

# Chanting for Resilience, Chanting for Compassion: A Guidebook for Counsellors

Stacey (Ana) Gheysen  
St. Stephen's College

## Personal Interest & Rationale

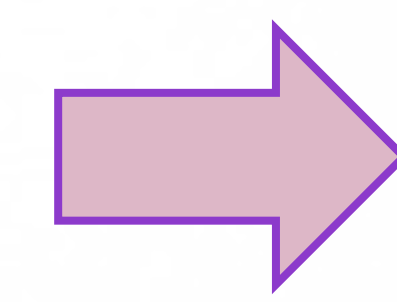
Counsellors are called upon to maintain a warm, empathetic presence while routinely witnessing suffering. We are at risk for empathetic distress, which makes a compassionate approach difficult and often leads to burnout. Much of the prevailing advice concerns strategies for coping outside of the therapy session (e.g. personal therapy, healthy living) or focuses exclusively on boundaries (e.g. detached concern). However, a growing body of evidence points to the effectiveness of contemplative and mindfulness practices in enabling a counsellor to be effective and present with clients. "The generation of compassion focuses on strengthening positive affect, while not ignoring the presence of suffering or changing the negative reality. Whereas empathy training increased negative affect and activation in associated brain circuits, compassion training reversed these effects by strengthening positive affect and activation in networks associated to affiliation and reward. Compassion may, therefore, represent a very potent strategy for preventing burnout" (Klimecki et al., 2014).

In recent years, insights from the *Polyvagal Theory* have been considered together with contemplative and mindfulness practices in clinical application. It provides a framework for understanding how, through these practices, we become more resilient, compassionate practitioners.

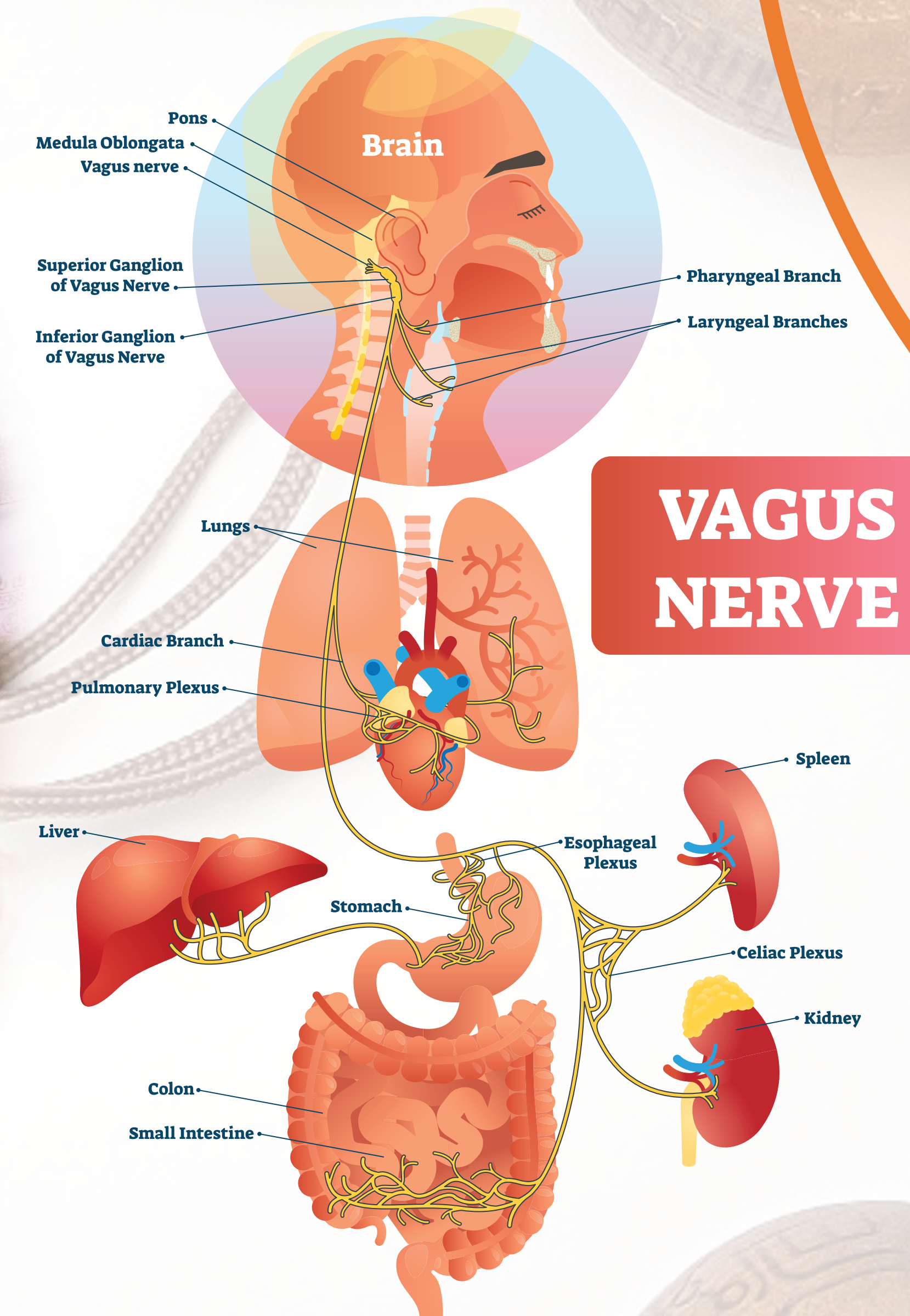
As the tenth cranial nerve in the autonomic nervous system, the vagus nerve originates in the brain stem and 'wanders' all over the body. Information is conveyed bi-directionally from brain to body and from body to brain. Vagal tone refers to the neural control of the heart via the vagus and is an index of homeostasis. "Since cardiac vagal tone reflects the general PNS [parasympathetic nervous system] input to the viscera, it may be used to monitor stress and index individual differences in stress vulnerability" (Porges, 2011).

