underhill, 1911/2002, p.258).

It seemed that one way that seeing the soul in all beings generated TUL was through an increased sense of connectedness. As explored in the literature review, unconditional positive and unconditional negative states appear to be separated along a continuum of connectedness, with unconditional positive states being features of extremely high connectedness and unconditional negative states (such as some forms of depression and anxiety) being symptoms of extreme disconnectedness. Deliberately considering that the ‘other’ person had a spark within them that was the same as a spark residing in the self, and as Andal discussed, may be the same as the divine that underlies all things, may have created a sense of connectedness, through which TUL arose.

Empathy and Compassion. In literature on awakening experiences, greater empathy and compassion were more often after-effects than triggers (Taylor, 2017). Similarly, in both study one and study 2, increases in empathy and compassion were reported as impacts of TUL experiences. Yet they have also been mentioned as triggers by two participants in the current study, suggesting a bi-directional relationship between empathy and compassion and TUL.

Empathy, compassion and seeing people as souls have a common factor of a reminder of connection. Andal shared “Seeing... the images of the children for the first time... stirred... compassion and suffering in me, it also stirred this deeper sense of connection with humanity.” Pavlovich and Krahne (2012) suggest that empathy “enhances connectedness through the unconscious sharing of neuro-pathways that dissolves the barriers between self and other” (p.131). Empathy creates the experience that whatever is felt by the other person is felt to some extent by the self. Thus, it is a practice which may create a sense of shared self-hood. In such moments, the ego-barrier which usually protects and defends the separate construct of self, is presumably thinner, potentially allowing an easier expansion into the oneness of wakefulness, and of TUL.

6.3.1.7 Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness

In many of the examples of non-ordinary states of consciousness, participants reported encounters with non-physical presences. In some reports, such as in the NDE cases, there was a sense of apparently sentient, non-localised TUL which participants experienced as an ultimate form of divinity. In other cases,

participants experienced visitations from beings they felt loved them unconditionally. In each of these examples, the love appeared to be coming from outside of the participant's own separate sense of self.

The experience of love coming from a seemingly external, non-physical source is congruent with many accounts collected by Fox (2014). He found that such experiences, which were often unsought, unexpected, and outside of his participants' prior spiritual paradigms, offered strong evidence for transpersonal realities beyond the material domain. He suggested that they may even be examples of interactions with God or a divine presence.

Mystical experiences of God or non-physical beings are often dismissed as neurologically generated illusions (Gloor et al., 1982; Persinger & Healy, 2002; Persinger & Murphy, 2016). The phenomenon, called "the sensed presence" (Suedfeld & Mocellin, 1987), is considered to be a hallucination created by stimulation to the right temporal lobe (Persinger & Murphy, 2016). The "sensed presence" is experienced as an independent, sentient being, which theorists suggest may be anthropomorphised by the experimenter's own conscious or unconscious beliefs.

Persinger created a helmet that stimulates the right temporal lobe of the brain using magnetic fields to induce sensed presence experiences (Persinger & Healy, 2002). Known as the Koren helmet, or more colloquially as the "God Helmet", Persinger's device has been found experimentally to lead to this phenomenon in 80% of participants. Persinger and Healy suggest that sensed presence experiences may thus be resident properties of the human brain (2002, p.533). In this model, the TUL connected to such presences would also be understood as a feature of neurological activation, potentially in the right temporal lobe.

A different paradigm through which to consider sensed presences and the TUL they inspire is pragmatism. In this view, pioneered partially by William James, objective truth is not as important as the value people attain from their subjective experiences. In James' (1902/1928) conception, religious experiences are not of value because they prove the existence of God, angels, or other religious phenomena, but because of the happiness, comfort, virtue or capacity for goodness they bring to the person who has the experience. Certainly, those who reported receiving love from apparently external, non-physical sources in the current study derived life changing benefit from these experiences. For example, Michael's entire conception of himself and his capacity was completely transformed because of interactions with non-physical beings who helped him realise that he was and had always been loved. This alleviated longstanding depression and alcohol addiction and led to a life of meaning, purpose, and contentment. Persinger and Todd confirm that "The profound experiences attributed to the "sensed presence" and their cultural anthropomorphisms such as deities and gods are persistent reports in human populations that are frequently associated with permanent changes in behaviour, reduced depression and alleviation of pain" (2016). These beneficial outcomes were part of Persinger's motivation for the Koren or God helmet.

However, there does appear to be some objective ground upon which sensed presence experiences could be interpreted as participants experienced them – as interactions with an actual non-physical presence. As mentioned in Section 4.7, sensed presences are common features of NDEs. Greyson found that encounters with a “mystical or unearthly being” were the eighth most cited characteristic of NDEs, reported by 47% of participants in the development of the NDE scale (1983). Yet, in NDEs, there is no measurable brain activation. Physicalist explanations of experiences in consciousness occurring in moments of clinical death have been suggested (as reviewed in section 3.7.3), however none currently account for the fullness of the phenomenon. If there truly is no brain activation involved in NDEs, figures of light and love appearing to a participant in moments of clinical death cannot be the result of right temporal stimulation. This is not conclusive evidence of non-physical sentient beings, or of an objective, non-physical presence of TUL that exists independent of the brain. However, it does suggest a difficulty in conclusively reducing such subjective experiences to illusions arising through specific neurological activity.

Two of the three participants in the current study who reported NDEs mentioned felt presences, either of God or other beings, through which their TUL experience arose. As these phenomena are unable to be conclusively explained through stimulation of the right temporal lobe, or any other part of the brain, it follows that neither is the TUL they felt. Two participants also had experiences of sensed presences outside of NDEs. The inconclusive nature of materialist explanations for sensed presence experiences within NDEs suggest that non-materialist interpretations of those experiences occurring outside of NDEs (and any accompanying TUL) cannot be rejected.

Receiving Unconditional Positive Regard in Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness. Participants often reported receiving relational qualities that could be associated with UPR (Rogers, 1957) through their encounters with sensed presences. Joy reported a visitation from an ascended master when she was a child. He shared with her some information about how her life would be and told her “you’re safe” “you’re not alone,” “I love you”. Michael described meeting an androgynous being in his NDE. He recalled “I felt safe in the presence of this person”. Recalling encountering more beings, he spoke about feeling loved for the truth of who he is rather than anything superficial. “They just loved the pure essence of me, the pure essence of my soul” (Michael, p.15). There is an implied sense here of feeling seen and understood for who he really is rather than for any kind of mask he may have worn in his life. This experienced helped Michael to connect with TUL, in which he perceived the universe as both the divine and as UL.

6.3.2 Characteristics

Five superordinate themes concerning the characteristics of TUL emerged through participant responses: oneness; wellbeing and positive emotion; divine and soul; beyondness; and energy. Many of these were transpersonal, in that they concerned a sense of self beyond the separate identity, or pertained to realities

that participants experienced as having a basis beyond physicality. All five characteristics had strong parallels with depictions of UL in both multifaith mystical literature, and literature on EASCs. Such parallels, outlined below, support the likelihood that these five characteristics represent core phenomenological features of how TUL is experienced across cultural and traditional contexts. Characteristics of TUL also exhibited strong alignment with those of awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017) supporting the possibility that TUL likely constitutes a sub-type of awakening experience.

6.3.2.1 Oneness

The characteristic of oneness was mentioned by all six participants. It also arose as a significant characteristic of TUL in Study One. Oneness or unity was one of the features that distinguished RUL from TUL experiences, and connected TUL with awakening experiences. As mentioned previously, a sense of unity is a hallmark of awakening experiences (De Castro, 2017; Newberg & Iversen, 2003; Taylor, 2012; Yaden et al., 2016). Oneness is also considered to be a core characteristic of mystical experiences (Happold, 1990; Stace, 1960; Underhill 1911/2002), and of ecstasis (Kotler & Wheal, 2017). In the current study, participants experienced that oneness as love. Tolle explains “beyond the veil of form and separation. This is the realisation of oneness. This is love” (1997/2010, p.155).

Coomber and Harré’s research on oneness suggests that it can be experienced at three levels of unity with the other, where “other” could refer to a person, a group, nature, or the universe at large (2022). Participants in the current study reported oneness with all these varieties of “other” in their TUL experiences. The first level of oneness - oneness as “expansion” - expands the self-concept to include the other. Oneness as “interdependence” refers to a symbiosis between the self and the other. This reflects the oneness experienced in medium intensity awakening experiences (Taylor, 2017). “Essential” oneness involves a sense of the self and the other sharing the same fundamental property (Coomber & Harré, 2022, p.49). Essential oneness is commonly reported in high-intensity awakening experiences in which people can have the feeling of dissolving into oneness, as though the whole universe is made of a common underlying substance (Taylor, 2017). This is also the form most focused upon in mystical literature (Happold, 1990; Underhill, 1911/2002).

From a purely physicalist perspective, it appears that human beings are not one with everything. We end at our skin; the tops of our heads and the soles of our feet, and we are thus separate from other people, who are similarly skin bound. However, in mystical perceptions and experiences, it is not our physicality that is one, but an essence of self beyond physicality (Durga, 2013, 2016; Happold, 1990; James, 1902/1928; Taylor, 2018; Underhill, 1911/2002, 1914/2006). Mahony, author of *Exquisite Love* provides a description of unity congruent with both eastern and western mystical thought: “within all the world of multiplicity is a single, pervasive, eternal and abiding foundation, a ground of all being, that supports, envelops and sustains all things” (2014, P.13). James asserts “In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical

tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed” (1902/1928, p.419). Thus, mystical oneness is a paradox, in which oneness and multiplicity co-exist.

Coomber and Harré posit that “a sense of oneness... does not eliminate a concurrent appreciation of difference or diversity. Rather, a sense of fundamental unity at a deep level may allow for appreciation of the other’s qualities” (2022, p.50). This was reflected in that participants felt that all diversity in creation was based in the same essence, interconnected, and made of love. For example, Sage stated “unity isn’t uniformity. It’s radical diversity and... abundance and complexity, but coming from that lived experience of wholeness” (Sage, p.6). The felt experience of this underlying unity enabled participants to love themselves and others in their manifestation of differentiation, rather than judging or excluding anything from love based on otherness.

Oneness, Transpersonal Unconditional Love and the Hard Problem of Consciousness. Theoretical understandings of experiences of oneness, and thus TUL, are impacted by the ongoing debate concerning the hard problem of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995). David Chalmers coined this term for the question of how the finite, ostensibly non-conscious matter of the brain could give rise to the apparently infinite colour, flavour, and variety of human subjective experience (1995). Experiences of oneness and TUL are certainly part of the potential colour and flavour of subjective experiences in consciousness. Thus, an understanding of the nature of consciousness may shed light on the nature of TUL, and potentially vice versa.

Physicalist views of consciousness suggest that all subjective phenomena or qualia are caused by physiological processes within the brain (Crick & Clark, 1994; Persigner & Murphy, 2016). If this is true, then TUL, whilst potentially beneficial, is a brain-generated phenomenon, rather than (as all participants in the current study perceived) an experience of contact with consciousness beyond the separate self. However, many non-materialist answers to the hard problem suggest that perhaps consciousness, not matter, is the foundational substance of reality (Chalmers, 2015; Koch, 2017; Taylor, 2018). Such theories (especially Taylor’s panspiritism) may be compatible with participants’ experiences of TUL existing as a oneness, as a field, or appearing to come toward them from an external sentient presence. If there is a consciousness that underlies reality, both mystical literature and participant experiences suggest TUL may be connected to, or a property of that underlying consciousness itself.

No polarity or separation. Three participants experienced polarity or separation fading into unity through TUL experiences. The unification of polarity is a feature of oneness that appears central to the cultivation of unconditional positive states in several of the mystical traditions discussed in Chapter 2. Conditions on joy and love could be seen as a manifestation of the experience of polarity. For example, it is only if something is perceived as the opposite to joyful or loveable (that is as un-joyful or un-loveable) that one would not experience those positive states in any given context. If everything is experienced as one, then there is no reason not to experience joy and love in any situation. Therefore, if a state of non-dual

consciousness can be attained, it follows that it may be accompanied by the capacity for unconditional positive states, including those of love and joy.

There is a sense in which this unity between polarities is associated with the “beyondness” quality of TUL experiences, discussed in Section 6.3.2.4, below. In many mystical traditions, duality and polarity only exist in the mind, body and emotions, which are transcended in the experience of oneness. As discussed in Section 2.2, both the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* explore experiences that transcend polarity (Easwaran, 2007; Hawley, 2001), giving rise to unconditional positive states.

In western mysticism, as in Taoism, Vedanta, and Kabbalah (discussed below) there is a prominent focus on the idea that polarity only exists at certain levels of consciousness, and that beyond those levels, there is a permanent oneness. The mystical Christian philosopher and Catholic Bishop, Nicholas of Cusa promoted a theory of the coincidence of opposites. He believed that “in God all opposites coincide... God is beyond the coincidence of contradictories... that *all* things – opposites or not – are present in God, that God is in all things” (Hopkins, 1978, p.12). To the mystic, God is both immanent and transcendent, both beyond and containing all polarity, and accessible to human consciousness (Happold, 1990). In unifying with that “God”, which could be termed spirit-force, Brahman or the Tao, one would attain an unconditional state of consciousness until the state of separation reasserted itself.

6.3.2.2 Wellbeing and Positive Emotion

Five participants described some kind of positive emotion that arose as part of their TUL experiences. Four participants discussed emotions of contentment, safety and feeling held in some way by a loved one, the universe, or TUL itself. Three described experiences of euphoria or wonder. All these elements are characteristics of the Vedantic notion of Brahman, and so feature in experiences of connection with this oneness that is believed to be a pervasive, non-localised consciousness. Verse 7 of the Mandukya Upanishad describes “He is infinite peace and love” (Easwaran, 2007, p.204). The Bhakti Sutra concurs, adding UJ: “it is of the nature of peace, and it is of the nature of supreme joy” (Mahony, 2014, sutra 61, p.271).

Positive emotion, accompanied by a sense of calmness or safety, are common in awakening experiences (Taylor, 2012b) and were features of the TUL experiences documented by Fox (2014). When love is experienced not as a transient and limited emotion, but as an unconditional part of the foundation of reality, it appears to offer great comfort and strength. An example of this is Happold’s account of Winnifred Holtby, who, upon being given a short time to live, experienced “The vision of a Love which is inherent, though not obvious, in the texture of the universe, which once glimpsed brings peace, acceptance, joy, and faith, and enables a man or woman to say with confidence that “there is nothing anywhere in the world or without that can make us afraid”” (in Happold, 1990, p.54). This reflects the peace, calmness and safety experienced by participants in the current study.

The Brahma Viharas posit that both “boundless joy” and “boundless compassion” are features of the state of enlightenment or awakening. This reflects the unconditional states of love and joy that have been discussed throughout this research. Both the literature review and study one associate these unconditional positive states with extremes of connectedness. The oneness and interconnectedness associated by many participants with their TUL experiences may be part of what gives rise to the abundance of positive affect.

The four participants who discussed feeling ‘safe’ and ‘held’ described characteristics often associated with the receipt of UPR (Ganley, 1989; Rogers, 1957; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). It seems, as discussed in study one, that the experience of being loved by a transpersonal force, or an apparently non-localised love, can fill the same needs as experiencing UPR from a person.

Kotler and Wheal discuss euphoric positive emotion in the expansive altered states of ecstasis in terms of neurological features. These include an increase in endorphins, norepinephrine, dopamine, serotonin, and anandamide (Kotler & Wheal, p.39). Such physiological correlates are prevalent in association with increases in positive emotion through many EASCs. However, as many of the positive emotional states Michael described were part of his NDE, it is unclear whether such physiological explanations (involving neurological function) would be relevant or sufficient to explain the apparent increase in positive affect during a time of apparent clinical death.

6.3.2.3 Divine and Soul

As explored by Taylor (2018), the topics of God, soul and divinity are often excluded from academic discourse within much of the discipline of psychology and other sciences because of the materialist paradigm of our secular culture. Yet, as this is an IPA study, designed to focus on the lived experience of participants and the meaning they give it, and all six participants mentioned either God, the soul or the divine in some form, it seems that to exclude it would be to do a disservice to their testimony. The prevalence of references to God or divinity may partially be a product of the way in which participants were selected. I approached many of them because I knew they had had particular spiritual experiences, connected to their respective paths. In exception to this, Michael was not on a path when he had his NDE (and TUL) experience, yet God was a central feature of his description, and has subsequently been represented in his artworks. Michael discussed in his interview how pivotal his NDE was in his sense of his relationship with what he terms God. This will be explored in Section 6.3.3.5.

In some cases, the Divine and the Soul were discussed together as part of TUL experiences. And al described realising “oh, this is the divine, the divine is this UL. The divine is... this energy that is in the form of our soul inside of us and is also everywhere.” This is reflective of the *bhakti* tradition of which she is a part. Mahony summarises the paradox of love as both universal divinity and individual soul, describing “Love as the universal Self that dwells within our particular selves” (Mahony, 2014, p.7).

Unconditional love as the Divine or God. Experiences of TUL as or flowing from a divine presence or God are congruent with most mystical, and even some religious conceptions of both divinity and TUL. Mahony states “God is Love. Accordingly, also: love is the nature of God. And thus: to love is to share in the divine nature” (2014, p.11). The Gospel of John also declares that love is God. Post concluded the introduction to his book *Unlimited Love* by stating, “In the final analysis, unlimited love is what God has for each and every one of us, and this is good news” (Post, 2003, p.xii).

God was not represented as an anthropomorphised divinity in any of the participant’s accounts. In every case, the terms God or the Divine referred to a universal energy, kindred to the mystical foundation of being described in other sections. Stace articulated this oneness experienced in many EASCs saying “there are not two Ones, but only one, which, in the mystic’s interpretation, is God or the Universal Self of the whole universe” (1960, p. 133). Participants either felt this presence of oneness loved them unconditionally or was itself TUL.

