

1 Article

# 2 'Better as a Buddhist': An Interpretative 3 Phenomenological Analysis of the reflections on their 4 religious beliefs of Buddhist men serving a prison 5 sentence for a sexual offence

6 **Abstract:** This paper presents a qualitative analysis of the accounts offered by individuals (n=7)  
7 convicted of a sexual offence who describe themselves as Buddhists. Data were collected through  
8 semi-structured interviews within a custodial environment and analysed using Interpretative  
9 Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This paper presents the two superordinate themes that emerged  
10 from the data: (i) Better as a Buddhist and (ii) Ebb and Flow. Reflections and analysis from the  
11 Buddhist prison chaplain are integrated within the analysis of prisoner-participant data.  
12 Implications of the analysis are discussed with reference to interventions that use Buddhist  
13 principles, factors that underpin factors that help reduce reoffending and those that fit with the  
14 formation of a desistance narrative for religious individuals who have committed sexual offences

15 **Keywords:** Buddhism; qualitative; sexual offending; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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## 17 1. Introduction

18 The purpose of prisons has changed over time. Initially, prisons were promulgated as a place of  
19 punishment; increasingly, they came to be places of rehabilitation (O'Connor 2004). Religion has been  
20 entwined with the concept of rehabilitation from its nascence, with the earliest ideas of rehabilitation  
21 involving religion as a correctional intervention. This included religious activity and the atonement  
22 for sinful behaviour as the focus of individuals' sentences (O'Connor 2004). Over time, and with a  
23 move towards a more secular society, religion has become separated from rehabilitation, with the  
24 latter now comfortably ensconced alongside psychology. Despite this, many prisoners still identify as  
25 religious and/or find religion and/or convert to a different religion whilst in custody. As such, there  
26 continues to be a strong religious presence within prisons, with the prison service chaplaincy  
27 accommodating a range of faiths. In the site of the present study, 72 percent of the prisoners identified  
28 as religious, with 7.6 percent (5.5 percent of the total population for the prison) registered Buddhists  
29 (Jo Honour, Coordinating Chaplain, personal communication, 2017).

30

31 The changing role of religion in society is echoed by the changing perception of what it means to  
32 be religious in prison: more cynical attitudes to religion 'on the outside' find parallels with more  
33 skeptical attitudes to those in prison who self-identify as religious. Whilst some evidence suggests that  
34 prisoners who 'find' religion whilst incarcerated believe that this will indeed help them to desist from  
35 offending in the future (Clear and Sumter 2002), prison staff may take a more cynical stance. Prison staff  
36 (and indeed the general public) may conclude that prisoners self-identify as religious to take advantage  
37 of a range of benefits, both major and minor. Clear et al.'s study (2000) suggests that long term prisoners  
38 may think that being religious will be viewed positively by a parole board when making decisions  
39 about their possible release. Minor benefits may include apparently trivial things, such as eating meals  
40 that are different to the standard fare, or receiving visits from sessional chaplains, brought in from the  
41 outside. This may not seem much of a benefit; however, prisoners relish the opportunity to interact with  
42 staff who have not been saturated by working constantly within the prison system, and who therefore  
43 may help prisoners to feel more 'normal' and less like a prisoner.

44

45 There has been a plethora of research examining the putative impact of religion on desistance from  
46 offending, seeking to explain how religion may inhibit an individual from continuing to commit crime  
47 (Hallett and McCoy 2014; Salas-Wright et al. 2014; Eshuys and Smallbone 2006; Kewley et al. 2016;  
48 Kewley, Beech and Harkins 2015). As a mainstream religion in Western society, Christianity is typically  
49 the religion that is the focus for this type of research. Such studies have predominantly reported an  
50 inverse relationship between religion and offending, although this is not consistently the case (Clear  
51 and Sumter 2002). Researchers have subsequently proceeded to generalize these findings from  
52 Christianity to all religions, echoing early research difficulties in the psychological study of religion  
53 when Christianity dominated people's construal of what a religion was. Yet religions vary in  
54 personality, practice and reputation. Generalizing religious desistance research from studies  
55 predominantly conducted in the US, including high proportions of Christian participants, and with  
56 many prisoners serving prison sentences for violent/anti-social crimes, has limitations. Examining why  
57 people have desisted from crime, through the analysis of rich, idiographic data, allows us to  
58 conceptualize the mechanisms through which each faith may inhibit reoffending. Where the type of  
59 offending is driven by different motivations and risk factors to generic violent/anti-social offending, as  
60 is the case with sexual offences (Mann, Hanson and Thornton 2010), idiographic data additionally offers  
61 explanatory depth to the quantitative association between desistance and faith.  
62

63 Sexual crime is increasingly being recognised as a serious societal concern. Secondary prevention  
64 initiatives, such as Dunkelfeld in Germany (Beier et al. 2009), the work of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation  
65 and Safer Living Foundation in the UK (Winder, Hocken and Allen 2017), and the Utah Prevention  
66 Project in the US are emerging across the world. The number of people being convicted of sexual  
67 offences is rising in the UK, with the highest number of sexual offences (since national recordkeeping  
68 commenced) being reported in December 2015. For the first time, the total number of sexual offences in  
69 a year exceeded 100,000 (Office for National Statistics 2015). The number of individuals who have been  
70 convicted of a sexual offence has risen by nine percent in the past twelve months, with the total now at  
71 12,771 sentenced individuals, representing 15 percent of the total prison population (Offender  
72 Management Service 2016). This means that an increasing number of people who have been convicted  
73 of a sexual offence will now be living in the community. For these individuals, nasty societal attitudes  
74 to 'sex offenders' will be just one of the challenges they face on release from prison.  
75

