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Spiritual Empowerment Through Buddhist Practice

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SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT THROUGH BUDDHIST PRACTICE

By

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Abstract

The Buddhist practice of eight Waterloo, Ontario residents are explored in this study, highlighting the relationship between the reported outcomes of Buddhist practice and individual empowerment. By employing a heuristic research methodology, as described by Moustakas (1994), I use my own experience as a Buddhist practitioner to contribute to the research data and elicit detailed descriptions from the participants. The findings of the interviews reveal four common themes of the participants' Buddhist practice: 1) increased awareness of unconscious habits; 2) peace from letting go of control; 3) a change in their perspective of self; and 4) enhanced connection with others. Discussion of the findings compares the outcomes of the participants' practice with Riger's (1993) proposed model of empowerment which incorporates both traditionally masculine ideals of control and individuality with traditionally feminine ideals of compassion and interconnection.

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Overview

In this paper I explore the Buddhist practices of myself and those of eight local (Waterloo, Ontario) Buddhist practitioners. I begin by providing a brief introduction to Buddhist theory and how it relates to psychology, particularly in regards to the relationship between concentration, mindful awareness, and mental well-being. I then discuss how I became interested in Buddhist practice and outline my experience with Buddhist practice over the past five years.

I then outline the literature on psychology and religion, community psychology and religion, Buddhist practice and individual empowerment, and finally Buddhism as practiced in North America.

Following the literature review, I discuss my research method and methodology, situating myself within the research as both a researcher and an insider in the world of North American Buddhist practice. A discussion of heuristic research methodology ensues, followed by a description of the recruitment process, data collection, and analysis of the data.

In the findings section I begin by describing my Buddhist practice over the course of my research and discuss the role that my practice has played in the analysis and interpretation of the data. I then provide brief personal vignettes of each participant to give the reader an idea of who the participants are, why they began a Buddhist practice, and in what ways they "practice". Following the participant vignettes, I present the five emerging themes from the data, including my own observations on each theme, given in italics.

The discussion section begins with an exploration of the link between the findings and empowerment theory, particularly the concept of empowerment as defined by Riger (1993). The limitations of the study are then examined, followed by a discussion of the implications of this research on community psychology. Therein I describe the potential for experience-based research in exploring the nature of awareness and compassion, as well as the challenges that researchers face in observing and describing phenomena which are rooted in experience and often defy description. I then conclude by suggesting that community psychologists need to reframe their concept of individual empowerment in such a way that recognizes the role of acceptance, transcendence of self, and interconnection.

Introduction

In the field of psychology, there are many different approaches to alleviating suffering, and, to a lesser extent, creating happiness. Some clinical psychologists look at past experiences to understand why people behave and feel the way they do in the present. Clinical psychologists also consider habits of thought and how these habits can be misguided and contribute to one's current suffering. Neuropsychologists consider the impact that brain chemistry has on how we think, act, and feel. Community psychologists contend that there are many factors which influence our capacity for suffering and happiness, both within the individual (such as the above-mentioned factors) and outside of the individual (e.g. family and peer relationships, culture, societal norms, etc.).

Buddhist philosophy asserts that it is our minds that contribute most significantly to our own suffering and that the mind can be deconstructed and reconstructed to give the

individual a more stable sense of peace, happiness, and equanimity. In fact, the Buddha is quoted as saying "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering". Through his own internal search, the Buddha discovered that suffering, or dissatisfaction, is inevitable: we suffer when we do not get what we want, we eventually become dissatisfied with what we have, we suffer when things do not turn out exactly as we had planned, we age, we get sick, etc. The Buddha found that our desire for pleasant experiences and our aversion to unpleasant experiences gives rise to suffering. Because there are so many factors in life that are out of our control, and because everything is constantly changing, trying to hold onto pleasant things and experiences while pushing away unpleasant ones makes us unhappy because it is a battle we cannot win. This habit of attachment and aversion is present from moment to moment, arising through our sense, including the thoughts in our minds.

The Buddha found liberation from suffering by relinquishing his desires and aversions. He taught that such a state does not negate the existence of personal preferences; one still has likes and dislikes, but one's happiness is not dependent on them. The state of liberation (also referred to as enlightenment or nirvana) is beyond words, according to the Buddha and many who have reached it since him. Instead of describing what enlightenment felt like, the Buddha would simply describe it as being free from suffering. Gunaratana (2001) attempts to illustrate it:

> The bliss of this state is indescribable. Its single characteristic is peace. It is not born, not created, not conditioned. The best we can do is to say what this state does not have. It does not have desire or attachment or grasping after things, people, and experiences. It does not have hatred or aversion or anger or greed. (p. 49)

Freeing oneself from the deeply conditioned habits which arise from desire and aversion requires consistent and dedicated effort. To do so, the Buddha recommended living one's life according to what he called "The Eightfold Path". The eight parts of this path, though numbered, are sometimes portrayed as eight spokes of a wheel, with the hub being wisdom and compassion, and with the spokes interacting with and supporting one another (Gunaratana, 2001). The Eightfold Path is as follows:

Wisdom training
1. Right View
2. Right Intentions

Ethics Training
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood

Meditation Training
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

It should be noted that "right" in this case does not refer to an objective, absolute "correct" approach in any given situation. The word "skillful" has been used in its place on the Eightfold Path and perhaps lends more nuance to the branches of The Eightfold Path.

Among the branches of the Eightfold Path, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration are of particular interest to psychologists seeking to understand the nature of suffering and happiness. "Mindfulness" is paying attention, from moment to moment, to what is. "What is" consists of the four foundations of mindfulness: 1) bodily sensations; 2) feelings (our reactions to sensations, which take the form of pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant); 3) thoughts; and 4) the *dhamma*, or mental objects (the nature of all objects as being impermanent, unsatisfactory, and devoid of an independent self)

(Gunaratana, 2001). One of the main meditation techniques in Buddhism, *Vipassana* (also known as mindfulness meditation or insight meditation), is used to cultivate great mindfulness, and ultimately to gain deep, experiential insight into the nature of reality.

However, mindfulness meditation is not meant to be practiced solely on the meditation cushion; it is a way of interacting with one's own reality at every moment in order to awaken to the present moment (Khema, 1987). A simple example of mindful action can be found in your current experience of reading this thesis: where is your attention? Have you read passages with your eyes but found your attention had strayed elsewhere for some time? Are you holding any unnecessary tension in your body? You can also make note of your reactions to what you are reading: are you finding any parts of the material unpleasant? What is the body's reaction to unpleasant material? Can you detect the suffering that can arise from such aversive reactions, or the suffering that comes from trying to hold on to pleasant reactions? Optimally, one carries forward such mindfulness into everything one does, gradually freeing the individual from the past conditioning that distorts his or her perception of the present moment. By gaining greater clarity, we reduce our own conditioned, unconscious suffering. According to Gunaratana (2001), "the deep purpose of mindfulness is to open the wisdom eye, for insight into the true nature of reality is the ultimate secret of lasting peace and happiness." (p. 221)

For Buddhist practice to be effective, a certain level of concentration is necessary in order to gain deep insights into reality through meditative practice. A concentrated mind is also needed in order to mindfully live in the present moment, with the numerous stimuli coming to us through the senses at any given moment (Khema, 1987; Gunaratana, 2001). I have noticed that my mind habitually wanders from one thought to the next,

often without my awareness of this process. Through meditative practice, the practitioner can focus on a single phenomenon—often the rise and fall of the breath—in order to enhance her or his concentration. Every time the mind wanders off into fantasy, planning, memories and the like, mindful awareness comes in to recognize the wandering mind and bring attention back to the object of focus (in this case, the rise and fall of the breath), over and over again. Through dedicated practice, deep levels of concentration can be cultivated. Deep concentration is said to suffuse the practitioner with equanimity, joy, and tranquility (Khema, 1987; Rinpoche, 1994; Gunaratana, 2001) . Though such concentration is said to be immensely pleasant, in Buddhist mindfulness practice, it is a means to an end; deep concentration is used to mindfully investigate one's experience in order to gain insight into the nature of reality (Gunaratana, 2001).

Buddhist practice, mindfulness and concentration work together to reduce suffering. Concentration helps the practitioner notice the various thoughts, body sensations, and reactions that come and go so quickly. Deep concentration helps the individual see the truth of the *dhamma* in every phenomenon that arises. Being mindful of one's thoughts and actions helps one think and act in positive, wholesome ways, which in turn, leads to greater concentration. Being mindful of the truth of impermanence and the suffering caused by attachment helps the practitioner experience such blissful states of concentration without being hurt when such states disappear or are not readily attained.

According to the Buddha, one does not see reality as it is because of one's past conditioning (Rinpoche, 1994). Instead of seeing the world with fresh, innocent eyes, one is inclined to fear the recurrence of negative experiences from the past and to try to recreate positive experiences, thereby distorting "what is" according to one's subtle,

pervasive hopes and fears. Again, such grasping and aversion is said to cause suffering. The ability to see, feel, smell, and hear objects undistorted by our own prejudices, concepts, and preferences is said to be liberating and a source of wisdom. Mindfulness and concentration practice lead to an enhanced awareness of self and a simultaneous deconstruction of the conditioned self. Concentration highlights the pervasive nature of one's unique habits, mindfulness notes their impermanent, selfless nature and the suffering caused by desire or aversion, and, in turn, more freedom from one's habits can be gained. With less clinging to one's self (including one's thoughts, opinions, experiences, and possessions), the practitioner is said to feel a greater sense of peace and oneness with the world. The practitioner still has preferences, beliefs, and possessions, but her sense of self is no longer so closely attached to them that she feels attacked when they are challenged.

In terms of understanding the nature of suffering and happiness, Buddhism offers a unique and valuable perspective for some who have only been exposed to western psychological theories on the matter. For instance, as a master's student in community psychology, I have felt particularly drawn to Buddhist teachings which address the importance of our minds in creating happiness (or suffering) while also acknowledging our innate capacities for compassion, interconnection, and love for other beings. I have found that Buddhist theories on happiness, interconnection, and compassion have much in common with community psychology values such as empowerment, respecting diversity, and social action. My interest in the topic began roughly seven years ago, when I abruptly went from a high point in my life to a sudden and painful bout of depression.

How I Became Interested in Spirituality

When I refer to "spirituality", I am referring to individual experiences and practices which help one recognize, experience, and accept one's Buddha nature. This reality, as described by Buddhist authors and practitioners (Trungpa, 1973; Rinpoche, 1994; Dalai Lama, 2003) is that one is naturally loving and deeply connected to nature and other human beings. I use the term "Buddha nature" here, but it is my belief that Christian teachings such as "love your neighbour as yourself", and "the kingdom of God is within you" point towards the same truth of love and interconnection. I have chosen this definition based on my own experiences of Buddha nature (though they are admittedly subjective).

It is impossible for me to completely convey the various events from my life that have led me to my spiritual journey. For the sake of concision and precision, I will highlight a time of my life that I view as being pivotal in my *decision* to learn about spirituality, particularly in regards to happiness and peace of mind.

Following my undergraduate degree, traumatic events led to me falling into a mild depression. The literature, music, relationships, and activities that had once brought me great joy were now rendered lifeless. More specifically, when looking at the DSM IV, I would say that I suffered from what would be called "dysthymia", a mild depression in which the symptoms are less severe than a clinical depression, with the symptoms lasting longer than a clinical depression. The way this felt is far more complex than a simple DSM-IV description, but I hope for now this suffices as an adequate description of what I was dealing with. What magnified the pain—and my reaction to it—was the severity with which my world had changed: I went from what I would consider the

happiest, most passionate time of my life to a period of marked numbness, where I felt out of touch with my heart and natural vitality; the hell which Dostoyevsky wrote about—the suffering of being unable to love—had become my new reality. What I lost is akin to what Walsh-Bowers (2000) described as the "spirit" as conceptualized by his Native Canadian students: "an everlasting life-force, giving purpose and direction" (p. 230).

My reaction to my emotional crash was to grasp for whatever happiness I could find, most often trying to emulate that which had made me happy before. But the harder I tried to recreate the conditions which seemingly gave rise to my happiness, the less happy and the more lost I became. It seemed the more attached I became to the passionate, lively period of life which I had recently lost, the further I moved away from feeling anything resembling the honest, deep feelings of love, confidence, and happiness that marked that time of my life. I lost sight of the fact that my happiness had come about naturally—I had treated people well, I had honoured my feelings and values, I had been humble, and I had been patient in matters of love and happiness.

Looking back at this intense experience of loss, I now realize that even though I had been very happy for some time, I still had many unresolved issues bubbling beneath the surface, ready to burst with the proper provocation. My insecurities had been glossed over with an inflated sense of ego and confidence. My fears of loss and abandonment had been buried beneath a belief that I was now too good to be left, ignored, or abandoned.

My Experience with Buddhism

My spiritual practice has had two distinct phases. In the first phase, I was introduced to the teachings of Buddhism on attachment and suffering, and attended three meditation retreats. The retreats (outlined below) gave me direct experience into the peace and happiness that can come from deep concentration. They also provided a taste of what it would be like to belong to a community of like-minded spiritual seekers. During this phase of my spiritual practice, I was not able to maintain a consistent meditation practice at home, nor had I been taught how to incorporate mindfulness into my everyday life. This period lasted from roughly 2006 until January 2009.

In January 2009 I renewed my Buddhist practice with greater dedication than I ever had before: though I still was not meditating every day, I was managing to meditate for about 30 minutes four or five times a week. I also managed to take the mindful awareness that I was cultivating on the meditation cushion and mix it in with my every day life. This second phase of my spiritual practice was largely supported by my enrolment in a local meditation course where I met another trustworthy teacher and a group of dedicated practitioners. What follows is an outline of my Buddhist practice during these two periods, along with the lessons I learned and the transformations I underwent.

"Phase One"

Though I could identify a few incidents, both during my childhood and immediately preceding my depression which clearly contributed to my depression, it was clear to me that my *reaction* to these incidents was causing me even greater distress. As a psychology student, I was aware of clinical and abnormal psychology theory, but I felt

that they lacked a logical, practical explanation for the suffering I had caused myself. Furthermore, I felt that psychology's common answer to depression—therapy and antidepressants—would be costly, time-consuming, and possibly damaging to my health. For the time-being, I decided to navigate my way through this troubling time without either intervention.

A few months after the onset of my depression a friend of mine introduced me to Buddhism, particularly through her knowledge of meditation and breathing techniques. I learned how one's breathing can affect one's mood and how one's mood can be reflected in one's breathing. I also took up meditation for a brief period, but I had little understanding of what to do and what the goal was; I was again attached to the idea that it would lead me to a blissful state, and the results that I achieved were disappointingly less blissful than I had expected.

During the first year of my master's degree in 2006, I decided to seek out experienced meditation teachers and perhaps attend a meditation retreat. I found a website for the Spring Rain Sangha in Toronto wherein there was an announcement for an upcoming *Vipassana* or "mindfulness meditation" retreat. I decided to attend, desperate to put myself through whatever rigours were necessary to bring more authenticity and peace into my life.

The Retreats

Between January 2005 and July 2006 I attended three 3-day retreats. Two of them were Vipassana meditation retreats and one was a *Metta* meditation retreat, all guided by Philip Starkman of the Spring Rain Sangha in Toronto. Philip is a counselor who resides in Toronto who has spent over 15 years in Japan, Burma, Thailand, and India

studying Buddhism and meditation. Interacting with him and experiencing the peacefulness, light-heartedness, and clarity of thought that this man exhibits has been inspirational to me both during the retreats and in the time writing this master's thesis. He has advised me on my spiritual path during meditation retreats as well as outside of the retreats as a counselor.

What follows is an outline of the protocol followed during the retreats, the schedule we followed while on retreat, and the changes in being and perspective I underwent as a result of the retreats.

Meditation instructions

During the Vipassana retreat we practiced a mixture of *Samatha* and Vipassana meditation. Samatha translates as "Calm Abiding" and, in the case of the Vipassana retreat, is used to settle the mind so that the practitioner can observe his or her thoughts and emotions with greater awareness. When practicing samatha, the practitioner puts "extraordinary focus on an ordinary object", as our teacher Philip Starkman would say. In this case, we were instructed to put our attention on our abdomen as we sat, concentrating on how it rises and expands when inhaling, and then relaxes and contracts when exhaling. We were instructed to maintain our focus as best as we could and to gently bring the mind back to this task when we noticed our minds wandering—and mine certainly did! This meditation was practiced for the first day, after which the more experienced meditators and those who felt they had achieved an adequate amount of calmness in their minds then switched to Vipassana meditation. Vipassana meditation (or "insight meditation") takes the mind and turns it onto itself, practicing a mindful awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, and sensations and the conditioned responses to

them. I was unable to reach a state of mind calm enough to truly practice Vipassana. I am fascinated, however, by the amount of chattering that goes on in my mind (and I imagine the minds of others). Sometimes I feel centered enough to really "see" this stream of thought more clearly; when this happens I realize how quickly and uncontrollably my thoughts usually go by. The nature of my mind and thoughts is hard to pin down—these thoughts are with me daily and seemingly right under my nose all the time, though I rarely seem to be in control of them or even aware of them! So when I am thinking these thoughts but I am not really aware of them, who is thinking the thoughts? Where are they coming from? I find such questions interesting to ponder from time to time, though I am not overly concerned with the answer for now.

The metta meditations were different from the Vipassana meditations. Metta is a word from the Pali language which means "loving-kindness", and comes from the Theravada Buddhist tradition (Rinpoche, 1994). The focus of the meditations and teachings during this retreat were on metta and what are called the *Brahma Viharas* (also known as the Four Immeasurables, the Four Noblest Qualities of Mind, and the Divine Abidings) that comprise metta: love (wanting all sentient beings to be happy); compassion (wanting all sentient beings to be free from suffering); sympathetic joy (finding joy in the good fortune and happiness of others); and equanimity (in simple terms, the ability to accept that which cannot be changed). Though this retreat followed a similar schedule to that of the vipassana retreat, it differed because the meditations were not silent. Instead, Philip, the retreat leader, would verbally instruct us to visualize sending out the four immeasurables to first ourselves, then a loved one, then a friend, then a neutral person, then someone with whom there is some dislike, and then finally

towards someone we considered to be an enemy. This, or a slight variation of it, would be the basis of our one-hour sitting meditations.

The walking meditations were a welcome opportunity to move my weary muscles between sitting meditations. In the Vipassana retreats we approached walking meditation with the same mindfulness as the sitting meditations: our attention was on every movement involved, every sound, and every minute detail of the walking experience. We moved about the retreat grounds very slowly, gently placing one foot down while slowly lifting the other foot off the ground. I noticed how the dirt felt underneath the heel of my foot as it first touched the ground. I noted the shift of my weight across the length of my foot as my other foot lifted off the ground. Then I began to think about what was for supper. I would then notice my mind had wandered and would bring it back to focusing on the sensation of walking. Such was the experience of walking meditation. We would continue walking the grounds at a very slow pace until the temple bell rang to signify that sitting meditation would start in ten minutes. During the metta retreat we silently offered metta to all that came across our path as we walked. So if I saw a squirrel, I would silently say something along the lines of "may you be happy" or "may you be free from suffering", or even something along the lines of "hey little guy, I hope you're happy".

During both retreats when we were not walking or sitting we were instructed to maintain mindful awareness of whatever we were doing. For instance, when opening a door, I would note the feel of the doorknob in my hand, the feel of it turning in my hand, the weight of the door as I pulled it open, etc. Every moment of the retreat was an opportunity to slow down the mind and body and become present to what was happening. Though this was foreign at first, it became easier as the retreat went on and had a calming

effect on my nerves.

Retreat schedule

Prior to signing up for the retreat, I had had no idea how rigorous it would be. Though I knew the retreat was silent, I did not know that eye contact would be discouraged (the silence and no eye contact are encouraged to enable attendees to go deeper within themselves, encouraging greater mindfulness of one's thoughts and emotions), and I certainly did not know that our schedule would be so demanding. For each of the three days we were to rise at 4:00 am where we would perform our walking meditation on the retreat grounds, then enter the temple at 5:00 am to do breathing exercises, chant, and do sitting meditation until 7:00 am. We then walked again for an hour, sat for an hour, and then ate breakfast in mindful silence. This pattern was repeated, with supper served at 5:00 pm, followed by a few more walking and sitting meditations and a Dharma talk at about 8:00 pm, where our guide, Philip Starkman, would give teachings on Buddhist concepts and answer any questions that the attendees had left for him on pieces of paper. Interviews were also scheduled for the second day of the retreat, where each attendee would meet with the leader of the retreat and refine his or her meditation practice.

Needless to say, this schedule was grueling on many levels: I found it very difficult to sit still for an hour at a time; waking up at 4:00 am, though not as difficult as expected, was still difficult; and my body, particularly my knees and back, was quite stiff and sore from the hours of cross-legged sitting I had done. Still, I tried to practice with mindfulness, dedication, and an open mind. I was quite grateful to attend this retreat under the careful tutelage of Philip Starkman who brought with him an air of mental

clarity and light-heartedness which made him an engaging speaker and a spiritual authority whom I felt I could trust.