This benevolent presence could be viewed as a form of non-localised consciousness. Such consciousness is considered a scientific possibility by many theorists, as has been discussed in other sections. Again, this raises questions pertaining to the hard problem of consciousness, regarding whether such a consciousness could exist beyond or independently of the brain. If it can, then it seems that TUL may be an expression or characteristic of that consciousness, or a way in which that consciousness can be subjectively experienced through human perception.

Experience of Being Seen, Known and Loved by God. Joy discussed the power of feeling personally known and loved by the divine. She said she felt “completely loved... No particle of me was not known or not loved. It's like being completely seen, completely known, completely loved, all-encompassing. God is all there is”. As was referred to in study one, this experience appeared to be a combination of TUL and RUL, in that the TUL of divine oneness was received as if RUL from a personal beloved, which was experienced as God. It appeared from Joy’s testimony that this experience led to benefits associated with UPR (Ganley, 1989; Rogers, 1957) such as the removal of shame, and a new, pervasive sense of self-love, as well as benefits that were associated with TUL in study one, such as increased connection with transpersonal states of consciousness.

In a parallel experience, Michael expressed his awe at the level of love he felt coming from what he perceived to be both God and UL. He was surprised at not being judged; at being totally accepted and loved. This experience allowed him to let go of the identity of insufficiency and shame he had held since his school days. Again, some of the impacts Michael reported, such as increased self-esteem, self-love, self-trust, and self-efficacy, are associated in the literature with the receipt of UPR.

Persinger and Murphy (2016) found that experiences of sensed presences were useful in the treatment of depression, pain, and anxiety. Perhaps some of this mechanism is a sense of being loved by the apparent

non-physical being experienced through neurological stimulation. Future research could explore these potentially therapeutic benefits of connecting with and receiving what appears subjectively to be non-localised love, perhaps comparing such experiences and their impact to that of person-centred therapy.

Soul and UL. The connection between TUL and the soul again reflects elements of UPR (Rogers, 1957) in that it hinges on the idea that every person has some essential value that is independent of any of their ethics, attitudes or actions. The major difference is that this essential value discussed in literature on UPR comes across as a conceptual prospect adopted by the therapist. In the case of both Michael and Karlie, they experienced the soul in what they described as an embodied way. This made it easier for them to not only conceptually consider that others have souls that can be unconditionally loved, but to spontaneously connect with their perception of that essence within people, and to experience love for that essence.

6.3.2.4 “Beyondness”

There were several elements of “beyondness” that appeared central to participant experiences of TUL and the meaning they derived from it. These involved TUL either being experienced beyond certain conditions, or participants feeling that they had surpassed certain boundaries of thought, emotion, or identity through their experience of TUL. Some of these “beyondness” characteristics represented the ineffability of mystical experience described by James (1902/1928).

Suzuki used the term “beyondness” to describe a characteristic of Satori, the Zen Buddhist state of enlightenment (in Stace, 1960, p.44). Barnard posited that “Zen is a discipline to see the Beyondness in everything” (p.80). He explained “a state of consciousness is developed and practiced that gives an all-pervasive awareness of the deeper in creation” (Barnard, 1997). This connects beyondness to the common mystical concept of the eternal ground of being hiding within all things.

The Upanishads also have a notion of beyondness. For example, verse three of the Atma Upanishad describes “Beyond all attributes, the supreme Self is the eternal witness, ever pure, indivisible, and uncompounded, far beyond the senses and the ego... This supreme Self purifies the impure” (Easwaran, 2007, p.277.) This suggests the unifying properties of TUL having the power to go beyond impurities which are the product of polarity. In this way, the beyondness quality of TUL may be a product of its oneness.

Beyond Body, Mind, Emotions. One of the key elements of TUL discussed by participants was that their experience was beyond mind, body, and emotion, and was ineffable. This differs from Post’s concept of unlimited love, which he states involves “an even balance or co-primacy between emotion and reason” (2003, p. 67). Whilst in unlimited love, reason and emotion are central components of equal importance, in TUL, it seems they are both transcended.

Tolle has associated experiences of TUL with moments of altered consciousness that are not governed by the mind. “Love as a continuous state is as yet very rare... Brief and elusive glimpses of love, however, are possible whenever there is a gap in the stream of mind” (Tolle, 1997/2010, p.148). This speaks to the fact that TUL is accessed in wakeful states of consciousness, whilst unlimited love is practiced in normal states of consciousness.

The Katha Upanishad supports the idea of Brahman, and thus TUL existing beyond thought. It proposes that thoughts are by their nature based in duality and separation, and thus cannot comprehend the oneness of Brahman: “The intellect cannot reveal the Self, beyond its duality of subject and object” (1.2.8, in Easwaran, 2007, p.76). This connects the unity or oneness of TUL discussed in Section 6.3.2.1 with the “beyondness” quality participants described.

The Mundaka Upanishad paradoxically suggests that such altered states – beyond thought – are both accessible through love, and productive of love. It explains “He is the source of love and may be known through love but not through thought” (2.2.1, Easwaran, 2007, p.190). This is reminiscent of the bidirectional relationship between love and illumination that has arisen elsewhere in this research. Love is the destination, but also a central key or pathway to access that destination. To the logical mind, this may seem paradoxical, as will be discussed below.

In addition to existing beyond thought, participants also discussed TUL existing beyond emotion. Andal commented that whilst TUL can create emotion, it is not itself an emotion. Templeton warned about TUL “do not confuse sentiment and sympathy with love” (2000, p.9). He seemed to imply that such emotions arise through the ego and that love exists beyond that part of self. Durga has delineated love from emotion, positing that TUL is the substance of the divine itself. Her description supports many elements of beyondness discussed by participants, as she equates TUL and divinity with what she terms the Void, which is beyond all thought, emotion and form. She explains “most people think that love is an emotion. Actually, love is God. It is the invisible no-thing of the Divine Void. Tapping into love is actually tapping into the Divine” (2016, p.93).

Spira (2016) and Tolle both discuss love, joy, and peace as qualities that are not of the mind or emotions, but beyond them. They posit that such states are unconditioned by thought and emotion because they exist beyond the duality of either. This makes them unconditional, or, as Tolle describes, part of the “higher good that has no opposite” (1997/2010, p.180). This further associates TUL and UJ, suggesting their shared potential mechanism as an experience of a unified, non-localised consciousness, or as a product of extreme connectedness.

Awakening, Freedom and Self-Transcendence. Andal and Amardeep discussed a sense of awakening, freedom, or the transcendence of their ego or separate self during TUL experiences. Spira connects freedom to experiences of the unconditioned self, which includes TUL, joy and peace. He declares

“causeless joy, imperturbable peace, love that knows no opposite, and freedom at the heart of all experience...this is your ever-present nature under all circumstances” (2016, p.1). The premise in all Spira’s work is that focusing on the consciousness beyond conditioning allows such conditioning to relax, inviting the experience of this innate inner freedom, which is by nature accompanied by TUL and UJ.

Andal and Amardeep experienced freedom and awakening as a sense of self that extended beyond their normal identity. This appeared to correlate with the theme of ego-dissolution, a characteristic of TUL experiences discussed in Study One. The medieval mystic Ruysbroeck described love liberating the seeker from the bindings of the separate ego into a discovery of the divine. He explained “by fruitive love he overpasses his created being and finds and tastes the riches and delights which are God Himself” (in Underhill, 1911/2002, p.117).

Freedom from the constraints of the separate identity is discussed by Kotler and Wheal (2017) in the “selflessness” component of their model of ecstasis. They describe that selflessness is correlated with hypofrontality, or reduced activation in large parts of the prefrontal cortex. This reduces or eliminates (for the duration of the experience) elements of the self-construct, including patterns of self-critical or self-vigilant thoughts (self-consciousness), and the collection of habitual stories and frameworks through which life and events are interpreted. This is similar to the notion of overcoming the ego to attain higher states of consciousness, which is prevalent in both eastern and western mysticism (Easwaran, 2007; Durga, 2016; Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2018; Underhill, 1911/2002).

Both Amardeep and Andal associated freedom and awakening with a sense of oneness. Kotler and Wheal’s construct of selflessness is not only characterised by the hypofrontality that reduces self-awareness and self-construct, but also by de-activation in the parietal lobes, which is associated with reductions in the self-other boundary. This pattern of de-activation is often associated with oneness experiences (Newberg & Iverson, 2003). Adopting a non-materialist stance on the basis of arguments already articulated (concerning inconclusive physicalist explanations of NDEs in which TUL arises), it may be that hypofrontality and the deactivation of the parietal lobes allows the “doors of perception” (Blake in Huxley, 1968 p.1) to be opened wide enough to experience what is potentially a non-localised transpersonal oneness of TUL.

Selflessness echoes Hayes et al.’s (2020) construct of psychological flexibility, and Taylor’s (2012) idea of the intensification and stilling of life energy. In these theories, the reduction of egoic self-construct is respectively either a characteristic (Hayes et al, 2020) or an initiator (Taylor, 2012) of awakening or self-transcendent states of consciousness. In both conceptions, the absence or weakening of habitual self-construct results in richer perspectives, new mental clarity, and a greater sense of authenticity or truth. In awakening states, it can be linked to increased love, including TUL (2017). In medium and high-intensity awakening states, Taylor posits that the reduction in egoic self-construct allows enhanced perception of a fundamental oneness that is not perceptible when that ego structure is too prominent.

Familiarity/Remembering Beyond Experience. Three participants described moments in which TUL, whilst never previously experienced, felt familiar. They spoke of it as if it was a quality that they were remembering, although they had not consciously experienced it before. Kotler and Wheal discuss a phenomenon called “anamnesis” which they describe as “the forgetting of the forgetting” (2017, p.40). This is a similar experience of learning or experiencing something that appears new to the conscious mind, but at the same time familiar, as if it has always been known.

Kotler and Wheal associate anamnesis with “the vivid, detailed, and revealing nature of non-ordinary states” (p.40). Their rationale is that when certain structures of the brain shut down, such as in hypofrontality, described above, the brain is able to process more information that is always available to it, but unable to be processed. They explain “Information that seems to be coming from outside of the self in such states, may actually be simply something that comes from beyond our normal experience, because our brains are processing in such a different way” (p.40). Kotler and Wheal suggest that this information is held locally through the brain and mind, however, they also allude to Huxley’s concept that perhaps in such states the local mind is able to digest substantially more non-localised consciousness than normal.

Huxley, (1968) suggested that “the function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main eliminative and not productive” (p.9). He subscribed to the panpsychist idea of a unified consciousness that encompassed and underlay all things. In his model, human survival required that that consciousness be “funnelled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system” (p.10) to facilitate the capacity to focus on specific elements of our environment rather than be overwhelmed with the knowledge of everything. He suggested that in certain altered states, this funnel is expanded, allowing a fuller experience of what he termed Mind at Large, which in the current research is referred to as non-localised consciousness. In this way, Huxley may see the experience of anamnesis as a “remembering” or connecting through localised consciousness to an aspect of consciousness or awareness that was previously non-localised. In a mystical conception, this would be the equivalent of expanding the separate self into connection with the universal self, in which all things have their being. This would mean such experiences fit comfortably, though paradoxically into the category of “beyond” as it would be a memory of experience, substance or self that was beyond the ego and beyond the localised consciousness of the brain.

Expansive, Limitless and Infinite. Three participants described TUL as infinite or vast. Sage’s comment was exemplary of this experience: “it’s not partitioned. It’s not compartmentalized. It’s not limited. It’s unlimited.” This corresponds with many concepts of divinity and transpersonal love in the mystical traditions. Stace (1960) discussed the Void experiences described by many mystics as an experience of this limitless, undifferentiated, contentless oneness:

Since the [mystical] experience has no content, it is often spoken of by the mystics as the Void or as nothingness; but also as the One, and as the Infinite. That there are in it no particular

existences is the same as saying that there are no distinctions in it, or that it is an undifferentiated unity. Since there is no multiplicity in it, it is the One. And that there are no distinctions in it or outside it means that there are no boundary lines in it between anything and anything. It is therefore the boundless or the infinite. (p.86)

One of the key features of Brahman is its permanence, encompassing a “beyondness” relative to temporal limitations. Katha Upanishad 1.3.15 declares “The supreme Self is beyond name and form, beyond the senses, inexhaustible, without beginning, without end, beyond time, space, and causality, eternal” (Easwaran, 2007, p.82). In this conception, the unconditional positive states that arise from unity with Brahman and realization of the Self are likely to be unconditional because of their derivation from that which has this characteristic of permanence. Like Brahman itself, they cannot be altered through the vicissitudes of time or circumstance.

Beyond Conditions, Attachments, and Judgements. Part of the unconditional nature of TUL for participants in Study Two was that it was free of judgement, attachments, or conditions. This has been discussed in other sections, referring to TUL as a permanent, non-localised consciousness that simply exists as part of the foundational substrate of all that is. According to both mystical interpretations, and participant responses, whether or not human beings can access this consciousness is not a matter of needing to meet any conditions or prerequisites. It is about connecting the localised consciousness of the separate self with this non-localised, foundational consciousness, which is innately characterised by UL, joy, and peace (Spira, 2016; Taylor, 2018; Tolle, 1997/2010).

The absence of judgements and conditions is another way in which TUL appears different from unlimited love (Post, 2003). Oman and Meyer (2013) compare unlimited love to empathy, delineating that empathy has no “positive moral direction” (p.6). In contrast, they say that unlimited love has a positive moral direction in that it is directed toward the good of its object(s). Like empathy, TUL as unconditioned non-localised consciousness does not appear to have a moral direction, but accepts and loves everything as it is. Yet, paradoxically, all participants found that in feeling wholly accepted, they usually transformed in some way from elements of unhappiness or maladaptive behaviours to greater peace, contentment, joy and skill.

Paradox: Beyond Logic. The theme of paradox involved participants describing TUL experiences in metaphors that appeared to contradict each other but which were experienced concurrently. Many of these were spatial, with Amardeep referring to an infinite space that was nonetheless contained within his heart, and feeling taken far away by his experience of TUL but simultaneously exceptionally present. Sage’s paradoxes were also spatial. As described below, she shared a sense of self that was both replicated throughout the cosmos, a small point within the cosmos and containing the cosmos within her.

These are common mystical paradoxes, in which going within and discovering a true inner self is a way to access oneness with a self that includes all things. Krishna tells Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita “Those who see Me in everything and everything in Me, know the staggering truth that the Self in the individual is the Self in All” (in Hawley, 2009, verse 6:30, p.61). Spira (2016) discusses this self as a beingness that exists beyond or underneath the normal thought processes of the conditioned mind. He posits that there is only one beingness in the entire universe. Thus, accessing this unconditioned ground of being within the self, is accessing the ground of being of all. As has been mentioned, Spira associates this with experiences of UL, joy and peace, which are natural unconditional qualities of this universal beingness.

Stace also discussed the contents of many altered states as paradoxes. He considered paradoxicality to be “a disregard of the commonly accepted laws of logic” and stated that it was one of the core hallmarks of the mystical experience (1960, p.68). Stace posited that the concept of a unity underlying apparent multiplicity is an example of mystical paradox. Of unconditional positive experiences, he writes “the paradox is that there should be a positive experience which has no positive content—an experience which is both something and nothing”. As he suggests, TUL as described by participants and UJ as described in mystical literature are love and joy for no reason; positive experiences without content.

Tolle (1997/2010) and Durga (2016) account for this paradox through the explanation that such experiences take place in a different dimension of being from those accessible to ordinary consciousness. Both authors discuss the inherent duality or polarity of the thinking mind, the emotions and the physical body. In these lower dimensions of consciousness, all emotions have their opposite. Polarity gives rise to choice and preference, and creates conditionality. However, they posit that there is consciousness or existence beyond mind, body and emotion, which Durga calls the Divine Void, and Tolle calls the Unmanifested. In both models, this “beyond” element both transcends and pervades all other parts of creation, but it is only consciously accessible through mystical or awakening states, in which thought and emotion are transcended. This unconditioned part of reality and self, whilst unmanifest or voidal, nonetheless is experienced as a kind of love or joy that is not contingent upon anything and which has no opposite. Love and joy are simply products of its beingness. In this research these qualities are termed unconditional positive states.

6.3.2.5 Energy

Five participants discussed TUL as a palpable form of energy. Karlie and Andal both described TUL in terms of overwhelming energy; the sense of a vast substance that was coming towards them or filling them. Michael recounted experiencing several different forms of love that he felt were condensed into one energy that was flowing to him. Joy spoke of the Divine or God, as she experienced it in her NDE as energy and as presence. Andal spoke of “soul energy” or “Divine Mother energy” as energies of TUL.

Green and Shellenberger (1993) conducted a review of medical literature in which love was considered an energy associated with psychological and physiological health and healing. They termed it an energy because of its capacity to produce effects, suggesting it is not merely a theoretical concept of love but an active agent. Many mystics and philosophers have discussed the idea of love as an energy (Durga, 2013, 2016; Sorokin, 1954/2002; Templeton, 2000). In *The Ways and Power of Love*, Sorokin (1954/2002) explored love as an energy in Christian scriptures, and as an infinite resource that can be imbibed and expressed by human beings, in order to expand what is otherwise a finite human capacity for love. Oman and Meyer have cited how Christian literature considers human beings to be capable of “channeling” the infinite love of God, as if it were a flow. They give the examples of St. Paul’s assertion “not I, but the Christ liveth in me” from Galatians, 2:20, and St. Francis’ prayer “Lord, make me an instrument...” (in Oman & Meyer, 2014, p.5). Sorokin posited that the energy of love is inexhaustible, paralleling the discussion above concerning TUL as a feature of an underlying, constant, infinite non-localised consciousness:

And often the more it functions, the greater are the returns of the energies it generates in others; the more it expends itself, the greater are the returns that replenish its expenditure. In this sense, it is a form of energy that is almost inexhaustible (like the energy of intra-atomic friction), an energy that sometimes actually grows through its expenditure. The more love expends itself, the stronger it becomes. (1954/2002, p.40)

Templeton explains this concept slightly differently, conjecturing “Certainly, we can see the effects of love, but not the divine energy creating the effects” (p.7). TUL in that conceptualisation would be divine energy he describes.