76 Kewley and colleagues (2016) highlighted how religious prisoners could find the process of  
77 reintegrating with society is helped by their engagement with a religious group or community, yet the  
78 authors state: 'however, some caution is needed as the transition from offender to non-offender was not  
79 seamless or straightforward for those with an innate sexual interest in children' (p.21). This is one  
80 element that distinguishes sexual offending from other offending as sexual interest can be difficult, or  
81 sometimes impossible to change (Beckstead 2012). With sexual offending, the reintegration can also be  
82 far more difficult (Harper, Hogue and Bartels 2017) yet emotional isolation is also a dynamic risk factor  
83 for sexual reoffending. The capacity to engage with a social group, and to identify with them, could  
84 function as a protective factor; moreover, engagement with a social group in the community could help  
85 to reduce the 'social curse' (Stevenson, McNamara and Muldoon 2014) that the label of 'sex offender'  
86 brings with it.  
87

88 Although the interrelationships between religion and desistance from sexual offending has only  
89 recently started to be investigated, there have been several studies examining the interrelationships  
90 between religion and desistance from generic, non-sexual, offending (McGuire 2013). Offending  
91 behaviour programs have been developed and adapted over time to reduce an individual's likelihood  
92 of reoffending. In recent years, techniques such as mindfulness have been introduced and there are a  
93 number of studies highlighting its potential effectiveness with an offender population (Bowen et al.  
94 2006; Dunn 2010). This technique stems from Buddhist practice and has been present for hundreds of  
95 years with Buddhists all over the world engaging in mindfulness on a daily basis. Research has reported  
96 that practising mindfulness is an effective therapy for a variety of psychological problems, being

97 especially effective at reducing anxiety, depression and stress (Khoury et al. 2013). Researchers have  
 98 reported that participants that engaged in mindfulness and other Buddhist-derived interventions  
 99 showed improvements across a range of criminogenic variables including substance abuse (Simpson et  
 100 al. 2007), anger and impulse control (Derezotes 2000), hostility (Dunn 2010), relaxation (Derezotes 2000),  
 101 self-esteem (Dunn 2010), and increased optimism (Bowen et al. 2006). These Buddhist practices have  
 102 now been included in mainstream sex offender treatment programs run by the UK prison service.  
 103

104 During someone's time in custody, an individual's religious practice is unlikely to be considered  
 105 unless it has been found to be directly linked to their risk of reoffending. This is also the case within  
 106 structured risk assessments that are often completed, particularly with long-term prisoners. With the  
 107 current movement to consider and develop individuals' protective factors (de Vries Robbé et al. 2015),  
 108 it is possible that religiosity could play a more important role in the future as elements of religious  
 109 behaviour could assist in protecting individuals from future offending. This study attempts to develop  
 110 an understanding of the role Buddhism plays in the lives of men convicted of sexual offences as a  
 111 starting point for considering the role it could play within risk or protective factors for individuals.  
 112

## 113 2. Results

114 The experiences and reflections of individuals serving custodial prison sentences for sexual  
 115 crime who are practising<sup>1</sup> Buddhists map into two main themes, presented in Table 1 below.  
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118 Table 1: Superordinate and Subordinate Themes  
 119

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1: Better as a Buddhist	1.1: Buddhist qualities
	1.2: I can see clearly now
	1.3: Better future
	1.4: Attachment is futile
	1.5: Rose tinted spectacles
2: Ebb and flow	2.1: Karma
	2.2: Emotional balance
	2.3: Acceptance
	2.4: Open to abuse

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### 2.1 Better as a Buddhist

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<sup>1</sup> Buddhist training can be divided into three sections: moral discipline, concentration and wisdom. Moral discipline begins with the observance of precepts, which anchor one's actions in principles of conscientious behaviour and moral restraint. Generally, lay Buddhists adhere to five basic precepts: to avoid harming sentient beings, to avoid taking what is not freely given, to avoid sexual misconduct, to avoid harsh or false speech and to avoid intoxicants including drugs and alcohol. Concentration, in the form of meditation is intended to stabilise the mind and clear away the obstacles to the unfolding of wisdom and greater clarity. When applied conscientiously and consistently this structured approach does lead to, amongst other things, greater clarity and insight into the "process" we call "me" (Kumar 2002; Rodrigues 2005).

124 This superordinate theme articulates the positive qualities that participants expressed they had  
125 gained from becoming a Buddhist and engaging in Buddhist practices; this theme reflects  
126 participants' beliefs that they had changed their lives and themselves for the better. All the  
127 participants explained that the way in which they viewed and interpreted situations had altered, and  
128 they had become better people because of their practice.

129

### 130 2.1.1 Buddhist Qualities

131 One of the most common themes that emerged from the data set was how participants had  
132 changed and how their perception of the world around them had changed since they started  
133 practising Buddhism.

134

135 "Buddhists are striving, if they're practising Buddhists, to erm improve themselves, to improve  
136 their perception of the world, be mindful and kind" (Hengist).

137

138 Participants asserted that the changes in themselves and their perceptions of the world had come  
139 about from an active process of 'striving', where individuals actively seek to change the way they  
140 think and make decisions. In the extract above, Hengist highlighted the constant development that  
141 he (and the others) believed was taking place as their Buddhism encouraged them to constantly strive  
142 to be better people. By taking notice of his actions and decisions, Hengist feels he can deliberately  
143 choose more positive actions and, over time, become a better person because of his ability to observe  
144 himself and to decide to behave in a more positive way (see Maruna 2001). This appeared to be an  
145 important Buddhist quality and participants took pride in their increased level of self-awareness and  
146 morality. By making the distinction of 'practising Buddhists', Hengist suggests that these skills are  
147 not available to other individuals (or to himself previously) and increases his belief that he is better  
148 as a Buddhist. It has been asserted that religiosity is frequently the source of desistance for those who  
149 manage to live offence-free lives (Hallett and McCoy 2014).