Insights and spiritual changes

After emerging from my first Vipassana retreat, I felt mentally fresh, more keenly focused, and I truly felt like I had a better understanding of how many of my conditioned responses were leading me away from true happiness. I particularly remember the drive home from the retreat, having a conversation with an attendee of the retreat who was riding with me. I remember being able to link my often random thoughts together so easily, engaging in an interesting and intelligent conversation, something which had sometimes been a struggle during my years of mild depression. I felt as though the many fears, thoughts, and preconceptions in my mind had dissipated, leaving little else to focus on than what was going on right in front of me. How wonderful it felt to have such peace of mind! How great it felt to connect with another human being on a meaningful level! This feeling gave me greater insight into the impact that the "ego" (or "self-centered thinking") has on my ability to feel at peace and connect with others.

Another facet of the retreat experience that surprised me was that the dedicated, purposeful practice during the retreat carried over into my interactions following the retreat in an effortless manner, particularly during the Vipassana retreat. I was pleased that my increased awareness came through somewhat effortlessly and instinctively. Contrary to what some believe mindful awareness to be, it was not robotic nor was it devoid of personality and spontaneity. As an experienced athlete and musician, I appreciated the similarity between this mindfulness practice and the slow, deliberate practice involved in learning new athletic movements or new musical pieces. Similar to

these examples, training the mind to become aware of the present moment takes slow, deliberate practice. As one practices more, one is better able to perform the task (in this case, attend to the present moment) with less effort than before.

Another valuable lesson learned along my spiritual path came during my 3-day *metta* mediation retreat. It was not always easy to earnestly wish my fellow meditators good fortune while meditating; my physical discomfort had made me feel edgy and irritable, and often the slightest noise during meditation or mindless action outside of the meditation hall would cause me to bristle with contempt. Still, however aggravating this would feel, it served as a valuable lesson for me: I came to a deep realization—one seemingly more intuitive than a mere intellectual understanding—that when I judge the behaviour of others in a harsh manner, it is a reflection of how I judge myself. When I reflected on how I felt when others would criticize me in a harsh, judgmental manner, I realized that I was often perpetuating this way of being when I would judge the actions of others in a similar manner. By letting go of my insistence that others should behave according to some arbitrary notion of perfection, my internal critic lost some of its power. On a practical level, this was significant because criticism is hardly ever effective when it is delivered in a harsh, judgmental way, regardless of whether it is directed toward oneself or others. In a spiritual sense, this realization "en-lightened" my heart and mind, as it encouraged me to approach myself and others with greater love and compassion while simultaneously letting go of a judgmental tendency that was rife with negativity, guilt, and shame. The power of this deep, intuitive lesson about the many effects of criticism, forgiveness, and compassion gives me more faith to practice compassion in the times where I am challenged to offer it.

Though the hours of meditation certainly contributed to the mental changes I had experienced, the knowledge I had gained during the dharma talks was also invaluable. Of particular interest to me was the concept of equanimity. I learned that my obsessing over how I was feeling from day to day, moment to moment was counter-productive; there would be some bad days, there would be some good days, and to anxiously suppress the negative emotions while trying to create the positive ones was futile. On the other end of the emotional spectrum, I learned that wallowing in the negative can also be destructive. I learned to ride the waves of these emotions, knowing that neither would last forever (the good and the bad). However, I do not want to promote the misconception that Buddhist philosophy encourages passivity and nihilism; with greater wisdom one is better able to skillfully know the difference between what can be changed and what can not be changed, and equanimity plays a role in being able to accept that which cannot be changed.

"Phase Two"

However intensely gratifying my experiences during and after these retreats were, I have come to realize that steady, dedicated meditation is necessary in order to make any changes in my habitual way of being. The years of working on this thesis—roughly three and a half!—have been spent with little mindfulness on my part and a little consistent dedication to meditation. January of 2009 is when I decided to enroll in a study course and meet regularly with a local meditation teacher, which has helped immensely. Currently, I have now managed to meditate for at least 20 minutes every day of the last two months and no longer feel like it is a chore. I notice more clearly how grounded, or centered, I feel as a result.

Over the past year I have become much more aware of how my body reacts to different stimuli and how tension in the body can be related to emotions. My work with a local meditation teacher, Susan Childs,

has helped me tune into a mysterious constriction in my throat and chest that appears from time to time. Her assistance helped me make some *very* difficult decisions in my life over the past year. I learned that talking certainly has its place, but it seems that the body does not lie. By tuning into my constricted throat with acceptance (i.e. not analyzing it, not holding on to any thoughts or feelings nor rejecting any) I was able to come to terms with the fact that I was not ready to get married to the amazing woman to whom I was engaged. I was able to sit there and feel the enormity of fear and pain I had been carrying about my decision, and I was able to more fully realize how painful this decision was going to be for myself and her. I do not think I would have been able to make it through this terribly difficult decision without Susan's help.

The tightness in my throat and chest opened up a bit more during a mindfulness meditation retreat in June of 2009. While there, much of my meditative attention was focused on this tightness. At times I would feel flashes of sadness, and images of my deceased mother would come up. Sometimes memories of past heartbreaks would arise as well. Tears would trickle down my face at times, but the pain was bearable; there was a certain peacefulness behind it all. As I went through this process more and more, I noticed that a strong feeling of love and connection would arise from somewhere inside of me, and I felt this feeling, body-wise, in my chest area. It felt as though everyone was my friend and that I truly cared for each and every person on the retreat. The feeling was amazing and it too made a tear or two drop from my eyes. It felt like I had found an old,

lost friend—a friend that had once been a constant companion, only to be scared off many years ago! My experience with pain and happiness during this retreat has proven to be one of my most valued. I have learned that, as clichéd as it may seem, you truly need to be able to "make friends" with your pain in order to feel deep peace and happiness.

Perhaps not surprisingly, over the past six months (June 2009-December 2009) I have become particularly drawn to metta and tonglen meditation as they seem to directly address the constriction I feel in my chest and throat. I am sometimes struck by the intensity of sorrow and love that I feel in these areas while performing metta and tonglen meditation. Tonglen meditation is generally done by picturing the suffering of another, or multiple, beings, as a cloud of smoke. The practitioner generates whatever feelings of compassion he or she can, and upon inhaling, pictures drawing in the suffering of others and converting it at their heart centre. The practitioner then pictures their self-cherishing nature being destroyed, and upon exhaling imagines the once-suffering being(s) being free from suffering (Chodron, 2007). As a psychology student, I find the approach of tonglen fascinating: instead of treating suffering and pain as something to avoid, the practitioner is encouraged to "make friends" with suffering. Chodron (2007) describes the usefulness of this paradox:

> Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure and, in the process, we become liberated from a very ancient prison of selfishness. We begin to feel love both for ourselves and others and also we being to take care of ourselves and others. It awakens our compassion and it also introduces us to a far larger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness that Buddhists call shunyata. By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being. At first we experience this as things not being such a big deal or so solid as they seemed before. (p. 27)

As someone who works in the social services field, I feel that these meditations are

invaluable tools to help me tune in to the suffering of others with greater depth and authenticity, thereby helping myself and those who need my assistance.

Perhaps most importantly, I have managed to incorporate the teachings of mindfulness and compassion into my everyday life. The Buddha emphasized the need to *live* the teachings of the Buddha, not simply test them out on the meditation cushion and be done with them (Khema, 1987). As often as I can, I try to "wake up" to what I am doing so that my attention is on the task at hand. One way of doing this is by noticing when I am lost in thought, taking a mindful breath (i.e. breathing in and simply paying attention to the inhalation, then cultivating the intention to let go of any resistance or tension on the exhalation), and then grounding myself by feeling my feet on the ground or my rear on the chair.

I also try to be mindful of any hostile reactions to others. When I notice a hostile thought come up, I accept it, pause, and then try to think compassionate thoughts, wishing the other person happiness and freedom from suffering. This helps remind me that the other person is just like me: he or she wants happiness and freedom from suffering, even though his or her actions may not seem to be wise. I have found that practices like this have made me slightly more inclined to view strangers in a more friendly way.

As the Buddha advised centuries ago, his theories on the nature of our suffering and the way to transcend it should be tested and measured against our own experience with a critical, rational mind:

> Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and

> elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it. – Buddha (Rinpoche, 1993, p. 18)

After observation and analysis, I have indeed found that his theories "agree with reason" and are "conducive to the good and benefit of one and all". My experiences with Buddhist practice have made me curious about the Buddhist practice of other Canadian "convert" Buddhists like myself, especially regarding the challenges they face in practicing and the benefits they have felt since beginning.

My Connection to the Research

As a young Canadian who has only recently taken up a Buddhist practice, I am still in the early stages of learning the many theories and traditions of the religion. What I do know is based on the reading I have done, the knowledge gleaned from the teachings and experiences from my three 3-day retreats, and the knowledge gained from my day-to-day practice (however sporadic it has been) over the years. Having said this, I have done my best to present Buddhist theory with as much clarity and accuracy as possible. Clearly illustrating Buddhist theory is no easy task given the importance of experiencing the phenomena one's self, as opposed to "understanding" the concepts on an intellectual level. Furthermore, complications can arise when translating ideas from the ancient languages of the traditional Buddhist nations to English. Given these complications with Buddhist theory, I can not claim to fully understand the theories; as one practices Buddhism, one's understanding and consciousness grow.

Furthermore, Buddhist philosophies can be subject to interpretation and skillful application. For instance, ethically speaking, what might be considered right in a given situation can be wrong in another, depending on the context. I would argue that this

contextual nature has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, I believe that such vagueness encourages the Buddhist to continually interact with the theories, applying them to his or her own unique situation, thereby deepening the Buddhist's knowledge, or at least familiarity, with the material. On the negative side, the teachings can be easily misunderstood or applied with bad intentions (it is my sincere hope that the reader tries to explore the theories that I present while keeping in mind that I can not explore each concept with the depth that they truly deserve). On this note, while writing this thesis, I have found the book *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground: Reconciling Eastern Ideals and Western Psychology* by Harvey Aronson (2004) to be a valuable guide for understanding these complex theories in language and contexts more familiar to westerners, and particularly western psychology students.

I recognize that I am intimately connected with the topic of Buddhism, which may obstruct an objective presentation of the ideology and connected issues. Given the personal nature of this paper and of spirituality in general, there is certainly a part of me that wants to believe that what I am doing is right; that my faith is justified and wise. However, the Buddhist theory of attachment comes to mind when discussing my objectivity. The Buddha advised that the cause of our suffering is our attachment to things that we believe are permanent, reliable sources of happiness. In reality, he said, everything is changing, and though we should not push away the pleasant aspects of life, we should not *depend* on them for our happiness. In the case of this thesis and my spiritual path, I must be mindful of my attachment to pride. What I seek is an accurate depiction of the experiences of my participants, not the simple validation of my beliefs and intelligence.

I focused my research on the experiences of Canadian-born citizens who have adopted a Buddhist practice. The positive changes that I have undergone as a result of such a decision have instilled in me a passion and curiosity for the experiences of others in this regard. As a community psychology student, I decided to focus on if and how the participants found their Buddhist practice to empower them, as defined by Riger (1993).

Overview of Relevant Literature

Psychology and Religion

In their summary of the relationship between psychology and religion, Bergin and Richards (2005) point to psychologist's adoption of the laws of *naturalism* during the 20th century as being instrumental in the ambivalent, and at times hostile, treatment religion and spirituality have been given by psychologists. In psychologists' effort to establish psychology as a "hard science", they adopted the prevailing scientific philosophies of their time, particularly that of *naturalism*, the belief that "natural laws and/or principles ultimately govern the events of nature, including our bodies, behaviors, and minds" (Slife, 2004, p. 45).

By framing their research and theories within the philosophy of naturalism, psychologists of that time were stating that psychological phenomena could be explained, measured, and predicted according to laws of nature, without reference to transcendent or spiritual theories. In so doing, they relegated the study of religious experience and spiritual wisdom to the realms of philosophy, religious studies and other "soft" social sciences. Many scientists of this era viewed matters of inward reflection such as consciousness to be mere "inward illusions" (Barbour, 1990, p. 220). Under the new scientific paradigm, matters of consciousness were also dismissed from examination

because science offered no way of measuring them. For instance, the founder of behaviorism, John Watson argued that "'states of consciousness, like the so-called phenomena of spiritualism, are not objectively verifiable and for that reason can never become data for science" (Watson, 1924/1983, p.1).

Still, it should be noted that the laws of naturalism do not necessarily clash with some of the basic tenets of world religions. For instance, Taoism identifies *Tao*, or "the way" as "a power which envelops, surrounds and flows through all things, living and non-living. The Tao regulates natural processes and nourishes balance in the Universe" (Kirkland, 2004, p. 11). According to Taoist theory, this life force is ever-present and is most strong when a balance of opposites is present. Though simplified here, the philosophy of Taoism presents a theory of how the world functions according to natural laws and/or principles, seemingly something any proponent of naturalism could appreciate. However, the examination of Tao would have required scientists to place some amount of faith in the existence of something that they could most likely never see, or prove to exist. In turn, it is difficult to say whether such ideas were ignored by scientists because they were faith-based or because scientists simply had no way of exploring such topics that would satisfy their own criteria for proof.

However, not all psychologists operated under a strictly natural-science paradigm during this time. In Europe, psychologists such as Wilhelm Wundt and Carl Jung were openly exploring the psychological nature of religion and spirituality. Their work preceded and inspired the movement called *humanistic-existentialism* in North American psychology, which challenged the oversimplified constructs of natural science that posited that humans were merely controlled by biological functions or their environment

(Bergin & Richards, 2005). Instead, humanistic-existential psychologists saw human behaviour as something more complex, with agency and human potential being of interest. Psychologists such as Abraham Maslow (1971) and Rollo May (1975) were exploring issues such as self-actualization and creativity. Though they were still influenced by naturalism, and religion was not talked about directly, their work was a departure from the status quo of natural-science psychologists and it touched upon issues of human potential which could be viewed as associated with religion.

During the same time a second movement of psychologists was openly writing about religion (Bergin & Richards, 2005). William James, Carl Jung, and Gordon Allport all explored the spiritual potential of human beings. For instance, Carl Jung introduced the idea of a *collective unconscious* which posited that humans, to a large extent, are governed by inherited, unconscious ideas—an idea which could be interpreted as endorsing a belief in reincarnation (Sundberg, Winebarger, & Taplin, 2002). Furthermore, Jung theorized that in order to be happy, individuals need to be whole, accepting and balancing the opposing forces within their personalities—a concept that is similar to the Taoist concept of yin and yang. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that this movement began to make an impact on mainstream psychology.

By placing their faith in scientific naturalism, psychologists were forced to ignore the more introverted aspects of the human experience, as well as create a theoretical model for human morality, a realm which had traditionally been informed by religion. With the influence of Darwin's work on evolution, psychologists such as Sigmund Freud theorized that humans were members of the animal kingdom and thus governed by the same drives and impulses as animals (Bergin & Richards, 2005). From this assumption

arose the theory of *ethical hedonism*, which held that human beings are by nature greedy and driven to pursue that which brings them the most pleasure. While religion in general may see such basic drives as natural (to varying degrees), it still advocates restraint, cooperation, and sacrifice—in other words, some sort of effort and duty on the part of humans to transcend these traits.

Here, psychologists took a markedly different stance from religion and advocated that we embrace these tendencies, as long as they cause no direct harm to others (Bergin & Richards, 2005). Morally speaking, psychologists' principles mirrored (and perhaps gave credence to) the political and economic principles of the industrial world; conventional psychologists promoted ethical hedonism, which purported to be a morally just system whereby humans gained happiness by giving in to their natural greedy tendencies, while conventional economists promoted capitalism, which purported to bring about societal happiness and prosperity by encouraging humans to be greedy and competitive. Without moral guidance from a religious or spiritual perspective, psychologists (and society) decided that we are best served by letting nature (or the free market) take its course.

Community psychology and religion

In the *Journal of Community Psychology*'s special issue on religion and spirituality, Kloos and Moore (2000) argue that psychologists' hostile or ambivalent attitude towards religion and spirituality is inconsistent with the values of community psychology. With such an attitude, community psychologists are not doing their best to understand individuals from within their own environments (where religion and spirituality often play a major role) and are missing an opportunity to deepen their

understanding of how religion and spirituality can enhance the well-being of others (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998), prevent substance abuse (Beitel, Genova, Schuman-Olivier, Arnold, Avants, & Margolin, 2007; Benson, 1992) and mental disorders (Ellison & Levin, 1998; Miller & Thoresen, 2003), and enhance people's sense of community (Becker & Dhingra, 2001; Maton & Wells, 1995).

Kloos and Moore also discuss the role that religion can play in empowerment, and I would argue that the theories of Buddhism can give community psychologists a deeper understanding of the concept of empowerment, particularly on the individual level. On an individual level, empowerment has typically been defined as a process and outcome in which individuals gain greater control over their lives (Rappaport, 1981), aided by, and resulting in, enhanced self-esteem and enhanced self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 1995).

Riger (1993) has criticized this definition of empowerment as being apolitical; that is, it ignores the ramifications of individuals and groups becoming empowered in a competitive society. In such a society, empowered individuals and groups are inevitably in competition again for more power, leading to conflict and lack of cohesion. Riger also views Rappaport's definition as problematic because it is based on traditionally masculine concepts such as mastery, power, and control while ignoring feminine concepts of empowerment such as cooperation and empathy. Similarly, Surrey (1991) argued that empowerment, as traditionally defined by community psychology, is derived from the viewpoints of the dominant male culture and thus ignores the unique perspective of women. As such, she states that the existing view of individual empowerment—one that is mainly agentic, individuation-focused, and mastery-driven—ignores the importance of empathy and interconnectedness in one's growth and empowerment. What

she and others call "self-in-relation" is a process whereby women, typically beginning with their relationship with a mother figure, develop through mutually empowering relationships where both parties learn the skill of empathizing with another. This view differs from the traditional view of empowerment; instead of viewing independence and mastery of one's domain as being central to individual empowerment, Surrey's self-in-relation holds that the ability to connect and empathize with others is essential to one's development, and that this process—hearing and being heard in a meaningful, honest manner—is itself empowering.

Jason and Moritsugo (2003) remarked that empowerment, devoid of value-based guidance, can actually have negative consequences, and that Buddhist philosophy can offer such guidance. In other words, the individual-based benefits of empowerment, such as a sense of agency and control over one's life must be balanced with a sense of compassion and responsibility for others in order for humankind to be best served, and according to Buddhist theory, to best create the conditions that give rise to one's own happiness. Riger (1993) challenged community psychologists to broaden their understanding and conceptualization of individual empowerment in a way that incorporates both these individual-centered and communal aspects of empowerment.

In his treatise on the need for a greater role for spirituality in community psychology, Walsh-Bowers (2000) asserted that "we have understood empowerment as psychological, political, or both, but always as secular. From Native and radical Christian perspectives empowerment also arises from within the person, emanating from and sustained by spiritual development" (p. 233). In addition to Native and radical Christian perspectives I would add that Buddhism offers a unique "from within"

perspective on empowerment that could broaden community psychology's conceptualization of empowerment. In addition, I believe that there is a relationship between the major theories and practices of Buddhism and Riger's (1993) version of empowerment. For this thesis, I explored the experiences of Canadian lay-persons who practice Buddhist meditation, ethics, and wisdom with this model of empowerment. First, in the following section, I will discuss how the established outcomes of individual empowerment are related to Buddhist philosophy.

Buddhism and empowerment

Buddhism and self-esteem

When discussing self-esteem in Buddhism, it is important to note that the western concept of self-esteem is somewhat foreign to the Asian cultures from which Buddhism originated, and the teachings on "self" are particularly unique from what we believe in the west (Aronson, 2004). One of the core teachings of the Buddha dictated that there is no permanent, unchanging self. This teaching is easily misunderstood and is often only realized in the later stages of practice. The self, in Buddhism, is ever changing, consisting of and depending on, numerous factors at any given moment. This does not mean that we do not have distinct personalities, per se, but that we are out of touch with reality and cause our own suffering when we cling to aspects of our personality. Ultimately, freedom from this clinging to a false self is the goal: "the enlightened...are not obstructed by any coarse sense of themselves, yet at the same time they are able to retain a functioning sense of identity" (Aronson, 2004, p. 82).

Aronson (2004) uses the example of pride to illustrate the suffering caused by this clinging to a false self. He states "pride is present when we are in the grip of some static

image of ourselves and our status, when our mind holds on to an inflated sense of 'I'" (p. 74). We then create our own suffering by trying to control this image of ourselves, which is ultimately illusory. By focusing on this illusion, we limit our experiences by forcing our actions to support our notion of our illusory self, thereby moving away from the boundless, limitless present moment. Aronson points out that in psychotherapy, the goal is to *loosen* these self-representations, particularly ones that are negative, or what would be referred to as "limiting" (e.g. "I am no good at math"; "I hate everyone"; "I can't make friends", etc.). Buddhism goes a step further and advocates the elimination of self-representations altogether; they are all limiting.

Having explored the Buddhist concept of self, the idea of self-esteem seems out of place. It would seem that the outcome of Buddhist practice is not necessarily enhanced self-esteem, but rather a peace of mind and insight into reality that supports the individual to let go of their over-identification with an enduring self. In a way, I suppose, the effect is to feel good about yourself by letting go of "your self". The well-being that comes from this freedom, referred to in Tibetan Buddhism as *Clear Seeing*, is spoken about by Sogyal Rinpoche: "As this Clear Seeing deepens, grasping at a false self, or ego, has dissolved, and we simply rest, as much as we can, in the nature of mind, this most natural mind state that is without any reference or concept, hope, or fear, yet with a quiet but soaring confidence—the deepest form of well-being imaginable" (Rinpoche, 1993, p. 76).

