

# Empathy, Guilt and Altruism: Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Practices

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EMOTIONS, PERSONALITY  
AND ALTRUISM  
RESEARCH GROUP

## Introduction

In recent studies, Tibetan Buddhist monks with extensive meditation experience have been found to exhibit general psychological wellbeing and unusual skill at emotion regulation. These characteristics may influence their adaptation to political oppression in Tibet, and to the stressful experience of escaping from Tibet, followed by immigration to Nepal and/or India. Prior studies have demonstrated that refugees who have escaped countries where they were imprisoned and/or tortured were subsequently likely to exhibit high rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other serious mood and anxiety disorders.

In contrast, several studies have indicated that Tibetan Buddhists, after long and dangerous flights across the Himalaya, have been arriving in India and Nepal with low levels of mental disorders, including PTSD. It has been suggested that this unusual and resilient response to traumatic conditions may be attributed to protective factors associated with the Tibetan Buddhist religion, for example the habitual tendency to see oneself as having suffered less than others, regardless of circumstances. In addition, beliefs that are an integral part of the religion itself, may play an important role. For example, Tibetan Buddhists believe in Karma, whereby prior actions – including actions in past lives – lead to events, something over which a person has no control in terms of the past. However, Karma is changeable, in accord with a person's current actions of "body, speech and mind." In this world-view, a better future may be predicted if a person is an active practitioner. The meditation practices commonly used have been empirically associated with psychological wellbeing in general.



## Methods (continued)

cognitively the situation experienced by another person. **Empathic Concern**: the degree of concern a person tends to feel on witnessing difficult or unpleasant experiences occurring to another person. **Personal Distress**: the degree of distress a person is likely to feel, upon witnessing difficulties experienced by another person.

**The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD)** (Radloff, 1977) is a widely-used 20-item self-report instrument, with responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, and total scores ranging from 0 to 60. The cut off score for depression is equal to or greater than 16, which indicates at least a mild depression, though many clinicians mark a mild depression starting well below 16.

**Brief Big Five Inventory (BFI)** (John, 1990) is a 44-item self-report inventory for assessing five personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

## Procedures

Subjects were directed to the study by way of a link provided in the online announcements, where they first read the introductory letter which outlined the anonymous nature of the study, and after which they indicated agreement to participation. From there they went to the study itself, which consisted of the standardized instruments and a demographic questionnaire that included questions about their meditation practices. After completing the survey, they submitted their data, which came into the EPARG server via FileMaker Pro, was then fed into Excel, and from there, was translated into an SPSS file for analysis.

## Acknowledgements

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## For further information

This is an ongoing study. For further information, go to [www.eparg.org](http://www.eparg.org) or contact Professor O'Connor at [loconnor@wi.edu](mailto:loconnor@wi.edu).

## Results

Using independent-samples *t*-tests, we found that Buddhists were significantly lower on Separation and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, Empathic Distress and Depression. Buddhists were significantly higher on the Big-5 factors of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness and significantly lower in Neuroticism. While Buddhists did not differ from the comparison group on Altruism towards Family and Friends, they were significantly higher in Altruism toward Strangers (See Table 1).

Table 2 presents correlations between meditation practices and psychological outcomes in the sample of Buddhist participants. Intensity of meditation (frequency and duration) tended to be associated with lower omnipotent responsibility guilt, empathic distress, and depression, and positively with empathic perspective-taking. In addition, some practices of meditation were positively associated with altruism to strangers, conscientiousness, and openness

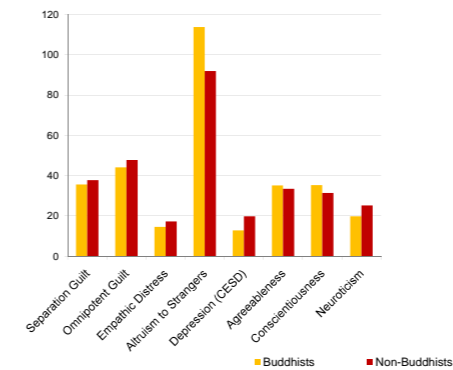


Table 1. Buddhists compared to Non-Buddhists on Psychological Outcomes

	Buddhists		Non-Buddhists		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
<b>Guilt</b>					
Survivor Guilt	68.8	8.3	68.6	11.2	-0.13
Separation Guilt	35.6	7.6	37.7	8.7	2.04*
Omnipotent Guilt	44.1	7.5	47.7	7.8	3.43**
<b>Empathy</b>					
Perspective-Taking	26.0	4.7	25.3	4.8	-0.97
Empathic Concern	28.1	3.5	27.9	4.2	-0.46
Empathic Distress	14.5	4.8	17.2	5.3	3.76***
<b>Altruism</b>					
Altruism to Family	175.1	29.5	170.5	32.0	-1.06
Altruism to Friends	172.4	26.9	173.9	27.8	0.39
Altruism to Strangers	113.7	34.1	91.9	31.5	-5.02***
<b>Depression (CESD)</b>	12.8	11.6	19.8	12.8	3.42**
<b>Personality</b>					
Extraversion	25.6	6.6	25.6	7.1	-0.03
Agreeableness	35.1	5.4	33.4	5.6	-2.34*
Conscientiousness	35.3	5.8	31.4	6.4	-4.55***
Neuroticism	19.8	5.6	25.2	6.6	5.98***
Openness	40.1	7.4	39.5	6.1	-0.76