Chanting is a contemplative practice found in spiritual traditions worldwide which improves our ability to be compassionate by strengthening vagal tone. In my experiences in spiritual & end of life care, and as a counselling practicum student, I have experienced empathetic distress and I have also felt the benefits of a regular chanting practice.

Healthy Vagal  
Tone activated  
by Chanting



Neurological  
basis for  
Compassion &  
Resilience



## Background and Explanation

Those who work in the helping professions, such as nurses, social workers, psychiatrists and counsellors, experience high rates of burnout (Morse et al., 2012).

"Moderating one's compassion for clients by emotional distance from them ("detached concern") was viewed as a way of protecting oneself from intense emotional arousal that could interfere with functioning effectively on the job. However, an imbalance of excessive detachment and little concern seemed to lead staff to respond to clients in negative, callous, and dehumanized ways" (Maslach et al, 2001).

One of the implications of Polyvagal Theory is that "compassion relies on a neural platform that enables an individual to maintain and express a physiological state of safety when confronted with the pain and suffering of others" (Porges, 2018).

"Polyvagal theory explains how the manipulation of vagal pathways is involved in the foundational processes upon which contemplative training and practice are based. These processes require two pathways (passive and active) to regulate the autonomic state and lead to a physiological state, which would enable feelings of safety and compassion to be felt and expressed... Thus, once one is in a physiological state that supports feelings of safety, successful training would result in a resilient autonomic nervous system that would acknowledge, without mirroring, the emotional reactivity and pain often expressed by those who are suffering" (Porges, 2018).

Chanting, ostensibly a spiritual or religious ritual, is in fact a gateway into developing a state of ease, growth, restoration and health. A passive pathway is provided by being in a safe, quiet space. An active pathway is provided by the act of chanting itself (ie. long exhalation relative to inhalation leads to parasympathetic nervous system activation). With regular practice, it contributes to maintaining a ventral state as baseline (Porges, 2017).

