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Chris Barker

University of Wollongong, cbarker@uow.edu.au

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Men, Buddhism and the Discontents of Western Modernity

Chris Barker

Late-Modernity involves a loss of personal meaningfulness leading to rising levels of depression and addiction. This paper explores the emotional life stories of a group of western men whose experiences have led them to embrace a globalized Buddhism for answers. Buddhism offers men emotional self-awareness, mindfulness, self-discipline, community, increased calmness of mind and a sense of self-worth. In that context the discourses of Buddhism provide a narrative of hope and a transformed masculinity. There is now a growing body of western scientific evidence showing that meditation and mindfulness have positive psychotherapeutic value. These issues are explored through a range of men's stories including: David, an emotionally balanced former Buddhist monk; Frank, once a disturbed psychiatric patient; Charles, whose meditation practices were prompted by his depression; Jon and Steve, whose normal unhappiness was eased by their Buddhism.

This paper explores the emotional life stories of a group of Anglo-Western men whose experiences have led them to embrace Buddhism. We will be concerned here with both the narratives of these men's lives and the social-cultural contexts in which they occur. Particular attention is paid to men's emotional lives as the condition for their adoption of meditative practices. These stories represent a small part of a much bigger project in which over 100 Australian, American and British men were interviewed about their lives (see Barker, 2007).

It is argued that the conditions of Late-Modernity involve a loss of personal meaningfulness. In particular, the traditional values of masculinity are no longer serving men well as testified by an epidemic of addiction and depression, "diseases of meaning" (Jobst, Shostak and Whitehouse, 1999) that centre on emotional management. In this context, a particular group of men have turned to Buddhism for answers. Here the broad processes of globalization are manifested concretely by Anglo-Western men who have appropriated an Eastern-originated philosophy now 'psychologized' and 'individualized' as Western Buddhism.

The Discontents of Masculinity

At the age of 15, Trevor (aged 47) left home to live on the streets of 'The Cross,' a slice of Sydney (Australia) that houses the sex industry, drug users and organized crime. He fell into "the seedy side of life," working as a doorman at sex clubs where

his social circle comprised sex workers, strippers, bouncers and bikers. At 17, he “hooked up with Hells Angels and really got involved in the club. We did pills, dope, a bit of coke, mostly acid and a lot of drinking; yeah, a lot of violence. We were involved in a lot of violence.”

Social alarm about the key features of Trevor’s story – drugs, alcohol, violence, macho men’s clubs and the feral side of sex – is one of the reasons why Western culture is currently engaged in a conversation about men. There is growing concern about men’s aggressive and violent relationships with others; their predilection for addiction to drugs, alcohol and sex; an apparent increase in mental health difficulties that looks like an epidemic of depression, and a sense that men have become unsure about their place in the world. In short, there is a feeling that men in Western cultures are caught up in an emotional crisis.

Symptoms of distress

In the United States, some 48 per cent of men are implicated in depression, suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence and crime at some point in their lives (Real, 1998, p. 84). In Australia, government health surveys (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998 and 2001) found that men are more likely than women to be obese, to have an accident (five times higher) and be diagnosed as HIV-positive (ten times higher). Men are also more likely than women to be diagnosed as having ‘mental disorders’ as a child (for example, attention deficit disorder), engage in high-risk behavior (for example, 11% of men compared to 4.5% of women are treated for substance abuse) and be a victim of suicide (six times higher, with 80 per cent of suicide victims being male and death rates highest among men aged 20–24 or 80 and above. (See also Clare, 2000, pp. 1-10). One in six men will suffer depression during their lives, but 80% will not receive treatment.¹

According to Steve Biddulph (1994), the central problems of men’s lives are loneliness, compulsive competition and lifelong emotional timidity. British psychiatrist Anthony Clare (2000) points out that throughout North America, Europe and Australia male suicides outnumber those committed by women by between three and four to one (p. 3). Clare also suggests that men are increasingly subject to a variety of health problems including cancer, anxiety, depression, circulatory problems and HIV-related disorders. Among the many factors that account for this is the tendency for men to be more *isolated* psychologically and socially than women.

In that context, there is more to be learnt from Trevor’s story than simply the troublesome aspects of sex, drugs and bikers. There is, for example, the abiding significance of human social relationships:

The one thing I found with the club is the comradeship. You feel like you belong. It’s the only place where I’ve really learnt what family means. People may think it’s strange because they don’t see the family values; they don’t see any family association at all, but a Hells Angel will put his family first and foremost. And they are loyal to one another. They will never do wrong by one another. (Trevor, aged 47)

Trevor stumbled upon a human connection within the family of Hells Angels that he had not found in his own childhood. He explained that he “had a very emotional and

to some extent physically abusive childhood.” He was continually told that he would never amount to anything, that he was “no good, useless and lazy.” He was never once told that he was loved nor cuddled or kissed. His parents were both alcoholics and he repeatedly witnessed them argue violently: “They used to attack each other with carving knives, broken beer bottles, anything they could get their hands on. I’ve got scars on me from where I’ve been belted, but they are only superficial; nothing like the scars that I’ve got emotionally.”