Andal described TUL being transferred from a teacher to a student through a flow of energy:

For those people who have experienced going before an avatar or living master, there is a palpableness to the expression of love. It's an energy emanating in that field, which then, you know, from psychological terms... would be co-regulating people into that state and they're receiving that divine energy.

Durga (2012) has discussed the spiritual idea that consciousness *is* energy. If this is true, it would follow that TUL could be conveyed energetically, both from person to person and from unmanifest divinity or unified non-localised consciousness to individual consciousness. This would also explain the phenomenon of participants frequently experiencing love as a non-localised, palpable field that surrounded them. Thus, it seems that energy may be a central part of the experience of TUL, in that either TUL may be a form of energy, or energy may be a mechanism through which TUL is conveyed and experienced.

6.3.3 Impact

All participants reported feeling transformed in significant ways through their TUL experiences. The superordinate themes of its impact were: uplifted personal relationships; personal healing and

transformation; increased capacity for purpose and service and a new understanding of or connection with divinity. The impacts participants experienced were congruent with those of awakening experiences, both in their content, and in the depth of transformation attained. TUL experiences demonstrated features of what Taylor (2017) as termed primary and secondary shifts in respect of awakening experiences. These shifts were achieved through both temporally bound experiences of TUL and more ongoing processes of ever-deepening TUL. As several participants spoke of both these forms of TUL, it was not always easy to distinguish the impacts of each. However, it seemed that in this cohort, peak experiences of TUL largely led to a commitment to living in a way that is more and more aligned with TUL, resulting in its enduring expression. Thus, it seems reasonable that the impacts of each form blended as participants wove TUL into their lives.

Michael experienced a peak, temporally bound TUL experience through his NDE. This resulted in a primary shift (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017). That is, he had a profound sense that his identity had transformed through his experience of TUL. The other five participants demonstrated what Taylor would call a gradual awakening process in addition to the peak TUL experiences they reported. They appeared to have a constant deepening of their everyday experience of TUL. The peak experiences mentioned by these five participants all resulted in secondary shifts. These were substantial changes in values, habits, and their perception of the world around them. However, two of these participants appeared to experience an overall primary shift over the period in which they had dedicated their lives to TUL.

Karlie and Andal, who had ever-deepening TUL, likely experienced primary shifts through this ongoing process. It was evident in both of their interviews that they found themselves unrecognisable from the people they had been before their journeys of TUL. However, in contrast to Michael's primary shift, which occurred immediately through his NDE, Karlie and Andal's shifts emerged throughout their journeys, and may continue to do so. This suggests that both peak experiences of TUL, and adopting a path of practicing and tending deliberately towards TUL are useful in the process of beneficial transformation.

TUL as an ongoing deepening may have similarities with Post's (2003) unlimited love. As the TUL became more instilled, participants certainly mentioned participating more in acts of service, care, and altruism for others. The difference between the two concepts is that unlimited love is practiced as a focus on values, attitudes, and actions, which can all be attained during normal states of consciousness. In contrast, on the journey of TUL, there is an emphasis on regularly altering one's state of consciousness to access an experience of love beyond the separate self, and beyond subject-object relationships. This appeared to bring regular peak experiences of TUL that contributed to the person's transformation, as well as enriching their capacity to express love and altruism to those they encountered.

6.3.3.1 Bidirectional Impact

Many of the reported impacts of TUL appeared to have a bi-directional relationship with it. In several cases, (across Study 1 and Study 2) compassion, forgiveness, empathy, service, and altruism led to peak experiences of TUL. Similarly, other participants had apparently spontaneous peak experiences of TUL which lead to a greater capacity for compassion, forgiveness, empathy, service, and altruism. This bidirectional relationship between awakening states and altruism is consistent with Taylor (2024).

6.3.3.2 Uplifting Personal Relationships

Templeton posited that:

Unlimited love can be considered a power because it provides a positive and meaningful avenue through which we can relax the struggle between ourselves and others. Often, it is this struggle that lies at the root of human discord and suffering. (2000, p.3)

All six participants discussed positive transformations in their interpersonal relationships arising from TUL. In some cases, these improvements arose from being able to “relax the struggle” of conflict, co-dependency, judgements, control, and expectations. In others, it was the ability to access more transpersonal love, which in turn bestowed more love, compassion, and kindness to share.

Positive interpersonal relationships have been linked with psychological health countless times in psychological literature on topics spanning from reductions in depression, to improvements in physical health, the management of chronic illness, and reduced mortality (Cohen, 2004; Khaw & Kern, 2014; Perissinotto et al., 2012). They are so central to human wellbeing, they are a category of Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model of psychological flourishing (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships Meaning and Achievement). Thus, improvements to interpersonal relationships are also likely to improve overall mental health.

Improvements in interpersonal relationships may benefit not only the individual, but also the broader society. Research suggests that, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, many people suffer from a general sense of disconnectedness from fellow human beings (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). This disconnection is linked with poor mental health (Hayes et al, 2020; Klussman et al., 2020), diminished levels of altruism and care for the wellbeing of others (Taylor, 2023), and even higher mortality rates (Holt-Lunstad, 2021).

As mentioned above, Taylor (2024) has suggested a bidirectional relationship between altruism and awakening (which includes heightened connectedness with all beings), in which practices of altruism increase connectedness and decrease separatism, whilst awakening in turn leads to more naturally arising expressions of altruism and good will towards others. As TUL appears to be a manifestation of extreme connection or oneness, and is a subtype of awakening experience, it is likely that it too would increase behaviours associated with connectedness, supporting both the wellbeing of the individual, and by extension, their social environment.

More Love and Good Will for Self and Others. Christian Mystic Paul Ferrini (1994) writes about the interconnectedness of self and other love. He writes: “When you can love yourself unconditionally, it is not difficult to love others. When you can accept others with all of their faults, it is not difficult to accept your own” (p.6). It seemed that accessing non-localised TUL enhanced the capacity for both self and other love.

Four participants discussed this as a benefit of TUL. Karlie explained “After having these experiences of UL, I feel like I could be in any environment with anybody... where they or I have done anything and still feel burning blazing love for them and me”. For three participants, (as discussed in Section 6.2.1.1) the practice of extending love to others assisted them in maintaining, and in some cases, deepening their day-to-day realisation of TUL. This became part of a gradual awakening process discussed by Taylor (2017). It is as if they were able to weave more of the features of the altered state of TUL into their normal daily consciousness and actions.

Andal, Michael and Karlie discussed that their peak experiences of TUL gave them a new understanding of other people, not as separate entities identified by their egos and actions, but as souls. For Karlie and Michael, the realisation of everybody’s soul-identity had been particular features of their peak TUL experiences, that then coloured how they perceived every person in their life. They felt that each soul was a unique expression of the one consciousness or self, that was having its own experience of learning and growth. This perception made compassion easy, and thus caused an effortless expression of kindness towards others. They commented that they were still triggered now and then by other people’s behaviours, but could remind themselves of this new world view and deliberately practice seeing and loving the soul in the other person, which would bring them back to love. This practice is reminiscent of Ram Dass’s often quoted statement that all beings are “God in Drag”, and that our job is to look past the costume and find the divine. The theory is that as we do this for others, we accidentally develop more self-compassion and both parties evolve.

Deeper Connection and Repairing Conflict. For Michael and Karlie, the capacity to see other people as souls allowed them to understand and forgive difficult interpersonal behaviours. This was central to Karlie’s first peak TUL experience, as she felt herself and her father meet each other as pure souls, rather than as humans who had made mistakes and hurt each other. This experience of purity created a new understanding between them, through which their relationship reconciled.

Michael found that his peak experience of TUL gave him insight about how conditions had operated both from and towards his family, friends, and partners. Understanding this enabled him to let go of his attachment to these expectations. He was more able to allow others to be themselves without wanting validation or approval, and to have more compassion when others sought validation from him.

Durga (2013) offers a model of relationships based in a multidimensional system of consciousness that reflects the Hindu concept of *koshas* (Kumar, 2002; Marathe & Acharya, 2020; Raina, 2016). In this model, ideas about a person, memories about past grievances, and conditions we have on another person sit in what Durga calls the astral dimension, or the mind layer of consciousness. This creates a kind of static or obscuration, through which we are unable to experience the truth of the soul and infinite dimensions in the other person or in the relationship and are thus unable to fully access the love and connection that exists there. When such mental and emotional debris is forgiven or released, more of that love and connection pervades a person's sense of the relationship in question. The purity discussed by Karlie – as if the relational slate is wiped clean – is accessible. Connection with the other person becomes much easier.

Other elements of love, such as compassion, have been associated with greater tendencies towards kindness and commitment to conflict resolution in relationships (Klimecki, 2019). Mahony suggests that by immersing in TUL, “we can more fully strengthen and refine our own particular expressions of love in our lives” (2014, P.7) which would lead to greater expressions of compassion, care and other behavioural manifestations that may improve relationships. Increases in compassion were recounted by participants both in Study 1 and Study 2. Further, as explored above, participants in Study 2 reported increased empathy, acceptance, and forgiveness from their TUL experiences. These attitudinal and behavioural changes may be part of the mechanism through which TUL improves interpersonal relationships.

It is possible, given the practical changes in people's experience of and skill in relationships, that interventions centred on UL – both RUL and TUL – may be useful in couple's therapy. Given that 43% of first marriages have been found to end in divorce (Forbes, 2024), new ways to improve both feelings of connection and skill in communication within relationships may be profoundly helpful for increasing both individual and family wellbeing.

Greater Empathy, Acceptance, Forgiveness, and Spaciousness. Five out of six participants experienced a greater sense of what Andal referred to as “spaciousness” in relationships and interpersonal love. This included transitions from judgement to discernment and forgiveness, and from conditions and expectations to a capacity to see the other person as they are. Sage commented that this transition was helped by an understanding that what she perceived as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ was something for her own personal guidance system, which may not suit that of others. This increased the set of relational circumstances in which she could feel and express UL.

The ability to love others with greater spaciousness reflects the form of RUL associated with UPR (Rogers, 1952) which emerged through Study One. It seems participants were able to see another person accurately, and to have discernment, but to love them regardless of the value of their actions or attitudes. Karlie exemplified this, discussing her perception of those she worked with in restorative justice who erred in their recovery process. Although she may have felt an initial pang of disappointment in such moments,

she was able to quickly recontextualise the negative behaviour or attitude they were demonstrating in terms of the non-linear nature of psychological healing. Compassion for their journey allowed her to be present with them through less-than-optimal behaviour, whilst maintaining the boundaries she needed for her own safety. Congruent with research on UPR (Ganley, 1989), Karlie's presence and capacity for compassionate boundaries appeared to contribute to therapeutic shifts in the attitudes and behaviours of those she worked with through the paradox of acceptance. She felt that this was enabled through her experiences of TUL.

For Andal, the reduction of judgement for others was accompanied by a reduction in self-judgement, reminiscent of the "common humanity" element of self-compassion (Neff & Germer, 2017). She realised that whilst no-one is perfect in the way their ego expresses, everyone is a soul. In that way, we share a common humanity both of perfection and imperfection, and neither impacts upon innate worth.

In addition to facilitating greater RUL in its typology of presence and acceptance, the limitless form of RUL was also enhanced through this sense of spaciousness. Participants reflected a sense of expansion, as though loving others unconditionally was a more authentic way to express themselves in their relationships, but societal conditioning had prevented this expression. This was not mentioned verbally, but was interpreted from the sense of joy and delight with which several participants (especially Andal and Michael) shared their new sense of freedom to love without conditions.

The Upanishads discuss the cultivation of a type of RUL that is similarly based in TUL, or an inherent understanding of oneness. In this love, there is no fear of abandonment or loss, because there is an understanding that the recipient of love is simply a different form of the same universal essence as the self. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* describes: "Whenever we love... we are really responding to the Self within that person. Therefore... if we discover this Self in our own consciousness, there will be no more parting, no more sorrow ever" (Nagler, 2007, p.96). The Upanishads describe this as a purer love, that is free of control, reflecting the sense of spaciousness of participants in Study One who reported expansive RUL in contexts of break up. This suggests, in corroboration of participants' own testimony, that experiences of TUL, which appear to be characterised by oneness and connection with a universal self, would be useful in cultivating RUL, particularly in its spacious form.

The quality of spaciousness or non-control is emphasised in descriptions of the Tao. Letting go of control of others or external situations and instead turning the focus inward is associated with enlightenment and empowerment. Verse 33 of the Tao te Ching advises "understand others and grow wise. Understand yourself and become enlightened. Conquering others requires force. Conquering yourself takes power" (Hamill, 2007, p.48). Becoming purified of the desire to control allows not only greater empowerment, but also a more boundless form of benevolence. Verse 51 states that the "Tao gives life without possessing, helps without expectation, fosters without controlling" (Hamill, 2007, P.74, verse 51). By extension, as

discovered by these participants, letting go of control would allow one to be a vehicle for the non-controlling flow of the Tao and its expression of TUL.

Better Communication. All six participants mentioned an improvement in their interpersonal communication as a result of either peak TUL experiences or their conscious intention to live in alignment with TUL. Most of them described a mechanism wherein love appeared to provide a safe container for difficult conversations. This resulted in greater receptivity on both sides.

Sage spoke of how she was able to accept what people said, even if it was different to what she believed. She felt no need to argue with another person's perception; no need to prove herself right. Instead, she felt she could offer her perspective with love and respect for the other person and their view. She shared that this resulted in people hardly ever being angry with her, because they didn't need to, as she was no threat to them or their identity. Verse 66 of the Tao te Ching discusses a similar result of living in alignment with the Tao "because one does not contend, the world does not contend in return" (in Hamill, 2007).

Boundaries. Three participants in the current study began to discuss boundaries before being asked about them. Amardeep said that when he first began having TUL experiences, his lack of boundaries would prevent TUL from integrating in his life. He would feel drained and uncentred trying to meet everyone else's needs, though conceptually, he had assumed that being selfless and always doing what others needed would be an expression of UL. As he grew in his understanding of himself and his relationship with TUL, he realised that having boundaries served TUL, and allowed him to expand into it. He felt that the absence of boundaries did UL a disservice.

Karlie also reported that boundaries had helped her to be more unconditionally loving with the community she worked with. Boundaries supported both the RUL of her interpersonal relationships with her community, and the TUL that arose in group processes. Karlie recounted an example in which she had expressed some new boundaries and then run a meditation with a particular group. She noticed there was more TUL palpable during the meditation than normal. As she contemplated this, she conjectured that the new boundaries created a bigger, stronger container, within which more love could exist. Similarly, Matsu-Pissot reported that in his (2008) study of the impact of receiving RUL from a teacher or mentor, many of his participants mentioned they had felt UL through the teacher sharing boundaries with them. They felt that this was a containing expression of RUL that helped them to connect more deeply with themselves, feel safe in the interpersonal connection with the teacher and access more TUL.

The idea of boundaries creating a robust and spacious vessel to hold more love reflects elements of Kabbalistic thought. Chesed, the sephiroth or symbolic centre of consciousness most associated with expansiveness, is often equated with UL, as love in this sephiroth would expand without limits (Ben Shimon Halevi, 1972; Fortune, 1925/2015). However, the expansive love of chesed can be associated

with overindulgence, which does a disservice both to the lover and the beloved, and with addiction (Eve, 2020). Such imbalances are usually connected with ego. In contrast, both mystical literature and participant accounts associate UL with experiences of soulfulness, where egoic attachments and overindulgences fall away (Easwaran, 2007; Happold, 1990; James, 1902/1928; Taylor, 2017). For example, both Michael and Karlie have found TUL transformative in relinquishing addictions and excesses, both regarding substances, and co-dependent and toxic relationship dynamics.

As explored in Section 2.5.5, the excess associated with chesed is balanced by gevurah, the equal but opposite sephirot, sitting on the pillar of form or contraction. Gevurah is the sephirot of discipline and boundaries. These qualities tame the excesses of chesed, bringing that polarity into equilibrium in tipharet, the sephirot that sits between them.

Tipharet is thus the sephiroth most connected with TUL. TUL is associated both in participant and mystical accounts with the transcendence or reunification of polarities. Similarly, tipharet is the unifier of all polarities on the tree of life. Further, tipharet represents the soul. When enlivened, it connects the adept to the Divine, or higher consciousness (Ben Shimon Halevi, 1972; Fortune, 1925/2015). This reflects how participants felt their TUL experiences were moments of connection with their soul, the divine, or a benevolent consciousness that transcended their separate self.

However, TUL would be an expression of tipharet in its enlivened or active state. This state requires chesed and gevurah to be balanced and harmonious. If participant responses were interpreted through this Kabbalistic lens, the people pleasing discussed by Amardeep would create an imbalance of chesed, pulling tipharet out of its alignment, and diminishing his capacity for TUL. In contrast, the boundaries Karlie provided her group would have realigned the balance of chesed, gevurah and tipharet, creating a more stable vehicle through which TUL could manifest. Thus, the discipline and boundaries of gevurah are necessary in the Kabbalistic tradition to balance the excesses of chesed and enable the activation and health of tipharet – the sephirot of TUL.

Three participants mentioned that boundaries were important manifestations of TUL because they preserved truth. This reflects the poem *Quia Amore Languedo*, in which the Christ declares “I am true love that false was never” (in Happold, 1990, p.41), and Corinthians 13:5-8, which instructs that love “finds its joy in the truth”. The implication in both texts is that, as expressed by these three participants, love and truth are synonymous.

There are mystical correlations of the relationship between love and truth. In the central Gnostic allegory, The Song of the Pearl, the protagonist is born of TUL, and abides in an allegorical Heavenly realm of truth. He leaves this to go on a quest. He descends into the delusion of physical incarnation, in which the truth of TUL and unity is obscured by the illusion of polarity. In this delusion, he forgets that he is of love, and from love. Eventually he finds a pearl, which symbolises truth. It causes him to overcome the illusion

of polarity he faces and allows him to return to the oneness and truth of TUL with his divine family (Haardt, 1971; Jacobs, 2005). Thus, in Gnosticism, TUL is obscured in the absence of truth, and returning to truth is a way of returning to TUL.

