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Spiritual Coping in American Buddhists: An Exploratory Study

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Researchers in the United States have examined spiritual coping in Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Muslims, but rarely Buddhists. Using qualitative methodology, the present study represents an initial investigation into Buddhist forms of coping. Twenty-four Buddhists from across the United States were interviewed by phone, examining how their spirituality is used to cope with stress. Thematic analyses revealed six forms of Buddhist coping—right understanding, meditation, mindfulness, spiritual struggles, morality, and finding support in one's sangha. Implications of the study are discussed, including possibilities for future research on Buddhist coping.

Researchers have explored religious coping in many spiritual traditions (Abu Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney, & Stein, 2008; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000; Tarakeshwar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2003). However, Buddhist forms of coping among Americans have rarely been studied, though some research has been conducted among Buddhists in eastern cultures (e.g., Cassaniti, 2006; de Silva, 2006). Buddhism is a salient group in the western hemisphere, with approximately 2 million Buddhists living in the United States (T. W. Smith, 2002). Western forms of Buddhist coping may be different from eastern methods given that each culture uniquely impacts the presentation of Buddhism (Gregory, 2001). Further, Buddhist

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coping may contain unique pathways that do not have clear counterparts in other spiritual traditions commonly practiced in the United States. Thus, it is important to understand how U.S. Buddhists utilize their Buddhist practice to cope with stress.

Previous research on Buddhist coping in Eastern cultures have explored how stressful events are framed in terms of Buddhist concepts, many of which are forms of meaning-making coping that help the individual interpret a stressful event and provide a sense of predictability in the world (Aldwin, 2007; Park & Folkman, 1997). Buddhist ideas also serve a sacred function, in that viewing stressful events within the context of Buddhist concepts allows a person to better understand spiritual truths and, in turn, alleviate his or her suffering (Chen, 2006; Smith, 1991). For instance, de Silva (2006) found that Sri Lankan survivors of the 2004 tsunami used the idea of impermanence to cope with the disaster, believing that the situation could change for the better or that they should appreciate the present moment because circumstances might worsen. The notion of impermanence is unique to Buddhism, as religious coping research in other religious traditions has yet to report on this concept.

Another form of meaning making—making an attribution for the cause of an event—was also evident among the tsunami survivors who used the law of karma to explain why the disaster occurred. Specifically, participants considered how their past actions led to the event. In this case, the attribution allowed the individuals to maintain a sense of control in the situation. However, some Buddhists report a more helpless orientation when considering how karma relates to stress, believing that certain life events are a result of their past actions and that there is no escaping the consequences of their behavior (Yamey & Greenwood, 2004). Buddhists are not alone in considering karma as a form of meaning making and control-oriented coping, as Hindus also attribute situations to this phenomenon (Tarakeshwar et al., 2003).

In one of the few studies of U.S. Buddhists, Soonthornchaiya and Dancy (2006) interviewed 20 Thai immigrants about the ways they coped with depression. Commonly reported Buddhist coping methods included going to the temple, talking to a monk, and practicing meditation. Many of these strategies relate to the psychological process of seeking social support within one's religion, a form of spiritual coping common to many traditions (Abu Raiya et al., 2008; Pargament et al., 2000; Tarakeshwar et al., 2003). Meditation is an important means toward attaining spiritual goals in Buddhism, as consistent meditation practice brings about successively higher states of consciousness, culminating in enlightenment (Smith, 1991).