In due course, Trevor distanced himself from the Hells Angels to live a more conventional life of marriage and children. But while it was possible to leave his biker family behind, the same was not true of his childhood. Sadly, but predictably, Trevor’s family of origin followed him into his adult relationships, where he reproduced the violence and alcohol abuse enacted by his parents. Inevitably, divorce and separation from his children ensued, a particular instance of a wider pattern of social change that is unsettling modern men.

Social Change and Modern Men

The place that men hold in the world is increasingly uncertain. Until recently, we have taken our position in the social order as men for granted. We did not need to ask ourselves what it meant to be a man or how men should behave. This is not to say that we did not ask questions about ‘the meaning of life.’ Rather, it is to suggest that these questions and their answers were not posed in terms of being a man. The current period is the first in which we are being forced to ask about what it means to live as a man. Men now have to confront questions about masculinity because the ground of prior certainty is being cut away from them by a series of social and cultural changes. A sense of loss and disorientation arises as men recognize the need to change – or are forced to do so – but have not yet forged new secure ways to be. Of particular significance here are the changes associated with work and the conduct of relationships.

Change at work

Upheavals in the global economy over the last 30 years have brought many changes to the world of work. The manual working class and ‘underclass’ have been particularly badly hit by the loss of skills, income and self-worth. To some degree, the ‘crisis of masculinity’ is a calamity of the working-class man who had found his social value and self-worth through being *useful* at work and to his family, and now finds himself without a job and without a purpose (Faludi, 1999, p. 30).

At the same time, our 21st-century consumer culture obliges those of us in work to acquire more and more income to spend on the things we want. We live in a world of advertising whose central message is buy, buy and buy some more because we are inadequate just as we are. We feel we must have this car, this house and this item of clothing in order to be of worth. Shopping is an emotional experience that temporarily makes us feel good, but whose ‘high’ is inevitably short-lived. Then we need to spend again and so we need to earn yet more.

In order to fund our consuming practices we are working longer and longer hours. For example, new working practices have increased the workload for middle-class white-collar workers who regularly work 50-, 60- or even 70-hour weeks. But intensified working hours are not providing us with the sense of purpose and

meaning that we need. For example, when men work such long hours, it is difficult for them to fully participate in their family life even when they want to, as many increasingly do.

Changing relationships

Today we are experiencing tensions between love, family and personal freedom that are restructuring the family (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). These changes are marked by historically high divorce figures, the sharp rise in informal or de facto marriages and the increasing number of people who live alone. There is mounting evidence that marriage is good for men's health, yet by 2010 one in three men will be living alone (Clare, 2000, p. 220).

Relationships today can no longer rely on the law or the Church or the extended family or force or lack of choice to hold them together. Divorce is relatively easy to obtain, religion has lost its moral sway over the majority of Western populations, and kinship networks are flung far and wide. Increasingly, then, we must *justify* the continuation of relationships rather than simply accept the continuation of family arrangements that make us unhappy. Personal autonomy, trust, reciprocity and equality are increasingly necessary characteristics of relationships (Giddens, 1992).

The modern family has conventionally required men to be independent and outward-looking. This often comes at the price of a masked emotional dependence on women and weaker skills of emotional communication (Chodorow, 1978). The long-standing predominance of men in the economic domain has commonly left the 'emotion work' of family intimacy to women. Consequently, many men lack skills of emotion management adequate to the new times in which we are experimenting with relationships that are more democratic. For example, Mike was a 57 year-old American who had struggled with depression and problematic relationships with women before becoming active in the men's movement. As part of his personal transformation Mike came to embrace a spiritual community and take on the role of prime childcarer in his later marriage.

I married. I didn't have very good social skills, naturally enough, being rejected a lot as a child. I was very very fearful of being rejected. So, almost I ended up marrying the first girl I went out with, at the age of 21. She was 18 and I was 21 and we got married and I was highly neurotic, very fearful, very jealous, very insecure and violent. I would lose my temper and strike her maybe four or five times a year. I never put her in hospital or never bruised her. There was a certain amount of control there but I was abusive and guilt was not part of my self-image. (Mike, aged 57)

As women pioneer radical changes in our private lives that challenge the taken-for-granted cultural practices of male control, so men are wondering about how they should conduct relationships. Some men struggle to make sense of relationships with women while others have embraced the need for personal change.

Personal change

Trevor continued to embody the reasons for cultural disquiet about men: he married again and began “sabotaging our relationship by drinking heavily.” However, Trevor was more fortunate on this occasion; his new wife understood the root causes of his behavior and encouraged him to attend counseling.