The implication from Amardeep, Karlie, and Sage was also that if truth is destroyed, TUL is obscured. On face value, this makes sense in that if there is deception, any love expressed is for a false representation, and is perhaps contingent on that false narrative being maintained. Thus, it is innately conditional. Further, falsehood creates separation between people; one person believing one narrative, the other another. TUL appears to thrive in connection and unity and to be inaccessible through separation.

In the Hindu tradition, both truth and TUL are characteristics or manifestations of Brahman. Brahman is commonly defined as *Sat Chit Ananda*: truth, consciousness, bliss (Easwaran, 2007). If Brahman is truth, and TUL is one of its characteristics, it is congruent that TUL would not exist in the absence of truth. The ego is not governed by Brahman, but by the illusion or *maya* of separation, distortion, and comparison (Durga, 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Taylor, 2023). As the experience of TUL is a manifestation of Brahman, and of oneness, it cannot be accessed from the ego which is based in separateness.

When people obscure their truth in people pleasing, they are often trying to win the approval of others, or to prove something to themselves about being able to help others. Such motivations arise from the ego rather than the soul because the soul is filled with an innate understanding of oneness, and doesn't require such validation (Durga, 2013, 2016). Verse 15 of the Tao te Ching explains "One who keeps to the Tao does not wish to be filled" (in Hamill, 2007, p.21). It is assumed that "one who keeps to the Tao" is one who lives congruently with one's true nature, reflected in Hinduism by the concept of soul. Thus, although Amardeep initially thought that people pleasing would be an expression of UL, as his experience and understanding of UL grew, he realised that the falsehood of people pleasing drew him out of congruence with the truth of his being, and thus out of UL.

This may shed light on the question in Study One (Section 5.4.4.3) of the participant who felt that UL had caused her to remain in a toxic relationship for too long. It seems that a complete form of TUL promotes healthy boundaries in support of truth that serves the good of all, which would not extend to allowing physical or verbal abuse. However, such experiences are transient. Once they pass, the mind may attempt to express that TUL, but practice it from a conceptual basis rather than an embodied one. This may turn TUL into a more sentimental experience, which may risk rescuing, people pleasing and tolerating bad behaviour on the conceptual basis that everything is loveable.

For example, Amardeep reported that he realised he was out of balance due to a lack of boundaries *after* he began to have TUL experiences. The more TUL experiences he had, the more he was able to witness and correct this imbalance. Thus, TUL experiences offered a gradual cure, but the people pleasing itself

was partially caused through trying to enact UL from a mental set of assumptions about how it should manifest.

When the true state of TUL is present, it seems that love can co-exist with boundaries. That is, a person can view bad behaviour with accurate perception whilst maintaining love for the person perpetrating it. However, a boundary would be implemented that either the perpetrator stop their harming actions, or the lover would continue to love them, but from a new, safe relational position (such as from a stance of friendship rather than romance, or in severe cases, in the absence of any formal relationship). Ideally, spiritual education could instruct people in not only the possibility of boundaries coexisting with UL, but their central importance to maintaining UL. With that type of education, when people have TUL experiences and attempt to integrate them into daily life, they may feel more empowered to let go of people pleasing and co-dependency and to embrace and express their own truth, which is more likely to reconnect them to TUL.

Less Co-dependency, Toxicity and Shame in Relationships. Michael, Amardeep, and Karlie all mentioned that their experiences of TUL helped them to let go of old, toxic dynamics in relationships. All three participants felt more easily able to let go of co-dependent tendencies that may have caused them to stay in a relationship too long or to have relationships that were based on a reciprocal meeting of needs rather than on genuine love. This again, contrasts with the account in which UL appeared to cause participant 10 of Study 1 to remain too long in a toxic relationship, suggesting there may have been other factors causing UL to express in that way. Durga (2013a) proposes that one way to overcome co-dependency in relationships is to connect to a higher source of love. She posits that our culture trains us to seek energy from other people in the form of validation and approval, but that we are actually capable of connecting with non-localised energy or consciousness that ‘fills’ us and makes us less dependent on external sources. Of course, relationships flourish through interdependency rather than independency, and thus it is still important to give and receive validation, approval, love, and attention. However, when one’s “cup” is full of a non-localised resource of love and energy, this exchange with others arises from that fullness and as an expression of love and connection, rather than as an expression of need and incompleteness. This was the experience Michael, Amardeep, and Karlie each described, which made them feel more free, whole, empowered, and capable of truly loving in interpersonal relationships.

6.3.3.3 Healing, Transformation and Evolution

All participants in this study underwent some form of healing, transformation, or evolution which they attributed to their TUL experience. Amardeep summarised, “love is really the panacea of all ills... human kindness, compassion and love”. This echoes Alexander, who, describing the healing power of the love he felt in his NDE, posited that “most of the pain we experience in the world comes from one source: lack of faith that love is real” (2012, p.201).

Amardeep and Alexander's perspectives on love as a panacea resonate with accounts throughout mystical literature. For example, Sorokin asserted: "As a creative energy of goodness, love unites what is separated, elevates what is base, purifies what is impure, ennobles what is ignoble, [and] creates harmony in the world of enmity" (1954/2002, p.34). Templeton agreed, summarising "Love has the power to transform lives, to heal sickness, to mute evil, and to create harmony out of discord" (2000, p.7). As mentioned in Section 2.2, reunification with Brahman and TUL is associated with the healing of all pain through the movement from polarity to unity. Similarly, the Gnostic Gospel of Philip asserts that: "love cures a multitude of sins" (Haardt, 1971, p.111). Verse 22 of the Tao te Ching discusses how a oneness with the Tao (through which it seems TUL arises) brings wholeness and healing: "The broken become whole, the crooked straighten, the empty are filled, the worn are renewed.... true wholeness is restored from within" (Hamill, 2007, p.32). In a more modern, medical context, Dr Bernie Siegal associates love with physical healing. He states:

If I told patients to raise their blood levels of immune globulins or killer T -cells, no one would know how. But if I can teach them to love themselves and others fully, the same change happens automatically. The truth is: Love heals. (In Green and Shellenberger, 1993, p.31)

Prima facie, such claims of love as a cure for such a wide array of ills may seem naïve and overly romanticised. Yet when love is understood not solely as a relational emotion, but as a distinct EASC that promotes an assortment of experientially evident psychological benefits, these assertions gain greater phenomenological and practical plausibility. Participants in Study Two reported an array of practical, beneficial transformations through their experiences of TUL, providing initial support to age-old claims that love can have a tangible, positive psychological impact.

Shift in Relationship with Self and Identity. Karlie, Michael, and Joy all experienced a significant change in their relationships with themselves through their TUL experiences. Each of them cultivated substantially more self-love and self-respect through their experiences, which transformed their behaviours and their subsequent relationship with the world around them. Alexander talks about a similar transformation arising through TUL in his NDE. He recounts:

I learned through my NDE, and the growth it engendered, to love myself. This then allows me to love others more fully and to feel a connection to all and everything, including nature, animals, and all beings. When you love yourself, you become love. (2012, p.202)

Andal and Amardeep each had experiences of TUL that caused them to discover that TUL was within them. Amardeep explained that this had given him a sense of freedom in the world because of his new identity that included a oneness with all things. Andal described the relief of reconnecting with love within, saying "[T]hat love is... so much more powerful than any self-constructed identity... ego identity... it was like just getting back to self... getting back to who I really am". She found that this new self-identification allowed many defensive behavioural and relational patterns to fall away.

Kotler and Wheal suggest that paradoxically, the EASC quality of selflessness (which has been linked to the TUL experience in Section 3.4.2.1) leads to a more enduring, expansive sense of self. In losing rigid attachment to habitual identities, perspectives, and distinctions normally associated with the self-construct and experiencing states of oneness with the world outside of the self, the self is reconstituted in a new and more resilient way. This appears congruent with both Andal and Amardeep's experiences of TUL.

Inner Resource of Love and Resilience. The sense of an inner resource of love was experienced by many participants as enhanced resilience or courage, which supported and uplifted them through potentially painful situations. In Michael's case, this inner resource or resilience enabled him to feel contentment even in the aftermath of his train accident. He recounted:

I came crashing straight back into my body, into the hospital, and all the pain came rushing through; all the sound of the hospital and the trauma came rushing back... but it was okay because... I was still fully charged with all this love that I'd been given...

This is a classic exemplar of the causeless quality of unconditional positive states. It seems they can often arise in circumstances where it would be normal to experience negative emotions such as fear or anguish (Fox, 2014). As in Michael's example, they can be experienced as if they are a substance or an energy that has come from outside of the individuated self. For example, Michael said he felt "charged" with love that he had been "given". He didn't appear to believe that the love had been generated by his own psyche. Regardless of the origin of the love, it brought him a sense of peace and resilience in the aftermath of an extremely traumatic experience.

This experience of resilience and inner resource of love from TUL was not only palpable to Michael from the inside, but visible to others from the outside. He recounted his mother telling him:

[E]very time we come to see you, we walk out and we just say that you're glowing and you're like we've never seen you before... even though you've got all these tubes and wires coming at you... you're giving out love and care to us and the nurses and everyone who's around you.

This reflects Templeton (2000) and Sorokin (1954/2002)'s concept of unlimited love as something that can be not only received from an infinite source, but transmitted out as kindness and luminosity towards others. It also supports the notion of TUL as energy, explored in section 6.3.2.5.

Both Sage and Karlie discuss the comfort they feel knowing that TUL is with them or available to them in all moments. Karlie shared: "When... I'm feeling a little lost... I know that that UL is within me and I don't ever have to be separate from it again... [I]t doesn't matter where I go that love is going to be there." This sense of feeling permanently connected to TUL as a non-localised consciousness may bring new light to Psalm 23:4-6. It declares "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (King James Bible, 1769/2017). As in Michael's situation, unconditional positive emotions are accessible no matter what circumstances one finds oneself in, even in the "shadow of death". As indicated by Karlie and Sage,

they bring great comfort, strength, and security, enabling resilience and courage, and often, joy in unlikely circumstances.

Decreased Negative Emotion and Increased Positive Emotion. Andal and Michael found that their predominant negative emotions – anger and self-criticism respectively – fell away as a result of their TUL experiences. For Andal, this was a gradual shift, and for Michael, it happened immediately through the TUL in his NDE. Karlie too discussed a gradual process by which her previous habitual state of psychological anguish, distrust, and poor self-worth began to be replaced with love. Sage and Amardeep discussed what seemed like more conscious transformations, fuelled by their TUL experiences, whereby when negative emotions such as fear or anger arose, they were able to make conscious choices to bring them back to love.

Mystical literature discusses many negative emotions being overcome by experiences of connection with a sense of underlying oneness, such as is involved in TUL. Several texts specifically focus on the negative experience of fear not being able to co-exist with love. One of the tenets of Sorokin's concept of love is that "Where there is fear, there is no love; where there is love, there is no fear" (1954/2002, p.40). Swami Vivekananda teaches "Fear comes from a selfish idea of cutting one's self off from the universe. The smaller and the more selfish I make myself, the more is my fear" (Vivekananda, 1896, p.88-89). This equates fear with separation, and places the concept of unity – experienced by all participants through their TUL – at the heart of fearlessness.

In concert with decreases in negative emotion, all six participants described attaining greater access to positive emotions such as joy, love, and peace through their experiences. Joy, love, and peace are conceptualised by Spira (2016), Taylor (2018), and Tolle (1997/2010) as innate positive qualities of being, accessible when the thinking mind is sufficiently still or in wakeful states of consciousness. Similar experiences have been extensively discussed through this thesis in terms of unconditional positive states.

Unconditional positive states of consciousness as emerging through this research, appear to parallel the various notions of a permanently blissful, loving energy or foundational state of being. This is variously referred to as Sat Chit Ananda, Source, Brahman, non-localised consciousness, the Tao, the Void, spirit-force, the Unmanifest, and many other names (Durga, 2016; Easwaran, 2007; Mahony, 2014; Spira, 2016; Taylor, 2018; Tolle, 1997/2010). Regardless of the tradition in which this underlying oneness is described, it is not viewed as a product of human consciousness, but instead as something that human beings can connect with in EASCs.

Unlike the turbulent nature of emotions, which change in response to various processes and stimuli, unconditional positive states exist constantly, and potentially non-locally; independent of the human mind or body. They are accessible through EASCs, in which the neurological "doors of perception" (Huxley, 1968, p.1) are open to such experiences. As has been explored, this can involve relaxing the chatter of

the ego, and possibly de-activating certain physiological structures of the brain (Kotler & Wheal, 2017) to promote an experience of unity. In some situations, and with practice, such states of relative oneness can begin to become more permanent to varying degrees, creating ongoing states of wakefulness and TUL, and a resultant increase in joy and happiness (Durga, 2016; Taylor, 2017; Tolle, 1997/2010).

Easwaran suggests that most of humanity seeks joy outside of themselves, but that there is no way to recover from separateness and suffering other than to realise or connect with a permanent inner ground of being:

The infinite - free, unbounded, full of joy -- is our native state. We have fallen from that state and seek it everywhere: every human activity is an attempt to fill this void. But as long as we try to fill it from outside ourselves, we are making demands on life which life cannot fulfill. (2007, p.41)

TUL appears to be a manifestation of reconnecting with this “native state”. Its discovery would mean, according to Easwaran, less disappointment and negative emotion through seeking fulfilment where it cannot be found (externally), and more satisfaction in the authentic, pervasive positive state of consciousness it brings.

Participants' increases in positive emotions may be partially due to other practices they adopted in the wake of their TUL experiences. Corneille & Luke (2021) discuss how following awakening experiences, participants were more likely to engage with activities such as meditation, mindfulness, and increased time in nature, which in turn led to increases in confidence, trust, empathy and altruism and reductions in stress and depression. Thus, whilst some increases in wellbeing were attributed directly to the EASC, others were derived from the behaviour change that it inspired. In the current study, participants reported positive shifts that they felt were the direct result of their TUL experience. Yet many also shifted their pattern of behaviour. Notably, even once the peak of their UL experience and self-arising love for all beings and things had passed, most participants maintained a deliberate attitude of care, compassion, love and unity towards all beings and things. Often, they reported that thinking and behaving in accordance with this paradigm of love and oneness led to increased feelings of genuine love and joy.

In psychological literature, a practice of Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) (based on a practice from the Metta Sutta) has been found to cultivate positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001). LKM is performed by intending to extend love out from the heart to include a broader and broader group of people. Fredrickson found that the cultivation of positive emotion through this heart-centred practice, particularly when repeated over several weeks, led in turn to increases in physical, intellectual, social, and psychological resources. Changes in attitude to incorporate all beings in a paradigm of oneness and love has thematic parallels with the practice of LKM, supporting the possibility that this change in attitude may have contributed to participants' increase in positive emotion. Given the findings from LKM research concerning the broadening and building of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), the increases in positive emotions cited by participants may have also have contributed to the increased internal resource and resilience many participants gained from UL (discussed above).

Softening of Ego and Reduction of Flaws. Five participants directly related a sense that TUL had softened their ego or helped them to reduce self-perceived personality flaws. Many of the participants discussed their relationship with their ego as something they were constantly aware of with a sense of loving compassion. They described that as they noticed their ego gripping onto something, wanting to control or react, they could offer that part of themselves love and redirect its attitude. Andal suggested that this enhanced capacity to meet the self with love was central to the ego's transformation. This concept is stressed in self-compassion literature, in which countless studies have found that meeting parts of the self that one wants to change with compassion has a more transformative effect than meeting those same parts with judgement (Neff & Germer, 2017).

Michael spoke about a transformation in his ego in which it seemed he felt like an astonished witness rather than an instigator. He described noticing that despite a total shift in his life from thinking he was worthless and talentless, to becoming a successful artist and author who gives regular interviews on television and radio, his ego doesn't seem to have inflated. Instead, he felt that all his work was an expression of the love he had experienced. It was as if his identity was not so attached to his ego as it once was, either in self-criticism or in pride, because it was associated with a bigger locus of selfhood after his experience of TUL.

Theologian Karl Rahner described a similar transformation from egoic selfhood to liberation:

In love, the ages of my soul spring open / Allowing me to breathe a new air of freedom / And forget my own petty self. / In love, my whole being streams forth/ Out of the rigid confines of / Narrowness and self-assertion, / Which make me a prisoner / Of my own poverty and emptiness.
(in Templeton, 2000, p.10)

This reflects Kotler and Wheal's (2017) concept of the selflessness that accompanies expansive altered states (EASCs, discussed in Section 3.4.2.1) where the tight grip of the ego and its self-consciousness is loosened. Perhaps the impact of selflessness sustains to some extent even after the peak EASC of TUL concludes. It would be of interest for future research to explore for how long after such experiences any such relaxation of the ego is maintained, and what types of individual differences between participants may impact it.

The ego-dissolution of EASCs as explored in psychedelic literature has been associated with reductions in depression and anxiety through a similar weakening of egoic processes. Specifically, according to Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson (2011), through the reduction of both cognitive fusion (self-consciousness based on the idea that there is a "right" way to be in any given situation) and experience avoidance (avoiding experiences which may threaten the self-narrative, whether positive or negative) as discussed in Section 3.5. It is possible that similar mechanisms may be in play in the impact of TUL on diminishing the common egoic experiences of self-consciousness and pride.

Enhanced Values, Virtues and Character Strengths

Andal and Amardeep both discussed how TUL was not only a mystical or meditative experience, but something that manifested in behavioural changes, and increased character strength. Andal also talked extensively about the joy of witnessing others in her spiritual community experiencing TUL and having the best parts of their personalities shine through as a result. As has been discussed in other sections, Templeton (2000) and Sorokin (1954/2002) posit that TUL is a limitless energy that is a substrate of the universe and that when individuals are able to connect with this love, they share in its resource. This resource of love then allows people to give, serve and express the best parts of their being.

In the Vedantic tradition, unification with TUL is equal to unification with the Divine itself, and thus allows the devotee to shine with the *tejas* or light and qualities of that divinity, which manifest in character strengths. In Durga's model of the five dimensions of consciousness, connected through the chakra system or energy body, when the heart chakra is open to and connected with TUL, a person innately feels more warmth for others, and expresses more kindness, compassion, and forgiveness as manifestations of that loving energy (2012; 2016).

