

Research Article



***External Mindfulness, Secure (Non)-Attachment,
and Healing Relational Trauma: Emerging
Models of Wellness for Modern Buddhists and
Buddhist Modernism***

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Much scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the incorporation of Buddhist-derived meditations such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) into psychotherapeutic and medical settings. This paper approaches the cross-fertilization of Buddhist and therapeutic notions of wellness from the opposite direction by exploring Dharma Punx teacher Josh Korda's interweaving of psychoanalytic developmental theory and affective neuroscience into his Buddhist teachings. Korda provides a useful case study of some of the main patterns emerging from psychotherapeutically informed American Buddhist convert lineages. One of these, I argue, is a "relational turn," a more context-sensitive approach to individual meditation practice and an increasing interest in developing interpersonal and communal dimensions of Buddhist practice. In conclusion, I consider what Korda's approach and this relational turn suggests in terms of the unfolding of Buddhist modernism in the West.

Keywords: Buddhism; Buddhism in America; Buddhism and Psychoanalysis

A shaved-headed man covered in bright tattoos and dressed casually in a green t-shirt and black sweat pants sat comfortably, one leg over another, in a chair at the front of the room. As he smiled at the sixty or so retreatants before him, a similar glimmer to the chunky silver jewelry on his fingers and wrists came off his front teeth. With the ease that his informal attire suggested, Josh Korda shared that he was feeling excited and nervous. This was because, he continued, whilst he had taught many silent mindfulness retreats, the goal of this particular one would be to cultivate relational mindfulness with others. It was quite scandalous, he continued with a giggle, that so many Buddhists could cultivate a real depth of meditation practice on retreat but not function well interpersonally in the world. Thus began the annual 2015 NYC+Brooklyn Dharma Punx retreat, co-taught by Korda, and Jessica Morey, Executive Director of Inward Bound Mindfulness Education, which legitimated the practice of relational mindfulness through both the Pāli Canon and attachment theory. Interweaving affective neuroscience with the *suttas*, advocating for *kalyāṇamittas* as a

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corrective to inadequate parenting, and ending with the chanting of the three refuges and five precepts in Pāli, Korda's opening dharma talk was as distinctive as his appearance.

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the incorporation of Buddhist-derived meditations such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) into psychotherapeutic and medical settings (Wilson, 2014; Helderman, 2015). This paper approaches the cross-fertilization of Buddhist and therapeutic notions of wellness from the opposite direction by exploring Korda's interweaving of psychoanalytic developmental theory and affective neuroscience into his Buddhist teachings. Whilst it has become commonplace to note the influence of psychology on American convert Buddhism, little work has been done to identify the specifics of this exchange: the exact type and ways it has been adopted and the particular populations it appeals to. Korda provides a useful example because he is self-reflexive about his psychodynamic adaptations, and as one of the most well-known "Gen X" teachers from the Buddhist Insight Network, he indicates some of the main patterns emerging from American Buddhist convert lineages. One of these, I argue, is a "relational turn," a more context-sensitive approach to individual meditation practice and an increasing interest in developing relational and communal dimensions of Buddhist practice.

The paper will begin with providing some biographical details of Korda and a brief outline of his Dharma Punx New York+Brooklyn sangha. In tracing Korda's trajectory as a Buddhist teacher, it will pay attention to the early formation of his psychological perspective as well as reflections on the specific audience his teachings address and appeal to. It will identify the specific theoretical and pragmatic ways that Korda adopts psychoanalytic and neuroscientific discourse into his Buddhist teachings; highlighting both how Buddhist thought and practice are used as tools for psychological health and how developmental insights are used to mend gaps in popular Buddhist modernist modalities. Next, it will consider how Korda's approach is illustrative of wider trends in both the Dharma Punx and Against the Stream network and the Insight community, a loose affiliation of meditation groups that are centered on the practice of insight or *vipassanā* meditation and inspired by Thai Forest and Burmese Theravādin lineages. In conclusion, I will consider what this relational turn suggests in terms of the unfolding of Buddhist modernism in the West.

My general approach is more descriptive than prescriptive. Taking a similar path to Jeff Wilson, who traces the dissemination of mindfulness in American culture, my aim is neither to debunk nor defend Korda, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which Buddhism is selectively adapted by and for certain populations in new historic and cultural settings (2014: 10). I am more interested here in illuminating the ways in which Korda positions and legitimates his own work in relationship to canonical Buddhism rather than delegitimizing his psychoanalytic interweavings against it. Methodologically, I draw from discourse analysis, the bulk of which is primary source material, and ethnography. The former involved analyzing all of Korda's dharma podcasts from 2010–June 2015 that had any therapeutic association in their title, as well as Korda's numerous blog posts. Additionally, I reviewed all of Korda's writing for Buddhist magazines *Shambhala Sun* and *Tricycle* and listened to two online retreats he had

taught for the latter. Ethnography consisted of participation-observation at a weekend retreat at the Garrison Institute in May 2015 and two visits to his NYC+Brooklyn Dharma Punx sangha in July 2015. This was supplemented by personal conversations with Korda and other teachers and group facilitators from Dharma Punx NYC+Brooklyn and numerous informal conversations with sangha members during and after ethnographic visits.