I went and saw a psychologist for about four or five months and got to the stage where I could talk about my childhood. I was brought up in such a way that I couldn't talk. If I had something wrong inside, if something was bothering me, I couldn't talk about it and these nightmares were going on, oh, I dunno, over ten years, I suppose. They had been going on and I hadn't told anybody. (Trevor, aged 47)

Trevor found psychotherapy useful to him in building up his self-esteem and developing communication skills. Now, the widespread diffusion of psychological ideas throughout our culture, courtesy of self-help literature and television shows like *Oprah*, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, our increased awareness of psychological dynamics is valuable for men like Trevor. On the other hand, it fuels a widespread anxiety that our emotional lives are permanently in difficulty and require attention, that we are in fact inadequate.

In particular, it has become an axiom that men are unable to express their emotions, and that this is detrimental to their relationships. It is now widely accepted that men ‘suppress’ their emotions. Trevor would seem to agree. Nonetheless, we may note that he *had* been expressing his prickly emotions – through alcohol and violence. It is not that he wasn't expressing emotion, but that he was not doing so in a socially approved or personally productive way. The key issue, then, is not whether men can express emotion, *but how they do so*. The tribulations of depression, alcoholism and violence that many men experience do not suggest a lack of emotion or its suppression *per se*, but rather excess. In due course, Trevor turned to Buddhism as a source of ‘skilful means’ to manage his emotions and it was in that context that I talked to him.

Buddhism East and West

Buddhism is a philosophy and practice that has its origins in India and which subsequently spread throughout South-East Asia (Theravada Buddhism) and onward into China and Japan (Chan and Zen Buddhism) as well as into Tibet (Vajrayana Buddhism). It is not my purpose here to offer a full exposition of Buddhist philosophy. However, even at the risk of simplification it may be useful to mention a few key points; namely that the core of Buddhist philosophy is constituted by ‘the four noble truths,’ ‘the eight fold path’ and ‘the three jewels’ (Lama Surya Das, 1997; Thich Naht Hahn, 1999).

The four noble truths suggest that we suffer anguish or discontent as a consequence of grasping or clinging on to that which we desire when ‘reality’ is impermanent and cannot be bent to our will. Nevertheless, there is a way out of suffering through the eight fold path of right view, right intention [wisdom]; right speech, right action, right livelihood [ethics] and right effort, right concentration and right mindfulness [meditation practice]. This path is essentially a combination of

meditative practice, mindfulness and ethics leading to self-awareness and acceptance of the present moment in the context of community. In order to achieve these ends, Buddhists may 'take refuge' in the Three Jewels of the Buddha (the Teacher and 'awakened one'), the Dharma (the scripture or teachings) and the Sangha (the community of Buddhists).

Buddhism and globalization

That Buddhism is now available to Western men is a facet of globalization. The concept of globalization refers to an intensified compression of the world and our increasing consciousness of it (Robertson, 1992). It can be understood in terms of the power and dynamism of the institutions of modernity (Giddens, 1990). However, globalization is not simply a process of western expansion driven by economic imperatives. Rather, as Arjun Appadurai (1990) has argued, contemporary global conditions are best characterized in terms of *disjunctive* flows that lack one harmonious 'master plan.' Globalization is not so much a matter of *either* homogenization or heterogenization, but rather of the ways in which both these tendencies work in tandem.

That globalization is not constituted by a monolithic one-way flow from the West-to-the-rest can be seen in the impact of non-western ideas and practices on the West. For example, the global impact of 'World Music,' the creation of ethnic diasporas through population movement from South to North, the commodification and sale of 'ethnic' food and clothing and, of particular relevance here, the influence of Buddhism, within the West.

Government census figures put the number of Buddhists in Australia in 1996 at 199,812, a growth of 43 percent since 1991 (Nelson, 1998). The 2006 census saw the number of Australian Buddhists double to 420,000, in other words 2.1 percent of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). It has been estimated that as of April 2002 there were 378 Buddhist organizations in Australia, a rise of 4.5 percent since September 2001.² In America the Harvard University Pluralism Project³ lists 2153 Buddhist centers around the country while the American Religious Identity Survey of 2004 suggest that there are 1.5 million Buddhists in the US, a rise of 170 percent since 1990 (Lampman, 2006).⁴ Given that these figures reflect only self-nominating Buddhists, it is reasonable to assume that the number of people involved in some facets of Buddhist practice such as meditation is a great deal higher. Indeed, it has been estimated (Ellison, 2006) that 10 million Americans participate in meditation of some kind.

What is of interest here is not simply the fact that Buddhism has been exported from Asia to Australia and the USA, but also the conditions of Western modernity that make it fertile soil. As my conversations suggest, the attraction of Buddhism for western men lies in its combination of individual growth in the context of emotional distress - a rather Western emphasis - and the sense of community that it engenders - a traditional Buddhist strength - that appears to many to have been lost in the West.

