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Research Article

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Almost a proper Buddhist: The post-secular complexity of Heritage Buddhist teen identity in Britain

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Research Article

Almost a proper Buddhist: the post-secular complexity of Heritage Buddhist teen identity in Britain¹

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how Buddhist affiliation relates to practice, how Buddhist teens define and experience their religious identity and which sociological paradigms are helpful in understanding the dynamics of Buddhist teen identity. Focus group methodology was used to examine attitudes to superstition, stereotypes, prejudice, religion and society, convictions, and friends for 65 heritage Buddhist teenagers from Britain. Shared identity was expressed in terms of spiritual teachers, eclecticism within the Buddhist tradition, Asian heritage, openness to the supernatural, relevance of Buddhism in the present day and temple-going. Practice rather than belief seemed to represent the operational difference between how Buddhist teens defined 'Buddhist' and 'proper Buddhist'. Buddhist teens experienced little negative prejudice on account of their religion but experienced being grouped with Buddhists of other ethnicities in others' eyes. Secularization, modernity, projection and especially post-secularism were found helpful as sociological paradigms for explaining various aspects of Buddhist teen identity.

Buddhism is unusual for having maintained a niche in post-secular western society in places where other religions have receded, in a way similar to New Age practices—having for some groups been reinvented as 'scientific' (McMahan 2008) or 'mindfulness-based' (Bodhi 2011). The chameleon-like nature of Buddhist identity does, on occasion however, reveal inconsistencies between affiliation and practice. For example, the Buddhist Aung San Syu Kyi was held under house arrest from 1989-2010 by those who were also Buddhists, although both parties claimed moral justification. Nominalism, where the self-identifier 'Buddhist' is worn like a wrist thread or an amulet, may be more widespread than expected—for example Ariyabuddhiphongs (2009: 193) has demonstrated that only 13.8% of Thai Buddhists keep five precepts. Thus, simply calling oneself a Buddhist might be of limited value to researchers wishing to predict attitudes, beliefs or degree of practice. Religious research amongst Christians in the UK has given more (Fane, 1999) or less (Voas and Bruce, 2004; Voas and Day, 2010) precedence to the statistical importance of religious self-identification—and for Buddhists it would be interesting to know how seriously religious self-identification is taken.

¹ An earlier draft of this article was presented at the 12th Nordic Conference on Religious Education in Reykjavik on 11 June 2013. The author would like to thank Revd. Canon, Prof. Leslie J. Francis (University of Warwick) and Dr. Mandy Robbins (Glyndŵr University) for supervision of this research, Prof. Kåre Fuglseth (University of Nordland) and anonymous peer reviewers for constructive criticism, and Dr Joyce Miller (University of Warwick) for pointing out the need to explain the gap between Buddhist ideals and implementation.

An extra layer of complexity is added to religious self-identification in the case of immigrant religion, since migrants experience a partial acculturation between their heritage culture and the culture of a mainstream host country. For non-Buddhist traditions, exploring such complexity in religious identity in the UK, whether it be for the Muslim (Jacobson, 1997), Hindu (Knott, 1986), or Sikh (Nesbitt, 2000) traditions have generated several models which may or may not be applicable to Buddhism—whether it be the ‘multiple cultural competence’ (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993: 174-178) or Østberg’s (2000) ‘integrated plural identity’, both of which deal with the trans-cultural skills that allow a young person to feel safe and secure when working with and across cultural boundaries, or re-indigenization of spiritual revivalism pioneered by converts (e.g. Carey, 1987). Being able to model identity in this way has helped inform policy on social cohesion and Religious Education (RE). Lack of such theory about Buddhist identity has, however, meant dedicated policy has tended to pass Buddhism by, and in its absence stereotypes have continued to abound. Modelling Buddhists’ identity also has implications for Buddhist acculturation in the West, Buddhist mental health, intra-Buddhist identity differences, and understanding the relationship between Buddhism and post-secularism. Ideally, it would be attractive to isolate Buddhist identity from features that are not strictly ‘religious.’ Some such features might include aspects of being a religious minority, aspects of Asian collectivist values or values from Dharmic religions—since large areas of overlap have been identified in previous research (Thanissaro, 2012). This is especially the case when many aspects of identity that seem important to Buddhists [and this may include aspects shared with affiliates of other religions (Frisk and Nynäs, 2012: 53)] are dismissed by academics as cultural accretions or superstitions (Tambiah, 1984)—presenting facets of identity too complex for sociologists to explain.

