

The Religious Coping of Buddhism: Primary or Secondary Control?

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Abstract

In facing life adversity, the control technique exercised by religious believers appears to be different from those without religious belief, as that of the former is subject to the incorporation of religious doctrines. As such, this paper aimed to examine the religious coping of Buddhism with reference to Rothbaum's perceived control model comprising primary and secondary control. Based on a review of religious teachings (Mahayana Buddhism), primary control is likely the dominant coping strategy. Nevertheless, in real-life situations, it seems that vicarious secondary control is also employed. With respect to these speculations on Buddhists' coping strategy, some recommendations for future research are made.

Keywords: Religious coping, Perceived control, Primary control, Vicarious secondary control, Buddhism

Introduction

In the encounter of life adversity, perceiving low or no control will exert deleterious effect on mental health and wellbeing [e.g., 1–4]. In this light, life adversity is found to be strongly associated with psychological disorders like depression [e.g., 5–7], affective and anxiety disorders [e.g., 5,8–10], personality disorders [e.g., 6,11,12], and post-traumatic stress disorder [e.g., 6,8,13]. Thus, the adoption of coping strategy is important to maintain individuals' mental health and wellbeing [14–16]. Nevertheless, it is found that the control technique exercised by religious believers is different from those without religious belief. That is, for those people who have religious belief, their coping strategies are mainly based on their affiliated religion, given that their value system is highly affected by the religious teachings [3,4,15].

Religion is related to the need for control over the environment [15,17]. In the field of psychology of religion, although some studies have examined Buddhist coping [e.g., 18–21], little research has investigated the nature of Buddhist perceived control. Hence, by using the highly regarded model of perceived control developed by Rothbaum et al. (1982) [22], together with a review of basic Buddhist teachings, this article presented a review of the perceived control exercised by Buddhists. In doing this, the review of Buddhist teaching

will be based on the belief of Mahayana Buddhism, one of the major branches of Buddhism [e.g., 23–25]. Moreover, given that scarcity of research has been done in this respect and hence little empirical evidence can be drawn on, the analyses of Buddhist perceived control in this study, with reference to the basic teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, are mostly in the form of speculative inference made by the author. Despite this, the conceptual framework created in this article can help develop empirical research. In this light, some recommendations for future study are made to facilitate more scientific understanding of Buddhist perceived control.

Perceived control, defined as the individual's judgment of the extent to which desired outcomes can be achieved and potential misfortunes can be diverted [e.g., 15,26–28], has been demonstrated to be an important factor in coping with life adversity [15,26,28]. According to Rothbaum et al. (1982) [22], perceived control can be distinguished between primary control and secondary control. While primary control involves actively changing the environment to fit the needs and desires of the self, secondary control entails changing one's own thoughts and feelings to fit the environment. Nevertheless, both primary and secondary control are important for maintaining mental health and wellbeing as they connote taking action to manage a problematic situation [15,29,30].

As religion affects coping [14,31], the adherents of different religions, it is reasoned, may adopt different kinds of strategies to deal with life adversity subject to the incorporation of differential religious teachings into their respective value system. In this regard, it is found that secondary control is the main strategy adopted by the adherents of Christianity [15]/Taoism [3,4] in coping with adverse situations, i.e., by means of vicariously associated with the all-powerful God/gods, people can psychologically experience enhanced control over the environment. However, unlike Christianity and Taoism, Buddhism is a nontheistic religion [e.g., 23–25]. Indeed, the Buddha also plainly said that he was not a god but was simply enlightened to ultimate reality [e.g., 24,25,32,33]. Following this, the Buddhists seem unlikely to make any attempt to vicariously associate with deity for assistance. Rather, Buddhism practically focuses on teaching adherents the way to realize enlightenment, which, in turn, helps them liberate from life suffering and attain happiness by their own will and effort [e.g., 34–37]. In line with this, primary control is likely the main strategy exercised by the Buddhists to cope with life situations, with such inference supported by a review of the basic Buddhist teachings below.