Passive (via neuroception)	Active (via chanting)
In a safe place free of cues for fight/flight/freeze behaviour	Breath (long exhalation, short inhalation)
Acoustic cues of safety (e.g. a parent's lullaby voice)	Vocalization

## Project Part I: The Book

### Audience

Counsellors and others in the helping professions who are at risk for burnout due to empathetic distress.

### Sample

For this practice to improve vagal tone, a key step is to begin with the passive pathway, ie. listening to the acoustic cues of a mother's voice. I have recorded the chants in two rounds of three minutes each. On the first round, just listen. Relax, close your eyes, and soak it in. Allow yourself to be sung to.

On the second round, chant along with the recording. Although you may feel tempted to wonder if your voice sounds good, it's more important to breathe in the same way as I am breathing in the recording. A short, deep inhalation is followed by a long exhalation to the end of the chant.

### Goals

Provide an explanation of the neurological and physiological basis for the way that chanting lays the foundation for compassion and increases resilience via the health of the vagus nerve. Give practical instructions for developing a regular chanting practice.

### Contents

#### Acknowledgements

#### Who is this book for?

#### Links to Recordings

#### Part One:

##### How we work

*Empathetic Distress*

*Emotional Sensitivity*

*Polyvagal Theory's Social Engagement System*

*High vs Low Vagal Tone*

*Physiological requirements of Compassion*

#### Part Two:

##### How chanting works

*Improves Vagal Tone*

*Improves Resilience*

*Interspiritual nature*

#### Part Three:

##### How we chant

*Set Up*

*Location/*

*Distractions*

*Mindfulness*

*Physical Readiness*

*Posture*

*Breathing*

##### Practice

*Listen*

*Chant*

*Pause*

*Ending*

## Feasibility & Next Steps

- Chants will be recorded at home with professional audio equipment and uploaded to SoundCloud, a free website for independent artists. There will be links in the guidebook.
- The guidebook will be formatted as a e-book for my own use in my counselling practice and as a download for a fee on my business website to other professionals.
- In addition, I intend to submit a book proposal to local independent publishers.
- I would like to be a guest presenter and offer online workshops based on the book as part of my professional practice.

## Acknowledgements

- Dr. Stephen Porges** is not only the originator of the Polyvagal Theory, but his appreciation of contemplative practices led him to make the connection between chanting, a healthy vagus nerve and compassion.
- Manorama**, founder of the Sanskrit Studies Method and the Luminous Soul Method, taught me that the sound of the mantra rides on the breath. For this and all the wisdom teachings she has imparted to me with love,  
I am grateful.

## Project Part II: The Recordings

### Hindu/Yoga - Bija Seed Sounds

*Lam, Vam, Ram, Yam, Ham, Om*

These syllables are each considered a seed of powerful sound energy which heals at the level of the chakras that correspond to the physical body and relate to a central psychological issue.

### Christian - Gregorian chant

*Ubi Caritas Et Amor, Deus Ibi Est*

One of the oldest known Christian chants which comes to us from medieval times means: "Where charity and love are, God is there".

### Buddhist - Mantra of Compassion

*Om Mani Padme Hum*

The mantra teaches the six practices that oppose the internal forces that cause suffering: generosity, ethics, patience, perseverance, concentration, and wisdom. It is perhaps the oldest and most well-known of the Buddhist mantras.

### Indigenous

*Oh Great Spirit, Earth Sun Sky and Sea, You are Inside, and All Around Me*

People inspired by Indigenous traditions from around the world have created chants to honor the central place of nature in spirituality.



