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Special Focus: Buddhism and Young People

Navigating Youth Transitions as a Buddhist: Privilege, Reflexivity and Sexuality

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This article focuses on how young Buddhists (aged between 18 and 25, living in the UK, who typically had not been raised Buddhist) utilised reflexivity as a strategy to navigate youth transitions. Participants' decision-making was premised on Buddhist ethics of avoiding harm, cultivating compassion, and embracing diversity. They scrutinised their actions to ensure they positioned themselves ethically in their everyday lives, particularly regarding sexuality. This reflexivity had a positive impact at the individual level, enabling them to construct a coherent biographical narrative. Yet, analysing this through the sociological lens of advantage and disadvantage, we posit that these accomplishments were facilitated by certain classed privileges. Their Buddhist identity was cultivated *because of*, rather than in spite of, their existing privileged location in the social strata, resulting in a consolidation of their already-privileged biographies. Our arguments are based on an in-depth mixed-method project which encompassed questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and video diaries.

Keywords: Buddhism; sexual diversity; youth; reflexivity; sexual misconduct; privilege

Buddhism is a minority religious tradition in the UK. Although the general population is typically positive towards Buddhism, associating it with peace and wellbeing, the number of young people claiming a Buddhist identity is small (Bluck 2006; Henry 2013). Yet, examining the lifeworlds of young Buddhists offers us insight into how their interpretation of Buddhist principles cultivates highly reflexive spiritual and sexual identities in a complex world, infused with competing discourses. This corresponds with Giddens' (1991) notion that reflexivity is heightened in late modern conceptualisations of the self. He suggested that reflexivity is a key feature of modern

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life, with choice being a cornerstone value. Because increasing choice is embedded in social life, individuals are more responsible for how they navigate expert systems and institutions. Reflexivity therefore becomes the mechanism through which individuals negotiate the world around them. As Giddens says:

> The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choices as filtered through abstract systems... the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices, among a diversity of options (1991: 5).

Authors like Giddens emphasise how identity work becomes a required task in the contemporary world, as people are compelled to choose between different options. In this process of individualisation, it is not that people become more selfish, but that identity construction becomes a requirement of participation in social life. Giddens himself was less critical regarding how reflexivity may be hampered by differential access to forms of choice, for example, in terms of gender, ethnicity, and social class. Yet, using our participants' experiences, we argue that this reflexive identity-making rests on access to certain resources (Threadgold and Nilan 2009). Crucially, participants typically had privileged biographies, in terms of educational background (i.e. being highly-educated), social class (i.e. being middle-class), and ethnicity (i.e. being white).

This social positioning enabled them to competently adapt Buddhism in their identity work. In this article we will use the concept of reflexivity to interrogate how our participants were able to utilise privileged elements of their identities to successfully become Buddhists, and to enact ethically-driven approaches to gender and sexuality, which were premised on harm-avoidance.

Many of our participants, regardless of their sexual and gender identities, held positive views towards sexual diversity, same-sex intimacy, and sex before marriage. Such a positioning reflects the significant change in values in the UK in recent years, epitomised through more extensive sexuality equality legislation as well as greater acceptance of sexual diversity, with those who are younger being more likely to express liberal views (Ross and Sacker 2010; Weeks 2007). At the same time, our participants' approach was also driven by their Buddhist ethics, in particular, the precept of avoiding sexual misconduct.[1] Despite traditional approaches to sexuality in Buddhism advocating celibacy for those ordained, as well as proscriptions against homosexual activity, there is also evidence of "sex positive" (Scherer 2011: 89) approaches, which emphasise the inclusion of queer sexualities and opposition to forms of sexual harm, such as sexual coercion. The Dalai Lama's (1996) understanding of homosexual acts as improper was routinely critiqued by participants, although great respect remained for his teachings. In contrast, Thích Nhất Hạnh was often endorsed and acclaimed as a Buddhist teacher who emphasised a "progressive" view on sexuality. Participants therefore sought out forms of Buddhism that cohered with their broader gender and sexual equality world views, and, similar to other research on Buddhist conversion, they typically disregarded Buddhist traditions which did not foster their broader values (Finlayson and Daniels 2008; Henry 2013 - for more details regarding how they identified with forms of Buddhism that supported their social values, see Page and Yip 2017). Therefore, their specific Buddhist context shaped their understanding of sexual ethics and helped foster their individual navigation of sexuality.[2]

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[1] The Five Precepts are: (i) not killing or causing harm to other living beings; (ii) not taking the not-given; (iii) avoiding sexual misconduct; (iv) avoiding false speech; (v) abstaining from intoxicants that cloud the mind (for more details see Harvey 2013; Henry 2013; Keown, 2003; Smith, Munt and Yip 2016; Thera, 2019).

