

# Existential Trajectories of Buddhist Teachers: From a search for meaning to challenging worldviews

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## Context

- In Contemporary Western scenario Buddhist meditation is increasingly approached as a healthy, secularized practice disconnected from the Buddhist legacy in its spiritual-religious acceptance;
- Western Buddhist Teachers' autobiographical-spiritual self call for insights into the meaning and purpose of the contemplative experience in such secularized and pluralistic cultural milieu.

## Research Question

- Considering the spiritual identity development (Poll, Smith 2003), its narrative structure has been explored throughout the analysis of the invariant themes across the accounts;
- To this aim participants' accounts were scrutinized connecting their perspectives on Western Buddhism with their own personal path and engagement with Buddhist teachings.

## Methods

- Participants: 2 Theravada Masters, 2 Zen Masters (1 Soto, 1 Rinzai School);
- Participant selection happened through purposive sampling;
- Phenomenologically-driven, semi-structured interview was assessed;
- In order to investigate how participants make sense of their experience the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis has been adopted.

## Themes

- Biographical disruptions and narrative reconfigurations;
- Beliefs and worldviews in both the theoretical and ethical framework;
- Values and beliefs transitions, in connection with the transformative practice of meditation;
- Each socio-cultural and spiritual involved factor, as well as the personal identity development throughout the Buddhist path.

Emergent Dimensions	Search for Meaning (1-2)	Biographical Disruptions (2-3-4)	Transition (4-5-6)	Spiritual Identity (6-7-8)	Social engagement (8-9-10)
<b>Framework</b>	religious incertitude, spiritual dissatisfaction	shocking events, meaninglessness	master encounter, spiritual recentering	worldview transformation	tradition witnessing, cultural ethical challenges
<b>Handling Criticalities</b>	bewilderment	existential imprisonment-impermanence	existential realisation of a revelation	existential commitment	leadership risks, peers interdependence
<b>Embodiment</b>	felt-meanings, mind-body exploration	need of embodied cohesion-recentering	refined discipline	healing recentering	promoting mind-body balance
<b>Practices</b>	martial arts, yoga, and expressive arts	social-ethical issues	apprenticeship, intensive retreats	buddhist training and rituality, beginner's mind	East-West philosophical connection
<b>Affective Feelings</b>	Doubt, rebellion, turmoil	anguish, absurd non-sense	devotional abandonment-determination	autenticity, suspension, joy	compassion, community belonging

Fig. 1 Thematic map of narrative chronological proceedings



Fig. 2 Interpretive concatenation of iterative phases

## Discussion

- These findings suggest that search for meaning is a pivotal impulse to renew worldviews and can reveal deeper theoretical understandings;
- The conception of the relative, mundane world as a non-intrinsic, transient phenomenon that calls for the beyond, abiding contemplation as a founding self-revolution;
- Contemplative adjustment to this vocation through the radical suspension of each assumption, as the letting-go of any concept empties the immediate experience and makes it mysterious;
- The search for a principle as the turning point where the lacking sense turns into a sacred, inexhaustible dialogue between immanent identity and transcendent Alterity;
- Spiritual identity is framed as the circular interplay between meditation and social-ethical engagement.

## Limitations

These interpretive findings include a criterion of uncertainty (Emden, Sandelowski 1999), i.e. the constructivist position of openly acknowledging that claims about research findings are tentative at best and might be impossible to show otherwise. This contingent view is congruent both with the emic nature of the study and its interpretive framework.

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