Research conducted on Americans has identified psychological processes underlying meditation (Alexander, Robinson, Orme-Johnson, Schneider, & Walton, 1994; Ivanovski & Mahli, 2007). However, these studies typically focus on Christian samples. This literature has demonstrated that meditation can be used as an emotion-focused coping strategy (Aldwin, 2007), improving physiological and psychological markers of stress (Alexander et al., 1994; Ivanovski & Mahli, 2007). Meditation is also a means by which to achieve mindfulness, which is an awareness of the present moment without judgment (Chen, 2006). Many recently developed psychotherapies have included the practice of mindfulness as a way to overcome stresses ranging from illness to work difficulties, and outcome studies have shown that these interventions are effective (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Hayes, Masuda, Bissett, Luoma, & Guerrero, 2004). Mindfulness may serve several functions in the coping process, including as a way to address one's emotions surrounding a stressor (Aldwin, 2007). When participants become observers of their experience, they gain some perspective and distance from their problems and report a decrease in distress (Hayes et al., 2004). Mindfulness may also be a

form of problem-focused coping by helping individuals become aware of their thoughts and behaviors in order to problem solve how they might deal with the stressor (Aldwin, 2007; Hayes et al., 2004). Finally, mindfulness serves a spiritual function, helping Buddhists attain the sacred goal of equanimity, the unconditional acceptance of any situation (Chen, 2006). With practice, Buddhists can detect mental patterns that cause suffering as soon as they arise, cutting off unpleasant emotional reactions before they expand on such thoughts (Chen, 2006).

In sum, prior research on Buddhist coping has identified several potential resources, but these studies have not described the spiritual struggles one faces in the coping process. Studies on other spiritual traditions have noted various religious difficulties in the coping process, such as disagreements with one's religious peers, feelings of guilt and fear because of one's spiritual beliefs, and expressing dissatisfaction in one's relationship with God (Abu Raiya et al., 2008; Pargament et al., 2000; Tarakeshwar et al., 2003). Buddhists might experience similar struggles, although it may be less likely that Buddhists would express problems with the transcendent due to its relatively nontheistic theology. Certain Buddhist sects attribute divine qualities to the Buddha and worship various buddha figures as one would a god; however, generally the concept of a god does not play as central a role in Buddhism as it does in other religions (Smith, 1991).

The goal of the current research is to fill the gaps in the Buddhist coping literature. Specifically, this research places the spotlight on Buddhism in the West by investigating the ways in which American Buddhists deal with stress. In addition, we attempt to examine the entire array of Buddhist forms of coping—including both the spiritual resources they use and the spiritual struggles they experience. Similar to preliminary investigations of coping in other religious groups (e.g., Abu Raiya et al., 2008; Tarakeshwar et al., 2003), the present study adopted a qualitative methodology. Such a procedure allows for a "bottom-up" approach, building on the perspectives of Buddhists themselves as a foundation for future studies.

METHODS

Sample

To be included in our study, all participants had to meet two criteria: (a) They had to be U.S. citizens or immigrants to the United States, and (b) they had to have practiced Buddhism for at least 5 years. Buddhist practice was defined as making a commitment to the spiritual tradition, such as taking the precept vows. The 5-year criterion for participation was used to ensure that participants had enough experience and knowledge about Buddhism to thoroughly describe Buddhist forms of coping.

Participants were recruited through Web postings on Buddhist Web sites and online social sites (e.g., Facebook), as well as fliers distributed to Buddhist sanghas across the country by way of connections with the lead author. Interested participants who met our selection criteria were interviewed over the phone for 30 min and were compensated with a $5 gift card. Our sample included 24 individuals between the ages of 19 and 77 ($M = 48.9$, $SD = 16.5$). Fourteen participants were female. Twenty-one individuals identified as European American, 2 as Asian American, and 1 as biracial. Twenty-one participants were U.S. citizens. The remainder immigrated from Britain, Ireland, and Malaysia. Eight participants lived in the

northeastern United States, 6 in the Midwest, 6 in the southeast, and 4 in the western United States. Nine participants reported they were Mahayana Buddhist (6 practiced Zen, 3 followed the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh), 9 identified as Theravadan, and 6 considered themselves Vajrayana Buddhist (specifically Tibetan). Individuals had practiced Buddhism for an average of 15.5 years. All but 1 participant converted to Buddhism as an adult; the other participant, a Malaysian immigrant, was raised Buddhist.