The basis of participants' decision-making was not in terms of whether a sexual partner was of the opposite sex or not, or whether one was married, but whether sexual relationships were being conducted ethically. This led to a reflexive scrutiny of their everyday sexual attitudes and practices, and a careful management of intimacy, sexual desire, and relationships. Young Buddhists therefore promoted progressive values and emphasized how Buddhism enabled the cultivation of these enlightened values. This positioning can be understood in relation to the difference scholars have determined, between modernist and postmodernist forms of Buddhism. As Gleig (2019) argues, Buddhist modernism describes the process where Buddhism is reshaped by Western modernity and comes to absorb its values, such as individuality and liberalism. But this process has often been reductive and elitist, prioritising white and middle-class practitioners, and is premised on colonialist hierarchies. Gleig (2019) argues that Western Buddhist communities in America have started to critique this positionality, through deconstructing hierarchies of privilege, in a form of Buddhism that can be deemed postmodern.[3] In this formulation, Buddhism embraces diversity, global connectivity, and relationality, challenging individualised understandings of Buddhism and the centrality of meditation. It also unseats the way Western forms of Buddhism has been privileged and deemed superior to Eastern configurations. This is understood in the context of changing communication, where the internet takes a more significant role in shaping our lives, facilitated through new styles in Buddhist leadership. Gleig (2019) examines a number of angles to this, including a postcolonial critique regarding the lack of ethnic diversity within Buddhism, as well as how young people challenge the idea of Buddhism as a metanarrative to instead emphasise innovation, variety, and fluidity in approaches:

> Diversity and inclusion issues, particularly racial justice, appeared at the top of Gen X concerns; and their reflections, on the whole, demonstrated a fairly sophisticated socio-political understanding of the challenges minorities face in and out of Buddhist sanghas, intersectionality, and power and privilege (2019: 236)

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[2] It is beyond the remit of this article to undertake a comparative analysis of the differences between Buddhist affiliations. Indeed, this is challenging for two reasons: the high proportion of participants who did not directly identify with a specific Buddhist tradition, and the fact the study was not designed for this purpose—instead, this was a much broader project which examined religious and sexual identities among young people. For further details of the original project, see Yip and Page (2013). For a more in-depth overview of the Buddhist participants see Page and Yip (2017).

[3] Similar features and transformations have been observed in the development in British Buddhism (Smith, Munt and Yip 2016).

Our participants were fully committed to ethical reflexivity, particularly in relation to emphasising gender and sexuality equality, with this deep reflexivity invoking a postmodernist sensibility. At the same time, however, privilege loomed large. Participants reflexively scrutinized their sexual attitudes and relationships, to ensure that they prioritised an ethical approach. But this was premised on their access to and facilitation of certain resources. In other words, their privileged biographies enabled this identity work to take place, rooted in social class distinctions. As we will go on to argue, although our participants displayed elements of a postmodern approach to Buddhism (e.g. embracing sexual, gender, and racial/ethnic diversity), modernist configurations were still influential (e.g. being less aware of their own privileged class position). Therefore, whilst issues of inequality were on their radar, there were elements of inequality that remained beyond critique and deeper reflection.

In the remainder of the article, we shall interrogate theoretical and conceptual literature on youth and reflexivity, and then give a detailed methodological account of the research. We then present two empirical themes, with the first illustrating the participants' privileged positions in identity-making. The second theme demonstrates how such reflexivity is practised in a specific and significant aspect of their lives: sexuality. The article finishes with our concluding reflections.

Youth and Reflexivity

Reflexivity has been a key means through which young people's identities have been understood within the sociology of youth. Drawing on Giddens' (1991) influential theory of reflexive modernity, youth studies scholars often prioritise the role of reflexivity in cultivating youth-based identity work as young people navigate crucial transitions in their lives (e.g. Bagnall 2005; Bennett and Robards 2014; Furlong 2013; Thomson 2009).

Following Giddens (1991), this reflexivity entails a heightened consciousness of one's actions, the choices one makes, and a continual engagement with a cost-and-benefit analysis of those choices to ensure that one forges a successful and coherent biography. However, we would contend that Giddens' universalising formulation of the self does not pay sufficient attention to the classed dimension in the conception and practice of such reflexivity (see also e.g. Threadgold and Nilan 2009). Young people are negotiating crucial transitions, such as from school to work or university, or setting up a new home, the process for becoming financially independent, and the exploration of intimacy and sexual relationships. They are therefore deemed key drivers and benefactors of the reflexive project, as they navigate these transitions which can be subject to great risk and uncertainty (Devadason, 2007; France 2007; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Thomson 2009). How they make sense of these transitions—and reflect on these processes—has been subject to much research, especially regarding economic transitions. Yet what is often forgotten in mainstream sociology of youth research is the religious and spiritual journeys that young people also navigate, as they decide whether to maintain their (non)religious background of childhood, to forge new religious connections, or to abandon any religious identity of their upbringing (e.g. Collins-Mayo, Mayo and Nash 2010; McNamara and Abo-Zena 2014; Possaimai 2009; Yip and Page 2013). This also entails processes of deep reflexivity, as young people determine the significance of religion in their lives and the extent to which it will aid their youth transitions, as well as determining the future role they imagine religion will play (Page, Yip and Keenan 2012; Page and Yip 2019).