Durga (2016), Tolle (1997/2010) and Taylor (2023) discuss that connection with the Void, the Unmanifest or spirit-force involves transcending the constricted and self-absorbed consciousness of the ego. As behaviour is no longer governed by the egoic tendencies of control and self-absorption, it is free to express with love and benevolence, which are considered characteristics of spirit-force itself. This sense of connection to and identification with spirit-force is a feature of wakefulness as described by Taylor (2018) which is associated with increases in altruism and compassion. Each of these models from diverse traditions support TUL experiences enhancing character strengths and the positive qualities of personal expression.

Greater Wisdom and Self-Awareness. Amardeep and Andal discussed increases in wisdom and self-awareness. They both experienced that through TUL, they gained new insights into the conditions that had bound them, were able to let such conditions go, and experienced a new level of connection with and understanding of themselves as a result. In this way, by freeing them of false conditions and expectations, TUL assisted them to meet and connect with their unconditioned selves. Through such experiences, they began to notice when they were driven by that authentic, unconditioned part of self, and when they were driven by other factors, and to be able to reorganise their consciousness to come back to authenticity as much as possible in any given situation.

Andal described a new sense of discernment that was based in an energetic feeling of truth verses falsehood rather than in thought. She explained that when her consciousness was in a state of TUL, it became obvious to her what paradigms, conditions or expectations she might have been holding onto that were not true and did not support her to be her most authentic self. This liberated her to let go of such outdated paradigms and live a life that brought greater joy and love.

Bob Kegan (1994) conducted research on adult personal development, which connected the construct of wisdom to self-transforming. He defined wisdom as an enhanced capacity for empathy and for psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility was described as a heightened ability to hold or understand apparently opposing perspectives, and the capacity to be flexible in how the self is perceived. Its benefits are discussed in Section 3.5.3.

Participants in study two demonstrated all three of these characteristics through their TUL experiences. Of particular note, all participants experienced a transformation of their sense of self through their TUL experiences and committed themselves to ongoing transformation and evolution, which would involve continually letting go of old identity structures. This is consistent with Kegan's (1994) finding that whilst only five percent of adults appear to develop to the stage of self-transforming – which includes wisdom – most of those individuals had had an experience of an EASC (of which TUL experiences are a subset). This experience had caused expected or unexpected transformation, which had then motivated them to seek more self-discovery and evolution. Future studies could explore whether TUL-specific EASCs similarly promote the cultivation of wisdom.

Overcoming Pain, Depression, Anxiety and Addiction. Karlie, Michael, and Andal all experienced the healing of depression, anxiety, or addiction through TUL. Such healings are anecdotally associated with both mystical and awakening experiences (Happold, 1990; Taylor, 2017) and with TUL (Fox, 2014; Templeton, 2000). Persinger and Murphy discuss the prevalence of similar transformations following “sensed presence” experiences, stating that the “reduction of depression and re-integration of the person’s cognitive structure with purpose and productivity, without medication, following these conversions have been remarkably ubiquitous both historically and cross-culturally” (Persinger & Murphy, 2016, p.29). Persinger and Murphy emphasise the benefit of experiences in which a person suddenly feels themselves to be held, loved, and looked after by a divine force that is congruent with their personal beliefs and practice. They suggest that the resulting decrease in depression and anxiety causes people to seek the experience of connection with what they have perceived to be a non-localised consciousness again. This can lead to the adoption of consistent practice, and resultant repetitive “sensed presence” experiences, which Persinger and Murphy suggest are the product of neurological activity in the right temporal lobes.

Karlie, Michael, Andal, and Joy all had experiences in which they felt connected to and loved by a divine presence (which they experienced as TUL) and which led to transformations of their psychological wellbeing. Part of Karlie’s deliberate practice was a regular turning over of her life into the hands of the unconditionally loving presence she felt connected to. This caused her to feel safe, even in incredibly stressful situations. All four accounts corroborate Persinger and Murphy’s (2016) claims concerning the benefits of experiences of a non-localised, loving presence. However, the two NDE reports of Michael and

Joy, involving apparent clinical death, challenge the assumption that sensed presences are always caused by neurological activity.

The Mechanism of Connectedness. Many teachers posit that depression, anxiety, and addiction are each manifestations of a sense of separation and emptiness, arising when human beings forget their innate interconnectedness (Easwaran, 2007; Spira, 2016; Taylor, 2023; Tolle, 1997/2010). Andal concurred with this idea, based on her own experience of recovering from undiagnosed depression and anxiety through TUL. She explained her theory that “if we get connected to our essence, then many of the maladies that we see... in our beings today, in our psyche, in our culture, they will rectify naturally”. In *The Ways and Powers of Love*, Sorokin posited that love is a cure to separation and the pain it brings. He states:

Love is the experience that annuls our individual loneliness; fills the emptiness of our isolation with the richest value; breaks and transcends the narrow walls of our little egos; makes us coparticipants in the highest life of humanity and in the whole cosmos; expands our true individuality to the immeasurable boundaries of the universe. (1954/2002, p.39)

Similarly, Section 2.4 offers an overview of how Vedanta sees fear and pain as manifestations of separation, and thus, views their healing as the natural product of unification with Brahman or oneness; the ultimate connectedness.

As explored in Section 3.5.2, psychological research suggests that connectedness is positively correlated with psychological flourishing and negatively correlated with depression and anxiety (Choi et al., 2020; Klussman et al., 2020; Watts et. al., 2022). Several participants spoke of improved interpersonal relationships and heightened motivation for altruism, which have both been associated with increased connectedness (Klussman et al., 2020; Taylor, 2023, 2024) in addition to unconditional positive states. It is possible that the connectedness arising through TUL experiences is part of the mechanism of its positive psychological impact.

Transpersonal Unconditional Love and Unconditional Positive Regard. Participants often reported feeling seen, held, and known through experiences of TUL in ways that mirrored both RUL in study one, and UPR (Rogers, 1957). This appeared to contribute to the benefits they reported in their mental health and self-confidence. For example, Michael experienced feeling completely seen and known by a divine presence he perceived as both TUL and the universe. He felt that although no part of him was hidden from its awareness, everything was accepted and loved. There was no judgement. Following this experience, he never drank again although drinking had previously been a problem. The way he described it was as though there was a sense of lack that was filled by the experience of feeling seen, known and loved. This phenomenon of receiving qualities of acceptance kindred to UPR from a non-localised presence of love has been reported before. Alexander (2012) reported a similar experience of feeling that the TUL he connected with through his NDE embraced and healed his core wound of

abandonment. The sense of acceptance, love, and presence from a non-physical energy was also common in many of the accounts of transpersonal love explored by Fox (2014).

Michael spoke about how in his experience of receiving this love without conditions or expectations, he realised that all other love he had received in his life had been conditional. Realising this, and receiving love that was beyond conditions, he was able to release those conditions that he had internalised as reasons he was unloveable, and unworthy. Person-Centred Therapy, which centres on UPR, is based on the understanding that human beings grow up learning about the conditions they must meet to be loved and approved of (Thorne, 1990). A classic example given is that of a baby subconsciously learning that they are more loveable to their mother if they do not cry. Rogers believed that this type of internalisation led to many human beings struggling to live up to the conditions on love that they had unconsciously developed through childhood, and feeling like a failure if they were unable to do so. He believed this led to the development of a negative self-construct, and consequent symptoms of mental and emotional malaise. UPR offered in therapy allowed a client the safety to explore a more authentic and robust self-construct that was not based in the opinion of others or any false expectations. It built a client's self-trust, and gave them strength, self-knowledge and inner freedom that began to transfer to real-world relationships and circumstances (Thorne, 1990). This appears to be analogous to Michael's experience, in which learning that he was unconditionally loved freed him not only to love himself, but also to discover the many talents he was unaware of, and to connect more deeply in his relationships.

Koole & Tshacher (2016) state that 75% of the pathology categories in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental Disorders, including addiction, anxiety, and depression, are predominantly difficulties with emotion regulation. UPR has been associated with improving self-regulatory skills (Ganley, 1989). It is possible that the TUL experiences described by participants, in which they felt those same UPR qualities of being seen, known, and unconditionally loved, may have increased their capacity for emotion regulation via a similar mechanism. Perhaps, for example in Michael's case, this may have played a role in reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety and addiction. The potential for EASCs involving TUL through sensed presences to provide similar benefits as relational UPR from a therapist would be an interesting exploration for future research.

6.3.3.4 Purpose, Service and Effective Action

Purpose. All participants experienced a new sense of purpose, often connected to service, or to the expression, or continued seeking of the TUL they had experienced. Purpose is defined as “a cognitive process that defines life goals and provides personal meaning” (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Participants described goals associated with expressing TUL, and a sense that TUL had become a central pillar of meaning in their lives.

Purpose and meaning have been attributed great importance for psychological flourishing within the field of positive psychology. Psychiatrist Victor Frankl (1984) suggested that purpose and meaning are even tools for survival in desperate and difficult life circumstances. In illustration of this, Frankl shared his inspiring story of surviving the horrors of Nazi concentration camps through finding meaning and purpose in his life through altruism.

Seligman, one of the fathers of positive psychology, also stresses the importance of meaning and purpose. He includes meaning in his model of the five qualities that contribute to psychological flourishing: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement (PERMA, 2011). McKnight and Kashdan's research has associated a sense of purpose with increased life-expectancy, alongside psychological and physical health outcomes.

Greater Capacity and Impact in Purpose and Service. Five participants discussed that their TUL experiences either led them to overcome doubts and fears and thus be more able to serve, or increased their sense of skill, self-efficacy, and the sense that they had something of value to offer the world. Michael and Karlie both had to overcome doubt or fear in some capacity to serve. For Michael, this was because he had always thought he was not good at anything. For Karlie, it was because she was called to serve in what could be a dangerous situation: sharing meditation and spiritual teachings in a high security prison.

Overcoming fear and increases in self-efficacy have been associated with TUL in other literature. Sorokin, author of *The Ways and Power of Love*, discussed how love conquers fear, and that this, in turn, bestows upon the lover a sense of power and capacity. He describes the one who has imbibed TUL:

He cannot be intimidated; he cannot be bribed; he cannot be beaten into subjection. All his energies are coiled up into the single power of love... Nothing in this coiled-up energy is wasted in inner conflicts and external friction; the whole of it is directed to one great purpose. (Sorokin, p.40)

This describes both Karlie and Michael's testimonies. Their passionate joy for their respective purposes, arising from and through TUL meant that in many instances, there was no room for the inner conflict of self-doubt or fear. Their respective senses of purpose were simply experienced as natural expressions of the TUL they had connected to.

Whilst this absence of fear was not permanent or constant – both participants experienced fluctuations and moments in which they doubted or experienced trepidation – Michael and Karlie were each able to overcome fear and doubt far more easily and quickly than they had been prior to their experiences of TUL. Both participants described consciously bringing their awareness back to their memory of TUL (in Michael's case) or practice of TUL and oneness (in Karlie's case) to reconnect with that sense of courage and confidence.

The Tattiriya Upanishad 3.10.2-4 paints a similar picture of TUL both inspiring service, and overcoming the inner fears or "enemies" which would prevent it:

Realizing this makes our words pleasing, our breathing deep, our arms ready to serve the Lord in all around, our feet ready to go to the help of everyone in need. Drawing on the Lord's resources within, security, wisdom and love in action, we conquer every enemy within to be united with the Lord of Love.

There is a parallel to this idea of love conquering inner enemies in psychological literature. Neff and Germer (2017) summarise a wide array of research on self-compassion that suggests that the more one is compassionate with oneself and the less one is self-judging and self-shaming, the more capacity one has to overcome fears, flaws, faults and procrastination and succeed in life. In Michael's case especially, this transition from self-criticism, shame and lack of self-belief to a sense of wholeness, oneness and being loved as he was empowered him to take action where he would not have had the self-confidence or self-efficacy to do so prior.

Greater Motivation for and Joy in Service. Five participants described heightened joy in, or motivation for service, generosity, and altruism. Four participants also spoke of feeling that their service was a way of reconnecting to or expressing the TUL they had experienced. The fact that TUL experiences led to acts of service as expressions of love is compatible with Sorokin (1954/2002) and Templeton's (2000) understanding of love as a transpersonal resource that can be channelled into human expressions of love and altruism. Sorokin (1954/2002, p.38) posits that altruism makes us "coparticipants" in love, and that a participation in altruistic love that takes one outside of one's own egoic sense of self is psychologically beneficial.

Post's (2003) conception of unlimited love similarly frames love as a resource or substance that can be channelled into altruism. Post references Sorokin's (1954/2002) concept that it is possible to connect to love as a "Creative Presence" that exists as the substrate of the universe, and that this facilitates increased expressions of worldly love, altruism, and care for others (2003, p.vii). However, Post does not incorporate any framework on EASCs, and thus it is unclear in the literature on unlimited love how the transpersonal resource of love is accessed by individuals to be expressed as altruism. The emerging conceptualisation of TUL as an EASC may provide a valuable insight on this mechanism of transpersonal or non-localised love facilitating altruistic action.

There appear to be further discrepancies between the altruism promoted by TUL and Post's (2003) unlimited love. Post stresses that the expression of unlimited love should be self-sacrificing. In contrast, participants reported that the manifestation of TUL through service was an expansive and authentic expression of their skills that fostered a satisfying sense of interconnectedness. Andal described it as the "effervescent joy of sharing unconditional love". Michael reflected on the sense of effortless reciprocity and abundance he felt when expressing love as service: "It's about... me giving out something to the universe and whatever I'm giving out to the universe, whatever any of us give out to the universe... we receive back... The universe wants... us to keep creating and recreating." He also spoke about how he felt helped, guided and in flow because his work was an expression of something beyond himself: "once I

started, I realized that I was getting help. I realized I was being guided... I was channelling through ideas to create my first painting... And a lot of synchronicity started to come into my life". Similarly for all five participants, service inspired by TUL was not an obligation, but an innately arising and satisfying form of self-expression that led to joy, fulfilment, and an enriched sense of connection with TUL.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna stresses that service is "in no way associated with the common image of self-neglect or self-flagellation," but "means offering, helping, and being dedicated to the welfare of all humanity. It implies a mutuality of existence with all other beings" (3.10, Hawley, 2001, p.29). The reason service does not include self-sacrifice in the *Bhagavad Gita* is because it is part of the expression of the oneness of Brahman. It is often either a method through which to realise oneness with Brahman, or a natural part of the expression of that realisation. In that way, service is viewed as a transpersonal act, where the one serving and the one being served are both expressions of the same self.

Within worldviews in which God or the divine is considered primarily transcendent rather than immanent, service is less likely to be understood as a transpersonal experience of the other as the self, because there is no established paradigm of hidden oneness. In such cases there is likely greater scope for minimising the self in service of the other. This is another difference between TUL and unlimited love. TUL arises through forms of wakefulness, which include oneness and interconnectedness. Unlimited love appears to be accessed in ordinary states of consciousness, and often in the context of a worldview involving a godhead that is separate from the individual. That godhead appears to offer love as a resource to support the good deeds of those who express unlimited love (Sorokin, 1954/2002; Templeton, 2000), but that resource doesn't appear to extend to a sense of unity, either with other people, or with that benevolent, loving godhead. Having said this, people from many faiths have had transpersonal experiences of oneness through service despite that unity not necessarily comprising a conscious part of their worldview (Taylor, 2024).

Unlimited love (Post, 2003) reflects to some degree the selfless service that participants reported both as an impact of TUL, and as a practice through which to trigger or perpetuate TUL. This suggests that unlimited love as a set of loving attitudes and actions may be a factor that both precipitates, and results from TUL experiences. This is in keeping with Taylor's (2024) assertion that acts of service and altruism have a bidirectional relationship with awakening states.

6.3.3.5 New Understanding of or Connection with Divinity

Five participants experienced a shift in their relationship with their conception of the divine through their TUL experiences. For two participants, this largely involved feeling closer to, or more authentic in their connection with their experience of divinity. For Andal, Karlie and Michael, however, this shift entailed a transition from their initial understanding of a conceptual, anthropomorphised, judgemental God, who may or may not be real, to the palpable sense of divinity as an essence of TUL that pervaded both themselves and the universe. Again, this represents a common, and perhaps perennial experiential hallmark of many

mystical traditions of a formless, benevolent oneness that is both immanent and transcendent, and is accessible within expansive altered states (Durga, 2016; Eawaran, 2007; Taylor, 2016, 2018; Tolle, 1997/2010; Underhill, 1911/2002).

Unconditional Love as an Ongoing Path or Practice. TUL experiences either inspired or re-invigorated participants' spirituality, increasing their interest in and commitment to spiritual practice as a way of maintaining connection with TUL. Taylor (2017) and Corneille and Luke (2021) found that often after awakening experiences, people started to follow a spiritual path in an attempt to reconnect with their awakening experience (which may have arisen accidentally). This was the case for participants of Study 2, who found that through spiritual practice, they were able to build their relationship with TUL in a more deliberate way, and to experience it on a more regular basis.

Happold (1990) described an advanced phase on the mystical path which he terms the "Illuminative Life". In this phase, mystical experiences become very frequent, and able to be accessed at will. St John of the Cross (in Happold, 1990, p.46) described this state, explaining "the soul has it in its power to abandon itself, whenever it wills, to this sweet sleep of love." It seemed that Karlie, Andal, Joy, and Amardeep acquired this skill of connecting to TUL at will through the regular practice they committed to as a result of their TUL experiences.

In several cases, it seemed that an aspiration towards experiencing and expressing TUL, and the cultivation of attitudes supportive of TUL were key hallmarks of participants' spiritual practices. Mahony discusses the benefits of aspiring towards TUL. He explains:

[T]here are levels of love, some more elevated than others. Our longing to know and experience higher forms of love will lead us to elevate the quality of our love, to refine our coarser expectations and expressions of love, and to cultivate and nourish love in our lives...we come to know that divine Love itself has always been with and within us, and our feelings of incompleteness, alienation or unfulfillment can dissolve. (2014, p.7-8)

This reflects the self-reflection and refinement participants accessed through TUL (discussed in Section 6.3.3.3). It seems that striving for TUL, and holding a paradigm in which TUL is possible, brings benefits, even if the full EASC may not be regularly accessed.

