

Public Abstract

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Title: The Process of Decentering: A Phenomenological Study of Asian American Buddhists from the Fo Guan Shan Temple Buddhist Order

In the past few decades, interest in Buddhist psychology has increased both in mainstream culture and academia. Researchers have been made efforts to bridge Buddhist psychology with Western psychology for the purpose of creating effective mental health interventions. Academic literature in Buddhist psychology, although increasing every year, is still limited. Most of the psychological literature is still focused on theoretical/philosophical explorations rather than data-driven explorations using uniform and systematic research methodologies. The current study seeks to enrich the existing literature by engaging in a data-driven exploration of the Buddhist phenomenon of decentering using a phenomenological methodology. In simple terms, decentering is the process of letting go our attachments and ultimately our ego so as to achieve liberation from suffering and reach enlightenment. This definition is grounded in the basic Buddhist principles of Four Noble Truths. Decentering is a personal process of being open to change in one's daily Buddhist practice, whereby a person learns to be less attached to worldly experiences, and reduce the suffering created by their conditioned mind (ego). The qualitative approach relied upon in-depth interviews with 6 participants selected from a Buddhist temple in Southwestern United States. Participants were Asian-Americans who were able to communicate in English and had been identified by an advanced practitioner has having experienced the phenomenon decentering. Data gathered was analyzed using a specific analytic method to critically examine the process of decentering in-depth. Analyses identified the essences of decentering and described how participants experienced this phenomenon. Results showed that the process of decentering is a multi-faceted experience. It paralleled millennia-old Buddhist training guidelines for achieving liberation from suffering, in particular, 3-fold training (Morality, Meditation and Wisdom) delineated within the Four Noble Truths. A significant result emerged indicating that Conation (motivation, goal-setting, and attitude) was an essential component which pervaded the entire process of decentering. Conation helped participants to gradually transform their habitual schema to a spiritual schema. Conation also served to drive decentering's mechanism of change, metacognition. Specifically, participants worked towards changing the way they related to their thoughts over time in a contemplative manner rather than changing the content of their thoughts. The pursuit of mental well-being through the use of decentering-related interventions has far-reaching implications for clinical research, training and practice, especially in the context of multicultural competence for mental health professionals.