For young people in general, sexuality can be a significant factor in shaping religious engagement. Much research on religious young people has emphasised the challenges they face in adhering to dominant religious norms on sexuality such as not having sex before marriage and not entering into a same-sex relationship (e.g. Hunt and Yip 2012; Page and Shipley 2020; Page and Yip 2012; Sharma 2011; Yip 2015; Yip and Page 2013). Indeed, these challenges can discourage individuals from continuing to formally engage with a religious tradition (Zuckerman 2010 & 2011). Sexuality is an important reference point in understanding how religious youth identities are forged, with the intersection of religion and sexuality being significant in identity navigation. A reflexive engagement can therefore take a number of different forms, but any kind of reflexivity is driven through forms of privilege and advantage, and connected to the type of capital (Bourdieu 1984) participants are able to access (Adkins 2004). As Threadgold and Nilan argue,

> For more privileged youth, reflexivity as cultural capital deployed in habitus offers considerable advantage for negotiation of future risks and the maintenance of a stable ontological security . . . working-class and marginal youth lose out . . . being reflexive, and successfully negotiating future risks, both real and perceived, constitutes privileged cultural capital (2009: 48)

Cultural capital relates to how certain forms of culture are legitimised and deemed more worthy, relating to cultural tastes, types of educational qualifications, and embodied dispositions (habitus) (Bourdieu 1984). Threadgold and Nilan (2009) formulate reflexivity as a form of cultural capital, as it engenders a legitimated means of negotiating selfhood. Reflexivity is therefore configured as an esteemed virtue in the contemporary world, and something to be encouraged. Those who are unable to be reflexive are castigated for non-compliance, giving further leverage in denigrating their already-marginalised status. Following Lash, Threadgold and Nilan call individuals in this position "reflexivity losers" (2009: 48). This corresponds with neoliberal forms of governance, which emphasise being independent and resourceful and not relying on public services for support (e.g. Harvey, 2007; Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005). Threadgold and Nilan's (2009) research focused on the socio-economic elements of identity, and how working-class young people had fewer choices open to them and therefore faced greater risks, such as concerns over how university education would be funded. Their middle-class counterparts, meanwhile, had the monetary security in which to experiment with their identities, and whilst they prioritised being successful, they had the space to "adapt and reinvent themselves" (2009: 63). In this article, we utilise this notion of reflexivity to explore how this privileged anchoring has enabled our participants to establish new identities as Buddhists, and how this was aligned with processes of identity-work that emphasised liberal sexuality values. Therefore, participants were taking a risk in adapting a minority religious identity, but this process was enabled because of their existing cultural resources and their middle-class privilege. Put differently, the specific habitus they inhabited facilitated their practice of reflexivity in identity-making. Furthermore, the types of Buddhist identities they endorsed enabled them to demonstrate forms of identity that cohered with "good" versions of religiosity, where liberal values were professed, such as strong and unconditional support for same-sex relationships.

Methods

This article focuses on 44 Buddhists aged between 18 and 25 and living in the UK. This is a subsample of a larger mixed-methods project called Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-faith Exploration, which focused on a broader range of religious traditions. The project devised a multi-faceted sampling process, including publicity via every organisation listed in the latest Buddhist Directory at the time, university-based Buddhist societies, Buddhafield (a UK-based festival attracting a large number of Buddhists), Facebook groups, youth organisations and cultural societies. It utilised three methods—questionnaires, interviews, and video diaries. Its aim was to map the meanings young adults generated around religion and sexuality, as well as understand their experiences, utilising a lived religion approach.[4] As McGuire argues, "To understand modern religious lives, we need to try to grasp the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of real individuals' religion-as-practiced, in the context of their everyday lives" (2008: 213). Lived religion therefore enables the mapping of diverse interpretations of religious practice. Although it prioritises the individual, McGuire argues that this is not merely a subjective approach. Instead, individuals often co-construct their experiences in relation with other religious actors. Although lived religion prioritises individuals over traditional authority structures, it does not mean that structure and tradition are no longer relevant in their reflexive management of everyday life. The questionnaire stage typically focused on documenting participants' views and attitudes on various topics including demographic information, religious practice, views about their religious tradition, views about sexuality and practices, attitudes to gender issues and living out their religion in a broadly secular society. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured and lasted between 1.5 hours and two hours. The interviews mapped significant events in participants' lives in relation to sexuality and religion. Meanwhile video diaries, being participant-led, were more focused on the very detailed realities of living out their religious and sexual identities, such as what books they were reading and what conversations they were having with others.

