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**The spirituality of Buddhist teens: religious/spiritual experiences and their associated triggers, attributes and attitudes**

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## **The spirituality of Buddhist teens: religious/spiritual experiences and their associated triggers, attributes and attitudes**

### **Abstract**

In the quantitative analysis of a survey of 417 13- to 20-year-old Buddhists, the 48% who had undergone a religious or spiritual experience (RSE) were significantly more likely to self-identify as a spiritual person. Buddhists who had undergone RSEs were also more positive about spiritual teachers, a monastic vocation, attitude to Buddhism, supernatural phenomena and mystical orientation. In the qualitative part of the analysis, descriptions of RSEs volunteered by 107 of these teens were compared with non-Buddhist categories for triggers and attributes. For Buddhist teens, triggers seemed to include a higher percentage of positive states of mind, especially those cultivated in meditation. Buddhist RSEs seemed to represent a subset of possible RSE categories previously described suggesting that Buddhist RSEs come from a spiritual root shared with ‘mystics’ of other religions. The article argues that the role of RSEs in Buddhist nurture, would seem to concern development of worldview rather than ideology or collectivism. (153 words)

### **Keywords**

spirituality, Buddhism, teenagers, spiritual experience, religious experience, mysticism

## **The spirituality of Buddhist teens: religious/spiritual experiences and their associated triggers, attributes and attitudes**

### **Introduction**

There was a time when western scholarship regarded spirituality to be the essence of Buddhism. More recently it has become more widely accepted that Buddhism consists of much more than spirituality, nonetheless there undoubtedly remains a spiritual aspect to this faith tradition that appeals to many categories of Buddhists. Such characterization would lead us to expect Buddhists to be more spiritual than followers of other religions and that study of young Buddhists might show a clear example of how mystical experience unfolds developmentally within the mainstream of a religious tradition.

### ***Buddhism, religion and youth in Britain***

At the time of the 2011 census, there were 247,743 Buddhists in England and Wales, 22,715 of whom were teenagers.<sup>1</sup> Some of these Buddhists have ethnic roots in the countries of Asia [so-called ‘heritage Buddhists’](Miller, 1992, 199) while others have become Buddhist independent of their family’s influence [so-called ‘convert’ Buddhists](Nattier, 1995, 42-49).

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<sup>1</sup> **Office of National Statistics**, “2011 Census: Key Statistics for England and Wales, March 2011” [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_290685.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_290685.pdf) and “Religion (detailed) by sex by age - England and Wales” <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/census-data/2011-census-ad-hoc-tables/ct0116---religion--detailed--by-sex-by-age---england-and-wales.xls>, accessed 17 September 2015.

### ***What are religious or spiritual experiences?***

While *religious* experiences reflect awareness of a benevolent non-physical power beyond and far greater than the individual self, *spiritual* experiences indicate an influence which is inexplicable in any down-to-earth way, independent of any specifically religious beliefs. Situated somewhere on the definitional borderline between the religious and the spiritual, is the ‘mystical experience’ which is a particular form of consciousness predisposing a spiritual interpretation of the universe (Happold, 1963, 17). Allport and Ross (1967) conceptualize mystical experience *within* the context of religion as an aspect of religiosity restricted to *intrinsic* experience – a core possibly shared between different religious traditions and transcending the cultural differences between them. Mystical orientation is of interest to this study because it has proven amenable to quantitative measurement by scales such as the M-Scale (Hood, 1975) or the Mystical Orientation Scale (Francis & Loudon, 2000).

The tradition of Alister Hardy’s Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU) has sought to gather accounts of religious and spiritual experiences. Such experiences have been reported in 30-50% of the UK populace – and with adaptation of question wording to avoid exclusion of non-theistic faiths, has exhibited similarly high incidence in other countries and cultures of the world. The foremost anthology of childhood spirituality from the RERU database is *The Original Vision* (Robinson, 1996), but childhood experiences in that book were mostly written down decades after the fact. In this paper, religious or spiritual experiences have been abbreviated to ‘RSE’, with those who have had an RSE being indicated by ‘RSE+’ and those who have not had an RSE being indicated by ‘RSE-’.