For one participant, it seemed that the ability to access love in more circumstances was the central hallmark of TUL; more so than the temporally bound EASC (although she had experienced the EASC several times). Sage experienced UL through her capacity to keep her ego in check and show up with non-judgement, kindness and presence with all people. This reflected accounts of RUL from participants in Study One, which may be made easier to cultivate after experiences of TUL. Huston Smith (1976/1992) has argued that for all major faith traditions, "the goal... is not religious experiences; it is the religious life" (in Oman & Meyer, 2014, p.63). Theologian Cole-Turner agrees, stating "[F]or Christianity, mysticism is

not found in the momentary experience, but in the lifelong interpretation that leads to transformation” (Cole-Turner, 2024).

This parallels Post’s 2003 concept of unlimited love, as the extension of attitudes of care and altruism to all (or close to all) beings. As mentioned in Section 6.3.1.6, perhaps such a practice of loving and accepting all beings may lead to the cultivation of, or increased capacity for TUL. Similarly, TUL experiences may enhance the capacity to practice the attitudes and values of unlimited love without self-depletion. Based on participant responses in this study, TUL would likely be experienced as an infinite source of love (as proposed by Sorokin, 1954/2002) which could both be received by the individual, and offered to others through kindness and altruism.

Taylor (2024) discusses a similar bidirectional relationship between altruism and wakefulness. The apparent difference with Post’s construct of unlimited love is that it appears to be experienced and practiced in an ordinary state of consciousness. In contrast, the ongoing practice of TUL appears from responses in this study to be inherently connected to attaining regular TUL experiences, or cultivating increased ongoing wakefulness involving TUL. For participants in Study Two, the central feature of ongoing wakefulness regarding TUL was a growing perception that others are expressions of the same oneness as the self, and this worldview made altruism a natural inner calling.

One challenge discussed in psychedelic literature is how to help subjects maintain their newfound sense of connectedness and the benefits it brings once the acute EASC of the psychedelic experience is over (Watts et al, 2022). The sense of connectedness and its benefits usually begins to fade after a few months. It is possible that cultivating a regular practice and ongoing attitude of TUL may enable the sense of connectedness and its benefits to be sustained longer. A selection of techniques and practices used by participants of this study to promote TUL is discussed in Section 6.3.1.4. These included deliberate spiritual practices such as meditation, purification and devotion; compassion, altruism, and service; and focusing on deliberately seeing others as loveable manifestations of an all-pervasive oneness. Further research could involve a transferability assessment to ascertain whether these practices and attitudes are associated with the cultivation of TUL in other populations, and could yield other techniques for accessing and maintaining connection with TUL.

6.4 Limitations

It is common for IPA research to involve a small and homogenous sample size in order to explore a specific phenomenon of interest (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The small sample in the current study, in addition to the adopted research paradigm of transcendental phenomenology, means that findings are not generalisable to the broader public. However, they are able to contribute phenomenological insights into potentially fundamental experiential structures of TUL. In keeping with Moustakas’ (1999) recommendations for transcendental phenomenological research, the insights offered in this study are

based both on participant responses, and their relationship with pre-existing representations of TUL in cross-cultural spiritual and psychological literature.

Another limitation was that as this study was conducted in partial fulfillment of my PhD, I conducted the entire analysis. My background in mystical study and experience, particularly of Vedanta and Kabbalah, may have biased my interpretations of participant responses. This limitation was in some ways ameliorated through the supervision process. Although my supervisors each have their own spiritual path, our training and backgrounds are different, allowing for diverse perspectives on spiritual themes.

In a similar vein, all but one participant subscribed to a spiritual path or tradition. It is likely that their own interpretation of their experiences may have been coloured by the lens of whatever spiritual training they had undertaken. This, combined with my own spiritual background, contributes to a double hermeneutic of spiritual interpretation applied to the original, subjective experience (Smith and Osbourne, 2003). However, participants represented a range of belief systems including Hinduism, Sikhism, Mystical Christianity, Shamanism and Universalism. Although Michael was initially not identified with any path, his experience caused him to adopt a worldview that aligns with general mysticism. The prevalence of similar themes across the diverse paths represented by participants, and in wider literature on TUL – spanning different spiritual and non-spiritual contexts – suggests that the emerging phenomenology of TUL transcends individual interpretation.

6.5 Conclusion

Study Two specifically explored TUL. That is, transpersonal unconditional love that is not contingent upon any form of external relationship. Two related forms of TUL emerged. The first was TUL as a temporally bound peak or awakening experience, which also arose in Study One. The second was TUL as an enduring and ever deepening orientation, awareness, or characteristic of daily consciousness. These two forms of TUL reflected Taylor's (2017) distinction between temporally bound awakening experiences and ongoing wakefulness. The parallels between the respective forms of TUL and wakefulness confirm the likelihood that TUL is a specific manifestation or sub-type of awakening.

The two forms of TUL had a bidirectional positive relationship. Peak TUL experiences often inspired the practices, perspectives, and life attitudes of enduring TUL, which in turn promoted more peak experiences. Both forms of TUL were distinct from RUL because of the lack of requirement for any particular relational context. They were also distinct from Post's (2003) construct of unlimited love due to the centrality of elements of wakefulness to both forms of TUL.

Study One suggested a relationship between RUL and TUL. This was supported in Study Two. However, Study Two suggested that TUL led to greater capacity for RUL, whilst Study One indicated that RUL could

trigger TUL experiences. These combined findings constitute initial evidence that TUL and RUL likely have a bidirectional relationship. It would be of value to explore this relationship further in future research.

6.5.1 A Preliminary Profile of TUL

As this was an IPA study with a typically small, ideographic sample, its findings are not directly generalisable to the broader population. However, in answer to my first research question, findings from this study do offer phenomenological insight into potentially core, experiential themes regarding the onset, characteristics, and impacts of TUL. These themes have been contextually supported in my discussion through triangulation with spiritual and psychological literature on UL, as recommended by Moustakas (1999). The result is a preliminary phenomenological profile of TUL that offers a foundation for further empirical investigation.

6.5.1.1 Triggers

In this participant group, that which promoted experiences of TUL included a quality teacher, who through both their teachings and their own embodiment of TUL, inspired, and in some cases uplifted participants into TUL; Practices, both of spirituality and personal development that made participants more open, available to and conscious of TUL; Like-minded community in which the paradigm of TUL was supported and in which collective wakefulness could be attained; Certain moments of relational connection with others (often but not always in the form of RUL); and Non-ordinary states of consciousness, including mystical experiences and NDEs.

Future studies could further explore which types of practices are most likely to trigger TUL experiences, maintain their positive effect, or lead to an enduring form of TUL. Additionally, they could investigate the apparently bidirectional relationship between RUL and TUL. It would also be of interest to discover how often TUL features in EASCs such as NDEs, mystical and awakening experiences. TUL has been mentioned in conjunction with each of these, both by participants and in pre-existing literature explored in Chapter 4, but is not an official characteristic of any of them (Greyson, 1983; James, 1902/1928; Stace, 1960; Taylor, 2017). This may mean it only arises in a certain proportion of EASCs, or that it hasn't been studied as a feature of these states because a cohesive psychological construct of TUL has not existed.

6.5.1.2 Characteristics

Characteristics included oneness; wellbeing and positive emotion; a sense of connection with what was perceived as God or the soul; “beyondness”; and energy. Each of these has transpersonal elements. That is, they transcended the separate sense of self in some way (American Psychological Society, 2018). The themes of oneness, divinity, and beyondness were self-evidently transpersonal, as they inherently

involved connection with an identity or presence beyond the separate self. Additionally, participants reported that the safety or joy they experienced during TUL did not arise in the same way as normal emotion, but felt as if it was holding them or lifting them from outside of themselves, or that perhaps they had connected with a deeper, safer truth that was foundational to their sense of themselves or the universe. This supported the possibility explored throughout this thesis of unconditional positive states as experiences of a permanent, non-localised consciousness. Similarly, the experience of TUL as energy suggested that it was perceived to have an essence unto itself that could exist independently of the physical body and brain.

These transpersonal characteristics of TUL supported the distinction between TUL and RUL, and the likely necessity of an EASC or wakeful state to experience peak forms of TUL. They also corroborated the possibility that TUL may not be a resident property of the human brain, but a characteristic of a non-localised consciousness that human beings can connect to through certain EASCs. In the three reports of TUL within NDEs, TUL occurred during clinical death. That is, in the apparent absence of neurological activity. Whilst this is insufficient to prove that those participants' experiences were of non-localised consciousness (there may be physicalist mechanisms to NDEs that are not yet understood, as discussed in Section 3.7.3), it does suggest a higher possibility that these experiences of TUL may have had a non-physical basis. In respect of research question three, experiences of TUL within NDEs suggest that current materialist understandings of consciousness may be insufficient to account for the mechanisms by which TUL is accessed and experienced. Consequently, a more expansive ontological framework – including potential non-physicalist paradigms of consciousness – may be necessary to comprehensively account for the mechanisms underlying the transcendental phenomenology of TUL.

The characteristic of unconditional positive states has been a theme of the literature review, Study One and Study Two. Their association in this research with features of oneness and interconnectedness support the idea that perhaps unconditional positive and negative states occur at opposite ends of a spectrum of connectedness. Future studies could investigate the prevalence of unconditional positive states, in which people feel a sense of uplifted affect, joy, love or peace which appear to arise for no reason, or independently of their situation. It would be of particular interest to explore how often unconditional positive states are accompanied by a sense of oneness or connectedness, and whether people associate them with transpersonal experiences or a sense of consciousness that exists beyond their separate self.

6.5.1.3 Impacts

Impacts of TUL reported in the current study suggest that TUL experiences are of practical benefit, which may extend not only to the individual but to their social and family groups, and possibly even to the broader society. There were four superordinate themes pertaining to the impact of TUL. The first was uplifted relationships, which included not only increased capacity for love and compassion, but also an

increased sense of skill in communication, even during conflict. The second was personal healing, transformation, and evolution. This included transformed self-relationship, uplifted emotional landscape, recovery from depression, anxiety and addiction, refinement of character and the gaining of wisdom and self-awareness. The third was an increased sense of meaning and purpose and a heightened desire and capacity for service and altruism. The fourth was a new relationship with divinity and spiritual practice.

Particularly the first three of these themes could have a substantially transformative effect, not only on the individual, but on society as a whole. As has been mentioned, depression and anxiety are currently experienced by 5 and 4% of the population respectively (WHO, 2023a, 2023b). Further, as has also been mentioned, the current divorce rate is 43% (of first marriages, Forbes, 2024) and in our post-COVID society, the experience of disconnection is high (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). Increases in interpersonal skills, compassion for others, service and altruism could increase connectedness both in personal relationships and in society at large, decreasing rates of depression and anxiety and promoting a more altruistic society.

It should be mentioned that participants for Study 2 were selected through purposive sampling (Smith & Osborn, 2003) on the criteria that I knew they had had a substantial and impactful experience of TUL. Not all people may be affected so positively or substantively. Future research could explore how individual differences may impact how TUL is attained and experienced, and the level and type of impact it has.

Chapter 7: General Discussion

This thesis has successfully explored all three of the research questions posed in Section 1.3. This chapter will summarise those findings, outlining preliminary profiles of relational and transpersonal UL, their relationship with awakening experiences, and their compatibility with materialist and non-materialist views of consciousness. Additionally, it will discuss an unexpected yet significant finding pertaining to the possibility of unconditional positive states as a broader context within which UL may be situated, and their implications on mental health.

Further to outlining the major findings of this thesis, this chapter will examine the role of privilege in shaping accessibility to UL experiences. It will also discuss how my personal bias may have impacted the research and the steps I took to mitigate that bias. Finally, it will offer future directions for the scientific research of UL, especially pertaining to transpersonal psychology, positive psychology, the psychology of emotion and relationships, the philosophy of religion, and interdisciplinary fields of consciousness science.

7.1 A Preliminary Profile of Unconditional Love

My first research question concerned the triggers, characteristics and impacts of UL. This thesis demonstrated that there are two forms of UL: relational (RUL) and transpersonal (TUL), which have distinct profiles. RUL exists within the bounds of relationships and requires a subject and an object. It can express as a form of compassionate, all-accepting presence, or as a sense of expansive and enduring love for one person regardless of the form the relationship may take. As explored in Study One, the all-accepting form of RUL brings psychological benefit to the recipient of RUL, often in the form of psychological safety that facilitates healing, transformation and self-actualisation. The expansive form brings benefit to the person who experiences RUL toward another, often in the form of peace and freedom from conditioning.

In contrast, TUL is not dependent on relationships. It can arise as a temporally bound peak or awakening experience. It can also exist as an ongoing, pervasive sense of connection with, and commitment to the experience of non-localised love in daily life. The peak and enduring forms of TUL promote each other. Both appear to create considerable psychological and interpersonal benefit, including improved interpersonal relationships; improved self-relationship and mental health; increased meaning, purpose, and altruism; and the adoption of, or recommitment to, spiritual or personal development, which in turn, further perpetuates TUL and its other benefits. The full profile of TUL is outlined in Section 6.5.1. Future research could refine, expand, and systematically validate these initial constructs of both RUL and TUL, assessing their validity across diverse populations and methodological frameworks.

7.2 Unconditional Love as a Form of Awakening Experience

My second research question concerned the relationship between UL and awakening experiences. The findings suggest that TUL but not RUL is dependent on wakeful EASCs and may be a subtype of awakening experience. TUL appears to be accessible exclusively through wakeful states of consciousness, whether in peak or sustained manifestations. It appears to be characterised by a transpersonal sense of connection with love or consciousness beyond the separate self. In contrast, RUL does not appear dependent on wakeful states of consciousness, although such states can indirectly facilitate it through promoting increases in compassion and acceptance. Thus, in answer to research question two, whilst awakening states may promote RUL in some cases, they are essential only to TUL, which appears to manifest as a distinct sub-type of awakening experience.

7.3 Unconditional Love and Ontologies of Consciousness

My third research question concerned whether the phenomenon of UL was compatible with materialist or non-materialist theories of consciousness. This question was primarily considered in relation to TUL, which was the initial focus of this thesis. Subjectively, the many transpersonal characteristics of TUL, combined with participant perceptions of a love that appeared to embrace them or exist outside or beyond their separate selves, implied that TUL may be a form of non-localised consciousness, independent of the brain. Further, these experiences of apparently non-localised love arose for three participants during NDEs. Physicalist explanations of NDEs are currently not sufficient to explain how rich experiences of subjective consciousness are possible during times where there is no measurable brain activity. This extends to the specific experience of TUL arising within an NDE. Thus, it does not seem from accounts in this research that TUL can currently be wholly accounted for as a resident property of the human brain, or that it can be fully explained through materialist paradigms of consciousness. Instead, TUL appears more compatible with non-materialist views of consciousness, including panspiritism, and many mystical cosmologies from diverse traditions which suggest that consciousness is a oneness or presence that underlies all of reality. Through such paradigms, TUL may be understood as an experiential manifestation of a non-localised consciousness, accessed through EASCs or wakeful states.

7.4 Unconditional Positive States

Unconditional positive states were not originally included in the research questions for this thesis, however, they emerged consistently throughout the literature review, Study One, and Study Two, and provided a broader psychological context within which to situate the emerging profile of TUL.

Unconditional positive states appear to differ from emotion in that they are not contingent on any external situation or circumstance. This non-contingency gives them their unconditional quality.

Congruent with TUL, whilst unconditional positive states – such as UJ, bliss or peace – could be explained with reference to materialist mechanisms such as hypofrontality, they also appeared compatible with non-materialist frameworks of consciousness. They could represent moments of transpersonal connection or oneness, within which their respective positive qualities are inherently present. In that frame, TUL would be one unconditional positive state of several that perhaps characterise high-intensity experiences of oneness.

Unconditional positive states appear to arise during EASCs or awakening states, and appear to have a strong relationship with connectedness. Whether arising neurologically, for example through hypofrontality or temporal lobe activation (Kotler & Wheal, 2017) or through transpersonal connection with a non-localised consciousness, connectedness may be a promising mechanism through which unconditional positive states occur. Unconditional positive states arising as a product of the extreme connectedness of EASCs offers a potential explanation as to why they do not behave in the contingent way traditional emotions do (as a response to external stimulus) but can occur for no apparent reason, or even in

adverse situations. Further research could elucidate the relationship between unconditional positive states, EASCs and connectedness, clarifying the directionality of these apparent interactions.

Developing a psychological understanding of unconditional positive states may contextualise depression and anxiety as unconditional negative states. These experiences are often similarly non-contingent on external circumstances, such as a person's objective situation or level of success or safety. It seemed from the literature reviewed and the two studies in this thesis, that there may be a continuum of connectedness, in which TUL and other unconditional positive states associated with EASCs correlate with extreme connectedness (oneness) whilst depression and anxiety correlate with extreme disconnectedness. Developing, validating, and refining this initial framework further could assist in the development of deliberate interventions to increase various forms of connectedness (social connectedness, nature connectedness, connection with self, and transpersonal connectedness) which may both promote experiences of unconditional positive states, and have a beneficial impact on general mental health.

7.5 Access to Unconditional Love

One of my goals for this research is to initiate the academic process of establishing UL as a more accessible experience. In alignment with awakening research (Taylor, 2017) it seems that TUL is available to a broad range of people, not only the spiritually inclined or enlightened, and that its benefits are thus also broadly available. However, currently TUL is not sufficiently understood to be widely sought. As the psychological understanding of the mechanisms, catalysts, and impact of TUL advances, TUL-based interventions may become more prominent options to incorporate when seeking to ameliorate mental health difficulties, to improve psychological flourishing, or to seek transpersonal experience or development. This would be further supported through research into how TUL's attainment and benefits are affected by individual differences.