150

151 Building insight and understanding our behaviour and decision-making is something that is of  
152 value not only within Buddhism, but to anyone working within a custodial environment. Many  
153 offending behaviour programs provided in prison spend a significant amount of time attempting to  
154 improve people's insight in their offending behaviour to help prevent them from reoffending. For  
155 most of the participants, being Buddhist meant being a good person both in the current moment and  
156 for the foreseeable future. This takes the insight-building one step further by applying morals to  
157 decision making and making the choice to apply any learning about themselves in a positive manner.

158

159 "I think the main value I take from it [Buddhism] is just how to be a better person erm both now  
160 and in the future" (Alphonse).

161

162 Identifying as a Buddhist appears to promote self-improvement in a way that was apparently  
163 not possible for the individual previously. The above extract is one characterized by moral reform in  
164 that through Buddhism they can become a better person, that is, someone who engages in more pro-  
165 social acts and fewer selfish ones. Such narratives of moral reform are common in prisoners who are  
166 'getting right with God' (Presser and Kurth 2009). For Alphonse, Buddhism appears to have provided  
167 him with a set of guidelines which help him to be a better person. It appears to be more than merely  
168 personal introspection, but actively applying Buddhist principles to their lives which helped them to  
169 feel that they were transforming into 'good selves' (Perrin and Blagden 2014). Participants  
170 highlighted characteristics they have developed since beginning to practise Buddhism; these  
171 included being more compassionate and understanding of others' foibles.

172

173 "I don't judge anybody you see, I've got no right to judge anybody...friendship towards other  
174 people not to harm other people, you know, just to be an all-round good guy...not criticize  
175 anybody" (Keith B).

176

177 "R: so how do you define being a Buddhist?"

178 "P: erm nice...yea that's just what it is, it's just being nice" (Alphonse).

179

180 All participants reported they had developed and improved themselves through their Buddhist  
181 practice; consequently, they also espoused a more positive self-identity of 'Buddhist'. This master  
182 status (Goffman 1963) of 'Buddhist' is a helpful move away from a denigrating label, or social curse  
183 (Stevenson, McNamara and Muldoon 2014), which should help them move on from their previous  
184 stigmatized identity, the 'old me' who offended. The qualities they outlined (compassion, being  
185 understanding) are presented as not being part of themselves before (i.e. while they were offending);  
186 therefore, by developing these qualities, participants are distancing themselves from their offending  
187 and the person they were at the time. Not only do they perceive themselves to be better people for  
188 having developed themselves through their Buddhist practice, but this also helped to take them  
189 further away from their identity as a 'sex offender'.

190

191 2.1.2 I can see clearly now

192 This theme encapsulates the notion that becoming Buddhist had helped participants to become  
193 more objective in their outlook, and to have a greater awareness of themselves and others.  
194 Participants felt that Buddhism had given them a clear purpose and path in life.

195

196 "It's more a case of refining the way that I view the world into a way that's more skilful" (Keith).

197

198 "the main thing, by stepping back and thinking about things first and seeing things for what  
199 they are straightaway...it teaches you to see the bigger picture...you can see the right way of  
200 doing something" (Paul Swift).

201

202 All participants spoke about how Buddhism helped them think more clearly and gain a better  
203 perspective on life. Being Buddhist appeared to allow participants to enter a process of self-reflection.  
204 This in turn allowed individuals to change their self-narratives. Presenting a positive self-conception  
205 has been demonstrated as leading to positive behaviour change (see Presser 2004), becoming a cycle  
206 of hope and promise, where a positive self-image leads to positive behavior which further reinforces  
207 a positive sense of self. There was a sense not only of being less insular in their thinking and of now  
208 being able to see the 'bigger picture'. Participants also spoke about things appearing to 'make sense',  
209 and of gaining more structure to their decision-making and problem solving. The notion of now  
210 having the right way to approach situations was consistent across participant narratives, the sense  
211 that being able to be objective provided them with an ability to deal with situations in a way that  
212 non-Buddhists (which included their former selves) could not. The ability to engage in self-reflection  
213 and self-evaluation are cornerstones of self-regulation, which in turn can posit behavioral change and  
214 contribute to desistance (Göbbels, Ward and Willis 2012).

215

216 This increased clarity was linked with practising mindfulness and being present in the moment,  
217 of paying attention to one's surroundings, thoughts and emotions. By behaving mindfully,  
218 participants felt they developed an increased awareness of situations and were therefore better able  
219 to make the 'right' decision. Consequently, they gained confidence and self-esteem through acting  
220 more mindfully and objectively.

221

222 "Mindfulness has to be mindful of, in my view, of things as they are. To see things, the negatives  
223 and the positives at the same time, as they are, to see the reality of it because if you start looking  
224 at it in a skewed way then I think that's unhealthy (Keith).

225

226 This participant suggests the way that he viewed things previously was detrimental to himself  
227 (and perhaps others). The use of 'skewed' implies he is aware that he was not perceiving things

228 accurately before, which may have led to unhealthy thoughts or actions. This fits with social  
229 information processing theories where misattributions can precipitate harmful and antisocial  
230 behaviour (see Huesmann 1998).

231

### 232 2.1.3 Better Future

233 Participants asserted that their Buddhist practice helped them both ‘in the moment’ but also to  
234 cope with their daily experience of being in custody. Moreover, participants also highlighted how  
235 they believed their Buddhist practice offered them a better future, and a chance to atone for their past  
236 actions.

237

238 “Buddhism will have a big influence on the way I live from now on...it’s going to keep me  
239 safe...the choices that I make is going to make my life what I want it” (Keith B).

240

241 In this extract, Keith B sets out how his Buddhist practice will affect his future life. Keith B is  
242 asserting that he will now have control over his life through being able to actively make good choices;  
243 he also explains how he will be kept ‘safe’ by Buddhism. Keith B explains Buddhism will, through  
244 practices such as mindfulness, through changes in personal characteristics, such as greater self-  
245 awareness, and by living in harmony with the Buddhist Noble Truths, allow him to lead a safe and  
246 offence-free life.