Freud Next to the Buddha on the Bookshelf

Korda frequently shares stories from his childhood as a central part of his teaching pedagogy, and his biography reveals much about his therapeutic approach to Buddhist teaching (Gunton, 2014). Born in the early 1960s in New York City, Korda describes his childhood environment as “insecure and unpredictable” due to his alcoholic father who was episodically violent towards both Korda and his mother. When his father got sober, he became a Sōtō Zen Buddhist and introduced twelve-year-old Korda to Buddhism with a copy of Philip Kapleau’s *Three Pillars of Zen*. Around the same time, Korda discovered depth psychology through his mother, who he describes as an “avid Freudian” who stacked the family bookshelves with texts by Freud, Jung, and Eric Fromm. It is not surprising, given that he witnessed his parents’ healing journeys vis-à-vis a mix of therapy and Zen Buddhism, that Korda shares he has always seen Buddhism and psychoanalysis as united in their concern to reduce human suffering (Korda, 2014a).

By the time he was in his teens, Korda had begun to develop a daily drug and alcohol habit and this continued after college when he became heavily involved in the punk and squatting scene in NYC. In 1995, he joined Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and achieved sobriety, but reports struggling with certain aspects of the organization, which he found “too pat, dogmatic and evangelical” (Gunton, 2014). Shortly after, Korda renewed his early interest in Buddhism, exploring different traditions before settling on Theravāda Buddhism. As he explained, “The Theravādin *suttas*, of all the canonical texts I’ve encountered, laid out practices in clear, graspable instructive terms. The moment I located the heavily psychological *suttas* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, such as the *Vitakkasanthāna*, or *Five Ways to Remove Intrusive Thoughts*, and the *Sabbāsava*, which details seven ways to work with obsessive states, I was hooked.”¹

Korda deepened his commitment to Buddhism when he began seeing a Buddhist therapist due to suffering from suicidal depression and anxiety triggered by witnessing the terrorist attacks of 9/11 on his way to work. As his biographical trajectory illustrates, Korda has always approached Buddhism through a pragmatic, psychological lens, and Buddhist strategies for mental health form the main bulk of his dharma teachings. He has numerous podcasts with titles such as “Strategies For Dealing with Fear” and “A Safe Container for Anxiety” (2015a) aimed at addressing the everyday psychological struggles and concerns of his students. This appears pedagogically successful: in informal conversations with participants, they repeatedly shared that it was the “realness” and “practicality” of Korda’s approach that attracted them. One told me, for example, “Josh’s

¹ Korda, personal interview, March 20, 2015.

talks help me make sense of what I'm going through in my life, like when he talks about how to deal with obsessive thoughts and driving yourself crazy with self-criticism." Another confided, "Josh just tells it like it is. He's helped me deal with my isolation and feeling sometimes that I'm not part of the human race."

A major turning point in Korda's Buddhist practice came through his friendship with Noah Levine who he had first met at an AA meeting in late 2001. In 2003, Levine began a Dharma Punx sitting group at Tibet House, a well-established Tibetan Buddhist teaching and cultural center, and soon gathered a small, regular sangha drawn mostly from the punk/hardcore scene. Korda reports being deeply moved by how Levine integrated the personal disclosure style of AA with Buddhist teachings. As he puts it, "Up until then all of the Buddhist teachers I had sat with had presented themselves as serene, unruffled, untroubled by issues of addiction, anxiety, etc."² When Levine returned to the East Coast in 2005, he asked Korda to take over as teacher, and the group relocated to the Bowery, an iconic neighborhood in Manhattan. In addition to training with Levine, Korda has also studied with a number of Theravādin monastics and lists his main influences as the Thai forest monks, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Ajahn Sucitto, Ajahn Amaro as well as Insight teacher and therapist, Tara Brach.

