Sisu as Guts, Grace, and Gentleness

A Way of Life, Growth, and Being in Times of Adversity

Emilia Elisabet Lahti
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**Abstract**

In this dissertation, I explore the Finnish construct of sisu denoting the enigmatic human ability to surpass one’s preconceived limitations in times of adversity. The partly autoethnographic dissertation was inspired by my own encounter with trauma and William James’ century-old questions pertaining to the “limits of human power” and the differing ”paths of access, or keys” between individuals accessing this inner strength (1907, p. 332). It presents sisu as a fundamental and universal phenomenon consisting of aspects such as transcendence, gentleness, interconnectedness, and our capacity to adjust our behavior to enable better life. Sisu is also described as an expression of gentle power through which one might not only survive but overcome and even find elevation for oneself in the course of one’s journey. Gentle power points to sisu as a harmonious quality, as opposed to stubborn sisu that becomes harmful.

The thesis contributes by enhancing our understanding of the conceptual foundation of sisu, while adding to a more culturally rich discourse on the human experience of overcoming adversity within the fields of psychology and humanities that have been criticized for not caring sufficiently for the social context of the human-related phenomena they research. By being inquisitive not only about “knowing” itself, but what might be good for me and the systems around me, the dissertation not only cares about ”What is sisu?” but ”What is good sisu?” and even, ”What good is sisu?” It consists of a summary and three essays. The first essay presents the results of a survey and thematic analysis to lay a conceptual foundation for sisu and build some vocabulary around this previously under-researched but rich construct.

The epistemological and ontological standpoint I have adopted views knowledge and human capacity as something ever-evolving that come into existence through experience and action. The second and third essay deploy a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach that included an autoethnographic field study to New Zealand consisting of a 2400-km/50-day ultra run and bicycle journey and a 2-month residency in a Chinese martial arts academy, to understand what overcoming challenges means, not as some-thing inferred and analyzed through second-hand sources or retrospectively, but against the backdrop of life-as-it-happens. Additionally, essay 3 examines sisu as gentle power through the framework of systems intelligence and its container of "thinking about one's thinking." Sisu as gentle power is explored theoretically in an essayistic form using my first-person observations as a student of Eastern martial arts which, I propose, run parallel to systems intelligence in their mutual emphasis on a kind of “reflective wisdom” that is a combination of presence, attunement, and focus on one’s self-reflective process. The thesis develops a perspective of sisu as "a way of life" in the lived phenomenology of everyday experience.

**Keywords** Sisu, gentle power, qualitative research, phenomenology, autoethnography

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Tekijä
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Tiivistelmä
Tutkin väitöskirjassani sisun käsittetä, joka viittaa ihmisten yleismaailmalliseen kykyyn yllättää omat ennalta olettamansa rajoitukset vastoinkäymisten keskellä. Työ sai syntynä omakohtaisesti kokemasti traumasta sekä William Jamesin edelleen osin vastaamattomista kysymyksistä liittyen "ihmisen voiman kapasiteetin rajoihin" ja niihin "polkuhiin ja avaimiin," joita ihmiset käyttävät löytiäiseen tuon voiman (1907, s. 332). Väitöskirja esittää sisun perustavanlaatuisena ilmiöinä, joka koostuu ominaisuuksista, kuten transsendenssi, lempyys, ja yhteys sekä ihmisen kyky muokata omaa toimintaansa paremman elämän synnyttämiseksi. Kuvaan sisua myös lempinä voimana (gentle power), jonka avulla yksilö ei ainoastaan "selvyyt" vaan voi toisinaan kokea "sisäistä laajentumista" jonkin vankean vaikean matkantapaleen aikana. Lempeä voima ilmentää harmonista ja rakentavaa sisua rikkovan sisun sijaan. Väitöskirja tarjoaa perustan myöhemmälle sisun käsitteelliselle ymmärtämiselle ja pyrkii rastamaan keskustelua vastoinkäymisten voittamisen kokemuksesta psykologian tieteen aiheentässä, jota on kritisoidu siitä, että se ei huomio riittävästi tutkimisensa ilmiöiden kontekstia. Koska olen kiinnostunut siitä, mikä on hyväksi minulle ja systeemeille, joiden osana elän, en kysy vain "Mitä on sisu?" mutta "Mitä on hyvä sisu?"


Avainsanat
Lämmin sisu, lemmä voima, laadullinen tutkimus, fenomenologia, autoetnografia

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This dissertation is dedicated to us mortal, 
yet magical vessels of life force
navigating the ocean of trials and triumphs
inherent to the human experience.

May you who read this feel fortified in your spirit
and access deeper and ever-fresher levels of sisu
and gentle power along the course of your journey.
Many of our grandest feats often feel impossible until they are done. It is no secret that finishing this dissertation, which became a kind of personal pilgrimage rather than only a piece of scholarly work, ended up taking enormous sisu. As a result of years of labor and love, and despite my sporadic resistance, it however was birthed and along with it a different version of me. The woman writing these lines feels richer in insight and more peaceful from the one who, in retrospect, quite intrepidly deep-dove into the ocean of life force and sisu in hopes of gaining knowledge of its determinants and thus, a clearer understanding of herself.

As with any quest, the journey depended on the grace and generosity of several key figures and guides along the path. I feel blessed for the magnificent family of mentors and friends, who have taken me into to their hearts and gifted me their time, wisdom, support, and sometimes, a shoulder to cry on. The maestro and “sensei,” as I endearingly call him, in the center of this story has been Prof. Emeritus Esa Saarinen, whose experience, graceful sisu, and insight into “that which might become into existence” (also an element of sisu) has been a rock under my feet. Prof. Saarinen’s contribution was especially palpable when I was facing the monumental task of summarizing my research findings and observations into something communicable. His astute “hunch” for what is essential, ultimately, allowed me to tie up the loose threads of my inquiry and find closure to the process. Prof. Saarinen also (sometimes, I must admit, to my great trouble) gently pushed me to not stop fine-tuning my “sisuesque composition” until I nailed the crescendo of my symphony; thus, becoming a catalyst for me to experience the joy of reaching my potential as a result of my fortitude. I am forever grateful to Prof. Saarinen, as well as Pipsa the Queen, for their unwavering generosity and support for my work over the years.

Truly monumental in their contribution have also been Prof. Lauri Järvilehto, whose gut feeling led to the birth of this doctoral journey at Aalto University, and whose unceasing enthusiasm and action mindset ushered me to transcend so many of my inner barriers into frontiers of sisu; and Dr. Frank Martela, who like Prof. Järvillehto, was my advisor and is greatly to be thanked for that I was able to complete this work. His pragmatic thinking, that is housed in such a beautiful mind of pure brilliance and despite Dr. Martela’s numerous other commitments, helped guide me forward with actionable steps, lifting me out of many dead-ends in the course of the dissertation process.

There have of course been numerous invaluable moments of support and wisdom shared during this journey by my friends and family. Thank you, Lauri Piitinalho, for being a magical scholarly creature and an example with the perfect words of support and guidance at the right time; Peter Kenttä, for his stellar commentary on my essays and paving the way for my graduation through his own gentle dedication toward his doctoral journey; Ukko Kärkkäinen, for helping me not get lost in the world intellectualism by reminding me to return to my heart and let my inquiry spring from that tender space; Tuutu, for being a trusty friend and holding a safe space for me to finish the doctoral journey in high spirits.
I am ever so grateful to my magnificent preliminary examiners Prof. Krista Lagus and Dr. Tim Lomas. Their attentive and detailed feedback stand as a shining testimony to their passion for supporting the development of the scientific dialogue in general, and their genuine consideration for this research in a way that proved invaluable to the process of refining my dissertation. My deepest gratitude also to our Doctoral Programme Committee for welcoming my somewhat unusual dissertation topic so full-heartedly and to the endlessly helpful and professional admin office staff at the Aalto University School of Science and DIEM.

There are also the people whose encouragement led me to take up this endeavor in the first place and follow through. Thank you, Saad, for seeing the gentle power in me way before I saw it and being an elevating example of “warm sisu” through your systems intelligence in action; my Äiti and Isä, for gifting me my life, never once asking “when are you going to graduate,” and supporting me with so much love even when I set my sights on running New Zealand; Mariela Kleiner and Rossella Munafò, whose Jeanne d’Arcian sisu turned out to be a never-ending reserve of inspiration during the aforementioned run; and Mina Holder, for her knowledge, humor, and strength during the 50 tough and magical days in the “Land of the Long White Cloud.”

I also wish to acknowledge the support of Prof. Angela Duckworth since the very onset of my journey into sisu and the silent encouragement I have felt from her; Prof. Martin Seligman, for offering me (along with so many other researchers) an entire scholarly garden where to plant my sisu trees—this dissertation is thus also a tribute to his sisu over the past decades; Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman, for his excitement over the construct since it was but a tiny sprout; Dr. Asta Raami for her spirited wisdom that keeps guiding me into ever-deeper echelons of insight; Heikki Peltola, for his spirited inquiry and playful wisdom that inspire me; and Dr. Emma Seppälä, who has been my benevolent mentor and academic role model throughout this sisuesque endeavor.

When we join our hands and hearts few things remain impossible. This dissertation—the fact that it now stands as completed—offers yet another testimony of the power of embodied fortitude and the ocean of graceful strength that resides within humans everywhere. It is with this resource, along with support from our benevolent companions, as I have come to experience, that one may indeed find the strength to begin something nearly impossible and have the endurance to see it to fulfillment.

Helsinki, July 2022
Emilia Elisabet Lahti
Content

Acknowledgements 2
List of Contributing Essays 7
Author’s Contribution 9

1. Introduction 13
   1.1 Objectives and research question summarized 16

2. Review of Literature 19
   2.1 A brief history of sisu 19
   2.2 A look at life force as a quality of humans 21
   2.3 Sisu and its counterparts 24
   2.4 The genius, the belly! 25
   2.5 The enteric nervous system 26
   2.6 Second wind – an idea whose time has come 27

3. Research Approach 29
   3.1 Phenomenology: An inquiry into the lived experience 29
   3.2 Systems intelligence: Being better, better 30
   3.3 Toward greater good 32

4. Data and Methods 34
   4.1 Empirical setting 34
   4.2 Data collection and selection 37
   4.3 Analytical methods 39
   4.4 Trustworthiness 42

5. Key Findings 44
   5.1 Essay 1: Preliminary essences of sisu through the survey data 44
   5.2 Essay 2: A personal inquiry into the lived experience of sisu 46
   5.3 Essay 3: Systems intelligence tactics for sisu as gentle power 50
   5.5 The strength of pliability: Above and beyond a philosophy of resolve 55

6. Discussion 58
   6.1 Contributions to current literature 58
   6.2 Practical implications 59
   6.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research 60
   6.4 Conclusion 61

7. References 63

Appendix A: Images from Sisu Not Silence events and the New Zealand run 75
Appendix B: Images from a 50-day field trip to a martial arts academy in China 80

Contributing Essays 85
List of Contributing Essays

This doctoral dissertation consists of a summary and of the following three essays which are referred to in the text by their numerals


2. Lahti, Emilia Elisabet. Sisu as transcendence, connection, and gentleness: An autoethnographic inquiry into the lived experience of inner fortitude during a 50-day/2400 km ultramarathon. Working paper. 53 pages.

Author’s Contribution

All three essays included in this dissertation from development of research questions to collecting and explicating the data, as well as writing the papers were developed by and based on the original idea of the author.

The doctoral candidate received valuable feedback and comments from her supervisor, advisors, and numerous kind scholars and friends, but she is the sole author of the dissertation.
Summary Part: Sisu as Guts, Grace, and Gentleness
1. Introduction

It is evident that our organism has stored-up reserves of energy that are ordinarily not called upon, but that may be called upon: deeper and deeper strata of combustible or explosible material, discontinuously arranged, but ready for use by anyone who probes so deep, and repairing themselves by rest as well as do the superficial strata. Most of us continue living unnecessarily near our surface.

—William James, 1914, p. 8

An undeniable fact of life is that to be alive, means having to face and overcome adversities of varying degrees. How we do this “facing” and “overcoming” is what perhaps defines us the most as humans. Several theories have been created to understand what makes humans endure and bounce back. This dissertation was inspired by my own encounter with traumatic adversity and later, William James’ (1842-1910) unanswered questions pertaining to the “limits of human power” and “the paths of access, or keys, differing with the diverse types of individuals, to the different kind of power” (1907, p. 332).

In other words, this research examines what are the resources humans draw from when there appears to be nothing left and how does life indeed prevail against the faintest of odds. This phenomenon, ubiquitous in its occurrence and yet, elusive in its constitution, is about the crossroad, tipping point, or “moment of truth,” when an individual feels they have reached the furthest edge of their preconceived capacity and reasonable risk. It is the next breath and seemingly impossible action taken when the scale could tip either way, or is, in fact, in favour of tipping backwards, and yet, we move onwards. So why and how does someone overcome and escape the most difficult situations nearly unscathed, whereas someone else feels the imprints of adversity like fingernail marks on the soft surface of a peach? How do we transcend physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion, and even transform fear into fuel to drive us further?

Over a hundred years ago, William James, a polymath and renowned philosopher also entitled as the founder of American psychology, stood in front of his colleagues and implored an inquiry into the phenomenon he called the second wind, suggesting that understanding this reserve of energy would hold the keys to the problem of individual and national education. He outlined the need for a more nuanced understanding of human endurance; to examine and measure where energy reserves come from and how to tap into them. He also outlined the need for what he called a “topography” of the limits and extent of “human power” (energy) like “an ophthalmologist’s chart of the limits of the human field of vision,” as well as “a methodical inventory... to the different kinds of power” (James, 1907, p. 332).
To this date, despite major advancements in science, from space exploration and medicine to technology and social sciences, vast gaps remain in understanding the very quality of our striving—call it human spirit if you will—to which we seem to owe much of this progress. In Finland, this quality has for centuries been known as sisu. It is arguably one of the most central words of the Finnish cultural identity. Etymologically sisu traces to sisus that translates as the “innermost part”, or “guts” and it has been around for about half a millennium (Häkkinen, 2004). The word carries flavors from both bad spiritedness as well as bold national spirit, thus reflecting the extensive journey of sisu as a cultural construct within the Finnish life world.

While the idea of guts itself as the seat of deep strength can be traced all the way to ancient Greek (Leicester, 1961) and while sisu has held such a central role in the Finnish culture, no peer-reviewed, empirical research existed to elaborate what sisu ultimately is. Instead, I came across expressions and stories pointing to something immensely potent, yet frustratingly elusive within the human experience. Later, after conducting the preliminary research on sisu while I was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania in 2012-2013, it became clear that contemporary psychology possessed no concept that encompassed what sisu appeared to denote. I thus observed a lack of research into sisu as a psychological construct, and more generally a gap in our psychological, as well as mainstream vocabulary and understanding, to describe the phenomenon of finding strength when individuals seem to have reached the end of their assumed capacities. What happens when we think it’s the end, akin to “the wall” sometimes described by marathon runners at the final kilometers of a marathon, but when this barrier is overcome by accessing a new, unexpected wave of strength? I couldn’t help but see a halo of unexamined potential lingering around the old construct of sisu from my native culture.

This dissertation consists of a summary and three essays. Its multimodal research approach deploys a qualitative and experiential approach to allow an inquiry into a construct of which little was previously known as a quality that pertains to human psychology and behavior, and ask the fundamental question of “What is sisu?” The summary describes the overall aims and objectives of the study, explicates the selected theoretical framework as well as methodologies, and finally, concludes with presenting the key findings from each essay. Essay 1 presents the results of the first peer-reviewed empirical study on sisu: a survey and thematic analysis conducted in 2013 to map the cultural understanding of sisu among a mainly Finnish group of respondents to describe the elusive construct and offer it a definition. The second and third essay deploys a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach along with tools from autoethnography in the form of two first-person autoethnographic field studies. The first took place during a 2400-km/50-day ultrarun and bicycle journey across the length of New Zealand in 2018. It was the manifestation of a dream I had for years, which, as I describe in chapter 4.1.1, also connects to the very onset this doctoral dissertation. The field trip was preceded by a 2-year preparation period during which I trained to prepare my body for this unusual feat and project managed its related social activism campaign called Sisu Not Silence, which I had founded to empower survivors of interpersonal violence, and which was the focus of the run. The second field trip was a 50-day residency in a martial arts academy in rural North China as a student of tai chi, kung fu, and Taoism. During this time, I trained six days a week with other, mostly Chinese, students. During both field trips I collected autoethnographic data through journaling.

Similar to courage, which has been notoriously challenging to measure (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), moments of hardships and growth through adversity are highly personalized experiences that tend to be challenging to study quantitatively. An example of this is the ubiquitous experience of pain that Neville-Jan (2003) set out to study using the first-person methodology of autoethnography. Furthermore, collecting data through an experiment that would expose
individuals to extreme stress or adversity in a simulated setting to study sisu, would be not only hard to execute but morally questionable. James (1907), who was fascinated about the "human spirit" and our ability to unearth new reserves of energy during crises, described the study of energy within humans as "an absolutely concrete study, to be carried on by using historical and biographical material mainly," adding: "laboratory experimentation can play but a small part" because, according to James, simulated situations can never be "as extreme as those which the emergencies of life will force on him" (p. 332). So, indeed, how to get inside the elusive fibers of sisu, instead of just confusing the map to the territory by observing it from outside? I concluded that perhaps sisu is best researched—at least for certain parts—through direct experience by observing the lived experience of sisu as it happens.

Essay 3, while carrying the same theoretical approach of hermeneutic phenomenology as essay 2, additionally examines sisu through the framework of systems intelligence (Saarinen & Hämäläinen, 2004; see also Hämäläinen & Saarinen, 2006, 2007a). Namely, it focuses on exploring the harmonious expression of sisu and proposes a tool for its cultivation through a systems intelligence informed self-reflective process. The third essay, therefore, is an amalgamation of hermeneutic phenomenology, systems intelligence, and first-person action research (Marshall, 1999, 2016) in that it is concerned with knowledge that informs practice. I am interested not just with knowing itself but also in exploring what might be good for me as a human individual and perhaps, more generally, to the systems around us. The aim is to understand not only “What is sisu?” but “What is good sisu?” and even, “What good is sisu?”