247

248 Participants’ narratives in this subtheme also linked to possible future selves. A possible self is  
249 a future orientated construct of ‘self’ formulated by an individual in relation to hopes, fears and  
250 aspirations for the future. Possible selves draw on versions of the self in the past and how they would  
251 like to be in the future (Markus and Nurius 1986). Buddhism appeared to be assisting participants to  
252 formulate pro-social selves that they wanted to be in the future. The possible self can allow for  
253 practical identities to be formed i.e. those that are pro-social goal orientated.

254

255 Several participants expressed the hope that they would have the opportunity to make amends  
256 for their past ‘unskilful’ behaviour. Skilful thinking and behavior, the practice of upaya in Mahayana  
257 Buddhism, represent intentions rooted in selflessness, kindness or wisdom as opposed to unskilful  
258 means derived from greed, delusion or hatred (Schroeder 2000). A cultivation of positive mental  
259 states allows one to think and act skilfully and with compassion; to associate with others practicing  
260 upaya or embracing a similar mind-set encourages one’s own practice and adoption of the positive  
261 outlook described by the participants.

262

263 Participants felt that their future behaviour would help them to atone for their previous  
264 ‘unskilful’ behaviour, and that Buddhism offered a framework to understand this change and  
265 development of the self in a way that society was not willing to do for someone who had committed  
266 a sexual offence. This corresponds with the indication that participants felt shame, guilt and remorse  
267 for their offending, and the bad decisions they had made which led them to offend. Practising  
268 Buddhism appeared to be a method by which they could atone for past actions and deal with the  
269 negative emotions they felt regarding their offending.

270

271 “I won’t hurt people I love anymore I think Buddhism is, for me, the best thing I can do...if I can  
272 really really get to grips with making myself a good person in prison I can do it really well on  
273 the outside so I mean the concept of atonement comes to me a lot, it really really seems a priority  
274 for me to atone for what I did. When I get out I can structure my life properly to A) not do any  
275 harm and B) atone and that will be for the rest of my life” (Hengist).

276

277 Here Hengist talks about the structure Buddhism offers him which helps him to atone for his  
278 past behaviour. Right now, in prison, with the help of Buddhism, he is becoming a better person, a  
279 different person. This narrative shift is an important aspect in the creation of a pro-social identity and

280 for desistance from reoffending. Religious narratives can provide powerful vehicles for people to  
281 reinterpret their sense of identity into something far more palatable (Maruna, Wilson and Curran  
282 2006). There are clear links through participants' narratives and within this theme with redemption  
283 and atonement for their past (bad) behavior. The redemptive self is a powerful motivator of change  
284 because one's identity becomes invested in this narrative of change (McAdams 2006), within the  
285 themes here this is achieved through participants adopting 'Buddhist qualities'. In many cultural  
286 narratives, common redemptive narratives incorporate forms of atonement (ibid). A negative  
287 emotional event becomes the opening act in a transformative and redemptive sequence. The positive  
288 ending, here, being a 'new' person, transformed through Buddhism. Here, faith and practice provide  
289 people with an enduring sense of positive self-transformation within the identity-defining life story  
290 (McAdams et al. 2004). The 'redemption script', for example, is characterized by wanting to 'give  
291 something back' and a recognition that, although individuals cannot change the past, they are aware  
292 that no one but themselves can control their present and future (Maruna 2001).

293

294 Participants claimed that their Buddhist practice and changed outlook on the world would  
295 reduce the likelihood of them reoffending on release. This appeared to stem from being more mindful  
296 about their actions, as well as now having the Sangha for support.

297

298 "I hope [Buddhism] will help me fit in because erm the world is a valid place out there and I  
299 used to be a part of it so I want to stay calm and focused" (John Doe).

300

301 "[other Buddhists] would have responded [to my offending] in a different way to the kind of  
302 tabloid reaction or propaganda...they'd see that for what it is [respond] with a very  
303 understanding kind of way" (Paul Jones).

304

305 For some participants, Buddhism was helping individuals obtain a sense of belonging, to allow  
306 them to belong to the world. This is important, particularly with this client group who experience a  
307 stigmatizing, hostile and rejecting world (Jahnke and Imhoff 2015). Indeed, finding 'belonging', can  
308 act as a protective factor (de Vries Robbé et al. 2015). Participants envisaged a better future due to  
309 their Buddhist practice - not only because of the skills they have learnt (mindfulness, objectivity,  
310 compassion), but because they would now be part of the Buddhist community. Participants  
311 expressed confidence that other Buddhists would accept and forgive them for their offending since  
312 Buddhism promulgated compassion and a non-judgmental stance. Participants spoke confidently  
313 about the future, downplaying concerns regarding other Buddhists' responses to their offending.

314

315 Attachment to a cohesive group, such as a religious community, can indeed be a social cure,  
316 bringing numerous wellbeing benefits and mitigating the 'social curse' of belonging to a group that  
317 is seen as unwanted by society, that of 'sex offender' (see Clifford, McNamara and Muldoon 2014).  
318 Furthermore, the hope of 'better futures' and possible selves cannot be underestimated, as research  
319 has found that self-identification and positive self-image are significant predictors of post-prison  
320 outcomes (LeBel et al. 2008). In contrast, feelings of stigmatization and a fear of being 'doomed to  
321 deviance' are associated with increased rates of recidivism (McCulloch and McNeill 2008).

322

#### 323 2.1.4 Attachment is futile

324 This subordinate theme captured participants' aim to have less attachment to things in the  
325 future. This fits with the teachings of Buddhism which states that all things are temporary, that  
326 attachment equals suffering, thus Buddhists should try to remove their attachments to (for example)  
327 material possessions to reduce personal suffering.