Against the Stream and Dharma Punx New York+Brooklyn

Describing itself as "an alternative Buddhist community in the Insight/Vipassana tradition," Dharma Punx NYC+Brooklyn runs autonomously but is informally affiliated with the Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation Society (ATS), a growing network started by Levine. The son of Buddhist and death awareness author, Stephen Levine, Levine (2004) became well known in American Buddhist convert circles through his memoir *Dharma Punx*, which details his journey to sobriety through Buddhist practice and his crafting of an alternative form of American Buddhism that draws its inspiration from the punk/hardcore scene rather than the hippy counter-culture that shaped the first wave of American convert teachers. ATS's membership draws significantly from the AA recovery community, and Levine has recently started the Refuge Recovery network, which offers a Buddhist approach to addiction treatment (Levine, 2014). Whilst identifying the Pali Canon as its primary inspiration, ATS sharply differentiates itself from Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia, which it believes has become distorted by mythological overlays and institutionally corrupted by "sexist, classist and racist politics." Claiming to recover the "original teachings of the Buddha," it paints a naturalistic portrait of the historic Buddha, or "Sid" as he is affectionately known, as "a radical psychologist and spiritual revolutionary."

ATS's claim to recover the original teachings of the Buddha reproduces a common and problematic trope of American convert Buddhism, namely a delineation between "cultural" and "essential" Buddhism. As such a word here on the category of American convert Buddhism is useful. An early distinction made within the sub-field of Buddhism in America is between Asian "ethnic" and American "convert" Buddhism. The former

² Korda, personal correspondence, March 20 2015

term is used to denote communities made up of Asian immigrants and their descendants, which are characterized as being focused on cultural preservation and merit-making activities. The latter is adopted for groups that are overwhelmingly populated by Caucasian middle- to upper-middle class converts who are primarily concerned with Buddhist meditation and philosophy (Numrich, 1996). A central claim of these groups is that they are recovering the core teachings of the Buddha from secondary Asian cultural overlays and distortions. Wakoh Shannon Hickey (2010) has problematized the ways in which this claim and the immigrant/convert distinction itself functions to reproduce white privilege. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to note that whilst ATS differentiates itself from the boomer generation of American convert teachers, it shares many qualities of the American convert lineage such as a privileging of meditation, a downplaying of the metaphysical and institutional aspects of traditional Buddhism, and an overwhelmingly Caucasian demographic.

ATS has a number of groups across the US but its three main centers are Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation Society in Los Angeles, led primarily by Noah Levine; Urban Dharma in San Francisco, led primarily by Vinny Ferraro; and Dharma Punx NYC+ Brooklyn, led by Korda (Bromley and Crutsinger, 2015). Although institutionally decentralized and autonomous, personal relationships between ATS teachers are strong and they annually guest teach and co-teach across sites. Whilst group format and teaching content differ, all share a core commitment to creating sanghas in which people feel personally connected to the teacher and community. As Ferraro states, “One of the hallmarks of ATS is speaking from and about personal experience, an approach informed by the methodology of twelve-step groups. There’s a certain amount of disclosure that the [recovery] community is used to, a casualness of conversation, that eye-level thing” (Merz, 2013).

Korda enacts this interpersonal approach on multiple levels: aesthetically, through embodiment, and pedagogically. Like many of his students, he is heavily tattooed, wears chunky jewelry, and dresses in casual clothes such as sweat pants and hoodies. His distinctive appearance signifies identification with the punk and recovery subculture from which many of his students are drawn, and a number of retreat attendees commented on how his appearance made him easier to relate to than Buddhist monastics or American boomer teachers. When giving dharma talks, he sits comfortably on chairs, one leg over the other, whilst many of his students stretch out before him. Between teachings, he often chats with students, and I observed him hugging several participants at the Garrison retreat as well as eating with retreatants during meal times. During his dharma talks, Korda frequently shares intimate and vulnerable stories from his own life. He is playful and performative, making numerous jokes, imitating people, and amplifying personality traits with different voice tones, etc. This combination of vulnerability and humor has clearly established a strong rapport between Korda and his students. This is done intentionally by Korda who wants his students to feel he is “right there with him” (Gunton, 2014). Korda describes this therapeutically as offering himself as a “safe object” to his students to create an “emotionally tolerant and secure relational space in which interpersonal healing can occur (Haas and Korda, 2014). Such a relationship, however, is not modeled on the therapist-client model, which maintains an

interpersonal distance and power hierarchy, but rather the peer-based sponsor-sponsee format of AA.³

Dharma Punx NYC+ Brooklyn describes itself as “an alternative Buddhist community in the Insight/Vipassana tradition” on its Facebook page. Korda is the main teacher, and Melissa McKay, who has trained intensively with monastics in Burma, also teaches classes and co-teaches with Korda. All of the Dharma Punx NYC+Brooklyn’s six Buddhism and two yoga classes, as well as Korda’s one-to-one Buddhist mentoring practice, are offered on a *dāna* (donation) basis. The most popular of these are Korda’s two classes: a Sunday night group in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and a Tuesday night class in the Bowery. Korda and Merz (2013) independently report up to 100 people regularly attending. The majority of attendees fall into their twenties and thirties, and, whilst the group was originally heavily composed of members of the recovery community, Korda reported that informal polls had revealed a decrease in that demographic from 70% to 50%. Some of this might be due to the fact that there is now a Refuge Recovery group in NYC, and other groups such as New York Insight offer their own recovery sanghas.