Instruments and Procedure

Five researchers conducted three to six semistructured interviews each. Interviews began with demographic information, including participants' age, gender, and number of years practicing Buddhism. Participants were then asked how they used Buddhism to cope with stress. After answering how they generally employed their spirituality to deal with problems, each participant was asked three follow-up questions: how Buddhism was involved in dealing with a particular stressful life event; what specific Buddhist ideas or behaviors were used to cope with stress; and what ways, if any, Buddhism was negatively involved in how they coped with stress. Participants were asked to define the terms they used (e.g., "meditation"; "being mindful"). Phone interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the interviewer.

Each researcher thematically analyzed the transcripts from interviews that he or she conducted, using the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory allows researchers to inductively explore the population of interest, using participants' perceptions and meaning as a catalyst for data analysis. Each interviewer individually read through a single transcript, noting major themes and subthemes. The researcher then read through the other interview transcripts that he or she conducted, noting any new categories that emerged. Previous transcripts were reviewed for the presence of each newly identified theme. Researchers then met as a group to define the categories and provide example quotes for each theme/subtheme. The five researchers reread and recoded the transcripts, with at least two reviewers for each transcript. Interrater reliability was calculated by dividing the frequency of similar codes across the 24 interviews by the total number of codes in the transcripts. Interrater reliability was 75%, a figure comparable to analyses in prior studies (J. A. Smith, Harre, & Langenhove, 2001). Researchers discussed disagreements until a unanimous decision was reached for each disputed code. After analyses of 24 interviews, the five coders agreed that theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006) was reached on the Buddhist coping construct and no further interviews were necessary. We use the term *Buddhist coping* instead of *religious coping* when referring to participants' answers in this study because most of our participants did not view their coping methods as religious.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Themes are presented in order of frequency, starting with the most common and ending with the least common category. Six major categories of Buddhist coping were identified: Right Understanding, Meditation, Mindfulness, Buddhist Struggles, Morality, and Sangha Support. The names of the themes and subthemes are the words of the authors and represent summaries of the specific ideas expressed by participants.

Right Understanding: Making Meaning From Stressful Events

The most common theme, mentioned by 23 of the 24 participants, was Right Understanding. Right Understanding is defined as attempting to view the world as it truly is. In this form of coping, participants wanted to see through their "delusions," or inaccurate perceptions of the world that caused them suffering. Participants reported using six different Buddhist ideas or resources to interpret and make sense of stressful situations: impermanence, compassion, karma, inter-being, dharma, and not-self. These six subthemes are defined with illustrative quotes, in Table 1.

A few clarifications on the Right Understanding subthemes should be noted. Participants were careful to use the term *not-self* instead of *no-self*. They reported that Buddhists do not deny the existence of the self, believing that some aspect of an individual experiences rebirth. However, participants viewed the idea of a stable personal identity as an illusion given their beliefs in the interdependence of all things and changing nature of individual personality. Participants noted that individuals may experience stress because they are attached to ideas about the self. One way to cope is to recognize that these attachments are not a lasting element of the self (i.e., "not-self").

Participants also clarified the meaning of the term *karma*. Karma was described in ways that were consistent with an internal—not an external—locus of control. Stressful situations were understood largely in terms of the participants' own actions. Furthermore, these Buddhists

TABLE 1
Subthemes of Right Understanding

Subtheme	*Definition*	n^a	*Example Quote*
Impermanence	Remembering that no stressor will last forever.	12	"I'm sitting at my computer at work feeling stressed and say to myself: 'This will pass.' "
Compassion	Showing empathy and nonjudgment toward self and others.	11	"When I get stressed at a person, I go back to that ... everyone-just-wants-happiness idea ... Whatever they're doing to upset me is motivated by their pursuit of happiness."
Karma	Believing stress resulted from one's past actions or considering the consequences of one's actions.	8	"If something bad happens in your life you know it is from something you have done. You are completely responsible for your actions."
Inter-being	Recalling that everything is connected when dealing with stress.	6	"Take something ... you're not happy with ... and be aware there's zillions of people ... experiencing that very same thing."
Dharma	Obtaining Buddhist information through readings or conversation.	5	"There's a lot of material in the canon.... It recommends a course of action for how I should deal with [stress]."
Not-self	Remembering there is no element of the self that is permanent or separate.	4	"Buddhism teaches there is no permanent, abiding self. That gives me the option whether to take myself seriously or not."

