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The Adjustment Process of Ex-Buddhist Monks to Life After the Monastery

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the adjustment process of five Western ex-Buddhist monks to life after the monastery, using an in depth case study approach and thematic analysis. Participants discussed their initial experience of leaving, the process of creating a new life and their relationship with the past. The findings indicated that while each case was unique, significant common themes emerged as features of the adjustment process. The adjustment had been multidimensional, challenging, difficult, confusing, complex and profound for the participants. They had to contend with issues of grief, delayed development, missing out on life experiences, difficulties with intimacy, money, identity, depression, anxiety and confusion. This was combined with the hope and promise of many newly found freedoms involved in establishing a new life and identity. Parallels are drawn to the experience of Catholic priests and nuns who have departed their Orders, Vietnam veterans, ex-cult members and individuals who have left total institutions where their identity and daily lives were highly prescribed. The adjustment experience of ex-Buddhist monks extends the literature on Buddhist monks and provides an example of a life transition of interest to the helping professions because of its potential relevance to a range of major transitions for which clients may seek assistance.

KEY WORDS: ex-Buddhist monks; adjustment processes; life transitions; Buddhism; religious to secular transitions.

Introduction

This study focuses on the adjustment process of Western ex-Buddhist monks to life after the monastery. It uses case studies involving in-depth interviews to investigate the experience of five participants who lived as Buddhist monks for a number of years and then disrobed, returning to secular life. Their's is an extreme example of change and adjustment, since moving from an

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institutionalised communal religious environment to an individual secular existence is a considerable journey. This study does not directly address the individuals' reasons for leaving monastic life, which would easily merit further investigation, but confines its study to what occurred *after* leaving the monastery.

Helping professionals are frequently involved in addressing the change and adjustment processes in the lives of their clients and in their own lives. Exploring the experience of those going through such an adjustment process may help shed light on this and other transitions that are not so extreme.

The aims of this research were to investigate an extreme adjustment process that had not previously been documented; to bring out into the open and raise awareness of the issues facing Western ex-Buddhist monks; and to assist professionals who may come in contact with individuals going through similar or related adjustment processes. Also, as a former Buddhist monk, I was interested to enhance my own understanding and adjustment process.

Background

The life of a Buddhist monk in the Theravadan, or Southern Tradition of Buddhism, is a rigorous one. Celibacy, no physical contact or conversations alone with women, no touching or using money, one meal a day before midday, shaving one's head, long periods of silent meditation, wearing an ochre robe and taking on a new name and identity are all mandatory. The emphasis of the monk's training is to learn how to surrender to the monastic form and tradition in order to live a wholesome life and develop insight and understanding into the nature of desire, attachment and why human beings experience suffering. The ultimate goal is total freedom from suffering and the development of a heart and mind of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and serenity (Sumedho, 1984).

Unlike Christian monks, Buddhist monks do not take lifetime vows and are free to leave at anytime (Bunnag, 1973). In Theravadan countries monks are highly revered, with most men taking only temporary ordination. In Thailand in particular, a man's time as a monk produces a "halo effect" which brings prestige, honour, social and economic advantages after he leaves (Bunnag, 1984). The overall experience of leaving the monastery in Thailand is generally one of financial and emotional support, positive acceptance and respect and a relatively easy adjustment back into secular life. Westerners have been ordained as Buddhist monks since the end of the 19th century but it is only in the last 30 years that communities of Western born monastics have been established (Bechert, 1984).

Nothing has been written specifically on the adjustment process of Western ex-Buddhist monks to secular life, so this project goes a little way to exploring a new and interesting area. Parallels exist to the experience of priests who

have left the Catholic priesthood (Gawith, 1992; Hickson & Gudz, 1995; Rice, 1990; Verdieck, Shields, & Hoge, 1988) and the experience of Catholic nuns who have left their Orders (Armstrong, 1981; Graham, 1992). There are also connections with related subjects such as Goffman's (1961) study of total institutions, reports on Vietnam veteran adjustment problems (Strayer & Ellenhorn, 1975) and studies of individuals who have exited cults (Lewis & Bromley, 1987; Singer, 2002; Taslimi, 1991).