Tracing back my path with sisu, I can see a handful of guiding intuitions that have directed me to this road less travelled. I list them here, recognizing their subjectivity and the occasional naïveté. There is a certain innocence in some of them, especially in my heart-felt belief in morality and ethical outlook as a “first philosophy,” in some such sense as that of Levinas (see Hand, 1989), and also in my urge to find unity, harmony, integration, and wholeness through rational and intellectual discourse that expands across a variety of disciplines of inquiry; an urge in which I have drawn inspiration for example from the work of Gregory Bateson (see Hawkins, 2004). This dissertation, including the summary, is offered as an academic contribution with due respect to the traditions of that institution, but at the same time, I strive to reach beyond what I perceive as “unwise assumptions” of some reductionistic conventions and paradigms of fragmentism of that institution, which in some of its more positivistic overtones often ends taking their primary inspiration from natural science. Especially important for me as a scholar is to honor previous discussions and the giant shoulders on which one as a scholar stands. A work with a broad scope and a personal touch, such as my dissertation aims to be, is doomed to overlook to some extent discussions that in the ideal world would have been included explicitly as part of the current dialogue. But the work proceeds primarily from the passion to reach out to a phenomenon, rather than from a desire to cover the various literatures and different academic discourses that have touched upon the phenomenon under scrutiny. The aim ambitiously is to seek to approach the theme of sisu as a phenomenon that reveals something of significance of the human condition itself.

My aim is to shed light on the phenomenon of sisu through three separate but intertwined essays. I hope the reader will find the essays to speak up, not only individually, but also as a multi-voiced choir strengthening one another, even if they are conducted using different methodologies, and although they employ varying frames of reference in their mode of conceptualizing. There is a point to the way in which each essay is composed, and I do hope that these three essays together, in their somewhat different “tone” or “musicality,” will yield understanding to the phenomenon they approach, also precisely because of their multi-voiced nature, as well as because of the difference in the discursive
practices adopted in the triplet. The essays together do not demonstrate the employment of just “mixed methods” but an orchestration of the right types of instruments to bring about the most suitable combination for the melody at hand. Even more, my hope is that the current work in its somewhat unconventional form, would point to the beauty of “the conversation of mankind,” as Oakeshott (1959) put it, as one humble but sincere effort of inquiry.

I realize the unusual nature of such thematization and more generally, the perhaps eccentric quality of the way of explicating and writing in some parts of this dissertation. However, as informed by appropriate scholarship and examination of earlier writers and researchers such as Gregory Bateson, John Shotter, C. D. Broad, William James, and even David Bohm that have endorsed similar aspirations, with regards to the multifaceted and elusive phenomenon discussed in my research, this path is a path I have chosen because I believe it carries an illuminating quality that a more positivist approach wouldn’t have. As such this work is also by no means value-free but indeed, for example, shares goals outlined by also systems informed positive psychology “[to] cultivate the wellbeing of human social systems, enable system co-evolution, and create positive unimagined futures” (Kern et al., 2019, p. 4). I hope the reader will bear with me as I attempt such an inquiry in the context of this dissertation within the meaning-world of sisu, which has proven to be such a tremendously fascinating area of inquiry and introspection.

1.1 Objectives and research question summarized

The theoretical objective of this dissertation is to increase understanding of the Finnish construct of sisu that denotes extraordinary strength in the face of challenges, but which has remained poorly understood as a psychological quality. The practical objective of this work is to contribute to understanding that would encourage sisu in the everyday life. I also sought to contribute to a more culturally rich discourse within psychology and the humanities that have been criticized for not paying sufficient attention to the social context of the human-related phenomena they research (Becker & Marecek, 2008). The central research question I set to answer was:

What is the essence of sisu as a form of overcoming extreme adversity?

Especially within the past two decades, the scientific landscape of understanding mental endurance has become enriched with theories relating to concepts such as posttraumatic growth (Ramos & Leal, 2013; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; 2004), grit (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009), resilience (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten et al., 2009), mental toughness (Gucciardi et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2007), courage (Pury & Lopez, 2009; Pury et al., 2007), and hardiness (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi, 2004; 2006). Conflict and adversity remain an inevitable part of human experience and gaining a more nuanced understanding of what enables individuals to endure hardships is not only useful but necessary. However, the majority of the constructs currently used in examining these phenomena are mostly derived from a Western (namely, North American) research tradition, therefore contributing to a discussion that is culturally one-sided and not representative of the discourse of the human family as a whole.

The differences between Eastern and Western cultures have been extensively studied in disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy, archeology, psychology, and applied linguistics (Pae, 2020). Pae further writes that West and East display a set of differences not only in architecture, clothing, language, script, and everyday practice, but they inform (and in turn are informed by) different kinds of value systems, styles of problem solving strategies, and even differences in attentional and perceptual patterns in that Easterners, for example, tend
adhere to a more holistic way of seeing things as part of a whole and Westerners generally display a more analytic way of perceiving and processing information. According to Nisbett (2003) the tendency of Eastern thinking, for example, to see the bigger whole over its parts is due to the collectivist social model, rather than differences in thought systems or metaphysics per se. The hypothesis is that East Asians think more in communal terms and therefore, their perceptual systems are better trained for peripheral vision and background vision. This collectivist way of seeing has therefore influenced Eastern philosophy, which, in turn, forms the basis for everyday patterns of engagement and thinking. While Western philosophy’s central concern revolve “knowledge” and “truth,” those for Chinese philosophy, for example, according to Hwang (1995) are “action” and “practice.” The Eastern conceptions of life include the willingness to endure hardships and even accept suffering to maintain peace of mind and sense of direction in the face of adversity (Ng et al., 2005). These conceptions are, of course, not foreign to Western thinking but the Western emphasis on engagement, achievement, and the idea of becoming (in which doing, endings, and projects function as milestones) is different from the contemplative focus of the Eastern mindset. Both Western and Eastern traditions have therefore different things to contribute also to the psychological discourse.

Bermant et al. (2011) urged practitioners within the field of positive psychology to be careful not to imitate psychology with its focus on American culture, but broaden the focus to other cultures and therefore, contribute to a more diverse understanding of the human experience. Late research psychologist Christopher Peterson (2008) noted that “science should not simply be an export business. There are lessons to be learned in all cultures about what makes life worth living, and no language has a monopoly on the vocabulary for describing the good life” (para. 3). Peterson was talking about the Japanese notion of *ikigai* (Jap. 生き甲斐; a sense of meaning of life) and referenced a longitudinal study that linked self-reported sense of *ikigai* not only to less stress and better physical health but to longevity (see Sone et al., 2008). Indeed, empirical research on *ikigai* has begun to emerge linking it to a lowered risk of mortality (Tanno & Sakata, 2007; Tanno et al., 2009) and a lower chance of cardiovascular disease (Koizumi et al., 2008).

From a psychological perspective, humans use non-cognitive qualities such as courage, grit, and perseverance to overcome challenges, but the conceptual landscape is still greatly unexplored when it comes to the depth and breadth of the qualities that allow individuals to thrive and transcend their assumed boundaries. Saarinen and Hämäläinen (2004) have further noted that, “the cause of the good life has not occupied the central focus of psychology or of philosophy in the past decades” (p. 13) and mention de Botton (2000), Comte-Sponville (2002), Churchman, (1982), and Seligman (2002) as the few notable exceptions. While there has since been a shift toward more research at least within psychology that is aimed not only at understanding wellbeing but creating practical solutions for its cultivation on individual and collective level, Bird (2014) notes that there is more that science (and scientists) can contribute to society—and they have the right and responsibility to do so.

The survey allowed for initial clarification of the construct of sisu and a map into its landscape as a reserve of strength. Being a central element of the Finnish cultural discourse and folklore, it has been previously researched in that regard (Taramaa, 2007), as well as in the context of Finnish ethnic heritage among second- and later-generation Finnish Americans (Aho, 1994; Taramaa, 2009), as an ethnic symbol in constructing and maintaining Finnish American culture (Palo Stoller, 1996; Susag, 1998), in the literary production of “Finnishness” within Finnish American authors (Taramaa, 2007), and for example, as part of underground iron ore miners’ occupational narratives (Lucas & Buzzanel, 2004). A systematic examination of sisu to understand it as an individual’s disposition or response model has been lacking throughout its history and the
construct has remained under-researched. Aho stated already in 1994 that “we need a good deal of organized, systematic scientific research to discover the scope and depth of Sisu [sic], geographically and situationally, and the depth and strength of both the beliefs and behaviors surrounding and emanating from sisu” (p. 2).

The key assumption adopted here is that sisu and systems intelligence—a person's ability to act intelligently within complex systems and adaptively carry out productive actions within and with respect to systems such as organizations, family and everyday life (Saarinen & Hämäläinen, 2004; see also Hämäläinen and Saarinen, 2006, 2007a)—are both endowments innate to every person but may lie dormant due to cultural programming, beliefs, past experiences, individual's mental dispositions, or the influence of contexts within which they live. These endowments are innate to us, but it seems it may often be left to chance to what extent individuals are able to tap into these beneficial reserves. The third essay, therefore, seeks to contribute to the existing collection of work within the intersection of applied and practical philosophy, and systems thinking, and bring those predicaments into light to discuss tools for accessing sisu in the everyday life.
2. Review of Literature

2.1 A brief history of sisu

No longer conscious of my movement, I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamt existed. From intense moments like this, love of running can grow.

—Roger Bannister, the first 4-minute mile record breaker, 1955

The Republic of Finland (called Suomi in Finnish) is a Nordic country with a population of approximately 5.5 million. It is bordered by Sweden on its west side, the Gulf of Bothnia in the north by Norway, and in the east and southeast, it shares a border with the Russian Federation that extends some 1340 kilometers. Despite what some might consider less than optimal circumstances for success (a harsh climate, limited variety of natural resources, small population, and extensive history of being dominated by its neighboring countries), it has become known as a progressive nation which frequently tops global charts pertaining to education, innovation, and overall quality of life.

Sisu is an ancient Finnish characterization of a quality that runs deeper than perseverance and has been described in vague terms such as “inner fire” and “superhuman nerve force” (Strode & Hinshaw as cited in Aho, 1994; Taramaa, 2007). It has been said to be a tough-to-translate, near spiritual quality that makes the individual push through even the most unbearable challenges and go beyond one’s preconceived mental or physical capacities (Aho, 1994; Lucas & Buzzanel, 2004). The significance and meaning of sisu have undergone transformations but while there have been fluctuations in how it has been regarded in its native country (reflecting Finland’s socio-economic times, history, and sports success), it has more and less remained part of the ongoing popular discourse of the country.

Paraphrasing the introduction, etymologically the word sisu derives from the word sisus, which refers to the internal organs of a human or animal body (literally, the guts) or it can mean the interior of an object. Dating back to the 16th century, when the first written remarks about sisu occurred, the word referred to a quality or inherent tendency. In Estonian, sisu still means the inner part or content, whereas in the Finnish language it evolved to describe a character trait. It is often thought to be embodied by those who diligently pursue long-term goals that seem to elude them, those who endure severe stress in their daily lives, or who for example against all odds choose to stand up against injustice. It can be embodied and expressed in a moment of mental or physical desperation. It is a deeply personal thing and there can be many ways how an individual experiences sisu. What unites all these elements, however, is the notion that sisu “will enable you to cut through even a stone wall” (Tokoi, 1957); a Finnish phrase about not giving up and literally going even through a rock if necessary.

As early as the 1940’s, some articulate attempts were made to grasp the essence of sisu. During what many in Finland would consider the biggest heyday of sisu (soon after the Winter War in 1939-1940), the Finnish newspaper Uusi
Suomi (Mitä on sisu?, 1942) conducted a reader contest to reach out to its audience for their definitions of sisu. Uusi Suomi wrote: “All of us somewhat know what sisu is … [it] has for long been a topic for discussion here in Finland and abroad. But how do we describe and define what sisu really is?” (p. 1). The paper received around thousand answers from the readers. The main finding was that sisu is not mere persistence, determination, or perseverance, but is about pushing beyond individual’s normal use of these qualities and this evolves to describe an entire nation through the collective experiences of hardship its people have endured together. What Uusi Suomi named the most comprehensive explanation was the following: “Sisu is a power reserve built into the vertebrae of the Finns through hundreds of years of trials and it enables extraordinary action beyond individual’s normal performance during a crucial moment” (p. 2). Sisu was also described to denote a mindset of “what must be done, will be done.”

The original use of the word was to describe a temper of any kind, positive or negative (Länsimäki, 2003). Whether good or bad, the point being that sisu was something intense. In a dictionary from 1745, sisucunda was described as the place in the human body where strong emotions emanate from (Länsimäki, 2003). In the historic literature of the time, when Finland was governed by Sweden and through the Lutheran clergy, the word quickly evolved to denote a bad quality (Tepora, 2012). Indeed, until to the early 19th century, sisu a carried rather negative association and was used to describe a bad-natured person (pahansisuinen meaning someone who has “bad sisu”) (Länsimäki, 2003). To act with sisu meant to display outrage and aggression.

In a mail survey exploring the Finnish ethnic heritage among second- and later-generation Finnish Americans conducted by Aho (1994), the most frequently mentioned definitions of sisu in this non-peer reviewed article were persistence, guts, determination, and courage. Eighty-two percent thought that their ideas about sisu affected their behavior and attitudes, and 99% of the 447 respondents believed that all Finns have the quality of sisu. In general, the respondents had first encountered the word sisu itself at a quite young age. An elderly Finnish farmer had described sisu as “stubbornness beyond reason” (Aho, 1994, p. 1). Palo Stoller (1996) also analyzed ethnic identity among second- and third-generation Finnish Americans. She emphasized the meaning of sisu in relation to hard work and stated that, “Perseverance and tenacity are two words used to define the Finnish characteristics of ‘sisu’, which one of the respondents in the research translated as guts, courage, determination, with just a trace of Finnish stubbornness” (Palo Stoller, 1996, p. 154).

Suomen Kuvailehti magazine in Finland conducted a reader survey asking people to nominate Finns who they believe display sisu. No instructions were given about what kind of people the readers were allowed to nominate, nor was it defined what sisu stands for. The results can be interpreted as one reflection of the kind of qualities sisu might reflect in the minds of contemporary Finns. In an article published in February 2013 (Heikkinen, 2013), they revealed the names of the people, mainly contemporary Finns, who were nominated by the readers. Although no more than 60 responses we received—a small number compared to the over thousand responses received by Uusi Suomi in 1942, and the list was complemented with suggestions from the magazine staff—the list is quite interesting. Among the individuals nominated for sisu were a 92-year-old war veteran who still lives independently, a professional soccer player who continues to play competitively despite several accidents and never truly making it, a peace mediator in global conflicts, a mountain climber who survived near-death at the North Pole, a cross-country skier who despite discouragement won multiple Olympic medals, a professional ice-hockey player who returned to the rink after suffering through cancer, a violinist whose fingers were cut off by a circular saw and fought through recovery to return to his orchestra, a competitive swimmer who won numerous accolades despite having muscular dystrophy, an overcomer of domestic violence, a marathon runner with over 1,500 races under his
belt, a doctor who was originally a refugee from Afghanistan, a single-parent, and long-time caregiver to a family member. This long list is a representation of what sisu might symbolize and what kind of narratives and responses to adversity it stirs.

As it was mentioned already in the 1942 *Uusi Suomi* newspaper article, there is no reason to suggest that sisu is something that is unique to one nation. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, late historian Richard Stites shed light on why the word may have earned such an elevated status and why an entire culture of sisu became important in Finland. He explained that Finland’s history “includes lots of wars, invasions and foreign occupation. Finns are not merely the victims of severe weather,” and according to Stites, “they have not been treated well by next-door neighbors Sweden and Russia, either. Sisu has sustained Finns through all of their long struggles” (Thomas, 2006).

While sisu lacks an exact synonym in other languages, it is sometimes likened as determination, guts, perseverance, and the capacity to endure any hardship. Abroad, sisu has been described essential to a true understanding of the Finnish character. Thomas (2006) further argued that sisu “implies a trait much deeper in the Finnish character, so deep, in fact, that it’s best observed in the dead of winter, when added reserves are needed just to make it from one five-hour day to the next.” *Running Times Magazine* reporter Adam Chase (2013) traveled to Finland in search of the true meaning of sisu and ended up coming back feeling somewhat disappointed: “I didn’t feel I’d acquired a solid grasp of sisu. But with time and distance for perspective, it grew on me.” Indeed, to me this sounds like a classic encounter with sisu. Even Finns often feel this way and say that sisu is hard to fully explain or translate. As I dove through material relating to sisu and what can broadly, but perhaps not briefly, be referred to as “human spirit,” this became more evident to me.

My thesis (Lahti, 2013) that was part of an applied positive psychology master’s degree and supervised by research professor Angela Duckworth, introduced sisu within a psychological and partly philosophical framework and offered it an initial footing within the academic vocabulary. This work was for the first time presented at the biennial International Positive Psychology Association World Congress (IPPA) in June 2013.

### 2.2 A look at life force as a quality of humans

“Remember that this which pulls the strings is the thing which is hidden within: this is the power of persuasion, this is life; this, if one may say so, is man.”

—Marcus Aurelius, 1862, Book X, Chapter 38

In his book about life force and work life, Riikonen (2013) notes that life force and human spirit are constructs that carry such thick air of ambiguity around them that most sane researchers would know to stay far away (see also Baumeister & Tierney, 2012; Stern, 2004). Philosophically complex, multifaceted, unmeasurable, and intangible through our current instruments, concepts like these are nothing short of a science nightmare, Riikonen continues. James (1907) much earlier raised a question regarding how this inner capacity is studied within psychology and noted how there is little focus on the “conception of the amount of energy available for running one’s mental and moral operations by” (p. 322). Indeed, energy is a word used often in common language and yet, as it was in James’ time and still is, we do not see the “conception never once mentioned or heard of in laboratory circle” (p. 322). While overlooked by psychology, energy is “used perhaps more than any other by common, practical men,” he continued.
By now, researchers have made wonderful strides in mapping the mental and physiological side of human capacity. We understand how muscles grow and endure, how fatigue plays into our vitality, and we also have a plethora of concepts (some mentioned in chapter 1.1) to help us describe the curious landscape of what makes humans endure. What we know less about is the life energy behind this enduring and persevering that becomes visible usually only when we are about to run out of it. James (1907) brought up this question of “oscillations of the level of mental energy” (p. 322) and because of its practical relevance to humans everywhere, described it to be of “superior in importance to anything we know” (p. 332).