According to the 2011 National Census there were 247,743 Buddhists in Britain, of whom 22,715 were in the age band between ten and nineteen years. At the time of writing, there were over fifty Buddhist temples with resident monastics in Great Britain, mostly situated in urban centres such as London, Birmingham and Manchester. Religiosity in the teenage years is thought important, not only for its educational applications, but also because there is a freshness of faith apparent in this age group. Two previous studies of Buddhist teen identity have found it affects work ethic and aim in life (Thanissaro, 2013: 11), and also varies to some extent independently from ethnic identity (Thanissaro, in press). The much wider variety of issues raised as important to Buddhist teens in Sumi Loundon’s (2001: xvi) anthology of Buddhist teen writings, make it likely that the facets of Buddhist teen identity extend beyond the scope of these two studies. This article focusses on questions seemingly left unasked in previous empirical research, while drawing on some of the focus group questions fielded in previous studies for teenagers of other religions. This study aims to answer the research questions of how Buddhist affiliation relates to practice, how Buddhist teens define and experience their religious identity and which sociological paradigms are helpful in understanding the dynamics of Buddhist teen identity.

Methodology

Rationale

The study of religion within individual differences psychology has centred around comparison of measurable aspects of religious behaviour—namely attitudes, degree of practice, belief and affiliation. Since religious values are assumed to be subconscious (Rohan, 2000: 271), their quantitative profiling relies on discerning patterns in answers to attitude questions. Some of these values are components of religious identity—especially those that indicate a sense of belonging. Since correlation between factors using a quantitative methodology does not indicate the direction of causality (for example, it is impossible from statistics alone to say whether a person practises Buddhism more because they say they are Buddhist or whether they say they are Buddhist because they practise more Buddhism). Without belittling the contribution of quantitative methodologies to the scientific study of religion, it remains useful to interrogate religious phenomena in a way that allows practitioners the opportunity to attribute causalities and relate their practice to a bigger picture using qualitative data gathering. Focus groups are a relatively time-efficient way of allowing large numbers of participants from a target group the opportunity to express themselves, using open questions. The nature of the data gathered tends to be that of group consensus, although consistent differences of opinion would also be recorded in the transcript of the resulting discussion. This research is not entirely ‘grounded’ since it draws upon categories pre-selected in previous values mapping research for adolescents of different religious affiliation to allow eventual comparison between religions.

Procedure

Focus groups comprising six to ten self-identifying Buddhist teenagers were conducted on six occasions in the temples they attended in the period July 2011 to August 2012. The twenty-one questions (see Appendix 1) included ten questions from the values areas of ‘superstitions’, stereotypes and prejudice, religion and society, convictions, and friends used in similar previous research (e.g. Halsall, 2004). Questions 5-6 and 15-16 are derived from Halsall’s previous work. Questions 3-4, 9-14 and 17 derive from Francis’s (2001) work. Questions 1-2, 7-8 and 18-19 are adapted from Loundon’s (2001) work to make the survey ‘fit for purpose’ for Buddhist teens by including additional topics she highlighted as important, including Asian heritage, exclusiveness and collectivism. Consistent differences of opinion are noted in addition to points of consensus. The focus groups were run to saturation—which means that although there was not necessarily consensus on all issues, no new patterns of response were emerging with new focus groups. For focus groups, the nature of data are expressed as the ‘voice of the group’, although where participants are quoted, they have been identified individually. Pseudonyms were adopted to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

Sample

Sixty-five teenagers took part in this project in the age range of thirteen to twenty. The

teenagers were drawn from Britain's Sinhalese, Thai, Burmese, Cambodian and Nepalese communities, and included teenagers of mixed race from intermarriage of Asian and Black or Asian and White parents. The sample focussed on heritage Buddhists and mostly adherents to Theravada Buddhist practice—the researcher, for the record, also being a 'convert' insider to Theravada Buddhism.