These literature sources have explored other extreme adjustment processes and help to situate the findings of this research. The common thread through all of them is that an extreme adjustment process is multi-dimensional (e.g., Gawith, 1992; SanGiovanni, 1978; Singer, 2002), confusing (e.g., Goffman, 1961; Graham, 1992) and profound (e.g., Janetius, 2000; Rice, 1990) for anyone who decides to leave a committed, identity creating, institutional environment. Issues of grief (e.g., Rice, 1990), delayed development (e.g., Strayer & Ellenhorn, 1975), missing out on life experiences (e.g., SanGiovanni, 1978), difficulties with intimacy (e.g., Gawith, 1992), money (e.g., Graham, 1992), identity (e.g., Hickson & Gudz, 1995), depression (e.g., Singer, 2002), anxiety and confusion (e.g., Lewis & Bromley, 1987) are hallmarks of extreme adjustment processes. In contrast, there is also the hope and promise of establishing a new life and identity for the individuals going through the adjustment and the opportunity and satisfaction that provides (e.g., Janetius, 2000; Rice, 1990). It is hoped that this study will bring alive the adjustment process of Western ex-Buddhist monks and assist the reader to have a better understanding of that particular journey.

Methodology

The primary research question was how Western ex-Buddhist monks have adjusted to life in the secular world. A case study approach was employed as an accepted and well-established qualitative research method (Orum, Feagin, & Sjoberg, 1991; Rose, 1991). Case study allows the researcher to investigate real life situations and take a holistic approach, which suited the broad nature of this study. Its special features are that it is exploratory, richly descriptive, heuristic and is particularly relevant when investigating questions of *how* or *why* (Winegardner, n.d.). Case study is often used by researchers who have an intrinsic personal interest in a situation and want to further their understanding of it, as in this situation (Stake, 1994). Case study is also widely used and accepted in the psychology and counseling fields, the target audience for this research (Berg, 2001).

My interest stemmed from having been a Buddhist monk for 12 years and having decided to exit the monastery three and a half years ago. Therefore, I had firsthand knowledge of the adjustment process involved in moving from a rule bound monastic system to life in the secular world and a desire to

navigate this terrain in the best possible way. I also had contact with other ex-Buddhist monks and was well positioned to study their adjustment process to life after the monastery.

Due to the small number of Western ex-Buddhist monks and the qualitative nature of the research, the risk of participant identification was great (Berg, 2001). This was addressed by obtaining informed written consent from each of the participants. It was made clear to them that, while every effort to insure the confidentiality of their information would be made, total anonymity could not be promised, particularly to people who knew and might be able to identify them. Participants were given the opportunity to alter, correct or remove information from the transcripts of the interview.

Researcher bias is unavoidable in qualitative research work (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998), but was a particular issue here, given the closeness of my own involvement with the research topic. The key was to be transparent and open about possible areas of bias. Thus, a research fieldwork journal was kept throughout the project.

Convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used to choose the subjects, thus assuring the ready access and appropriateness of the study group (Berg, 2001). Five Western ex-Buddhist monks who were known to me were approached by letter and asked whether they would like to know more about the proposed project, with a view to considering involvement. A positive response was received from all and an information sheet and consent form, to return if they were willing to participate, were sent to them. A former novice monk also agreed to participate in a pilot interview. This was undertaken to refine the semi-structured interview questions and practice the interview technique.

Single in-depth interviews with each of the five participants were then tape recorded. These interviews were semi-structured, with two main open-ended questions and a checklist of possible topics that might be covered. Semi-structured interviews enabled a comparison between respondents, while allowing flexibility and an open-ended inquiry to occur (Gillham, 2000). The two broad questions related to the experience of leaving the monastery and the adjustments made since then were: 'What was it like when you left the monastery?' and 'Tell me about the adjustments you have made since leaving the monastery?' The checklist topics included relationships, money, work, family, food, sexuality and grief. Each interview took from 1¼–1½ hours. Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face while two were done over the phone due to geographical distance. Each taped interview was transcribed and then sent to participants to check for accuracy, providing them the editorial opportunity to add to or subtract from anything they had said (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). Follow-up contact with the participants to clarify factual detail was done by phone or email.