In Buddhism, life adversity is inevitable; as it is taught that suffering is an intrinsic part of life and that the goal of Buddhism is to teach individuals how to put an end to their sufferings [e.g., 25,36–38]. In this light, Buddha means the “enlightened one”, alluded to one who is completely free from faults and mental obstructions, and sees things as they really are [e.g., 24,25,35]. In fact, enlightenment, as the Buddhists believe, is the only way that leads to liberation from life sufferings and attainment of real and lasting happiness [24,37]. Besides, through the acquisition and practice of Buddhist teachings, everyone has the potentiality to enter the path of enlightenment and becomes a Buddha [e.g., 25,35–37]. In this analogy, the Buddhists are able to attain enhanced control over life circumstances by their own will and effort. This can be illustrated by the learning and practice of Buddhist teachings such as Three Basic Characteristics, Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, and Dependent Arising and Karma.

Three Basic Characteristics

The Three Basic Characteristics – impermanence, dissatisfaction and no-self are advocated by Buddhism as the way to gain a direct apprehension of the truth of reality [e.g., 25,32,33,37]. It thereby serves as a buffer and helps mitigate the negative effect of life circumstances on humans due to incorrect apprehension of reality.

The first characteristic of impermanence means that reality is never static but continually undergoes change [32,33,37]. In fact, all things in the world are in a state of continual dissolution, as they comprise constituents that arise together

and then, in time, fall apart subject to decay [32,33,37]. This characterization of impermanence leads to the second characteristic of dissatisfaction. That is, since all things in life must pass away, so must all the pleasures these things provide be fleeting [32,33]. This, in turn, makes people feel that life is dissatisfactory. Moreover, impermanence implicated all phenomena lack any underlying and permanent substance [32,35], it thereby leads to the third characteristic of no-self. In this light, Buddhism teaches that the constituents of selfhood are the “Five Aggregates,” viz., body, sensation, perception, mental state, and consciousness [24,33,35]. Since none of them is permanent substance, it implies the non-existence of permanent self [e.g., 24,32,33,35]. Yet, this characterization carries a liberating effect, as it enlightens people that human suffering arises when attempts are made to preserve self-satisfying experiences transitory in nature [23,33,37,39].

In short, the learning of Three Basic Characteristics enables the Buddhists to gain a direct apprehension of the truth of reality which helps buffer against the negative effect of life adversity. In this relation, the Buddhists were attested to have higher sense of liberation, increased personal control and equanimity, due to the relinquishment of self-centered cravings [e.g., 37,40–42].

Four Noble Truths of Life/ Eightfold Path

Referring to the above Buddhist teaching that life is characterized by impermanence, dissatisfaction and selflessness and hence human suffering is inevitable, it can be further elaborated by the Four Noble Truths of Life, concerning about the dissatisfying human condition, the cause and cessation of suffering, and the path leading to release [e.g., 24,32,33,35].

The first noble truth is the Truth of Suffering. Buddhism states that suffering is an intrinsic part of human life, in physical form like birth, sickness, aging and death; and in psychological form such as pain, grief, sorrow, lamentation and despair experienced in association with what is unpleasant, dissociation from what is pleasant, and the failure to get what one desires [24,32,33]. Furthermore, because of reincarnation, humans have to re-experience these sufferings life after life without cessation [24,34,36,38]. Nevertheless, Buddhism does not deny any happiness in life; however, the good times do not last as sooner or later they fade away, or people become bored with what once seemed novel [24,32,33]. Also, people have countless desires that they cannot fulfill all; and when fulfilled, do not bring the satisfaction for which they hope. Hence, even when life is not painful, it is unsatisfactory and unfulfilling [24,32,33].

The second noble truth is the Cause of Suffering. People have cravings, manifested in the desire to possess and control

something like fame, wealth, sensual pleasure; or in the attachment to certain ideas or actions, which can be traced to the false belief in permanent essence or self [24,35,37]. All these cravings, believed by the Buddhists, are caused by “Three Root Evils” (greed, hatred, and delusion), the fundamental motivations of the unwholesome actions [33,37,43]. Being motivated by greed, one’s action is rooted in the longing for something or someone, or in the strong desires like avarice or lust [24,33,37]. Being motivated by hatred involves irritation with something or someone, or strong feelings of aversion, anger or even wrath [24,33,37]. Delusion as motivation means pursuing actions resulted from an active distortion of, or hiding from, the truth in certain matters one should make the effort to understand [24,33,37].