Findings

Findings here are grouped under the headings that emerged in response to the questions discussed and included Buddhist identity in the eyes of the teenagers and others, spiritual teachers, exclusivity to Buddhist tradition, Asian heritage, the supernatural, relevance of Buddhism in the present day, practice and temple-going. Although quantitative measure was not the main goal, some indication of the strength of opinion is indicated by the degree of agreement between groups. Where the author uses the term 'all' or 'unanimous' it means all the groups agreed. Where the author uses the term 'majority' it means almost all the groups agreed. The terms 'most' or 'many' mean more than half the groups agreed. The term 'some' means more than one group agreed. Where comments are attributed to particular individuals, names have been identified from field notes and the transcribed recordings.

Buddhist identity

Something of the nature of being Buddhist can be intimated from the teenagers' own ideas about the difference between being a 'Buddhist' and a 'proper Buddhist'.

Table 1. Buddhists and Proper Buddhists

Buddhists	Proper Buddhists
Keeping 5 Precepts, not drinking alcohol	Strictly keeping 5 Precepts
Meditating	Meditating more than most
Chanting	Chanting confidently every day
Being calm & peaceful	Not fighting back if provoked
Doing what's right	Strong moral conscience always to do the right thing
Being a 'philosopher'	Discussing Buddhism knowledgeably
Aiming for better lifetime/Nirvana	Practising Buddhism, attending temple regularly, helping without being asked, donating a lot to the temple

Table 1 shows the differences of degree between being a ‘Buddhist’ and a ‘proper Buddhist’. Where a person was a ‘proper’ Buddhist they seemed to have internalized practices such as the ethics of Five Precepts, meditation, chanting and Buddhist knowledge and transformed ideals into regular implementation. Keeping Five Precepts was the most commonly mentioned benchmark—according to Tony, a thirteen-year-old Thai boy that, “If you obey ... Five Precepts... it’s like it makes you *almost* a proper Buddhist...[although]...there is a load of other things that you should do.” Participants unanimously confirmed Maya, a fifteen-year-old Sinhalese girl’s assertion that Buddhists, “...don’t believe in God, but...believe in the philosophy of life and how [it can be improved] through education and stuff.” Most of the teenagers said Buddhists believed in rebirth.

How Buddhist teens felt they were seen by others

Ethnically-speaking, the teenagers said they experienced little discrimination. They did not report any prejudice owing to their Buddhist religious affiliation. If anything, they were surprised to be grouped, in others’ eyes, with fellow ‘Orientals’. Some were proud of their Asian ethnicity, disapproving of others who denied it, while others secretly wished to appear White. In terms of ethnicity, they felt sorry for hard-working ‘foreigners’ who were denied access to the UK merely on the basis of being the wrong nationality.

The teenagers experienced stereotyping by friends and at school. Being Buddhist was seen favourably by friends and teachers who expected them to be peaceful, kind and ‘into’ meditation. In RE, Buddhism was portrayed historically, nonetheless Maya describing her RE teacher as:

...very pro-Buddhist. Her ... [standpoint] is ... the westernized idea that all ... Buddhists are meditating all the time. Literally, she once asked me [imitates teacher’s voice], “You know, when you go to your temple, do you just sit there...meditate... and hope for the best?”

Some socialized by preference with Buddhist friends, but many found religion *not* to be the main consideration in choosing friends.