It seems from both studies One and Two, and analogous research on EASCs, that TUL is a widely accessible, non-exclusive state of consciousness. Triggers of TUL were so eclectic as to include spiritual and personal development practices, various relational experiences, psychedelics, NDEs, time in nature, dance and embodiment, and spontaneous onset. Regarding accessibility, spontaneous onset is of particular interest. Many participants across both studies had TUL experiences by surprise, either early in their pursuit of spirituality, in contexts where they were not consciously seeking TUL, or in times of great difficulty or trauma. This suggests that there is no prerequisite of prior transpersonal experience, practice, knowledge, skill, or level of psychological health to access a TUL experience.

Whilst TUL experiences themselves do not appear contingent on any prerequisite factors, some of the catalysts and interventions that could enable more deliberate experiences of TUL may be less broadly accessible. Material, social, and psychological factors each impact how readily such interventions may be

accessed and implemented by people of different background and situation. Materially, resources such as: the availability of time for contemplation and spiritual practice; the money to participate in certain formalised opportunities for psychological or spiritual development (such as retreats, courses, therapy, or education programs); and access to a community of like-minded people may impact how accessible certain TUL interventions may be. Socially, cultural narratives and community-held beliefs or cosmologies may influence how free an individual feels to explore divergent perspectives on consciousness and love. Psychologically, certain forms of mental ill-health such as depression may reduce motivation to engage with interventions. Other psychological concerns may make some of the contemplative practices often recommended to experience substance-free EASCs difficult to achieve. Thus, although none of these factors prohibit the experience of TUL, especially through spontaneous onset, they may make certain pathways of pursuing of TUL experiences more difficult. Awareness of these potential barriers at the outset of developing psychological interventions involving TUL may enable more inclusive implementation. Given the diversity of apparent pathways to TUL, it is likely that interventions could be developed and validated that accommodate a wide variety of individual differences.

7.6 Personal Reflection

Prior to this Ph.D., I had experienced UL through spiritual study and practice and through relationships. These experiences were informed by spiritual and mystical theory and training but not any scientific theory. UL was a central focus of my life but was felt as part of the ineffable “isness” of reality, rather than as something definable or with discernible parts. The process of this research has brought a new clarity to a number of aspects of my understanding of UL. It has reinforced the centrality of wakefulness or expansive altered states for accessing UL as a non-localised form of consciousness, and clarified how I perceive the relationship between individual experience and non-localised love. It has also given me a new awareness of unconditional positive states as likely manifestations of a non-localised consciousness, accessible through extreme connectedness, and of the potential continuum of connectedness, by which they may be related to unconditional negative states. Finally, it confirmed my own experience that UL can manifest in the different, though related forms of TUL and RUL, and that these two forms may promote each other. This clarity has subtly altered how I perceive, connect with, and express UL, making it feel more accessible as an experience, and easier to talk about.

7.6.1 Bias

As someone who has practiced bhakti and multifaith mysticism from a young age, my worldview is that there is one common divinity that underlies all things. In this worldview, love is both part of that divinity, and a practice to reunify the illusion of separation back into an awareness or experience of oneness. In keeping with the fundamental tenets of mysticism (Happold, 1990; Underhill, 1911/2002), this has not only been a conceptual understanding for me but an experiential one through an abundance of spiritually induced EASCs, which have often included TUL and UJ and brought profound beneficial impact. This may

have caused bias in the form of expecting that unconditional positive states would arise for others in the same way they have for me, would exhibit similar characteristics, and yield similar benefits.

As a qualitative researcher, I attempted to bracket these experiences and assumptions so that I could be present with and receptive to participants' experiences and the meaning they gave them. I did this through a reflexive journaling practice (Hanson, 1994). After conducting each interview, I identified my own biases that I felt may pertain to the content covered and the questions I asked. I found this assisted me to keep those biases conscious but contained both through subsequent interviews and the analysis process.

In addition to reflexive practice, I employed phenomenological validation (Moustakas, 1999) to refine my understanding of participants' accounts. In several cases where I was aware that my perception may be affected by my own bias, I fed back to participants my understanding of certain elements of their descriptions, inviting them to clarify or elaborate on their experiences. Most participants affirmed my understanding, and gave further information that enriched their accounts. In one or two instances, they adjusted or refined the understanding I had fed back to them, offering clarifications that strengthened the integrity of their phenomenological insights. This dynamic process of clarification aligned with the Husserlian principle of intersubjectivity (Kjosavik et al., 2019) in which meaning was co-constructed to some degree between myself and participants. In both scenarios, inviting a more conscious process of intersubjectivity resulted in the participant providing richer descriptive information, revealing additional experiential elements that were valuable to the research.

Given the homogeneity of the participant pool, my personal bias may have been further compounded by the double hermeneutic process (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), in which participants' own spiritual worldviews and consequent interpretations of their experiences likely shaped their phenomenological descriptions. All but one of my participants in Study Two would consider themselves on a spiritual path. Thus, whilst the flavour of mysticism differed, the core premise of a oneness underlying reality was a worldview five participants shared. Nonetheless, there was one participant in Study Two who was not of a mystical or spiritual background, but who described phenomenological elements of his experience that matched those of the other five, including the sense of oneness. Further, as discussed in Chapter 3, similar experiential phenomena are frequently described in psychedelic and NDE literature, as well as in literature on awakening experiences, which can occur in both spiritual and non-spiritual contexts.

The systematic triangulation of participant accounts with other spiritual and psychological sources in the discussion was important to mitigate this potential bias of participant spirituality. As suggested by Moustakas, (1999), it enabled me to distil which phenomenological features were more likely to represent core experiential characteristics of TUL as opposed to elements of participants' own interpretive framework or conceptual filtering. Those features that appear to transcend personal subjectivity arose not only across participant responses, but also in accounts spanning a variety of diverse historical and

cultural origins. The resulting inventory of phenomenological features of TUL are not exhaustive, but provide a basis that future empirical research on TUL can expand and refine.

Of course, given the innately subjective nature of qualitative analysis, it was not possible to completely eliminate bias. Thus, it would be of use to the psychological understanding of UL if future research teams included those without a spiritual background, and more participants who did not identify with spirituality or mysticism. However, there are difficulties to this. The one participant in Study 2 who had no pre-existing mystical identity adopted a spiritual worldview as a result of his experience, a phenomenon which appears common (Happold, 1990; James, 1902/1928; Taylor, 2017). Thus, it may be difficult to find participants who have experienced TUL but have a complete lack of spiritual paradigm. Further, Tart (1975) suggests that certain elements of altered states of consciousness, such as the paradoxical qualia they frequently entail, are difficult to understand from a normal state of consciousness, unless similar altered states have previously been experienced. In this way, whilst my experiences of TUL may have created bias, it also may have assisted certain elements of understanding and connection with interviewees.

7.7 Directions for Future Research

The purpose of this thesis was to initiate an academic, psychological investigation of UL. As such, the resulting framework is intended not as a conclusion of the scientific exploration of UL, but as a beginning point. Consequently, it raises various questions and opportunities for further exploration, both within psychology and related domains.

7.7.1 RUL, TUL, and Their Relationship

One of the key findings of this thesis was that there are two apparent manifestations of UL: RUL and TUL. Whilst it built initial phenomenological frameworks for each, further research on both TUL and RUL would be useful to replicate the findings and explore whether they are generalisable or applicable across diverse populations and using diverse research methods. Such research may include specific studies to refine and empirically validate the distinct forms of TUL and RUL and explore the consistency of their manifestations across different populations. Additionally, further studies could focus on the short and long-term impacts of both TUL and RUL.

Results from this thesis suggested a bi-directional relationship between RUL and TUL. In addition to exploring these two forms of UL as they exist independently, it would be of interest to develop a greater understanding of any relationship between them and its potential mechanisms. This may provide clarity as to whether RUL and TUL are completely distinct or are different manifestations of the one underlying UL. If the latter, and TUL is an experience of a fundamental, non-localised consciousness, this may open

avenues of inquiry as to how such non-localised consciousness may play into and uplift interpersonal relational dynamics.

In further exploration of the relationship between TUL and RUL, future studies could focus specifically on the expansive or limitless form of RUL. As explained in section 5.4.3.2, expansive RUL may involve elements that parallel low intensity awakening experiences. This may connect the apparently separate constructs of RUL and TUL along a non-linear continuum of wakefulness. Further, expansive RUL was often mentioned in the context of breakups. It would be useful to understand what factors contribute to breakups being experienced with expansive RUL as opposed to with resentment, and whether these positive and negative reactions are mutually exclusive or can occur at different stages of the separation process. This understanding could improve relational dynamics and psychological wellbeing both in non-nuclear families and during processes of divorce and separation.

7.7.2 Unconditional Positive States of Consciousness

The notion of unconditional positive states of consciousness, including but not limited to TUL, also offers abundant scope for future research. Unconditional positive states may be opposite experiences to unconditional negative states, such as depression and anxiety, which are endemic in our culture. The World Health Organisation states that “depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide” (2017), suggesting that new understandings of its mechanism and potentials for reversal are of vital importance. It seems from the preliminary findings of this thesis that connectedness may be part of this mechanism. That is, there may be a continuum of connectedness, in which extreme disconnectedness may correlate with unconditional negative states (such as depression and anxiety), while extreme connectedness may arise in conjunction with unconditional positive states including TUL and UJ. Further research could explore the relationship between unconditional positive states and connectedness, and any implications this relationship may have for understanding depression and anxiety. Research could also investigate which practices (both spiritual and secular) are most conducive to TUL and other unconditional positive states, and which are most accessible to those experiencing mental ill-health.

Another question of interest concerning unconditional positive states and connectedness is what level of connectedness might be required to induce unconditional positive states. It could be that unconditional positive states arise only with extreme forms of connectedness, often described as oneness or a sense of connection with a fundamental consciousness underlying all things. As with TUL, this extreme connectedness, featuring transpersonal elements, may only arise within EASCs. Future research could explore a continuum of connectedness, its relationship with unconditional positive and negative states of consciousness, its relationship with awakening experiences, and its implications for the possibility of non-localised consciousness.

7.8 Interdisciplinary Contributions

The findings of this thesis have interdisciplinary applications spanning psychology, philosophy, and the science of consciousness. Of relevance to positive psychology, both TUL and RUL represent positive capacities within human consciousness, which in turn appear to foster psychological flourishing, improved interpersonal relationships, and the development of character strengths. Within transpersonal psychology, TUL represents a significant contribution in that it introduces a distinct subtype of EASC or wakeful experience accessible through transpersonal practice. Unconditional positive states may similarly be features of certain EASCs, though further research is required to confirm their phenomenology.

RUL, TUL, and unconditional positive states are potentially rich topics of interest to the psychology of emotion and relationships. For example, whilst the accepting and present form of RUL developed in Study One may be kindred to pre-existing psychological understandings of love, the expansive typology of RUL raises questions about how and why love may appear to become more free and expansive in certain instances of parting, breakup or bereavement. In perhaps a more disruptive contribution, TUL appears to represent an entirely novel paradigm of love that transcends the requirement of any relational context. Similarly, the notion of unconditional positive states as a whole, including TUL, contributes the possibility of a distinct set of subjective, emotionally rich experiences that do not appear contingent on external events and circumstances and are thus not consistent with traditional conceptions of emotion. This may present an avenue of research concerning how unconditional positive states compare to what are traditionally understood as positive emotions in both their characteristics and impact. Pertaining to general mental health, developing a more comprehensive understanding of TUL and other unconditional positive states may shed light on elements of the mechanisms of depression and anxiety as potential unconditional negative states, and may contribute to the development of interventions to alleviate certain forms of psychological malaise.

Beyond the sphere of psychology, this research and its findings may be of interest to philosophers of religion. It is relevant to the study of comparative religious philosophy and related epistemological enquiries into spiritual experience. The phenomenological typology of UL, particularly of TUL, appears consistent with soft perennialism, as outlined by Taylor (2016). TUL appears to be a distinct transpersonal experience whose phenomenological characteristics transcend variations in philosophical or traditional worldview, and thus may imply some core, underlying ontological reality that may be accessed by people of varied religiosity.

In a similar vein, the findings of this research intersect with ongoing interdisciplinary debates within the field of consciousness science. TUL represents a rich, subjective experience of transpersonal consciousness. Its intrinsic association with EASCs, its inclusion of phenomenological experiences of non-localised sensed presences, and its occurrence within NDEs (where there is little or no measurable

brain activity) positions TUL as a significant and interesting phenomenon for theories of consciousness to account for.

7.9 Conclusion

This thesis has been a beginning point in the cultivation of a psychological understanding of UL. Whilst far from exhaustive, it has contributed early frameworks for two distinct forms of UL – RUL and TUL – including how they arise, their characteristics and their impacts. It has also found that not only TUL, but other unconditional positive states, including joy and peace, are potentials in human consciousness. Unconditional positive states appear to arise either as emergent properties of, or concurrently with, states of extreme connectedness, which separates them from unconditional negative states (such as depression and anxiety), which are associated with disconnectedness. The extreme connectedness – often experienced as oneness – of unconditional positive states appears to be accessible only through wakeful EASCs, which are characterised by interconnectedness or oneness. It could be, as proposed by many mystical traditions and some scientific theories, that such states are moments of contact with a fundamental, non-localised consciousness through which all things have their being and are thus interconnected. This was often the subjective experience described by participants. The possibility of UL as a non-localised consciousness intersects with broader interdisciplinary inquiries into the hard problem of consciousness, especially concerning the mechanisms of subjective experience and the nature of consciousness itself. A vast array of personal and interpersonal benefits were associated with UL, particularly in its transpersonal form. They suggest that the continued scientific investigation of UL, and unconditional positive states in general, would have a beneficial impact on individual mental health, interpersonal relationships, and our capacity to flourish as a connected and altruistic society.

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Appendix E:

Participant Summaries, Study Two

E.1 Michael

Michael had rejected his childhood Christianity due to a lack of connection with what he perceived to be a judgemental version of God. Undiagnosed dyslexia made school difficult, resulting in authority figures telling him he wasn't smart, curious or capable. As an adult, he worked in construction, for which he didn't feel any skill or calling. This perpetuated a sense of purposelessness and uselessness which led him to alcohol. Having hit financial difficulty and returned to live with relatives outside of London, he was involved in a train accident. His coat was caught in the closing train door and he was dragged underneath as it departed from the station. He was still conscious when he arrived at the hospital despite his arm being only loosely attached to his body. Before long he drifted into a near-death experience.

He found himself lying on a structure, with familiar though unrecognisable, comforting beings of unconditional love healing him. He described that the healing was not only for his body and physical damage, but of all the wounds of his consciousness. He felt unconditional love coming out of their hands to effect this healing. At one point, he looked over the edge of the area he was lying in and saw stars and galaxies. Then he saw a tunnel of brilliant white light, which he knew was God. He felt love from God. He knew through the whole NDE that he was loved, that he had always been loved, that there had never been anything wrong with him.

After his experience, Michael continued to feel unconditional love within and sought to share that love with others, as he felt it was a natural expression of the universe. Straight after his experience, as he was lying with his mangled body in his hospital bed, his friends and family were amazed by how happy and loving he was – how much kindness he was shining out to the people around him. He said he could still feel the love from the experience and this resource supported him in the difficult process of healing.

After his recovery, he began painting what he had seen to try and integrate his experience. He had never painted before, but friends of friends gifted him a room to use, and to his surprise, he produced high level artwork. At the time of the interview several of his paintings were loaned out for an exhibition in New York.

Not only did he discover skill as an artist, but various events then led him to compose a symphony about his experience. This was played by an orchestra and broadcast by the BBC. He then co-wrote a book about his experience and now spends his time either painting or giving talks and interviews for radio and television.

Michael believes that the shift in his self-efficacy, self-worth and quality of life - from believing he had no skill or worth, to becoming an artist, composer and author, and more importantly, believing he is worthy and loved - was due to his NDE and the unconditional love he received through it. He says he realised that he had always been loved and there was no need for self-harshness. He realised that everyone is innately loved and delights in sharing his story in case it allows people to feel that for themselves.

Michael realised through his experience that many human forms of love – certainly many that he had experienced – are based in co-dependency and expectation. He saw how his poor self-worth and his desire to rescue others for validation had impacted his romantic relationships, and how it was possible to love unconditionally without those power games. These realisations transformed his relationships with his parents, siblings, friends and ex-lovers.

Another result of his experience was a newfound belief in God. Not as the judgemental character he had learned about in school, but as unconditional love, and as the universe itself, which loved everyone and everything as it is. His alcoholism disappeared because he simply didn't need to drink anymore, and he experienced substantially more happiness, contentment and quality of life.

E.2 Karlie

Karlie characterised her life prior to unconditional love as one of separation, pain, anguish, addiction and difficult relationships. Her path of unconditional love began when she sought sobriety at the age of 27 and entered into recovery. Not long after, she went to a spiritual school where the people she met seemed to embody a lot of love.

At first, this scared her and she wanted to run away. She said that she felt her heart was not open enough to receive or connect with that energy. Her mind didn't understand what was happening and wasn't sure whether to trust the apparent love she was witnessing. However, as she began to do the practices, she found that she would feel better and different. She describes a point where the energy became so overwhelming that she burst into tears and knew that that energy was love. As she started to open into this, she noticed that it felt familiar to her, though she had never done spiritual practice before.

Karlie describes her first big experience of unconditional love resulting from a guided forgiveness meditation. As a result of learning about forgiveness in recovery, she had been reconnecting with her father who she had been not spoken to for fifteen years after substantial mistreatment in her childhood. In meditation, her teacher led a practice of singing Ho'opono pono (a recitation of 'I'm sorry, please forgive me, thank you, I love you') directed at someone you wanted to forgive. Karlie had a vision of herself and her father singing this to each other, both crying, with a white dove between them. She felt deep unconditional love and forgiveness in the session that had made her cry not only in her vision, but also physically. She felt everything that was not pure in their relationship burn away, leaving peace and unconditional love.

When she opened her eyes at the end of the meditation, her father had sent her a picture of a white dove that had flown into his kitchen. She was amazed at this synchronicity and apparent connection, as he had not consciously known that she was doing a healing practice on their relationship at that time. This healing unconditional love experience profoundly changed her relationship with her father, with whom she has been on good terms ever since. She felt that it also opened her heart and increased her capacity for love in general.