328

329 "I get quite attached to people, I make friends and I expect them to be there all the time so when  
330 they're not then that gets me down a bit but then I'm learning not to attach myself to people or  
331 things" (Paul Swift).

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“There really isn’t anything called the future there is only the present moment” (Hengist).

Participants spoke about how, since becoming Buddhists, they have tried to adopt a less anxious attitude apropos their relationships with others, following this Buddhist notion of impermanence in life. Being able to step away from attachments might be helpful for those convicted of sexual offences, who have often lost relationships by virtue of the nature of their offence and have been stripped of possessions as one of the pains of imprisonment (Crewe 2011). Thus, a teaching that helps people to rationalize how attachment could be unhelpful may be a positive for these men, giving a meaning to what they have lost.

Attachment to sex was a key area that was highlighted within the interviews and is relevant to the participants’ offending. Participants highlighted how they felt Buddhist teachings would help them to manage this in the future.

“[sexual] pleasure is an attachment and in forming these attachments with these things erm one teaching of Buddhism is that there is suffering in attachment because you know you either crave for something that you’re attached to or you fear that you’re going to lose something so there’s the suffering in the worrying” (Paul Jones).

Applying the Buddhist notion of non-attachment to sexual preoccupation, a dynamic risk factor for sexual reoffending (Thornton et al. 2003), could be extremely helpful for individuals convicted of a sexual offence. Viewing the need for sexual pleasure as an attachment which causes suffering could help individuals to challenge sexual preoccupation when they experience this and would offer them a framework to support their attempts to detach from sexual drives that may have underpinned their offending.

#### 2.1.5 Rose-tinted Buddhist Spectacles

This theme highlights several challenges with potentially unrealistic expectations around themselves, an exaggerated sense of superiority over non-Buddhists and a sense that, because they were Buddhists, previous offending could merely be part of a larger pattern of what was ‘meant to be’. Some participants used Buddhist principles to look at their future in such a positive light that they failed to consider challenges they may face on release. Buddhism was the answer to all problems. Although some participants talked about taking responsibility for their actions and having the choice to do ‘good’, others maintained that ‘Karma decides’ what happens, thus absolving responsibility and removing personal control.

“The way Karma works is that you realise you’ve done something wrong...but it maybe gives you an incentive to make sure that in the future you do something incredibly good for people...to balance out what you’ve done wrong...it’s a major permission giver isn’t it...if somebody can get away with it in some respect...that’s not the right principles behind it but that’s not to say people don’t do it like that” (Alphonse).

In this extract, Karma seems to balance out previous transgressions through doing a ‘good’ act later. This description of Karma also provides a vehicle for the suffering of victims, which could potentially be justified on these grounds. As stated in Alphonse’s extract, such a conceptualization may act as a ‘permission giver’, explaining away actions as being ‘Karma’.

#### 2.2 Ebb and Flow

This superordinate theme brings together subthemes relating to harmony and equilibrium; it is a balance that comes about through the adjustment of disequilibrium, of constant calibration and change rather than a result of stasis.



384

## 385 2.2.1 Karma

386 A number of participants discussed how practising Buddhism has helped them to recognise that  
387 their actions are their responsibility, that they have the choice to do good, and must take the  
388 consequences of their actions if they do not. Participants spoke about the balancing out of good and  
389 bad.

390 Karma and what this means to the participants was a substantive topic in participants'  
391 narratives. It appeared that this had a substantial impact on how the participants made decisions.

392

393 "If you dish out bad Karma all the time you're going to end up coming back in these places so  
394 try and good Karma and things will go nice...I find it a lot more enjoyable to erm have good  
395 Karma...I've got a clear conscious I can go back to my cell and I can sleep every night whereas  
396 before I found it very difficult" (John Doe).

397

398 In the extract above, John Doe describes the notion of Karma as providing him with a level of  
399 inner peace. The emphasis placed on the concept of Karma appears to change how participants feel  
400 about their life and decision making. Learning about Karma appears to have provided them with a  
401 reason to behave well, which they said they were previously lacking. When practising Buddhism,  
402 behaving positively has the added incentive of providing good Karma which may motivate  
403 individuals to make more positive decisions. The combination of increased responsibility-taking for  
404 behaviour combined with the morality and ethics taught by Buddhism and the concept of Karma  
405 encouraged participants to want to behave in a way they perceived as being 'good' or 'kind'.

406

407 "I was just going through this process of trying to understand things...just looking at me...why  
408 my life had been such a disaster...the conclusions that I come to was it was, erm, it was my  
409 decision erm, no matter how clouded my mind was it was, you know, no matter what I had  
410 experienced up to that point, it was still my decision" (Paul Jones).

411

412 This links with research that indicates that an internal locus of control has been associated with  
413 increased benefit from treatment in a sample of people who had abused children. Further, having an  
414 internal locus of control prior to treatment was an important predictor of treatment success (Fisher,  
415 Beech and Browne 1998). Believing they have a choice in their decisions provides the participants  
416 with a sense of control over their lives. Combined with the decision to try and do good (as set out in  
417 the previous superordinate theme, *Better as a Buddhist*) a belief in Karma could contribute to the men  
418 living a fulfilling and pro-social life in the future. In the extract above, participant Paul Jones twice  
419 emphasizes the difficulties he was encountering when he offended. However, he also affirms that he  
420 must nevertheless take responsibility for his decisions. The feeling of being in control and taking  
421 responsibility for one's actions, as exemplified in an internal locus of control, would be considered a  
422 positive outcome for a treatment intervention and consequent desistance, certainly for those  
423 convicted of sexual offences (McAnena, Craissati and Southgate 2016).