Spiritual teachers

All the teenagers considered having a spiritual teacher important—explaining, in the words of Maung Pyar Zang, a fourteen-year-old Burmese boy, “...book[s] don’t really persuade you to have faith in your religion,” while for Anne, a thirteen-year-old Thai girl, “[Google] has a part of the answer, but not all.” Having a spiritual teacher they could meet in person somehow contextualized the knowledge. For heritage Buddhists, the spiritual teacher would be a monk or perhaps a teacher in the temple school—someone they would see and consult in informal ‘pastoral time’ on a weekly or a monthly basis. Maung Photu, a thirteen-year-old Burmese boy commented that, “you need to be *shown* how to do [Buddhist practice].” Spiritual teachers *persuaded* you to have faith in your religion, since according to Ma Phyu, a fourteen-year-old Burmese

girl, “...just reading about it... [one]...might just lose faith in it.” Spiritual teachers also *challenged* students to think about moral choices and answered their questions more convincingly than could books or RE teachers.

Exclusivity to a Buddhist tradition

Most of the teenagers were at least *open* to learning from Buddhist traditions other than their own. Some had heard of other Buddhist traditions and could name them; others (especially pre-adolescents) seemed relatively unaware of Buddhism different to theirs referring to their own tradition as ‘normal Buddhism’. Most agreed Buddhism was *truer* than other religions. Maya commented that, “Christians will respect *their* religion more—and it is the same with us.” They thought other religions, in the words of Alex, a nineteen-year-old Thai boy, were, “...different perceptions of...similar things...but not completely the same.” Buddhism stood out because in the words of Vari, a twenty-year-old Thai boy because, “they... teach you about the Law of Karma,” and in the words of Maung Kyaw, a sixteen-year-old Burmese boy, “because you can *see* the benefits rather than relying on blind faith.”

Asian Heritage

All the teenage groups said they felt an emotional connection with Asia. Annie, a thirteen-year-old Thai girl, admitted if she and her sister were unable to go to Asia, “...we’d feel we were missing out on something important...might cry—our gran [who still lives there] brought us up.” Although numbers did not allow detailed comparison between the different ethnicities of Buddhist teens—it appeared additionally to the differences previously described (Thanissaro, in press) between heritage and convert Buddhists that affinity for Asia was not as strong for the children of mixed families, those who were UK-born or those who had not learned an Asian language. Vari thought it, “...important that you always know where you came from ...and not just forget.” Others liked to go to Asia but still felt like an outsider when visiting—in the words of Tishi, a sixteen-year-old Sinhalese girl:

If you go to Sri Lanka [other relatives]...know more about the culture and the traditions there than you—and you are absolutely ‘clueless’ when they are talking about something.

Others felt a need to avail themselves of their parents’ traditional religious knowledge before it was too late—in this case referring to the particularly Buddhist way of performing a funeral, in the words of Maya, “... my parents ... always ... say, ‘If we die, you don’t know what to do, do you?’”

The Supernatural

Most of the teenagers did not believe in horoscopes or witches. By contrast, teenagers in half the groups had firsthand experience of seeing ghosts [believed not to be uncommon in teenagers but normally attributed to coping strategies when mourning dead relatives (Day, 2009)]. Tea described a childhood encounter in Thailand:

When I was young, I was on the back of a motorcycle at night and they were in pursuit—...they were black shadows, tall and thin...as if they'd been dried out...I was terrified, but I kept looking back at them. I can't remember anything else from that time, but the picture of those ghosts is still clear in my mind.

Some believed black magic existed, having encountered it firsthand in Asia. Most believed the Devil existed as 'Mara' - which Sam, a 19-year-old Thai boy explained as, "...things...that make us want to do...wrong...even though we *know* it is wrong...it just captures us...It is a part of us [rather than being outside us]." The majority thought angels might exist in terms of *devas*² but had no direct experience of them. The Sinhalese agreed with Tishi's view³ that, "As a Buddhist person, you are not *supposed* to believe in angels...so, I don't believe in angels...but I like the concept, that's all."