Karlie had many other similar experiences of unconditional love through her spiritual practice and school. This led her to want to give back, and to begin facilitating restorative justice programs in a high security prison as service. She describes another peak unconditional love experience running a restorative justice fair in one of the prison yards. ~~She explains that the beauty of restorative justice is that it is not about punishment but about healing, on the basis that crime arises from some kind of wound or trauma.~~ The participants had been learning to write remorse letters to their victims. At the end, they stood up and each said the name of their victim, with love and accountability. By the 200th man, Karlie said she was in tears. She said something within her felt like it was being

healed through witnessing the practice, and that it created a field of love that everyone could feel.

She felt a profound sense of unity in this experience of unconditional love. When asked whether the prisoners felt it too, she said that she thought many of them did, and that through the spiritual practices she has taught them, many of them have started feeling a sense of unity not only with each other, but also with the guards on the yards. She expressed that she felt connection to have been a core mechanism in the healing she both experienced and witnessed through such processes.

Karlie commented on the centrality of unity and unconditional love to restorative justice work. She reflected that if people entered the prison system with a sense of superiority, judgement or a desire to rescue or change people, it didn't work. She went into detail about how the attitude of rescuing interferes with unconditional love, damaging the "field of possibility" (Karlie, p.16) in which change can take place. In her case, she thought she was entering into that line of work to help others, but realised that she herself was being healed; that it is a oneness, which she felt brings her back to unconditional love.

Karlie recalled that when she first entered the prison system, the prisoners didn't trust her, and that this reminded her of her own lack of trust when she had first found spirituality and unconditionally loving people. She spoke of how they would often test her, and she needed to be steadfast with her own spiritual and personal development work so she could be consistent with the love she had for them.

Karlie particularly spoke of the work of managing her own expectations, as these would inhibit unconditional love. She said sometimes, because it is a high security prison, she would witness extreme behaviours that were difficult not to judge. Then she would remind herself that her judgement was due to her own expectation that people wouldn't fall into old patterns and behaviours. She strove to cultivate greater compassion and acceptance for both others and herself for times when she had slipped on her own journey into unconditional love. She found this freed her to experience more unconditional love for herself and others.

Another technique Karlie used to return to unconditional love was seeing herself in others when she felt triggered by them. This took the form of shadow work and an intense accountability practice. Karlie attained great personal healing through these techniques and greater unity and unconditional love with and for those she served.

Spiritual practice is another big part of what gave Karlie the strength to stay in unconditional love through the challenges this line of work inevitably brings. She does spiritual ceremony every day, and has a strong practice of prayer and meditation. Often, her prayer and meditation is dedicated to surrender; turning her will over to a higher power, and trying to 'set aside' everything she thought she knew about herself and the world so she can be truly present. She says that in this practice she feels loved by the divine, held and safe. She has a vast sense of trust and faith, even when scary things are happening around her. The safety empowers her to love.

With her attitude of not rescuing people, but simply bringing love, offering what she has and seeing what they want to adopt and accept, Karlie has witnessed profound transformations in the prison. At the time of the interview, 50 inmates were doing a nine-day program of spiritual practice with her by their own choice, involving ceremonies that they conducted themselves morning and evening. One of them told her that during the group spiritual practice she facilitates in the prison, everything feels like love. Karlie reflects that she feels it is partially because of the connection they have cultivated that this is possible.

Working in the prison system, boundaries have been an important learning for Karlie. She has discovered that they are part of unconditional love, and that when she has boundaries, people feel safer, so there is more capacity for love. She says when she is not able to be skilful with a boundary, it is usually because she has slid into fear and is less established in love. By contrast, when she is offering a skilful boundary, she does it in a way where the recipient still feels loved, and she is just sharing how it is with them; what is and is not possible. She talks about how people can feel it when someone is in fear, and because the prison system is home to a lot of traumatised people, that can dysregulate everyone, bringing out their own fear and trauma defences, and the worst parts of themselves. Her response to this is to be scrupulous in looking after what she calls her own energy so that it is established in a place of love and she doesn't trigger this fear effect.

In summarising how unconditional love has changed her life, Karlie said that she went from addiction, psychological turmoil and toxic relationships to a sense of self-love, purpose, joy and fulfilment. She says that unconditional love has become a kind of resource. She knows that wherever she is and whatever is happening in any relationship dynamic, she can come back to that and blaze with love for herself and the other person.

She says when she feels lost, she remembers unconditional love and feels safety and trust for herself and the divine.

E.3 Amardeep

Amardeep had a profound unconditional love experience as a three-year old with his grandmother, who was chanting to him as she took care of him as a young infant. His grandmother was a very devotional woman, and as she put oil on his skin, he felt a vibration from her of love and peace. He said it magnified his reality, making the small motes of dust in the air appear beautiful in the sunshine, and created a sense of depth and spaciousness. He recalls that there wasn't any sense of separation between himself and his grandmother, just a sense of oneness and being held and loved.

He subsequently moved away from his family's religion in his teenage years because of various peer pressures. This led to an existential crisis of faith – his innate Sikh spirituality from childhood warring with the secularism of the British culture he lived in. As the crisis intensified, his physical body took a toll, with progressively worsening asthma. A year and a half later, the asthma escalated. It triggered a near death experience of unconditional love and a reality beyond separation.

In his NDE, he felt that unconditional love was the Divine itself. As elaborated through the analysis, he describes it as an infinite wholeness, oneness, and paradoxical perfection – in that what we would normally perceive as 'good' or 'bad', and all emotions are contained within unconditional love. He said it transformed his view of reality from a 'mechanistic' paradigm to one of unity.

Integrating this new understanding of his reality was difficult. He was still a teenager, and was still swayed by societal norms and expectations of having a girlfriend, getting a particular job, going out etc. Yet some of these physical world desires seemed in conflict with his inner calling to meditate and reconnect with what he had experienced in his NDE.

The solution came when he travelled to India and met his guru. He says "what I experienced in the NDE, I felt emanating out of him as a human being" (Amardeep, p.11). Two years later, he moved to the ashram to commit to the spiritual path, train his mind and surrender his ego. For Amardeep, his guru exemplified his goal: to be able to live with

his consciousness mainly established in unconditional love. As he sought to emulate this love in action, he developed the desire to serve others from a place of wholeness and oneness (Amardeep, p.12).

Having accessed a state of mostly unconditional love, one of the troubles Amardeep had was a lack of boundaries. The more he worked with this, the more he realised that unconditional love actually requires boundaries. When he began to implement them, he experienced breakthroughs in holding unconditional love in relationship contexts, even during experiences of differing values or separation.

Amardeep attributes several benefits to unconditional love. In his spiritual life, he feels that his association with his guru helped him to put down his ego to an extent that enabled him to access more love in all parts of life and to serve others. He is clear that he still has an ego, but that he learned how to be in a conscious relationship with it in which it doesn't drive his life.

In his personal life, he gained the ability to access both empathy and truth in personal relationships. For example, he describes a difficult break-up. Due to the unconditional love within, he was able to both empathise with his ex, and know from his truth that they were not compatible anymore and would not serve each other by staying together. He was able to accomplish the seeming paradox of simultaneously loving and leaving. He found this increase in empathy and compassion combined with an increased ability to take care of his own needs extremely helpful. The unconditional love and accompanying spiritual practice also gave him a 'spiritual backbone' that supported him through the experience - and through his whole life - with discipline and inner peace.

E.4 Joy

Joy has experienced unconditional love in many forms throughout her life. Each experience was accessed differently. One arose through spiritual community and practice, one through a spontaneous non-ordinary state of consciousness as a child, one through dance, one through communion with nature, and one (for Joy the most profound) through a near death experience.

Joy experienced an existential yearning for God as a young child and had a sense of not fully belonging on the Earth. As her mum was also a seeker, she experienced several different spiritual schools through her childhood. One was particularly impactful. Joy and

her peers would prepare a way to worship the divine together each week and would take turns to lead a service for each other. She describes this experience as an opportunity to “saturate in God’s love together” (Joy, p.2-3) and talks of a sense of “exquisite bliss” (Joy, p.3). In these services, Joy experienced unconditional love from and for the divine, and she also felt that she and the community of young people she was worshiping with loved each other unconditionally.

Another moment of unconditional love came through a non-ordinary experience. During her childhood Joy’s parent’s marriage was hostile and she had substantial mental and emotional turmoil related to their fighting. In one instance, she was hiding under her bed, listening to her parents’ conflict and frightened for what might happen, when she had a “visitation from ascended Master Jesus” (Joy, p.25). He told her that he loved her – and she felt that love deeply. He also told her things about her life to come, which turned out to be true. Both the love and the insights gave her vast hope and comfort in subsequent times of difficulty.

Joy describes another experience of unconditional love connected with nature, in a wood in Ireland. She said she felt a sense of aliveness, of being known by the woods, of being enveloped in a “cocoon of exquisite love” (Joy, p.10). She felt a sense of oneness and interconnection with the woods, as though her outbreath was its in-breath and vice versa.

Later, having returned to the USA, Joy spoke of feeling unconditional love in a dance class. This arose through a sense of unity with the teacher and other students as they performed each movement in synchrony with each other. She felt the aliveness of her body and a sense of joy at being alive in that unity in that moment.

The experience of unconditional love that appeared to have the most significant impact on Joy was her near death experience. Having been rushed to the emergency department, she technically died during surgery. She found herself “catapulted into a field of unconditional love” (Joy, p.17). She said that only unconditional love existed in that place, and that she was face-to-face with the Divine. It didn’t take a form, apart from love and presence. She felt deeply known, held and loved by it.

In the course of her experience, the divine presence pointed out a layer of shame that had kept her separate from unconditional love. This was removed, and she was told that this would help her to be able to feel that sense of divine connection and unconditional love more easily when she went back to her body.

After this experience, she felt that she was able to access unconditional love as soon as she turned her awareness to it. The resource of unconditional love and connection with the divine she had found gave her resilience in the face of the difficult physical recovery from surgery. She felt that her romantic relationship was enriched by it, and she discovered a freedom to be more herself in her life; only doing what she felt called to do and no longer living in any kind of obligation. Joy spoke of how after so long of wondering why she was on Earth and feeling like she perhaps didn't belong, she suddenly had a sense of great joy, perfection and bliss at being alive.

E.5 Sage

Sage is a quantum physicist who believes from both her mystical experiences and scientific research that the whole universe is unconditional love, and that we are each a microcosmic part of that macrocosmic reality. In her interview, Sage says that she always had an awareness of being part of the wholeness of the universe and therefore part of unconditional love. She believes that all children have an innate sense of unconditional love, until conditioning and circumstances cause us to feel separate.

Whilst other participants described peak experiences of unconditional love, Sage felt that what was more noticeable was the troughs. She talked about how unconditional love can't be thought with the mind, and so although she always knew she was one with unconditional love and with the universe, there were certain times of difficulty, stress or challenge in her life where the felt sense of that was not as strong as at other times. She stressed that the feeling of unconditional love never went away, but that sometimes it was on the "low burner" (Sage, p.2).

Sage began having non-ordinary experiences as a young child that confirmed her sense of unconditional love. She described the first she could remember. A discarnate light appeared and she heard a non-physical voice that she knew was coming from that light. She doesn't remember what it said, but she remembers the feeling; that it was loving and kind and felt like an invitation for her to remember something she hadn't forgotten but didn't consciously know. Since then, she has intentionally sought to go deeper into that remembering and to ground those experiences of oneness and love through service. She says the journey for her is not to focus on going out into non-ordinary states, but on how to bring the beauty she experiences there back and use it for good in the world.

Another moment that stood out to her was walking out in nature doing field work for her PhD in anthropological archaeology. She said she suddenly heard “In the commonality of our humanity, we're all ordinary; in the commonality of our divinity, we're all extraordinary” (Sage, p.3). This resonated with Sage about her experiences of the non-ordinary and of unconditional love. That mundane tasks, such as washing dishes, can become extraordinary when they are done with love, and that those vast experiences of universal unconditional love are actually just experiences of our true nature, and thus could be ordinary.

Sage talks about fear and chronic anxiety as opposites of love, as they take up the space that love would naturally fill. She believes that these emotions are symptoms separation. They are thus unable to co-exist with unconditional love, which has an innate quality of wholeness.

After a number of big, emotionally painful events, Sage describes going through a difficult period psychologically. In this time, she deliberately took refuge in her head in order to keep her heart safe. She felt that she was only able to access a small percentage of the wholeness and unconditional love she knew was there. Then she says her heart broke open through another painful event, and the full experience of unconditional love came back. From then on, though the intensity varied, the unconditional love was always there.

In the big moment of unconditional love through heart break, Sage felt that her ego was dissolved. It didn't go away completely, but after the experience, it was somewhat softened. From then, she was more easily able to tell if she had somehow closed or tightened her heart and could engage in a process of re-opening and returning to an attitude of serving. Sage emphasises that it is this conscious journey of continuing to recognise our state and open into unconditional love and service with it that is important. She talks about how this requires courage.

With unconditional love as a central focus of her life, Sage feels that her relationships have become easier. She says that when she is coming from love and non-judgement, people don't feel threatened, so they can be themselves and are unlikely to be angry or difficult. She feels that she is more able both to hear others and to be heard by them.

Whilst Sage sees love as a sense of oneness and non-judgement, this doesn't mean a lack of accurate discernment or boundaries when they are needed. She distinguishes

between judgement and discernment, considering judgement to be an imposition of her own values onto someone else, whilst discernment is a sense of knowing what is right for her and acting accordingly. These realisations have meant she is more easily able to deliver boundaries, centred on a loving sharing of her experience, and that they are better received because of that love and respect.

For Sage, unconditional love is where there is wholeness in relationship, or the absence of separation. She talks about how unconditional love is not partitioned. There are no reasons not to love something or someone, there is simply a wholeness of love.

E. 6 Andal

The context for Andal's experiences of unconditional love included a lifelong background of sensitivity, a sense of difference from others, and seeking. Andal felt a yearning from early childhood for something she couldn't quite express. She was moved by a televised Live Aid show when she was five, in which she first saw images of starving children in Africa. Whilst it pained her to see the suffering, it also connected her with humanity and triggered an outpouring of love and a yearning to serve and help people she didn't know.

After this initial moment of unconditional love, her sense of difference from the rest of her society increased, and so did her frustration. She perceived a lot of injustice around her – systematic problems that caused suffering – and was distressed at a sense of not being able to make the changes she thought should be made to alleviate that suffering. She could sometimes be extreme in how this passion for elevating humanity expressed, talking about how she wanted to “fight the good fight” (Andal, p.13).

She went on to become a successful psychologist and get engaged to her boyfriend. She experienced several elements of personal unconditional love in that relationship – feeling seen, known and loved exactly as she was – and says this opened her heart. By the time she began her doctorate, she was ostensibly on the path to ticking all the boxes she sought to tick, but she felt something was missing. This led her to a meditation class that began the next chapter of her life.

As will be described in other sections, Andal had incredibly rich experiences of transformation, purification, evolution and unconditional love through the spiritual school she found. Despite her full work and study schedule, she felt compelled to attend

seminars and be with her teacher and community every weekend. She cites the practices, the teacher, the teachings, the space and the community as substantial factors in being able to let go of old, limiting conditioning, negativity and access unconditional love states on a regular basis.

Andal's life began to shift through these experiences. In her family for example, she went from being known as the 'angry dwarf' to being known as 'the peaceful one' (Andal, p.19). Andal also talks about realising that she had likely suffered undiagnosed depression and social anxiety, and that these maladies of consciousness disappeared when she found unconditional love and unity as opposed to the illusion of separation.

After several years of deep spiritual study, regular experiences of unconditional love, and already having noticed substantial shifts in her consciousness and life, Andal met her guru in India. This was profound on many levels. She began an even richer practice of the Bhakti or devotional tradition (described in subsequent sections).

The regular practice itself was part of maintaining her consciousness in unconditional love. However, more significantly, she emphatically praises the living example she had in her guru, the inspiration he is and the impact being in his presence, directing her devotion towards him and witnessing his way of being and serving in the world had; opening her into more and more unconditional love as a way of life.

With Shakti Amma, Andal felt she had found her ultimate purpose and home. She now lives in his ashram, where there is constant spiritual practice going on, designed both to lift individuals into unconditional love, but also to make the place resonate with that state of consciousness, so that people are more likely, in Andal's words, to be 'co-regulated' (Andal, p.21) into unconditional love by being there.

Andal focuses a lot in her interview on the relationship between Unconditional Love, the soul and the Divine. In her experience, these things are inextricably connected. The soul is an individuated version of the Divine at large, which pervades and is the whole universe, and is made of unconditional love. Thus, connecting with the soul or the divine can help a person to connect to unconditional love, and connecting to unconditional love can help a person to connect with the soul/divine. She says "Oh, this is the divine, the divine is this unconditional love. The divine is... this energy that is in the form of our soul inside of us and is also everywhere." Andal, p.7

She found that this lived, felt discovery made her feel less limited and more connected to who she really is. "It didn't take very long, really to identify with the... deeper truth. Because the truth is the truth and the soul. And that love is... so much more powerful than any self-constructed identity... it was like just getting back to self, you know, getting back to who I really am." (Andal p.18)

Andal owns that whilst a person may have an unconditional love experience, this doesn't necessarily mean that will be constant for the rest of life. She talks about it as a state that shows us what we are capable of and then needs to be maintained through self-awareness, regular practice and simply intending to live in that way on an ongoing basis.

In the course of this ongoing process, it seems that there is a shift in general attitudes, consciousness and behaviours that makes unconditional love for all beings more possible and probable.

The obstacles Andal overcame to attain the experience of unconditional love were the illusion of separation, conditioning and expectations, emotional turbulence, and disconnection from the inner truth of her being.

The impact of unconditional love in Andal's life included a sense of inner healing and transformation, increased self-knowledge and a softened ego. Additionally, she describes having more access to character strengths such as kindness and compassion, transformed and uplifted interpersonal relationships, increased motivation for service and altruism, and more joy, satisfaction and peace.