While pondered extensively on human energy during crises already a century ago, the conversation pertaining to the force that drives and moves us forward traces back to our earliest thinkers. Ancient speculations have related it to aliveness and have treated it as being signified by movement. When something moves it appears somehow to be alive and when it stops, it no longer is. Aristotle (384-322 BC) considered living beings those who moved out of their own will. However, he thought them all to have originally been set in motion by a force outside their own will, kind of an unmoved mover or prime mover (Latin: primum movens; Ancient Greek: οὐ κινούμενον κινεῖ) that made it happen (Nielsen, 1971; see also Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Contra Gentiles, 1975). Consequently, while life is manifested in movement, the halted breath signifies death. The one that no longer breathes is no longer alive. Anyone reading this can easily test the necessity of breathing just by pausing their breath intentionally for a minute. It was evident to early humans that breathing was crucial to staying alive and many early ideas about life force were linked to air, the invisible substance circulating through one’s lungs by constant breathing. According to ancient Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and other traditions, life existed because of life force and energies animating the body and enabling it to breathe, move, think, and digest food (see Manasa et al., 2020).

The idea of life force or some kind of an original primal or perennial energy is central to nearly every ancient tradition. The words used for it often connect life force to breath and according to Burton (1918/2012), it is fairly accurate to propose that for most Greeks, Ψυχή (psyche, spirit) refers to a quality of life force as movement that, when lost, resulted in death. In the Taoist worldview and practice, it is called qi or chi, which literally translates to “breath” or “air.” In the Japanese tradition it is called ki (Ohnishi & Ohnishi, 2006). Ki and qi/chí, transliterated as 脈, in both Japanese and Chinese traditions, and broadly meaning vital life force, are key concepts within Eastern medicine, Eastern philosophy, as well as in the martial arts (Ohnishi & Ohnishi, 2009). The basis of many martial arts being indeed in the cultivation qi to build well-being and power (Manasa et al., 2020). The ancient Egyptians referred to life force as ka (life force and a person’s double), the ancient Greeks called it pneuma (πνεῦμα; the breath). For Native Americans the concept is referred to as the Great Spirit, whereas for example in the Western African Yoruba tribe, it is known as ashe (also ase; divine force, energy, and power behind things) and it denotes the omnipresent vital force that runs across all life (see Murphy, 1993). In the Hawai’ian tradition this primal energy is known as ha or mana (the power of the elemental forces of nature embodied in an object or person) and perhaps interestingly, in the Finnish language henki is a word used in some contexts for “a person” and it also translates as “spirit” and “breath.”

The earliest mention of the Hindu concept for life force, referred to as prana (प्राण, breath, vital principle) in Ayurveda, goes back 3,000 years. Similar with ki and qi/chí, prana is the core of Indian medicine, martial arts, and the entire yogic philosophy. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been practiced for over 3,000 years and it considers life first and foremost a bio-electrical energy phenomenon, as opposed to the Western idea of biomedicine that applies biological and physiological principles to clinical practice (Liu, 2018; Lu et al.,
No solid scientific explanation has been offered to explain the working principle of the meridian system that is the basis of Traditional Chinese Medicine. However, while still thin in research data, what is labeled as the “primo vascular system” (PVS) has been proposed as a candidate to explain its fundamental functioning (Stefanov et al., 2013, see also Ghiron, 2019; Longhurst, 2010).

In science, the notion of a vital force or *élan vital* (French) dates to the 1600’s (Rubik et al., 2015). *Élan vital* is a hypothetical explanation proposed by philosopher Henri Bergson for the evolution and development of organisms. He linked *élan vital* closely with consciousness, the intuitive perception of experience, and the “flow of inner time.” The concept is translated as "impulse of life" or as "vital force" by his detractors. Similar ideas can be found in the work of the pre-Christian Stoic philosopher Posidonius, who postulated that a vital force was emanated by the sun to all living creatures on the Earth’s surface. The concept of *élan vital* also bears a resembling echo to German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s concept of *the will-to-live* (German: Wille zum Leben) that he used to conceptualize the “psychological force to fight for self-preservation, which is seen as an important and active process of conscious and unconscious reasoning” (Barrett, 2018, p. 43). The difference between having a will to live versus the lack of it, is for example a factor with individuals contemplating taking their own life (Brown et al., 2005). Furthermore, studies on the desire for death and interest in physician-assisted suicide have found depression, not pain, to be a predictor for this choice of action (Breitbart et al., 2000; Chochinov et al., 1995). This speaks for the loss of life will or life force as a more powerful predictor of survival than our ability to endure pain.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) who dedicated the bulk of his extensive career as a research psychologist to studying attention, struggled with the terms used for describing attention and used the term *psychic energy* to describe it. Csikszentmihalyi wrote that “in psychology, attention plays a role in many ways analogous to the role that energy plays in physical mechanics” (p. xv), and just like physical energy, psychic energy has its limits. Despite claims around multitasking, attention cannot truly be divided while still endeavoring with high quality. While no one has comprehensively been able to quantify the amount of attention that individual has at their disposal, the limits of attention have been described in terms of “bits” of information and it has been suggested that the conscious mind can perceive around 40 to 60 bits of information per second, while our sensory systems may pick up information at a rate of eleven million bits per second (Moscoso & del Prado, 2009; Zimmerman, 1986). It perhaps is not completely clear what counts as a bit either, as “with experience it is possible to “chunk” several bits of information in a single Gestalt that then can be processed as if it were a bit” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. xv).

In addition to something akin to the Greek idea of Ψυχή (psyche) as a vital force that grants our bodies their locomotion and without which we are dead (Burton, 1918/2012), at the core of sisu however appears to be also a blend of equanimity and ability for emotion regulation. While acts of life force are ubiquitous in our stories and traditions, it remains hard to describe this phenomenon exhaustively and even harder to quantify it into the language of the naturalistic research tradition. The same divide is seen in philosophy: Democritus postulated that everything, including organisms, is reducible to its constituents. Aristotle on the other hand viewed that life processes are autonomous, and organisms are integral wholes. These opposite (or complementary, depending on one’s approach) viewpoints remain present in today’s dialogues within medicine, science, and research: the biochemical view of life being represented by molecular reductionism and the systems biology view that embraces a systems-level understanding (Hiroki, 2002; see also Bruggeman & Westerhoff, 2007).
2.3 Sisu and its counterparts

*The four-minute mile had become rather like an Everest, a challenge to the human spirit. It was a barrier that seemed to defy all attempts to break it, an irksome reminder that man’s striving might be in vain.*

—Roger Bannister, 2015, p. 116

Broadly describing sisu can be said to be about surpassing one’s observed mental or physical limitations and accessing previously unknown energy in response to an adversity. Sisu, however, also points to a source of energy and fortitude that is more visceral than cognitive and of which we currently seem to know very little about: the embodied and somatic dimension of human capacity. Rather than being about mental toughness, sisu may perhaps more accurately be described as a reserve of embodied, somatic fortitude. What follows is that it can’t necessarily be directly compared with its counterparts that are all described as traits, dispositions, attitudes, and mindsets traced ultimately to the human mind. However, to help introduce sisu, it is described here in relation to some of its adjacent terms.

Whereas perseverance is the steadfast pursuit of a task despite encountering obstacles and discouragement, with its emphasis on endurance measured by duration and consistency (Markman et al., 2005), grit involves passion and its transformation into perseverance (Duckworth et al., 2007). One of the core components of grit is a sense of goal orientation; a pursuit of a dominant superordinate life goal (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Though “being gritty” and persevering means to keep on going despite adversities along the way, it does not necessarily require a singular adverse incident to initiate it (Collins et al., 2016). The most pronounced quality of sisu relates to overcoming adversity, discomfort, and challenges. In my survey data it was rarely described in relation to the pursuit of goals. Sisu overlaps with certain endurance aspects of perseverance and grit but differs in its emphasis on short-term intensity rather than long-term stamina. Most of the examples of sisu in the data involved determination and doggedness typical to grit but without the passion or focus for a big, overarching life goal. Sisu is less about passion, achievement, and winning (although it can relate to those situations as well) and more about “putting up a good fight” and giving some task or challenge everything you have. Grit and perseverance get us on the path and keep us focused and motivated to keep on going. Sisu is the spare tank of gas we tap into when we seem to have ran out of energy.

While there is no one universal definition of courage, researchers have been making progress in separating several different types of courage. The common thread between all of them, whether related to overcoming judgment, social exclusion, unfavorable consequences, pain, or serious physical harm, is about overcoming some form of fear (e.g., Norton & Weiss, 2009; Rachman, 1990). Even though acting courageously in a particular situation means having to overcome fear, it may not always require going above and beyond one’s observed resources and therefore, tapping into sisu. Consequently, while courage was not a main narrative in the data, facing and overcoming one’s fears is, for example, part of a theme pertaining to sisu called the action mindset (essay 1).

Psychological resilience is defined as positive adaptation to tragedy or ongoing significant life stressors (Luthar et al., 2000) and the ability to bounce back from hardship (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). It is increasingly viewed as a dynamic process in which learned coping methods and psychological strategies such as optimism, problem solving, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation play a role (Luthar et al., 2000; Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Hardiness was originally researched as a pathway to resilience and is described as a combination of three separate but interrelated attitudes of commitment, control, and challenge (3Cs) (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). Mental toughness is an umbrella term
used rather liberally to refer to sport-specific and sport-general values, attitudes, behaviors, and emotions that enable the individual to persevere, overcome an obstacle, and manage pressure (Gucciardi et al., 2008, 2009). Similarly to resilience, it is viewed as a collection of developed and inherent strategies and mental qualities. Sisu is proposed as one pathway to resilience; it may contribute to an individual’s ability to retain the commitment and control required for hardiness and allow for the final push of an athlete approaching the end of their known capacities. One response to the sisu survey stated that, “Sisu is a state of body, mind, heart, and soul in which you will not give up, no matter what comes your way. It is brother to “grit” and sister to “perseverance” and it will carry you through thick and thin.”

There is a likely overlap to be found between most constructs that explain how humans overcome challenges. While it can be tempting to draw lines where one quality, such as perseverance, begins and another one, like sisu ends, it is elusive to try find such lines. Instead, sisu invites an inquiry into the (for now) less sung dimension of fortitude: to inner strength as an embodied and somatic quality.

2.4 The genius, the belly!

*Magister artis ingenique largitor venter [That master of arts, that dispenser of genius, the belly].*

–Ancient Roman poet Persius (Ramsay, 1942)

The idea that the gut and the brain are closely connected has been rooted in our language and belief system for centuries. The ancient Greeks saw the stomach as the seat of humanly inner strength (Leicester, 1961) and etymologically the root of the word, sisu, too, implies strength that is inside our bellies, rather than being cognitive and of the mind. In the mid 14th century, it was believed that the intestines and the bowel were the seat of emotions and human spirit. As far back as 500 BC, Greek dramatist and author Aeschylus regarded bowels as the origin of more violent passions such as anger and rage. To the Greek, the stomach was an animate agent: “[the stomach] could feel its own emptiness and generate the sensation of hunger, break up food, and carefully separate useful nutrients from the chaff” (History of the stomach and intestines, n.d.). In fact, all body parts were believed to have their own opinions and emotions— but among them, the stomach “has been recognized for its lordly character” (Nuland, 2000, p. 60). Menenius Agrippa, a roman politician and soldier, described the stomach as the very important member of the body who is superior to other organs and the house of life force and strength (Nuland, 2000). However, the Hebrews saw the bowel as the seat of tender affections such as kindness, benevolence, and compassion (History of the stomach and intestines, n.d.) and malfunctioning of the stomach would impair all other functions of the body—an interesting view also in the light of the current gut research.

In the Indian Vedic literature and chakra systems, the belly (known as the 2nd or sacral chakra) is regarded as the center of inner strength and in the Chinese and Japanese tradition, the lower belly (lower dantien) is viewed as the place where ki or chi (that gives its holder the energy and power that makes all action possible) can be stored after its been cultivated through internal martial arts (Manasa et al., 2020). These ideas resemble the idea of sisucunda (pointed as the governing organ of sisu in 1745; Tepora, 2012) being originally described as a strong emotion of any kind, positive or negative. Nowadays both words “sisu” and “guts” are more commonly used to imply bravery, but a closer inspection of the two reveals their differences as result of their unique cultural evolution. However, even after centuries of research, the stomach’s full function remains a mystery in many accounts. Koussoulis et al. (2012) write that, “Even after the
first indications of its function and role appeared, every formulated idea on the nature of the gastric liquid remained open to controversy” (p. 119).

Whereas “having guts” primarily refers to displaying the courage or audacity to do something risky (being perhaps closer to the Hebrew word chutzpah; ḥuṣpāḥ, חֻצְפָּה), “having sisu” is about being formidable, but ideally it includes an aspiration for good quality. If you ask Finns about acting with sisu, the answer could involve qualities such as integrity, hard work, and to do one’s best. Sisu has been described as, “to do what is the right thing even if no one is watching” (Mitä on sisu?, 1942). This way, instead of being solely a tenacious behavioral response or action during a challenging moment, like perseverance or grit, sisu also emits a kind of life-philosophical light and holds an essential connection to values. Sisu could be seen as a tool and as a tool it can be used for all kinds of pursuits (both hurtful and harmful, or helpful and hopeful), and in all kinds of ways depending on the intention and even values of the person.

Whether this inexplicable expression of aliveness and courage, that is present in the human body as long as there is air in our lungs, is referred to as qi, ki, perseverance, sisu, or guts—and whether we find its physical pathways or exact in the body or not—the mysterious phenomenon of life energy remains a central enabling factor in the collective story of life and our evolution. While it is inevitable that our questions will keep outnumbering our answers, research into the gut biome seems to offer some promising new research frontiers.

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2.5 The enteric nervous system

Understanding the gut, and the gut-brain connection, took a leap forward with the discovery of the enteric nervous system (ENS) in the middle of the nineteenth century (Furness, 2006). Because of its complexity, size, and similarity to the central nervous system (CNS), the enteric nervous system has become described as the “independent brain-in-the-gut” (Wood, 2018, p. 361). In fact, as the work by Furness and Stebbing (2018) shows, all extant species that can be traced back the furthest in evolution and have neurons, have an enteric nervous system. However, not all of them have a central nervous system. Enteric nervous system can therefore be called our first evolved or original brain. Once both the central and enteric nervous system had developed, they formed connections with each other and other organs. They both contain integrative neural circuitry (Furness & Stebbing) but the enteric nervous system uses more than 30 neurotransmitters, just like the brain and around 95 percent of the body’s serotonin is found in the bowels. Serotonin has been linked to mood regulation and low levels of this neurotransmitter is linked to depression (Vahid-Ansari & Albert, 2021), which could make an interesting connection between individual’s perceived inner strength and the gut. The opposite of embodied fortitude is not fear or weakness but inaction, passivity, and lack of life energy like in the case of depression. We stop being moved and we stop moving.

Preclinical evidence suggests that gut microbes are part of the unconscious system regulating our behavioral responses related to stress, pain perception, emotions, and social interactions (Dinan et al., 2015; Foster et al., 2017). For example, researchers have been able to influence the brain chemistry of mice by changing the balance between beneficial and disease-causing bacteria in their gut, thereby leading it to become bolder (Bercik et al., 2011) and less anxious (Bravo et al., 2011). When Bercik and his research team (Bercik et al., 2011) transplanted gut microbiota between different strains of mice, they discovered that behavioural traits would transmit along with the microbiota. The recipient animals would take on traits of the donor’s personality and relatively timid mice would become more exploratory. More recently, an open-label microbial transfer therapy in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) showed significant improvement in behavioral ASD symptoms (Kang et al., 2017).
Since all decision-making, coping with demanding life events and self-imposed challenges require a level of emotion regulation, the new research on the role of the gut microbiota in modulating our behavior and emotions should not be ignored within psychology. Descartes’ separation of the mind and body has dominated Western medicine for hundreds of years, but since the science discourse is maturing from pure intellect of the mind to recognizing other forms of intelligence rooted in embodied cognition—and perhaps even in the health of our gut biome—perhaps soon it will embrace the idea that our ability to endure life’s challenges could indeed be a case of “mind with matter,” not “mind over matter,” as the often used expression goes. While it’s not yet clear how the microbiome alters the brain, or how the enteric nervous system influences our emotions and behavior, research in this field could in the future offer a more complete understanding of human psychology. Somatics is a term coined by Thomas Hanna in 1976 and it is used to refer to the developing field and discipline of mind-body integration.

Each new approach in psychology and human sciences has had to find its way from the margins. This journey is often tedious as the new approach may seem dangerous to those coming from the currently prevailing world view (Shotter, 2008). With an evolution from a mechanistic, isolated view to a systems-informed, wholesome conceptualization of human behavior, research that was overlooked for decades is now creating an unprecedented paradigm shift in the conceptualization of human behavior. Research in gerontology, for example, is beginning to demonstrate the role of the gut to our emotions (Panduro et al., 2017) and clinical trials to date support probiotic modulation of neurological and neuropsychiatric disorders as well as emotions via the gut-brain axis (Kim et al., 2018; see also Carabotti et al., 2015). This finding encourages research around the potential connection between the gut and the phenomenon represented by sisu that science might in the coming years be able to shed a brighter light on.