\* *p* < .05    \*\* *p* < .01    \*\*\* *p* < .001

## Discussion

These results support the hypothesis that people who are practicing Tibetan Buddhist meditation tend to experience less empathy-based guilt, specifically guilt that occurs when someone is especially worried about harming a family member or other loved one by being "different," in addition to feeling exceptionally responsible to others, for problems for which the guilt-ridden person has neither the power to bring on nor the power to alleviate. In both types of empathy-based guilt, someone is assuming responsibility unrealistically, and this involves faulty cognitions and particularly those connected to attributions for harm. This may be the result of better affect regulation, secondary to meditation practice, or it may be the result of beliefs embedded in the religion. Future research may illuminate this further.

The finding that practicing Tibetan Buddhists demonstrate greater altruism towards strangers may be particularly important in these times where we are rapidly becoming a global family. While this finding may, as in the case of lower rates of guilt and depression when these practitioners are compared to a non-Buddhist sample, be the result of meditation practice, it may instead be the result of beliefs embedded in the Mahayana tradition that is common to Tibetan Buddhists.

The Mahayana Buddhists are trained to believe that to be successful, to achieve happiness and wellbeing in this life and in future lifetimes, the ultimate goal is to become a Bodhisattva, a person for whom liberating all sentient beings takes precedence over liberating the self. While we don't yet know the role that these conscious beliefs may play in determining the results found in this study, the differences found within the Tibetan Buddhist sample in terms of levels of meditative practice, suggests that the practice itself may provide the explanation we seek, above and perhaps independent of the consciously expressed beliefs held within the religion.

Table 2. Correlations Between Psychological Outcomes and Meditation Practices among Buddhists

	Frequency of Meditation	Years of Meditation	Times/Day	Duration/Session	Times/day X Duration
<b>Guilt</b>					
Survivor Guilt	.07	.16	-.11	.04	-.04
Separation Guilt	-.18	-.15	-.02	-.15	-.12
Omnipotent Guilt	-.30*	-.28*	-.34**	-.17	-.29*
<b>Empathy</b>					
Perspective-Taking	.29*	.37**	.20	.27*	.25
Empathic Concern	.13	.01	.02	.06	.08
Empathic Distress	-.53**	-.29*	-.41**	-.33*	-.42**
<b>Altruism</b>					
Altruism-Family	.12	-.21	.11	-.01	.05
Altruism-Friends	.05	-.20	.09	-.09	.06
Altruism-Strangers	.29*	.22	.20	.01	.20
<b>Depression (CESD)</b>	-.18	-.25*	-.33*	-.23	-.30*
<b>Personality</b>					
Extraversion	.12	.01	.16	.27*	.18
Agreeableness	.11	.12	.18	.23	.23
Conscientiousness	.36**	.19	.22	.33*	.35*
Neuroticism	-.211	-.06	-.34*	-.22	-.31*
Openness	.28*	.19	.20	.27*	.21

\* *p* < .05    \*\* *p* < .01

## Methods

To explore factors that might contribute to these apparent psychological benefits of Tibetan practitioners immigrating after escaping oppressive conditions, we conducted an anonymous on-line study including 98 Tibetan Buddhists (85% American Tibetan Buddhists) compared to 444 non-Buddhists. The study was announced on Craigslist, and on a variety of Tibetan Buddhist listservs connected to the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) in the United States.

### INSTRUMENTS:

**Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67:** (IGQ-67: O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush & Sampson, 1997). The IGQ-67 is a 67-item measure, using Likert-type scales to assess empathy-based guilt. Three subscales were used in this study: **Survivor Guilt**: is characterized by the belief that being successful or happy will make others feel inadequate simply by comparison (e.g., "It makes me very uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with"). **Separation Guilt**: is characterized by the belief that if a person separates, leads his or her own life, or differs from loved ones in some way, he or she will cause loved ones to suffer (e.g. "I am reluctant to express an opinion that is different from the opinions held by my family or friends"). **Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt**: is characterized by the belief that one is responsible for the happiness and well being of others (e.g. "I often find myself doing what someone else wants me to do, rather than doing what I would most enjoy").

**Dispositional Altruism Scale (DAS)** Berry & O'Connor, 2002). The DAS is a 45-item instrument, derived from a measure of social support (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). Instead of measuring how much social support a person received, the DAS measures how much support someone tends to extend to others. Respondents indicate how frequently they perform acts of altruism for family members, friends, and strangers in a variety of social situations. Items from this questionnaire include how often the participant "gave money for an indefinite amount of time" and "helped them think about a problem."

**Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)** Davis, 1980): The IRI is a 28-item self-report instrument measuring distinct categories of empathy. **Perspective taking**: the ability to identify with, or understand