Conversations with Buddhist Men

David: Developing an inner strength

David was an Anglo-Australian and former Thai-based Buddhist monk who had become a meditation teacher. He told me that his experience of spiritual life had been a direct challenge to core Western notions of masculinity.

Whilst I am now a lay person and am involved in the things lay people do, finding my spirituality allows me to have a perspective on my experience of being alive as a human being, as a man. Here are men living in many ways a way of life that many people would say isn't masculine. They're not exerting their masculinity through their language, through the clothes they wear, through their behaviors, through involvement with women; and yet there was something about them, something that was deep and strong. It was like a spiritual strength that was there. I found that inspiring. (David, aged 37)

David felt that his monastic experience offered him a perspective on masculinity that departed from the ascendant Western view. Monks are, of course, expressing a particular style of manhood through their language, clothes and actions. However, David is suggesting that the ways of monks are more desirable than those of conventional modern men. The gentleness of language and behavior characteristic of Thai monks is contrasted to the implied aggression of Westerners. Likewise, while the clothing of monks is deliberately plain, so that of Western men is for display. The monks are described as 'deep and strong' so that, by implication, Western masculinity is deemed somewhat superficial.

The idea of strength is a core characteristic of conventional Western notions about men. However, it is recast here to suggest not physical but mental and emotional potency. Spiritual practices often contain notions of endurance and acceptance that are also characteristic of our pre-1960s male conventions. While David is declining Western masculinity, he is simultaneously re-describing and reclaiming one of its core characteristics; that is, the idea of personal 'inner' depth and power. His contention chimes with Susan Faludi's (1999) case that an "ornamental culture" of celebrity, image, entertainment and marketing has turned masculinity into a matter of display rather than celebrating personal qualities of character, confidence and purpose (pp. 34-35).

David's father embodied qualities similar to those of the monks he admired. Although as a child his father "was a bit of an embarrassment" to him, being quite different from other local fathers, David thought him wise: "I looked up to him and respected him." His father was stoical in the face of a life-threatening medical condition and encouraged David's family to "live a fairly simple life." For example, they did not have a television set.

His attitudes and thriftiness, carefulness, became very much a part of our growing up as well. We respected nature; we respected life, animal life, but also we were careful how we spent our money and really looked after things as well as we could. I'd say my parents, especially my father, was quite a strict parent and so that instilled within me a respect for the law, a respect for, a sense of morality, a sense of self-discipline as well. (David, aged 37)

David's father was attracted to Buddhism and took his son to the local temple, where David "felt a connectedness to the monks; quiet, calm, serene people, men". Throughout David's childhood, his father modeled the values of independence, self-sufficiency, thriftiness, carefulness, stoicism, respect for life, morality and self-discipline to him. Later, in a Thai monastery where "it was austere but there was a sense of joy that came from living very simply", David was to find those values again. Courtesy of globalization, David connects the pre-modern discourses of Buddhism to his father's 1950s values. In doing so, he critiques the ornamental masculinity of contemporary culture. That is, character virtues such as strength of mind and care for others are contrasted with the superficiality of consumer exhibition.

It is often said that David's father's generation lacked emotional intelligence. However, David thought his father "more emotionally aware than my mother; more emotionally sensitive in a good way and yet, you know, he was always a very masculine man ... I felt he was a wise man ... I felt very close to him." In a Thai monastery, David also found that:

There was an emotional fulfillment through talking to the other monks and so an emotional intelligence that was there, that I guess was more real and emotional than what men tend to think is emotional life, which is basically just physical, sexual life. (David, aged 37)

Compared to Trevor, David looks like an exceptional and fortunate man. He has been able to cultivate a meaningful and emotionally balanced life. Yet, we live in times when our culture poses particular obstacles to achieving this and many of the Buddhist men I spoke with came to it through their struggle with emotional suffering.

A problem of our time

The people of pre-modern societies had living traditions of family, community, morality and Gods into which they were embedded and which endowed them with purpose. Modern Western societies have fewer such meaningful collective traditions or communities. The conventional family is in disarray and our God has been declared well and truly dead. We live in atomized societies where the central institutions are geared to individuals rather than to communities.

In Western cultures, we hide away much that is intrinsic to life but which might threaten our emotional security, including death and mental illness (Giddens, 1991). The sick and dying are segregated from us in hospitals, enabling us to forget that it is in our nature to grow old, to get sick and to die. Our culture then struggles to provide us with the answers to life's 'big' questions that are necessary to a full and satisfying existence.

Ironically, as we have sought to reduce our fear of death and sickness through material 'progress,' contemporary culture has generated new forms of anxiety. Driven by an obsession with 'the economy,' we are more concerned with personal consumer choice than with meaningful relationships. We spend more time working and shopping than belonging within our family or community. We must then depend on our individual stories without the guidance of a broader meaningful

context. Lacking surety, our life choices become an anxiety-inducing process and meaninglessness a fundamental problem of our time.