2.6 Second wind – an idea whose time has come

One of the most fascinating yet puzzling things about humans is how we often have such immense capacity to survive the most seemingly unbearable conditions. James (1907; 1914) pondered on this phenomenon and speculated that there is energy hidden beyond our conscious reach and it can be accessed when it is truly needed. How far are we capable of going? We simply do not know until we get to the edge of our capacity. Additionally, the limit seems to not be a fixed one. It expands but also retracts based on our actions. Instead of merely harming the system, an adversity that is faced with a resilient and open mind can serve as an impetus for even greater resilience, as well as a sense of empowerment and purpose. James (1914) wrote:

> I have mused on the phenomenon of second wind, trying to find a physiological theory. It is evident that our organism has stored-up reserves of energy that are ordinarily not called upon, but that may be called upon: deeper and deeper strata of combustible or explosive material, discontinuously arranged, but ready for use by anyone who probes so deep, and repairing themselves by rest as well as do the superficial strata. Most of us continue living unnecessarily near our surface. (p. 8)

James found the topic of human spirit so important that in a presidential address delivered before the American Philosophical Association at Columbia University, he outlined the need for a “topographic survey made of the limits of human power in every conceivable direction ... to construct a methodical inventory of the paths of access, or keys, differing with the diverse types of
individuals, to the different kind of power” (1907, p. 332). Below is a longer quote relaying parts of his thinking:

Practically every one knows in his own person the difference between the days when the tide of this energy is high in him and those when it is low, though no one knows exactly what reality the term energy covers when used here, or what its tides, tensions, and levels are in themselves. This vagueness is probably the reason why our scientific psychologists ignore the conception altogether. It undoubtedly connects itself with the energies of the nervous system, but it presents fluctuations that cannot easily be translated into neural terms. It offers itself as the notion of a quantity, but its ebbs and floods produce extraordinary qualitative results. To have its level raised is the most important thing that can happen to a man, yet in all my reading I know of no single page or paragraph of a scientific psychology book in which it receives mention. (James, 1907, p. 322)

In the following chapter, I outline the theoretical and methodological framework with which I approach the study of this vague but fascinating theme in the context of sisu. I also describe my research orientation, which draws from hermeneutic phenomenology and systems intelligence, as two humanly attuned forms of experiencing and conducting research.
3. Research Approach

3.1 Phenomenology: An inquiry into the lived experience

Phenomenology, the interpretive study of human experience and events (von Eckartsberg, 1998), was selected in congruence with my philosophical framework that is qualitative and experiential. Elliott and Timulak (2005) write that qualitative research is used when little is known about a phenomenon, and it can create a base for future quantitative studies on the topic in question. Finlay (2011) further points out that qualitative research is a human science rather than a natural science: “It explores the textured meanings and subjective interpretations of a fluid, uncertain world” (p. 9). It “illuminates the less tangible meanings and intricacies of our social world” (p. 8) and is grounded on the belief that “knowledge making is possible through subjective experience and insights” (Kafle, 2011, p. 194). Phenomenology marries well with this as a qualitative approach to understanding the context and the meanings of the “lived experiences” of people (Husserl, 1931; 1983). First conceptualized by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology, to Husserl was about the essential laws of consciousness but in a way that does not “speculate about essential structures governing consciousness; it intuits them as they are given in consciousness” (Gutland, 2018, p. 11). Phenomenology is both a school of philosophy and a method—introduced here first as a research framework and in the next chapter as part of my methodological toolkit—and it has gone through several updates and additions, including now works of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and others.

The word phenomenon comes from the Greek word phaenesthai (φαίνεσθαι), which means to show itself, to appear, to flare up (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). The goal is “a rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity” (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 5). The aim is to examine and clarify human situations, events, meanings, and experiences “as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life” (von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 3). To obtain vivid, nuanced descriptions of a human experience as it was lived in the context of time, space, and relationships (Finlay, 2011; van Manen, 2015). In my work, I mainly build upon the work of Max van Manen (2007, 2015) which represents a practical, interpretive inquiry using hermeneutic phenomenology with qualitative empirical methods. Hermeneutic phenomenology—discussed from a methods perspective in the following chapter—is one of the off-shoots of phenomenology and in it, the researcher is encouraged to interpret the meanings of the phenomena. Phenomenology does not seek to categorize or generalize the experiences in its focus, but simply asks: “What is this experience like, or “What is it about?”

Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenologist known for example for Phenomenology of Perception (1962), described phenomenology as “the study of essences” (1962, p. vii). Merleau-Ponty also highlighted the body as the primary place from which to know the world and these essences, a different path to the long philosophical tradition of placing consciousness as the source of knowledge. Van Manen (1997) builds on this idea by elaborating that these essences aren’t some mystical ultimate meanings but are best viewed as a kind of
“linguistic construction,” or “description of a phenomenon” (p. 39) that helps us “hold a moment” within the lived experience, so that we may seek to grasp an idea of its nature. The aim is not the production of law-like statements but instead, to offer “plausible insights that bring us in a more direct contact with the world” (p. 8-9). Similarly, based on this research framework, the exploration of the lived experience of sisu is a description and an interpretation, not a prescription. It is a complementary window of perspective that helps render yet another corner of the human “lifeworlds” more known by means of “insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world” (p. 8).

As Langdridge (2007) notes, whichever kind of a phenomenological methodology is chosen for particular research, interpreting and delivering a message in the form of a description of an experience of lived life is key. The word hermeneutic comes from the Greek word hermeneuin (ἐρμηνεύτω; English: to interpret) and was inspired by Greek mythological character, Hermes, who was tasked with delivering messages of Greek Gods to the people (Gadamer, 2006). Tirard et al. (2010) write that, “Life is an empirical concept; and, as suggested by the many unsuccessful efforts to define it, this task is likely to remain, at best, a work in progress” (p. 1003). Late Jungian psychologist, James Hillman (2011), discussed the idea of “soul” in an interview on archetypical psychotherapy and summarized that people often sense what it is, but that we lose this meaning when we try to transport it to psychology because we can’t “define it in…conceptual terms. Making a nice, clean idea of it. It’s not a clean idea. It’s experienced, it’s something that has to do with the depth of you.”

To demonstrate this, I shall expand slightly toward the topic of martial arts (this is a central theme of my inquiry in essay 3). Bar-On Cohen (2007) offers a related and eloquent example of “life as an empirical concept” through an exploration of the karate concept of kime (決断; from kimeru which means to decide) that, much like sisu, is hard to simplify through a translation. Kime cannot be “neatly fixed by logic” or “grasped by the senses” (p. 75) and instead, it takes shape and form somewhere in the pre-linguistic in-between space of these realms that, in turn, themselves are by their nature elusive. The main thing seems to be that a “somatic conundrum” like kime, while it can be used as word in training to enable “concise communication between students and teachers,” still remains “meaningless to a beginner” (p. 75). “It is only practiced into existence,” Bar-On Cohen continues (p. 78). Just like kime as a word is used to “draw awareness” to an idea, words can indeed help us ask questions and thus, initiate an inquiry into the un-translated and un-known. However, to understand these spaces, we are asked to step into the world of the affectual and the experiential.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, with its focus “toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding” (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991), and combined with appropriate methods for its first-person examination through both text and direct experience, is deemed suitable for inquiring into the lived experience of sisu through my own personal process of making sense of inner strength in extreme adversity.

### 3.2 Systems intelligence: Being better, better

Systems intelligence along with my autoethnographic journey into martial arts which, as I have come to understand, shares a common ground of a kind of “silent wisdom” with systems intelligence, is the framework from which I examine sisu in essay 3. According to Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2007a; Hämäläinen et al., 2014; see also Törmänen et al., 2016, 2021), systems intelligence is a key competence we all possess as humans. It functions on the premise that we live within a system, every one of our actions matter and that we as intelligent creatures can adjust and correct our behavior based on the feedback we receive from
our environment (Hämäläinen & Saarinen, 2007a). “To smile, to radiate warmth, to generate in another the feeling of being accepted,” Hämäläinen and Saarinen write, “are quintessential human possibilities all of us possess as part of our innate constitution” (2007a, p. 13). Systems intelligence is indeed explicit in its positive overtones and strive towards human flourishment. It takes a stand to uphold what is good in humans and systems, as opposed to assuming brokenness:

Systems intelligence has become something of a movement in organizational life in Finland and has been also used as a strategy in companies (Hämäläinen & Saarinen, 2006). It “is about human intellect in action, in connection of other agents and in environments that change” (Hämäläinen & Saarinen, 2007a, p. 3). As an approach that stems from a belief in the human potential, systems intelligence is about the betterment and improvement of human life across all its domains.

While systems thinking seeks to observe and understand the network from the outside, systems intelligence looks at these systems from within. In fact, its outright “refusal to take the outsider’s view to the systems which are addressed” is one of its key contrasts to systems thinking (Hämäläinen & Saarinen, 2007c, p. 42) and is what also brings it into ontological alignment with phenomenology as “a detailed and systematic attempt to understand the structures of first-person lived experience” (Tassone, 2017, p. 1). They are both about stepping into the unpruned undergrowth of human phenomena, which systems also are, with curiosity and acknowledgement of their changing, often ambiguous nature. Systems intelligence views all phenomena inherently dynamic and therefore, the individual can never truly step outside to reflect upon them, because this act itself changes the constitution of the system.

Monat (2018) explains that patterns are repeating events, characteristics, and phenomena within the system that emerge from the self-organized structures to which they are connected to. These self-organized structures in turn, are caused by their “underlying forces” that are seen as the mechanisms of self-organization. In nature these forces are things like gravity, the electronic charge of ions, the physical shape and structure of molecules, the instinctive survival mechanisms like swarming and flocking, as well as comfort/discomfort perceptions like sensitivity to heterogeneity, separation, alignment, and cohesion that organize behavior (Monat, 2018, p. 4-5). In human systems these underlying forces of self-organization can for example be mental models and beliefs that we use to explain how the world and human relationships work.

Saarinen and Hämäläinen (2007b) outline “thinking about our thinking” (p. 59-60) as a self-directed practice for consciously exposing and reimagining these patterns and habits of thinking. Instead of viewing sisu as a pure personality trait or capacity—as it could for example in the psychological tradition—within a systems tradition framework sisu can also be approached, for example,

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as a *structure of mental models* with its own particular “underlying forces” i.e. mechanisms of self-organization (Monat, 2018), also including something such as culture that gives birth to patterns of behavior (i.e. being *sisuesque*—to display sisu—as a pattern of not-giving-up-ness).

### 3.3 Toward greater good

This chapter describes my own aspiration toward science and scholarly work that “does good” (Bird, 2014). Sundararajan (2005) writes that in addition to its empirical prowess, the scientific vision of a good life needs self-reflexivity and critical thinking to help restore its moral map. Through a self-reflective research practice, like in the case of autoethnography (see essays 2 and 3), the scientist gains not only insight about data somewhere “out there,” but a chance “to narrow the gap between science and life” (Sundararajan, 2005, p. 35). Along with this an “insight into the cultural and historical contexts of his or her own research” (p. 54) and perhaps—at best—to his or her own personal growth and maturity. Because of their role as experts and holders of specialized knowledge, scientists can help oversee, preempt, and direct focus, funds, and energy to topics that carry major collective significance or influence the wellbeing and safety of communities at large. While accurate and responsible research conduct are the “covenant within the scientific community,” as Bird (2014) writes, “[having] integrity is not enough” (p. 169). Truly good science the way Bird describes it, is socially responsible science—beyond just ethical practices—it is “science that does good, that benefits society and, in some quarters, that benefits the planet” (p. 169, italics added; see also “macro ethics,” Herkert, 2003). On the other hand, Bochner (2012) writes:

> Like most social science inquiry, the kind of social science writing I favor aspires to truth, but these truths are not literal truths; they’re emotional, dialogic, and collaborative truths. Autoethnographies are not intended to be received, but rather to be encountered, conversed with, and appreciated. My concern is not with better science but with better living and thus I am not so much aiming for some goal called ‘Truth’ as for an enlarged capacity to deal with life’s challenges and contingencies. (p. 161)

This approach echoes my own thinking around the goals of this work. Van Manen (1997) is explicit about the fact that phenomenology can have the aim in creating tools for better thinking, understanding, tact, and virtuous action:

> *The fundamental model of this approach is textual reflection on the lived experiences and practical actions of everyday life with the intent to increase one’s thoughtfulness and practical resources or tact.* (p. 3)

Furthermore, because hermeneutic phenomenological research is “about the fullness of living” and “to become more fully who we are,” any description within this framework according to van Manen (1997) is bound to carry a moral imperative to encourage better thinking for the purpose of leading a better life (p. 12). *Fathering*, as van Manen describes, can for instance be studied against the expectation of *good fathering* including the act of taking “active responsibility for a child’s growth,” and therefore, against that backdrop, it can be deemed good or poor. Similarly, while the main aim of essays 2 and 3 is to describe the mundane, yet enthralling compositions of the daily life experience of sisu, they do so with an intention to support both the researcher’s and reader’s capacity for better thinking that can potentially carry significance even to a collective benefit. A disproportionately large amount of research within psychological sciences comes from institutions located in North America. This research, described with acronym WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) by
Henrich et al. (2010) might result to a skewed and deficient understanding of the human experience. Inviting and taking action to create a more nuanced discourse within psychology around the determinants of wellbeing in human life—especially around topics that relate to overcoming adversity because of its relevance to individuals across the plane of human existence—is not only good for us, but necessary for creating tools that alleviate suffering and increase people’s ability to influence their own wellbeing positively. Finally, to avoid the trap of reductionist thinking (Agazzi, 1990), to acknowledge the crucial role of the “moral map” in our scientific vision of a good life (Sundararajan, 2005), and to answer the call of “good science” in the sense highlighted by Bird (2014), in essay 3, I approach sisu from the vantage point of systems intelligence that allows me to view myself as a researcher and my research in relation to the greater whole. Aligned with the aspirations of the “third wave of positive psychology” (Lomas et al., 2021), I do this with a wish to expand the dialogue and vocabulary around sisu beyond the empowerment of a singular individual (holding perhaps more self-focused goals) and encourage a socially aware inquiry that asks: “To what end is sisu cultivated?”
4. Data and Methods

4.1 Empirical setting

The empirical analysis and context of this dissertation is two-fold. Essay 1 is based on a large sample of responses to an on-line survey gathered during spring of 2013. No paid crowdsourcing services were used, but the survey spread organically through shares on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Essays 2 and 3 are based on my autoethnographic memos, diary entries, and observations on sisu and overcoming challenges that were written between 2015 and 2020. Majority of the notes included are from 2016-2019 when I conducted two major field trips for the purpose of this data collection. These two field trips are described below for empirical context.

Consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenological method, data collection and analysis were done throughout the study with an objective to probe sisu from an insider perspective (Miles et al., 2014), to explore the “lived meaning of the written documents” (Pinar, 2011, p. 141; as referred to in Ramsook, 2018, p. 20), and allow the phenomena related to life bring me into more “direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1997, p. 8-9).

4.1.1 A 50-day ultramarathon across New Zealand

Data for essay 2 was gathered during a 2400-km/50-day run and bicycle fieldtrip across New Zealand to explore the phenomenon of sisu through my own lived experience. The somewhat unusual empirical study setting was designed to activate and simulate moments in which, due to the sheer physical and mental demands of the endeavor, I was likely to be challenged and brought to the edges of my assumed limits.

My academic journey into sisu began at the aftermath of leaving a violent relationship that I experienced while living in New York City 2009-2010. My curiosity for inner strength and sisu stemmed from wanting to understand how overcomers of interpersonal violence find strength to begin anew after something so tragic as intimate partner abuse—how might I find that strength in my own life? My ex-partner had been convicted at the New York Family Court and a two-year restraining order had been issued. As I began a journey toward emotional healing, I first became interested in life force and inner strength in general. Later, through my pre-existing but dormant cultural knowledge of sisu as well as a serendipitous encounter with Dr. Angela Duckworth and her work on grit, I became deeply engrossed with the research. This path of seeking to make sense of what had happened and how inner strength operates across adversities in individuals’ lives, ultimately resulted in this doctoral dissertation.

At the end of 2015, I had an idea how to both fulfill my doctoral research requirements and act on my inner imperative to help dismantle systems that hold in place patterns of silence around intimate partner violence and therefore, perpetuate abuse. I set my sights on running the length of both islands of New Zealand in 50 days to draw attention to the epidemic issue of interpersonal violence and help change the narrative around survivors (overcomers) by acknowledging and celebrating their strength and courage, while supporting their
empowerment. While doing so, I would engage in an autoethnographic inquiry into sisu by running an ultramarathon each day. I ultimately ended up taking a day off to address medical concerns after running 12 consecutive 50 kilometer days. Luckily, things turned out to be ok, but at this point I pivoted from my earlier plan to only run. I added in cycling days to prevent injury and align with insights (discussed as epiphanies) I had gained around the nature of sisu.

New Zealand was chosen because of my long-enduring personal fascination with the country’s culture, their native Polynesian people called the Māori and their traditions, as well as the country’s geography but (unfortunately) also for its grim statistics on domestic violence topping the global charts. Along the course of the journey, several volunteers along the way joined to contribute their resources in the form of time, knowledge, connections, and support.

My notebook shows me I started first training on November 6, 2015 with New Zealand in mind. It had a photo shot from the vantage point of my running shoes on top of a mountain overlooking a beautiful view. I wrote on that day:

**A day in the life of Emilia’s running shoe. We are now 9.8 miles closer to realizing the dream of running the length of New Zealand to raise awareness of the prevalence of interpersonal violence in families globally, gathering data for a PhD on sisu. While doing so, we’ll be holding warm, empowering events in each city and town along the way for the purpose of helping survivors find support and rediscover their inner strength.**

I had done a couple of marathons several years earlier, but I didn’t at the time have an active workout routine, and I had never engaged in any ultrarunning. The physical preparation for the run meant that I consistently trained 4-6 days a week with the number of weekly hours ultimately reaching up to 21 (consisting of mainly running, swimming, and cycling with running kilometers each week ranging from 30 to 120). During the two-year preparation, I also trained for and completed endurance events such as two 1-2 km long open water swims (I learned to swim freestyle for the first time to bring variation to my training and prevent injury), road cycling races of which the longest one was 105 kilometers in August 2016, as well completing my first half and full Ironman distance triathlons. The full distance Ironman consisted of a 3.8 km open water swim, 180 km bicycle section, and 42.2 km marathon run, and it took place at Lake Taupo in New Zealand in March 2017.

I also initiated a campaign named *Sisu Not Silence* that emphasizes the importance of choosing courage and sisu over shame and silence to change the narrative around survivors of domestic violence; to transform the focus from the shame that is so often unjustly placed on the shoulders of the victims and survivors to celebrating their strength and building resources for support. With help from tens of volunteers across the world, mainly from Finland, United States, Canada, and New Zealand, we co-created 20 Sisu Not Silence campaign events in Finland and New Zealand. These events took sometimes the form of men’s and women’s circles that I facilitated (number of participants in each circle ranging between 5 and 30), while some were larger community events with close to 80 participants in New Zealand and one being a fundraising concert with music, modern dance performances, speeches, and poetry that was held in Helsinki at the Alexander Theatre in May 2017.