### ***How RSEs are operationalized***

In the Hardy tradition, descriptions of RSEs are generally elicited by the question, ‘Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or a power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?’ While remaining broadly within the Alister Hardy tradition, data gathering has sometimes been made fit for purpose by adjustments to the question asked. Young Christian respondents in Northern Ireland (Greer, 1981), had their religious experiences surveyed using the question, ‘Have you ever had an experience of God (e.g. his presence or his help or anything else)?’ More ecumenical wording, amenable to non-Christians (e.g. Yao & Badham, 2007; Yaran, 2004) or even the non-religious (e.g. McQuillan, 2002; Pupynin & Brodbeck, 2001) has also shown religious experiences outside Christianity and spiritual experiences with incidence rates as high as those reported by questions using a specifically Christian terminology. In connection with Psychological Type amongst Catholics and Episcopalians, intuitive feelers had more mystical experiences than non-intuitive feelers (Dendinger, 1983). High levels of mystical experience found in students (M-Scale) were associated with higher scores on the intuitive and feeling scales but no sex-differences were noted (Campbell, 1983).

### ***Categorizing RSEs***

In the current scientific paradigm of socially-constructed reality, RSEs form a curious category failing to fit neatly in sociology except as ‘projection’ (Thanissaro, 2014a). The comparison of reported religious and spiritual experiences across traditions have led some scholars (e.g. Stace, 1961; Zaehner, 1957) to assume them to be the same – accounts differing only due to the language constraints of the

reporter's cultural-religious milieu. Other scholars (e.g. Katz, 1978, 65) understood that religious experience could be entirely different from one religion to another or at the very least, contextualized to the expectations of that religion, therefore warranting continued careful, expert study of *specific* mystical traditions to discourage preconceived notions that all mystical experience is necessarily similar. With the objective of elucidating whether RSEs form a common subjective core shared by different faith traditions, categorizing and comparing the perceived components of RSEs has been the main tool of analysis in this study. The exercise of forming a taxonomy of RSEs might seem to hark back to phenomenology in Comparative Religion, but since one of the main objectives of this study is to ask whether the nature of spiritual experiences is the same for Buddhists and non-Buddhists, the technique is arguably fit for purpose given the nature of non-Buddhist RSE data available for comparison.

Taxonomies considered but rejected owing to excessive reliance on theistic vocabulary included those of Hardy (1979, 26-29), Greer (1982) and Hay and Heald (1987). Most fit for purpose in this study, because of its lack of reliance on theistic terminology is Marianne Rankin's categorization of possible triggers of RSE included religious (Rankin, 2008, 53f) and non-religious (Rankin, 2008, 78f) triggers. Religious triggers included worship, ceremonies, prayer, contemplation, meditation, blessing, silence, *darshan*<sup>2</sup>, renunciation, sacred places, pilgrimage, fasting, chanting, yoga, interfaith and search. Non-religious triggers included place, illness/prospect of death, accident, despair, depression, fear, anger, nature, music or sound. By distinguishing the RSE itself from reported triggers or consequences, Rankin has reduced the number of categories down to 26, namely: childhood

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<sup>2</sup> Personal audience (lit. a 'viewing') with a guru in the Hindu tradition

experience, initiatory, conversion, regenerative, healing, miracles, guidance, solitary, communal, visions, light, love, voices, tongues, angels, dreams, shamanic journeys, shamanic healing, drugs and trips, synchronicity, sense of presence, the numinous, dark night of the soul, dark side, dangerous spiritual movements and irreligious/deconversion (Rankin, 2008, 93f). In her overview of RSEs, Rankin has been able to categorize written accounts in the RERU archive in terms of their triggers, content and consequences.

### ***RSEs in Buddhism***

Previous studies have largely shown that Buddhists to fit the expectations for mystical experience shown in other religions. In Edwards and Lewis's (2008, 27) study, eleven Nichiren Daishonen Buddhists achieved a higher than average score on the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS) and this, the authors explained was due to Buddhism being generally pro-mystical.

This study aims to fill a gap in the knowledge about both RSEs and spirituality in general for Buddhists by exploring their incidence in the teen age range, while categorizing RSEs described in terms of their triggers and content to shed light on the degree of overlap between Buddhist RSEs and those in other religions. By quantitative analysis of the individual differences between RSE+ and RSE- Buddhist teens this paper sets out to elucidate the specialist characteristics of Buddhists who have had an RSE – Buddhists who, as we shall see, tend to refer to themselves as 'spiritual'.