## Personal Interest & Rationale

Counsellors are called upon to maintain a warm, empathetic presence while routinely witnessing suffering. We are at risk for empathetic distress, which makes a compassionate approach difficult and often leads to burnout. Much of the prevailing advice concerns strategies for coping outside of the therapy session (e.g. personal therapy, healthy living) or focuses exclusively on boundaries (e.g. detached concern). However, a growing body of evidence points to the effectiveness of contemplative and mindfulness practices in enabling a counsellor to be effective and present with clients. "The generation of compassion focuses on strengthening positive affect, while not ignoring the presence of suffering or changing the negative reality. Whereas empathy training increased negative affect and activation in associated brain circuits, compassion training reversed these effects by strengthening positive affect and activation in networks associated to affiliation and reward. Compassion may, therefore, represent a very potent strategy for preventing burnout" (Klimecki et al., 2014).

In recent years, insights from the *Polyvagal Theory* have been considered together with contemplative and mindfulness practices in clinical application. It provides a framework for understanding how, through these practices, we become more resilient, compassionate practitioners.

As the tenth cranial nerve in the autonomic nervous system, the vagus nerve originates in the brain stem and 'wanders' all over the body. Information is conveyed bi-directionally from brain to body and from body to brain. Vagal tone refers to the neural control of the heart via the vagus and is an index of homeostasis. "Since cardiac vagal tone reflects the general PNS [parasympathetic nervous system] input to the viscera, it may be used to monitor stress and index individual differences in stress vulnerability" (Porges, 2011).

Chanting is a contemplative practice found in spiritual traditions worldwide which improves our ability to be compassionate by strengthening vagal tone. In my experiences in spiritual & end of life care, and as a counselling practicum student, I have experienced empathetic distress and I have also felt the benefits of a regular chanting practice.

# Chanting for Resilience, Chanting for Compassion: A Guidebook for Counselling Therapists

Stacey (Ana) Gheysen  
St. Stephen's College

## Background and Explanation

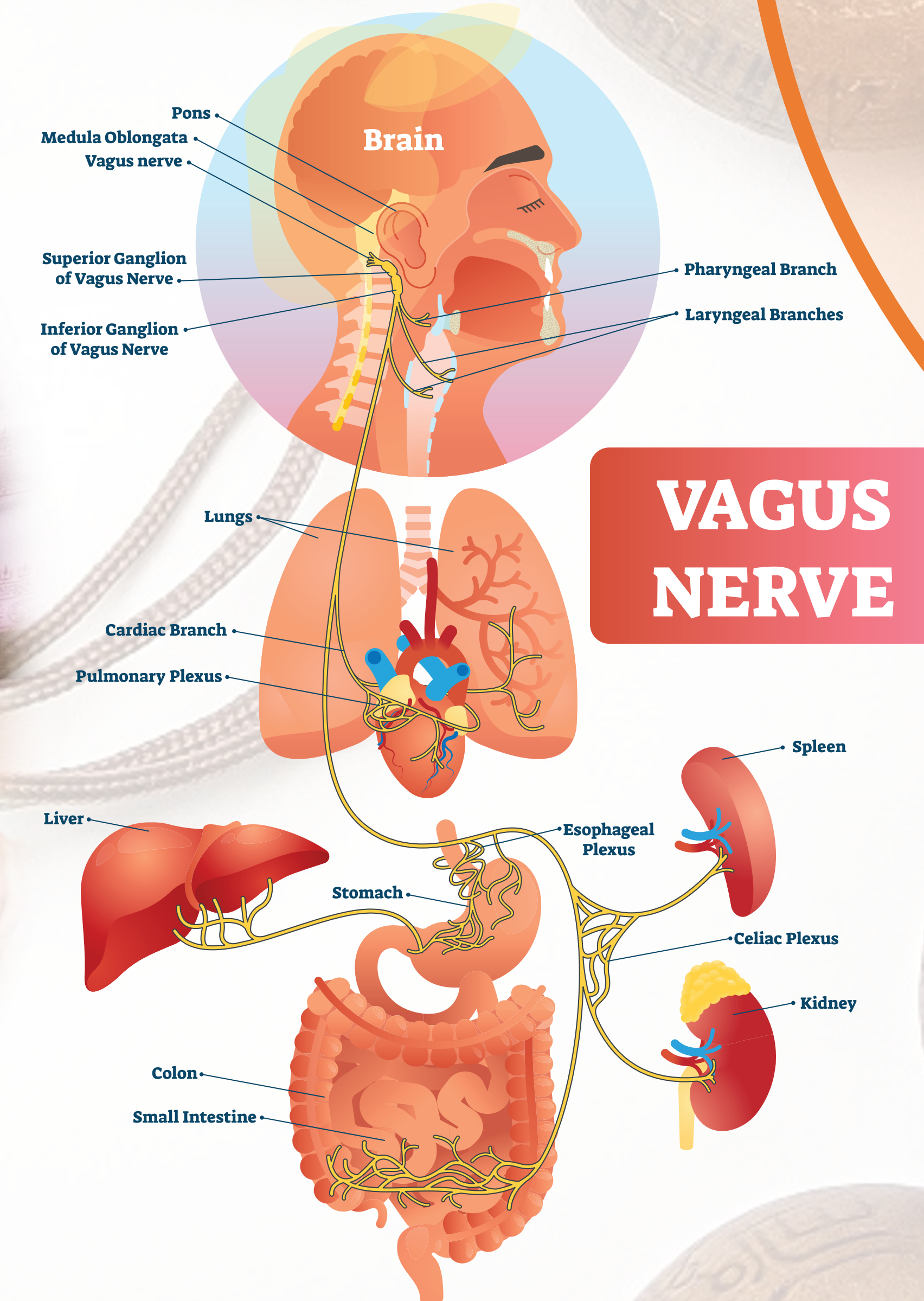
Those who work in the helping professions, such as nurses, social workers, psychiatrists and counsellors, experience high rates of burnout (Morse et al., 2012).