One time after having spoken at length with Philip Starkman about some difficulties I was facing, he stressed to me the importance of keeping a steady meditation practice and deepening my understanding of the impermanence of self. I did not ask him specifically why this lesson was pertinent to what I was going through, but the

implication was that the suffering I was going through was related to my clinging to some illusory self. Though I do not think I have ever fully "felt" the truth of this concept, I do think that I have had glimpses of its significance in my life. For instance, when I think about the times where I have been my happiest and had the most peace of mind, I remember my interactions with other people as being light and natural. I remember asking people many questions and taking a genuine interest in who they were and how they were doing, while seemingly having little concern about the impression I was making. I liken this mind state to what positive psychologists refer to as "flow". Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes flow as a state of being where "concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted" (p. 71). In more Buddhist terms, during states of flow one manages to decrease one's pre-occupation with self, transcending the duality of self and object, thereby creating a feeling of being "at one with the world". In contrast, when I was at my lowest points, I remember conversations seeming stilted and my thoughts obsessing over the impression I was making, what the other person was thinking about me, and other "selfish" thoughts. As a result, my interactions with others would feel unnatural, and my self-obsession would often prevent me from truly connecting with others.

Buddhism and self-efficacy

Buddhism and self-efficacy are intertwined: the liberating practices of Buddhism are generally accessible and the practices themselves lead to the individual having greater control over his or her life. As basic as it may seem, one of the most important messages of Buddhism is that happiness essentially comes from within, and that there are ways of

changing the way we think, perceive, and relate to others that can lead to this happiness. The Dalai Lama has spent much of his time in recent years collaborating with western scientists, exploring the intersection of western psychology and Buddhism. During one of these dialogues, he commented on Buddhism's potential to make one happier and to change his or her neurology:

> The systematic training of the mind, the cultivation of happiness, the genuine inter-transformation by deliberately selecting and focusing on positive mental states and challenging negative mental states is possible because of the very structure and function of the brain. But the wiring in our brains is not static, not irrevocably fixed. Our brains are also adaptable. (H.H. The Dalai Lama, in Davidson, 2005, p. 26)

Recent research by Davidson has also explored the plasticity of the brain and shown that meditation can indeed change the neurological makeup of the brain. Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, Schumacher, Rosenkranz, Muller, Santorelli, Urbanowski, Harrington, Bonus, and Sheridan (2003) studied the brain electrical activity and immune functioning of individuals participating in an eight-week clinical training program in mindfulness meditation. In comparison with the control group and their own pre-test measures, after the eight week program the meditators showed enhanced activity in the left anterior lobe which has been shown to be associated with positive affect.

On a more pragmatic level, Buddhist meditation practices can help the individual to understand the nature of her or his thoughts, emotions, and general perceptions, thereby decreasing the mysterious control they can have over the person. For instance, Samatha meditation can enhance one's focus, thereby reducing the distracting chatter inside one's head. With this focused mind, Vipassana meditation can be used to explore (and ultimately, realize) the impermanent nature of these thoughts and emotions and how our reactions to them can lead to suffering. As this calming of the mind and learning take

place, the meditator is then given more power to identify harmful habits and break free from them. Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program is partially based on this approach, and it has documented results in reducing anxiety (Baer, 2006; Kabat-Zinn, Wheeler, Light, Skillings, Scharf, Cropley, Hosmer, & Bernhard, 1998).

A Buddhist practice, when applied wisely and with adequate effort, should produce in the individual what psychologists refer to as self-efficacy because the individual actually learns how to identify the causes of her or his suffering (e.g. maladaptive thoughts, emotions, and perceptions) and how to decrease their impact on him or herself. As a result, the individual is left with greater control over his or her mood and greater control over everything in life that is affected by his or her moods.

Buddhism, Compassion, Empathy, and Altruism

In the context of Buddhist philosophy, the two previously discussed outcomes of empowerment enhance the ability of the practitioner to feel compassion, to empathize with others, and to act in an altruistic fashion. Again, this is different from the mastery-focused community psychology definition of empowerment (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995) which has traditionally ignored how compassion, empathy, and altruism can be both empowering processes as well as outcomes of empowerment. The decreased obsession with self enables the practitioner to be more fully present to actual reality instead of acting and reacting according to conditioned perceptions which distort reality. Added to this, the insights into an individual's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions give the practitioner a greater ability to empathize with the plight of others, as well as greater awareness of the intentions behind his or her actions.

The resulting compassion from this expanded wisdom differs in some ways from western society's idea of compassion. In the west, compassion is sometimes thought of as being similar to love, warm feelings, and as being directed towards those we most care about (Das, 1997). In Buddhism, as wisdom increases, compassion takes on an increasingly objective and detached stance. Trungpa (1973) points out that such compassion requires great wisdom that sees past the surface of suffering, and it can sometimes appear to be cruel; action based on this wisdom is based on what the person *needs*, which is not necessarily the same as what the person wants.

The basis for compassionate action is a deeper understanding of the reality of *dependent origination*. Dependent origination explains that everything in the universe exists in relation to everything else (Yamamoto, 2003). Yamamoto (2003) explains that this truth can be seen in ecology, where biodiversity and symbiotic relationships flourish due to the interconnection of nature. Extended to all of nature, including human beings, a deeper appreciation of dependent origination can lead one to appreciate other humans and their suffering on a deeper level and feel a greater sense of responsibility for the relief of said suffering through compassionate and altruistic actions (Dockett, 2003).

Within the Buddhist tradition there are also specific meditation techniques that can be used to generate compassion for one's self and others. As outlined earlier, metta meditation is based on the four immeasurables (love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity). Kristeller and Johnson (2005) addressed the apparent contradiction between meditation (a perceived solitary, withdrawn action) and the development of compassion and empathy for others. They proposed a two-stage model of how this works. The meditation practice first works to reduce one's association and obsession with the self,

and then it directs the practitioner's attention to the universal qualities of the metta meditation, filling in the blank left from the diminished preoccupation with self. Though Kristeller and Johnson offer suggestions for the roles that such practices can play in the helping professions, it is clear that their two-stage model does not offer anything unique when compared with the Buddhist theories from which this meditation practice arose!

Another Buddhist practice intended to cultivate compassion is *tonglen*. Tonglen translates loosely as "taking and receiving" and involves exchanging one's joy, well-being, and peace of mind for the suffering of others (Rinpoche, 2003). Though one does not actually directly take on the suffering of others, the intention to relieve others of their suffering is cultivated; in other words, compassion (the desire that others be free from suffering) is enhanced. The practitioner can picture the suffering of others as a black cloud, and upon inhalation, imagine it traveling to his or her heart, *destroying his or her self-cherishing nature*. Rinpoche (2003) offers strong praise for the benefits of this meditation: "It helps you to find within yourself and then to reveal the loving, expansive radiance of your own true nature. No other practice I know is as effective in destroying the self-grasping, self-cherishing, and self-absorption of the ego, which is the root of all our suffering and the root of all hard-heartedness" (p. 197).

The Buddhist teachings on the relationship between self-absorption and compassion have been particularly appealing to me. I have worked in various social services jobs in the past and know firsthand how challenging it can be to care for others, especially when you yourself are hurting inside. It has been frustrating and sometimes embarrassing seeing someone suffering right in front of my eyes, yet being unable to feel much compassion because of my fearful obsession over how *I* was feeling, how their

ordeal was affecting *my* life and *my* time. Since taking up my Buddhist practice, I have found it easier to relax in the presence of others. I have felt a deeper faith in the power of compassion and the importance of taking an interest in the thoughts and feelings of other people instead of simply waiting my turn to talk about myself. As I continue my practice I hope to deepen my commitment to helping others and decrease the self-cherishing tendencies I have developed as a reaction to my past.

The transformation from self-absorption to expanded compassion and interconnection was explored by Vieten, Amorok, and Schlitz (2006). They interviewed 47 spiritual leaders (ministers, monks, scholars, speakers, etc.) spanning a multitude of religions and spiritual disciplines in an attempt to explore the outcomes of transformative experiences and practices and the conditions which facilitate them. Analysis of the interviews uncovered four common outcomes of transformative experiences and practices. First, participants most commonly reported a greater sense of empathy, altruism, and compassion as a result of their spiritual transformations. This was often characterized as being more than just generous, passive "love"; one respondent referred to it as "love with teeth" (p. 921), referring to a compassion that is strong in the face of suffering and injustice. Secondly, participants developed a new way of relating to pain and suffering; instead of resisting it, they were better able to accept pain and suffering as part of life, thereby decreasing their aversion to it. By changing their views on pain and suffering, respondents reported being better equipped to deal with the suffering of others. A third finding was that these religious leaders were better able to relate to others, reacting to the challenges of diversity and suffering with an open heart and genuine interest. Finally, because of their transformative practices and experiences, the

respondents experienced less isolation and a greater sense of community, as well as a strong desire to improve their communities.

The foundation of these transformations was a dramatic experience, or gradual milder experiences, of a sense of oneness with the world. Though many of the religious teachings of their traditions emphasized this concept, it was a deep, intuitive experience of the concept of interconnection that allowed the participants to comprehend it beyond an intellectual level. This realization was accompanied by a change in perspective; they described seeing the world through different eyes, with a broader, more open view.

Due to my empowering experiences of practicing Buddhism, I have chose to examine the relationship between Riger's (1993) version of empowerment and the Buddhist practice of members of the Riverview Dharma Centre in Waterloo, Ontario. Some researchers have examined convert Buddhism, mainly through surveys and essays (Coleman, 1999; Hammond & Machacek, 1999; Fields, 1998). Some qualitative research has been done on the cultivation of wisdom by Tibetan Buddhist monks (Levitt, 1999), while a few master's theses (Campbell, 2004) have explored convert Buddhists using qualitative research methods. For instance, Charles (2000) interviewed female survivors of childhood sex abuse to examine how they use meditation to work through their traumatic experiences. Fredenburg (2002) interviewed psychotherapists who were Buddhist or felt strongly influenced by Buddhism, exploring the impact that Buddhism has had on their psychotherapy practice. Likewise, Brenner (1997) interviewed social workers with experience in Zen meditation Buddhism, exploring the impact that Zen Buddhism has on their approach to social work.

Within the realm of qualitative research on convert Buddhism, research on Canadians is particularly lacking. Buddhism in Ontario (Koppedrayer & Fenn, 2006) and Buddhism in Toronto (McLellan, 2006) have been examined in Matthews' (ed.) *Buddhism in Canada* (2006), serving mainly as an overview of the various Buddhist centres in these regions, their traditions, rituals, foci, and membership makeup. However, Campbell (2004) has investigated convert Buddhists with a qualitative approach. This unpublished master's thesis provides insight into the nature of Toronto Zen Buddhist practice in the lives of convert lay practitioners, documenting the ways which these Buddhists balance everyday life with a Buddhist practice which can be time-consuming and contrary to the values of Western society. Her interviews also touched upon some of the benefits that participants perceived as resulting from their practice. For instance, some reported that they felt more mindful in their daily activities and were thus less likely to forget where they put their keys. Others reported an opening of the heart, resulting in enhanced relationships with co-workers, family, and friends.

Similarly, I took a qualitative approach and examined the phenomenon Buddhist practice within the lives of members of a Waterloo, Ontario sangha. Only one of the eight participants in my study considered herself to be Buddhist. The remaining seven meditated regularly, and incorporated Buddhist philosophy and ethics into their lives, though they did not consider themselves to be "Buddhist". They also practiced a Buddhism that differs from Zen Buddhism, particularly in its approach to meditation. The Vipassana and Metta meditations (see p. 5-6 for explanations of these meditation techniques) are meant to provide (but are not limited to) three tangible benefits: the

focusing of the mind; the ability to understand the nature of one's various sensations (i.e. thoughts, emotions, perceptions); and enhanced compassion for self and others.

By interviewing eight members of the Riverview Dharma Centre, I hoped to accomplish two things: 1) to contribute to community psychologists' understanding of the concept of individual empowerment and; 2) to contribute to community psychologists' understanding of the empowering nature of Buddhist practice. My interviews focused on the nature of the participants' practice (i.e. what aspects of Buddhism play a large role in their lives and how), how they perceive their practice affecting the various aspects of individual empowerment (i.e. self-esteem, self-efficacy, compassion, empathy, and altruism), and their opinion of what "empowerment" means.

Buddhism in North America

When discussing Buddhism in North America, it is important to differentiate between the Buddhism mainly practiced by Asian immigrants and the Buddhism mainly practiced by those born in North America. The former—what is referred to as "Ethnic" (Fields, 1998; Nattier, 1998) or "Asian" (Seagram, 1999; Coleman, 1999) Buddhism—is often useful as a way to maintain cultural traditions and form a cohesive community in a foreign land (Asai & Williams, 1999; Nattier, 1998), and of course, to provide spiritual teachings to its members. Gatherings are often multi-generational and centered around Buddhist rituals and ceremonies from their homeland (Fields, 1998). In contrast, the Buddhism typically practiced by those born in North America—which has been coined "Elite" (Nattier, 1998) or "White" (Fields, 1998) Buddhism—is heavy on the meditation and light on rituals and community-building. Most gatherings consist of individuals forty years of age and older (Fields, 1998).

However, the differences between what I will refer to as "convert Buddhism" and Asian Buddhism (as practiced in North America by Asian immigrants and Asia) do not end there. Outside of the Catholic church, the practice of monasticism is foreign to western culture, and as a result, the convert Buddhism movement consists mainly of lay-person practitioners and teachers, though monks certainly have played a role in the importation of Buddhism and the training of many western teachers (Fields, 1998; Fronsdal, 1998; Numrich, 1998). Their main interest tends to be on meditation, and the meditation style is usually either from the Zen, Tibetan, or Vipassana tradition, and sometimes mixes techniques and concepts of different schools of Buddhism (Fields, 1998; Nattier; 1998).

Though Buddhism was introduced to North American shores before the 1960's, it was during the 1960's that Buddhism seemed to flourish (Seager, 1999; Fields, 1998). Fields (1998) points out that by experiencing different states of consciousness through drug use (as was relatively common during that era), some developed a hunger for such elevated states and turned to Buddhism and meditation as a safe way of getting high without the negative side-effects. Today, convert Buddhism still bears the influence of this counter-cultural movement, uniquely incorporating the concepts of democracy and inclusion within Buddhist groups. For instance, the traditional divide between monks and laypersons has been challenged and modified (in large part due to the small number of monks in North America), leading to a less hierarchical structure (Tanaka, 1998). Furthermore, in contrast to Asian Buddhism, many teachers in convert Buddhism are women (Fronsdal, 1998) and some feminists have embraced Buddhism as a spiritual

rallying point due to its empowering meditation techniques and gender-neutral core teachings (Gross, 1998; Tanaka, 1998).

The demographic make-up of American convert Buddhists (who I would consider to be similar to Canadian-born convert Buddhists) can be glimpsed in Coleman's (1999) survey of six major Buddhist centres in the United States. Of the 359 respondents, 57% were female and a large majority (90%) were white (hence Fields' use of the term "White Buddhism"). Their mean age was 46, income above average, political orientation heavily skewed to "the left" as indicated on a self-ranked, left-to-right political scale, and their education level was found to be quite high: 51% were found to have had advanced degrees. Factors such as this led Nattier (1998) to refer to convert Buddhists as "Elite Buddhists": they enjoy a unique amount of financial, educational, and racial privilege, and as a result, are blessed with the opportunity to spend time and money on meditation groups, retreats, books, and even vacations to foreign Buddhist centres for advanced learning. Upon reading Coleman's findings and Nattier's observations, I could not help but feel much more aware and appreciative of the luxury of time, money, and access that I have. I was also reminded of how the Buddha began his journey, dissatisfied with a life of privilege, trying to come to terms with the inevitability of pain, sickness, and death. Over 2000 years later here is a group of people with similar circumstances, following a similar path.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

The research question

Through semi-structured interviews, I explored if and how the participants' Buddhist practice had been empowering, in terms of Riger's (1993) model of

empowerment. Again, this model posits that individual empowerment should consist of both individual-focused outcomes (e.g. self-mastery, sense of control over life, healthy self-esteem) and other-focused outcomes (e.g. compassion for self and others, the ability to empathize with others, the tendency and ability to act selflessly for the benefit of others, etc.).

Research orientation

Given the personal nature of my research, I based my research approach on Moustakas' (1990) heuristic inquiry. Heuristic research is a variation of phenomenological research that utilizes the personal experiences of the researcher. Contrary to most research approaches which seek to minimize the experiences and potential biases of the researcher, heuristic inquiry lends authority to the knowledge that is gained from personal experience: "through exploratory open-ended inquiry, self-directed search, and immersion in active experience, one is able to get inside the question, become one with it, and thus achieve an understanding of it" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 15). Therefore, in order for heuristic research to be appropriate, the researcher must have an intense interest in and experience with the phenomenon, and this interest and experience must be shared by the participants. Though terms such as "intense interest" and "experience" are quite subjective, I believe that those who dedicate themselves to a spiritual practice such as Buddhism (including myself) naturally hold what most would consider an "intense interest" in the topic. Rosch (1997) argues that the insights privy to the researcher and dedicated Buddhist practitioner provide him or her with a body of knowledge that is of value to psychology research:

> All this said, what psychology may really need is a major paradigm shift to take into account the broader portrait of what a human

> being is and can do provided by the meditative traditions. The only way to do this is to rely on the authority of individual experience...Perhaps such a shift requires a body of psychologists who have personal experience themselves of that broader mode of knowing and being; perhaps it is such a community which will eventually rewrite psychology. (p. 25)

In other words, Buddhism offers insights into human nature and potential, and though examining the experiences of others can provide such insights, the experience of the researcher with Buddhism can play a valuable role in explicating important information—information which comes from an intuitive, tacit knowledge of the subject.

The basis for using heuristic inquiry to explore the experiences of Buddhist practitioners also lies in the emphasis that Buddhism places on practice and experience, and their integration into the individual's being. In heuristic inquiry the researcher aims to recreate the lived experience of the participant from the frame of reference of the participant (Moustakas, 1990). Through collaboration and reflection, the heuristic research process can also lead to growth in both the researcher and participant. Here Moustakas points out the similarity between heuristic research and person-centered therapy in that "both approaches emphasize that their primary concern is the person's unfolding sense of truth, explication of experience to deeper levels of meaning, and expansion of consciousness" (p. 105).

As a Buddhist practitioner, I appreciate the respect that heuristic research gives to one's personal search. In both Buddhism and heuristic inquiry the practitioner or researcher is *always* practicing and researching. In Buddhism, every second of the day is an opportunity to tune in to the present moment, to become more aware of one's intentions, and to apply the philosophical teachings and personal insights into more pure, liberating action. Likewise, heuristic research asks the researcher to harness her or his

passion for the topic at hand, using the researcher's immersion in the topic as a breeding ground for personally unique insights. Ultimately, I cannot think of a more appropriate approach to this research; to me, to research the role of Buddhist practice in the lives of myself and others *without* drawing from my own personal experience would be like trying to fully realize the essence of the Buddhist teachings by only reading books. This essence is more fully realized and integrated into my life through meditation. In heuristic inquiry, the essence of the phenomenon is more fully explicated by the researcher's self-searching and her or his ability to use the knowledge generated through this self-searching to engage others in a manner that captures the essence of the participant's experience (Moustakas & Douglass, 1985).

Relationship with Participants

I interviewed members of the Riverview Dharma Centre, which is situated in Waterloo, Ontario. It offers a non-sectarian approach to the Buddhist tradition, drawing from Zen, Theravadan, and Tibetan teachings, though its emphasis is on Vipassana meditation. The Riverview Dharma Centre was founded in 1999 by Susan Child and consists of roughly 200 members. It hosts study groups, meditation sessions, guest speakers, and retreats.

Recruiting process

I initially approached Susan Child through email, asking if she could meet with me to discuss my research and the possibility of involving members of her sangha. Attached to the email was an information letter outlining the nature of my research and a consent form. When I met with Susan to discuss my research plans she was enthusiastic about having the sangha involved. She felt it would be best if she were to mention my

research to the attendees of her two weekly study groups. I then provided her with information letters to hand to anyone interested in participating.

The information forms provided a description of the study (e.g. the goal of my research, how long interviews were expected to take, expectations and possible roles of the participant beyond simply being interviewed, etc.) and allowed space for interested participants to give information about their Buddhist practice. The questions concerning their practice were:

1. What is your religious orientation? For how long have you identified as such?
2. How often, and for how long, do you meditate each week (on average)?
3. How often, per year, do you attend long-term (at least 3 days) meditation retreats?
4. Generally speaking, what aspects of Buddhist morality do you try to incorporate into your life?
5. Generally speaking, what Buddhist theories or philosophies do you try to incorporate into your life?