During the run, my plan was to complete a minimum of 30 miles (48 km’s) each of day. During 15 evenings out the 50, after completing the run, I gave a keynote or held a circle in the town or city where we had arrived. The events were all prepared in advance with the help of locals, and we also had the honor to collaborate with the *tangata whenua*, the indigenous Māori community of New Zealand. I had a hired crew of one person—an experienced ultra-runner
Mina Holder from the U.K. to drive the van in which we would also sleep. She would oversee food, logistics, body care, maintenance of our van, arranging accommodation, choosing camp sites, and so on during the trip. Her knowledge, help, humor, and strength proved irreplaceable during the journey. Both Mina and I followed a vegan diet during the run to which I had made the switch during the 5-6 months leading up to run. The reason was to align with the ideology of compassion through nonviolence toward all beings. While I experienced a variety of other challenges during the run, I had no stomach issues to mention; I attribute part of my success to my gut health. We also sought to use as little plastic as possible throughout the run and buy local produce to minimize waste and thus, minimize the strain on the land caused by us during our stay.

Excluding a handful of days, I ran mostly alone and had pitstops with Mina about 3-6 times a day depending on my energy and condition. The route followed the main highways. The run began on January 18th, 2018, at the Southernmost tip of New Zealand’s South Island and concluded at Takapuna Beach in Auckland on March 8th, 2018. Instead of finishing at the remote area of Cape Reinga, which is the Northernmost tip of New Zealand’s North Island, Mina and I made a plan that I would run the South Island from Wellington to Auckland first. Then we drove our van up north to Cape Reinga, from where I ran the remaining leg of the journey, finishing at New Zealand’s most populated city, Auckland. To get from South Island to North Island, we took a ferry. Apart from the extremely challenging first two weeks of the journey (that also form the core of my reflections in essay 2), I was mainly in good spirits, and while acknowledging overall demanding nature of the endeavor, I feel that the experience was a positive and transformative one.

4.1.2 A 50-day residency in a martial arts academy in China

The second field trip took place over 50 days between January 9th and February 28th, 2019 (see Appendix B for images). I wanted to re-examine sisu about a year after completing New Zealand and do so in a different context. My reason for doing something different was clear: I wanted to choose a setting that would offer a new angle to my quest to peel off yet another layer of my lived experience of sisu. At this point, I had a moderate amount of previous experience in martial arts and mainly in aikido. I had however become engrossed with its philosophy, and I was thirsty for learning more. My initial desire was to travel to Japan to train aikido, but as I struggled to find the right school, I instead found an opportunity to join one of the oldest Shaolin kung fu schools in China.

I travelled to Kunyu Mountains located in North China’s Shandong province to attend traditional martial arts training in Shaolin kung fu. The conditions were quite basic and the older wing of the student dorm, where I was assigned to stay, was old, cold, and drafty. On most nights, I went to sleep with a hot water bottle, two blankets, and my most of my clothes on, and would still wake up with the tip of my nose freezing cold. The scheduled training was rigorous and took place 5 days a week from 6 am until 6 pm with many of us training also in our spare time in the evenings and over the weekends. Throughout the stay, I recorded my observations and reflections in a digital journal that I later used as my autoethnographic data for the analysis in essay 3.

Training consisted of daily running (sometimes uphill at the nearby mountain that also hosted a sacred site of Taoism), qigong, kung fu, tai chi, sanda (Chinese kick boxing), strength training, and power stretching, as well as optional lectures in Taoism, calligraphy, Chinese massage techniques, and Chinese language. I attended Taoism, calligraphy, and Chinese massage. The school at the time hosted approximately 100 students of which Westerners were a minority. Teaching took place mostly in Mandarin Chinese and translated (when possible) with the help of a translator.
Almost half-way through to my stay, due to considerations related to previous health concerns, I switched from kung fu to Chen style tai chi, which is considered the original form of tai chi founded in late 16th century. While many assume tai chi to be a very soft exercise, as I too had previously concluded, I soon learned that its training was intense and strenuous with immense detail and effort put into attaining the correct posture, speed, and precision of one’s movement. Chen style tai chi’s aim is to cultivate internal power (qi/chi) for the execution of martial arts.

While initially disappointed for having to switch from kung fu, which was my initial reason to travel to this particular school, I ended up being very happy with the change and felt that I actually benefitted from it. Turned out it supported an already ongoing shift in my personal journey toward more balance in my expression of sisu and thus, more discernment, gentleness, and insight concerning how I relate to energy.

4.2 Data collection and selection

Essay 1 is based on responses from 1,208 respondents, who took part in an online survey on sisu during spring of 2013. No paid crowdsourcing services were used, but the survey (available in Finnish and in English) spread organically through social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The average age of the respondents was 42 years (SD 12.5), and 80% were women and 95% Finnish. Essays 2 and 3 were based on my personal memos around the experiences, emotions, and observations I had throughout the run in New Zealand and the 2-year preparation time leading to it, and the 50-day training period in China.

Together, the data invokes a decade’s worth of perpetual overcoming of challenges with its countless moments of overturning fear and uncertainty in one form or another. Discontinuously arrayed, punctuated by elusive but always, in retrospect, tangible moments of sisu, these moments form the continuum of events during which I feel I became to know my sisu very intimately. Most field notes are from 2016-2019 during which I collected data specifically for this dissertation during the two field trips that were described previously. However, the entire data period for field notes extends over a 6-year window between 2015-2020. The survey data used in essay 1 was obtained between March and May of 2013. Below is the table summarizing the data categories and when they were logged.

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<th>Table 1. Summary of Research</th>
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<td><strong>Time span</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Methods of analysis</strong></td>
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Rodriguez and Ryave (2002) suggest two specific methods for bringing tacit phenomena to light through self-observation: interval recording (e.g., time-based) and free-format narrative recording. A key objective of both methods is to reduce the distance between occurrence and data collection, thus leading to data that is more accurate, vivid, and free from the transformations of faulty memory. Documents which facilitate broad coverage over a long period of time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) add additional insights and key information and allow for a more rigorous and comprehensive analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Free-format data recording was followed and included voice memos captured with a smartphone app, handwritten memos, as well as notes in a digital diary app. The notes were created sometimes daily—like during the field trips to New Zealand and China—sometimes weekly, and sometimes they included supporting material such as videos, audio notes, sketches, and references to email exchanges as attachments. The memos were at times scribbled in a hurry when I was exhausted after a day of running, cycling, or training. Sometimes the experience inspired an entry that is closer to a poem or a song. To borrow van Manen’s expression, “research is a caring act” (1990, p. 5). To me, it was about caring for the essence of one of the most bare, intimate, and enthralling of our human experience: moments in which we transcend doubt, fear, and adversity and therefore, through those personally lived experiences, become to be in possession of that very experience with both its gifts and challenges. Pinar (2011) mentions the “lived meaning of the written documents” (p. 141) in research data collection. A mixture of these field notes is included in essays 2 and 3 to take the reader into my lived experience of sisu. The notes were there to allow me to track my observations and experiences for the research and not miss moments that could have been forgotten. They allowed me to track the evolution of my thinking around sisu to produce the framework for this dissertation and helped me work through any inner conflicts I had along the way. They also became to serve an important personal purpose in that they created a container to crystalize some of the key moments of my personal journey of “becoming-into-existence” (Broad, 1923) as part of my inner evolution.

It is easy to see how to a practitioner of first-person inquiry, everything can become data and potentially, a path toward deeper understanding of self, others, and the world around (Marshall, 2016). However, when everything from an encounter with one’s spouse, friend, a passing encounter with a cashier, a poem, or a news article becomes data, the sheer amount of these potentially limitless encounters can get quite overwhelming quite fast. This happened to me as well and the challenge was how would I choose a small enough number of entries from all my field notes for this research? Denshire (2015) writes about the methodological challenges she faced during her doctoral research when assembling an autoethnographic account of her life as an occupational therapist and deciding on selection criteria for the published work she would include in the research. Ultimately, Denshire “rejected selection criteria based on (a) topic, (b) theoretical framing and (c) type of journal” and wrote that “I decided to select publications according to criteria relating to points of becoming in my life” (p. 8; italics added).

To allow me to create a selection criteria of my own, I borrowed the concept of epiphany that autoethnographers often use and write about—moments that have significantly shaped the authors life and experiences, as well as life changing moments that may include existential struggle or trauma that call us to pause and reflect (Adams et al., 2017; Denzin, 2001; see also Douglas & Carless, 2013, p. 85)—along with Heidegger’s concept of Lichtung that literally translates as a clearing in the woods or forest that is free of obstruction. To Heidegger these “clearings” were illuminated spaces of being where the truth can become revealed and where increased awareness may occur (Chai, 2014). Denzin (2001) describes epiphanies as “ruptures” (p. 38) in the structure of everyday life in which “meaningful biographical experience occurs” (p. 145) and after which the
person isn’t quite same. With epiphanies and Lichtungs as my phenomenological tool (into my “points of becoming” as Denshire would put it), I was able to single out moments from hundreds of notes and entries along the years that were particularly expansive and avoid getting lost in my data. These moments—illuminated reflections—reorganized my lived experience by offering an opening, a clearing, in my thinking; an evolution with regards to my understanding of sisu. At last, I created my own selection criteria for my epiphanies as clearings. To be qualified, the experience would have to have the two following essences:

1. A sudden insight with depth regarding an essential quality of sisu.
   -\> Reorganizing my understanding of sisu.

2. A significant impact on how I relate to my sisu.
   -\> Reorganizing my understanding of sisu as my personal quality in a way that leads to a lasting impact.

When I began to explicate the data for essays 2 and 3, I incorporated elements also from thematic analysis—a process already familiar to me from my analysis of essay 1. What the combination of approaches has allowed me to do has been to acknowledge both the co-created nature of knowledge and embrace the experiential nature of human existence. Much like in thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2006) write, the relevance of data was determined by “whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (p. 82) and whether it is personally relevant to me in terms of the research topic. To avoid overlap, the actual data analyses themselves are discussed in their respective essays.

4.3 Analytical methods

Heron (1981) has written that, “[t]he propositional outcomes of the research depend critically on the practical and experiential components of the process of the research” (p. 27) and continues to postulate that research is a special case of social behaviour for which the basic explanatory model of intelligent self-direction applies. It is “commitment to purposes in the light of principles - combined with relative determinism” (p. 19). Adopting the theoretical viewpoint of phenomenology, which is both a philosophical framework and a methodology (Bahadur Qutoshi, 2018; Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010), led me to embracing a set of first-person methods that enable “a way of doing science in which the observer actively and knowingly lives and participates in the phenomenon and its coming into being” (Scharmer, 2007, p. 157). Autoethnography and first-person inquiry are an overlapping and mutually informing bundle of research orientations from different heritages. As automethodologies, they are both rooted in the researcher’s use of the subjective self—and first-person approaches in themselves are a natural part of the epistemology of knowledge in the postpositivist science.

For essay 1, thematic analysis was applied to analyze two qualitative data sets and for essays 2 and 3, an amalgamation of autoethnography, first-person action research, and hermeneutics was used. They are each presented below.

4.3.1 Thematic analysis

I used thematic analysis in essay 1 to examine sisu through data collected via online survey. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 76) describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data.” Rather than merely organising the data, it is often used to interpret
various aspects of the research topic and is particularly useful when not much is known about the topic under study (Boyatzis, 1998) or when dealing with a large data set as it invites the researcher to take a well-structured approach to the analysis (King, 2004). Thematic analysis goes beyond word or phrase counting and quantifiable measures to “identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas” (Guest et al., 2012, p. 10). Just like the importance of a Lichtung, which does not derive from its quantifiable measures or reoccurrence, but rather “whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). A six-phase guide for conducting thematic analysis in a way that employs a clear, replicable, and transparent methodology outlined by Braun and Clarke was applied.

4.3.2 Hermeneutic phenomenology

The motto of phenomenology, according to van Manen (1990) is Husserl’s “Zu den Sachen” which van Manen takes to mean both “to the things themselves” and “let’s get down to what matters” (p. 184), and it represents an attempt to understand life and its phenomena from the first-person perceptive (Tassone, 2017). The hermeneutic take relates particularly to the process of interpreting the texts that are brought in—for example field notes as well as quotes, research text, and anecdotes. Just like the aim of phenomenology is to reflect on phenomena that are experienced in consciousness without going into their causes or objective reality—van Manen (1997) refers to this as keeping the question of the meaning of the phenomena open—the aim of my study is to reflect on sisu, not to give an explanation for its nature.

Van Manen (2017) considers the phenomenological method as a path to understanding, noting that there is no fixed set of methods to conduct this type of research, while Bahadur Qutoshi (2018) calls phenomenology an “intellectual engagement” (p. 215). In Kafle’s (2011) words, hermeneutic research “avoids method for method’s sake” and he offers “commitment to an abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question, investigating the experience as it is lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and consideration of parts and whole” as research activities to producing a dynamic interplay of research (p. 190-191). Van Manen (1997) additionally describes orientation, strength, richness, and depth as the major quality concerns for the production of text. In this process

orientation is the involvement of the researcher in the world of the research participants and their stories. Strength refers to the convincing capacity of the text to represent the core intention of the understanding of the inherent meanings as expressed by the research participants through their stories. Richness is intended to serve the aesthetic quality of the text that narrates the meanings as perceived by the participants. Depth is the ability of the research text to penetrate down and express the best of the intentions of the participants. (p. 196)

At the heart of van Manen's method is the idea that we can best understand human beings and the phenomena related to life from the “experiential reality” of people’s “life worlds” (van Manen, 1997, p. xi). Through this process of interpreting text or an experience, the researcher arrives to this “world” through the process of hermeneutic circle, which involves the “researcher moving from parts of the experience to the whole of the experience, and back and forth again and again to increase the depth and level of understanding from within the text” (Laverty, 2003, para. 15). What this means is that the researcher conversationally observes and writes into existence a reality they live with and therefore, makes available “an idea, a notion being questioned” (van Manen, 1997, p. 129). Unlike other qualitative approaches, the hermeneutic approach is open to the poetic qualities of language, and it also encourages the aesthetically tuned way
of writing as a process and a product (Henricksson & Friesen, 2012). To recognize stories, and even the poetic dimension of writing narrative, does not require one gives up facts and accurate accounting for the supposed free play of poetry. In a hermeneutic sense, the researcher turns life into language and language again into life as it becomes sensed, felt, and grasped through the researcher’s experience.

4.3.3 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a critical and reflexive form of scientific qualitative inquiry in which the personal is used to investigate the self and the social, therefore opening a space for forms of inquiry that are experiential and direct (van den Broucke, 2019). It offers a research method in which the researcher’s personal writings, narratives, and experiences of the phenomenon in question are utilized and form a core of the research data (Duncan, 2004; Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Spry, 2001). The birth of autoethnography, as well the first-person qualitative methods more generally, trace back to the “crises in science” inspired by postmodernism, and it challenges the traditional ways of doing research and representing others (Spry, 2001). It also views research as a tool for contributing to a dialogue that is politically aware and socially conscious (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008). While systematically analyzing, the autoethnographer, much like an impressionist within art, uses “words, metaphors, phrasings, imagery, and most critically, expansive recall of fieldwork experience” (van Maanen, 2011, p. 102). When these are put together in a vibrant, tight, and imaginative rendering of first-person reflection, according to John van Maanen, “an impressionist tale of the field results” (p. 102). Such approach was chosen because I felt it offered an even more precise and “on point” vocabulary around my “doing” of my hermeneutic phenomenological autoethnography (one I couldn’t quite find from the hermeneutic texts alone) along with methodological tools that helped me further increase the validity of my study.

Autoethnography in research can work in several directions. When written down, it makes witnessing possible and allows readers to observe similar experiences in their own lives. That way it potentially opens a space for remembrance of parts within the reader’s own inner storyboard that may have been forgotten (for writing as a pathway to knowledge, see Richardson, 2000). First-person experience can that way become a form of dynamic co-witnessing by giving one’s own experience as an offering to collective experiencing: by opening vulnerably in our own life, we open a space for vulnerability in a broader sense. Denzin (2001, 2014) points to the autoethnographer’s function as researcher and researched in the process: the autoethnographer functions as a universal singular; a single instance of a more universal social experience. As Sartre (1981) describes the universal singular, this subject is “summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he resumes it by reproducing himself in it as a singularity” (p. ix). In other words, every person is like every other person and yet, like no other. The autoethnographer inscribes the experiences of a historical moment, universalizing these experiences in their singular effects on a particular life (p. 234). Holman Jones (2005) writes about autoethnography that it is setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation... and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives. (p. 765)

By connecting essays 2 and 3 to a first-person methodology, I wanted to also lessen the risk of becoming too removed from the “real world” or getting entangled in mere conceptualization. Bochner (2012) comments on the horizons of academic writing:
We wanted to create a space in which social science texts could be viewed as stories and their authors—the researchers—as storytellers. The personal, emotional, and embodied narratives we had in mind would be presented in forms that depart radically from the conventions of rational/analytic social science reporting. We wanted to break away from standard conventions of academic writing and inaugurate a fresh and appealing option suited to the turn toward narrative. If we experience our lives as stories, then why not represent them as stories? Why shouldn’t social scientists represent life as temporally unfolding narratives and researchers as a vital part of the action? Shouldn’t there be a closer connection between our research texts and the lives they represent? (p. 157)

Aligning with phenomenology, instead of starting with a hypothesis, autoethnography highlights research as a process of discovery (Ellis, 2004) and writing as part of this process as a way of knowing, a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). This is done through vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection (Ellis, 1991) to "invoke" readers to enter the "emergent experience" of doing and writing research (Ronai, 1992, p. 123), conceive of identity as an "emergent process" (Rambo, 2005, p. 583), and consider evocative, concrete texts to be as important as abstract analyses.