## **Procedures**

### ***Instrument***

As part of the Young People's Values Survey adapted for Buddhist teenagers, a survey was deployed in the period January 2013 to September 2014 at Buddhist gatherings in Britain and also as an online survey. A two-part question in the survey enquired about the religious or spiritual experience of the respondents. Following Greer's tradition, but made fit for purpose to the expected worldviews of the Buddhist sample by removing explicit references to God, the first part of the question asked, 'Have you ever had something you would describe as a spiritual or religious experience?' Instead of offering the simple yes/no dichotomy of the Greer-style survey, shades of certainty in the 'yes' category were investigated by allowing two further choices of answer: 'perhaps, but I am not really sure' and 'probably, but I am not certain'. Following the style of some of the previous Northern Irish surveys (ap Siôn, 2006; Greer, 1981), a second part of the question invited respondents to *elaborate* on their religious experience with the words, 'describe this experience if you can' while leaving about a quarter of an A4 page free in the survey for them to put their experience into words. The survey also contained Likert five-point scale (strongly agree, agree, not certain, disagree, disagree strongly) questions for which Buddhist teens could indicate their degree of agreement with statements from a variety of values-domains including Religious Education, media, discrimination, school, work, religious convictions and the supernatural. In quantitative comparisons, cross-tabulation was made between RSE+ (the aggregate of three shades of certainty in the 'yes' category) and RSE- with only statistically significant differences reported in this paper. The survey also contained three sets of scale measurements: a set of Francis Psychological Type Scales [FPTS](Francis, 2005)

allowing comparison of psychological type distribution ratios by Self-Selection Ratio Table (Kaldor & Craig, 2003); the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale [MOS](Francis & Loudon, 2000) measuring affinity for Happold's seven factors identifying a mystical experience on a scale from 21-105, and; the Scale of Attitude towards Buddhism [TSAB](Thanissaro, 2011) measuring the affective component of Buddhist religiosity on a scale from 24-120.

Similar to the research experience of David Hay (1987, 136), in 11% of the written RSE descriptions, it was evident that participants had misunderstood the survey question. In these cases, 'religious experience' was understood as something that it was advantageous to have in the same way as 'work experience' was something advantageous to claim at a job interview. Some, like Maung Kyaw, a 18-year-old Burmese Buddhist, simply listed examples of their participation in temple activities, with the words, 'Being a novice twice'. Others, like Elly, a 13-year-old Caucasian Buddhist, distinguished between participation in activities [religious experience] and the religious experiences perhaps arising from those [which they had not experienced], in one case elucidated as '*proper* religious experiences':

I haven't had a proper religious or spiritual experience, but I have done some meditation and a few rituals.

Participants who had written comments of this nature to describe their experience were allocated to the RSE- category. The quantitative analysis of data was facilitated by SPSS for which the Chi-square routine was used as the test of significance for cross-tabulation of *categorical* variables (i.e. RSE+ versus RSE-) and an independent means t-test routine for *continuous* variables (i.e. the MOS or TSAB).

## Sample

**Table 1. Constitution of Buddhist sample**

<b><i>Tradition</i></b>	<b><i>%</i></b>
Srilankan	23
Thai	16
Tibetan	12
Burmese	11
Vietnamese	9
Japanese	5
Bangladeshi	3
Chinese	2
Triratana Buddhist Community	2
Cambodian	1

A total of 417 teenagers self-identifying as Buddhists were surveyed in the age range 13-20. These latter form the sample for the quantitative analysis of the present data in Part 1 of the findings below. There were more or less even proportions of male (54%) and female (46%). The constituent representation of Buddhist traditions within the sample are summarized in Table 1. Ethnically, 52% were Asian, 34% were Caucasian and 11% were of mixed ethnicity – meaning that the sample contained 61% heritage and 39% convert Buddhists. For the qualitative analysis of the present study analyzed in Part 2 of the findings, there were 107 teens who gave verbal *descriptions* of *bona fide* RSEs and where cited, are identified by *pseudonyms*.