Interview data were then analysed to identify major themes. This was done manually by highlighting and naming the topics covered in each interview and then combining all of the interviews together and clustering topics into

categories. The categories were then sorted and clustered again, as larger themes became apparent (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The results of the analysis are reported and discussed in the following section.

Results and discussion

The relevant details of the five participants involved in the study are outlined in Table 1.

All were men of Western European backgrounds who had entered the monastery in their early to mid-20s and lived as monks from between 10 and 18 years. The time elapsed since they disrobed ranged from 3 to 9 years.

The topics that emerged from the interviews were organised into three main themes: the initial experience of leaving; creating a new life; and their relationship with the past. The second theme was further sub-divided into three sub-themes: relationships and intimacy, employment, and inner changes. The third theme was also broken into three: lack of development and missing out, use of therapy and response to monastic life.

The initial experience of leaving

The experience of disrobing and leaving the monastery after 10 or more years was a charged event. On the one hand there was the excitement, newness, freshness and freedom of no longer being bound by the strict monastic rules of behaviour. Participant A described it as *"stepping out into a new world and being able to do whatever I like to do..."* Participant D spoke about the sense of freedom, of not having to represent the monks or Buddhism anymore and having the freedom to "*just be more myself*." Participant B described it as a "*decompression*", "*exciting*" and a "*great expansion of energy*."

Accompanying the initial sense of freedom and excitement though was the insecurity and anxiety of having one's identity, points of reference and

TABLE 1

Participant's Profile

Participant	Year ordained	Year disrobed	Current age
A	1981	2000	48
B	1982	1995	44
C	1981	1998	46
D	1984	1994	46
E	1979	1994	47

structures removed in an instant. Participant C described it as being in "*freefall*", having lost his identity, having no money, no job and no bearings.

> "*The whole identity of the previous 17 years had suddenly gone and I was nobody going nowhere with nothing to formulate an identity with*."

Participant B said he found it "*very lonely*" and "*sometimes very aimless*." Major change processes have been described as progressing from excitement through chaos to integration (Girdano, cited in Janetius, 2000), matching the experience of the participants in this study. A study of Catholic ex-priests observed how a sense of initial euphoria was quickly replaced by loss of status, loss of identity and poverty (Rice, 1990). Sheehy (1976) commented that all major life changes are potentially stressful.

In addition to the excitement and fear, there were other immediate significant adjustments. Participant B spoke about the loss of social esteem and respect that occurred when he moved from being a senior monk with power and influence to a "*nobody with no money*." Goffman (1961) in his study of individuals in total institutions, noted that release may entail moving from the top of a small world to the bottom of a large one. Participant E talked about the sense of humiliation he felt "*signing up for the dole...at 38 years of age*" and the confusion of having to learn what an ATM machine was and how to use it. He described his experience as both "*overwhelming*" and "*devastating*":

> "*The experience of leaving was like losing your job, having no money, being divorced, losing your spirituality blah blah blah – all at once*!"

While the initial experience was one of excitement and dislocation, rebirth and anxiety, because leaving was voluntary and self-initiated, there was also a strong sense of embarking upon a new life. Participant B described having *"a strong sense of wanting to move forward"* and *"wanting to move into something new."* Participant A said that he "*had a fair amount of trust that things will just work out and they will be fine*." Rice (1990) poignantly comments that for an ex-priest "he almost ceases to exist as a person and must try to build a totally new personality. It takes years and it takes tears" (p. 47).