4.4 Trustworthiness

The subjective and co-creational nature of all inquiry and study is the foundational premise of all first-person inquiry (Marshall, 2016). While following a systematic research method and collection of qualitative data, what we have here is an interpretation of the phenomena of sisu, and we might as well be straight from the beginning—my interpretation of embodied fortitude and sisu. Denoted phenomenologist Marion (2002) advises against constructivist approaches to phenomenology where meanings are attributed to a phenomenon or event by the researcher. In Marion’s view, meanings or essences of things do not simply “show” themselves because we decide to examine or turn to them. Instead, when this happens it is because, as Marion continues, these things and essences have already given themselves to us. I have been inspired by the challenge of scientific work to remain open and navigate my research from a place of continuously renewed curiosity, humility, and fresh eyes. As such, I am the student and recipient of the phenomena and learnings that come to me from outside and invite me to respond, inquire, and witness. That way the phenomena indeed give themselves and thus, are the teacher—instead of me exerting some kind of authority on them by “extracting the phenomena” from the landscape of happenings.

I have throughout the research journey avoided putting forward ideas on sisu and then finding evidence for it, as “hypotheses aimed to support proposed theories” lead to self-proving and “scientifically bankrupt models” (Mcknight & Kashdan, 2009). This has meant constantly checking in with myself over the course of the years long process of this work and continuously adopting the “new eyes” of the beginner. One exception to this was choosing to take the theme of gentleness (later, gentle power) in essay 2 and use it as a central organizing concept for exploring the development of harmonious or constructive sisu in essay 3. Naturally, this choice guided my attention toward essences of sisu in my field notes that are likely to relate to the beneficial, sustainable, and uplifting outcomes of my sisu. Science has traditionally been suspicious of using the information acquired from within to analyze what happens within. Rightfully so, but the sentence itself raises the paradox: how could the with-in be explored in a wholesome manner only from outside? Indeed, the answer seems to be some combination that ideally invokes a blending of both worlds.
The trustworthiness of the study was ensured by dedication to the qualitative methods outlined by thematic analysis (essay 1) as well as hermeneutic phenomenology along with the first-person tools adopted (essays 2 and 3). Furthermore, while rigorous scientific research has traditionally been considered in terms of quantitative measures and hard data (van Manen, 1990), “human science research [in contrast] is rigorous when it is ‘strong’ or ‘hard’ in a moral and spirited sense” (p. 18). Van Manen continues to note that, “[a] strong and rigorous human science text distinguishes itself by its courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself” (p. 18).
5. Key Findings

The dissertation explored the essence of sisu among a mainly Finnish population of respondents through a thematic analysis based on a survey, as well as my phenomenological autoethnographic inquiry into the essence of the lived experience of sisu. Finally, it looked at sisu in the light of systems intelligence and a reflective self-practice toward the cultivation of constructive sisu. Sisu shares overlapping features with non-cognitive qualities such as courage, perseverance, and grit but its most pronounced aspect is about tapping into our existing yet previously un-accessed reserves of energy that seem embodied and somatic, rather than entirely mental. Furthermore, it also responds to the question “how and with what quality” are our sisuesque actions taken. The following chapter summarizes key findings from the three essays that constitute the dissertation.

5.1 Essay 1: Preliminary essences of sisu through the survey data

The first part of the thematic analysis in essay 1 for “What is sisu?” generated three themes regarding the most resounding essence of sisu. While each of the three storylines presents a separate angle, they are all about finding a way to keep moving forward or “stay alive” when the external evidence and internal emotional feedback might point to doing the contrary. The second part of the analysis deals with the question “Can there be too much sisu?” and if leaning into unyielding resolve is a good choice to make.

5.1.1 Extraordinary perseverance

One of the qualities of sisu is that of a strength capacity unlocked during a moment of heightened stress, rather than the ability to persist and stick to a task per se (which for example grit and perseverance both are by definition). It is perseverance in extraordinary situations. To elaborate on extraordinary perseverance as a subset of sisu: it is an inner potential which enables individuals to tap into energy beyond their pre-conceived resources. Wielding sisu in the face of adversity helps individuals push through what first seemed like the boundaries of their mental or physical energy; it is what ignites or emerges when our assumed fortitude ends, and we venture beyond the previously known edges of our inner strength. As one respondent put it: “Sisu to refers to the strength that lies beyond perceived limitations. Sisu exists within everyone and is usually stumbled upon when one faces insurmountable adversity.” It adds a tool in the psychological toolkit of explaining and understanding how humans overcome and transcend the edges or their previously known capacities.

The promising discovery supporting this narrative is that the threshold of exceeding our capacities seems indeed not fixed but can be influenced. In a 2008 study, Pollo et al. found that subjects, who were given a placebo but told it was caffeine were able to lift more weight. Clark et al. (2000) discovered a similar effect in a simulated 40-km bicycle time trial. The placebo effect has also been illustrated for pain and movement disorders (Amanzio & Benedetti, 1999; Pollo et al., 2011), and there is evidence to suggest that the effect is related to
individuals’ expectations and beliefs. Amanzio & Benedetti (1999) showed that placebo analgesia (pain relief) could be induced with verbal suggestions and Dweck’s decades of research on mindset suggest that the beliefs individuals hold about their abilities impact their future behavior and even willpower (Job et al., 2010; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Extraordinary perseverance is a shift toward expansion or a “becoming-into-existence” (Broad, 1923, p. 68) that can happen when we have reached the end of our assumed perseverance but don’t yet give up.

5.1.2 Action mindset

Humans constantly run mental simulations of their current situation and environment, to detect its opportunities and especially its possible threats (Carroll & Shepperd, 2009). When we observe a challenge, which appears greater than our perceived resources, from point of view of survival it is rational to back down. The second theme, action mindset, denotes an active, courageous approach toward challenges that seem greater than our reserves, opportunities, or capacities. Whereas extraordinary perseverance relates to surpassing our pre-conceived capacities during the literal and proverbial marathons of life, action mindset enables us to embark on a journey in the first place that we sense is likely to test our capacities. “It is a non-delusional fearlessness toward what would otherwise be a difficult/frightening situation,” one study respondent wrote. Action mindset means to actively reach toward the edges of our perceived limits and stretch the existing boundaries of our psychological stamina. We don’t know how strong or capable we truly are before we stand face to face with our inner make and step beyond this invisible, but often deeply felt boundary. Action mindset is an inner inclination and unstated conviction that leans us into the headwind of new of lasting challenges with faith and curiosity, instead of having us react by turning away.

A study by Job et al. (2010) showed that research participants who believed that their willpower is limited and fixed were more likely to give up than those who believed that willpower is self-renewing. They named this predisposition growth mindset. Action mindset as a quality of sisu contributes to how we approach problems. I would describe it as akin to signing up for a marathon, becoming a parent, or setting up your startup, while (or despite) knowing that what awaits you is at times a horribly strenuous road. Action mindset provides a “leap before you look” attitude, so that we are not paralyzed at the get-go by the sheer amount of work we are required to do, or by crushed by our ideas of all that might go wrong. It is about acting and trusting that when the many moments of sisu arrive to test us, we are able keep up the practice, stand behind our vision, and navigate the obstacles.

5.1.3 Latent power

The third theme, latent power, is about the quality of this stored-up inner strength of individuals that is accessed when their other reserves seem to have been consumed. It echoes the etymological origin of sisu as “guts.” In the words of one respondent, “[sisu] is what defines us and is almost like magic in the sense that with it, you can do what others think is not possible.” Extraordinary perseverance and action mindset indeed incorporate nuances from concepts such as courage, perseverance, and grit with their non-cognitive dimension that has to do with our beliefs and mindsets, while latent power points to something somatic and un-thought rather than mental and “willed.” Latent power or “intestinal fortitude” as described by one respondent, is about fortitude as a somatic quality.

The overall approach of this thesis is guided by the idea of the embodied nature of human behavior and decision making. Typically overshadowed by
approaches in which behavior is seen to emanate from the mind or viewed as distanced from the body, the orientation of this dissertation seeks to link with the tradition that views the body as having a central role in shaping our mind, actions, and emotions. Embodied cognition has now been fairly well established and it is the radical hypothesis that “our bodies and their perceptually guided motions through the world do much of the work required to achieve our goals” (Wilson & Golonka, 2013). Embodied cognition acknowledges the power of our rational and cognitive competencies but also celebrates our non-cognitive human abilities, which often in the narrowly oriented rationalistic approaches of human science are dismissed as too unorthodox, and in the mainstream dialogue too vague.

5.1.4 Sisu as a harmful vs. beneficial quality

While sisu can be a positive driving force that is central to both survival and high-performance, it was evident from the survey that there can also be too much sisu, and according to the survey answers, this can lead to stubbornness, foolhardiness, inflexible thinking, and even mercilessness toward others. Three main themes around harmful sisu were generated as a result of a survey: 1) sisu that leads to extreme mental stress and overextending the body in ways that lead to physical injury, accidents, and burnout; 2) sisu that causes harm to others as a result of an obsession over a task at the expense of others, ignoring people's perspectives, failing to sympathize with their struggles, as well as being cold and ruthless toward colleagues, family, and friends; and 3) sisu that impairs the individual's ability to think, reason, and discern a healthy course of action. The last mentioned can lead to poor judgment, inability to see the big picture of things, evaluate one's capacities, ask for help, and know when to quit or pivot. It has a ripple-like impact on the two previously mentioned themes. It is proposed that beneficial (or healthy) sisu should be informed by reason and cultivated (and practiced) with thoughtfulness. The topic of healthy sisu as “warm sisu” (or gentle power) was further expanded and developed in essays 2 and 3.

However, as proposed by the “second wave of positive psychology”—a scholarship that looks critically at the nuanced notions of positive and negative within the discipline—there is an ultimate challenge to assigning phenomena in such binary and contracted categories (Ivtzan et al., 2015; Wong, 2011). There is a finely tuned, yet subtle interplay between polarities such as positive and negative, in which positive does not automatically infer “good” or “better” and negative does not simply infer “bad” or “worse,” as such appraisals are context dependent and thus, not fixed. Furthermore, there is another shift within positive psychology taking place (the “third wave”) that goes beyond the individual and embraces the greater complexity of human life as a phenomenon that is embedded in systems (see Lomas et al., 2021). An orientation that in terms of my research on sisu, is present in essay 3.

5.2 Essay 2: A personal inquiry into the lived experience of sisu

While the first study (essay 1) mapped the cultural representations on sisu through a survey—naming its three preliminary essences as extraordinary perseverance, action mindset, and latent power, the second study approached sisu as a lived experience by explicating what overcoming extreme challenges looks like, not only as something inferred and analyzed from retrospectively constructed survey data, but against the backdrop of life-as-it-happens.

In analyzing my notes written during the run, I ultimately came to envision three key aspects in the phenomenon of sisu as a lived experience. In order to highlight the special nature of these key aspects of sisu as a lived experience, in my autoethnographical description of the object of this study, I venture to talk
about “epiphanies” instead of “key aspects.” With this terminology, I wish to highlight the fact that phenomenologically, there was more to these “key aspects” of sisu as a lived experience than their cognitive significance in a process of conceptual articulation. There was an existential, beyond-the-cognitive force aspect to what the analysis revealed that was in line with the aims of autoethnographic methodology, that potentially addresses the reader through more emotional and subjectively significant perspectives.

The three unique primary epiphanies illuminated by my personal lived experience are sisu as transcendence, sisu as connection, and finally, sisu as gentleness. Along the lines of thinking by Schneider et al. (2001), I seek to understand “what does it mean to be fully existentially human” in moments of deep distress and also “how does that understanding illuminate the fulfilled or vital life? (p. xx). The summaries of these epiphanies are presented below.

5.2.1 Transcendence

Sisu as transcendence falls into synchronicity with the in the moment nature of sisu that in essay 1 was described as “short-term intensity rather than long-term stamina” (p. 72). Namely, the epiphany here was the emergence of something potential but previously not present in my reality. Similarly, there were qualities of my sisu that always existed in me but that were not uncovered before they, as in Broad’s (1923) terms, “became-into-existence” as the result of this process that involved sisu. I observed this phenomenon of shifting, into what felt like a more expanded experience of my sisu, several times already while training for New Zealand and during the run itself. These moments, to me, were major epiphanies or “clearings” to use the previously presented concept of Lichtung by Heidegger (1962) in which a kind of illuminated awareness regarding not only that experience, but the nature of my sisu occurred. These moments continue to stand out as integrated and yet dynamic milestones among the stories of my life lived and recorded for this dissertation. Dynamic here, to me, means that these experiences are not static, statuesque-like collections of events but such that enrichen my present moment and breathe aliveness into the choices I make in the now.

Therefore, “a moment of sisu,” instead of being looked at as behavioral response to an experienced adversity, as it could be seen from a more purely psychological lens, becomes more than a static point or an action to note. To me, it has become to indicate a bridge between a) my present world of potential and b) future world in which this potential has become actualized. In which, both being “worlds” but b), the future world that became-into-being, being one in which, the sum total of existence includes not only the potential (a horizon of a new level of sisu) but the experience of transcending one’s assumed boundary. Before tapping into this undercurrent of sisu, future being both a potentiality and an actuality; at the same time not-anythingness and becoming-into-existence. A shift emerging from the tender edge of ceasing from action and paradoxically, therefore, allowing further action to happen.

Research proposes stress as a powerful modulator of the mammalian brain (Kirby et al., 2013) and research within the theoretical framework of posttraumatic growth demonstrates how traumatic experiences, despite being traumatic by nature, can often act as pathways to positive change and deeper realization of one’s strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). During my ultrarun, I did not simply face obstacles, survive, and then move on, but was invited to a transformation, or inner recalibration of a kind, in which the limits of my assumed capacities became subject to renegotiation.

The key essence of this epiphany is in the phenomenon of transcendence to “the other side” of something that was an assumed limit of my doing or being, or the furthest edge of my expression at the time. For example: “I can run non-stop 30 minutes before I have to stop” was transcended hundreds of times
during my training, until a statement, “As long as I honor myself by listening to what my body needs nutrition, pace, and rest-wise, I can run pretty much as long as I want to,” was one example of the evolution of my limits that evolved hand in hand with my experienced reality. Where this transcending seemed to usually happen was a kind of momentary shifting—a moment of sisu—where a previously unrevealed “level” of sisu became revealed as a result of the actions of that particular moment, where I (sometimes against my better judgement, as someone looking at me from outside could have concluded) challenged my pre-conceived borders.

5.2.2 Connection

Sisu as connection communicates an idea that sisu neither resides solely within the individual nor in the social structures around the individual. What I propose is that part of sisu is expressed in the space (exchange of energy and action) in-between individuals or an individual and their environment. What follows is that while we can strive to pave the way for sisu through, say our thinking (see essay 3), sisu or its potential is still influenced by the dynamic ebb and flow of our lived engagement with life that sees us engage, respond, and act within the dynamic and shared life worlds of our existence, that inevitably involves other humans.

Competition, fear of judgement, and crises, but also a deep sense of purpose or fighting for a cause deemed worthy can open a window to powerful displays of courage and emotional endurance. Research on psychological safety in organizational teamwork setting by Edmondson (1999; 2019), for example, shows that an experience of psychological safety can lead to more courageous self-expression in the form of healthy risk taking, sharing innovative ideas, and increased creativity. Research suggests that the presence of even just one strong, supportive individual in a child’s life can be enough to mean the tipping point for survival (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

The social constructionist theory views interaction between social actors as the dynamic process through which we jointly construct our understanding of the world and ourselves (Burr, 2015). Shotter (2008) continues on the same note by describing how one’s replies are never fully one’s alone but are shaped by the mutual dance between the one and the other (or others), making everything that happens an ever-evolving string of responses to invitations of actions and gestures: “What any one individual is doing is a part of what of what a ‘we’ is doing” (p. 97), Shotter writes. The outcome, therefore, is not attributed to the actors alone or to the environment within which they act.

To Shotter (2008) it appears as if “the particular situation itself were a third agency in the exchange with ‘its’ own unique requirements” (p. 97). Borrowing the idea of Bakhtin’s (1986, p. 126) superaddressee, as I propose in essay 2, there seems to lie a quality of a kind of in-between space between people, that might contribute to the likelihood of sisu emerging. However, this space not as a judge or witness, as in Bakhtin’s sense, but as a web of “superpotentiality,” to which all emergent futures and potential realities are glued, and from which they are switched on and off (like genes) through the words, actions, and examples of those inter-acting with each other. Bakhtin (1986) claimed and Shotter (1995)—among others—elaborated on the idea that all collective human action is dialogically or responsively linked in some way, both to previous, already executed actions, and to anticipated, next possible actions” (p. 53). Shotter writes about this space as joint action and points out that focus on the cognitive processes and individual’s internal mental representations has overshadowed the other special aspects of humans in conversational spaces. Same can perhaps be said about sisu which, while seen as a trait of a nation, has lacked a language that would place it in the space of the actual communion between individuals.
and thus, call forth a dialogue around how to nurture or reinforce this (often surprisingly fragile) space of potential and power.

5.2.3 Gentleness

While endurance is about cultivating the emotional and physical stamina to endure life’s curve balls, it is also crucial to become a well-rounded thinker, who can assimilate information from the surrounding environment and respond to challenges in a constructive way. What I also witnessed in New Zealand, were the repeated moments in which sisu for me was not found in grinding my teeth and using force but emerged through an act of honoring myself and being attuned to where the limits of my sisu resided in each moment. Then threading these limits, like signposts, with awareness and openness as opposed to fixed stubbornness. The healthy expression of sisu is not blind and obsessive but adaptive, conscious, and informed by both reason and intuition. It can also mean acceptance, surrender, and finding contentment in the moment instead of fighting the expression of the moment. This epiphany from my own experience in New Zealand, aligns with research by Vallerand et al. (2003) on the two types of passion for activities. “Whether a passion will foster positive affect and healthy persistence depends on whether it is harmonious or obsessive” (p. 757). While challenges act as a pathway to sisu and therefore growth, reasoning and self-understanding are the lamp to guide our steps. Sisu itself is neither “good” nor “bad.” Sisu, how I describe it, is not just about what I do. The way it ends up being characterized depends on how I use this capacity, which is of course also influenced by our environment—an idea highlighted by the third wave of positive psychology that invites a dialogue to reach out from the narrow sphere of the single individual and into the world in which the individual lives and acts (Lomas et al, 2021).