"Moderating one's compassion for clients by emotional distance from them ("detached concern") was viewed as a way of protecting oneself from intense emotional arousal that could interfere with functioning effectively on the job. However, an imbalance of excessive detachment and little concern seemed to lead staff to respond to clients in negative, callous, and dehumanized ways" (Maslach et al, 2001).

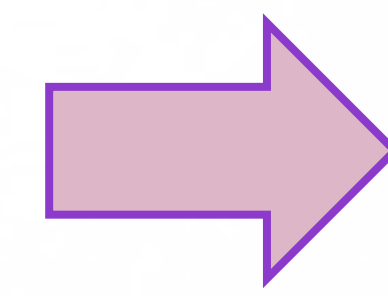
One of the implications of Polyvagal Theory is that "compassion relies on a neural platform that enables an individual to maintain and express a physiological state of safety when confronted with the pain and suffering of others" (Porges, 2018).

"Polyvagal theory explains how the manipulation of vagal pathways is involved in the foundational processes upon which contemplative training and practice are based. These processes require two pathways (passive and active) to regulate the autonomic state and lead to a physiological state, which would enable feelings of safety and compassion to be felt and expressed... Thus, once one is in a physiological state that supports feelings of safety, successful training would result in a resilient autonomic nervous system that would acknowledge, without mirroring, the emotional reactivity and pain often expressed by those who are suffering" (Porges, 2018).

Chanting, ostensibly a spiritual or religious ritual, is in fact a gateway into developing a state of ease, growth, restoration and health. A passive pathway is provided by being in a safe, quiet space. An active pathway is provided by the act of chanting itself (ie. long exhalation relative to inhalation leads to parasympathetic nervous system activation). With regular practice, it contributes to maintaining a ventral state as baseline (Porges, 2017).



Healthy Vagal  
Tone activated  
by Chanting



Neurological  
basis for  
Compassion &  
Resilience

## Project Part I: The Book

### Audience

Counsellors and others in the helping professions who are at risk for burnout due to empathetic distress.