Creating a new life

Relationships and intimacy. The strongest and most ubiquitous theme, emerging from the interviews, was the desire to explore relationships and intimacy after coming out of the monastery. Participant A stated that a longing for relationship was *"the most dominant and primary reason why I left the monastery..."* All participants said it had been a factor in their leaving and that the opportunity for intimacy and relationships, particularly with women, had been lacking in the monastery. Participant B noted that intimacy with oneself had been emphasised and developed in the monastery, but that

intimacy with others had been positively discouraged. He experienced a lack of development regarding interpersonal roles around intimacy. For ex-priests, interest in relationships and developing intimacy are also major factors in their exiting the priesthood (Rice, 1990). However, this appears to be a less strong motivating factor for Catholic nuns leaving their orders, whose reasons tend to be more philosophically based (Hart, Ames, & Sawyer, 1974).

While relationships and intimacy were out of bounds in the Buddhist monastery, afterwards they were seen, or hoped for, as a means to further personal development. Participant A described wanting to establish a "*reflective relationship*" that would assist in "*long term personal exploration*." Participant D explained how he went to India "*looking for a guru and then ended up with a woman*." For him, being in a committed relationship has involved extraordinary learning and development that was not available in the monastery. While he had good friends in the monastery he explained that "*you don't sleep with the other monks, you don't do everything with them*." He noted,

> "*there's something about the intimacy and the attachment [in a relationship] that kind of made me want to work through the difficulties rather than run away*."

Relationships and intimacy while highly valued, appeared also to be the biggest source of struggle and difficulty in the participants' lives. Participant A described intimate relationships as "*really confusing and difficult to traverse for me*."

Participant C spoke of how he was immediately confronted by old issues that he had naively thought the monastery had equipped him to deal with and how he often became overwhelmed and had been humbled by the challenges of a relationship. Participant E found that, although he came out of the monastery in his late 30s, he entered into relationships more like a 20 year old. Women his own age "*were in a very different place*" than he was and that had created difficulties and confusion.

Similar adjustment problems have been discussed in relation to former priests (Hickson & Gudz, 1995). Their relationships while priests were often unrewarding, distant and highly stylised and after leaving they found intimacy was a major problem. Thus they continued to have difficulty and discomfort in an area that could have been a deep source of satisfaction.

Another issue mentioned by participants was the similarity between a committed relationship and the discipline of monastic life. The boundaries, rules, fidelity and letting go of desires necessary in a relationship, had striking parallels to life as a celibate renunciate. For some, choosing between personal freedom and a committed relationship was not an easy decision. Participant A described

> *"...having come out of one kind of binding convention and gone slam bang into another one..."*

Employment. The issue of employment brought a range of responses from the participants. Participant A described it as "*the most fortunate and easy adjustment*", while for others it had been a source of frustration and struggle. Career choices involved how and whether it was possible, to draw on monastic experience in finding employment. They were unsure whether to pick up work they were doing before entering the monastery or start a new career. Dealing with employers, and a society in general, that had little or no appreciation of the training received in the monastery was problematic. The latter has been referred to as 'stigmatisation' in the literature and is defined as a "cool reception in the wider world" (Goffman, 1961, p. 73). Stigmatisation is all too common for individuals coming out of total institutions and was reflected in the experience of the participants.

Everyone except Participant A had chosen to be self-employed and had found it a real struggle. Each had to find new approaches to work and making money, according to their own circumstances. Participant B's first job was with a mental health agency but he felt out of place in a work environment that did not put spiritual values first. His efforts to find paid employment, congruent with his personal values, had led him to self-employment as a trainer and meditation teacher. Participant C described making a living as the "*biggest discipline*" of lay life, providing both structure and difficulties. For him, re-orienting to the necessity of making a profit, time pressures and acknowledging that his body can no longer work as hard or as long as he could in his 20s was a struggle. Finding meaningful, appropriate and profitable work has been difficult for many ex-priests as well (Gawith, 1992).