Diseases of meaning

Men's psychological and cultural training makes us particularly vulnerable to hyper-individualism, which cuts us off from each other and from wider community narratives. We are often more individualistic, success-oriented and competitive than women. We lack the social networks that sustain the human heart. In that context, we might understand male depression and addiction as 'diseases of meaning' (Jobst, Shostak, and Whitehouse, 1999). Meaning is linked to emotion because, as cognitive psychology demonstrates, the way we think is a vital component of how we feel. The thought that our life lacks purpose, or that we have failed to live up to our ideals, is constitutive of emptiness, anxiety, anger and depression. Contemporary men face change and loss in their relationships with work, women and the family without alternative collective value systems to draw on.

Yet, paradoxically, the contemporary stress on individuals making themselves anew also presents us with the opportunity to constructively reshape ourselves. For example, Western culture is now witnessing a resurgence of interest in 'spirituality' that contributes to a meaningful life (Tacey, 2004, pp. 1-11; Young-Eisendrath and Miller, 2000, pp. 1-9). Mike (a 57 year-old American, see above) told me that during a period of self-fashioning prompted by depression, "the spirituality came first." He found meaning in being an at-home father and offering 'service' to others. For Mark (a 48 year-old Australian computer engineer), the idea of spirituality was inseparable from emotional development. He pointed to the experience of being "dispirited" to indicate what it meant to him. Bruce (a 54 year-old British journalist living in Australia), who organized a men's group, saw spirituality as, "doing anything mindfully. I think that when you are sufficiently mindful you are having a spiritual experience."

Meditation and mindfulness

Spiritual practices are becoming increasingly influential within Western psychology. In particular, Buddhist notions of meditation and mindfulness are becoming established within Western therapeutic practices. Meditation entails two key elements: concentration and 'insight.' The practice involves developing the capacity to place attention on one single point. This is commonly the in-and-out movement of the breath. As concentration is strengthened, the mind settles, we become more peaceful, and understanding grows. To act skilfully in the world and increase our contentment, we need to be mindful of what is happening right now. Mindfulness involves deliberately and purposefully placing one's attention on the present moment in a non-judgmental fashion. When we are walking, we need to be conscious that we are walking. When we are sitting, we need to know that we are sitting (Thich Naht Hahn, 1975).

Mindfulness brings our conscious attention to immediate experience without struggling to change it. And if we pay attention to our emotions, we come to appreciate the conditions under which they arise, what they feel like and how best to deal with them. We become less attached to them and more able to make self-conscious choices. We can also set out to cultivate particular states of mind such as

compassion or loving-kindness. These are the kinds of practices that engaged the Western men I spoke with.

Charles: A spiritual home

Charles was a 50 year-old Australian meditation teacher who as a young man trained to be a Catholic priest but later adopted Buddhism and for a while became a monk. He described how, at the age of 16, he suffered what he thought was “some kind of a nervous breakdown” in which:

I suddenly instantaneously saw that all concepts are just concepts. So of course everything that I thought that I was and everything that I planned to do, all of which I took to be real, suddenly I could see they're not real. It was like God had just disappeared [Charles relinquished his Catholic faith] and I was in this black, utterly alone, total aloneness, and it would be like that forever. And the side effect was depression, like I was deeply depressed for years. (Charles, aged 50)

During Charles's lengthy struggle with depression, he encountered meditation. This prompted sustained study visits to South-East Asia and Hawaii to further his practice.

My concentration was developing and as the concentration develops the mind calms down and you start to let go of a lot of stuff. So when I meditated I felt really good. And I was doing a lot of meditation in Hawaii. So generally I felt pretty good, unusually so in comparison. It was a paradise in comparison with anything that I had been through since I was 16. (Charles, aged 50)

Meditation enabled Charles to feel better than he did in his more usual state of misery and he deploys a metaphor from his Catholic background, “paradise,” to describe his new condition. Over time, his confidence in Buddhist practices grew until he joined a South-East Asian monastery to live as a monk. He had found his ‘spiritual home.’ That is:

A place where you are comfortable and where you can practice the dharma⁵ ... a place where you feel that it's natural, that what you are doing is natural and that it belongs in this culture, and it belongs to who you are and where you come from and how you behave as a person. And you've got friends; friendship is really important because if you don't have friends you are in trouble ... a life that isn't based on simply gaining material possessions or position; that goes deeper than that. That to me is a spiritual life. But because of the mental suffering that I've been through and the suffering that I went through was purely mental, nothing physical, it was purely mental. To me that has a deeper aspect of creating a mental happiness and contentment. It's not dependent on material circumstances. (Charles, aged 50)

Charles's search for a spiritual *home* is connected to his personal history. The idea of a home resonates with feelings of attachment, security and relationship. By contrast,

the principal difficulties of Charles's life were emotional loss, leading to a concern with "mental happiness and contentment" more than with material possessions. In particular, his family 'home' involved a relationship with an alcoholic father that "was distant and became troublesome. I became very angry with him."