## Findings

In keeping with the two ways in which data have been analyzed, I have divided the findings up into qualitative and quantitative sections. In the first part, quantitative analysis describes the frequency of incidence and certainty with which the Buddhist teens had RSEs, and differences of attitude statistically linked with having them. In

the second part, qualitative analysis suggests a taxonomy with examples, of the triggers and attributes of Buddhist RSEs.

**Part 1: Quantitative analysis**

*Incidence of religious or spiritual experiences*

Almost half the Buddhist teenage sample of 417 (48%) reported some kind of RSE.<sup>3</sup> Of the Buddhist teens reporting RSEs, 29% thought they had *perhaps* had a religious experience, but were not really sure, 11% thought they had *probably* had a religious experience, but were not certain and 19% *were* certain. There were equal proportions of RSEs reported by male and female Buddhist teens. Convert Buddhists were 1½ times as likely to be RSE+ (73%) and to offer a description of their RSE (45%) as heritage Buddhists (48% and 21% respectively).

*Significant differences in attitudes*

Having had an RSE was linked statistically to some attitude patterns<sup>4</sup> of the Buddhist teenagers. Findings showed that having had a RSE was linked to differences in attitude both in religious beliefs and practices.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2. Differences in Buddhist teen religious beliefs between those who had or had not experienced an RSE (% agreement)**

	RSE-	RSE+	$\chi^2$	p<
I believe in life after death	45	57	5.5	.05
I believe in ghosts	28	40	5.0	.05
I believe it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead	15	29	11.8	.01
I believe in black magic	7	16	4.6	.01
I believe in my horoscope	14	23	4.2	.05
I believe fortune-tellers can tell the future	6	14	6.6	.05
I believe in God	14	23	4.6	.05

*Yates correction applied throughout.*

<sup>3</sup> Having adjusted for the likely proportion misunderstanding the question as detailed in the procedure section.

<sup>4</sup> Some other authors refer to similar patterns as value differences or value-domain differences (Francis & Penny 2013)

<sup>5</sup> RSE+ Buddhists were also less dependent on internet, TV, heightened sensitivity to violence and discrimination, less establishment values concerning school and work.

As shown in Table 2, RSE+ corresponded with stronger belief in supernatural phenomena. A higher percentage of RSE+ believed in life after death (57%), ghosts (40%), contacting spirits of the dead (29%), black magic (16%), horoscopes (23%), fortune-tellers (14%) and God (23%) than RSE- (for whom the equivalent percentages were 45%, 28%, 15%, 7%, 14%, 6% and 14% respectively).

**Table 3. Differences in Buddhist teen attitude to religious practices between those who had or had not experienced an RSE (% agreement)**

	RSE-	RSE+	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i> <
Collective Worship (e.g. assemblies with a theme) should be held in school	23	33	5.0	.05
I would seriously consider becoming a monk or nun	10	27	17.5	.001
Spending time as a Buddhist monk is beneficial to the world at large	47	57	4.0	.05
Spending time meditating is a constructive use of one's time	55	66	5.0	.05
I am a spiritual person	33	52	14.6	.001
I feel the need for a Buddhist spiritual teacher	34	48	7.8	.01
Sangha Day is important to me	40	50	4.2	.05
I would choose to marry someone else who was Buddhist	28	38	4.0	.05
It is important to be a vegetarian	14	25	7.3	.01
I like to practise things from several different Buddhist traditions	30	45	9.8	.01

*Yates correction applied throughout.*

As shown in Table 3, RSE+ corresponded with a more positive experience of Collective Worship (CW) and more likelihood of considering a vocation in the monastic community. A third of RSE+ (33%) thought CW should be held in school compared with less than a quarter (23%) of RSE-. RSE+ were 2½ times more likely to consider a career path in a monastic community with over a quarter seriously considering to become a monk or nun (27%) compared with only 10% of RSE-. RSE+ were also more likely to think that spending time as a Buddhist monk was beneficial to the world at large (57%) and that meditation was a constructive use of one's time (66%) than RSE- (for whom agreement was 47% and 55% respectively). RSE+ corresponded with being more spiritual. Over half (52%) the RSE+ self-identified as a spiritual person and almost half (48%) felt the need for a spiritual