Participant D stated that it had "*taken a long time to get around to where I had wanted to go. Or figuring it out*." He struggled with valuing his own knowledge and expertise in financial terms and found charging clients difficult. After several financially unsuccessful attempts at self-employment, he had embarked upon a more traditional training and employment opportunity through a mental health service. Participant E had also embarked upon several different career paths to try to find something satisfactory. He was aware that his career decisions had been strongly motivated by fear, concerns about his advancing age and wanting to find an occupation to work in for the rest of his life. For him, the uncertainty of self-employment had been "*a challenge and a struggle*" and he found it "*really really hard*" to honour his past learning as a monk and combine that with earning money. These issues have a strong concordance with the experience of ex-priests whom Rice (1990) found often enter the work force in late mid-life and have difficulty finding work, adjusting to a work culture and not having previous experience or qualifications recognized.

Inner changes. There had been numerous 'inner changes' in participants' lives. These ranged from a whole re-orientation of being and attitudes towards

'the world' to having to let go of ingrained monastic attitudes and habits in order to develop more appropriate worldly ones.

Participant B described moving from relating to the world from a space of "*beingness to doingness*." He expressed an initial lack "*of a coherent sense of who I was*" after leaving, recognising that the main orientation of his life needed to change. This meant a shift from the monastic ideal of deliberately trying *not* to create karma (self-driven intentional actions) to deliberately trying *to* create karma, through valuing the doingness. He described this inner paradigm shift as one of recognising that

> "*being dynamic and proactive in the world is equally spiritual as being detached and into beingness*."

Changes in identity and fundamental reorientations to life are common in situations of extreme adjustment. In his study of ex-priests, Gawith (1992) found that developing a new comfortable and authentic identity with was the biggest adjustment.

Participant E described his re-entry into the world as "*a hugely devastating experience*." He questioned the value and worth of his time as a monk and felt he had to undo everything and "*...at the same time having to go out there and build a life*." He felt unprepared and under resourced in "*finding a job, re-entering a career, going back to university, getting my brain going again*." Part of the inner adjustment process for him had been shifting from the high risk, all-or-nothing approach to life found in the monastery, to one that was more balanced, realistic and based on security. This level of emotional turbulence is similar to that reported by individuals leaving cults. Lewis and Bromley (1987) considered the psychological disturbances involved in these adjustments to be best understood as symptoms of general traumatic stress.

Post-monastic life had also meant a broader and less prescribed range of experiences. Participant C remarked upon moving from "*a special role*" and "*feeling special as a monk*" to enjoying the ordinariness and anonymity of lay life. The sense of being special had "*led to a kind of inflation, an inflated sense of self...*" He had been humbled through the difficulty of his experience living with a woman and her daughter. Participant D reported becoming less idealistic and judgemental of himself and others and generally more humble and tolerant since leaving the monastery.

Ingrained monastic attitudes and behaviours also changed. Participant B experienced a letting go of the "*non-relational style*" of the solitary monk and the monastic taboo around "*the full expression of the personal*." The deliberate cultivation of a more relational and self-expressive life had been challenging but rewarding. Participant C commented that the trite monastic panacea for everything of "*just be mindful*" was inadequate in dealing with intimate relationships. He realised that he needed "*to be more communicative with my*

reactions, to express them…" and in fact had to learn to "*become them*" rather than just being mindful of them. This involved a paradigm shift from an aloof, detached position towards life to a more fully engaged and embodied one. For Participant E there had been significant learning around the fear that he had experienced "*in a way I'd never experienced fear before in my life*." Fear and the sense of loss have been identified as a major feature for priests leaving the priesthood (Rice, 1990). Participant D found buying things for himself and indulging his wants rather than just his needs a big adjustment from monastic values.

Attitudes towards attachment had also needed to be reworked. For Buddhist monks the highest aim is non-attachment to internal and external worlds, a state of being that engages with the world without suffering from the vagaries and transitory nature of life. Commitment to a person and a relationship, the experience of purchasing a house, acquiring possessions, putting down roots and deciding whether to have children have all required new attitudes towards attachment. For Participant D,

> "*there is something about getting attached, it's almost like being more in life in a sense, of being more willing to be more in life and a part of it*."

He also proposed that the monastic ideal of non-attachment was easily corrupted, becoming instead a blanket rejection of experience, a way of fooling yourself that you were free from attachment to the world by rejection rather than non-attachment:

> "*It's quite easy to be detached* [*as opposed to 'non-attached'*] *if you're not attached*."