### Sample

For this practice to improve vagal tone, a key step is to begin with the passive pathway, ie. listening to the acoustic cues of a mother's voice. I have recorded the chants in two rounds of three minutes each. On the first round, just listen. Relax, close your eyes, and soak it in. Allow yourself to be sung to.

On the second round, chant along with the recording. Although you may feel tempted to wonder if your voice sounds good, it's more important to breathe in the same way as I am breathing in the recording. A short, deep inhalation is followed by a long exhalation to the end of the chant.

### Goals

Provide an explanation of the neurological and physiological basis for the way that chanting lays the foundation for compassion and increases resilience via the health of the vagus nerve. Give practical instructions for developing a regular chanting practice.

### Contents

#### Acknowledgements

#### Who is this book for?

#### Links to Recordings

#### Part One:

#### How we work

*Empathetic Distress*

*Emotional Sensitivity*

*Polyvagal Theory's Social*

*Engagement System*

*Vagal Tone*

*Physiological requirements*

*of Compassion*

#### Part Two:

#### How chanting works

*Improves Vagal Tone*

*Improves Resilience*

*Interspiritual nature*

#### Part Three:

#### How we chant

*Set Up*

*Location/*

*Distractions*

*Mindfulness*

*Physical Readiness*

*Posture*

*Breathing*

#### Practice

*Listen*

*Chant*

*Pause*

*Ending*

## Feasibility & Next Steps

- Chants will be recorded at home with professional audio equipment and uploaded to SoundCloud, a free website for independent artists. There will be links in the guidebook.
- The guidebook will be formatted as a e-book for my own use in my counselling practice and as a download for a fee on my business website to other professionals.
- In addition, I intend to submit a book proposal to local independent publishers.
- I would like to be a guest presenter and offer online workshops based on the book as part of my professional practice.

## Acknowledgements

- Dr. Stephen Porges** is not only the originator of the Polyvagal Theory, but his appreciation of contemplative practices led him to make the connection between chanting, a healthy vagus nerve and compassion.
- Manorama**, founder of the Sanskrit Studies Method and the Luminous Soul Method, taught me that the sound of the mantra rides on the breath. For this and all the wisdom teachings she has imparted to me with love, I am grateful.

## Project Part II: The Recordings

### Hindu/Yoga - Bija Seed Sounds

In the Yoga tradition there are bija (seed) sounds for the chakras in Sanskrit that do not have a direct translation into English. Each syllable is considered a seed of powerful sound energy which heals at the level of each chakra. The chakras correspond to places in the physical and energy body as well as relating to a central psychological issue.

*Lam, Lam, Lam, Lam, Lam' Lam, Lam, Lam, Lam, Lam'*

*Vam, Vam, Vam, Vam, Vam' Vam, Vam, Vam, Vam, Vam'*

*Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram' Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram, Ram'*

*Yam, Yam, Yam, Yam, Yam' Yam, Yam, Yam, Yam, Yam'*

*Ham, Ham, Ham, Ham, Ham' Ham, Ham, Ham, Ham, Ham'*

*Om, Om, Om, Om, Om' Om, Om, Om, Om, Om'*

### Christian - Gregorian chant

From the Christian tradition we have one of the oldest known Gregorian chants in Latin which comes to us from medieval times. This is the first line of a much longer hymn which means - where charity and love are, God is there.

*Ubi Caritas Et Amor' Deus Ibi Est'*

### Indigenous

For this project, I wanted to include an example of a chant in English which would be appealing to those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious. This beautiful chant is part of a collection of community chants compiled by Sára Rain on her website: [www.trigoddess.org](http://www.trigoddess.org) The lyrics allude to an Indigenous way of seeing, to a spirituality rooted in nature, and to an appreciation for all the ways that Spirit moves.

*Oh Great Spirit' Earth Sun Sky and Sea'*

*you are inside and all around me'*