I selected the participants who identified themselves as having no religious affiliation. I chose this criterion for three reasons: 1) it matched my experience as a Buddhist practitioner who does not consider himself to be formally "Buddhist"; 2) I felt that it would generate the largest number of responses; and 3) I did not want to confuse matters by interviewing individuals who practice some aspects of Buddhism but currently identify as belonging to another religion. I also selected participants who had practiced Buddhism for at least two years and who reported that they observe Buddhist morality and incorporate Buddhist theory/philosophy in their lives. I selected participants who meditated most often (as indicated in their retreat attendance, meditation frequency and

duration). I felt that these selection criteria provided rich depictions of Buddhist practice and its potential for effecting change in the lives of individuals.

Prior to beginning the interviews, I gave the participants an informed consent form detailing: the purpose of the study; how the information would be used; the general topics to be covered in the interviews; the measures to be taken to ensure confidentiality; and the possible risks and/or benefits of participation. I used pseudonyms in the report to ensure confidentiality, and participants were assured that the recordings of the interviews would only be available to me and my thesis advisor, Richard Walsh-Bowers, and that I would erase the digital recordings upon completion of the study.

Data collection

My interviews were a combination of the informal conversational interview and interview guide approach (Patton, 2002). By taking an informal conversational approach, I made use of my own skills as an interested, empathetic listener, shaping the direction of the interview to fit with the responses of the participant. Though an effort was made to touch upon all areas of the interview guide, I used my intuition to probe the areas that were more relevant to each participant. I gave a copy of the interview guide to each participant in advance of the interview so that he or she could prepare and identify areas which he or she did not wish to discuss. The interviews took place in an individual study room in the school library at Wilfrid Laurier University. I conducted one pilot interview prior to conducting my official eight interviews so that I could familiarize myself with the interview process.

My interview style was informed by a feminist research perspective, which emphasizes the need for a more egalitarian relationship between the interviewer and

interviewee (Oakley, 1981). This perspective also emphasizes the importance of establishing a rapport between interviewer and interviewee, with the interviewer connecting with the participant through self-disclosure (Cotterill, 1992). When appropriate, I disclosed pertinent personal information. I recorded the interviews on a digital audio recorder and later transcribed them for analysis. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. Following each interview I recorded my personal reflections on the interview on the digital audio recorder that was used to record the interview. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Participants were asked probe questions guided by their responses. I feel this was especially important when it comes to Buddhist theory. As I have stated previously, I asked the participants to clarify what certain abstract concepts meant to them. For instance, if a participant stated that after having meditated for years she felt that she is less preoccupied with her ego, I asked her what "ego" means to her, as well as examples of how she feels she has become less preoccupied with it.

After each interview I transcribed what was said and supplied the participant with a copy of the transcript and made myself available through the telephone and email if they disagreed with anything within the transcript and/or wished to delete, clarify, or expand on any of what they had said. I identified any quotes within their transcript that I considered using within the report. In my experience as a participant in a qualitative research project, I believe that these "member-checks" are of great value because, especially with theoretically complex topics, I have found it difficult to form coherent responses when put on the spot. If the aim of the interview is to elicit the true experiences and opinions of the participant, then the researcher would be wise to give the

participant the time and space to do so, and the participant should have the right to make sure his or her opinions and experiences are accurately captured.

Throughout the research process, I also kept a research diary consisting of notes on my thoughts and feelings about the process of conducting research and the content of my research. This diary was meant as a way of cultivating my awareness of my own personal opinions, which would both enhance my contribution to the research data as well as minimize the chance that my own experiences and opinions would unduly influence the interpretation of the data.

Analysis of the data

The stages of data analysis followed the guidelines laid out by Moustakas (2002). The approach to coding the analysis was also informed by Walsh-Bowers (2002) and Miles and Huberman (1994).

1. *Data gathering and organization*

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and their interview transcripts were organized sequentially into a binder. Before proceeding to the next stage, each participant reviewed a transcript of his or her interview. No participant indicated a desire to change any of their responses and each indicated that I could proceed in my research.

2. *Immersion*

I read each interview transcript at least twice in order to get a "feel" for the tone and content of the interview. I then analyzed the interviews line by line to uncover what Moustakas (1990) refers to as its "qualities", or meaning units. I noted these qualities on the interview transcript and noted my personal reflection or insights concerning the nature of the text in the margin of the transcript. These qualities were then coded, and

themes and sub-themes were identified. Themes were chosen based on their breadth (number of different participants referring to a certain topic) as well as frequency (the total number of times a topic is referred to).

I then compared across interview transcripts, gathering similar remarks as I came across them, placing them within the appropriate topic category, and summarizing them with my own description, all while being mindful of which quotes could be used to succinctly capture the essence of the topic. Once a framework of categories was established, I created a matrix according to participant and subcategory in order to make clear who said what and which subcategories were more frequently referred to.

3. *Incubation and development of individual depictions*

During this stage, the data was set aside for five days. I spent these five days in my friend's isolated cabin in Tobermory, Ontario. While there I meditated, exercised, and kept a journal of my thoughts and insights. Moustakas emphasizes the importance of this incubation phase, which allows space for intuition and tacit knowledge to give rise to a deeper understanding of the data.

Following these five days, I used my recorded insights to modify my original coding of the interviews. I then re-read the transcripts and incorporated the notes I had taken during the five-day incubation to refine my codes. I then took these codes and created a "depiction" of each participant's experience. This depiction was in the form of a narrative and was meant to succinctly summarize the story of the participant. These narratives served as an alternative and concise piece of data, giving me a more holistic sense of each person's spiritual practice and journey.

4. *Does the depiction match the original data?*

I compared each individual depiction with its corresponding interview transcript to make sure that it accurately captured the main themes and overall "story" of the participant. I then looked for overlooked themes and checked my original findings with the raw data to make sure that the meaning and tone of the participants' statements were captured. Before proceeding to the next stage, I verified these depictions with each participant.

5. *Synthesis of codes and individual depictions*

I combined the observations gleaned from the individual depictions with the themes I had identified in coding the individual interviews, generating five distinct common themes between the eight participants.

6. *Integration of personal observations*

Once I had generated the five themes, I reflected on their meaning to me as a Buddhist practitioner and made notes. I then combined these notes with personal observations I had collected in the previous stages of analysis. These observations served as the basis for the personal reflections I have added in italics at the end of each theme in the findings section.

Sharing the findings

Prior to being interviewed, participants signed a consent form upon which they indicated whether or not they would like to be notified of the findings upon completion of the research project, and how they would like these results to be shared with them. Five out of eight of the participants indicated that they would like a written summary of the findings sent to them via email, and I have done so.

FINDINGS

Over the course of my research, my understanding of the spiritual issues discussed by myself and the participants has changed greatly. Though my understanding is certainly dependent on many different factors at any given time (e.g., peace of mind, nutrition, mood, etc.) what clearly has made the biggest difference in the depth of my understanding has been the amount of dedicated practice I undertake. Much of the early two years working on this thesis was spent in a fog-like state of mind and spirit. I was not meditating much (if at all) and spiritual teachings were of little interest to me. As such, the interviews with the participants were at times difficult, mainly because I felt a disconnection between myself, the participants, and the topics of discussion. Though much of what was said was familiar, I was not really *living* the values and experiences being discussed. When it came time to read over the interviews and begin my analysis, I felt overwhelmed by the depth and intensity of the stories of my participants; I did not feel as though I was in the proper mind-frame to truly understand what they were saying; and I felt as though I was not honouring their stories or my own spiritual values—I felt like a bit of a fraud.

Since conducting the interviews in the summer of 2008, I have renewed my effort to maintain a consistent spiritual practice of meditation. Given my unpredictable moods and inclination towards instant-gratification, maintaining a steady practice has been a great challenge over the past five years. Susan Childs, a teacher at the local sangha, has been invaluable to my practice. She has taken the time to meet with me on a personal basis on several occasions, helping me refine my meditation, particularly in regards to the relationship between body sensations and emotions. Through our meetings, I have

gained greater awareness of my own body sensations and have learned how to better relate to them by *feeling* them with an open, non-analytical attitude. By grounding myself through the meditative process, suspending my analytical mind (as much as possible), and bringing a true felt-awareness to the strong physical sensations in my body (especially tightness felt in my throat and sternum), deep emotions related to loss, fear, and anger have arisen with surprising intensity. The atmosphere of the meditation hall, and Susan's calm, compassionate support, have enabled such feelings to arise and dissipate safely with greater intensity than I had ever experienced while meditating alone.

In January 2009 I also began attending courses on mindfulness, held weekly at the local sangha. These sessions were two hours long, with the first 30-45 minutes being guided meditation by Susan Childs and the second half being discussion of different topics related to mindfulness in meditation and everyday life. This coursework helped me gain a greater understanding of the details of mindfulness meditation and also taught me how to incorporate meditation into my everyday life. Attending the weekly sessions with like-minded individuals has also given me support to maintain a consistent meditation practice at home.

I have described this process of spiritual and academic renewal for a couple reasons. First, I have conducted my research with a heuristic methodology approach. As was explained earlier in this paper, this approach to research makes use of the researcher's keen interest in and experience with the phenomenon of interest, treating the researcher's own experience with the phenomenon as viable data. Moustakas and Douglas (1985) explain that "it is the focus on the human person in experience and that person's reflective search, awareness, and discovery that constitutes the essential core of

heuristic investigation" (p. 42). As such, observations about my own experiences with the research process are important tools that help deepen my own understanding of the topic at hand and also serve to provide the reader with the context within which this subjective, reflective process (and resultant data) took place. My second reason for including the previous observations about my spiritual practice in relation to the thesis-writing process is to remind the reader that everything within this thesis is filtered through my own lens, the participants (in the findings and discussion sections), and the reader. The influence of one's own unique perceptions is of particular relevance to the deeply philosophical and experiential nature of my research; at any given time, one's understanding of the phenomena of interest will vary; what I have written as of now is of a deeper understanding than what I would have written just three months ago, thanks to my renewed dedication to a spiritual practice and time for further reflection. Likewise, what you, the reader, understand now may differ from what you understand tomorrow or years from now, depending on a number of factors.

Review of research procedure

I interviewed 8 participants for this study. All of the participants were Caucasian whose ages ranged from 35-70 years. Participants were recruited from the local Riverview Dharma Centre in Waterloo, Ontario. All participants were associated with the centre in some way, either through membership, study courses offered through the centre, or by casual attendance of its Sunday morning group meditation sessions. The interviews examined the nature of their Buddhist practice (i.e. how and how often they meditate; how they incorporate Buddhist philosophies and morality into their lives) and how they perceive the effect of their practice on their feelings of self-efficacy, control,

self-esteem, empathy, and compassion. Self-efficacy, control, self-esteem, empathy, and compassion were focused upon because they have been linked to empowerment in the community psychology literature. All participants noted that they had meditated approximately five times a week for at least 2 years, incorporated Buddhist philosophy into their lives, and were influenced, in some way, by Buddhist moral teachings, though none identified him or herself as "Buddhist". All participants indicated that they practice Vipassana meditation (a.k.a. insight or mindfulness meditation) as their core meditation practice, while two participants indicated that they also practice Metta (loving-kindness) meditation on a less frequent basis. Two participants noted that they regularly practice hatha yoga, and indicated that yoga was a valuable element of their spiritual practice.

Participant biographies

Chris

My first interview was with a cheery man named Chris. He stated that, as a child of the 60's, he had always had an interest in personal growth and spirituality. This interest led him to take a wellness course at a local college where he was given the chance to write a paper on any topic of interest. He chose meditation. This experience whetted his appetite for meditation and Buddhist philosophy.

About three or four years later, he decided to seek out a teacher or course to give him guidance on how to meditate on his own. The local teacher that he found was instrumental in Chris' adoption of a Buddhist practice; Chris remarked that this teacher, a man from Mumbai, India, had an infectious laughter, wonderful presence, and great wisdom, and that these traits were inspirational. Throughout our interview, Chris would enthusiastically apply sayings to certain situations to point to a deeper truth beneath what

we were discussing. For example, when describing how he met his first meditation teacher, he fondly recalled the saying "when the student is ready, the teacher will appear".

Chris does not describe himself as "Buddhist", nor does he aspire to become Buddhist. He feels that in order to be Buddhist, one must take vows, abstain from alcohol, and make an effort to abstain from killing insects, and he is a man that likes his hockey and beer! With enthusiasm, he told me about his French Canadian roots and love of playing hockey.

Buddhist meditation and various spiritual books have fueled him during his years of practice. He spoke of books by Eckart Tolle and Suzuki Roshi and how he loved reading such works more than once, often connecting with them in different ways upon re-reading. Of particular interest to him are Zen Buddhism's teachings on non-duality. He described an ease of operating in every day life that was less and less dependent on how life unfolded, and more and more happy approaching life with little resistance by trusting his instinct and operating as much as possible through honesty and warmth. He referred to a cherished Zen quote to illustrate much of his approach to life and happiness: "the way is easy for those who have no preferences". Looking back at the many remarks Chris made about being in the flow of life and non-resistance, much of what he said reminds me of the Taoist theory or concept of "Tao". In Taoism, the concept of the Tao is that of a universal flow of energy or reality, and that to live one's life in the flow of the Tao produces great happiness and health. It is only appropriate that he had recently become very interested in Zen teachings, because Zen was created when the concepts of

Buddhism reached China and Japan, mixing with some of the wisdom from Taoism and Confucianism.

Chris remarked to me that he could talk for two more hours about spirituality, and I believed him. Our interview was easy and enjoyable, taking place on a beautiful summer afternoon. I remember feeling appreciative of having met an older man who seems to be living an earnest spiritual life, whose demeanor was so strong, lively, and full of warmth.

Anita

Anita has been instructing courses on meditation and Buddhism in the Theravadan tradition for nearly 10 years now. She founded and runs a Buddhist centre in Southwestern Ontario. She says that she has always been interested in the deeper questions in life. She attributes this partly to the death of her mother at the young age of fourteen. When she told me this, I lit up slightly, realizing we shared the bond of having lost our mothers at a young age (I was four when my mom died). It was a strange way of connecting with her—a mix of surprise, joy, and empathy—and I felt a bit embarrassed for having become excited at this personal revelation. Her words struck me deeply when she said "oh, so you know how it is. Your world is never the same after that". I do not remember anything about my mother and she was not talked about much in my home growing up, so my mother, her death, and all related matter has remained a mystery to me over the years. Over the last five years or so I have sought out more information about my mother and the impact that losing a parent at such a young age can have on a person, so her words were especially poignant. She went on to tell me about how losing her mother, along with working as a nurse in her early 20s, had left her deeply moved by the

reality of sickness and death, and that she wanted to learn more about how to deal with these realities.

When Anita first came across Buddhist teachings in her 20s, she was drawn in by its forthright teachings on death and suffering—that they are a part of life and are unavoidable. She felt that this was a refreshing contrast to the North American cultural norm of "bucking up and getting on with life". She eventually moved overseas for a stint of living as a monk in Thailand and to get a degree in Buddhist Studies at the University of London. While living the monastic life, she learned much about the concept of surrender. She went through what she refers to as "the dark night of the soul" while there, and she lost everything: her relationship, her possessions, and her faith in the Buddhist teachings. She remarked that by surrendering to this intense period of questioning and loss, she learned on a very deep level that "there's nothing to fear". Gradually, she regained her strength and her faith in the practice, and the experience drastically changed her for the better.

Following her "dark night of the soul", Anita realized that she had been quite self-absorbed for many years. She describes her realization of this as "a shock. A complete shock". Her experience of intense surrender helped her abandon some of her self-centered ways and make room for others in her life.

Having practiced for so many years with such intensity, Anita has learned many valuable lessons. She has learned that in order to feel the positive feelings of peacefulness, joy, and love, you have to be able to face all of "the stuff that got in the way". I remember I was in a bit of a sensitive mood the day I interviewed Anita, and when she said this, I felt a jolt of self-consciousness and fear, as though I was just

realizing that I had been avoiding pain and suffering in my life for a long time, and that it was futile to avoid it forever. Her work with her own suffering has also made it easier to feel empathy for others: "It seems the more you're able to feel your own feelings and suffering, the more you recognize that others experience that, right"?

Overall, Anita values her practice because she feels that it enables her to "stand in the ground of her own experience". Anita explained that the present moment is all that there ever is and that to be able to be fully present and accepting of the present moment is truly empowering. Though she has been practicing for a long time, she still considers herself a beginner and chuckles at memories of herself thinking she "understood it all", only to be proven wrong soon after. When I asked her about the role of compassion in her practice, she remarked that she feels that people expect spiritual authorities to be wise, compassionate, and joyful all of the time, but that the teachings are more about being honest and grounded in the present moment. Traits such as wisdom and compassion should come with practice, but they are not to be expected all of the time. It was interesting for me to hear this, knowing that I have often felt self-conscious in the presence of such people, expecting myself to be kind, insightful, and all of those egocentric things. Talking to her, it became clearer to me that I (like many others) am prone to placing unfair expectations on both myself and others. I wondered what it is like for a teacher such as herself to have such expectations placed on her and to possibly intimidate other people due to her spiritual progress.

Bill

Bill is a jovial, strong-voiced man in his early 60s. He is currently retired from his position of Dean at an Ontario college. Being raised fundamentalist evangelical

Christian, religion has always played a role in his life, but this upbringing often left him with more questions than answers. The "pat" answers that were given to him in response to some of his questions about the Bible did not satisfy him, and when he came across some Buddhist teachings as he got older, they resonated with him. He was especially drawn to the simple, straight-forward approach to some Buddhist theories, as well as the Buddha's advice for doubters to try out his methods and see for themselves, in contrast to the over-defensiveness and circular logic that he had been exposed to in his early experiences with Christianity.

Bill has practiced for 4.5 years and has noticed many ways that meditation seems to have made certain spiritual truths more intuitively true for him. For instance, he feels that he now understands the meaning of "love your neighbour as yourself" on a deeper level—that compassion for self and others is vital and that there is little difference between himself and others. Bill says that he recognized this "oneness" the more he practiced, and sees himself and others as all different branches of the same tree, and that to help others is to help the whole tree (and thus, himself).

With practice, Bill has also become more aware of the trappings of attachment. As an athletic, charismatic young man, life came pretty easily for Bill. As he aged, he became aware that these traits did not impress people as much, and that they deteriorated too. He told me that to lose such facets of himself was a difficult loss, but he felt that the Buddhist teachings on attachment (that to cling to the good or push away the bad both lead to suffering) and change (all things change) helped him deal with such loss in a grounded manner. Similarly, his practice has enabled him to have a more balanced view of himself that is neither grandiose nor overly negative.

Riley

Riley, a lady in her 50s, was raised Roman Catholic and is part Sicilian, which, according to her, gives her a bit of a temper! She became interested in Buddhism (particularly meditation) about five years ago during a time where she was experiencing a lot of anger.

She is currently going through a divorce and credits her Buddhist practice with teaching her how to surrender to things she cannot control in the divorce proceedings, particularly the bureaucratic process. She often described an approach to life's ups and downs as "letting things pass through" her with no resistance. She likened this to a boxer who, instead of holding rigid against a punch, rolls with the punch to minimize its impact. She feels that in the past, she would resist the unpleasant aspects of life and consequently accumulate resentment and anger. She finds that she now ruminates less and is able to face her emotions and let them go more easily.

Riley is also grateful for how her practice has enhanced her feelings of empathy and compassion for others. She feels that she is better able to be present because of her practice, and when she is more present, her history (old patterns, old beliefs, etc.) and the history between herself and the other person vanish, providing a fresh start. She is still learning how to deal with her sometimes intense feelings of empathy; at times she feels an intense connection in her own body to what others are feeling emotionally. She feels that, because she is more present, she has more options in any given situation, and that in the past her old habits had limited her perspective and subsequent options.

Gina

Gina, a single mother of two in her thirties, has been meditating for almost six years now. She became interested in meditation and Buddhist teachings through her yoga teacher, who often incorporated Buddhist teachings on loving-kindness into her classes. She also wanted to "bring more quiet" into her life and values the peacefulness of meditation. Her spiritual practice includes yoga, meditation, and Buddhist philosophy, though she describes herself as more of a "hands-on" person than a philosopher.

Currently, she is focused on the concept of equanimity in her practice. She is trying her best to accept the things in life that she cannot change. As she has worked on cultivating greater equanimity, Gina has become more aware of the various ways she tries to control situations in her life instead of doing her best and letting go of the outcome. Additionally, she is learning how to be aware of how her conditioned mind can distort reality, particularly when life unfolds in a way that makes her uncomfortable. She says that this awareness also helps her become more aware of when she is acting habitually, or "in an old pattern", instead of acting from a fresh, realistic perspective. The importance of this has been especially noticeable to her in regards to relationships, where she feels that she has been drawn to romantic partners in the past for unhealthy reasons. Though she says it is refreshing to let go of such restrictive patterns, it is difficult to know how to operate once they are gone. For this, her teacher tells her that it is important to stay grounded through body awareness, and to listen to her intuition.

Through her years of practice, Gina has grown into a less "I"-focused way of existing, enabling her to better connect with others in her life. This has changed the way she relates to her children, as she says she feels more patience when they are

misbehaving, and a better ability to tune in to how they are feeling. Likewise, in her job as a social worker, she has felt a difference in her interactions with clients. Instead of waiting for her clients to finish talking so that she can intervene and give advice, she has found herself better able to listen to her clients with empathy and then work collaboratively with them. She has developed a habit of performing small acts of kindness such as giving her parking pass to someone when she is done with it or holding doors open for people, and she enjoys the small sense of connection that these moments bring to her and those on the receiving end.