Korda, however, reaches a much larger population through his online and writing activities. This is mostly due to his dharma talks, which he uploads weekly onto the Dharma Punx website as podcasts available for free download. At the end of May 2016 there were 395 dharma talks dated from June 2009 to the present, which have been downloaded over a million times with over 10,000 regular monthly users. Korda also reaches a wider audience through his writing for *Shambhala Sun*, *Tricycle* and *The Huffington Post* and has taught two online retreats for *Tricycle*, which have been amongst its most watched.⁴

The Pāli Canon, Psychoanalysis and Neuroscience: Theoretical Interweavings

Korda began studying Pāli in the late 1990s with a focus on the Middle-Length Discourse Suttas, and most of his Buddhist teachings cover foundational Theravādin thought and practices drawn from these. Alongside podcasts titles such as “The Brahmavihāras” (Korda, 2011b) and “Liberation from Self-Centeredness” (Korda, 2012), however, one finds “Buddhism and Attachment Theory” (Korda, 2015q) and “How the Buddha Reparented Himself” (Korda, 2015). As this indicates, Korda’s dharma talks draw heavily from psychoanalytic developmental theory; his main influences are object relations theorist D. W. Winnicott, self-psychologist Heinz Kohut, and the attachment theory of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Whilst no means uniform, all of these thinkers are located in what Stephen Mitchell labeled as psychoanalytic “relational-model theories.” Positioned along a wide spectrum in relation to the classical Freudian drive model, these theorists are united by a shared view of the self as constituted by relational configurations and driven primarily by interpersonal needs rather than instinctual relief. Such thinkers, therefore, shift focus from the discharge and regulation of sexual and aggressive energy to the forging and maintenance of stable relationships as key to

³ Korda, personal conversation, May 17 2015.

⁴ James Thatcher (web coordinator), Tricycle Foundation, personal correspondence, July 30, 2015

understanding the formation of the self and psychic health. As Mitchell summarizes, within this diverse field, “Mind has been redefined from a set of predetermined structures emerging from inside an individual organism to transactional patterns and internal structures derived from an interactive, interpersonal field” (Mitchell, 1988: 17).

Korda also refers to himself as a “neuroscientific geek” and borrows from affective neuroscience, particularly the work of Alan Shore, to show how attachment needs and patterns are wired into the brain, thereby adding further “hard evidence” to the relational self that emerges from these psychoanalytic models. Similarly, he draws from evolutionary neuroscientists such as Robin Dunbar to situate relational and emotional needs in the right hemisphere of the brain and locate them as essential to the evolutionary survival of the species. His general tendency seems to be to follow his developmental teaching with neurological insights as support and “hard evidence” for the former (Korda, 2014c).

Korda interweaves these different clinicians together to present a basic universal trajectory of human development and then discusses how Buddhist thought and practice can contribute to its successful navigation. As this developmental narrative is at the core of Korda’s teaching, it necessitates some close attention: The infant begins life completely dependent and must forge a strong connection with her caretaker for survival. This is done through emotions, which far from being merely internal states are the infant’s primary means by which the infant expresses her needs to her caretaker. What Winnicott called the “good enough mother” must empathetically mirror these back to the infant in order to regulate her emotions. If this pattern is repeated consistently over the first three years of life, it will result in the infant developing her own ability to experience, self-regulate, and express a full range of emotions and also provide an internalized template for future secure relationships with others.

For many individuals, however, there are disruptions in this process and this results in an array of developmental wounds and defensive strategies. Central amongst these are the formation of insecure attachment patterns, the inability to self-regulate emotional life, and the creation of a false, performative self. For example, if certain emotional states are not tolerable to the primary caretaker, they are unable to mirror them back to the infant, so these emotions will be “defensively excluded” and the infant will develop a reified “performative” rather than authentic, flexible sense of self. Excluded emotions do not disappear, however, but rather manifest as unconscious somatic holding patterns and tensions. In order to experience some short-term relief from these, the individual will engage in either avoidance or acting out strategies such as addiction or repetitive compulsive relationships. As Korda explains:

The body becomes a battleground of feelings that want to arrive in the mind, which pushes them back down, and it can result in a perennially tight abdomen or a chest that always feels hollow, or a throat that feels constricted and strangled, or a jaw that’s locked, or a forehead that’s always light. It’s an expression of the battle between authentic needs [that are] trying to be, trying to be witnessed by the mind, trying to be accepted, trying to be expressed to others. And the fearful mind that thinks, “Oh no, if I express these needs, I’ll once again get rejected, I’ll once

again feel like that infant whose other could not meet its needs.” And it gets pushed down, and the body becomes this battleground of tension. We close off the body and we seek distractions. That becomes the chief process of the false self—closing, tightening and turning away, [and] seeking distractions so that we don’t have to acknowledge those deep needs (Haas and Korda, 2014).