Just like in the case of any behavior, how we act has its foundation in our values and belief systems (e.g. Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Eyal et al., 2009; Fischer, 2017). Indeed, having too much sisu was a concern among respondents of the sisu survey, who expressed that too much sisu could lead to harmful outcomes—harm to oneself, harm to one’s family, work colleagues, and so forth. In my own experienced space, it was also a reality I experienced personally in New Zealand, and one which led to this epiphany of gentleness. Like a related construct, courage, sisu is not a miracle drug and it can create severely bad outcomes too. In Comte-Sponville’s (2012) words: “the most suspect thing about courage is its indiscrimination: it can serve good or evil ends without changing their nature” (p. 45). Descartes in his treatise on the Passions of the Soul distinguishes even between “virtuous” and “vicious” humility. Sisu, too, can become an expression of either polarity (Descartes & Moriarty, 2015). “Gentle sisu” (developed through the humanly tuned effort of systems intelligence, as I propose in essay 3) can help create a more balanced and constructive expression of this quality.

I suggest that this balanced inner power is the mature and constructive expression of sisu that is mediated by gentleness. Gentleness here is seen as excellence in action—embodied fortitude and sisu expressed in a way that renders sisu, not only tough but even graceful and therefore, healthier for the individual and people around. To Aristotle (1934), gentleness was a virtue of temperance and the observance of mean between anger and “lack of spirit”—to not be led by emotion and “irascibility” (Nic Eth. 2.7). Comte-Sponville (2012) writes that “gentleness in anger stands as the middle-ground.” Gentleness is not to be interpreted as weakness or fragility but rather, as the power of yielding and mindful adaptation.
5.3 Essay 3: Systems intelligence tactics for sisu as gentle power

The analysis of essay 1 proposes that sisu can become harmful or beneficial to the individual and their environment depending on how it is expressed. The phenomenological explication of my lived experience of sisu in essay 2 yields a similar conclusion and proposes that sisu itself is accordingly morally blind. Moving on to a more philosophical and slightly prescriptive realm, I suggest that it is useful to label the more beneficial and healthy expressions of sisu as gentle power. I define gentle power as sisu that is not blind, obsessive, harsh, or “emotionally granular” but adaptive, sensitive to fluctuation in its constitution, and aware of its impact on its surrounding, and while not necessarily of reason, it is informed by reason. To help support the growth of sisu into the direction of gentle power, one may seek to ground it in a self-reflective practice.

The articulation of sisu as gentle power in the container of “thinking about one’s thinking” using the conceptual framework of the eight factors of systems intelligence (Hämäläinen et al., 2014; Hämäläinen & Saarinen, 2007a, 2007b) is explored theoretically in an essayistic, autoethnographic form using my first-person observations as a student of Eastern martial arts, which I propose, run parallel to systems intelligence in their emphasis on a kind of “reflective wisdom” typical also to systems intelligence, that is a combination of presence, attunement, and focus on one’s self-reflective process in the context of action.

All in all, essay 3 moves around the themes of sisu, systems intelligence, first-person experience of autoethnography, and Eastern martial arts, and the connections between these aspects. The articulation I propose here is an effort to talk about sisu conceptually, using the systems intelligence framework as a backbone, and with the idea that the reader would get a hunch of what “being better in sisu” might involve.

The following chapters outline key ideas resulting from my autoethnography that aimed to understand more about the phenomenon of sisu in its constructive expression. I have framed my inquiry using four systems intelligence skill dimensions previously suggested by Törmäinen et al. (2016).

5.3.1 Perceiving systems: Perception and attunement at the dojo

Systemic perception consists of the two skills of perception and attunement and is a core quality of systems intelligence. It is about identifying and recognizing systems, patterns, and interconnections around us, while having situational awareness (Hämäläinen et al., 2019). To see the details of these patterns is to see beyond and beneath what is immediately present to our eyes. This is the access point to “thinking about our thinking” and in terms of sisu, it means to see beyond the challenges of the present moment that I described as being part of the action mindset inherent to sisu. Systemic perception means to develop a wide, clear vision, and not be stuck in one perspective or single access point of inquiry. Sisu becomes gentle power when it’s acted through openness to attune to both our mind and body’s states. Learning to master this ability calls to engage intersubjectively, be present, mindful, situationally sensitive, and open (Hämäläinen et al., 2019, p. 3). In terms of sisu as gentle power, again, it requires the ability to remain flexible, relaxed, and see with “soft eyes”—a concept borrowed from aikido meaning to refrain from looking sharply and instead, allowing the horizon to come to you (see Park, 2018, p. 104)—and thus, not become locked into anticipating a specific outcome.

Aikido further acknowledges that we cannot achieve the mindset of the “sage” (denoting wisdom and good judgment) by simply thinking about it, nor can it be done if one remains divorced from the body’s somatic intelligence (Park, 2018). Instead, it is achieved by feeling, sensing, and experiencing our way through the lived experience of life. Systems intelligence too is a holistic practice, which includes an invitation to let our body speak and then respond to this
sensed information (Hämäläinen et al., 2014). During life, if survival however requires us to disconnect from our bodies, we may go backwards and become disconnected from our body (e.g., van der Kolk, 2015). Then our natural systems intelligence remains “an unrecognized capacity that awaits revitalization” (Hämäläinen et al., 2014, p. 14).

Kikubari (気配り) according to Hagen (2017) is “the essence of mindfulness, except that instead of investing consciousness in one’s own body, it is an external mindfulness that connects and expands awareness to all of one’s surroundings.” The highest level of kikubari is “happo-no Undo” in which the aikidoka focuses on attackers from eight different compass points simultaneously. Just like the beginning of any kata—a form or sequence of pre-arranged movements in Japanese martial arts—begins with awareness of what lies both within and around the performer of the kata, I propose that systemic perception as this awareness, is a core foundation of the “higher octave” expression of sisu.

Just like learning to sense other people’s needs or tune into the emerging future, learning to use sisu in a constructive way (i.e., knowing when to push forward, when to take it easier, and even let go) is a skill that depends on our ability to attune to what is actually going on within us, but also, outside us. If I am not able to read these situations or attune to myself—which means I may end up over-extending or become unmerciful toward others—it can sometimes be our very sisu that leads to our defeat. In martial arts, this attunement relates to what aikido master Robert Nadeau calls “keeping an openness” (R. Nadeau, personal communication, May 7, 2014). For sisu to be constructive, an individual must learn to sense the thin line after which a push becomes a shove, boldness becomes blindness, and power stiffens into force. This requires intentional presence, as this subtle shift is usually felt before it is reasoned or becomes externally visible to us and others. When we are attuned to our internal states, train to notice when the fight or flight response of the nervous system takes over, or when we default to fixed mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), we can become aware of our actions in the moment, and consciously release our inner grip and open to experiencing more of our healthy resources too.

In everyday systems intelligence—especially when we are under pressure and challenged—our actions are greatly defined by our ability to tune in to what is happening (not be caught in our stories that may be fueled by fear) and from there, discern the right course of action. To get back up gracefully when we do fall (whether at the dojo or witnessed by our family and peers at the “Dojo of everyday life”), requires the ability to stay composed, and to stay composed requires presence, openness, and nonjudgment. Sensing and attunement bring us to a deeper place of presence which, as opposed to running around reacting and putting down fires, allows us to tap into the gentle power side of sisu as a healthy and sustainable response to stress, struggle, and adversity.

5.3.2 Thinking about systems: Reflection and wise action at the dojo

Hämäläinen et al. (2014) write that “reflection is a key capacity that helps us choose systems commensurate actions. It allows us to ask, “what have I done?” or “what is my responsibility?” Reflecting on the systems around us and our actions in those systems, moves us towards living with systems intelligence” (p. 73). In terms of reflection, sisu serves a two-fold role: while sisu may become cultivated by the practice of reflection that shines awareness upon one’s thinking and therefore, enables better action, some level of sisu itself could be required to push through some of the most hardened borders of our discomfort as well as “edge-emotions” (see Mälkki & Green, 2016) that we may encounter in the process.

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3  賦 勤 literally means "energy" and 配り kubari means "delivery." It can be understood as awareness of one’s surrounding that allows one to think ahead.
Reflection is about conscious thought and is a key element for cultivating healthy sisu since it calls for a deliberate and ongoing examination of the motives, habits, and belief patterns that drive our action. In other words, the brain can be conceived to involve two operating systems called System 1 and System 2 and there is a dichotomy between these two modes of thought (Kahneman, 2011). The first system is automatic, unconscious, emotional, and makes up about 98% of our thinking. System 2 is slower, rational, and logical. It requires deliberate and conscious processing. It is thus essential to consciously (learn to) tune into the System 2 type deliberate thinking. The benefit of systems intelligent reflection is that it uses the System 2 type deliberate processing to decode the sensory and cognitive impulses that happen within us. Research further suggests that mental toughness for example is grounded in the ability to successfully regulate one’s emotions (see Cooper et al., 2019; McCarthy & Hyland, 2018; Moore et al., 2015; Mutz et al., 2017) and meditation and contemplative practices may be of help with this.

During the martial arts training in China, a great deal of time—around 1/3 of our practice—consisted of different contemplative practices and cultivating life energy through meditation, qigong, and other introspective tasks like cleaning the training hall or sweeping snow at the compound. In martial arts, the purpose of cultivating a wake but still mind is done so that the constant thinking would not intervene with the flow of movement. Cultivating wisdom is another central concept in Eastern traditions and is a goal in itself for example in aikido (Gleason, 1995; Ueshiba, 1992). Aikido’s ultimate goal and utmost victory being “shobu aiki,” which according to Gleason (1995) means to overcome and destroy the mind of doubt and conflict within oneself. Wisdom is a combination of discernment to choose one’s battles and if an altercation does ensue, to know which course of action suits the situation. Wisdom is a deeper form of understanding by “enabling application of knowledge to life challenges” (Grossmann, 2017, p. 233). It could be considered a kind of “crown jewel” of systems intelligence because it means to be able to actually use what we sense about the systems through our systems perception and attunement, and transmute it into insightful action, alignment, and harmony (Hämäläinen et al., 2014).

A central idea of aikido is that one’s training should not be just for the dojo (to learn the technique and be strong) but that it should translate to all aspects of the practitioner’s life as “wisdom, judgment, the mind of a sage” (Gleason, 1995, p. 5). Similarly, the ultimate culmination of systems intelligence is in the creation of a foundation for wise action from where to move onwards with grace, patience, and sound judgment. In terms of sisu, wise action means not to succumb into stubbornness by getting entangled with unhealthy patterns and the reactive and automated System 1 type thinking regarding our choices in stressful moments (unless of course they happen in favor of our healthy sisu). Instead, being discerning and humble enough to see the possible beneficial action options and then, being wise enough to know how to apply this information in a way that leads to harmonious and life-giving choices—to sisu as its expression of gentler strength.

5.3.3 Acting in systems: Positive engagement and effective responsiveness at the dojo

Positive engagement is the exterior of our inner world expressed through the tone of our voice, the way we listen (or don’t), the overall way in which we move in social systems, and it refers to the quality of our communication and engagement (Hämäläinen et al., 2014). Perhaps better than through any self-evaluation scales, the level of my systems intelligence becomes shown in how I engage with the world in times of distress and pressure. These moments reveal what I do well (when I am able to respond from a balanced and attuned place) but they also show when I tend to fall off from the saddle of systems intelligence and spin
into my shadow sisu (i.e., into patterns of hardness, harshness, impatience, force, and so on) and thus, these moments gift me precious information regarding where to guide my inner work.

The heart of systems intelligence, as it is a practice and not merely a theory, is about learning to live successfully in these “situations, contexts and environments, with other people and subject to forces that are overwhelming and unknown to us” (Hämäläinen et al., 2014, p. 14). Part of this is what is called effective responsiveness, which means to act at the right moment and the right way. Training toward “perfect timing” in karate, for example, entails “deciphering small movements and interpreting them” and “[it] includes the aptitude to perceive those signs and react to them before the attacker is aware of her own decision” (Bar-On Cohen, 2007, p. 1; italics added). Taking this principle to the systems intelligence framework in terms of gentle power, means that I pay attention to the littlest cues within communication.

When faced with something overwhelming or even something traumatic—or during a “moment of sisu”—the impulse might be to react immediately to remove the source of discomfort, stress, or pressure. However, if I apply systems intelligence principles into how to act in systems, I instead slow down enough to have a chance to scan the whole situation with as much detail and patience as I can (“What is actually happening? What is at stake? What options do I have? What are my own patterns and beliefs concerning this situation that are currently active? What are my active triggers and what might I be missing?) and based on this mapping, have the action I take have a chance to yield a favorable outcome.

Systems intelligence further notes that we never only act for ourselves, but always within the broader system as our inner world becomes expressed through the style of our engagement in the systems. Winnicott (1960) originally coined the term “holding environment” (as in to hold an emotional environment or space) to describe the space between the mother and her infant that is neither fully psychological nor physical and which facilitates the child’s transition to autonomy. Winnicott went on to connect this to therapy and argued that the job of a therapist is to offer a holding environment for the client so that they may begin to recognize previously their neglected ego needs and support the emergence of the “true self.” In a similar manner, I propose that holding spaces for others through positive engagement is ultimately an opportunity to hold a space for their sisu too. One could even see the martial arts dojo to be this kind of a “holding environment” that supports the student’s process of inner growth and becoming.

A world devoid of care is a reality nobody in their right mind wants, and yet we witness pockets of it every day. Systems intelligence not only proposes that qualities like psychological safety, compassion, being present to one another are a key to “better being,” but it offers a way forward by saying that the tools for creating psychological safety and spaces where we feel seen already reside in us (Hämäläinen et al., 2014; Hämäläinen & Saarinen, 2007a). All this action, ultimately, is for the purpose of caring for ourselves and others. So that our nervous system can relax into an experience of more love and less fear and as a result, we can ease into our most creative, connected, and courageous expression as humans.

Our humanity has had to paddle upstream to survive and our history and personal anecdotes confirm that we truly can do so. However, the next evolution of our endurance and fortitude is hopefully a call to sisu infused with and inspired by systems intelligence. It is a path that calls us to leverage, and actively create, environments that allow our human collective more chances to naturally open to our best expression and performance—together.
5.3.4 Systemic attitude: Positive attitude and spirited inquiry at the dojo

Positive attitude is an approach of assuming the best possible as a way of perceiving events, our surrounding world, and the people we encounter, and it underpins all the other factors that make up systems intelligence (Hämäläinen et al., 2014). Positive attitude is also deeply tied to the practice of Eastern martial arts, and it connects not only to the idea of respect between training partners and the teacher, but to one’s overall attitude toward the process of training and self-development. Escobar (2019) writes that, “aikido is an activity that opens up a new perspective on life by teaching people to manage their emotions, as well as to understand and multiply their personal human strengths in order to benefit society and promote non-violence” (p. 166). Escobar continues to say that the heart of aikido is the practice of building a constructive frame of mind and habits that eradicate violence in all its forms, to such extent that it has been called the art of peace (Ueshiba, 1992). The theory of the broadening and building influence of positive emotions by Fredrickson (2001; 2004) supports this. I have experienced this several times: the moment I give in to negativity, I experience as if my access to my capacity for problem solving, creativity, and executive functions shrinks. Remaining relaxed both in the mind and the body is of key importance in martial arts and it seems to be case for the real-life dojo of human life worlds as well.

Behavioral studies suggest that positive attitude can increase persistence and effort during learning (Singh et al., 2002) whereas resilience, which is a broad conceptual umbrella that covers “many concepts related to positive patterns of adaptation in context of adversity” (Masten & Obradovic, 2006, p. 14), has been indicated in many studies to have a steady connection to optimism (see Baldwin et al., 2011; Klohnen, 1996; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Positive attitude, therefore, is not only a quality of a systems intelligent person, whose curiosity and open heart allow them to move through life with a bigger net positive impact, but it is a core skill for emerging strong from tough situations. I propose that positive attitude—instead of the more traditional view of sisu as pushing through no matter what—is a core element of fostering sisu and it goes through elevating one’s quality of thinking and fostering an optimistic outlook.

Spirited discovery brushes shoulders with action mindset—one of the three aspects of sisu identified in essay 1. It means to have a predisposition to lean into the proverbial wind (as opposed to shying away at the sight of strong headwind), move beyond the horizon of what is known, and traverse again and again to the “edge of our emotions,” to use Mälkki’s (2011; 2019) previously mentioned brilliant concept. To highlight the powerful impact of such perspective, imagine a world in which people generally approach novel or even uncomfortable situations, encounters, and even outright challenges with healthy sisu, openness, creativity, curiosity, courage, and so on. Then imagine another world defined by rigidity, suspicion, lack of enthusiasm, and passivity. It is easy to see the importance of how we approach life to the kind of life we end up living.

A core aim of systems approaches is to “[find] resources to live with pliability” (Marshall, 2016, p. 24). To be systems intelligent means “to allow for the possibility of something other than we can imagine occurring” (Hämäläinen et al., 2014, p. 148; italics added). It means to remain “a disciple of life” by nurturing the pliant and supple life motion of spirited discovery and thus, remain a student, no matter how skilled or experienced we become in the course of life. To adventure and take the risk that comes with not wearing a hard shell in a world where hurt, for now, remains as prevalent as love. Ultimately, to choose to trust in life.
The discourse around sisu has traditionally revolved around narratives of “pushing through adversity” with such unyielding resistance and fight that is almost glorious in its stubbornness. Sisu has for long been described as “stubbornness beyond reason” (Aho, 1994, p. 1), “never giving up, fighting until the end, and then beyond” (essay 1), and “to not cry when you are getting a spanking” (Mitä on sisu?, 1942). While such narratives were indeed present in my analysis of the survey data on the cultural representations of sisu (essay 1), there is also another complementary storyline—perhaps a paradoxical one—that is making its entrance into the discourse. It is one that renders our understanding of the human experience of going beyond one’s preconceived capacity and bearing the unbearable more in terms of surrender than resistance, being closer to what I would call strength of pliability rather than sheer resolve.

Sisu is a Finnish characterization of a quality that runs deeper than perseverance. However, I propose that perhaps this “depth” is more like canon of fortitude with a multitude of tunes, rather than a single tune (most often of tenacity), played through the instrument of our effort. Throughout this doctoral research, I have struggled to put the core of what I have experienced into words. The felt sense I have had about sisu is in some sense impersonal, a kind of connectivity that reaches beyond the ego or beyond the self. This is one of the overarching insights I have of my moments of “epiphanies” in essay 2, as well as my experiences described in essay 3. In some sense it was not only “me” experiencing, at least not in the conceptual sense in which I narrate myself as a person who is “X” and “Y” to my conscious ego. There is a strong element of connectivity or attunement with life and life energy in my zone of sisu moments that conceptually and objectively could easily be deemed extreme and rationally beyond the limits of inner strength. This state of sisu was highlighted almost as a sense of variation (increase and decrease) in my sensibility to the “rhythm” or “melody”-like elements in what I experienced with-in myself and with regards to my surroundings.