Young Buddhists were particularly difficult to locate; Buddhism in Britain is associated with a middle-aged demographic, rather than a youthful one (Bluck 2006; Henry 2013; Smith, Munt and Yip 2016; Starkey 2020). In terms of the demographics of the sample, 56.8% of the sample of 44 identified as women, 40.9% identified as men and one person identified as trans.[5] The majority specified that their ethnicity was white (77.3%) and the other largest ethnicity categories were mixed (9.1%) and Indian (6.8%).[6] The majority said their nationality was British (75%), and most (75%) had made a conscious decision to become Buddhist; typically speaking, Buddhism had not been the religious tradition in which they had been raised. Meanwhile, 11% said that one or both parents had adopted a Buddhist identity at some point in their lives, though they may no longer practise, and a further 9% belonged to families where Buddhism was embedded and multi-generational. Two participants (4.5%) did not know enough about their parents' religiosity to be able to say whether their religious identity was the same as their parents. The majority, therefore, had adopted a Buddhist identity independent of their family's positioning. While some have argued that such individuals be described as "convert," as opposed to "heritage" Buddhists, we recognise the problems with such a distinction, especially given that some participants were children of parents who themselves had "converted" (Page and Yip 2017; Thanissaro 2014). In addition, others have emphasised that this distinction has created hierarchies of belonging, with white "convert" Buddhists often deemed more authentic, innovative, and progressive, thereby fostering forms of white privilege, where "heritage" (i.e. traditional) forms of Buddhism are dismissed (Gleig 2019; Lam 2017). In our study, the majority of participants had made an explicit decision to identify as Buddhist, independent of any family socialisation or influence.

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[4] A full methodological and epistemological account is available in Yip and Page (2013).

[5] The total valid number of responses was 44.

[6] The total valid number of responses was 44.

In terms of Buddhist affiliation, we used participants' own self-identification, though 16 participants did not identify with a specific tradition. Of those remaining, the majority Buddhist tradition to which participants belonged was the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community (9 participants). As Starkey (2019) notes, Triratna was founded in 1967, and draws on various Buddhist traditions. In the UK context, it is a popular tradition, having been extremely successful at adapting to its British surroundings, as well as being present in locations throughout the UK (see also Smith, Munt and Yip 2016; Vajragupta 2010). Other identifications included Theravada Buddhism, Soka Gakkai International, Mahayana Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism. Pseudonyms for participants have been used throughout.

Locating Privileged Identities

Our participants' identities typically intersected on privileged axes in terms of social class, ethnicity, and education. Aged between 18 and 25, they had usually actively chosen a Buddhist identity; they had typically not been raised Buddhist.[7] The majority of participants were white, well-educated, and had either been raised in middle-class environments, or aspired to a middle-class identity. This positioning had given them access to educational resources which enabled them to locate Buddhism in their lives, online and offline, even in contexts where Buddhism had not featured in their upbringing. For example, encountering Buddhist artefacts at the British Museum gave one participant a route into further Buddhist exploration, whilst another had engaged with a meditation retreat connected with the Buddhism being learnt at school (Page and Yip 2017). Here certain esteemed cultural engagements and capital resources (e.g. the monetary funds to attend a retreat) could be significant in gaining an awareness of Buddhism in the first place, and was often linked to educational endeavours. Furthermore, once a spark for learning about Buddhism had been lit, this was typically sustained through hours of independent research and exploration, thereby drawing on educational forms of capital where independent study was valued and esteemed (e.g. by their families). Their middle-class positioning therefore often enabled these young people to begin their Buddhist exploration, as well as sustain it over time.

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[7] This made them distinctive to other religious young adults in the broader research project who were far more likely to have stayed in the religion within which they were raised (see Yip and Page 2013).

This was consolidated through their educational pathways. 63.6% self-identified as students[8], and 32.5% held at least a degree[9]. The majority of the sample were in education or had pursued education in the recent past. Furthermore, education was often an expected and aspired route, constantly reinforced in their middle-class habitus. Thus, pursuing a university education was an assumed pathway by families and was little-commented upon. For example, Jessica, an 18-year-old woman of mixed ethnicity, belonging to the Triratna Buddhist Community, was undertaking her A-levels[10] and was reflecting on her life plans, saying she would probably enter a relationship "in 5 years' time probably because that's like after uni. Definitely after uni." The university pathway was taken for granted; an incidental footnote in the narration of her plans. This only warranted deeper reflection by those who had experienced upward social mobility and where university attendance was not so assured. For example, Poppy came from a working-class background but attended an esteemed middle-class school, saying, "I was surrounded by peers who were expected to go to uni and were expected to do well and I managed to, by A-levels, get in with a crowd who were, you know, quite swotty [studious] I suppose." This educational positioning enabled Poppy to imagine university as a viable and achievable pathway, to the extent that she was now engaged in postgraduate study.

The fact that many of our sample were either anticipating university, already in university, or had attended university in the recent past, gave them a significant resource in strengthening their Buddhist identity. The degree subjects participants were studying were typically focused around social science and arts and humanities, as opposed to science and medicine pathways. Many of these subjects prioritised reading and reflection, which consolidated their main pathway to Buddhism—centred on individual study and engagement. University typically gave participants the space to explore Buddhism, and also offered socialisation opportunities, particularly if the university had its own Buddhist Society.