[a]Number of participants out of 24 who mentioned the designated subtheme.

considered the future ramifications of their choices in the face of stress. None of the participants reported a sense of helplessness or a belief that the current situation was their karmic fate, as has been reported in previous studies with Buddhists (Yamey & Greenwood, 2004).

Right Understanding is similar to Christian techniques of religious reframing in that both spiritual traditions utilize sacred terminology to interpret stressful events (Pargament et al., 2000). The psychological processes involved in religious appraisals appear to be similar across faiths, in that individuals draw on their spiritual beliefs to make meaning of a stressful event (Park & Folkman, 1997). Of course Christians, and other religious groups, have a different belief system than Buddhists, thus the particular content of the appraisals differ.

Meditation: Using Concentration to Cope With Stress

The second theme found in the present study was Meditation, which did not contain any subthemes. Meditation is defined as nonjudgmental focus on a specific stimulus (e.g., the breath, a mantra, etc.). Twenty-one of the 24 participants reported they used meditation to deal with stress. For example, a young female professional explained how she coped after getting fired from her job: "There were many nights when I would wake up and have panic attacks. I wasn't contributing to my 401k, all this stuff that corporate America drilled into your head. But I would just do meditation ... to ... deal with the transition." In this example, meditation is used as a form of tension reduction, a way to reduce negative emotions surrounding the stressful event (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). In fact, the overwhelming majority of quotes in this category were emotion-focused forms of coping.

Participants used many different types of meditation to deal with their emotions surrounding stress. Some participants turned to their breath, as a 62-year-old female Zen practitioner noted: "bringing myself to a quieter place inside ... I don't have to formally meditate to do that, I can do that while driving, like when someone cuts me off.... I can just take a few deep breaths and let go." Others engaged in various forms of lovingkindness meditation, wishing themselves and others well-being. An elderly Theravadan female explained, "I can get involved in something that may be creating anxiety or agitation ... I sit and go 'May I be happy ... may I be peaceful' [to cope with the anxiety or agitation]." Some participants meditated upon a koan or repeated a mantra. A 56-year-old male Tibetan Buddhist described how he used mantra meditation to cope with medical problems: "I had kidney stone surgery Friday and you are awake for that ... they blast you with a thousands shots of electric volts over your kidney.... That is not the most painless thing to do.... I was doing mantras ... over and over the entire hour of that procedure.... My mind was focused on the mantra, not what was happening in my body." This man's description could be interpreted as another type of emotion-focused coping—distraction. To feel better, individuals shift their focus from the stressor to an alternative, more enjoyable object of attention (Carver et al., 1989). However, the manner in which Buddhists distract themselves via meditation may in and of itself be a means toward a spiritual aspiration. Rather than distracting himself by watching television, this participant recited a sacred mantra that is used to cultivate an ability to skillfully work with suffering (Smith, 1991).

Although meditation is a part of many religious traditions, including Christian contemplation and Hinduism (Smith, 1991), it has received little attention in the context of religious coping. In fact, we found only one previous study that included meditation as a form of religious coping, a

measure of Hindu coping that included one item assessing how frequently an individual turned to meditation to deal with stress (Tarakeshwar et al., 2003). The findings from the current study suggest that meditation may be a particularly salient coping resource for Buddhists.