Relevance of Buddhism in the present day

None of the groups thought Buddhism had been replaced by Science, but thought Buddhism had the advantage of accommodating the supernatural, and in the words of Maung Ni, a 13-year-old Burmese boy, "Science can't explain *how* you should live your life," with Ma Phyu adding, "Science is just... evidence about [things]...it is not that deep." They thought Buddhism was bolstered by Science—especially where cognitive science proved the benefits of meditation or where Science helped purge superstitious elements from Buddhism. Most of the groups thought Buddhist scriptures were more relevant than ever—the exception being some truth claims and certain stories. They explained that the majority of human problems had not changed at root—therefore teachings on how to live properly, cope, be peaceful and have mental discipline remained relevant. The relevance was also demonstrated in their eyes by the number still following Buddhist teachings.

Practice and Temple-going

The teenagers, like Maya, accepted meditation as an important Buddhist practice,

... I'd wake up and sit in my room and just meditate—and it would get me ready for the day....Like during my exams, when it was my 'mocks' [GCSE's]...it really does stress you. ...Six o'clock, wake up, meditate like *five* minutes, and you are *ready* for the day. Literally, if I forget coffee, that is your stimulant!

The attitude of all groups, however echoing the words of Anusha, a 13-year-old Sinhalese girl, was that meditation is, "...an important *part* [of Buddhist practice]—but not the *only*...thing: it's ...something that you do in order to understand everything else." Other necessary practices matched those described above in Table 1. Maung

² Non-winged inhabitants of Buddhist heaven realms

³ This teaching is a revivalist teaching still commonplace in Sri Lanka introduced by Dharmapala and later Gangodawila Soma Thero who purged what they considered 'superstitious' beliefs (although these beliefs are still considered orthodox in Thailand and Myanmar).

Kyaw, pointed out that meditation without other practices could lead to its misuse, saying, "... [although] you could meditate a lot...if you were not the proper Buddhist you might use that [ability] for gambling and such."

With many of the practices other than meditating at home such as the ethics of Five Precepts, chanting and Buddhist knowledge, attending a temple was advantageous—especially as it was a place where they met more experienced people face-to-face, had a sense of belonging and felt more motivated. Attendance at a temple was almost unanimously for special occasions (Buddhist festivals or personal rites of passage), although the more pious attended any time they were free.

Discussion

Findings were, on the whole, what one might expect from Buddhist teenagers loyal to their faith—with some different shades of opinion on Asian pride, knowledge of Buddhist traditions outside their own and the degree of rejection of supernatural phenomena. For the remainder of this paper I will discuss the research questions in the light of the findings.

How teen Buddhist affiliation relates to practice

As with Buddhists in China (Yao and Badham, 2007: 98), there was wide variation in the degree of Buddhist practice amongst these Buddhist teenagers, from regular involvement to nominalism, in a way that could not be predicted from their self-identification as Buddhist. The correlation between affiliation and practice seemed to be weaker than has been found to be case for Christians, where it was found that even for nominal Christians, the fact that they self-identified as Christian, without practising, correlated with a more positive attitude to Christian values (Francis and Robbins, 2004).

How Buddhist teens define & experience their identity

Buddhist teens seem to define their identity in relation to the regularity with which they performed Buddhist practices such as Five Precepts, meditation and chanting—rather than belief. At first sight, using the prefix 'proper' might seem to be an abuse of religious essentialism. Psychological researchers such as Ahn et al. (2001) have noted, however, that as long as its limitations are understood, such consideration of 'essences' can be harnessed to yield valuable psychological insights. For example, to be 'properly' a religious person has been acknowledged as an important part of identity which allows ethnic transcendence in a pluralist congregation (Marti 2008). For Buddhists the 'proper' distinction seemed to relate to *degree* of practice rather than a particular initiation rite as would be found amongst Sikhs using the term 'proper' (Nesbitt, 1999). Buddhism is one of the religions towards which young people often say they feel the closest affinity, even if they are not actually Buddhists themselves. It was therefore no surprise to hear from the teens that their experience of their religious identity was that it caused little negative prejudice—only leading to some positive