What is the relevance of these developmental vicissitudes for Buddhism? Korda suggests that Buddhist tools can aid in the repair of developmental breakdown, particularly relational wounding. Understanding these developmental processes can enable his students, who display interpersonal challenges, to practice Buddhism in ways that can support affect regulation rather than amplify defensive strategies. To illustrate these it is useful to focus on two of Korda’s core concepts: emotional regulation and secure attachment, and the theoretical and pragmatic ways he interweaves them into his Buddhist teachings.

Much of Korda’s attention is focused on developing the capacity to experience a wide range of emotions without needing to repress or discharge them in harmful ways. The retrieval of repressed emotions is of particular concern to Korda because, like himself, many of his students are in recovery and have historically turned to substance abuse as an unskillful, harmful means to self-regulate. For Korda, emotional regulation requires developing a “safe container”; an awareness that is able to tolerate and somatically experience painful and previously excluded emotions. One way to develop this safe container is through the practice of Buddhist *vipassanā* or mindfulness practice. A few words on these terms are necessary. In theory, Korda clearly differentiates between *vipassanā* and mindfulness. He describes *vipassanā* as that which is focused on observing inner phenomena specifically to develop awareness of the three marks of existence—*dukkha* (suffering), *annica* (impermanence), and *anattā* (no-self)—and mindfulness as referring to that which the Buddha called *sati*, the cultivation of awareness of whatever is arising in the four foundations of experience rather than focusing on impermanence. However, in practice, he sometimes uses the two terms interchangeably, which can be confusing. For our purposes here it is sufficient to note that when Korda promotes *vipassanā* or mindfulness practice, as providing affect regulation and relational healing, he is referring to *sati sampajañña*, which he translates alternatively as a “non-judgmental, inquisitive, somatic awareness” and a “fully receptive present time awareness.”⁵ When he problematizes *vipassanā* practice as psychologically counterproductive or even injurious for certain populations, such as those struggling with depression or de-personalization, he is most often referring to the cultivation of a detached observation of the three marks of existence as articulated in Mahasi Sayadaw’s Progress of Insight commentary on the development of Insight knowledge. For this reason, Korda only teaches *sati sampajañña* or open-awareness forms of *vipassanā* and mindfulness, which places him in the Thai Forest lineage style of *vipassanā* practice rather than the Burmese Mahasi Sayadaw or S. N. Goenka lineages that are also popular in the Insight network (Gleig, 2013).

Korda typically describes the function of *sati sampajañña* in the following way:

⁵ Joshua Korda, personal correspondence, February 2 2016.

Vipassanā is about creating a space in which these feelings can be felt and welcomed. It allows a space for messy and spontaneous and authentic feelings to unfold. Resistance is what makes these feelings so powerful. Meditation is giving our feelings the mothering that we have been craving so long. We give ourselves the parenting we never had and begin the process of healing: opening and reintegration, softening and healing. We own all our experience, which is the most emotionally healthy state we can be in (Korda, 2013g).

Vipassanā, in other words, becomes the means to establish that which was not developed in childhood: the internalization of a secure basis that allows for emotional self-regulation and attuned relationships with others. A similar framing of mindfulness via the lens of attachment theory can be found in the work of David Wallin (2007), Daniel Siegel (2007), and Harvey Aronson (2012), although their focus has been on the use of mindfulness in the psychotherapeutic relationship rather than within Buddhist communities. Like Wallin and Siegel, Korda uses affective neuroscience to provide further scientific evidence for attachment theory, supplementing his relational developmental narrative with complex details of corresponding neural brain activity (Korda, 2013c, 2013f, 2011a).

Whilst Korda promotes *vipassanā* as a tool for developing emotional self-regulation and secure attachment, he also warns that it has limits and can also be used in psychologically damaging ways. On the one extreme, it can be employed as a dissociative technique as indicated by John Welwood's popular term "spiritual bypassing" the use of spiritual practice for developmentally defensive purposes (Korda, 2014g). For individuals with disorganized attachment patterns, *vipassanā* practice alone cannot provide relational healing. As he notes, "Painful emotions, born of early childhood abandonments and poor attachment schemes, do not go away on their own. They require reliable relational support to override" (Korda, 2014o).