Gina cannot imagine living her life without her Buddhist practice. Though she is never sure how her spiritual practice will affect her, she is confident that whatever happens is for the best and that she will be able to handle it. Her yoga teacher helped her put her spiritual practice in perspective, telling her that her work is like a savings account—the more she practices, the more she adds into her "spiritual bank account", giving her strength, wisdom, and compassion when she most needs them.

Mary

Mary is a friendly, talkative social worker in her forties. She has been meditating off and on for roughly thirty years and has attended four retreats. She is considering applying to Naropa University in Colorado for a master's degree in Tibetan Buddhist Studies, but she is not sure if she can handle such a commitment, which would include a thirty day silent meditation retreat, consisting of six to seven hours of sitting meditation each day.

Mary was raised Catholic and has always had an interest in spirituality. Her parents' hypocritical approach to religion—they would insist she attend church and pray,

yet they rarely did either—as well as some grievances she has with the Catholic church, repelled her from religion and spirituality for a couple of years. When she came across the teachings of Buddhism, she says that she was struck by the Buddha's notion that, at our core, we are full of love, compassion, and wisdom, but we have just lost touch with that essence. She felt that this was in contrast to what she had been taught in church: "that you can't trust yourself because you're bad at the core and so you need to follow these tenets and we will lead you". Though she later noticed many similarities between the teachings of the Buddha and of Jesus Christ, her experience with the institution of the Catholic church had made Buddhism a more appealing spiritual approach.

She began her spiritual practice in response to the suffering she had endured in her life, in part due to the verbal abuse she suffered from her mother while growing up. Her mother had addiction problems and constantly told Mary that she was stupid, ugly, and worthless. Mary says that her practice has given her a more realistic perspective of her own self-worth, and that she "hears her mom's voice" less often. She also credits her practice with making her more aware of her tendency to be lost in thought. With greater awareness of such moments, she says she has greater freedom in life, freeing herself from harmful habitual patterns in thought and behaviour. In a similar vein, she has become more aware of the consequences of her actions.

Mary's ability to empathize with others has increased over the years of her practice. In her work as a social worker, she sometimes feels intense empathy for her clients and says that this can be a strength and challenge. She enjoys the natural, intense connection shared with another person, but she acknowledges that this connection can sometimes affect her physically and emotionally if she does not maintain awareness of

her own limits. She remarks that this connection has developed over time and can not be forced—at times she truly does understand and feel the pain of the other person.

Over the past ten years, Mary has noticed a spiritual awakening in North America and hopes that more people adopt a meaningful spiritual practice. She has enjoyed reading books by Eckart Tolle such as *A New Earth* and points to the popularity of these books as an indication that there is great interest in spirituality in North America. She continues to practice because the rewards are so rich, though she still suffers more than she would like.

Matt

Matt, an animated man in his 40s, has been meditating for five years and feels that his practice has been "life-changing". Having struggled with his sexual orientation for as early as he can remember, he believes that his spiritual practice was instrumental in helping him come to terms with his homosexuality, and ultimately coming out of the closet as a gay man.

Looking back on the years spent denying his sexual orientation, Matt regrets having wasted so many years "living a lie" and feels that lying to himself for so long negatively altered his perception of reality. By lying to himself for so long about his sexuality, he says that he avoided unpleasant truths in other areas of his life too, until he found himself afraid to feel emotional pain of any sort. Though he was always pretty sure about his sexual orientation, it was not until he was 38 that he became involved in a same-sex relationship and subsequently identified himself as a gay man with certainty.

With the support of his partner (who had an interest in spirituality), Matt began meditating about three times a week and also explored Buddhist philosophies,

particularly related to attachment. Matt believed that his attachment to feeling "safe" had kept him from being fully alive. He had been afraid to feel emotional pain—particularly the uncertainty of the reactions of his loved ones to him coming out of the closet—and the repression of his true feelings was akin to self-rejection. About one year after beginning his spiritual practice, Matt felt he had enough of worrying about what others thought of him. It took "all the courage in the world" on his part, but he felt that whatever trouble coming out of the closet would cause would pale in comparison to the torture he had been putting himself through. Ultimately, letting go of his attachment to this old, "safe" way of living was liberating for Matt. He felt lighter in his chest, he felt effortlessly happy, and he feels that other people were more drawn to him. This experience serves as a constant reminder to him to trust in himself and let go of his need to avoid situations which may cause him suffering.

He believes that he now has a much healthier perspective of his place in this world, and a greater appreciation of his limited time on earth. He says that he lives life with more urgency now, and takes a more active role in addressing the suffering in his life and the lives of others. He particularly enjoys volunteering at a local organization dedicated to helping those struggling with sexual identity and feels a responsibility to help others—particularly youth—who are in the same situation as he once was.

Rick

Rick, a shy young man in his twenties, has been meditating for three years. He began meditating in response to persistent anxiety which had caused him to lose his job and several friends. His anxiety began at the age of 21 when he was involved in a near-fatal car accident. This accident left him with a broken leg and severe damage to his

kidneys, as well as a "crippling" fear of leaving his home. In response, he eventually sought psychiatric help, but financial reasons prevented him from dedicating himself to a long-term regimen of psychotherapy and drug treatment. The three months of psychotherapy and anti-anxiety medication that he managed to get through were ultimately unsatisfying, and the side effects of the drugs "turned me into a zombie while all my friends were out partying and having the time of their lives". Once Rick realized he could not tolerate the strain on his body and bank account, he gave up on treatment, moved in with his older brother, and became more reclusive.

About a year later, Rick read some information on Buddhism while on an online discussion forum. He remembers hearing about the theory of attachment and suffering and felt that it applied to the anxieties he had been feeling. Though he describes himself as not very analytically-inclined, he was compelled to research Buddhism and attachment, and eventually mustered up the courage and energy to attend a local meditation group. He spent the next year meditating daily, sometimes up to an hour a day. He now manages to meditate about four or five times a week, a half hour at a time.

Though Rick still does not feel like his old self, he credits his meditation practice with making him more aware of the irrational thoughts that contribute to his anxiety. He also feels more aware of how stuck he had become (since the accident) in "staying safe", socially-speaking, and credits his Buddhist practice with enabling him to relax more in social situations. Buddhist theories on attachment helped him realize that he had been creating his own limitations based on his fear of what could happen, and he feels that he has had some success trusting his ability to handle whatever happens in a given situation (as opposed to being limited by his anxiety of what could happen). .

Overview of findings

The participants were asked to explain why they began their Buddhist practice and to give examples of how they had changed as a result of this practice. Following each interview, I made personal notes about recurring themes as well as similarities with my own experience practicing Buddhist spirituality, as part of my heuristic methodology. After all eight interviews were conducted, I then coded the interviews and identified themes and sub-themes based on their breadth (i.e. the number of participants referring to a certain topic) and frequency (the total number of times to which a topic is referred). My analysis of the interviews has identified five themes. I refer to them as "key elements of the participants' practice" here and in the Discussion section. I have presented these key elements in numerical order for organizational purposes; the numbers are not meant to convey that the participants' spiritual practice results in a clear, linear set of outcomes. The key elements of their practice are as follows: 1) why they began their practice; 2) making the unconscious conscious; 3) the paradox of letting go to gain control; 4) change in the perspective of "self"; and 5) grounded interactions with the world. What follows is an exploration of these themes, quoting the participants to illustrate the nature of the key elements. Because I have conducted this research using a heuristic methodology, I also have included my own observations at the end of each section, in italics.

The terms "spirituality", "Buddhist practice", and "spiritual practice" will be used in the description of the participants' accounts. These terms describe the participant's use of Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and morality, sometimes combined with other spiritual practices such as yoga and reading non-Buddhist spiritual literature.

The findings of this study should also be placed within their proper context: the participants and I are what authors have referred to as "convert Buddhists" or "elite Buddhists" (for detailed description of these terms, see pp. 41-43). As such, our practice is based on a variety of Buddhist schools of thought. Furthermore, this "elite Buddhism" is signified by a level of privilege, evidenced by our skin colour (all participants were Caucasian), educational background (all but one participants was either a college or university graduate), and availability of resources (time and money) for retreats (each participant attends at least one retreat per year).

Why they began their practice

The reasons for adopting Buddhist philosophies and practices varied among the participants. Not surprisingly, four began because they believed it would help them cope with personal issues. For instance, Riley, a single divorcee who sometimes struggled with her "Sicilian temper" remarked that she "had been interested in it for some time. I lived out of country for a while and when I came back I was going through a rough time. I thought, 'now's the time'". Gina, a single mother of two, stated that she "wanted to find more quiet" in her life. Meanwhile, Anita explained that her early experiences with death (her mother died when she was 17 and she also witnessed the death of patients as a nurse in her early twenties) contributed to a persistent unhappiness and yearning for a solution to the suffering she felt and had witnessed:

> And all the sickness, old age, death, and combined, I think I was really quite depressed since my mom died, but it would come up and I'd smoke pot and it'd go away, or a new relationship. But there was this chronic unhappiness. So I got into trying to understand it, like the Buddha. So I started reading existential philosophers, but it didn't help me find any peace. They don't have any answers, they just say this is the way it is. So that was it until about 24, and then I got married because I thought that was the solution, and then I got divorced because it wasn't. I kept moving

> around, unhappy with jobs, changing careers, traveling, and always plagued by this underlying unhappiness. And um, when I encountered Buddhism, it was the first time in my life anyone had spoken honestly about that being the truth—that there's suffering and death and that there is freedom from that.

In particular, Anita mentioned that Buddhist perspective on death and suffering differed from the norms she had experienced while growing up: "about the fact that there's suffering as part of human existence. Our cultural norms are all 'buck up, get on with it' and to put up a strong front". Similarly, Rick had become frustrated with lingering anxiety, brought on in part because of a traumatic car accident when he was 21. He explains that the therapy and medication he had tried as a remedy to this anxiety had not been very effective, and he felt that some spiritual guidance was needed:

> I was constantly on edge ever since [the accident]. I was never very calm before that, but after, I was a wreck. So I was trying therapy, popping pills, but I didn't feel like it was doing much for me. I felt like I needed something that I had control over—something that wasn't so expensive. I read about meditation and the theories of attachment and it seemed like something that was getting more at the root of my troubles.

Two participants stated that their interest in Buddhism was a natural extension of a spiritual curiosity that they had had from an early age. Chris remarked that a Buddhist practice just seemed like the next logical step in his spiritual development:

> Well, initially the curiousity, um, I've always been interested since like, since I left home at 18, about the uh...I go back as far as the '60's and '70's and 'I'm okay, you're okay' and how to be your own best friend, and on and on and on. So as far as personal growth and self-actualization and all that kind of stuff, I've always done it all along and I think what's happened is it just—as you kind of develop your self-awareness, your consciousness, that curiousity you have, I think it finally evolves into something like this kind of stuff.

Two participants disclosed that their earlier experiences with other religions left them dissatisfied. What they had read about Buddhism resonated with them, leading

them to look into it further. For instance, Mary reported that the Buddha's teaching about one's true nature differed from what she had learned in her study of the Bible and during her upbringing as a Presbyterian:

> I was raised here and was sent off to Sunday school in a Presbyterian Christian church and didn't buy any of it—it didn't resonate with me. But when I started reading the Dharma and Buddhist teachings it just fit in my brain and it made sense to me... I think I think early on, one of the lines that always stuck with me that the Buddha had said is "don't believe me, experience it for yourself". When I did the little bit of studying I did of the Bible, personally I felt that that was what Jesus was saying too, but Christians were twisting it and saying that you can't trust yourself because you're bad at the core and so you need to follow these tenets and we will lead you. That wasn't what I was hearing from the teachings of the Buddha. He was saying you are perfect and beautiful at the core and you've forgotten that.

Similarly, Bill explains in the following quote his experience of being brought up as a fundamentalist Christian and the contrast he noticed between the way he was taught in Christianity and what he learned about Buddhism:

> So hyper-Christianity, bible-beating, constant prayer in the homes, constant uh, reminder that we're different than everybody and that it's all laid out in the bible but you need a minister and a very educated person to interpret all of the meaning in the bible. There were 'pat' answers, that once you got to a certain point, they'd use circular logic. Even as a young adolescent, I started to go "wait a minute". Other paths can become extremely complicated and the further you go in, the more complication and argument can develop—either internally or with others. And Buddhism doesn't seem to get more complex; it continues to encourage you to see it clearly and simply and not um, uh...not in need of defence or need of theory or in need of a lot of uh...convoluted kinds of logic.

I had little exposure to religion or spirituality during my upbringing. My journey to a Buddhist practice came about from my experience as a relatively happy young adult and a sudden devastating crash which left me feeling out of touch with any natural sense of peace and contentment.

Before I became depressed, I felt very much at peace and connected to the world. I had a natural interest in others, a strong intellectual curiosity, and felt as though I was "full of love". I felt little need to project a certain image of myself to others; I simply existed contentedly with little pre-occupation with who I was or the impression I was making.

Though I was certainly happy, I was obviously unaware of some underlying problems within—be they mental, emotional, or physical—otherwise, I would not have crashed so hard and so suddenly. While depressed I noticed a sharp contrast between my depressed state and my happy state: when happy, I had a natural interest in the well-being of others but when depressed, I felt trapped within my own fearful world of self-related thoughts. I also noticed that I was creating my own suffering in (at least) two distinct ways: 1) I desperately yearned to feel the peace and happiness I had so recently naturally felt; and 2) I was terribly afraid to feel the negative feelings that were lurking within. After some exposure to Buddhist teachings on the suffering caused by attachment and the ego, I clearly saw the merit behind the Buddha's message. I had experienced the deep love and compassion that arises when one can look beyond oneself, and I decided, after four years of suffering and doing little to combat it, that it was time to attempt to recapture my "Buddha nature" through a Buddhist spiritual practice.

Making the unconscious conscious

In the following theme, the participants discuss how they became more aware of previously unconscious thoughts and actions. In using the term "unconscious", I am referring to the two aspects of the unconscious as described by psychodynamic theory: 1) the pre-conscious (i.e. phenomena available to the individual at any given moment but to

which he or she is not currently paying attention to); and 2) the dynamic unconscious (i.e. phenomena which the individual is unaware of and cannot access due to defense mechanisms such as repression and denial) (Aranow, 1996).

An important part of the participants' spiritual transformation was the development of an awareness of the connection between their thoughts, bodily sensations, and reactions to events. First, six reported that they became more aware of previously unconscious thought patterns and reactions. Here, Gina describes how she became more aware of how she was raising her children:

> I'm more aware of what I do, so it seems to be in my face all the time. Like I feel continually irritated by my kids, but I was before always reacting in a certain way but didn't notice. And before, in a way, it was like ignorance is bliss. But then you figure out what is going on and then it's horrific. You then realize what the effect of that pattern has been on the people who are receiving it.

Anita was discussing the challenge of ongoing spiritual work, likening it to the peeling of an onion, with conscious awareness peeling away the layers:

> So for the parts of yourself that aren't awake yet—you peel away layers and you become more present. But the parts that aren't awake, you're ignorant about and you only become aware of them when they're triggered and you go into reactivity...The effort is in trying to wake those parts up, trying to see them.

While talking about negative emotions, Chris noted that he is more aware of how his reactions feel in his body. In this case, a feeling in the body acts as a signal to him that previously reactive, or "unconscious", emotions are arising:

> But I find that sometimes when I'm not that ["unconscious"]—when these other emotions arise—the difference I've noticed is that I recognize them now so that in the body, when it comes up, I'm more aware of it now.

Along with this mindfulness of habitual thoughts and reactions came the awareness that these unconscious thoughts and reactions often lead to suffering. Five

participants said that by being mindful of their bodily reactions to situations, they could be present to what was going on (their body's automatic reaction to a situation) without allowing their minds to distort the situation and perpetuate habitual thoughts and reactions. In the following quote, Mary explains how a sound can lead to a fearful feeling in her body, which, if she is not mindful of this reaction, can lead to further thoughts which exacerbate the feeling and distort reality:

> Buddha would say when you experience something, where do you feel it in your body? So then you go to that place and experience it...so I'm sitting and I hear a sound and my brain tells me a story that oh, someone might be breaking in and all of a sudden my stomach tightens, my heart starts pounding, so then I think, "this is my stomach tightening, this is my heart pounding". That's what it is—it's not the story. So then I'm able to just experience the sensations and then let it go.

She went on to explain that in the past she would allow the thoughts to continue, leading to needless worry and action, and that these thoughts no longer have the same power over her:

> I would ruminate in the story and think someone was coming in and something terrible was going to happen, and I need to move and you know, the next thing I know, I'm packing and moving. So when a thought comes, I'm more apt to go to my feelings, as opposed to letting the thoughts turn into stories, which is BS most of the time. I'm much more in tune with me now.

Anita disclosed that by analyzing a situation, she creates separation from the present moment, but by staying present to the body's reaction, she feels connected to the moment:

> And so then the feeling is there—fear is often at the root of judgment—so if you feel the fear...it comes up, you judge the person or situation, and there's an automatic disconnect. If you just feel the fear, you can stay in connection with the moment. Everything is impermanent and it goes if you don't feed it with your thoughts.

Four participants described their awareness of thoughts and bodily sensations as a feeling of surrender, or non-resistance. They described a process of moving past negative reactions by, as Chris put it, "shining the light of awareness on it". Matt stated that by letting go of his resistance to such negative sensations, he was able to feel a sense of peace:

> It [ego] tries to put up walls. And the best peaceful feeling I've had is whatever is coming at me, to let it pass through me. The moment passes and you're right back in present moment and you can think clearly. You're not putting up that resistance and you're not stuck on 'I have to feel this way'—it passes through you and you accept it and once it's gone, you're not hung up on wanting it to feel any different than it is.

Bill echoed the importance of detached awareness of one's emotions. Here, he discusses how his meditation work taught him how to observe his emotions rather than allowing himself to get caught up in them:

> I think, again, this is something I learned prior to meditation, but wasn't very good at it. Being an observer of my own emotions rather than being in them, in the maelstrom of your emotion. Rather than being in the maelstrom, but also having an observer who is able to say 'this is what you're doing...feeling all these feelings and I'm going to be in them for a while. Okay, I guess this is what you're going to do' and the idea of an observer became much more enforced because of the meditation.

The participants' approach to their thoughts and feelings varied: five participants would maintain mindful awareness of their body's reaction to a situation, four described a process whereby they chose to surrender to what they were feeling while maintaining an awareness of the process, while four mentioned using both approaches.

Over the years—and particularly while working on this thesis—I have tried to become more aware of my thoughts and feelings with varying degrees of success. I have found meditation to be a great vehicle to illustrate the challenge of maintaining such awareness. In meditation my aim is to simply "watch the breath" by focusing on the

expansion and contraction of my belly. As I try to do this, my mind often wanders off to different thoughts. When this happens, I am supposed to notice that my mind has wandered and subsequently redirect my attention to my belly. However, it often takes several seconds or even minutes of "mindless" thinking before I realize that my mind has gone off track. So who or what is doing this "mindless" thinking? Ostensibly, I am creating these thoughts in some sort of way, but still I do not seem to have much control over them.

If my thoughts are ever-present and seemingly out of my control, I believe it is important to examine the possible effect that such thoughts can have on my well-being. In meditation, if I catch my mind mulling over some imaginary situation, I will sometimes pay attention to how my body has reacted to these thoughts. If the thoughts are fearful, I may notice my breath as more shallow, my shoulder and neck muscles tensing up, and my head will feel different somehow. If this is how my body reacts during meditation, then what is the short-term and long-term effect of such thoughts throughout my days, months, and years?

I have also tried to be more mindful of my thoughts and body sensations from moment to moment in everyday life, as was discussed by some of the participants. The task of being mindful is partly remembering to actually be mindful—that is, a big part of being mindful is "remembering" to "wake up" to what I am doing, thinking, and feeling at any given moment. When I wake up in the morning I try my best to be mindful of my tendency to start thinking of all the things I have to do and all the worries that I am creating in my head. Instead of getting caught up in the seemingly automatic process of planning, thinking, and worrying, I try my best to notice these thoughts and let them go

by redirecting my attention to my body and how it is reacting to my thoughts. I then try to "wake up" to my internal and external world as often as possible throughout the day.

The paradox of letting go to gain control

Upon being asked about how their Buddhist practice affected their feelings of control over their own lives, all of the participants indicated that their *perception* of control and *the role* that it played in their lives had markedly changed and had affected their well-being. While many talked about their enhanced "control" over their well-being through the uses of awareness outlined in the previous theme, many also felt that very little in life is truly under their control; letting go of the need to control the events of their lives created a sense of freedom and peacefulness. For example, Chris had been speaking about his decision to not get married, feeling that he could not guarantee that his feelings for someone would never change over time. He told me that his acceptance of the impermanence of his feelings helped him appreciate the person and the present moment without getting fixed on a set outcome. Here he describes the peacefulness he has felt by letting go of control:

> I hardly use that word, "control". To me, that's egoic: control is usually what the ego wants. And it's absolutely the opposite. There's no real control in the sense of...things just unfold exactly as they're meant to. We need not to resist that and not find any conflict in that. That's where your sense of—at least my sense—of peace comes from. You're just so open. It's so wonderful, so beautiful, just the way it is. It just affects the way you feel things and perceive things.