The safety net of economic capital offered by families was also important in being able to facilitate their Buddhist practice. We have already mentioned the significant resource required to attend Buddhist retreats, but a key element of participants' stories was the travel they had done, or were planning to do, in order to further their Buddhist practice. Tim had spent a year travelling around India, and it was here where he embraced vegetarianism and cemented his Buddhist identity. For Tim, vegetarianism was one of the means through which he consolidated his Buddhist practice. Katie was planning a year-long trip to various countries where Buddhism was practised and was preparing to visit Buddhist monasteries *en route*. Jessica was about to embark on a gap year in China and was both excited and nervous about encountering new forms of Buddhist practice. Stefan spent a number of years in Thailand and Australia living in Buddhist monasteries and José had migrated to the UK from Mexico to live in a Buddhist community. Significantly, these trips were narrated in worthy terms, with the Buddhist element for the purpose of the trip being foregrounded. For example, Tim emphasised the charitable element of his travelling, where he had been involved with development projects:

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[8] The total valid number of responses was 44.

[9] The total valid number of responses was 43.

[10] A-levels (Advanced Levels) are the typical qualifications 16–18-year-olds take in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

> [Buddhism] does influence me, mainly because of the destinations, especially Asia; Buddhism has heavily influenced my choices of where I wanted to go and also the nature of the work as well. Environmental and teaching and helping out. So, that was really my commitment to go in the direction of practising in accordance with what I'm doing. (24-year-old white man, Theravada Buddhist)

Travel was therefore not understood in terms of mere tourism or enjoyment; instead participants emphasised the serious Buddhist engagement and good works that formed the *raison d'être* of the trip. Whilst discussions surrounding funding these trips occasionally surfaced, financial resource was rarely an impediment, and there was a sense in which families offered a financial safety net. For instance, José, a 21-year-old white man, belonging to the Triratna Buddhist Community reflected on the middle-class positioning of his family in Mexico, facilitated through his father's career, but this was combined with a father who "was always trying to support all our interests," and who would provide transport to the local Buddhist centre. Therefore, a number of different capitals (cultural and economic) combined in facilitating José's engagement with Buddhism.

The social acceptance of our participants' Buddhist identities was also significant. Some had parents who had previously engaged with Buddhism themselves, though many no longer practised. This gave cultural licence to their own children's engagement and exploration. Meanwhile even those parents who did not identify with Buddhism in any capacity could be very supportive, particularly in a broader social environment where Buddhist practices such as meditation are given positive coverage in media sources, as Ralph, a 20-year-old white male Anglican-Buddhist, explains:

> I haven't encountered that many people who've been really stumped by [Buddhism]; maybe that is just because. . . I tend to move in fairly middle-class circles so most people are attracted to the idea of Buddhism even if they don't know very much about it.

Ralph described his parents as "quite supportive" because his Buddhist approach corresponded with "their kind of fairly liberal slightly left-wing views anyway." Participants were therefore not likely to encounter hostility or negativity from their families and social networks, and instead Buddhism became associated with practices that had become esteemed in certain cultural contexts, such as the broader middle-class engagement with mindfulness or meditation, even among non-Buddhists. Indeed, in the popular Western discourse, Buddhism is often constructed as a practice that promotes peace and enhances individual wellbeing and development, with increasing scientific evidence (e.g. Feldman and Kuyken 2019). Buddhism therefore cultivated positive vibes, and was not considered a religious tradition that raised alarm, or was deemed problematic in any way, thereby situating it differently to how other religious traditions were coded, such as Islam and conservative Christianity, which have generated negativity (e.g. Gleig 2019; Halafoff, Fitzpatrick and Lam 2012; Modood 2010).

This non-threatening status attached to Buddhism was consolidated through the perception that it endorsed sexual and gender equality (e.g. Smith, Munt and Yip 2016). Buddhism was coded as a "safe" religion that corresponded with broader equality and diversity endeavours promoted in wider culture. For example, at the level of attitudes, it was clear that our Buddhist participants were different to participants belonging to other religious traditions. They were more likely to see Buddhism as being positive to sexuality issues and they themselves were more likely to have liberal views towards sexuality (Page and Yip 2017). A commitment to equality and diversity was typically foregrounded by participants, and this was reinforced in their beliefs about sexuality, where strong support was demonstrated for same-sex equality—86.4% believing that "heterosexuality and homosexuality should be treated equally."[11] George was heterosexual but firmly believed that Buddhism endorsed same-sex equality:

> There is a very important idea in Buddhism which is intent. . . . It doesn't matter if it is two men, a man and a woman or two women. . . . As long as the intention is the same . . . it is not really an issue. . . . If I was homosexual I would probably be more inclined to be Buddhist because as I see it, it is very accepting of homosexuality.