His adjustment to secular life included the realisation that some of the cornerstone monastic values and ideals needed to be reconsidered in light of the requirements and responsibilities of lay life. How to make the Buddha's teachings work for them in their new life context was a concern and ongoing inquiry for all the participants.

Relationship with the past

The adjustment process involved participants coming to terms with their years spent as monks. This included addressing areas of delayed development and life experiences that had been missed. For some, counseling or psychotherapy had played a part in their adjustment. How they felt about their time in the monastery and whether there had been a recognizable grieving process elicited highly individual responses.

Lack of development and missing out. Part of coming to terms with the past for participants was recognising their delayed development and missed life experiences. Participant B remarked that his fears of intimacy, self-expression

and self-presentation had been "*mothballed*" while in the monastery. Participant C found that the monastery had provided a lot of personal space so that childish immature emotions did not come up with regard to relationships, but since disrobing he had frequently dealt with intimacy issues unaddressed in the monastery. One aspect was that he was 24 when he went in and 41 when he came out, but his sexual attitudes were still those of a 24 year old.

When Participant E left the monastery he realised he had *"entered the world basically with the emotions of a guy in his early 20's."* He felt that he was "*emotionally stunted*" by his years in the monastery, had not dealt with personal issues and in fact had regressed. Strayer and Ellenhorn (1975) found Vietnam veterans discovered they were disadvantaged in many areas when they came home and were socially and educationally behind their peers. Many ex-priests also describe feeling emotionally damaged and disadvantaged in comparison to their peers (Rice, 1990).

Participants also named having missed out on significant life experiences during their time in the monastery. Participant D mentioned feeling as if he was just starting out professionally, whereas others his age were well-advanced in their careers. He had also missed out on social and relationship experiences in general that other 20 and 30 year olds had had. He lacked confidence and self-esteem in professional circles and had "*found it difficult to hold my own in other people's environments*."

Participant B echoed this, expressing feelings of slight inferiority when he compared his worldly accomplishments to others. Participant E said it was hard to see friends his own age that had established stable lives, homes and relationships and to realise that "*I had nothing*." He also had strongly felt the need to catch-up with his peer group and "*show the monks that I was actually o.k*." This urgency had led to risky investment decisions and significant financial loss. He had missed out on a variety of important experiences in his 20s and 30s, not the least of which was "*creating a career*".

Typically it is during the 20s that most people sort out the externals of their lives in terms of establishing a career, house and home (Sheehy, 1976). These had all been missed, during the participants' years in the monastery. Missing out on age-appropriate skills, knowledge and life experiences has been called 'age incongruity' or 'age deviance' in the literature (SanGiovanni, 1978). In her study of ex-nuns, SanGiovanni suggested that the high incidence of age deviance discovered had parallels with stigmatised persons moving out of prisons, asylums, sanitaria and orphanages.

Use of therapy. In an effort to understand the adjustment process and work on areas that lacked development, some had turned to counseling and psychotherapy for help. Participant E had sought professional help as a way of addressing his issues of emotional immaturity and poor communication. While finding it helpful, he was dismayed to discover that he was "*even worse than I*

thought I was." He thought it had taken "*about 7 years to get through some of that stuff*" and believed his disrobing still strongly influenced his life.

Participant D found psychotherapy provided someone to listen to him and gave him a mirror to reflect on himself. The importance of relationship in therapy had been eye opening to him, as well as its focus on investigating the *causes* of moods and depression. Those differences, he said, were in stark contrast to the emphasis in the monastery on being mindful and "*bearing with the suffering*" on one's own, rather than looking for the underlying causes of disturbed affect. Psychotherapy and involvement in a men's group had been fundamental to his adjustment and provided him with a sense of community and kindred spirits.