424

## 425 2.2.2 Emotional Balance

426 This theme highlights how participants have used Buddhist practice, and in particular  
427 mindfulness and meditation, to help them to manage strong negative emotions including anger and  
428 depression. Research has shown that people with sexual convictions can lack emotional management  
429 skills; developing skills to be able to deal with unhelpful emotions can be extremely beneficial to such  
430 individuals (Gillespie et al. 2012).

431

432 "I was going into heavy depressions...I have to fight the urge to kill myself in all of the negative  
433 energy...using the meditation and skills when I was going through the negative process I was  
434 able to get on top of the downward spiral before it was able to get hold of me and drag me

435 down...I'm able to recognise when it's coming and I can then go and meditate and control it to  
436 stop it from coming" (Keith).

437

438 This extract suggests that Buddhist practice has provided him with the tools to be able to  
439 recognise and manage bouts of depression more effectively using techniques of mindfulness and  
440 meditation. Being better equipped to cope with negative emotions will benefit a range of areas of  
441 individuals' lives, including relationships, employment, physical health and desistance from sexual  
442 offending. Another participant reflects on how Buddhism has helped him change his angry outlook  
443 on himself and others.

444

445 "If I hadn't stumbled across [Buddhism] I'd be really really angry with myself and with  
446 everybody else as well...I wouldn't be, you know, even a vaguely pleasant person I don't think,  
447 erm I'd be very very sad as well... It helps you deal with stress it helps you deal with deep  
448 emotions and gives you perspective" (Hengist).

449

450 Providing a healthy and helpful coping strategy for dealing with emotions, and a better base  
451 from which to problem solve ('perspective') is a healthy part of the desistance process (Ward and  
452 Mann 2004).

453

454 Participants also talked about how their Buddhist practice and identifying as a Buddhist helped  
455 them to deal with the stigma of being labelled as a 'sex offender' by providing them with an  
456 alternative 'good' identity which they could develop and focus on, relating back to the earlier theme  
457 of atonement.

458

459 "The normal human being inside you is disgusted and ashamed by it [offending] and the  
460 Buddhist inside you perks up a little bit and you are still disgusted and ashamed but you're also,  
461 you also understand, it takes account of the fact you can be a better person in the future"  
462 (Alphonse).

463

464 It is possible that developing a Buddhist identity helps prisoners to cope with the problems of  
465 being in custody. By developing and changing themselves during their sentence, they can manage  
466 the emotions associated with having their freedom restricted, a lack of control and being away from  
467 friends, family and their normal coping strategies. This positive identity may also provide them with  
468 hope for the future which in turn helps them to cope with the difficulties of serving a custodial  
469 sentence, and the pains of imprisonment associated with this (Crewe 2011). In this sense, changes in  
470 identity through Buddhist practice strike at the heart of the 'Good Lives Model' (GLM) of offender  
471 rehabilitation (see Ward & Stewart 2003; Ward & Marshall 2007). The GLM aims to help offenders  
472 construct more adaptive narrative identities while also giving the offender the tools to enable them  
473 to attain those goods which are important to them post-release. This parallels Vaughan's (2007)  
474 argument that change in one's internal narrative identity comes from a reconsolidation of their  
475 ultimate concerns. There is evidence to suggest that religion can represent the core from which many  
476 of these mechanisms can flourish and assist the desistance process in offenders (Perrin, Blagden,  
477 Winder & Norman, 2016).

478

### 479 2.2.3 Acceptance

480 This subtheme highlights how the participants described their approach to problems in life as a  
481 Buddhist. They spoke about the notion of 'impermanence': that things are constantly changing.  
482 Participants explained that this helped them to accept how things are in the present moment and to  
483 reduce craving and desire for things to be different.

484

485 "You shouldn't crave for things because craving is what causes the suffering...be satisfied with  
486 how it is there and then...things are forever changing, nothing stays the same, people come and  
487 go" (Paul Swift).  
488

489 Paul Swift states you 'shouldn't' crave for things, here he is setting himself a strict rule which he  
490 reports to live by. It appears this is an ideal to strive for rather than being an easy goal to achieve as  
491 he later highlights how he does experience cravings and struggles to stay 'in the moment' at times.  
492

493 "I'm more focused...more considered kind of life...how to respond on a daily basis in a better  
494 way...look at the chain of consequences" (Paul Jones).  
495

496 Here Paul Jones uses the concept of acceptance to explain how he approaches situations. By  
497 considering how behaviour and thoughts impact on each other allowed him to make better decisions.  
498 One participant described getting to the 'it doesn't matter' stage before getting annoyed and  
499 frustrated with a person or problem. This highlights how accepting the current moment can help the  
500 participants to manage difficult situations: to the Buddhist, since things are not permanent, but will  
501 change, one simply needs to wait as negative feelings will not last.  
502

503 "it takes a lot of time even now I sort of get annoyed with certain things people's actions but  
504 again it's just a passing moment" (Paul Swift).  
505

#### 506 2.2.4 Open to abuse

507 One further element to this subtheme was the idea that Buddhist prisoners are left vulnerable  
508 within the establishment due to the nature of their beliefs and their practice. Practising Buddhist  
509 principles and being thoughtful of others allows individuals to take advantage of them. The fact that  
510 other individuals do not live by the same principles they do leaves them open to potential  
511 victimisation.  
512

513 "because of our um giving freely people will take advantage of it they'll come into my cell and  
514 they'll say I want a cigarette by rights I have to give them one coz they've asked you know I give  
515 freely but some of them jump on board and they use that excuse to say oh I want this I want that  
516 you know I don't say anything it's not my problem they're the ones with the problem not me  
517 you know if I've got it they can have it if I haven't got it they don't full stop ... you've got to be  
518 very careful you can be taken advantage of" (Keith).  
519

520 Within this extract, Keith acknowledges his duty to give freely as a Buddhist, but he also appears  
521 to resent this at times.  
522