Another population vulnerable to the misuse of *vipassanā* is those who have suffered from trauma. For these individuals, Korda explains, *vipassanā* can trigger a "flooding" of overwhelming sensations. In such cases, Korda recommends switching to concentration meditations in order to lessen the impact. Similarly, Korda has questioned the centrality of intensive silent retreat practice in the Insight community. He laments "a fetishization, if not outright idealization, of long term silent retreats as the solution for all forms of suffering and despair." Such a view is problematic because such retreats can actually be psychically damaging for certain populations. For example, for those who have insecure, ambivalent or disorganized attachment patterns, the silent, no eye-contact format of these retreats can re-trigger attachment breakdowns. Further, for some participants, the dissolution of self experienced through the classical Stages of Insight path can lead to intense states of psychic regression. For such students, the allotted 15-minute interview is insufficient and teachers must strive to provide reassuring emotional exchanges. This was one of the reasons why Korda is incorporating periods of interpersonal inquiry and relational mindfulness practices into his retreats (Korda, 2014k). Moreover, Korda believes that *vipassanā* retreat teachers should be trained to recognize and respond appropriately to practitioners showing signs of re-traumatization. Most crucial is that

they are able to discern between someone who is contemplating impermanence versus someone who is experiencing a dissociative episode or experiencing depersonalization.⁶

Korda's reflections on the relationship between trauma and meditation reflect a general trend within the wider *vipassanā* and psychotherapeutic-Buddhist communities. On the one side, a number of psychotherapists are investigating the ways in which mindfulness and Buddhist contemplative practices can be employed as interventions with trauma populations (Follette, Briere, Rozelle, Hopper and Rome, 2014). On the other, there is a growing dialogue about combining *vipassanā* practice with trauma work in Buddhist communities. One popular approach is Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing (SE), a psychosomatic approach to healing trauma (Levine, 1995). The Insight Meditation Society Teacher Training Program requires that teacher trainees complete one year of psychotherapeutic training, and SE is one of three therapeutic modalities on option. A search for "trauma" on the Spirit Rock website yielded 123 results with one example: "The Healing Experience of Trauma: Using Mindfulness and Somatic Skills to Transform Trauma." Within this conversation, there is also reflection on the dangers as well as potentials of *vipassanā* for working with trauma. Buddhist practitioner and researcher David Treleaven (2012), for example, has written a study on *vipassanā* through the lens of trauma theory, which concludes by interrogating the assumption that awareness of the body yields universal beneficial results. His research was motivated by his own experience of "contemplative dissociation," or the sense of "disconnection between thoughts, emotions and physical sensations exacerbated by contemplative practice" (Treleaven, 2010: 20).

Reservations about the type of intensive retreat practice inherited from the Burmese Theravādin lineage of the American Insight community can be traced as early as the 1980s when former Theravādin monk and co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, Jack Kornfield, raised concern about the limits of individual meditation for addressing certain psychological issues. Much of Kornfield's following work, such as establishing Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California and his promotion of a more integrated and embodied approach to Buddhism, offers a corrective to this (Gleig, 2012: 133-136). More recently this issue has been highlighted by Willoughby Britton's pointedly titled Dark Night Project, now re-named as the Varieties of Contemplative Experience, at Brown University. Working with a cross-disciplinary team of academic researchers and Buddhist teachers, Britton has collected much empirical data on some of the deleterious cognitive, affective, perceptual, and psychological effects of meditation practice. A primary goal of her project was to create an adequate support structure and wider communal context for participants, as the lack of this appeared to have played an instrumental role in their difficulties (Britton, 2014).

Similarly, Buddhist scholar Jane Compson (2014) has convincingly argued that the unmooring of Buddhist meditation from its traditional monastic, communal, and philosophical context, which has been a primary feature of Buddhist modernism, has led to certain harmful results for some modern practitioners. She details the following problems: the teaching of meditation en masse rather than a personal relation in which

⁶ Josh Korda, personal correspondence, March 20, 2015.

the teacher has knowledge of the character of the student, the lack of monastic social support and shared soteriological worldview, and immediate access to more advanced or esoteric practices that were traditionally taught after other forms of preliminary training. Compson views intensive silent retreats with relatively lower teacher-to-student ratios as rendering practitioners particularly vulnerable to traumatic activation and emotional distress. In light of this, she asks:

When dislocated from their original context, these ancient techniques might carry new and unanticipated risks. How do we re-member teachings or practices that may have been dislocated? How do we re-envision ways of supporting these practices in new contexts? (Compson, 2014: 133-136).

Compson concludes that in some cases the way that Buddhist meditation has been taught in the West needs to be modified. She forwards the Trauma Resilience Model (TRM), a body-based intervention developed by Laurie Leitch and Elaine Miller-Karas as one healing modality to mitigate the psychological distress that might be caused for some populations by *vipassanā* practice. In summary, Kornfield, Britton, and Compson all echo Korda's concerns about the risks of de-contextualized individual meditative practice and reach the same conclusion that these practices need to be re-embedded in wider relational and communal contexts. For Korda, Bowlby and Main's psychoanalytic theory of secure attachment provides one way to re-envision and re-embed Buddhist meditation.