teacher (compared with only 33% and 34% respectively for RSE-). RSE+ were more likely to see the importance of Sangha Day (50%) and want to marry a fellow Buddhist (38%) than RSE- (for whom the respective percentages were 40% and 28%). RSE+ were more likely to be vegetarian<sup>6</sup> and eclectic in their Buddhist tastes. Where a quarter (25%) of RSE+ thought it important to be vegetarian and over two-fifths (45%) liked to practise different Buddhist traditions, these attitudes were more rarely found in RSE- (14% and 30% respectively). RSE+ were significantly more positive in their attitude towards Buddhism (97.39 [S.D.= 13.81]) than RSE- (94.71 [S.D.= 12.35])( $t[415]=-2.065, p<.05$ ). RSE+ also had a significantly higher Mystical Orientation (75.36 [S.D.= 16.38]) than RSE- (65.97 [S.D.= 15.55])( $t[327]=-5.303, p<.001$ ). From the FPTs, the most noticeable difference in Psychological Type between RSE+ and RSE- was that RSE+ teens were significantly more likely to exhibit a Feeling (F) preference (55%) and a Perceiving (P) attitude (28%) to the outside world than RSE- teens (for whom the equivalent percentages were 41% and 13% respectively).

### ***Part 2: Qualitative analysis***

This second part of the findings section is based on the written descriptions of RSEs volunteered by 107 of the Buddhist teenagers. The descriptions available to the present study, which were more abbreviated than those published by Rankin, allowed categorization only in the case of triggers and content – and taxonomies of these form the remainder of this section. These were reached by comparison with Rankin and in this dataset were allocated by the author to these categories based on the highest incidences.

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<sup>6</sup> Vegetarianism is an aspect of Buddhist practice for some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism; being vegetarian would be considered a form of religious piety.

*Categories of RSE Triggers*

**Table 4. Triggers of RSE**

<b>Trigger</b>	<b>Incidence (%)</b>
Meditation	33
Dreams	18
Coincidence	8
Renunciation	7
Sacred place	6
Drugs or trips	6
Prayer	5
Worship	2
Journey	2
Nature	2
Teacher	2
Other*	8

\*including a death, a spiritual message, a sermon, a Buddhist video, a Buddhist artefact, illness and reading Buddhist scripture

As shown in Table 4, in the case of these Buddhist teenagers, relevant categories of trigger were found to include practising meditation (33%), dreams (18%), coincidences (8%), renunciation (7%), sacred places (6%), drugs or trips (6%), prayer (5%), worship (2%), journeys (2%), nature (2%) and the presence of a spiritual teacher (2%).

The RSE of Ma Phyu, a 15-year-old Burmese Buddhist, illustrates how practising meditation can act as a trigger:

When I meditated at the monastery while the wind was blowing and there were no distractions, I experienced peacefulness...

The RSE of Neo, a 14-year-old Thai Buddhist illustrates how dreaming almost triggered a clairvoyant feat:

Once I had a dream where I saw myself in the dream – I was walking past a car and noticed the registration of its number plate. When I woke up I told my grandma the number I dreamt. She bought a lottery ticket with my number at the start but the winning number had my numbers at the end.

The RSE of Miaw, a 13-year-old Thai Buddhist illustrates how renunciation can act as a trigger:

I stayed at a temple for a week with some of my friends and two that I had never met before. On the last day, we had to meditate at a park in public, I felt so peaceful. It was like I was floating in the sky. I felt more comfortable on the ground. At the temple, the floor is very uncomfortable and quite unlike the park which was filled with birds tweeting and fresh air.

The RSE of Sajitha, a 20-year-old Srilankan Buddhist illustrates how being in a sacred place can act as a trigger:

The power of any religious place of worship contains so much spiritual energy that is so overwhelming. Whether psychologically created or not, the effect on the mind is huge.

The RSE of Máire, a 20-year-old Caucasian Buddhist illustrates how a coincidence can act as a trigger:

Recently I was walking in the supermarket and the glass ceiling fell down a few feet in front of me – where I was about to walk. I didn't see this as a 'sign', but it definitely affected me in the realization of how easily life can end ... like I could have taken a different parking space and had I been three seconds earlier, I would have been seriously injured or died – like every action does make a difference...