Sheets-Johnstone (1999) has written about the temporally dynamic nature of present moments and their variation in intensity just like in a musical sound, also adding along the lines of thinking by Stern (2004), that our thinking about psychological phenomena (as well as therapy) has been either time-blind or in ignorance of “the temporal dynamics” of lived experience. Stern (1995, 2000) calls these fleeting dynamic time-shapes “vitality affects,” which I propose offers a useful conceptual handle for describing the states of sisu at the heart of my epiphanies. Stern, too, uses the metaphor of music to discuss the nature of the present moment, writing that it seems to have “a marked time dynamic, as does a musical phrase” (2004, p. 27). As a result of my experience and research, I view sisu more in terms of this vitality affect state than the straightforward “non-giving-upness” that most often is associated with resolve and fortitude. The vitality affect illuminates the temporally dynamic nature of sisu as the emergent, and therefore not a simple “ON/OFF-switch-like” lived experience of fortitude, but one which in fact is more like an entire mixer table; embodied, corporeal, and beyond any dualistic philosophy of resolve and adversity.

James discusses the challenge of intellectualism (the human ability to use thought to deal with abstractions at the expense of emotions), which he discusses in relation to experience and writes in The Pluralistic Universe at lecture VII:

> In principle, then, as I said, intellectualism’s edge is broken; it can only approximate to reality, and its logic is inapplicable to our inner life, which spurns its vetoes and mocks at its impossibilities. Every bit of us at every is part and parcel of a wider self, it quivers along various radii like the wind-rose on a compass, and the actual in it is
continuously one with possibles not yet in our present sight.
(1908/2018, p. 176)

At the heart of this, lies James’ view that the “immediately felt-life” cannot be simply compressed into “units that intellectualist logic holds to and makes its calculations with” (James, 1908/2018, p. 175). Therefore, in the undertone of one’s immediately present (temporal) life, one always ultimately finds a flux, or a kind of untetheredness, which does not allow those experiences to be domesticated and boxed neatly—even when one might so wish for the purpose of their intellectual pursuits. Instead, “[w]e realize this life as something always off its balance, something in transition, something that shoots out of a darkness through a dawn into a brightness that we feel to be the dawn fulfilled,” James continues (p. 173).

I propose that sisu across our life experiences (and even across a singular experience) draws from a multitude of states, which all play out inside its dynamic vitality affect state, which, to borrow James, are “continuously one with possibles not yet in our present sight.” Sometimes expressed as unyieldingness and sometimes as yieldingness. Both expressions moving “the doer” toward the unified end-result of allowing life to penetrate through “death” and burst out from the confines of our experienced contraction. Furthermore, while sisu as vital affect state (amidst “possibles yet not in sight”) indeed emerges inside the action window of hardship—or put again in musical terms—while the title of a particular symphony of sisu might be described in terms of overcoming some extreme adversity, the tonic of its musical scale (also known as the keynote or the first and last note) is not necessarily drawn, or it does not need to be drawn, from the sound of the struggle itself, but from how one “tunes in” or “tunes themselves” with regards to both their inner process and how they approach (or relate to) their outer environment during the struggle. The higher octave expression of this process being not only a melody of “sisu as survival” but “sisu as a harmony” within the temporal dynamics of the lived experience of overcoming adversity.

If there is more strength to us that meets the eye—as I propose there is—perhaps there is also more to strength that meets the eye. With this I refer particularly to the tight’ish confines of conceptual language used to discuss the phenomenon of inner strength, including sisu, and on the other hand, the potential that lives in the space of the felt, pre-linguistic, and corporeally experienced, that Stern (1999) approaches through the previously mentioned idea of “vitality affect” and Bateson (1972) approaches as “grace.” This state being, in Benjamin’s (2018) terms “beyond the doer and being done to,” where one holds the cognitive dissonance of two opposites (see Festinger, 1957) and in a way, ends up occupying a space beyond this duality. What Benjamin refers in her research as the “third” or “thirdness” points to “a position constituted through holding the tension of recognition between difference and sameness, taking the other to be a separate but equivalent center of initiative and consciousness” (p. 4). This “position of the third” perhaps being akin to Bakhtin’s superaddressee (1986, p. 126), the presence of a kind of impending possibility inherent to particular space. However, this superaddressee, not as a judge or witness in Bakhtin’s sense, but as a “superpotentiality” to which all emergent futures and potential realities are stored or glued, and from which they become composed through (and through-out) the temporally dynamic present moment(s).

Finally, developing sisu (or cultivating, say, systems intelligence) is a practice of self-reflection in which we venture into the unknown to learn by trial and error as we test out our ideas. It is often an act of courage to pass the thresholds of our assumed capacities, since to do so we must simultaneously hold space for both our greatness and our incompleteness. I propose that the deliberate practice of the human inherent qualities of sisu and systems intelligence can be a way to positive transformation on individual level, and through the causal feedback loops of interaction inherent to human systems, it can promote the development of a more heightened intersubjective social awareness and
collaboration. Neither thinking nor resolve alone is enough to create sustainable behavioral practices for such an outcome. However, systems intelligence and sisu thoughtfully blended into a virtuous cycle that is the kind of “distinctly humanly tuned effort” that Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2007a, p. 6) speak for, can perhaps offer such a path, and guide us closer to an existence that feels like home.
6. Discussion

6.1 Contributions to current literature

Sisu is a centuries old Finnish construct that until recently has remained under-researched and poorly defined. This dissertation makes a contribution to pre-existing research literature in at least three main ways. Brought together, it makes theoretical contributions to our understanding around sisu and the phenomenon of embodied fortitude it more generally points to.

First, this study was the first of its kind to examine and describe sisu within the psychological and phenomenological frameworks. It thus rendered the construct less elusive by giving it a citable definition and placing it on the map in relation to other related terms (essay 1). It did so by exploring the essence of sisu through data obtained using an online survey and by means of (even) radical experimental field studies which yielded a number of observations around sisu—some of them (i.e., gentleness as strength; essay 2) perhaps surprising or slightly paradoxical in their nature. Based on the qualitative data I presented, sisu differentiates itself from more familiar constructs such as grit, perseverance, resilience, hardiness, and so on. It for example overlaps with certain endurance aspects of perseverance and grit but differs in its emphasis on short-term intensity rather than long-term stamina. More interestingly, it points to a different way of inquiring into strength: as something visceral and somatic. Sisu seems to go beyond conscious willing and connects to our primordial instincts for survival buried deep within the circuits of the somatic body.

Second, while the research expands the collective popular dialogue by adding a novel and empirically explored cultural concept to discuss strength in the face of adversity, it also adds diversity to the contemporary (positive) psychology and social sciences research literature by singling out an intrapsychological phenomenon within the human experience for which no research term previously existed. Understanding what comprises (or compromises) any individual’s behavior is a multi-layered and complex task. Current research implies that beliefs, mindset, experiences, cultural expectations, as well as the examples we witness around us may all carry a piece of this puzzle. Bermant et al. (2011) advice practitioners within the field of positive psychology to broaden their focus to other cultures beyond the mainstream North American research culture to contribute to a more diverse understanding of the human experience. The research on sisu is starting to bear some fruit as Lomas (2016) has outlined the beginnings of a positive cross-cultural lexicography of “untranslatable” words pertaining to wellbeing that do not have a direct English translation and attributes the research on sisu as the inspiration for the lexicography. Furthermore, a Spanish word rasmia has been researched by Merino et al. (2020) as a concept related to sisu, and a preliminary tool for measuring sisu is being developed at Helsinki University (Henttonen et al., in review) with potential applications being researched within the vital domain of work wellbeing.

Third, I outlined systems intelligence, more specifically “thinking about our thinking” (Hämäläinen et al., 2014; Hämäläinen & Saarinen, 2007b) as a self-directed practice for exposing and reimaging patterns and habits of thinking that may stand in the way of accessing sisu more readily. More specifically, I
examined sisu in the light of the eight factors of systems intelligence as a path to cultivating gentle power which is the harmonious and healthy expression of sisu. The research also answers the call outlined by Kern et al. (2019, p. 4) for further maturation and sophistication of the theory, methodology, and practice across the field positive psychology through an approach they call “systems informed positive psychology” which incorporates principles and concepts from the systems sciences into positive psychology. Similarly, it contributes to the invitation of the “third wave of positive psychology” (Lomas et al., 2021) to view phenomena in the focus of our research-making beyond the individual and thus, embrace the greater complexity of human life as it is embedded in multitudes of systems and contexts, while “becoming more interdisciplinary and multicultural, and embracing a wider range of methodologies” (p. 660).

It marks the first time that systems intelligence is explored, not only in relation to sisu, but any mental fortitude related concept, while being the first attempt to explore sisu in the light a systematic personal practice related paradigm that might offer future directions for its cultivation in the everyday. The essay also built connections between Eastern martial arts philosophy and Western qualitative research tradition, as well as systems intelligence, which now that imagined may all open further useful future research parallels.

Just like systems intelligence is not only about thinking (that’s why it is an update to systems thinking) but about intentional thinking with an aspiration for ever-unfolding betterment, sisu is not just about action with exquisite determination, but about exquisite determination with an aspiration for qualities like harmony, gentle power, and attunement. Sisu and systems intelligence dance especially well together because of their shared reverence for ever-unfolding personal growth and belief in the potential of our human nature to seek elevation itself. The ultimate call of system intelligence, as well as aikido that is used as a practice related backdrop to my inquiry in essay 3, is the realization of the deep, research-backed benefits that informed, deliberate, and caring actions can have through and throughout our lives and systems. Both approaches, sisu and martial arts, are new additions to the domain of systems intelligence and help expand on the theoretical literature of the discipline.

### 6.2 Practical implications

Sundararajan (2005) writes that in addition to its empirical prowess, the scientific vision of a good life needs self-reflexivity, and critical thinking. Through my self-reflective research practice, like in the case of the autoethnographic first-person inquiry in essay 2, insights were gained not about data somewhere “out there,” but to create something useful and practical for life “right here”—starting with my own experience—and in order “to narrow the gap between science and life” (Sundararajan, 2005, p. 35). Much like climbing on top of a mountain to gain a broader view over the landscape, through the introduction, study, and testing of new ideas, researchers have the means to bring previously invisible worlds (and words) into our periphery.

Language gives birth to mental imagery and constructs that help us describe our experiences and understand the world we live in. There are lessons to be learned in all cultures about how humans persevere. Rendering an idea that is “untranslatable” into a description which communicates meaning, can bring it closer within reach and open a possibility for empowering new dialogues. As we grow in our understanding of the phenomenon outlined in this paper—which draws from a multitude of disciplines and ideas—we can unlock tools to even address William James’ century-old question pertaining to the extent and limits of human spirit. My humble yet ambitious wish is that by introducing not only sisu, but the idea of gentle power as the maxim of healthy sisu, this research can inspire an exchange around the importance of creating cultures that cease to
worship mental toughness, success, and achievement at the expense of deep human connection, sustainability, and care for oneself, others, and our planet. I propose that when people around us exhibit a lifestyle of sisu as gentle power based on a systems intelligent inquiry, it can foster positive upward spirals to encourage sisu at least in the following ways. It primes people 1.) to be on active lookout to create opportunities for building psychological safety as well as to create spaces of encouragement where individuals are more likely to connect to and express their sisu, and 2.) to notice, witness, and reflect other’s sisuesque actions back to them, that way reinforcing the building of self-efficacy, self-empowerment, and agency. Research shows that because of the evolutionary priming of the human brain for survival, it is natural to focus on possible threats and what is not working. While the “negativity bias” (see e.g., Vaish et al., 2008) has its value, working toward a balanced view of both threats and possibilities seems to provide a more fruitful place to act from when one is under stress or perceived treat.

We live embedded within a dynamic web of systems and therefore, all our actions have an impact on others around us (Saarinen & Hämäläinen, 2010). Understanding this systemic nature of life, as espoused by systems intelligence, can help establish a deeper sense of belonging to something greater and therefore, encourage a sense of connection to systems around us. Seeing oneself as an influencer within the dynamic puzzle of life can further encourage a sense of responsibility for one’s actions (Senge et al., 2004) and having a higher purpose has been for example linked to lower risk of mortality (Alimujiang, et al, 2019). It may also come with benefits such as greater cognitive functioning, sense of engagement, motivation, and productivity (Mcknight & Kashdan, 2009). Bringing sisu into mainstream discussion in Finland and around the world is about building the realm of possibilities and harnessing them to inspire and stand with people, who are presently feeling overpowered by the challenges that they see lie ahead. It is imperative to ensure that these constructs of well-being cover as much of the landscape of our study as possible. Researching the enabling factors of perseverance and achievement can expand our understanding of flourishing and help us cultivate it wisely.

### 6.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

While rendering a more nuanced understanding of the construct of sisu and opening a gate to its further research, the study also affirms the notion of sisu as a construct that proves challenging to explain and ambiguities remain. Out of the three themes that are used to describe the main essence of sisu in essay 1, especially the third one, latent power, leaves us with more questions than answers. This may be partly because the language and research for examining the embodied nature of human emotion and cognition have been overshadowed by the notion of behaviors emanating from the mind.

The survey itself in essay 1 did not offer a deep enough dive into the construct, and descriptions such as “hard to describe” and my personal favorite “magical quality” were commonplace. Future questions that could yield a much needed broader inquiry into sisu and the phenomenon of inner fortitude that it denotes, could be along the lines of: “What is the actual role of the gut and intestines in influencing one’s sisuesque actions and what is the relationship between the mind and the gut biome with regards to sisu?” and “Why do some people seem to exhibit more sisu naturally than others and is there a way to decode this process in with such detail yet simplicity that sisu could be taught to a first grader?”

The second, autoethnographic phase of the research offered a needed deeper inquiry into sisu. However, it is a representation of just one person’s lived experience of something ultimately so ubiquitous, that it is endlessly rich with a multitude of unique stories that each depend on and are defined by several changing variables. Further studies and simply, more research, be it qualitative,
quantitative, or mixed, will help make the discourse around sisu more accurate, generalizable, and hopefully useful for everyday practice. The phenomenon indicated by sisu is crucial to the healthy development of our society, as well as survival, as it relates to one’s ability to take action in challenging situations. Future researchers are encouraged to study the development of sisu as a multidimensional, holistic quality that includes the somatic, cognitive, and life philosophical view to human performance, as well in respect to established theories of development such as Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory, the five major Learning Theories, and even The Attachment Theory.

The growing research of the role of the gut biome in emotion regulation and therefore, our behavioral responses to stress and adversity can offer another fascinating pathway to understanding sisu. Longitudinal research is also needed to determine how sisu might change over time and to identify its possible crucial developmental periods or windows (e.g. are strategies and practices enabling sisu best learned in a certain age, is sisu best integrated to our action repertoire during physical challenges and when we learn through our body, or perhaps when experiencing deep emotional strain such as going through a divorce?). Finally, while Finland is the original “home of sisu” the construct, examples of humans reaching beyond their known capacities are woven into the collective canvas or our day-to-day everywhere, as well as across the history of our species. A systematic examination of stories and words from other cultures (such as the Spanish rasmia or Afghan sumud) could further deepen our knowledge of the overall phenomenon of inner strength.

In terms of sisu and systems intelligence, the parallels between the framework of systems intelligence and Eastern martial arts (especially aikido), while previously unexplored, may offer a fascinating intersection of inquiry with potentially useful future research parallels in the domains of personal development and leadership, as well as applied philosophical inquiries—including the intersection of systems intelligence and Taoism.

6.4 Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to shed light on the centuries old but previously underexamined Finnish cultural construct of sisu as it pertains to the universal human phenomenon of inner strength in the face of adversity. The topic was explored first through a more traditional survey approach using thematic analysis. This produced an initial map to lay a foundation for further inquiry of sisu through a more personal—namely my autoethnographic journey—into the lived experience of sisu. The findings from both research modes combined shed light on the construct beyond its previous blueprint. It expands on sisu as a previously elusive dimension of human strength by presenting it as a quality that is multidimensional and multidisciplinary in its make up: in this dissertation sisu is witnessed not only as relentlessness or as a quality of the individual, but as gentleness and something found in the in-between of individuals coming together. It is also observed as a quality, whose roots reach beyond the plane of cognitive discourse and into the more visceral landscape of our expression. Finally, healthy sisu as “gentle power” was explored as a quality of human functioning related to systems intelligence and as a practice of systems intelligence.

Besides the novel information the dissertation provides on the determinants of human fortitude through sisu, it is my hope that it may encourage further research on sisu as well as other under-explored cultural constructs and ideas, so that this work can grow beyond its primary form as an academic research artifact and into something that helps individuals unearth reserves of inner power when they most need them. While realizing the grandeur of such wish, my hope nevertheless remains that this dissertation may act as an invitation for the reader—including myself—to not just “do more” or “be stronger” but have the patience, deliberation, and wisdom to determine our most honest, true, and
harmonious next move. After this to have the courage and yes, sisu, to follow through with what needs to be done, and do so in a way that enables a more beautiful world.
7. References


This dissertation explores the age-old Finnish construct of sisu which
denotes the human ability to surpass one's preconceived limitations in
times of adversity. It presents it as a fundamental and universal
phenomenon consisting of aspects such as transcendence, gentleness,
interconnectedness, and individuals' capacity to adjust their behavior to
enable better life. Sisu is also described as an expression of gentle
power, through which one might not only survive but overcome and
even find elevation for oneself in the course of one's journey. Gentle
power points to sisu as a harmonious quality, as opposed to stubborn
sisu that becomes harmful and is examined through the framework of
systems intelligence and its container of "thinking about one's
thinking." The partly autoethnographic dissertation deploys a
hermeneutic phenomenological research approach that included an
autoethnographic field study to New Zealand consisting of a 2400-
km/50-day ultra run and bicycle journey and a 2-month residency in a
Chinese martial arts academy to understand what overcoming
challenges means, not as something inferred and analyzed through
second-hand sources or in retrospect, but against the backdrop of life
as-it-happens.