Participant B mentioned the value of a men's group as well, and while he had not sought professional help, he had several supportive friends who happened to be counselors and therapists. Participant A described his relationship with therapy as "*useful, but I haven't found that it comes without a struggle*." For him its benefits contrasted with its financial cost, conflicts with therapists and difficult decisions over whether to undertake individual or couples counseling or invest in personal growth workshops and training instead.

Numerous writers have underlined the usefulness of counseling or psychotherapy for people leaving religious communities (Gawith, 1992; Hickson & Gudz, 1995; Rice, 1990; Singer, 2002). Rice (1990) stated that ex-priests need counseling and advice for all aspects of their transitions. Another study of people who have exited from cults found that those who received counseling "make the easiest, best, and quickest returns to normal life" (Singer, 2002, p. 2). Group work with ex-priests that focused on a variety of relevant themes has also been found to be particularly helpful (Hickson & Gudz, 1995).

Response to monastic life. Part of the relationship with the past was how participants currently viewed their years in the monastery, with responses ranging from positive to strongly negative. Often there was a balanced reporting of good and bad features. Similarly, grief had been a highly individual experience. In their study of individuals who had left religious cults, Lewis and Bromley (1987) found there were "very complex and ambivalent sentiments about their former groups" (p. 512). This would concur with what was reported by the participants.

From a positive perspective, Participant C said that he did not feel that his monastic experience had disadvantaged him, quite the contrary, he was extremely grateful as it had enabled him "*to establish a strong faith in myself, in my spiritual life – in life itself*." Yet he recognised that the monastery had its limitations and justifiably, was not oriented to preparing him for life after he disrobed. He commented that there had been a sense of continuity to his life since leaving and that the same issues challenged him today as had challenged him in the monastery, identified as "*learning to take full responsibility for who*

I am in the world and all of my feelings and reactions." This sense of continuity was noted in the lives of ex-priests; "overall it appears that priests who left have a sense of continuity as well as change" (Gawith, 1992, p. 56).

Participant B also spoke of continuity; his leaving was not so much a severing as "*a movement that carried me through and out of the monastery*." It had been important to really value his past monastic experience and not dismiss it. He emphasised that "*it's not that when I disrobed that I started from nowhere*"; he had actually developed some important and precious skills that continued to be relevant. He reflected that "*it's difficult going into a monastery and it's difficult coming out*." The high level of energy, commitment and integrity meant that monastic life was "*a difficult act to follow*." On one occasion he had explained to a current monastic that in leaving, it was not that he had found something better, rather, something different. He had endeavoured to keep alive a sense of community and the depth of consciousness that he developed in the monastery.

The relationship with the past, however, was not always one of appreciation and valuing. Participant E had to deal with viewing his life as a monk as meaningless and a belief that "*I had basically wasted a lot of my life*." After leaving, he felt rejected and financially and emotionally unsupported by the monks and thought their espousal of brotherhood, kindness and compassion were hypocritical considering his own treatment on exiting. The hardest thing had been

> " *that I put all of this energy and effort and commitment – amazing commitment into something – and basically it has all been shelved*."

Goffman (1961) noted that time in total institutions was often seen as wasted by the individual and as responsible for their failure to gain money, marital relations or training certificates.

Participant E also expressed resentment that the monastery had been financially unsupportive. He would have appreciated monetary assistance to get himself established and ongoing support and endorsement from the monastery for his and other ex-monastics' skills and knowledge. Their support could have helped him to create a livelihood that better incorporated his monastic experience. Participant B also would have liked more support and understanding from the monastery and less judgement, shame and condemnation. He suggested that a formal protocol should be established for leaving the monastery that would lift the taboo, educate those within the monastery and help to normalise the experience.

The shame and judgement from the Buddhist community experienced by participants appeared to be a feature peculiar to Western ex-Buddhist monks and was not reflected in the experience of their Asian counterparts (Bunnag, 1984). It is representative though of the experience of ex-priests who spoke of the lack of financial assistance from the Church and of being shamed after

they left (Gawith, 1992; Hickson & Gudz, 1995; Rice, 1990). There are also parallels with the experience of Vietnam veterans who returned home, not as heroes, but as social outcastes for whom shame and the corresponding feelings of bitterness, depression and apathy had been significant features of their adjustment (Strayer & Ellenhorn, 1975).