In this case, Chris is referring to the ego as the sense of constant craving and dissatisfaction in all of us which resists reality when reality does not meet the ego's needs (a more detailed discussion of the ego in Buddhism can be found in the Discussion). A major turning point in Matt's spiritual journey was when he came out of the closet as a

gay man. By coming out, he realized the peacefulness he could feel by letting go of his need to control what others thought of him and instead trusting in himself and the present moment:

> So finally, I'd had enough. Enough nervousness, enough chatter in my head, enough shame. I'd hit the point where whatever had to happen *had to* happen. I came out and just trusted myself for once. I stopped censoring my feelings, I stopped letting my fears, others' opinions, dictate to me how to live my life. Though it was hard for a while, my whole approach to life had changed: whatever came up, I could handle it because I didn't feel the need to fight it.

The peace derived from letting go of control was described by Bill as paradoxical. In this case, letting go of the need to control brings about peacefulness, which he describes as being similar to feeling like he is "in control":

> Well again, it's a bit of a paradox. The more I realize I don't have control, the more in control I feel. So ah, being in control isn't a feeling, so the feeling would be acceptance or peacefulness with the fact that I don't have control. It's like a control thing, but it's not. The absence of the fear of losing control for sure, is peaceful.

Some participants recognized the importance of relinquishing control, but acknowledged that the process was difficult. Here, Gina had been talking about how a main part of her practice at the time was focused on the concept of "equanimity"—acceptance of things as they are. She describes the challenges she faces in this endeavor:

> I'm noticing that I really want to have control over quite a lot of things and I didn't believe so before. And um, when I've been working on letting go of some of that control, I don't know how to behave in some situations. If I'm not trying to influence it in some way, what do I do? So it's been interesting to me to figure out how prominent that has been in my life when I didn't realize it before. So it's not, I didn't like learning that about myself and I don't like how it feels to give it up and not know what to do. But I'm staying with it. We'll just see.

We then discussed how one knows what to do when one relinquishes control ("A" denotes "Adam", the interviewer, and "G" denotes "Gina"):

> A: Yeah, I imagine—I've dealt with some of this as well—and what I've felt is it's also hard to know what to trust—are you acting out of an old pattern or—
>
> G: Exactly <Laugher>. I voiced that concern to my teacher and he said to sit with it longer and with more regularity and you will just 'know'. It will become an inner knowing of what's right.

This idea of letting go of control yet still actively making decisions has been difficult for me to fully grasp while studying spirituality. Does letting go of control mean that one must take a passive role in life? Here, Chris and I explore this concept (with "C" denoting "Chris"):

> C: It's so perfect, just the way it is. You don't have to change anything. I mean, when something goes wrong, everything is perfect just as it is, but when the roof is leaking, get it repaired.
>
> A: Yeah. Okay, *that* rang a bell for the whole thing about the paradox between accepting things as they are and letting them be but yet when something is wrong, taking the necessary steps. And identifying what is wrong and what is just...your ego saying "I don't like this this way"
>
> C: But you'll be guided. You'll know what to say, you'll know what to do. And if it's not right, you did it on intuition, on instinct, you did it and if it's not right then fine, there are no mistakes, only lessons.

In Chris's example, he is underscoring the link between present-moment awareness and wisdom in his decision-making. Anita spoke about the relationship between present-moment awareness and wisdom, emphasizing the importance of becoming present first to what is being felt in the body (what I imagine one would refer to as feeling "centered" or "grounded") before making a decision:

> With thinking about it, like how do I get rid of it, how do I understand it? Those things, they feed it. And we're conditioned to do these things and it's hard to interrupt. Don't trust your thinking mind until you've come into presence and felt what is in your body. Then clarity will arise and thoughts that come up are wise.

Again, mindful awareness played an important role in this process of surrendering. All of the participants stated that simply being aware of what was happening—as opposed to trying to control what was happening—gave them a sense of peace.

Through my practice, I too have become more aware of the role that control can play in my life. I have particularly noticed the futility of control and how it can be abused when it comes to romantic relationships. I have noticed a tendency to pursue romantic interests with the hope that they will feel the same way about me that I do about them. In order to ensure this, I think of different ways to present myself, different things to say and do to make me more appealing. However, this effort to influence someone else's opinion of me seems to simply create more stress than good. If she does indeed start to like me, is it an appreciation of me or the façade that I was presenting? So throughout my romantic relationships I have tried to question my need to influence the other person for my own gain. Why is it so important that she like me? What if I just "be myself"? "What if I let my guard down and show my true colours? Will she still like me then? Would I want her around if she did not"? It seems to me that the need to control oneself, others, or situations can lead to distorting the truth. As a result, I try my best to be honest with myself and others, be mindful of the temptation to control the world around me, and simply have faith that things will work out for the best if I am honest and keep an open heart and mind.

Change in perspective of self

Some interview questions focused on how the participants felt about themselves as a result of their practice. Four participants noted that their spiritual practice helped

them make peace with who they are. Similar to letting go of factors outside of their control, they were able to let go of some of the expectations placed on them by themselves and others, as well as letting go of the need to define themselves in general. In the following quote, Mary discusses her search for identity as an adopted child and how her spiritual practice allayed her need to "find" herself in relation to her adoptive and birth parents:

> I didn't have to look for similarities or differences between birth father and his relatives and my birth mother and I didn't have to be that or a combination of that, or influenced by my adopted parents and sort of finding in all of that mix, with all that influence, who I am. The yoga and meditation helped me sort all that out and get deeper into that.

She went on to explain how yoga and meditation helped with this process:

> The yoga helped with emotional stability around those times and the meditation helped me let it settle in my experience, without it being heady and intellectual and trying to 'figure it out' that way—that it could settle in my body and find a home in there and be a comfortable fit, without needing to fit in to everyone else's expectations

Bill explained that meditation helped him let go of a tendency to judge himself or others in terms of extremes:

> I believe that I am closer to a balance of this issue of grandiosity, big powerful and then nothing...I'm much more middle ground and balanced about my importance, my expectations of myself and others, and disappointments and failures, they're not as critical either. That would be one thing that's important that meditation has helped me with. Again, that's a concept I understood before and then the meditation helped to integrate it.

Five participants discussed ways in which their understanding of the nature of self had changed and how this new understanding affected the way they lived their lives. Three specifically reported feeling the truth of the Buddhist model of self: the self, like all of reality, is impermanent and in a constant state of change. In Bill's case, feeling the

truth of impermanence and change (in himself and in the world) helped him adapt to such changes in life:

> I think the idea that I'm a temporary entity has been helpful to me. I think I approach my life differently because of that. I think before getting that concept, I wanted to make decisions about things that were more, quote "permanent" [participant makes quotation marks with fingers], that were more anchored, again "anchored" [participant makes quotation marks with fingers]. These are fantasies and so rather than being shaken by that, I feel some relief about that.

Matt explained that his knowledge of impermanence helped him gain perspective of his role in the universe and his priorities: "To have an attitude that I am impermanent, I am um, just kind of a manifestation of something else right now means that it doesn't matter. There are many things that just don't matter". Prior to the following quote, Riley had been discussing the reality of old age, sickness, and death, and how seeing others go through these processes made her more aware of her own impermanence. She explains that this realization made her more aware of her choice in how she reacts to such hardships:

> Um, so not only am I impermanent, I'm also responsible for my reactions to these things that come towards me like disease or pain or loss. I believe it's my job, cosmically, to learn, period. And then to learn, in these cases, to learn to grow and react and choose wisely under these circumstances.

Some participants discussed their opinions on the nature of one's true self, and many spoke about their own experiences of being in tune with their authentic selves. In Buddhism, the authentic self is believed to radiate compassion for all beings, free from the ego-based thoughts which create false separations between oneself and the outer world (Rinpoche, 1994). This authentic self neither rejects or grasps on to "what is" and is thus able to face any situation in a wise and appropriate manner. Anita describes the process by which the authentic self is uncovered: "The psychological self is conditioned

and the practice is undoing the layers of conditioning, dissolving them, and when they've dissolved, what is left is natural, authentic self". When I asked about the nature of this authentic self, she replied:

> There is no self there, so there is no impression. There isn't any sense of self to evaluate it. It's natural spontaneous expression that meets the moment as it is and comes out of the moment. It knows clearly what to do and what it does is the most helpful action in the most helpful way. It's happening from the situation, not the situation plus these ego-centered distortions.

In the following quote, Anita discusses her experience with this sense of what she called "non-self" following an intense experience of surrender:

> It's big. It's like you really don't exist. It's more like...if you try to put it in language—and you can't—there's no God and there's no us, but we are God. That's the bigness of it. It blows your mind. Then you start to, um, everything comes alive, because you are everything. So this sounds weird right? But it's like everything is a teacher. You can learn from trees, the rocks, the wind.

She goes on to explain how such a unique, personal experience can be difficult to convey so that others understand it:

> It's like people thought Native people were nuts, talking to trees and the wind, right? And people for centuries have tried to explain it and then it gets taken in a conceptual way—and it's the only way we can explain it unless we experience it. So there's no way to talk about it but teachers try to point at it.

Here, Mary describes how she hopes to come closer to knowing this true self through meditation:

> Meditation is hard work because it means sitting with something that is painful, that I don't want to sit with, because what it's doing is it's bringing it up and it's letting it go and it's undoing all those layers of conditioning so that I can become closer and get to see and remember and get to know that true self.

I became depressed years ago in part because of what I would call an inflated ego. I had grown up with my share of insecurities and fears and during my final two years of undergraduate work, these fears had all but vanished. I was left feeling full of love for myself and others, intellectually curious, and confident. When circumstances occurred challenging my inflated ego, I crashed and lost a sense of who I was. The difference from one day to the next was drastic—my world as I knew it had collapsed, largely due to my reaction to what had happened.

I have managed to "find myself", to some extent, again, not through intellectual introspection but through meditation and faith in spiritual concepts such as equanimity. By redirecting my focus to the present moment (with varying degrees of success), I have reconnected with the world around me and become less preoccupied with myself (in fact, I am quite tired of thinking about myself!). With less focus on myself, I have also allowed "my self" to develop as necessary, not according to the fearful, watchful eye of the ego. Similar to what Bill said, my work on present-moment awareness and equanimity seems to have lessened the impact that strong positive and negative events in my life have on my well-being. I enjoy the good times but do not get too hung up on them and I am better able to handle the difficult times, because I know they will not last forever. I am also able to take myself a little less seriously, because my sense of worth is not so strongly connected to the ever-changing moods and thoughts within me.

Connecting with others

After having discussed the personal changes that the participants perceived as being associated with their practice, our discussions turned to how their practice had seemed to impact the way they felt about, and dealt with, other people. Six participants

reported enhanced feelings of compassion, empathy, and/or altruism. They linked this change to their practice, describing it as a natural process that followed their new approach to "self", their thoughts and feelings, and reality itself. In relation to this subject, a recurring theme in the interviews was the ability to "allow for space" when dealing with other people. Three participants reported that they were better able to do so, because they had spent time dealing with their own personal issues. Examining their own personal issues created a sense of centeredness that made them comfortable with allowing the moment to unfold as it needed to, instead of allowing a more ego-centered approach to control and dictate the situation. Here, Bill gives another example of how his practice had given him a different perspective on his Christian teachings, in this case, in relation to the connection between self and other:

> If you'd asked me back then, I wouldn't describe it like this, but I do now: If you let go of the fantasy of who you are and then uh, are at peace with who you are, it becomes natural or logical to then look outward to the other. I remember some philosophy—Martin Luther and the "I-thou" thing. I think that's where I'd come from before.

Anita supports this link between making peace with the self and allowing space for others:

> I have more...I feel I have more, um, ability to be with my own stuff so that I can enter into presence and compassion with other people. I'm getting better at that. I'm increasingly learning to hold space for others to let them be as they are without trying to fix it. And that's come with my trying to be comfortable with my own feelings.

Here, Gina discusses the role of space when dealing with clients as a social worker. She relates mindfulness of her "patterned behaviour" and body awareness as impacting how she deals with difficult clients:

> Yeah, and I notice it changes how I act towards them, and I also notice at work—I'm a social worker—and sometimes I'm dealing with some clients

> who may be difficult. My body experience of dealing with that is different. It's much more calm and I'm more comfortable allowing space between what someone is saying and my response. So it's not just about me waiting for space to interject my thoughts; I can consider what they've said before talking and there's no rush. I have time to sort of um...respond rather than react so that it's not necessarily coming from a patterned behaviour of mine. It can be a little more free of that. I've found it very—the practice—to be very helpful.

Another social worker, Mary, discusses the change she has undergone when dealing with clients from a focus on herself to an opening of space for her clients:

> I take the time to allow them to speak and consider it important whereas I'm not sure I did that with much frequency before... A lot of me-focused conversations and a lot of "me"-directed plans when dealing with clients, rather than letting them express where they are with things and figuring out what they can do. And it has been a gradual change.

In the following series of quotes, Chris tells a story about how his meditation practice led to inner changes, which in turn, led to a more positive approach to his job as a supervisor in a factory, which before had been confrontational and stressful:

> And then enters meditation. So over an amount of time, you get the clarity, you get to see things. First of all, I developed that connection and that confidence. And then things started changing. Things really, really changed. I would go into work, same people, same process, same problems, same everything. But it was all different. Everything was different. Once I changed inside, the outside world changed.

He went on to describe how he became clearer with his workers about work expectations and disciplinary action, and how this clarity and consistency had earned him the respect of those who had been working hard and helped the underperformers increase their productivity. Here he describes how his attitude towards work had changed:

> I wasn't yelling anymore, I was happy and everything and the union head probably didn't like that. But we got along and after that everything was fine. And I'd go to work now instead of before, thinking "oh shit, what's going to happen now" and get nervous...instead I'd go to work and be ready. I didn't care. Whatever happened, I could deal with it.

Here, he finishes his story, telling me about how, despite the existence of a salary freeze at his job, he was rewarded with a raise for his effectiveness:

> Things were working better for me at work, I'm getting results, getting things done. People are coming to me more because I'm just more effective and efficient. So it seemed like my natural skills were allowed to flow. And because I was getting along with everybody, people were getting the job done, they didn't mind. I'd show appreciation when someone did well. I was having fun and was really busy. So the manager says, "Listen Chris, you've been doing a very good job lately and I just wanted you to know that it hasn't gone unnoticed and that we're giving you a raise". Adam, the first thing, when he said that, the first thing that came to my mind was "damn, this stuff does work"!.

Four participants noted that their understanding of Buddhist concepts of self and interconnection helped them to feel greater compassion for others. Here, Bill once again relates the lessons he had learned from his fundamentalist Christian upbringing to his Buddhist teachings, in this case, the concept of treating others as you would treat yourself:

> Another one is "love your neighbour as yourself". I had this great insight—well no, I read a great insight into that statement—the guy who commented on the statement said "as" is really critical because if you love your neighbour *as* yourself as opposed to *as much as,* it's more accurate because he is you and you are him. So love your neighbour as yourself, because he *is* yourself. And the sense of oneness—that we are all one—and that compassion for self can be compassion for others and compassion for others can be compassion for self.

As was often the case in our interview, Bill notes how his Buddhist practice had helped him gain a deeper understanding of such concepts and integrate them into his life:

> That was a great "aha" moment. Something about my meditation practice, and I'm not sure what, really affirms some of these things that I already knew were true. But there's something about them that just brings it into focus, solidifies it, integrates it, and pulls it together for me.

Chris spoke about how he had changed his perceptions of others, feeling a more natural tendency towards compassion and understanding. He discussed how his experiences of interconnection led to a more accepting attitude towards others:

> Yeah, it comes more naturally. It just comes out. We're not different. Everybody's the same. I realized that. When someone's acting like a jerk, his behaviour might be unacceptable, but deep down he's like me and you. Our nature is kindness and loving and giving and gentle and compassion. We always feel better when we do good things than bad things. So it's hard sometimes to understand that and to see that in the stuff that's going on around us.

Matt described his challenges in dealing with people with different opinions than his, and highlighted the difference that meditation and mindfulness played in decreasing this habit:

> So I'd been labeling people as this or that, and I was getting all hung up on how they should be more like me—see things my way. But I knew in the back of my head that I was reinforcing these animosities within me, and making myself more hostile and defensive. So over time, through meditation and mindful awareness of this tendency, I was able to let go of this judgmental tendency more and more.

As a result, he described a natural openness and sense of connection with others:

> So the more I realized how harmful my own hostilities are to myself, the more I noticed it in others. I'd still get upset when they were hostile, but I'd also be more aware of the effect that their hostile attitude has on their own happiness. This encouraged me to forgive myself and others for all that negative crap and to work towards behaving in a way that brings out positive qualities in myself and others, even if—and it's very challenging sometimes—they disagree with me.

Some participants reported a change in their ability to empathize with the feelings of others. In particular, three participants mentioned how their feelings of empathy had sometimes been so strong as to cause them some discomfort. While Anita was discussing her increased comfort with allowing space for others to speak, she also stated that "right now, I feel like I have no skin. I feel the pain of the world quite acutely and I feel a bit, at

times, uh, like I'm not sure how to bear it all. But that's part of the path". In the following quote, Riley discusses how her approach to these intense feelings of empathy has changed since taking up Buddhist meditation.

> I can feel what people are feeling and I can actually feel it in my body. If someone's feeling sadness, those chemicals go off in my brain, and it's not good. It's actually taught me how to feel compassion for a person, because we empathize with people to understand, but we don't need to keep experiencing it, so I bring it back to compassion. Compassion simply means allowing that person to be in that space. You just stay present without getting sucked in <laugh>. I didn't come to realize that until I started doing Buddhist meditation.

Mary also expressed some difficulty in dealing with powerful levels of empathy. She reasons that this intense empathy is connected with the concepts of authentic self and interconnectedness:

> I feel *intensely* connected to other people's emotions. It makes it tough with the work I'm doing. If someone is with me in a counseling session and I'm to be sober and together and they're crying, I have very strong physical responses to other people's pain, and I'm starting to understand that better as being something to do with the interconnectedness: the non-self.

I asked her more about this phenomenon, and she tried to explain the feeling of actually "feeling" someone's pain as opposed to having an intellectual understanding of their suffering. Our verbatim conversation is as follows:

> A: So does it feel like you can identify with them more or is it more of a feeling that feels out of control?
>
> M: It's more empathy. I feel their emotional pain and I think "whoa, I'm right there. I get what you're going through. I *really* get what you're going through"
>
> A: Not just intellectual understanding—
>
> M: Right. Just being there with them and knowing that it's too bad that they're experiencing that. I'll bring it out and I'm not just saying "oh, you know, yeah, I feel your pain" kind of thing. But I *do* feel that pain. I think

> it's not an easy thing because I have my own pain and then to feel other people's as well, it can be very exhausting. But it happens and I just deal with it.

Though she stated that this intense empathy was challenging at times, she also said that it left her feeling a deeper connection with the other person:

> Generally. I feel it really intensely and then yeah, it goes away, but it leaves, for me, it leaves more of a bond with that person. Then all of a sudden I'm feeling like I now recognize that connection that I have with all living things.

My spiritual work, this thesis included, has given me a clearer idea of the relationship between anxiety, control, self-centeredness, and feeling a sense of connection with the world. It is so difficult to feel connected with others when I feel tense. Worries distort what is happening in front of me. Worries pull my attention away from the world around me and redirect it to worrisome thoughts in my head. The worries create a need to control myself and the world around me so that these fearful thoughts do not become a reality. This fearful state of mind cuts me off from the outside world in at least two ways: 1) it fixes my attention on myself (my thoughts, my fears, etc.); and 2) it distorts my surroundings in a negative manner, causing me to further insulate myself in a worrisome cocoon. In contrast, letting go of the need to control my surroundings can be liberating, though challenging. Letting go of control means that I must be open to the myriad possible outcomes of a given situation, not just my narrowly-defined set of acceptable outcomes. Letting go takes a sense of confidence that I can face and handle whatever comes up. Ultimately, letting go of control (and worries) seems dependent on the ability to be present and the faith that this presence is safe and is the ground for the wisest of action. With such presence, my worries vanish, and my interactions with others can be fresh and light.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Having incorporated various Buddhist practices and philosophies into my life over the last five years, I have personally experienced changes which I would describe as empowering. In conducting my research, my goal was to explore the experiences of others who had incorporated Buddhist practices into their lives, comparing the outcomes of their practice with the established outcomes of empowerment within the community psychology literature. Analysis of the eight interviews has uncovered changes in the lives of these participants which resemble the established outcomes of empowerment in their own unique way. The following is a discussion of the findings and how they compare with existing literature on spiritual practices (particularly Buddhist practices), Buddhist practitioners, and individual empowerment research within community psychology.

Though Riger's (1993) discussion of empowerment has been referenced previously in this paper, I would like to take the time now to remind the reader of her general thesis, given its important role in the formulation of my research question and subsequent research procedures. In her critique of community psychologists' conceptualization of empowerment, Riger argued two main points: 1) that, in their research, community psychologists had focused too much on one's *sense* of empowerment (as opposed to real gains in power) and; 2) that community psychologists had limited their definition of empowerment by adhering to psychology's traditional male-centric value-base of agency, mastery, and control, overlooking the empowering nature of traditionally feminine concepts of community, compassion, and empathy. I will now discuss the relevance of my findings to these two points.