The RSE of Luna, a 17-year-old Caucasian Buddhist illustrates how rituals can act as a trigger:

Sometimes during rituals or *pujas* I feel something I cannot describe.

Harsha, a 15-year-old Srilankan Buddhist related how the death of a loved one triggered his RSE:

I used to be down to earth and I just got on with life. After my dad passed away I suddenly started to think more deeply about life and the purpose of life. ...I started to look more into religion, mostly Buddhism. In Dhamma school, every time I learn the Abhidhamma, in my head, everything makes so much sense.

The RSE of Christine, a 20-year-old Caucasian Buddhist illustrates how (petitionary or intercessional) prayer can act as a trigger:

I prayed for guidance and I found that it was answered by things which happened in my life which showed me the right path.

Finally, the RSE of Rosanna, a 19-year-old Caucasian Buddhist, illustrates how the majesty of nature can act as a trigger:

...being outdoors in a field at night during a thunderstorm and feeling the power of the universe.

#### *Categories of Religious Experience Content*

Categorizing the attributes or content of the RSEs, results suggested a nine-fold categorization.

**Table 5. Main attributes of Buddhist teen RSEs**

<i>Main attribute</i>	<i>Incidence (%)</i>
Meditation inner experience	23
Insight (worded)	21
Wonder (wordless)	15
Other-worldly contact	15
Dream	5
Answered prayer	5
Synchronicity	5
Vision/Voices	5
Healing	3
Other*	4

\* including deja-vu, clairvoyance and telepathy

As shown in Table 5, attributes of RSEs emerging from the survey responses elicited by the same question included (in decreasing order of frequency) meditation inner experiences (23%), spontaneously arising insights (21%), wonder (15%), other-worldly contacts (15%), dreams (5%), answered prayers (5%), synchronicity (5%),

visions or voices (5%) and healing (3%). For the remainder of this findings section, I will exemplify each of the categories with survey examples.

*1. Meditation inner experience:* These RSEs seem to describe experiences happening *during* meditation practice. Examples of these might include the RSE of Vari, 20-year-old Thai Buddhist:

One time meditating, I felt like there was a spotlight shining into my eyes very brightly – but only for a few seconds.

*2. Insights about life:* These RSEs seem to describe spontaneously arising realizations of existential truths, that could later be put into *words*. An example of this might include the RSE of Nuwan, a 13-year-old Srilankan Buddhist:

... to live a fulfilling life you wouldn't care if you died the next day, as you'd die knowing you achieved fulfilment; in your own way, not in the conventional/capitalistic way such as wealth, good job etc ... but our lives aren't ready to be over if we're not yet ready to die – thought about this meditating once.

*3. Wonder:* These RSEs seem to describe spontaneously arising realizations of existential truths, that seemed to represent a *feeling* rather than something to be put into words. An example of an experiences in this category might include the RSE of Edmund, a 15-year-old Caucasian Buddhist:

When my parents, my brother and I went to India for a holiday we visited a very sacred place... a monk lived in a cave there for many, many years in retreat, meditating. He achieved enlightenment and when he came out he proved his Buddhahood by placing his hand on the rock wall of the cave and leaving a deep imprint, as if the hard rock he touched was soft wet clay. I have seen this hand print deep in the rock, and there is no other explanation for it than it was caused by a real hand.

4. *Other-worldly contact*: These seem to describe encountering beings recognized as other-worldly (angels or ghosts) or an other-worldly realm of existence. Examples of experiences in this category might include the RSE of Bob, a 16-year-old Caucasian Buddhist:

My mum received an email saying that we could welcome angels into our home. I didn't believe this until one day where I saw an angel in my room.

5. *Dreams*: These RSEs seem to describe experiences remembered upon waking from a dream. Examples of experiences in this category might include the RSE of Naomi, a 15-year-old Caucasian Buddhist, who explained, "I had a dream which told me I should be more devoted."

6. *Answered prayer*: These RSEs seem to describe miraculous outcomes of intercessory prayer as is illustrated by the RSE of Linh, an 18-year-old Vietnamese Buddhist:

When praying to Buddha for happiness and enlightenment in my life, I could feel it working.