Mindfulness: Staying in the Moment

The third most common domain of Buddhist coping was Mindfulness, mentioned by 20 participants. Although the construct of mindfulness overlaps with the idea of meditation, participants seemed to differentiate between the two concepts. Participants viewed mindfulness as more unstructured than meditation. In this form of coping, participants described attending to whatever was occurring in the moment, whether it was a particular thought, emotion, or environmental circumstance. Some participants used mindfulness to distract themselves from the unpleasant feelings surrounding the stressor, as noted by a 35-year-old Tibetan Buddhist: "Usually when I am stressed out, it's because I'm imagining terrible things that are going to happen to me ... like I won't be able to pay my rent.... So being mindful is like I have to come back and remember, here I am in my office, sitting here talking on the phone ... and not let my mind wander off into these fantasies that create suffering." Other participants used mindfulness to examine the stressful situation in more detail, as a form of problem-focused coping (Aldwin, 2007). A 52-year-old Theravada practitioner explained, "The goal is to become mindful of your own actions ... know what it is you're thinking and feeling ... without judging it, notice it. If something makes you crazy, what's under the crazy? Oh it's anger. What's under the anger? Oh, I'm really scared.... That's such a different way of being in the world." There is also a spiritual function to this form of coping, in that one of the goals in Buddhism is to achieve awareness and understanding, a major element in the path toward enlightenment (Chen, 2006; Smith, 1991).

Participants revealed four ways in which they used mindfulness to deal with stress: recognizing and letting go of attachments, labeling an experience, mindfully changing one's thoughts and behaviors, and accepting things as they are. Definitions and example quotes of these subthemes are provided in Table 2. Many of these techniques appear to be similar to secular forms of coping. For instance, researchers have assessed the notion of acceptance as a form of coping (Carver et al., 1989). The first three Mindfulness subthemes are also comparable to the psychological process of cognitive monitoring, in which people attend to their thoughts in order to create more adaptive cognitions (Aldwin, 2007). What is unique about Buddhist coping, however, is that participants reported they did not need to restructure their cognitions when labeling them. Rather, participants reported that simply observing an experience could lessen suffering in the situation (i.e., an emotion-focused form of coping). Participants described this as "disidentifying" from the experience, recognizing that part of their identity can exist outside of the emotional state.

Buddhist Struggles: The Difficulties of Buddhist Coping

The fourth major theme found in the present study was Buddhist Struggles, mentioned by 14 of the 24 participants. In this category, Buddhists expressed difficulties with their spirituality as they attempted to cope with stress. Two subthemes emerged: Bad Buddhist and Its Not Easy Being Buddhist.

TABLE 2
Subthemes of Mindfulness

Subtheme	*Definition*	n^a	*Example Quote*
Recognizing attachments	Recognizing the cause of stress is clinging to things.	8	"When I really get stressed out ... I need to take a step back, look at the situation.... Whatever is going on, is it because of my attachment to something?"
Labeling	Describing what is happening in the mind and body when stressed.	6	"[I] notice if an occasion is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If I am at the dentist, I'm in pain ... I can notice, 'This is unpleasant.' "
Mindfully changing thoughts and behaviors	Attempting to change one's thinking or actions after becoming aware of stress.	6	"If I want to have a happy life it is up to me to do it. If I am being mindful and I notice that I have taken on too much, [I can] change my lifestyle ... "
Acceptance	Allowing a situation or person to be as it is, without judgment.	6	"I confront the fact that...I am anxious about something that happened at work, or with my children ... just accepting that and letting it drift through me."

[a]Number of participants out of 24 who mentioned the designated subtheme.