The nature of the participants' empowerment

In their discussion of power, Hollander and Offermann (1990) refer to three types of power: 1) *power over* ("explicit or implicit dominance"); 2) *power to* ("the opportunity to act more freely within some realms"); and 3) *power from* ("the ability to resist the power of others by effectively fending off their unwanted demands") (p. 179). Theoreticians of power note an important difference between "power over" and the latter two kinds of power, "power to" and "power from". One's "power over" directly affects one's control over resources and decision-making, while one's "power to" is affected, in part, by a sense of efficacy or self-esteem. In her discussion on power theory, Riger (1993) points out that because one's "power to" can be enhanced by an increase in self-esteem (i.e. one is better able to do something when one feels better about oneself), measures aimed at empowering individuals sometimes ignore the importance of giving people more control over important decisions in their lives and greater access to resources (i.e. "power over"). Though she recognizes that one's "power to" can impact one's "power over", she claims that they are not the same, and that by ignoring the importance of "power over", researchers do not address political and social factors which can influence one's power.

The findings of my investigation into Buddhist spirituality and individual empowerment certainly point towards an empowerment that is "power to"-oriented. Many outcomes of the participants' practice gave them "greater opportunity to act more freely within some realms". For instance, becoming more aware of their own habitual ways of interacting with the world gave many participants the opportunity to break free from said habits, allowing for healthier, "truer" action. Some participants also discussed

the importance of reevaluating their notion of self and their expectations of self, giving them greater self-acceptance, a more balanced view of themselves, and greater access to their "authentic selves." In so doing, the participants point towards a spiritual practice which frees them from the limits of past conditioning in terms of their thoughts, actions, and self-image, allowing for a more present-moment-based relation with life. Anita aptly illustrated the link between operating from one's authentic self and "power-to":

> The only real power is to be able to stand in the ground of your experience. Then you are all powerful, for all the right reasons. Being present in one's experience, wisdom, clarity, heartfelt compassion, and kindness all arise. That's true natural power. We all have that. We can't bring it in. We have to be here and know our experience and have it arise out of that.

Though the Buddhist practice of myself and the participants of this study can be said to be "power to"-focused, an argument can be made that this practice also addresses some of the sociopolitical power dynamics which Riger has shown to be missing from much of the empowerment literature. Because western society is based on a capitalist system, competition and greed are seen as virtues which propel individuals and society to greater levels of progress. In such a system, individuals are implicitly and explicitly encouraged to consume goods and materials to give them a sense of self and self-worth. Through competition with others, individuals are encouraged to separate themselves from others, potentially leading to an unhealthy obsession with themselves and distrust of others, thereby neglecting the needs and rights of others.

This orientation towards life is in stark contrast to the Buddhist ethos which sees greed as one of the three defilements of the mind and self-grasping, self-cherishing, and self-absorption of the ego as the root of all suffering. If we are to accept what Buddhism tells us about the nature of suffering, then it can be said that the structure of western

society (i.e. a capitalist system which promotes competition, greed, and consumption) can be a breeding ground for suffering and that the Buddhist practice examined in this study is one aimed at some of the root causes of suffering which are so prevalent in the western world. Though the practitioners do not directly challenge the power structures of society that encourage greed and individualism, their practice is a way of acknowledging the unhealthy aspects of this orientation. Instead of unconsciously adhering to a life of ego-centric living, consumerism, and competition, the practitioners speak of a practice that encourages quiet reflection, detachment from one's ego, and a mindset which is more open to the experiences of others.

The constituents of the participants' empowerment

In the second part of Stephanie Riger's (1993) critique of the empowerment literature, she notes that empowerment has traditionally been defined according to typically masculine principles such as mastery and control, ignoring the role that traditionally feminine principles, such as compassion and connection with others, can play in empowering individuals. The responses of the participants in this study illustrate a spiritual practice which produces results similar to "control", "compassion", and "connection". I will now explore the key elements of the participants' practice and their relation to a model of empowerment which incorporates both the self-related aspects of control, efficacy, and self-esteem, and the other-related aspects of connection and compassion.

The issue of control was of particular interest to the participants during the interviews. Traditionally, empowerment literature has focused on how people can gain more control over their lives (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995), but the participants

framed the issue of control in a unique manner. Each of the participants reported a way of relating to their moment-to-moment experience that involved an awareness of their thoughts, emotions, and body sensations and a subsequent process of focused attention and acceptance of them. In a world filled with unpredictability, bringing awareness to one's moment-to-moment experience was presented as a reliable way of maintaining a stable mind. The participants discussed how their meditation practice had increased their awareness of previously unconscious habits in their thoughts and actions, often by pausing and bringing mindful attention to their bodies. By becoming more aware of these thoughts and actions, the participants gained more control over their own suffering. Instead of being controlled by unseen forces, the participants were better able to see the conditioned patterns behind their thoughts and actions, decreasing the suffering that they could cause themselves and others. With greater awareness of their moment-to-moment experience, they could better identify the link between the way they interacted with the world and their own happiness or suffering. They then had a clearer understanding of what was within their control and what was not.

Beyond bringing awareness to their conditioned patterns, the participants described a new way of relating to their inner experience which was described as a process of "surrender" or "acceptance". The notion of surrender is ambiguous, and like many spiritual concepts, prone to misinterpretation. The surrender discussed by the participants is not a passive giving-up, so to speak, but is more related to the skillful distinction between egocentric control and what could be called wise, skillful, or "right" action. As one participant (Chris) said, "That energy...you just feel fine with everything because it's perfect. It's so perfect, just the way it is. You don't have to change

anything. I mean, when something goes wrong, everything is perfect just as it is, but when the roof is leaking, get it repaired".

In Buddhist terminology, the participants seem to be talking about the ideas of *attachment* and *aversion*. The Buddha said that we become *attached* to the things in life which bring us pleasure and we are *averse* to that which brings us displeasure, and that both of these reactions create suffering. This habit of aversion and attachment is present from moment-to-moment, reacting to all that comes through our senses, including our thoughts. The participants seem to be describing a relinquishment of their attachment and aversion; they are learning to surrender to reality without clinging to the good or pushing away the bad. As Bill put it, "So the very idea of letting go sounds like a good thing when letting go of pain, but you also have to let go of good things, like your body and sense of strength: you're letting go of that as well. You don't have to, but it goes away. You do lose strength, you do lose power, so the attachment to those things continues to be the problem, not the fact that you're going through these natural processes". Thus, the participants changed the way they dealt with the parts of life that they could not control while gaining greater control over that which they could control: their relationship to the present moment. As such, one could say that the participants gained control over their lives, because they were no longer so easily swayed by the unpredictable nature of their own thoughts and emotions which can often sabotage one's own agenda, nor was their happiness so much at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control.

Researchers on empowerment have also identified an increase in self-esteem and self-efficacy as factors in individual empowerment (Pargament & Maton, 2000;

Zimmerman, 1995). The participants of this study indicated that their spirituality has made them feel better about themselves, but not necessarily in the traditional sense of self-esteem (i.e. "I am good at *x*"; "I am a really good *x*"). More accurately, the participants discussed a shift in their perspective of "the self" which was influenced by Buddhist theories of the self (along with theories on the ego or false self). In my work with Buddhism, the theories on ego or "false self" at times have been difficult for me to grasp. Not only do I find the Buddhist concept of ego (which differs from psychology's definition of ego) to be difficult to define, but Buddhist teachings on ego also run counter to some fundamental beliefs in western culture. Throughout the interviews, each participant, in some way, referred to "the ego" or "false self". In Buddhism, ego refers to the false self, or the belief in an enduring, unchanging self. Here, Sogyal Rinpoche (1994) provides a definition of ego:

> We cannot remember our true identity, our original nature. Frantically, and in real dread, we cast around and improvise another identity, one we clutch onto with all the desperation of someone falling continuously into an abyss. This false and ignorantly assumed identity is "ego". So ego, then, is the absence of true knowledge of who we really are, together with its result: a doomed clutching on, at all costs, to a cobbled together and makeshift image of ourselves, an inevitably chameleon charlatan self that keeps changing and has to, to keep alive the fiction of its existence. (p. 120)

The ego causes us suffering because we cling to our notions of a permanent identity when in reality, it does not exist. Negative past experiences can shape our false identity and limit ourselves and positive past experiences can shape our identity in such a way that causes us to cling to our new positive identity. Bill's remarks about a more balanced view of himself seem to highlight the peacefulness that can come from letting go of our false self: "I believe that I am closer to a balance of this issue of grandiosity,

big powerful and then nothing...I'm much more middle ground and balanced about my importance, my expectations of myself and others, and disappointments and failures, they're not as critical either". So Bill's quote exemplifies an approach to personal identity where one does not take oneself too seriously. Instead of focusing on becoming anything in particular, the focus is on undoing the layers of conditioning which have created the false self which can contribute to one's suffering.

Staying with the concept of ego, there was much discussion throughout the interviews of the difference between when one was operating from an ego-centric mindset and when one was in tune with the "true self". The ego was described as fearful, controlling, and selfish, while the true self was said to be what is obscured by the ego: an open, light, wise, and compassionate state of being. So again, instead of describing their practice as enhancing some sort of static self-image, the participants described a process of letting go of the need to define themselves according to such identities, and that the process of letting go of the need to define themselves was liberating.

Still, a sense of self was seen as important in the spiritual process. Anita explained that a sense of self is necessary in order to eventually deconstruct the self:

> So how I understand things right now is that it would seem, that um, developmentally, it's important to um...acquire a strong functional sense of self. It's based on my own experience. You have to be somebody before you can be nobody. So you use that strength to hold the fort while you take it all apart. The practice itself is...the psychological self is conditioned and the practice is undoing the layers of conditioning, dissolving them and when they've dissolved, what is left is natural, authentic self.

In the above quote, Anita highlights the nuanced nature of the Buddhist approach to the self: though "self" is seen as impermanent and dependent on ever-changing (and impermanent) conditions, we all have some sort of identity, and our sense of our own

identity is necessary to get us through the rigours of self-deconstruction. Harvey Aronson (2004) explains this abstract concept as follows:

> This then is the Buddhist context within which it makes sense to talk of abandoning the sense of "I am". One is giving up the automatic, reactive, inflexible identification with and attachment to self-representations. Because of this, the sage is said to see things "as they are"; and the Buddha is called "One who has understood things just as they are". Those who have realized things as they are can still use names and labels such as "I" to refer to themselves, but they are not bound by them internally. Their sense of identity and their psychological functioning do not imply any investment in a sense of ontological substantiality. (p. 83)

Aronson (2004) points out that Buddhism and psychoanalysis both aim to discover the true self, but Buddhism's version of the true self is concerned with and aware of the equality and interconnectedness of all beings, while much of psychology's tradition centers around the explication of one's unique identity. Dockett and North-Schulte (2003) make the point that misconceptions about one's true self can lead to a false sense of inferiority or superiority, particularly among ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities. Consequently, a cycle of domination and subjugation can ensue, with the oppressors identifying with (and feeling the need to maintain) their superior status and the oppressed eventually accepting the limits of inferiority placed upon them. In the case of Western Buddhist practitioners, it is possible that their de-identification with the self can protect them from the harm of being an oppressor or an oppressed person (at least in a psychological sense). So, taking into consideration the previously discussed changes, it would seem that the practice described by the participants leads to greater self-efficacy, which has been defined as the belief that one is capable of performing in a certain manner to attain certain goals (Bandura, 1982).

Previously, we examined how the participants' approach to control, their consciousness, and "the self" helped them decrease their suffering. Besides decreasing their suffering, the participants also linked their practice to greater effectiveness in other walks of life. Some participants mentioned an improvement in their relationships with other people in their lives, including relatives and co-workers. Many participants discussed how their spiritual practice had given them greater mental clarity, enabling them to be more effective workers. For instance, Chris discussed how he believed his meditation had allowed him to transcend the normally combative relationship between supervisors and employees at the automotive factory where he was a supervisor. Instead of operating out of the "traditional" (his words) role of the adversarial supervisor, Chris gradually approached his job differently, offering clearer communication of his expectations and consequences which were less emotionally-charged than they had been before. He also spoke of an open-minded confidence that he had towards his work which made him feel capable to face any situation which arose. In cases such as this, the participants' spiritual practice can be seen as helping them function better internally (e.g., emotional regulation and mental clarity), and these internal changes subsequently enhance their outer lives.

In a similar vein, several participants spoke of an inner transformation which enabled them to connect with others on a deeper level with greater ease. The process of giving mindful attention to one's thoughts, body sensations, and feelings—free of clinging or aversion—enabled the practitioners to allow space for others to express their feelings in times of suffering instead of feeling the need to try to solve the problem at hand. This approach of "allowing space" for the feelings of others mirrors the

mindfulness approach taken by the practitioners regarding their own thoughts, body sensations, and feelings: the present moment (e.g. one's thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, as well as outer circumstances) is witnessed and experienced as is, free of clinging or aversion. This mindful approach can be seen as a skill to be used in any situation for one's own life and for connecting with others, and the experience of giving space to one's own difficult inner world was often reported as something that enabled the participants to more naturally empathize with others going through similar situations. As Rick put it, "it seems the more you're able to feel your own feelings and suffering, the more you recognize that others experience that". The importance of empathy and connection was especially emphasized by those working in the "helping" realm of the workforce. Effortlessly connecting with others was said to be beneficial for both the participants in their job performance and the recipients of their help.

Riger's challenge to community psychologists was to conceive of empowerment in a way that incorporates both traditionally masculine (e.g. sense of control, self-esteem, autonomy) and feminine (e.g. compassion, interconnection, empathy) characteristics associated with empowerment. It would appear that the spiritual practice of the participants created an empowered state of being characterized by both the masculine and feminine aspects of empowerment. Each participant described a change in how they related to their own inner and outer worlds which ultimately led them to greater peace and a greater sense of connection to others. Such changes were not only beneficial to the participants in and of themselves, but also led to greater harmony with the world around them.

In her study of Toronto-area Zen practitioners, Campbell (2004) found that the spiritual practice of her participants yielded similar benefits to those explored in my study. She found that many of her participants became Buddhist in order to help themselves cope with personal difficulties and that their practice had a real-world, practical effect on their family, work, and social lives. These Zen practitioners reported feeling more spiritual benefits of their practice, such as mindfulness, selflessness, and compassion, as their practice deepened.

Though the benefits of the Buddhist practices of these two studies (mine and Campbell's) were similar, the actual practices of the two sets of participants differed greatly, as did their explanations for their spiritual development. The Zen practitioners described a multi-faceted practice, including seated and walking meditation, chanting, and prostrations. Seated meditation (known in the Zen tradition, as *zazen*) was the main means of practice, where practitioners focused on the breath and redirected their focus back to the breath upon noticing that their mind had wandered. In the Zen tradition, intellectual analysis, during meditation and life, is generally eschewed in favour of an emphasis on direct, concentrated attention to the present moment and the inherent emptiness of all phenomena.

In contrast, the *Vipassana* approach to meditation employed by the participants of my study uses the deep concentration fostered by focused attention on an ordinary object (e.g. the rise and fall of the abdomen while breathing) to explore the four foundations of mindfulness (i.e. mindfulness of the body; mindfulness of feelings/sensations; mindfulness of mental objects; and mindfulness of the core teachings of the Buddha—impermanence, no-self, and the suffering caused by craving). Perhaps due to the

psychological focus of my study (as opposed to Campbell's work within the field of Religion and Culture, which also examined how practitioners balanced their practice with the demands of everyday life) and the different Buddhist traditions studied, the participants of my study went into greater detail about their approach to their inner world. In particular, their increased awareness of habitual thoughts and actions, as well as a change in their relationship with the concept of control were salient effects of their mindfulness practice. These effects of practice were often pointed to as benefits in and of themselves, but also as contributors to outcomes such as increased present-moment awareness, peace of mind, and a greater sense of oneness with the world around them.

The findings seem to indicate three intersections between the inner work of the participants and a sense of connection. First, the mindfulness practice of the participants enabled them to change their relationships with themselves. By bringing mindful attention to their thoughts, emotions, and body sensations, the participants seemed to generate greater acceptance of their moment-to-moment experience. With less tension between the present moment and the separate, fearful needs of the ego, one could say that the participants brought more harmony into their lives and came closer to what many described as their true selves or "non-self". This true self was described as being naturally joyful, compassionate, and aware of a deep connection with the world around it. Secondly, by waking up to their conditioned selves, the participants learned to relate to their own suffering in a clearer and more honest manner. This process allowed them to become more familiar with their own suffering and thus better able to recognize suffering in others and deal with it in a more direct, clear fashion. Thirdly, by bringing mindful attention to their body sensations, thoughts, and emotions, the participants were able to

create "space" around these objects of attention, decreasing the suffering caused by pushing away unwanted sensations, thoughts, and emotions and clinging to desirable ones. Giving space to their internal world seemed to translate to their interactions with others, where participants often described the importance of giving others space to express themselves instead of feeling the need to interject with their own agenda. What is interesting to note is that the sense of oneness described by the participants was not something that they had purposely strived to achieve. Instead, compassion and empathy seemed to arise more naturally as a result of the changes the participants had made in their approach to their inner world.

In their research on the spiritual transformations of spiritual and religious teachers and scholars, Vieten, Amorok, and Schlitz (2006) found a similar relationship between spiritual transformation and a sense of interconnection. They interviewed 47 teachers and scholars from religious and spiritual traditions in order to explore the outcomes and factors common to spiritually transformative experiences. The religious and spiritual traditions of the participants varied, so the researchers did not focus on the individual spiritual practices of the participants but rather the common outcomes of their practices. As I found, the participants of Vieten et al.'s study experienced an increased sense of connection with others as a result of their spiritual transformations. This increased kinship with others took form in numerous ways: increased capacity to be sensitive to the suffering of others; less fear in response to pain and suffering; decreased isolation and greater sense of community; a shift in perspective from an isolated self to a greater sense of a self that is connected to others and a larger whole; and a greater awareness of one's "authentic self" whose true nature is loving, compassionate, wise, and joyful. The

participants reported their transformative process as being gradual as well as being punctuated by intense experiences of "oneness" with the world around them.

Considering the findings of the current study, the Vieten et al. study, as well as the testimonies of countless spiritual practitioners throughout the ages (Khema, 1987; Rinpoche, 1994; Das, 1997), it is clear that the realm of spirituality has much to offer community psychologists in conceptualizing the nature of empowerment. Though I am hesitant to give the empowerment derived from spiritual practice an "official" name, for the sake of this study, I think it is appropriate to refer to it as "spiritual empowerment". This spiritual empowerment resembles community psychologists' broadest definitions of empowerment, which are concerned with giving people more control over their own lives (Duffy & Wong, 2003). However, what is unique about spiritual empowerment is that it gives the individual more control at the very basic level: his or her mind.

The Buddha, and countless others after him, spent many years using unique methods to explore the nature of mind and reality. They uncovered how the mind operates on a subtle level, from moment to moment, and how the mind, when not used wisely, causes suffering and distortions of reality. They also discovered that underneath the conditioned mind, behind the self-involved ego, lies one's true self which is naturally aware of its connection to the world around it, and is capable of great feelings of love, joy, strength, and peace, among other "positive" traits. So a mindfulness practice can be empowering, because it can help people become more aware of how little control they have over their own minds and how much control their minds exert on them from moment to moment. From there, they can learn to relate to their inner world in a healthier way and use their mind as a tool to help them gain more control over their lives

instead of being at the mercy of their limiting conditioned self. Not only can the absence of the mind's subtle influences be liberating, but the true nature of self—what could be called "Buddha nature", "true self", "Christ consciousness", "presence", "being", etc.—can then shine through in its absence to a greater degree and give the individual great amounts of personal, grounded power.

In a special issue on religion and spirituality in the Journal of Community Psychology, Walsh-Bowers (2000) remarks that from radical Christian and Native perspectives, individuals can be empowered through personal spiritual development, and this empowered state can enhance one's connection to the world around them. He discusses the role of spirit as something that gives one direction in life, a unifier of the body and mind, and an essential aspect in overcoming false dualities. Drawing from his work as a community psychologist and his teaching psychology to aboriginal peoples, Walsh-Bowers sees the realm of spirituality as fertile ground for community psychologists to expand their understanding of key values such as empowerment. In this study I explored the spiritual practice of the participants and how they used Buddhist techniques to explore the connection between their body and mind. One of the main outcomes of their practice was a feeling of greater connection with others, exhibited in greater acceptance of themselves and others, more comfort with their own suffering, and a more natural way of helping others. This greater sense of connection between oneself and one's environment was also highlighted by Walsh-Bowers as a key theme in Native spirituality and an important intersection between community psychology and spirituality. Likewise, the transcendence of self to a greater awareness of the reality of

interconnection was reported by the spiritual teachers and scholars Vieten et al.'s (2006) study.