7. *Synchronicity*: These RSEs seem to describe what Buddhists would more commonly term ‘the fruits of karma’ or a sense of purpose in coincidence such as is illustrated by the RSE of Zaw Htet, a 13-year-old Burmese Buddhist:

I once talked back to my mother and my hand was injured by accidentally slamming it in the door straight after. I think this is proof of bad karma.

8. *Vision/Audition*: These RSEs seem to describe things unexpectedly seen or heard that have no down-to-earth explanation as illustrated by the RSE of Anoja, a 14-year-old Srilankan Buddhist (an example which also doubles as a comparatively rare incidence of a non-solitary RSE):

I went to the temple and it was crowded, full of many people. On the statue of Buddha, I saw the colours of the Buddhist flag going around the robe.

9. *Healing*: These RSEs seem to describe a miracle cure with religious causation. The RSE of Gaynor, a 15-year-old Caucasian Buddhist told simply that he recovered from obsessive-compulsive disorder through the help of Buddhism.

Of 102 experiences that could be categorized, 86 (84%) were solitary and only 16 (16%) were communal.

## **Discussion**

This study contributes something new to the knowledge of teenage RSEs because it shows how RSEs can be gathered appropriately from Buddhists, while offering a new database of experiences that have been written down while still fresh in the mind of the respondent, unlike those in *The Original Vision*. They are also pioneering in having been collected from practising Buddhists, rather than from adherents of theistic religions – a category of experience noticeably absent from the RERU book series. The remainder of this section discusses similarities and differences between Buddhist and non-Buddhist RSEs, the validity of the Mystical Orientation concept for Buddhists and ‘spirituality’ through Buddhist eyes.

### ***Similarities between Buddhist and non-Buddhist RSEs***

Buddhist RSEs are similar to RSEs of non-Buddhists in that RSE incidence amongst Buddhists is at a level to be expected for the age group, since for the 16- to 24-year-old age range David Hay projected growth from his 1980s UK incidence figure of 29% (Hay, 1987, 125) to reach 43-51% of young people by the millennium (Hay & Hunt, 2000). The triggers described by the Buddhist teens seem to represent a subset of those already described in Rankin’s categorization.<sup>7</sup> Categories that seem relevant to the experiences, if not offering a comprehensive structure, included solitary, communal, regenerative, light, angels, dreams, and perhaps sensing a presence. Buddhist RSEs are similar to those previously reported for other religions in their levels of incidence and also share some categories of triggers and content. Also, all the major categories of attributes identified, whether they be meditation inner experience, insight, dreams, wonder, other-worldly contact, answered prayer,

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<sup>7</sup> Given that Rankin has used other synonyms for her category names – for example, Rankin’s *silence* during a retreat might be compared to temporary *renunciation* of busy life, as Buddhists would see it.

synchronicity, visions, voices or healing are also represented in non-Buddhist RSEs. Similarly, the main forms of RSE triggers identified, namely meditation, dreams, coincidences, renunciation, sacred places, drugs or trips, prayer, worship, journeys, nature and the presence of a spiritual teacher can be found to trigger non-Buddhist RSEs too. The content and triggers of religious experiences in teen Buddhist accounts show that rather than something entirely different from the RSEs of theistic religions, they are likely to come from a common spiritual root shared with ‘mystics’ of other religions.

### ***Differences between Buddhist and non-Buddhist RSEs***

Buddhist RSEs are different to RSEs of non-Buddhists in that the proportions for these categories are very different from those found in Hay’s National Gallup Poll study (Hay & Heald, 1987). The equal sharing of RSEs amongst male and female Buddhists deviates from expected UK incidences where such experiences are reported more commonly by women (41%) than men (31%)(Hay, 1987, 124). If the incidence of Buddhist triggers is compared to the full range of 26 described by Rankin, there are many trigger categories conspicuous by their absence – namely: blessing, pilgrimage, fasting, yoga, interfaith, search, despair, depression, fear and anger. In as far as it is meaningful to make a comparison with Hay’s sample of 172 religiously-undifferentiated adults from the Nottingham population where he managed to put a percentage to the triggers [distressed or ill at ease (50%); confused (6%); curious or searching (5%); praying or concentrating (5%), or; nothing special (34%)](Hay, 1987, 149) the percentages described by Buddhist teens seem to reflect a much higher incidence of *positive* states of mind as triggers. Conspicuous by their absence were categories of attributes such as initiatory, conversion, regenerative,