Indeed, a large number of participants were LGBTQ (heterosexuals comprised only 44.2% of the sample[12]), and many saw their sexual identity as fully compatible with a Buddhist approach to sexuality, as Zara explained:

> I'm bisexual . . . I couldn't be part of a religion that didn't accept me . . . [Buddhism] is so safe that I haven't even thought about it [potential biphobia in Buddhism]. It hasn't even crossed my mind . . . [Buddhism and bisexuality] are very interlinked. Otherwise I just wouldn't be Buddhist. (24-year-old white woman belonging to the Triratna Buddhist Community)

While the view that Buddhism is accepting of sexual difference and diversity is pervasive amongst our participants, research has shown that the level of acceptance and the acceptance of specific types of non-normative sexualities (i.e. homosexuality as opposed to bisexuality) could differ across Buddhist traditions as well as geographical and cultural areas (e.g. Cabezón and Anderson 1994; Faure 1998; Smith, Munt and Yip 2016). Within the UK context, the Triratna Buddhist community has fostered inclusive policies (Smith, Munt and Yip 2016), with this context impacting on Zara's positive experience (for a more detailed discussion specifically on bisexual young Buddhists in our studies, see Yip and Page 2020). Indeed, 93.2% either strongly agreed or agreed that "Consenting adults should be allowed to express their sexuality however they wish,"[13] demonstrating far higher support than within our broader sample of religious young adults (see Yip and Page 2013). This positioning chimed with participants' orientation to ethical sexual practices, which was not about starting with a particular rule such as avoiding sex until marriage, but was about context-specific reflection regarding how a particular action may cause harm or not. Their orientation to sexuality matters was therefore fundamentally different to other religious groups who did start with rule-bound positions on specific types and kinds of sexuality—such as avoiding same-sex relationships or not having sex before marriage. Buddhism was typically understood as a tradition which supported sexuality diversity, corresponding with a postmodern positioning which emphasised fluidity, mutability, plurality and diversity (Gleig 2019: 8–12, 173). This allowed them to understand Buddhism as a safe place to be queer, constructing Buddhism as a religious tradition which often trumped other religious spaces, which were deemed highly negative in equality and diversity terms.

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[11] The total valid number of responses is 44.

[12] The total valid number of responses is 43.

[13] The total valid number of responses is 44.

Reflexivity and the Management of Sexuality

Our participants were drawn to Buddhism because of its perceived egalitarian ethos and manifestations, and its ability to offer them a means of managing the everyday complexities of life underpinned by individual agency and personal responsibility, what we term elsewhere as an "ethics for life" (Page and Yip 2017; see also Yip and Page 2013). Participants were often constructing, de-constructing, and re-constructing strategies to help them navigate the challenges of life, and some had experienced distressing "significant moments," such as bereavement and mental health breakdowns. Other religious traditions which were more readily known about (particularly Christianity) were assessed and often rejected by participants, usually because they were perceived as being too authoritarian and rule-bound (Page and Yip 2017). Buddhism was deemed far more flexible, with the ability for participants to apply an ethical approach on their own terms. Their approach to Buddhism was typically quite individualised, and self-guided, but what was core was a commitment to ethical values that involved having the right intentions and avoiding causing harm to others, typified by these responses:

> It's not like that [Buddhism] allows you to do anything [you want]. There are the four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path[14]: the right intention, right speech, right truthfulness etc. These are all instructions as well. You can see that they teach you and guide you. . . . As long as you practise the right way, speech and things, and try and be the best person you can . . . as long as you are a good person at heart and as long as you do not harm others. (Caroline, 23-year-old woman of mixed ethnicity who did not specify her Buddhist affiliation)
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> The point of skilful actions[15] is that you don't do any harm to yourself first and foremost . . . when you realise that you don't what to harm yourself, that you just want to be happy, that you don't want to experience pain or suffering, it can be pretty much said that all other human or living beings have this similar sense of [wanting] to be

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[14] The four Noble Truths consist of (1) suffering; (2) craving; (3) cessation of suffering and (4) reaching nirvana through deploying the Eightfold Path (Keown 2003; Thera 2019).

[15] Being skillful in one's actions relates to the ethical principles of karma, and understanding the consequences of one's actions, with the individual attempting to cultivate actions that formulate good deeds, rather than bad ones (Keown 2003; Thera 2019).

> peaceful and secure and happy in their lives. So based on that contemplation, you can develop feelings of compassion and kindness . . . the base line of Buddhism for most people is practising generosity. That immediately makes you feel happier and from that platform you [are] consciously thinking about how you can make other people happy . . . it permeates the rest of your life, really, and you notice a change in your behaviour and generally you are happier I guess. (Tim, 24-year-old white man, Theravada Buddhist)

We make a distinction between individualism, i.e. the idea that one is self-absorbed, and individualisation, where one is compelled to engage in choice-making identity-work within the conditions of contemporary society (Lam 2017). Within their identity construction, participants developed an ethically-robust framework for life (what we call elsewhere "ethics for life," see Page and Yip 2017), informed by their individualised reflections in relation to engagement with others and the social world. This ethical approach to others could also be connected to one's own wellbeing, so a virtuous circle was cultivated, where being compassionate to others and not causing harm incrementally made one a better person, protected against self-destructive behaviours, and therefore was also personally enriching and enabling. In short, their individualisation practices did not result in self-absorbed narcissism, but rather, foregrounded relationships with others. This resonates with what Lam (2017 & 2018), based on her study of young Buddhists in Australia, calls "disindividualisation," where the "do-it-yourself" (DIY) approach and the "do-it-with others" (DIWO) approach mutually reinforce, in the construction of identity and social participation. As previously indicated, harm-avoidance was specifically invoked in relation to intimate sexual relationships. Participants started from the position of avoiding sexual misconduct and were aware that practices that other religious traditions endorsed, such as sex-within-marriage-only, could cause harm. This framing meant that their decision-making was underpinned by avoiding harm to others, which differed sharply from the moral and ethical position of participants in the study from other religious traditions; for Buddhist participants, ethical relationality was not premised on married heterosexuality (see Page and Yip 2017 and Yip and Page 2013 for more details). For the young Buddhists, then, each sexual encounter had to be appraised and analysed on its own terms to determine whether or not harm was being induced and a variety of approaches rooted in Buddhist thought, such as skilful practice and mindfulness, were deployed to ensure ethical sexual practices, as George explains:

> Talking about causal sex and one-night stands, I think as a young person there is pressure to do that. . . . There is skilful and unskilful [sex]. So engaging in casual sex maybe unskilful because it will cause suffering as a whole and get attached to sex and suffer when you can't get what you want. (24-year-old white man, Theravada/Triratna Buddhist Community)

Participants therefore reflexively scrutinised their everyday sexual attitudes and practices, engaging in a careful management of intimacy, sexual desire, and relationships. George wanted to cultivate skilful forms of sexuality which did not cause harm or suffering, and where one did not become dependent on sex as a form of negative attachment. Reflexivity was at the heart of our participants'

Buddhist practice. This entailed a reflexivity that was enacted as sexual relationships were lived out, leading to much self-assessment of one's behaviour. Ralph went into great detail in his video diary regarding how he reflected on his own approach to sexuality and how he was trying to ethically improve himself:

> Sexual energy can go wrong . . . my sexual energy is a good thing at heart but that doesn't mean that getting attached to it, concentrating on that is going to be a good thing. So whilst orgasming might be a pleasurable thing, there is more to me as a human than orgasming. And therefore when I am trying to explore my sexual energy a bit more. . . . [My] mistakes (that I think everyone makes) are to objectify women and you kind of want a style of sex that is slightly aggressive or more from the man's point of view. Or when I fantasise, I think of one-night stands and the excitement involved in that, and when I masturbate, I am rarely thinking about having sex in a loving relationship in a mutual and gentle way. And that is not to say that is the only type of sex, but I think I would like to work at transforming my sexuality, if this is even possible, into something that is mutual and then it is less objectifying.

Ralph analysed his bodily behaviour closely and was trying to cultivate more ethical forms of relating to his desire that did not imagine harm to others and himself. His fantasy life, as much as his physical sexual relationships, were therefore equally ripe for scrutiny. Meanwhile Poppy was cultivating mindful speech, where she attempted to not cause harm through what she said to others. She was currently supporting her partner who was having a difficult time due to his work, but she had spent a number of weeks at a Buddhist retreat and they therefore had not seen each other:

> I'm trying to practise speech precepts that include avoiding harsh speech. . . . My fiancé had texted saying, "Can I talk to you?". . . When I got the text last night my first reaction was to go to bed and reflect on what we had been studying. And I had a moment of feeling quite precious about the experience when actually what the kind thing to do was to speak to him and see what [he needed]. He was obviously unhappy. So I text him back and he phoned me. And we ended up being on the phone for about an hour and he is finding it very hard at work, and he is missing me. And it was actually quite a sad discussion because I had that sense that there is nothing I can do. If I was with him there would be nothing I could do, I could give him a hug. But all I could do, really, is listen. There is something quite tender about realising that actually sometimes there is nothing you can do. (25-year-old white woman, Triratna Buddhist Community)

Poppy's immediate thought was to prioritise her Buddhist learning and use her evening to reflect on her study. This is what she had carved time out for. But after further contemplation, she instead foregrounded her partner over herself, and the need to offer her partner loving-kindness[16]. Given the pressures her long-term relationship was facing, and the fact that she had been away from home for some weeks, this was a protection mechanism to help ensure the survival of the relationship. Her actions of becoming the listener was reoriented to being positive and the best thing she could have chosen to do. Again, reflexivity was at the heart of Poppy's approach, where she carefully chose the best route to take, in order that she could be as ethical as she could be.

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[16] For a detailed discussion of "loving-kindness" see e.g. Harvey (2013) and Thera (2019).

Conclusion

The vast majority of the young Buddhists we studied had not been raised as Buddhist. Many therefore had to locate Buddhism for themselves. This was achieved through the deployment of significant cultural and economic capital they had access to, especially in terms of education and cultural connections (Bourdieu 1984). Such economic and cultural capital were present in the various "fields of existence" they inhabited. Thomson defines "field of existence" as "a specific arena of an individual's biography, likely to be coterminous with specific spaces, places and institutions, and making available particular technologies of the self" (2009: 24). She further argues that a "field of existence" is also a "biographical domain" (e.g. home, school) of an individual, which informs the writing and re-writing of their biographical narrative. "Field of existence" and "biographical domain" are structured by significant factors such as class and gender. This is clearly reflected in the lives of our participants. The resources they possessed due to their class, education and ethnicity enabled their Buddhist engagement to be maintained and extended. This is particularly true in terms of the support their parents often offered, the educational spaces which cultivated deep learning about Buddhism, and the economic capital which enabled a fair number of our participants to plan trips abroad to further their Buddhist knowledge and practice. In short, our Buddhist participants were able to become Buddhist in the first place—a minority religion in the UK—because of their possession of significant types of capital. From the outset, their engagement with Buddhism was dependent on being reflexive about their identity and future, which itself is a classed way of being (Threadgold and Nilan 2019). Finding Buddhism had typically occurred through a process of deep introspection regarding what they wanted out of their lives and what was missing; embracing Buddhism was an atypical path, and one rarely chosen by their peers. They were therefore willing to take risks by engaging with a relatively unknown religious tradition, to generate greater benefits in their lives, especially for those seeking deeper meaning or who was managing what Giddens (1991) calls "fateful moments" in their lives. But risk-taking paid off.