Sarason (1994) implores community psychologists to investigate what he calls a "sense of transcendence", which he defines as "the belief that one is part of a larger scheme of things in two respects: that scheme of things impacts on you, and you somehow do or will impact on it" (p. 79). He explains that everyone has a need to feel this sense of transcendence and that this concept can be a philosophical foundation for community psychologists' support of "sense of community" as a key value. In the aforementioned special issue on religion and spirituality, Hill (2000) adds to Sarason's recommendation, encouraging community psychologists to develop their understanding of this concept as being "not a matter of faith, but rather the experience of an actual dimension of reality, one which is available to all human beings" (p. 144). She theorizes that there are at least three distinct aspects to the concept of a sense of transcendence: 1) a sense of connection with the natural world; 2) an emotional awareness of our relationship with others, in the past, present, and future; and 3) a feeling of "awe and wonderment" (p. 146) of our own role as a small part of a larger, mysterious whole.

In the current study, the participants did not discuss a sense of connection with the natural world (i.e. nature, wildlife, etc.). However, an emotional awareness of their relationship with others and a feeling of awe and wonderment were both common themes in their descriptions of their spiritual transformations. In addition, participants in Vieten et al.'s (2006) study spoke of a transcendence of self towards greater feelings of connection with the world around them, using descriptions such as "less feeling of fragmentation and isolation", "integration into a larger reality", and "a realization that 'I

am a part of a consciousness that is so much bigger" (p. 923). It seems that what is "transcended" is what Buddhists would refer to as the "false self" or "ego." Though the concept of false self/ego has been explored already, it is an abstract concept which should be clarified often by those who have experience examining it within themselves. Here, Buddhist nun Ayya Khema (1987), a survivor of the holocaust and convert Buddhist, explains the logic behind transcending the self towards greater awareness of oneness and compassion:

> Anyone who is ego-centered has little joyfulness because there is no satisfaction to be had in ego gratification. We can never get to the end of our problems. There's always a new one arising. But when one lets go of that and directs one's attention to the all-prevailing unsatisfactoriness, to which every living being is subject, not only can one see the universality of it, but also that one's own particular suffering has no real significance. It's part of the whole of existence. Then compassion for oneself and all beings arises. And determination to make an end to all suffering gains the strength it needs to succeed. (p. 40)

Feeling a sense of transcendence can then be seen as empowering, because it indicates that the individual has learned, to some extent, to transcend his or her own suffering—or ego—and as a result, has developed a natural kinship with his or her surrounding world. Both the transcendence of self and the resultant sense of oneness can be seen as empowering.

Moane (2003) has pointed out that the aims of community psychology and liberation psychology are similar in that both fields are concerned with the impact of social conditions on one's psychological well-being and that both identify empowerment, on multiple levels, as being an important intervention. Liberation psychologists are interested in the impact of structures of power on our well-being and point out that these structures of power can be oppressive (e.g. by limiting access to resources, restricting

freedom of expression, etc.). They explain that this oppression leads to (and is maintained by) internalized oppression on the individual level, marked by traits such as helplessness and a sense of inferiority. Besides the previously discussed work of Riger (1993), community psychologists have pointed out that an inordinate number of empowerment interventions by community psychologists have been focused on the individual, ignoring the role that meso and macro level entities can play in the lives of individuals and communities (Perkins, 1995). In Buddhist philosophy, the mind that is the ultimate oppressor and dedicated training is aimed at retraining the mind to see ourselves and the world around us with fresh, unbiased eyes. With skillful use of the mind we can see past the limited view of our egos and have a braver, more honest and compassionate relationship with ourselves and others. Reflecting on the connection between the awareness-raising nature of the participants' Buddhist practice and their ensuing enhanced sense of connection, a case can be made that spiritually-based empowerment can address both the oppressive nature of one's own mind and the oppressive conditions of Western society.

I would now like to discuss the findings of my research in terms of spiritual empowerment's role in liberating the participants from their own internalized oppression. The responses of the participants in the current study describe a spiritual practice which seems to have liberated them, to a certain extent, from their own internalized oppression. They first described a process of awakening to their unconscious thoughts, body sensations, and emotions, a process which was also called "becoming present." The participants described a state of being that was more grounded in the current moment, leaving them better prepared to face what was going on in their surrounding world and

their internal world with greater clarity and detachment. Not only did the participants become more aware of the subtle influence of their unconscious (or what many referred to as "ego") on the way they perceived and interacted with the world, but by becoming more aware of this subtle influence, they were better able to make choices that were fresh and based on the present moment. They described the ego as being control-based, fearful, and based on attachment and aversion. Loosening the grip of the ego can then be seen as liberating, because it is coloured by the past and can thus limit one's perception of reality, keeping the individual stuck in one's own limited views and conditioned responses.

An ego-centered mind is also said to be insecure and in constant need of control over its surroundings (Khema, 1987; Gunaratana, 2001). The participants described a newfound peace by recognizing the control they had over their reaction to the world and relinquishing their need to control that which they could not. By seeing that they did not have control over so many factors in life, less suffering could be caused by the need to hold on to pleasant experiences and push away unpleasant experiences, bringing their hearts and minds in greater harmony with the way things actually were. In so doing, they could be seen as liberated from the limitations of an approach to life which was dependent on certain conditions for happiness and peace of mind.

A change in perspective of self was a major part of the participants' spiritual practice. First, this change in perspective pertained to a more balanced view of oneself (i.e. not getting caught up in extreme views of oneself). The participants linked a more balanced view of themselves with greater peace of mind and less volatility in their moods. To be more accepting of one's own limitations can be liberating, because, again,

it brings the person in harmony with reality. Instead of being attached to certain results (or expectations) the individual is freer to focus on the task at hand, putting forth his or her best effort. Secondly, a greater awareness of one's impermanence and relative insignificance was reported. Seeing oneself as a small part of a larger whole can be associated with liberation, because it can allow the individual to not take him or herself so seriously. Many participants in Vieten et al.'s (2006) work reported a feeling of greater freedom, awareness, and expansiveness in conjunction with feeling connected to a whole larger than themselves. Finally, some interviewees in my study discussed their spiritual practice as a process that brings them closer to their true self. This true self was a primary focus of the participants in Vieten et al.'s (2006) work, and was described as being naturally compassionate, brave, light-hearted, and wise. Harvey (1995) explains that liberation comes about through the renunciation of the constricted self-images of "I", "mine", "I am", etc.:

> He does not "lean" on anything for support...he has a boundaryless *citta* (mind), not limited by attachment or I-identification, and immeasurable with such qualities as lovingkindness. (p. 63)

So in a sense, this true self also brings about what Hill (2000) and Sarason (1994) described as a sense of transcendence. What seems to be transcended is the limited, ego-bound mind. This ego-bound mind causes suffering to the individual, and its transcendence—echoing the Aboriginal Canadian spiritual beliefs described by Walsh-Bowers (2000)—breaks down the barriers of false dualities that can leave us feeling isolated and at odds with the world.

By examining the interplay between individual spiritual practice and a sense of connection with the outer world, community psychologists can refine their own principles

and lend authoritative support to their value-based stance within the purportedly value-neutral realm of science. There is ample support within numerous realms of religion and spirituality for the values and goals of community psychologists, much of which have been discussed in this paper. When approached with right intentions, these spiritualities point towards deep, universal truths—the very same truths that the natural sciences seek to uncover. Due to the rapid pace of globalization, different methods of exploring these truths are now more readily available to all cultures. Community psychologists identify respect for diversity and collaboration with other fields as two key facets of their work. It seems to me that further collaboration with the realm of spirituality could expand community psychologists' understanding of the issues facing individuals and society at large.

Limitations of current study

In this study I interviewed eight participants, exploring their Buddhist practice and the effect that it had on their empowerment in terms of control over their own lives, self-esteem, and sense of connection with others. I also employed a heuristic research method, which drew upon my own experiences with the research topic, treating my experience as equally valid as those of the participants. Though it is possible that more participants would have added to the depth and breadth of responses, my final two interviews did not yield any new data, indicating to me that the breadth of data would not be increased by interviewing any more participants.

I also interviewed only eight participants out of a healthy respect for the abstract nature of the subject matter. Whatever my data may have lacked in volume, it seemed sufficiently deep for the scope of a master's thesis. Some may also argue that such a

small sample size can not lead to generalizable conclusions about my target population and research question. I would not argue with this contention, but I would argue that not all research should have this as its goal. This research fits with Walsh-Bowers' (2000) recommendation that community psychologists make the goal of their research and action "understanding situated, contextualized knowledge not developing generalizable, universalized laws, based upon the positivistic principles of prediction and control" (p. 233). A study such as this can be seen as an exploration into the world of lay-Buddhist practitioners in Waterloo, Ontario, and can serve as an impetus for further research with more specific aims.

Because my own experience with Buddhism was the impetus for my research as well as part of the data for my research, the findings may be prone to my own bias. With such a personal research topic I leave myself somewhat vulnerable in sharing my own experiences and beliefs. Though my own unique experiences with Buddhist practice may have biased the findings in some sort of way, I did undertake specific steps to minimize this effect, such as keeping a research diary apprising myself of my own reactions to the data as it emerged from the interview process on through the stages of analysis and performing member checks with my participants to ensure that I had accurately reported the context and meaning of their responses. As I have argued earlier in this paper, research on deeply personal, experiential topics such as the empowering nature of spirituality can be strengthened by the researcher's own personal experiences with the topic. Buddhist practitioners are told to look beyond the intellectual level of the teachings and to fully integrate them into their lives on a deeper, more intuitive level through regular meditation and contemplation. It was my hope that my own involvement

with Buddhist practice would add another unique perspective to my research as well as add greater insight into the oft-abstract data and theory.

Given that this research project was done with qualitative research methods, its results are largely dependent on my skills as a researcher to explicate and analyze vast amounts of abstract data. Furthermore, the abstract data herein is filtered through my own understanding, which is influenced in part by my own experiences with the realms of psychology and spirituality. The responses of the participants have value in and of themselves, but given the abstract nature of the topics covered, the reader is also dependent on my personal understanding of the topics being discussed in order to more fully elucidate the issue at hand.

Opportunities for future research

While writing this thesis, what has often stood out to me has been the elusive nature of words. The "truth" can be pointed to through our descriptions, but ultimately, its full depth cannot be fully understood through our intellect. Contemporary spiritual teacher Eckart Tolle (2005) describes the effect that labeling can have on our well-being and on our ability to truly comprehend reality:

> The quicker you are in attaching verbal or mental labels to things, people, or situations, the more shallow and lifeless your reality becomes, and the more deadened you become to reality, the miracle of life that continuously unfolds within and around you. In this way, cleverness may be gained, but wisdom is lost, and so are joy, love, creativity, and aliveness. They are concealed in the still gap between the perception and the interpretation. Of course, we have to use words and thoughts. They have their own beauty—but do we need to become imprisoned in them? (p. 26-27)

The Tao of Jeet Kun Do (1975) by martial artist Bruce Lee is a collection of Lee's observations on the relationship between Taoist and Buddhist philosophies and martial arts. Though he writes in detail about the importance of the different traits of a martial

artist, such as balance, speed, endurance, etc., above all, he emphasizes the importance of training the mind to be openly aware from moment to moment in order to see things as they are and act accordingly. The following are a few quotes from Lee which underscore the importance of an openly aware mind in understanding "truth":

> Awareness is without choice, without demand, without anxiety; in that state of mind, there is perception. Perception alone will resolve all our problems. (p. 19)
>
> Understanding requires not just a moment of perception, but a continuous awareness, a continuous state of inquiry without conclusion. (p. 19).
>
> *Knowledge* is fixed in time, whereas, *knowing* is continual. Knowledge comes from a source, from an accumulation, from a conclusion, while knowing is a movement. (p. 16)
>
> How can there be methods and systems to arrive at something that is living? To that which is static, fixed, dead, there can be a way, a definite path, but not to that which is living. Do not reduce reality to a static thing and then invent methods to reach it. (p. 18)

I am exploring the concept of "present-moment awareness" here in an effort to highlight the potential for understanding that arises from such awareness. Terms and concepts such as "awareness", "being in the moment", and "presence" represent a concept which has unfathomable depth. Numerous spiritual teachers and practitioners—including those interviewed for this thesis—have linked this state of awareness with peace of mind, compassion, and joyfulness. Thus, psychologists would be well served to explore the spiritual concept of awareness for at least two reasons: 1) it is the ground for natural compassion, oneness, peace of mind, and joy; and 2) it is the ground through which "truth" can be more realistically experienced.

Yet how can researchers explore the concept of awareness in a way that truly captures its essence? As the above authors, as well as many others (Khema, 1987;

Rinpoche, 1994; Crook, 1997; Valentine, 1997) have stated, a concept such as awareness, though certainly possessing certain characteristics, is ultimately beyond description. To know what this non-dualistic awareness truly "is" and feels like, one must *experience* it for his or herself. Furthermore, there is a certain hubris involved in using our scientific means to "reduce reality to a static thing and then invent methods to reach it": as researchers we may cover up the essence of numerous spiritual concepts with labels and theories, missing the point that the only way to truly know their essence is through personal experience. So what is the role of science in studying spiritual concepts? Valentine (1997) argues that wisdom arising from personal experience, though of value, cannot be considered part of science. Crook (1992) and Valentine both argue that experience-based methods and more traditionally scientific methods are "ways of investigation and modes of modeling reality [which] each have their realms of meaningful applicability" (Crook, 1992, p. 20). As was discussed in the literature review of this paper, psychologists have largely ignored the realm of spirituality in part due to natural science's inadequate means of investigating spiritual concepts. It seems to me that there is much to be learned from the realm of spirituality and that experience-based research can be a valuable avenue through which this realm can be investigated.

One promising area for intersection between material-based science and experiential-based wisdom is the study of the link between the body, mind, and spirit. Many participants in my study discussed the importance of directing their attention to their bodies in an effort to be grounded in their experience. Instead of reacting to situations in an unconscious, egoic manner (e.g. reacting through conditioned responses, allowing the mind to make up stories about what is happening), the participants would

pause and direct their attention to how their body was reacting to the situation with a non-judgmental, accepting attitude (this is also a method that I employ in my practice). It is believed that going into the body keeps the person connected with their experience and that the analytical, story-telling mind creates false barriers between the person and a more true experience of the present moment. As Anita put it, "With thinking about it, 'like how do I get rid of it, how do I understand it'? Those things, they feed it. And we're conditioned to do these things and it's hard to interrupt. Don't trust your thinking mind until you've come into presence and felt what is in your body". I believe that the wisdom behind directing attention to one's bodily reactions is similar to the wisdom in Lee's (1975) directive: "Let yourself go with the disease, be with it, keep company with it—this is the way to be rid of it" (p. 8). Many health professionals are now accepting that there is a strong relationship between mental issues such as depression and stress and disease. Perhaps by letting oneself "go with the disease" (i.e. one's in-the-moment bodily reactions to stimuli), one can reduce the interplay between the mind and body which contributes to disease. Meditative approaches which incorporate body awareness could serve as valuable avenues through which medical professionals could explore the relationship between the body, mind, and spirit.

Some researchers in the biological realm are also making discoveries which acknowledge the interplay between mind, body, and spirit. Traditionally, scientists have believed that the biochemical system of receptors and message-sending chemicals (i.e. hormones, peptides, and neurotransmitters) were located solely in the nervous system, including the brain. Pert (1999) has found that these receptors and chemicals (called ligands) are found throughout the body and that certain spots in the body are saturated

with receptors and ligands, creating mini-minds. Though the brain is still seen as the focal point of thought and feeling, Pert has found that it is not the single site of the psyche, nor is the flow of thoughts and feelings uni-directional (i.e. from brain to body).

In my own spiritual practice, I have at times been amazed by the reaction between my body and my emotions. Sometimes meditating on tightness in my body has yielded releases of energy and sorrow of which I had been previously unaware. I have noticed a clear and undeniable difference in my body between the times that I am relaxed and happy and when I am anxious. Carson, Keefe, Lynch, Carson, Goli, Fras, and Thorp (2005) examined the impact of *metta* (loving-kindness) meditation on lower back pain. Participants suffering from lower back pain were divided into two groups: metta meditation and standard care. The results of this pilot study found that those in the meditation group reported significantly less back pain than those in the standard care group (who showed no improvement) after eight weeks. Daily measures also showed that the more meditation the individual performed, the less back pain they reported and the less angry they were the following day. Such studies illustrate the complicated, multi-faceted relationship between thoughts, emotions, and physical symptoms.

As was outlined in the literature review, there is a dearth of research on compassion within community psychology. Many participants within this study and others (Vieten et al. 2006; Campbell, 2004) have reported that compassion naturally arises as a result of their spiritual practice. Given the lack of research on compassion within community psychology, awareness-generating practices such as the Buddhist practices explored in this paper can serve as avenues for exploring the nature of compassion, both through the testimonies of those who practice and through personal

exploration as researchers. I believe that greater clarity around the nature of compassion is needed for everyone, particularly those in the helping fields. The study of metta meditation could yield insights into the potential for cultivating compassion for self and others through dedicated practice.

The participants in my study mainly practiced mindfulness meditation and reported greater compassion for themselves and others as a result of their practice. Metta meditation is a practice specifically intended to train the practitioner to feel and exhibit "The Four Immeasurables" of compassion: 1) loving-kindness (the wish for others to be happy); 2) compassion (the wish for others to be free from suffering); 3) sympathetic joy (taking pleasure in the good qualities and success of others); and 4) equanimity (to be unswayed by the ups and downs of life). Though I imagine that long-term metta practitioners would experience benefits from their practice similar to those of the participants in my study, they may place greater emphasis on their sense of connection and compassion and could offer unique insights into such phenomena.

Conclusion

Through their spiritual practice, the participants of my study have taken their mental and spiritual well-being into their own hands. They have made previously unconscious habits conscious. They have learned to relate to their moment-to-moment experience with greater awareness and detachment. This "moment-to-moment" experience not only pertains to what happens around them—it also refers to their inner world. As a result, the participants reported changes in how they viewed themselves, and even their own concept of self. By increasing their awareness and detached acceptance of their inner lives, many participants reported an increased sense of peace which allowed

for greater feelings of interconnection and compassion. Other participants reported that their ability to feel their own pain (through detached awareness) enabled them to feel more empathy for the plight of others. I think that such personal changes should be taken very seriously. To me, they address what personal empowerment means. I believe that Anita expressed it best when, in response to the question of "what does empowerment mean to you?", replied, "being able to stand in the ground of one's experience". To live one's life with an honest, aware, and direct approach, I have found, takes great courage and training. In fact, energy, patience, determination, and truthfulness are four of the "Ten Perfections" in Buddhism, which are qualities necessary for enlightenment (Khema, 1987).

"Waking up" to one's own inner life also brings life to one's outer world. Here in 2009 with the world dealing with numerous crises, it is hard to overemphasize the need for individuals around the globe to "wake up" to the damage that is being done to the planet. Community psychologists are already somewhat inclined to care about the critical issues of our time, yet, like all humans, they sometimes do not care all that much. I know I have often been faced with the suffering of another individual and have simply not felt much for him or her in any capacity. What a shame! I have also had the fortune of truly feeling the pain and suffering of another in a heartfelt manner. This feeling of empathy, though marked by an intuitive feeling of another person's pain, also felt powerful, clear, and grounded. The idea that we all have a deeply compassionate nature at our core is truly energizing to me. To be able to truly sense the suffering of another being and feel compelled to take action is of great importance to me, and likewise, should be valued by social scientists (and all of humankind!) as well. Such enhanced

compassion would not only benefit those who receive help: it would also be directed to the providers of assistance, thereby preventing "compassion fatigue" and burnout.

The findings of this study suggest that community psychologists can expand their conceptualization of empowerment. Increased awareness of one's inner world has been described as leading to a more authentic and aware sense of control over one's moment-to-moment experiences. Accepting the aspects of one's life that are out of one's control has been described as leading to greater peace of mind. By cultivating greater awareness and acceptance of one's suffering, one is better able to tolerate the unpredictable nature of life. This awareness and acceptance of one's own suffering also seems to aid in one's ability to respond to others in a grounded, compassionate manner. Thus, one aspect of empowerment can be described, as the participant Anita stated, "the ability to stand in the ground of your experience". This understanding of empowerment emphasizes the importance of being able to live life with open awareness, and the peace that can be derived from such an approach.

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Background information about participant and his/her Buddhist practice

1. Why did you choose to adopt a Buddhist practice?
2. How do you meditate?
3. What is a specific Buddhist moral precept that you aim to follow, and why?
    a. How do you incorporate this into your life?
4. What Buddhist philosophy (or philosophies) resonate(s) with you the most?
    a. How do you incorporate these philosophies into your life?

Buddhist practice and empowerment

For the following questions, I would like you to describe the changes that have taken place (if any) as well as what has helped produce these changes (e.g. meditation, theories, moral behavior, etc.).

5. How has Buddhism affected the way you feel about yourself?
6. How has Buddhism affected the way you relate to your thoughts and feelings?
7. How has Buddhism affected your feelings of control over your own life?
8. How has Buddhism affected your feelings of compassion for yourself? For other beings?
9. How has Buddhism affected your ability to empathize with others?
10. How has Buddhism affected your tendency to perform selfless acts for others?
11. Considering the impact that your Buddhist practice has had on your life, in your opinion, what is *the most significant* change that has taken place?
12. The word "empowerment" can take on many different meanings. What does empowerment mean to you, and how does your Buddhist practice contribute to it?
12. Is there anything you would like to mention or expand upon that we have missed?

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