Eleven participants expressed dissatisfaction with themselves because of the belief that they did not practice Buddhism correctly when dealing with stress (i.e., Bad Buddhist). For example, some participants expressed disappointment with their meditation practice. A 54-year-old Tibetan Buddhist, coping with a recent divorce, explained his struggles with meditation: "If I am around other Buddhists, sometimes I don't feel like I fit in [because I don't] practice as regularly as I should." Buddhists noted other ways they practiced incorrectly. A 35-year old Theravada practitioner described how she misconstrued the Buddhist notion of right thought: "I realized something was not working right.... I was actually using the notion of right view to judge myself.... Every time a situation would come, I would think afterward 'if I had just been seeing that clearly that wouldn't have had to happen.' " In this form of coping, participants appeared to be engaging in self-blame, which is considered an emotion-focused form of coping (Aldwin, 2007). However, self-blame can also serve as a precursor to more active forms of coping, as it assumes an acceptance of responsibility and an internal locus of control. For instance, some Buddhists, such as the female participant who recognized she was misusing Buddhist terminology, recognized the need to take action and fortify her spiritual resources.

Six other participants believed they were practicing Buddhism correctly but expressed discontent with the unique demands of Buddhist forms of coping. We termed this subtheme Its Not Easy Being Buddhist. For example, a 53-year-old Tibetan practitioner explained the difficulties of staying mindful and practicing kindness when dealing with others who are causing her stress: "It's certainly easier to go with habitual patterns than it is to wake up and do something different.... It's easier just to pay attention to me and not worry about the other guy.... [However, in Buddhism] I can't just go with my selfish behavior." A 52-year-old Tibetan Buddhist explained that in situations beyond her control, she found Buddhism difficult because it did not provide the benefits of other religions: "If something really bad would happen to someone I loved ... I wish that I could pray to someone that could go ahead and change it ... kind of the way a lot of Christians seem to use prayer, that [idea of] 'Jesus is gonna save us.' "

In this form of coping, participants are engaging in a secondary appraisal, assessing the burdens as well as the resources they bring to the situation (Aldwin, 2007; Park & Folkman, 1997).

Our findings indicate that Buddhists, like individuals from other spiritual groups, experience spiritual struggles when coping with stress. However, we found that Buddhist struggles were limited to intrapsychic conflict, whereas spiritual coping in other religions include interpersonal difficulties (Pargament et al., 2000). Further, Buddhists did not report dissatisfaction or difficulties in a relationship with God as members of other religions have (Abu Raiya et al., 2008). This is not surprising, given that the concept of a higher power does not play as central a role in Buddhism as it does in other religions (Smith, 1991). However, as noted by one participant, it also means there is no all-powerful God who can intercede on one's behalf.

Morality: Helping All Living Beings

Morality was another way that individuals used Buddhism to cope with stress. This term refers to the elements of the Eightfold Path dealing with moral behavior—practicing right speech, right livelihood, and right action. The goal is to act in ways that help and do not harm other living beings. Eight of the 24 participants reported using morality to cope with stress. There were no subthemes in this category. A 56-year-old Zen Buddhist described the stress he faced caring for the downtrodden at a homeless shelter. He tried to practice right action and right speech in his dealings with the homeless: "Being peaceful ... embracing them ... feeling that you're in tune with them. You try to do your best to reflect peace and equanimity so that they're not so angry." Others considered the idea of right livelihood when experiencing career transitions. For instance, a 19-year-old Theravadan was stressed because he could not attend college. He realized he could help himself and others by becoming a monk. The 31-year-old female mentioned earlier, who was struggling with finances after losing her job, considered the idea of right livelihood as she transitioned to a new position with lower pay: "I would go back to some Buddhist tenets ... the one that I always referred to is right livelihood ... whatever you are doing, you are doing for the betterment of your community." These quotes underline a sense of social responsibility among American Buddhists in which participants find a sense of purpose, social identity, and connection with others. It is similar to the Christian form of coping, "good deeds," in which individuals try to live a more religiously integrated life (Pargament et al., 1990).