Charles felt that his family provided physical security but not love. "I was basically unhappy," he said. For many years, social isolation plagued his life: "I've always found it difficult to make friends at school; I never fitted in at school." He did enjoy college life more "because there were a lot of deadbeats like me." However, relationships were few and far between: "I have always been very shy and socially I never quite learnt to fit in." In a spiritual home, Charles belongs and he has friends.

Echoing the Buddhist concept of karma, Charles reflected on the fact that, while the past was gone, the present moment was built upon it. Karma contains the idea that what we do today has consequences for tomorrow; this is because of that. At 50, Charles was no longer the person who suffered as a 16 year-old. However, "there's someone sitting here whose consciousness is partially dependent upon that experience." He described this process as an "evolution of consciousness" in which he had acquired greater levels of equanimity.

Equanimity is one of the purposes of spiritual practice. It involves a radical acceptance of 'what is'; an even-handedness towards events achieved through an understanding of their causes and conditions (Salzberg, 1997, pp. 136-152). For Charles, equanimity entails composure and "the ability to remain balanced without identifying with stuff that you don't actually need to identify with." For example, he told me about a relationship with a woman that had become troubled (he was no longer a monk). He experienced "the churning of emotions" in which "I could see this really needy person kind of emerging out of the shadows and I just refused to identify with it. It's not that I don't have needs, it's just that I refuse to identify with them."

Frank: The gift of recovery

The reduction of psychological suffering was also at the core of Frank's remarkable life. Through a combination of psychotherapy and spiritual practice, Frank had transformed a troubled life into one of greater acceptance, peace and contentment. Indeed, he now described his extreme levels of suffering as "a gift," a word he used on eight occasions in one conversation.

I just think every day is a gift now. I wouldn't be where I'm at today, with the understanding that I have, if those things hadn't happened and that's why I believe the book is written; we just live it. So it's a sense of, we learn from suffering, we don't learn from the good times. We appreciate the good times because they balance the suffering, but the true learning curves are the suffering. Now we are brought up not to like that, instead of owning it. I have just learnt that the more I own it, I just accept the fact that something shitty can happen today and if it does, I'll fix it. I won't let it get me any more. I won't suffer from a panic attack in a car park anymore. The level of anxiety could still be there, but it won't be as great as it used to be. So it's adopting that proactive approach to whatever happens on the day – I'm gonna, you just have to greet each day and take it on board. (Frank, aged 38)

The influence of spiritual thinking on Frank is evident in the way he talks about the transformation of suffering. Buddhism teaches that we must learn from difficulties and come to equanimity. Happiness is not so much about getting what we want as wanting what we've got. We might describe this process as 'letting go' of the things that make us suffer. In particular, meditation involves learning to experience emotional difficulties without acting them out. Frank says by learning from his suffering he has come to accept levels of anxiety that he might previously have found intolerable.

Acceptance is surely at the heart of the phrase "the book is written." The notion of "owning" his emotional experiences is, however, a phrase derived from Western psychology. Indeed, Frank sought to integrate spiritual practices with psychotherapy. On the one hand: "I guess where I've actually found the most peace is in Tibetan Buddhism," he said. However, on the other hand: "Where I learnt most about compassion was in a psychiatric hospital amongst the other patients."

As a child, Frank was physically mistreated by his mother and sexually abused by her lover, a man who later became his stepfather. The sexual abuse started when he was 11 and continued until he was 20. It included being drugged from the age of 15. As a consequence, "I learnt to dissociate at a very young age." In its milder form, disassociation entails distracting ourselves from the present moment through daydreaming or endlessly recycling thoughts in our mind. In its more severe mode, it entails an emotional 'numbness' and detachment from other people. In Frank's case, disassociation was pushed to the extreme of generating complete personalities. He also experienced acute anxiety and depression, leading to substance abuse. Intense disassociation of this type is often associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

By the time I was 34, I was actually diagnosed with DID, dissociative identity disorder, where there were five main personalities and about 19 other fragments. In essence I now appreciate that as a sense of oneness; they were all my coping strategies. (Frank, aged 38)

Frank told me that his condition was a response to childhood abuse that enabled him to distance himself from the painful reality of his experience. He developed this strategy to the point where coping mechanisms became alternative personalities. A shift from one 'personality' to another was commonly triggered by factors in the environment: a noise, a smell, a word, or an image. On some occasions, 'he' was able to 'will' a personality change.

At some levels, Frank was able to cope. Indeed, he successfully advanced through the managerial ranks of retail companies. However, his 'workaholic' career advancement was a mask for emotional suffering. Frank suffered severe bouts of depression and drug abuse. He made three suicide attempts, leading to lengthy periods of hospitalization.