### 523 3. Discussion

524 This research highlights how participants serving custodial sentences for a sexual offence  
525 perceive that they have changed through becoming a Buddhist and engaging in Buddhist practice.  
526 Participants reported how they used Buddhism to cope with daily life within custody as well as to  
527 develop themselves into 'better', more pro-social individuals ready for release. While the sample size  
528 was modest, it was appropriate for the phenomenological method used which requires detailed  
529 analysis of rich, idiographic data. It should be acknowledged that the sample was self-selecting and  
530 constituted 15 percent of the Buddhist population in the prison.  
531

532 So why Buddhism? The current study with prisoners who identify as Buddhist is part of a larger  
533 research program with individuals of different faiths (see Winder, Blagden and Lievesley, 2016;  
534 Blagden, Winder and Lievesley, under review). Research on the link between recidivism and religion  
535 has demonstrated a weak association between the two (Johnson 2004): research such as this has

536 however led to calls for more research on the impact of religious involvement and, in particular, faith-  
537 based treatment programs in prison (see, for example, Thomas and Zaitzow 2006). Alongside  
538 quantitative studies, it is important to undertake qualitative research that helps to inform our  
539 understanding of the theoretical and clinical basis for any statistical relationships. The current study  
540 was designed to achieve this idiographic exploration of Buddhist faith and practice.  
541

542 One of the main aims of cognitive-behavioral-based interventions (the main form of intervention  
543 in the UK prison service) is to provide individuals with skills that they lack, which may have  
544 contributed to their offending. Participants highlighted how Buddhism and their Buddhist practice  
545 has enabled them to develop in ways that improved their emotional regulation, problem solving and  
546 develop an internal locus of control. These are all psychologically meaningful risk factors related to  
547 sexual offending (Mann, Hanson and Thornton 2010). Indeed, several parallels between Buddhist  
548 teachings and skills taught on offending behaviour programs became apparent. Both appear to  
549 encourage individuals to change unhelpful negative behaviours, both encourage insight and  
550 consideration of problems and feelings and both support building healthier, more content identities  
551 whilst reducing harm to others. As noted in the analysis Buddhist practice had links with the Good  
552 Lives Model of offender rehabilitation, a strengths based treatment approach, which moves away  
553 from focusing on risk factors and instead looks to galvanise any prosocial traits in offenders (ward  
554 and Stewart, 2003). The GLM aims to help offenders construct more adaptive narrative identities and  
555 some participants articulated that their Buddhist practice assist in the transition to more  
556 positive/good selves. What is apparent is how both programs and Buddhism have the potential to  
557 support each other in assisting people who have committed a sexual offence to live an offence-free  
558 life. This is possibly unusual. Typically, the chaplaincy works separately from offending behaviour  
559 programs, and therapists may fear or avoid touching on areas relating to an individuals' faith, for  
560 fear of offence or accusations of prejudice (Wakame 2014). However, it is important that the existence  
561 and impact of the beliefs presented by religious individuals are not avoided by the prison service.  
562 Religious illiteracy (Moore 2007) amongst therapists working with individuals convicted of sexual  
563 offences hinders the unravelling of faith-linked rationalizations for offending behaviour, an integral  
564 part of cognitive-behavioral treatment programs.  
565

566 From understanding Buddhist practices, there seemed a substantial number of benefits for  
567 participant. Indeed, some of the Buddhist practices such as mindfulness and compassion are being  
568 adopted into mainstream, secular treatment programs. However, as with any faith, there are  
569 indubitably going to arise misunderstandings apropos beliefs and practices that may foster unhealthy  
570 attitudes or behavior by adherents. Prisoners, in their somewhat isolated existence, may cultivate to  
571 an extreme faith-based attitudes or behavior, some of which may be unhealthy for this particular  
572 service user group. The main example of this here is regarding attachment; while participants  
573 highlighted how Buddhism would discourage having attachments (towards people or objects),  
574 research has demonstrated that having an emotionally intimate relationship with a partner (which  
575 would involve an attachment) can help to protect individuals from further sexual offending. This is  
576 a clear conflict between what an individual's Buddhist practice may tell them and what professionals  
577 involved in helping someone to remain offence-free may encourage. Of course, having an  
578 emotionally intimate relationship (or an attachment) is not the sole factor involved in remaining  
579 offence-free and it is possible that someone could live pro-socially without this; but it is an element  
580 that could cause conflict for individuals who are incarcerated for a sexual offence and who are  
581 Buddhist. Another example of Buddhist practice potentially conflicting with risk management is the  
582 idea that the future does not exist. This concept is linked to mindfulness and that individuals should  
583 live in the moment as much as possible. Although most participants were realistic about needing to  
584 plan for the future, it is possible that some Buddhist prisoners may choose not to do this, choosing to  
585 manage themselves in the moment instead. This could be problematic for an individual as they would  
586 not be foreseeing any potential consequences of their actions or anticipating any future risk that could  
587 be a result of their actions or behavior. Previous research has found religion could be used in self-

588 serving ways by individuals who interpreted religious doctrine in a way that allowed them to justify  
 589 their behaviour, exacerbating their offending (Topalli, Brezina and Bernhardt 2013).  
 590

591 It should also be acknowledged that this research cannot comment on the utility (or otherwise)  
 592 of Buddhist practices in the community. Feeling accepted by a community can be an important  
 593 protective factor for desistance by individuals with sexual convictions; the current study is unable to  
 594 comment on the experiences of Buddhist participants in the community, nor the participants' ability  
 595 or desire to continue to practice Buddhism when they are released. Future studies would find this a  
 596 useful area to explore.  
 597