Internal and External Mindfulness: Secure Attachment in/as/and Buddhist

Practice

One of Korda's dharma podcasts is posted with a photo of a child's hand resting in an adult's with the title, "Towards a Buddhist Approach to Love and Attachment" across the bottom of it (Korda, 2014k). This image might strike one as odd given that the Buddha named his own child Rāhula or "fetter" and that the cultivation of non-attachment is central to Buddhist soteriology. Korda argues, however, that it is crucial to distinguish between two forms of attachment or relationality in Buddhism: the first is *upādāna*, the clinging to people, things, and views, which he believes has been often poorly translated as attachment. The second is *mitta*, which translates as friend and which Korda sees as a model of relationship analogous to that of secure attachment in psychoanalysis.

Korda's delineation between different forms of relationality and attachment within Buddhism receives support from Harvey Aronson. In a comparative reflection on Buddhist and Western psychotherapeutic understandings of attachment, Aronson notes, "In the English translation of Buddhist texts, attachment is reserved for the sticky kind type of fixated relationship to people, places and things or views of such intensity that it can serve as a moral cause for future rebirth. Here attachment binds one to a cycle of pain" (2012: 6). He laments that an unfortunate consequence of translating *upādāna* as attachment without qualifying the specific *form* of attachment it refers to is that Western audiences tend to interpret it as a monolithic prescription for detachment and disengagement. This, however, distorts the historic reality that Buddhists practitioners

have a long history of engagement with others that is marked by qualities associated with secure attachment patterns such as “a rich caring dimensionality” (2012: 7). Further, like Korda, he also finds evidence of healthy attachment within Buddhist discourse, pointing not to *mitta*, however, but the immeasurable qualities of *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *muditā* (compassion) in Theravāda Buddhism. As he states, “In developmental psychology attachment is used to denote the healthy web of needs and interactions between parent and infant that promote safety and security between infant and parent (from the parent side this seems consonant with the use of love and/or compassion in the traditional translation of Buddhist literature)” (2012: 10).

Like Aronson, Korda believes *upādāna* should be reserved for a certain type of unhealthy attachment and that once *upādāna* and *mitta* are sufficiently differentiated, Buddhism offers a number of resources for the flourishing of the latter. First and foremost is the emphasis on sangha or community as one of the three jewels or three refuges of Buddhism. Korda laments that with its focus on individual meditation practice, the sangha, used here in a loose sense of Buddhist community, has been all too often neglected in American convert Buddhism, and, as a corrective, he frequently refers to the importance of *kalyāṇamitta* or spiritual friendship and the centrality of the sangha in the Pāli canon. However, he goes further than re-directing attention to traditional articulations of the sangha by expanding this canonical perspective with what he sees as psychoanalytic and neuroscientific evidence on the inherently social nature of humans and reframing the purpose of sangha through the lens of secure attachment. Korda’s dharma talks, for example, are littered with sentences such as “Secure connection via wise friendships are the whole of the path—the foundation of understanding the dharma, the security of the third refuge.”⁷ Similarly, he champions the sangha as providing a “safe container,” which can collectively “hold” those difficult emotions that individuals cannot tolerate alone and foster corrective interpersonal experiences that can help heal the relational gaps of the past (2013d). Hence whilst Korda legitimates his innovations with recourse to canonical texts, his approach to sangha is less a recovery of traditional sangha and more a rebuilding and revisioning of Buddhist community through a psychoanalytic and neurocognitive lens.

In addition to redirecting attention to the importance of sangha, Korda is also slowly introducing a number of relational practices, which draw from both Buddhist and non-Buddhist sources. These range from structured discussion activities to meditative practices. For example, in order to encourage interaction between sangha members, he asks them to form dyads and triads and gives them questions to discuss that are related to his dharma talk. He has also developed a series of relational and external mindfulness practices, which aim to bring the focused awareness cultivated in individual meditation to interactions with others. One source Korda has drawn on is “conscious interaction,” a communicative practice, which he presents as a supplement to Buddhist practice (2014c). Although Korda draws from non-Buddhist sources in developing relational mindfulness practices, he also legitimates it as Buddhist via Bhikkhu Analayo’s (2004) translation and commentary on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Here Analayo discusses the refrain on internal and external mindfulness within the *sutta*, noting that the presence of the

⁷ Josh Korda, personal correspondence, May 26 2015.

latter has been put aside in modern translations (2004: 94-96). After considering different interpretations, Anayalo concludes that external mindfulness means being mindful of other people and discusses several ways to practice this. Using Anayalo's commentary as a springboard, Korda created new exercises designed to cultivate such external mindfulness and taught a number of these at the 2015 Garrison retreat. One example was dyad work that involved one person sharing something difficult for them whilst their partner followed instructions essentially designed to hold and mirror their partner's experience in an attuned mindful awareness, whilst also tracing their own internal experience of listening.