Becoming a Buddhist extended, rather than curtailed, participants' already-privileged identities. Despite its minority status, because of the positive positioning of Buddhism and Buddhist practices such as meditation in mainstream culture, Buddhism did not undermine their identity. Adopting a vegetarian diet, having liberal views to sexual diversity and gender equality, embedding meditative practice and the ethics of compassion, positioned participants as perhaps a little bit different, and maybe as avant-garde, but not as culturally subversive, of, for instance, neoliberal conceptions of the self and social relations. Buddhism became different enough, but not radically so. Buddhism was understood as the "right" sort of religion, which cultivated forms of practices that were deemed beneficial to the individual's wellbeing but broadly benign beyond this. Negativity was attached to young people belonging to other religious traditions, particularly conservative ones that failed to promote sexual equality, and our participants were keen to emphasise how they endorsed and subscribed to sexual equality endeavours that corresponded with a liberalising of sexual values in UK society (Weeks 2007).

Participants also emphasised the progressive and egalitarian nature of Buddhism, often bypassing or minimising the contentious issues that have arisen regarding minority sexualities within various Buddhist traditions (e.g. the Dalai Lama's [1996] suggestion that homosexual acts are improper, which lead to much debate). The idea that Buddhism was equality-generating for sexual minorities was non-negotiable for participants (Page and Yip 2017) and was linked to how they ethically positioned Buddhism. This situated our participants as vanguards for the Buddhist postmodernist project (Gleig 2019), as they emphasised Buddhism's equality-bearing credentials which neatly aligned with secular equality endeavours. But this did little to critique the underpinning forms of privilege and power that these Buddhist practitioners had, and their role in determining what British Buddhism should look like. Participants tended not to reflect on the hierarchical relationship between Buddhism and the West; instead, their engagement was highly individualised, and bore personal benefits as they negotiated various youth transitions. While they demonstrated much dexterity regarding the questioning of dominant sexual norms and the embracing of sexual diversity, social class was not so prominent on their radar, and did not feature in their reflexivity identity-making. Therefore, ultimately, participants embraced both modernist and postmodernist forms of Buddhism (see also Gleig 2012).

Participants' engagement with Buddhism was in a context of individualisation, where identity-construction was a necessary part of their everyday life, in order to demonstrate their successful navigation of youth transitions in an environment of making the "right" choices (Giddens 1991; Lam 2017, 2018).The highly individualised nature of their engagement with Buddhism, and the means through which Buddhism was positioned as enabling one to evaluate and manage life problems and crises, meant that Buddhism was understood as enabling successful youth transitions, and complemented broader neoliberal endeavours for young people to be independent and self-reliant (Devadason, 2007; France 2007; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Thomson 2009; Threadgold and Nilan 2009). The development of the participants' biographies was hinged on their ability to be reflexive. Indeed, in their habitus, reflexivity was a routinized, habituated and normalized practice. As Adams asserts, "Notions of reflexivity, and in fact any form of self-consciousness are all a product of culture in this sense. The individual cannot stand aside from her social and cultural origins and use them, transparently, as a variety of options with which to resource an individualized reflexive self-identity" (2003: 234. See also Adams 2007). We can see this clearly in the experiences of the young Buddhists we studied. Reflexivity was central to their Buddhist practice, and this reflexivity was premised on harm-avoidance and the scrutiny of their sexual relationships to ensure that they were enacting ethical pathways. But this also enabled their successful navigation of neoliberal youth transitions, and the risks associated with them. Reflexivity in and of itself made Buddhists more self-reliant, and their careful analysis of their actions made them more likely to choose a pathway that encouraged successful outcomes. As our particular focus of our study was sexuality, we have demonstrated how the navigation of sexual relationships was a significant area of life where this reflexivity was deployed. Reflexivity enabled them to live out more positive intimate relationships that were increasingly likely to succeed in the longer term. They navigated individualised processes for managing their lives—what Lam (2017) calls purposefully working on the self—which did not depend on external resources, but this was dependent upon—and therefore was built on—their existing resources. Access to various forms of capital (Bourdieu 1984) gave them the ability to cultivate reflexivity, with reflexivity itself being deemed a positive thing in broader culture. Becoming Buddhist therefore consolidated, and extended, their existing privilege.

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