#### 598 4. Materials and Methods

##### 599 4.1 Participants

600 The sample consisted of seven adult males convicted of a sexual offence who were currently  
 601 serving sentences at a UK prison which specialises in working with men convicted of such offences.  
 602 Although the sample size is modest, thorough analysis of the data was prioritised over a larger  
 603 sample size as this allowed a richer exploration of the idiographic data.  
 604

605 Participants were all white British, with a mean age of 42 (SD: 16.02). All participants had  
 606 completed an offending behavior program, either a specialist sex offender treatment program or a  
 607 living skills program. The inclusion criteria for the research were: prisoners, serving a custodial  
 608 sentence for a sexual offence, identifying themselves as Buddhist. The sample comprised 15 percent  
 609 of the Buddhist population at the prison.  
 610

611 Participants' names were changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities and provide them  
 612 with anonymity throughout the study. See Table 2 for information regarding the participants.  
 613

614 Table 2. Participant information  
 615

P	Pseudonym	Occupation	Religious before / after offending	Offending behavior programmes completed
1	Hengist	Worked on night club doors, pub doors	Discovered Buddhism in prison	Core SOTP
2	Alphonse	Student	Buddhist since age 8	Thinking Skills Programme
3	Paul Swift	Only in the community for short time, worked as a joiner, barman and in a burger bar	Raised Church of England, discovered Buddhism in prison	Core SOTP Enhanced Thinking Skills Controlling Anger and Learning to manage it
4	Keith	Medically retired/ previously a lorry driver	Discovered Buddhism in prison	Becoming New Me SOTP Adapted Better Lives Booster
5	Keith B	Emergency Medical Technician	Raised Church of England; practicing Buddhism at times throughout life	Thinking Skills Programme Core SOTP Extended SOTP

6	John Doe	Electrician	Raised Roman Catholic	Prison- Addressing Substance Related Offending Enhanced Thinking Skills Core SOTP Extended SOTP
7	Paul Jones	Police Officer	Discovered Buddhism in prison	Core SOTP

616

617

618 

#### 4.2 Data Collection

619 Access to participants was granted following ethical approval by Her Majesty's Prison Service  
620 and a UK university. Potential participants were recruited through visiting the establishment  
621 Buddhist group, posters on the wings and an interview on the prison radio station. Volunteers  
622 contacted the lead researcher who arranged an information and consent appointment with potential  
623 participants.

624

625 All participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis by one of the researchers in a private  
626 room within the prison, offering a respectful environment for participants to discuss their  
627 experiences. Each interview was recorded on a passcode-protected dictaphone and transcribed  
628 verbatim.

629

630 

##### 4.2.1 Interviews

631 The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours.  
632 The interview schedule was developed from that used for previous research investigating  
633 Christianity within this population (Winder, Blagden and Lievesley, in press) and the questions were  
634 adapted to reflect the differences between Buddhism and the Christian faith. The questions were  
635 categorized into five main sections:

636

637 1. Questions about their Buddhist practice and the values they associated with this

638

639 2. Self, home and family environment, personal information (such as occupation and age)

640

641 3. Their Buddhist beliefs in relation to their offending

642

643 4. Treatment interventions and their Buddhist beliefs

644

645 5. Future plans, goals, and coping outside prison

646

647 

#### 4.3 Analysis

648 The research utilised the analytic method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).  
649 This method was chosen as its aim is to explore the lived experience of individuals and the meaning  
650 they attribute to that, whilst also acknowledging and including the impact of the researchers'  
651 interpretations.  
652 IPA is concerned with the quality of the experience rather than with the identification of cause-  
653 effect relationships (Willig 2008). This means it can attempt to explain events and experiences but  
654 cannot predict them. Although it is subjective, it is systematic. Through analyzing the semi-structured  
655 interviews, we aimed to facilitate the understanding of experiences of Buddhist individuals convicted  
656 of a sexual offence. Analysis was guided by previous precedents (see for example, Smith 2004; Smith  
657 and Osborn 2008), entailing detailed reading and re-reading of transcripts, the production of notes  
658 pertaining to possible subordinate themes, and systematic generation and clustering of subordinate  
659 themes into superordinate themes.

655 

## 5. Conclusions

656 It appears that many aspects of Buddhism could be helpful for individuals both on a risk  
657 management and a personal level. The interviews highlighted how Buddhism has the potential to act  
658 as a protective factor for some individuals by helping them to build insight and awareness, skills to  
659 manage emotions, become part of a pro-social community and develop morality and compassion  
660 towards themselves and others. These are all positive elements and it was clear from the research  
661 how much the participants felt they had benefited from their Buddhist practice.  
662

663 One concern was the potential for misinterpretation from individuals, despite clear guidance  
664 from the Buddhist Chaplain. It is possible that individuals will interpret the Buddhist teachings in  
665 their own way, in fact one element Buddhism teaches is about taking responsibility and making up  
666 your own mind about how to behave (The Eightfold Path). This could potentially lead to individuals  
667 choosing risky behaviours and justifying them either with Karma or through cognitive distortions.  
668

669 One outcome of the research was the idea of teaching ethics alongside mindfulness in order to  
670 promote compassion and kindness. This is something that the participants and the Buddhist  
671 Chaplain were passionate about when discussing the use of mindfulness within interventions. As the  
672 concept of mindfulness comes from Buddhism this is particularly relevant and it is interesting that  
673 Compassion Based Therapy is becoming more popular within psychology. This could suggest an  
674 increase in the belief that building compassion can help to improve individuals' lives.  
675

676 One positive outcome from this research is that all participants noted a need and a motivation  
677 to make changes to themselves, and a wish to be offence-free in future. Participants all spoke  
678 hopefully about being able to manage their risk in the community. Although there is no clear  
679 indication that Buddhist practice in itself reduces the risk of sexual recidivism, it appears to provide  
680 adherents with an element of hope and motivation to change. Emerging evidence would indicate this  
681 is a positive finding indeed.  
682

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