Some participants described morality in terms of the five precepts—vowing not to kill, steal, speak in harmful ways, use intoxicants, or practice sexual misconduct. A 55-year-old Zen Buddhist noted that when he's "pulled off center" he sometimes recites the precepts. A 21-year-old Malaysian male explained how he coped with the stress of starting college: "You put your priorities toward important things. I followed the precepts I was taught when I was young." Here, participants are using the precepts to remind them of their goals and values in life, providing them direction, identity, and a sense of meaning and purpose (Park & Folkman, 1997).

Sangha Support: Finding Intimacy When Stressed

The sixth and final theme in the present study was Sangha Support, mentioned by seven participants. This category did not have any subthemes. Sangha Support is defined as turning

to other Buddhists for mutual affirmation, comfort, and assistance. It is the equivalent of spiritual support, described in the religious coping literature conducted with other faiths (Abu Raiya et al., 2008; Pargament et al., 2000; Tarakeshwar et al., 2003). Through instrumental support, individuals obtain assistance dealing with the problem itself (Aldwin, 2007; Carver et al., 1989). A 35-year-old Tibetan Buddhist described how she turned to the wisdom of others when she had major difficulties: "I would go talk to a senior Buddhist student or teacher … someone who's got a lot more experience, if I'm really having a bad time." She explained that other Buddhists related spiritual ideas to her experience: "It just reminds me of basic teachings … If I don't have a constant reminder … I just forget."

Others looked to fellow Buddhists for connection and intimacy, a type of emotion-focused support (Aldwin, 2007; Carver et al., 1989). A female participant explained, "We study together and meditate together and that's an incredible support…. I feel very accepted." A 57-year-old Zen female expanded on how she relates to her spiritual community to cope: "When you walk through the doors of that community it's like you leave the world behind…. The community is welcoming…. I feel such a strong sense of belonging and acceptance there."

Unlike Christians, who often turn to their spiritual colleagues for support (Pargament et al., 2000), few Buddhists in the present study used this form of coping. This may be a function of the demographic characteristics of the sample in the current investigation, which consisted of mostly Buddhist "converts," originally from the United States. Such participants are believed to practice Buddhism individually, without a sangha to turn to for support (Gregory, 2001). It would be interesting to examine Buddhist coping—especially Sangha Support—in a sample of U.S. immigrants who are Buddhists from birth. Buddhists immigrants often look to the Buddhist community for a sense of cultural heritage (Gregory, 2001), and so they might be more likely to turn to the sangha for support than their American counterparts. Future research might examine the extent to which American Buddhist immigrants use Sangha Support and other forms of spiritual coping to deal with stress.

Limitations and Implications

Qualitative research provides its own sets of advantages and disadvantages. Grounded theory may be particularly useful when addressing a new area of scientific exploration, such as Buddhist coping, as it allows for theoretical saturation of the construct (Charmaz, 2006). Asking participants how Buddhism is involved in the coping process might bring about ideas that researchers might not have considered. In addition, qualitative studies provide an element of external validity that quantitative methods cannot. In qualitative studies, the data are "grounded in" real-world phenomena (Charmaz, 2006)—in this case, the language and perspective of Buddhists coping with stress. Quantitative studies, on the other hand, might measure the construct framed in terms of the researchers' own beliefs, rather than the participants'.

Qualitative research is subject to its own set of limitations, however, as the researchers' own background can bias how they ask questions and interpret patterns within the data (Charmaz, 2006; J. A. Smith et al., 2001). Subjectivity cannot be eliminated, though it can be tempered by using strategies such as those in the current study. For example, we continuously reviewed the data to check interpretations and used multiple coders to ensure that themes were not idiosyncratic to one researcher's perspective.