Frank's recovery involved a two-and-a-half-year process of personality integration that he described as a "buddy-up system." This procedure is best addressed in the language of psychiatry, which lies beyond the scope of this paper. The focus here is on his use of Buddhism as a supportive practice. Frank's key therapist introduced him to Eastern psychology, which he read enthusiastically. He

attended a practice centre across the road from the hospital and began to understand himself through spiritual concepts. He made connections between them and psychotherapy. "You could say that Buddha was the first cognitive behavioral therapist ever," he argued.

The comparison Frank draws between cognitive therapy and Buddhism is one that others have also made because both involve mindfully examining one's own thought processes (see below). In any case, the combination of psychotherapy and meditation enabled Frank "to head towards that sense of peace or spiritual awareness that we are at one with the universe." Asked how much Buddhism had been a part of his recovery, Frank replied with a phrase he used on three occasions: "It was meant to be. The book was written and I just turn a page each day."

Eastern Meditation Meets Western science

The emotional life stories told by David and Frank could hardly be more different. For David, mindfulness meditation was simply part of a life devoted to emotional balance. For Frank, it was a life raft thrown to a drowning man, a shining light amidst extreme pain and suffering. But for both men it was an emotionally beneficial practice, and one for which there is a growing body of supportive scientific evidence.

Meditation and the brain

Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin has used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans to monitor the brain activity of an experienced Buddhist monk (under the pseudonym of Lama Oser) as he underwent a series of meditation exercises (Goleman, 2003, pp. 3-28; Kabat-Zinn, 2005, pp. 368-75). Davidson had already established that people demonstrating a higher ratio of activity in the left prefrontal cortex exhibit happier, more joyful temperaments and recover more swiftly from emotional setbacks (Davidson, et al, 2003). By contrast, a higher ratio of activity in the right prefrontal cortex is associated with fear, anxiety and depression. Most people are located in the middle ground with 67 percent of subjects being moderately happy and 33 percent placed on the outer edges of the spectrum. However, activity in Lama Oser's left prefrontal cortex was 'off the chart' even when not meditating.

In others studies Davidson demonstrated that meditation actually increases left-sided brain activity. For example, his study of biotech workers found that, after eight weeks of meditation, levels of left-brain activity had grown, along with happier moods. Meditation seems to act cumulatively to strengthen the parts of the brain that calm fear and give rise to happiness. Further scientific investigation is providing evidence that meditation and mindfulness offer tangible benefits to mental health and emotional management.

Mindfulness and medicine

John Kabat-Zinn (1990) pioneered the practices of mindfulness within Western medicine at the University of Massachusetts' Stress Reduction Clinic. He deployed them in the treatment of heart disease, anxiety, panic attack and chronic pain, demonstrating that patients experienced long-lasting physical and psychological benefits from meditation.

Some practitioners of cognitive therapy have appropriated mindfulness to treat depression, anxiety and borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993). Cognitive therapy is founded on the idea that recurrent negative thoughts of loss, failure, worthlessness and rejection are not simply symptoms of depression but causes. Patients are therefore encouraged to monitor their thoughts in order to examine them for their usefulness and veracity. Studies confirm the efficacy of cognitive therapy in the treatment of depression (Segal, et al, 2002). Mindfulness entails paying attention to the present moment, and so, like cognitive therapy, we observe the flow of thinking. There is now evidence that meditation and mindfulness can play an effective part in the treatment of depression.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression

Segal, et al (2002) developed mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression (MBCT) and presented evidence that it reduces relapse rates. Depression is associated with a 'ruminative response style.' Sufferers go over and over incidents and feelings in a ceaseless cycle. To end the blue mood, it is necessary to break the constant cycle of chewing over thoughts. We need to develop space in the mind so that awareness can recognize thinking as 'just thoughts' rather than solidified reality.

Segal and his colleagues anticipated that 'mindfulness' would allow patients to notice when they are about to undergo perilous mood swings, enabling them to undercut the hazardous process of rumination. They tested their ideas in an experiment involving 145 patients. They taught volunteers skills of mindfulness and compared them with a group who had not undergone this training. Their evidence suggests that for patients undergoing MBCT who had experienced three or more previous episodes of depression (77 percent of the sample) relapse rates after five years were 37 percent, compared to 66 percent for patients receiving treatment as usual (Segal, et al, 2002, pp. 311-23). However, MBCT was no more effective than 'treatment as usual' in patients with less than three previous depressive episodes. This may be because MBCT worked to disrupt automatic relapse mechanisms (particularly the rumination process) that become of greater significance with more frequent depressions.

Jon and Steve: Ordinary suffering

Both Frank's extreme misery and David's contentment were unusual emotional states among the men I spoke with. Mostly, these meditators thought themselves confronted with the ordinary suffering of the human condition. Jon was not abused as a child and hailed from a family that we would normally see as 'good enough.' Yet, he felt isolated and lacking in the loving relationships he desired. He talked about loneliness and a "feeling of grief around not being loved. There was a feeling of pain around not having the feeling of a real kind of emotional connectedness with either of my parents" (Jon, aged 40).