stereotyping in the eyes of others, similar to the phenomenon of Pan-Asianism described in the US (Zhou and Lee, 2004: 14). Buddhist identity is intermingled sometimes inextricably with ethnicity (if you ask about religion, Buddhists reply about ethnicity, such as their Asian roots). To say ethnicity is completely separate from religious identity is not accurate, although it could be considered to occupy a separate 'layer' or 'strand' from aspects more clearly belonging to Buddhist tradition. In this respect, Jackson (1997: 69) has noted the close, but layered relationship between religion, group culture and individual life. It is difficult to make a clear distinction between religious and ethnic identity, because in the religious practitioner's experience any separation seems academic. Nonetheless, the layer of 'group culture', rather than confusing the picture of religion, lends clarity in a way that helps avoid stereotyping religious behaviour.

Sociological models to explain the complexity of Buddhist teen identity

Table 2. Amenability of Buddhist identity aspects to different sociological paradigms

Post-secularism	Secularization	Modernity	Projection
Reaction against stereotyping, globalized facilitation of meeting up of Asian cultures in the West, commercial aspect of looking for personal benefits from one's identity, seeing Buddhism as complementary to science, pan-Asianism	Insistence on denying non-scientific aspects. Rejecting horoscopes and witchcraft	Essentialization of own identity (with qualifications), institutionalized to temple life and following spiritual teachers	Supernatural experiences

As shown in Table 2, several sociological paradigms might be required to explain comprehensively all the facets of Buddhist teen identity described in this study. Possible paradigms amenable to the data include post-secularism, secularization, modernity and projection.

Post-secularism

Buddhist practice in Britain seems to have led to a renewed devotion to religious values. How post-secularism moves away from the 'melting-pot' ethos of acculturation is highly relevant to the experience of Buddhists in diaspora to the West, which for many communities is now in its second generation. Many of the characteristics of post-secularism are useful in explaining the tenacity with which Buddhist identity features very different to the values of a mainstream culture are being passed down to a second generation of young heritage Buddhists. The melting pot theory of acculturation which would predict an immigrant minority religion would gradually lose its identity to that of a majority secular mainstream fails to correspond with the observed reality of heritage Buddhist teens living in Britain receiving nurture into their

family's tradition. Thanissaro (2013: 14) has already invoked the post-secular aspect of 'liquid religion' to account for the seemingly porous interface between Asian cultural identity and the western cultural mainstream, a compromise between pleasing parents and the Buddhist community, fitting in with non-Buddhist peers enough not to be ostracized and succeeding in education. Examples of resistance against mainstream secular forces undermining identity (the so called 'resistance identity'), was exemplified in this study's findings as seen in the teen reaction against stereotyping and special effort to ensure that funerary practices would not die with their parents. It would also include efforts to counter relativism concerning religious truth claims. Post-secularism can also serve to explain certain aspects of the focus group findings, such as the way Buddhist teens mix and match between cultures, the coexistence of contrasts and resistance identity. Some identity features could be attributed to response to a 'free-market' view of religion, for example where teens were looking for personal benefits from aspects of their Buddhist identity. Globalization, another aspect of post-secularism is also illustrated by examples visible in the findings such as Pan-Asianism and the immediacy of contact with Asian cultures and influences. These features seem symptomatic of a post-secular reinvention of Buddhism. In brief, the aspects of modernity mixed with postmodern (or post-secular) resistance identity (McMahan, 2008: 244f.) can explain why Buddhism continues to be practised actively in spite of the context of a secular mainstream in UK society.

Secularization

Some feel that the presence of Buddhism in the western world is, in itself, a sign of secularization (like New Age practices or Humanism), since it seems symptomatic of a decline in Christian faith. Nothing in the data contradicts this observation, but it may be of some consolation to learn that Buddhists also seem to be subject to the forces of secularization. From the data, signs of secularism in Buddhist identity were the insistence on denying non-scientific practices such as witchcraft and consulting horoscopes, especially amongst the Sinhalese teens, who tended to deny all supernatural experience.