Nonetheless, we recognize we made two major assumptions that could have affected our study. First, we assumed that Buddhism was a religion. Some participants in the current study took issue with the term “religious” coping. They viewed Buddhism more as a philosophy or spiritual tradition than a religion, perhaps reflecting the individualistic tendency of American Buddhist converts and aversion to traditional religious language (Gregory, 2001). However, when we explored Buddhist methods of coping with participants, it became apparent that these techniques had sacred connotations. They viewed Buddhist coping strategies as a way to obtain an extraordinary level of consciousness and deeper experience of the truth. As one participant explained, “The goal is to obtain successively higher states of an enlightened mind.” Enlightenment meant a new way to perceive the world, without suffering: “In a way I’ve described to you ‘big coping,’ because if you do these things every day for a long time, then your life becomes transformed in such a way that there is no suffering or stress.” Such transcendence speaks to the very essence of what religion is—a search for significance in ways related to the *sacred* (Pargament et al., 2000). Thus, we believe the methods of Buddhist coping do fit within the psychological study of religion and spirituality.

We readily acknowledge a second bias—assuming that Buddhism could be used to cope with a stressful event. Given that prior psychological research has noted a few ways individuals employed Buddhism to cope with stress (de Silva, 2006; Soonthornchaiya & Dancy, 2006), we felt confident in working from this assumption. Indeed, participants in our study seemed comfortable with our questions; no one was unable to answer our questions or turned down the interview. Of course, many participants clarified that they practice Buddhism not to alleviate stress but to pursue spiritual aspirations. Another potential qualitative study could explore the myriad of Buddhist practices, and the reasons why such individuals engage in those behaviors.

The present investigation provides a foundation for future quantitative research on Buddhism. Specifically, the information gathered in this study could be used to create a scale of Buddhist coping. For instance, subscales could be created for Morality, Bad Buddhist, Its Not Easy Being Buddhist, and each of the six meaning-making forms of coping (e.g., Karma, Not-Self, Inter-Being, etc.). These subscales could address the psychological processes involved in the Buddhist coping methods. For example, subscales of Meditation, Mindfulness, and Sangha Support might include items that deal with emotion-focused coping, and other items related to problem-focused coping. Participants in the present study reported using Mindfulness and Sangha Support in both of these fashions. Although Meditation was used only to deal with emotions in the present study, it is possible some Buddhists might engage in an “analytical” type of meditation, focusing on the problem itself (Smith, 1991). We would also suggest creating a subscale representing the passive view of karma. Although participants in the present study maintained an internal locus of control when attributing the event to karma, prior research has noted some Buddhists believe there is nothing they can do to cope with the stressor (Yamey & Greenwood, 2004). If a quantitative scale of Buddhist coping was created, addressing such psychological processes, it could be given to a large sample to detect if there is a small number of American Buddhists that report a more fatalistic view of karma or a minority who use meditation as a way to solve problems.

Factor analysis could provide statistical evidence in differentiating the various methods of Buddhist coping. For instance, factor analysis would reveal whether items addressing a coping method form a single variable (e.g., all meditation items load on a single factor), or split into multiple factors based on various psychological processes (e.g., emotion-focused meditation

items load on one factor, and problem-focused meditation items on another). Once there are data to support the factor structure of a Buddhist coping scale, the subscales could be correlated with measures of well-being and outcomes to stress. We suspect that the majority of the coping methods would have positive implications, given that participants in the present study hinted at the psychological and spiritual functions underlying these techniques. However, spiritual struggles likely would relate to maladjustment, given the difficulties participants described in the present study. Viewing karma in a passive way may also relate to poor outcomes, as has been found with secular and spiritual coping methods that maintain an external locus of control (Aldwin, 2007; Pargament et al., 2000). Quantitative studies with a large sample size would also have the statistical power to detect whether various forms of Buddhist coping vary by demographic (e.g., age, gender) or spiritual variables (e.g., Buddhist sect, Buddhist from birth vs. convert). For instance, researchers could test the idea that American Buddhist immigrants would be more likely to use Sangha Support than Buddhist converts who are American citizens. There are many different research questions that could be answered with a quantitative scale of Buddhist coping. Using Buddhism to deal with stress, like spiritual coping in other religions, represents fertile ground for research, and we hope the present study serves as a springboard for further analysis.

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