Grief was experienced by each in their own way. Participant C went through a protracted grieving process during the 5 years before he actually disrobed, described in the literature as "anticipatory grief" (Rice, 1990). When he had occasionally gone back to the monastery to visit, he still felt the loss of identity, structure, vision, community and a "*romantic spiritual vision*" that "*was quite magnificent in its way*." Participant B for the first year had a lot of grief and pain because he had "*set my heart on being a monk and now I'd severed that*." Participant D stated his grief process had not been strong and that it was more "*a sense of loss*." He also had gone through an anticipatory grieving process before leaving. Participant A suspected there were walled off areas of grief in his life that he resisted that could be connected with disrobing. Participant E described slowly moving towards acceptance but at times there was still sadness, anger and tears even 10 years on from leaving.

With any major life transition, grief is a natural part of the process (Sheehy, 1976). Part of moving into the future is healing and letting go of the past. Ex-priests have spoken about their leaving as a death (Rice, 1990), and grief can be considered as an aspect of every extreme adjustment process mentioned in this study. Grief takes time to heal (Kubler-Ross, 1970) and is highly individualistic (Freeman & Ward, 1998).

Conclusion

The adjustment process for the participants in this study had been difficult and complex. It had also been highly individualised although some areas and themes demonstrated similarities. The shift from a high demand institutionalised religious life that emphasised surrender to a tradition and the letting go of individual desire and attachment, to an individual secular existence had not been easy. In comparison to their Asian counterparts in Thailand, these Western ex-Buddhist monks had less support and understanding from the monastery and society in general and more shame and adjustment problems. The shame and lack of understanding by the society they belonged to demonstrated similarities with the experience of Vietnam veterans and ex-cult members and their corresponding difficulties in adjustment. The lack of financial support from the monastery and the struggle with issues such as intimacy, relationships, work, delayed development, missed life experiences, grief and general disorientation shared many similarities with the experience of Christian priests and nuns leaving their religious orders.

In this study, the use of in depth case study reporting has detailed the experiences of the participants and provided a series of vignettes into their lives. This has shown their adjustment process to be comprehensive, challenging and profound. It has intentionally not explored the reasons behind their leaving the monastery as this is another complex and interesting story that would be of value for future study. A study like this no doubt leaves many unanswered questions in the mind of the reader. The glimpses we have of the participant's lives in these vignettes tell just a partial story of lives in progress and continual transition. What work did they choose? Did they marry and have children? Do they still practice Buddhism? Did their years of monastic life assist or hinder their post-monastic life? Did the Buddha's teaching of non-attachment and awareness fail them in the monastery and afterward? These and many other questions could be the catalyst for future investigation or help to focus the mind of the reader on the transitions and adjustment issues in their own lives or in the lives of their clients.

The adjustment process of this magnitude and complexity takes time and no doubt involves levels and depth of integration. Therefore, it would be of value to conduct a longitudinal follow-up study to see how this process has unfolded over time. It would also be of interest to consider the lasting effects of monastic life and its long hours of meditation and the residues it has left years down the track.

The study also revealed and provided insight into some of the issues that may be encountered in other related major life transitions. The experience of the participants may be generalisable to the extreme adjustment processes of individuals leaving other institutional rule bound settings such as the military, prison and mental hospitals. The general features may also have relevance to other less extreme adjustment processes like career changes, divorce or migration.

It is hoped that this study will assist helping professionals working with clients who are going through similar adjustment processes. Helping professionals are frequently involved in the process of change, and managing the process in clients and in themselves is a big part of the work. Becoming familiar with an extreme case of change and adjustment in order to highlight some of its features is what this research has been concerned with.

This research has gone a little way towards investigating an area not studied before. Major life transitions are becoming more common and greater understanding assists individuals going through them, professionals working with clients and society in general. There is a need for further research into the subject of extreme adjustments and for follow-up studies to be done at a later date.

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