Modernity

Facets of modernity seen in the focus group data included essentialization of their own identity (with qualifications), institutionalization around temple life and following spiritual teachers. Some aspects of Buddhist modernity are clung to (or have re-emerged) such as the discourse on 'scientific Buddhism' [while denying some parts of Buddhist teachings including prescientific cosmologies and miracle stories (see e.g. McMahan, 2008: 114)].

Also, as we have seen from the views Buddhists have expressed in this study, essentialism is not necessarily a modern artefact. Being a 'proper' Buddhist qualifies the religious label 'Buddhist' seemingly with a degree of practice that proves that one is not *merely* a 'nominal' Buddhist. Being a 'proper' Buddhist seems to be one way the Buddhist teens express how seriously some Buddhists take their identity in terms of practice.

Projection

Some aspects of religious experience, including the supernatural encounters mentioned in the findings, but also extending to mystical experience, would require the sociological paradigm of projection to account for them. Without involving himself with the epistemology of such experiences, Berger (1967: 180) accounts for such ‘apparitions’ as projections of a grid of reference that leads adherents raised in a certain religious culture to anticipate, and have a vocabulary to deal with, certain aspects of the supernatural. Similarly, mystical experience can be expected, to some extent, to be contextualized to the expectations of religionists by the tradition they follow (Katz, 1978).

Of the four paradigms mentioned, post-secularism tends to accommodate the inconsistencies of Buddhist tradition best, especially the apparent resurgence of interest in the religion, because in itself, it tends to deal with the eclecticism of late post-modern religion.

To return to the Aung San Su Kyi example, the data of this study, while not encouraging essentialism, can perhaps help with recognition of ‘atypical’ aspects of Buddhist life, while giving a flavour of the compromises often experienced by Buddhists inhabiting a contrasting mainstream culture. With this empirical identification of Buddhist values, it might now make sense to distinguish between Buddhist values and Buddhist self-identification—so that in future academic publications on nominal Buddhists need not be held up as exemplars of Buddhist religiosity. An example of this approach has been for Yao and Badham (2007) to use both self-identification and possession of a Buddhist home shrine as identifiers for Buddhists. Just as the Buddhist teenagers themselves have done, it would be prudent to consider degree of practice, not just self-identification when drawing conclusions about seeming contradiction between affiliation and behaviour. Thus while recognizing the limitations and dangers of essentialism, within specific social applications, it is hoped researchers will now unpack the term ‘Buddhist’ more critically while at the same time recognizing the agreed values validly communicated in expressions such as, “that didn’t seem a particularly ‘Buddhist’ thing to do.”

Suggestions for further research

This paper has dealt with some of the complexities of Buddhist identity in the juxtaposition of affiliation and practice. Unfortunately, affiliation is not the only possible correlate of religious identity and other factors such as religious attitudes, age, sex and consideration of different ways of practising Buddhism also warrant research as to their influence on Buddhist identity. Extension of research into multiple factors would best be approached quantitatively.

Appendix 1: Focus Group Questions

1. What do you think a person who was a ‘proper’ Buddhist would be like?

2. If you met someone who didn't know what it meant to be Buddhist, how would you explain what this means?
3. Do Buddhists believe in God?
4. Do you believe in life after death?
5. Are there too many foreigners in UK?
6. Have you been discriminated against because of religion or ethnicity?
7. Is having a spiritual teacher important to you? If so, why?
8. Would you mix and match different Buddhist traditions?
9. Do you believe in horoscopes?
10. Do you believe in witches?
11. Do you believe in ghosts?
12. Do you believe in black magic?
13. Do you believe in the devil?
14. Do you believe in angels?
15. Has Buddhism been replaced by science?
16. Have Buddhist scriptures gone out of date?
17. Has Buddhism become irrelevant these days,
18. Do you feel you need to go and find your roots in Asia?
19. Some people say if you are Buddhist, meditation is the only really important thing. Can you comment on this?
20. Would you go to the temple for certain life events?
21. Can you practise Buddhism as well on your own as you can with a group?

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