The third noble truth is the Cessation of Suffering. When craving is removed, suffering is ceased and nirvana is attained [e.g., 32,33,37,38]. Nirvana is the full enlightenment involving a radically transformed state of consciousness free of the “Three Root Evils” of greed, hatred and delusion, and the obsession with “me and mine” [32,33,37,38]. Besides, nirvana can occur during life or after death [32]. For Nirvana-in-life, it is an enlightened state characterized by peace, deep spiritual joy, compassion, and a refined and subtle awareness. Meanwhile, the negative mental states and emotions such as doubt, worry, anxiety, and fear are absent from the enlightened mind [32,37,38]. For Nirvana at death, it means the cessation of reincarnation as well as the related sufferings, and the enjoyment of eternal peace [e.g., 32,33,37,38].

The fourth noble truth is the path that ends suffering and leads to Nirvana, set forth by the Eightfold Path [32,34,36,37]. The Eightfold Path consists of eight factors subsumed under three categories, viz., wisdom (proper view), morality (proper conduct) and meditation (proper practice): (1) Right Understanding means the acceptance of Buddhist teachings, e.g., attaching to the existence of a permanent “self” binds one to dissatisfactory living. (2) Right Thought means making a serious commitment to develop right attitudes, e.g., freeing oneself from an unwholesome mind such as greed or ill will towards others. (3) Right Speech means the use of speech skillfully for the benefit of others and refraining from the four types of wrong speech, i.e., falsehood, slander, harsh words, and idle gossip. (4) Right Action is expressed as the Five Precepts, i.e., not to kill, not to steal, not to commit sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to partake of intoxicating drinks or drugs. (5) Right Livelihood means not engaging in an occupation which causes harm to others. (6) Right Effort means gaining control of one’s thoughts and cultivating positive states of mind. (7) Right Mindfulness means cultivating constant awareness of one’s body, e.g., at a particular moment, what one’s sensations, feelings, thoughts, and impulses are. (8) Right Meditation means the development of deep level mental calm, which is useful for illuminating the true nature of all things, pacifying distracting thoughts, purifying unruly

emotions and inordinate desires caused suffering [32,33,37].

In sum, by following the Eightfold Path, people can undergo self-transformation in the intellectual, emotional, and moral aspects [37]. This, in turn, allows them to rectify the deluded view of reality and to overcome unwholesome desires; thus, enabling them to attain enlightenment. Hence, pragmatically, the Buddhists are provided with the means to liberate from suffering and realize happiness, the attainment of which is entirely out of their own will and effort. As such, the author inferred that they are likely to have high sense of control through the exercise of primary control.

Dependent Arising and Karma

The teachings of Dependent Arising and karma both further support the idea that Buddhists are likely to have high perceived control. Simply speaking, Dependent Arising connotes that every effect has a cause [24,33,37]. That is, everything which comes into being originated in dependence on something else, and nothing exists independently in and for itself [24,32,37]. Correspondingly, karma refers to the result of willful intention [24,33,37], a manifestation of Dependent Arising in explaining the arising and cessation of human suffering through reincarnation.

In Buddhism, when people are dead, it only means that one stage of being ends and another stage of being begins. In this light, the rebirth may occur in any of the six realms, from the lowest to the highest order as: hell, animal, ghost, titan, human, god [24,32,37]. As such, the realm to which rebirth taken place is determined by the moral deeds a person performs in this life [24,33,37].

In relating karma to rebirth, the behaviors motivated by the “Three Root Evils”, i.e., greed, hatred, and delusion are non-virtuous. As a result, bad karma is generated; thus, causing rebirth in the lower realms like hell and animal. Contrarily, the behaviors motivated by the opposites of the “Three Root Evils”, i.e., non-attachment, benevolence, and understanding are virtuous. In turn, good karma resulted and thereby leads to rebirth in the higher realms like human and god [e.g., 32,33,35,37].