Jon was a 40 year-old Australian studying environmental management. He felt that his experience of family life was no different from others, but of course emotional distress is not dependent on suffering the severe trauma of Frank's life. Routine emotional neglect is quite enough for normal unhappiness.

I kind of reconnected into Buddhist stuff and meditation again, into exploring myself a bit more actively, you know, not having any choice really but to deal with psychological issues and stuff that I needed to process and examine, you know, to shine a light on. (Jon, aged 40)

Jon's 'reconnection' with Buddhism was a long and winding road through hippie communes, religious cults, drug use, travel to Asia and bouts of depression. Like most of these men, his adoption of spiritual practices was a developmental process. The metaphor 'to shine a light on' is a classic Buddhist phrase that chimes with the mythical last words of the Buddha that one should 'be a lamp unto oneself.' The phrase suggests that we need to explore our own thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions in order to discover the sources of our suffering, and that it is our responsibility to do so. We are invited to shine the lamp of mindfulness upon ourselves. The main feature of Jon's life on which he needed to shine that light was "relationship dramas and relationship pain: the end of relationships, the experience of emotional aloneness."

Like Jon, Steve (aged 42, an Australian psychologist) did not experience anything that our culture would normally understand as abuse. However, within his childhood family lie the roots of a melancholy personality prone to self-criticism and moderate depression: "I had pretty loving parents, but there was an underlying criticalness." Steve became "a bit of a loner" and felt that "I have a bit of a problem around intimacy, which is a bit of a men's issue, I guess." He continued: "The Zen thing gave me a kind of stability and actually one of the other things I think that it did for me was to start to give me a way of connecting with people." Above all, mindfulness helped Steve to "face reality" and "be able to tolerate the way things are and not trying to make it perfect."

A Grounded Spirituality

Freed from the irrationalities of medieval religion, contemporary spirituality is concerned with meaning and emotional balance. It is skeptical and does not require superstitious beliefs or blind faith. This grounded spirituality is self-reflective and plays a necessary part in the emotional lives of human beings. Though our white-bearded supernatural God has died, we human beings still need purpose, ethics and love. It's in our genes. For David, contemporary spirituality provides:

A perspective, a confidence, an awareness within which one can embrace and count one's experience. A sense of knowing who one is and what one isn't. A sense of feeling connected to humanity and even beyond humanity; a connectedness to nature, to beingness; being able to put things in a much broader perspective of life and of lives rather than being just caught up in the small-minded pettiness of mundane issues. Being able to focus attention on mundane issues, but at the same time when it's appropriate, being able to fall back into the bigger perspective of, okay, this will pass; in the great scheme of things it's not that important. Being able to feel more connected to the essence of being a human being or in touch with feelings, emotions, more aware of desires and aversions. (David, aged 37).

Thus for David, spirituality in a Buddhist context is not centered on the metaphysical but rather concerns our *awareness of experience* in ways that *connect* us with all life and put our own existence into a meaningful *broader perspective*. Spirituality involves learning to *focus attention* on the *mundane* as a part of a *bigger perspective*, knowing that all things are impermanent and *will pass*. In this way, we are able to be more aware of the nature of our *emotions*.

Conclusion

The life experiences of Trevor, David and Frank are atypical while those of Charles, Jon, and Steve are the more usual ones of 'normal unhappiness.' Yet, while a certain level of suffering may be part of the human condition (as Buddhism says that it is), the particular kinds of unhappiness discussed here are specific to contemporary Western culture as mediated here through the experiences of men. Thus I have argued that contemporary Western culture has increased the levels of isolation, meaninglessness, anxiety and depression for men which they are not always well equipped to understand and deal with.

In that context the globalized discourses of Buddhism, whose central theme is the reduction of suffering, have been taken up to provide a narrative of hope and a transformed masculinity. Buddhism offers some men a language and associated practices that encourage emotional self-awareness, mindfulness, self-discipline, community, increased calmness of mind and a sense of self-worth. Fortuitously, there is now a growing body of Western scientific evidence (Kabat-Zinn, 1990 and 2005; Goleman, 2003) that some Buddhist practices, notably meditation and mindfulness, have positive psychotherapeutic value in the management of the emotional discontents of modernity.

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Notes

¹See <http://www.uplift.com> and <http://www.beyondblue.org.au>, retrieved November 2007.

²See <http://www.buddhanet.net>, retrieved November 2007.

³See <http://www.pluralism.org>, retrieved November 2007.

⁴The American Religious Identity Survey can be found at http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm, retrieved November 2007.

⁵Dharma here means Buddhist teachings and practices.

Chris Barker, Associate Professor
School of Social Sciences, Media and Communications
University of Wollongong, Wollongong NSW 2522/AUSTRALIA
e: cbarker@uow.edu.au