love, tongues, shamanic journeys, shamanic healing, the numinous, Dark Night of the Soul, the Dark Side or dangerous religious movements or irreligious/deconversion. Applying Rankin's 26 categories for the content of religious or spiritual experience to the Buddhist teen experiences, the fit is *not* as neat as for the 'triggers' – possibly because her categories do not seem to be mutually exclusive – for example, an experience could be solitary, involve light and have happened in childhood. In terms of typology, the vast majority of Buddhist RSEs were solitary rather than communal in nature.

Differences between Buddhist and non-Buddhist RSEs are not to be overlooked however, as the majority of Greer's categories (i.e. theistic ones) seem conspicuously *absent* from this Buddhist sample. It is possible to account for some of this difference by the wording of Greer's question which emphasised experiences involving God. Buddhist teen RSEs seemed to have arisen out of more *positive* states of mind than have previously been found in the general population and terms of content, the experiences reported tend to be less anthropomorphic in their projections than those reported in other religions, as one might expect from a non-theistic religion. It is true that for some of these experiences, the triggers could be multiple.

### ***Validity of Mystical Orientation and RSEs for Buddhist religiosity***

This study has researched a larger Buddhist sample than has previously been available for studies involving the MOS. As RSE+ Buddhists scored significantly higher on this scale, it lends validity to the MOS and commends the instrument for further use with Buddhists. That TSAB scores are significantly higher for RSE+

Buddhists also confirms that RSEs are statistically linked with the affective component of Buddhist religiosity, and may even contribute to it.

### *Spirituality through Buddhist eyes*

From the present study it could be generalized that a Buddhist who self-identifies as a ‘spiritual person’ is likely to be a Buddhist who has had an RSE. They will be someone who places importance on having a spiritual teacher, whether it be a lay meditation teacher or a monk. They will be the sort of person who has spent more time than their peers thinking about their aim in life and may have strong plans for a monastic vocation. In terms of Psychological Type they are likely to have preferences for Feeling and Perceiving – which for caregivers and teachers may mean that such teens are likely to come into conflict when their values are challenged. All spiritual Buddhists usually require is respectful listening, rather than pathologizing their experiences, being satisfied when there is open exploration (Killen & Murphy, 2003). They are likely to have a ‘sixth-sense’ for other-worldly things, and their belief in the supernatural may have arisen from first-hand experience. Although spirituality spans heritage and convert styles of Buddhism, it is likely that a Buddhist who says they are spiritual, rather than religious, will be a convert Buddhist in their religious style – corresponding with Waterhouse’s (1999) observation that the authenticity of personal attainments lent authority among convert Buddhist groups – the legitimacy of lineage being accorded more importance by heritage Buddhists. Although some Buddhist teens use the terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘atheist’ interchangeably, belief in God seems to feature as part of Buddhist spirituality. It should not be forgotten that there is much more to Buddhist identity than being merely ‘spiritual’ as is illustrated by mainstream heritage

Buddhists in their description of what it means to be a ‘proper Buddhist’ (Thanissaro, 2014a). The data seem to support the conclusion that Buddhism is not an institutionalized form of spirituality but rather that spirituality seems to contribute one of several aspects of authenticity to Buddhist identity. In terms of modelling the role of RSEs in Buddhist nurture, would seem to concern development of what has been argued elsewhere as ‘worldview’ (Thanissaro, 2014b) rather than ideology or collectivism.

### ***Suggestions for further research***

In future surveys of Buddhist RSEs it would be instructive to explore dual categorization of RSE content in the same way as ap Siôn (2006) and to work further with the categories suggested in this paper, giving a choice of tick boxes for teens to categorize their own experiences rather than to leave this up to the researcher – including unelicited categories from other religious traditions to find out whether experiences outside the nine main categories are encountered but not invested with religious significance. To answer the question of whether RSEs regenerate faith for Buddhists, would require a longitudinal study where TSAB scores are measured before and after having an RSE to find whether elevated faith precedes an RSE or vice-versa.

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