In addition, virtuous behaviors or good karma are believed to be the main cause of happiness and good fortune in life [24,35,37]. For example, people who have good health, comfortable living conditions, harmonious relationships, and success in activities are the results of their past good karma [24,35,37]. Conversely, all the adversities people experience in life such as sickness, poverty, conflicts, and accidents are the results of their past bad karma [24,35,37]. In sum, it seems that the Buddhists are able to exert high level of control on the quality of their present life as well as their future being by their own behaviors.

Taken together, in Buddhism, life is suffering; however, through its teachings, e.g., the Three Basic Characteristics and the Four Noble Truths, people can gain a direct apprehension of the truth of reality. Moreover, by practicing the Eightfold Path, people can undergo self-transformation in intellectual, emotional, and moral aspects by which to attain enlightenment. Additionally, the teachings of Dependent Arising and karma offer guidance on avoiding suffering like unhappy lower rebirth, and the conditions necessary for a happy and satisfactory life. Hence, the Buddhists can take an active role in shaping or influencing their life circumstances. Following this, primary control seems to be the dominant coping strategy adopted by the Buddhists.

This review, based on the Buddhist teachings, attempted to examine the coping strategy adopted by the Buddhists in handling life adversity. In this light, drawing on some basic Buddhist teachings like the Three Basic Characteristics, Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, Dependent Arising and karma; primary control, it is inferred, is the dominant strategy exercised by the adherents. However, in reality, the author believed that the merging of Buddhism with local cultures seems to make the situation more complex. That is, such localization, speculated by the author, may perhaps give rise to a variant form of coping strategy comprising both primary and secondary control (i.e., vicarious control), which may be illustrated by the situation of Hong Kong. It is common to find that the Buddhists in Hong Kong, in addition to learning and practicing the Buddhist teachings, engage in devotional behaviors (e.g., praying to the Buddha or engaging in rituals like bowing, offering food, flowers, and incense to a Buddha figure on an altar) to ask for the blessing of Buddha. Seemingly, these behaviors may be conceived as a kind of vicarious secondary control. Hence, the author interpreted that this variant form of coping strategy comprised of primary control and vicarious secondary control is the product of localization, which may perhaps be explained by the influence of Taoist culture in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is predominantly a Chinese cultural society. Hence, Taoism, a religion indigenous to China, has a profound influence on Hong Kong [44]. According to Taoism, there are over three thousand gods, with each god supposed to be controlling on certain kinds of things in the universe [3,4,45]. Indeed, in Taoism, some of the gods were once human, i.e., the ancestors, heroes, and those who did great deeds in life would be elevated to the status of god after death [3,4,45]. Hence, in coping with adverse situations, vicarious secondary control is the main strategy adopted by the Taoists. That is, the devotional activities laid down in Taoism permit people to interact with the supernatural forces in the universe to ask for their assistance. Hence, through the rituals, people can psychologically experience enhanced control over the environment resulted from associating vicariously with the deities [3,4]. Under such influence, the Buddha, it is

plausible, be viewed as one of the deities such that blessing can be obtained through devotional activities. Extending this reasoning, as Asia is deeply influenced by the Chinese culture [46], it is possible that such variant form of coping strategy may also be prevalent in the other Asian societies. Furthermore, related to this variant form of coping strategy is the issue as to whether the adoption of vicarious secondary control by Buddhists is indicative of their perceived low self-efficacy in handling adverse situations possibly related to low sense of primary control.

Nevertheless, the above are simply speculations which should be subject to empirical verification. In this light, to investigate the religious coping of Buddhism, some recommendations for future research are made as follows: Firstly, to investigate in different cultural societies, what form of perceived control (e.g., either primary or vicarious secondary control, or both control) is adopted by the Buddhists, as well as whether there is any interaction effect of localized culture with Buddhism on the adoption of coping strategy. Secondly, it seems necessary to investigate whether any psychological factors such as perceived self-efficacy affect the adoption of coping strategies. Thirdly, apart from Mahayana Buddhism, there are other branches of Buddhism like Theravada Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism [47], the teachings of which may be varied; hence, it is warranted to investigate whether the coping strategy adopted is correspondingly different from one to another. Fourthly, further study should be conducted regarding how these variant forms of religious coping, i.e., the adoption of either primary or vicarious secondary control, or both controls, are related to the mental health and well-being of Buddhists.

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