Another practice led by the co-leader of the retreat, Jessica Morey re-configured mindful walking to include both external and internal attention. Retreatants were instructed to begin walking with 90% to 10% internal-external awareness, gradually altering that to 10% to 90%, and then finishing with a group discussion of what percentage of internal to external awareness was most comfortable or difficult for them and why. Morey shared that she had begun developing external mindfulness practices out of personal and pragmatic pedagogical necessity. She had found that despite her own extensive meditation training at both the Insight Meditation Society and Theravādin monasteries in Burma, she was struggling with interpersonal dynamics in her own life. She also found that when teaching mindfulness to teenagers, they were unable to exclusively focus on silent individual meditation practice. The two experiences combined had prompted her to explore a more relational turn in her Buddhist and secular mindfulness teaching and practice.⁸

Korda and Morey's employment of external mindfulness practice reflects emerging patterns within both the wider Insight and Dharma Punx communities. Morey, who has over twenty years of experience in the East Coast Insight community and who is currently in the ATS teaching training program, reported that Anayalo's recovery of "external mindfulness" in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* had made a strong impact on the Insight community, sharing, for example, that it was one of the required reading texts in the Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leaders program. My own previous scholarship on the Insight community provides some collaborating evidence for this. One area external mindfulness that has been employed is Gregory Kramer's Insight Dialogues, an interpersonal mindfulness meditation practice that draws on psychotherapy and the Pāli Canon, and describes itself as being based on a "relational understanding of the Buddha's teaching" (Gleig, 2012: 141).⁹ Another area is current attempts to make Buddhist sanghas more diverse and inclusive. Insight teacher Larry Yang, for example, utilizes the notion of external mindfulness to support his multicultural hermeneutic of Buddhism. He argues that the Insight community has historically focused exclusively on mindfulness in the internal realm of the meditator, whereas diversity awareness is the application of mindfulness to the external realm or collective experience of community (Author, 2014: 17).

⁸ Jessica Morey, Interview, May 22 2015.

⁹ Metta: Insight Dialogues <https://metta.org/about-us/our-purpose/> accessed July 23 2015.

Similarly, the attachment theory undergirding relational practices is starting to be more widely circulated and systematized within the Against the Stream network. This is due mostly to George Haas, who is a colleague and friend of Korda, the ATS teaching mentor of Morey, and introduced both to attachment theory. Haas is based in Los Angeles and teaches regularly at the ATS center as well as running an online meditation mentor program. His primary meditation training comes from Shinzen Young, and he is a senior facilitator in Young's Vipassana Support International group. Haas has also trained with leading attachment theorists Mary Main and Eric Hesse, and taught his first class on Buddhism and attachment theory in 2008. He has developed and teaches two Buddhist and attachment theory courses delivered in either a ten-month or eight-week intensive format—The Meaningful Life for general audiences and Meditation Interventions for the Addiction Process for the recovery community—as well as a mentoring training and certification program for ATS.¹⁰

Whilst these trends suggest that attachment theory and relational mindfulness practices are becoming more disseminated across the ATS and Dharma Punx network, the question remains, however, as to how deep an impact they are currently having on sangha formation. Although Korda increasingly forefronts secure attachment in his dharma talks, the 2015 Garrison retreat was his first retreat devoted to relational mindfulness, and I was surprised on my site visits to his Sunday and Tuesday classes at how incohesive the group felt. Whilst Korda called on many people by their first names during the Q&A sessions, demonstrating teacher-student connectivity, the drop-in format and rented location of the class did not seem particularly supportive of community cohesion. This made me curious as to how securely connected to each other, as well as Korda, sangha members felt and what intentional group structures were in place to support the translation of Korda's teaching on secure attachment and external mindfulness to an organizational and group dynamic level. Qualitative research on a broad sample of Dharma Punx attendees would be required to determine the former, but in terms of the latter, community organization appears more haphazard and piecemeal than intentional and systematic. There is a student-led Facebook group, Dharma Punx NYC Sangha, which currently has 494 members and which contains posts about social gatherings and political activism events but there are no specific structures such as having regular sangha gatherings or class greeters to support group cohesion. Informal conversations with sangha members revealed some felt it had been easy to connect with other students but others felt connected to Korda but not to the larger sangha.¹¹

One attempt to build up sangha at Dharma Punx NYC has come from Janusz Welin and Rakhel Shapiro, who started a Wednesday night co-facilitated group called Deepen Your Practice in December 2013. Both shared that they had become somewhat frustrated at the drop-in format of Korda's classes and lack of intentional community building in the sangha. In response, they designed a class that includes a more systematic and progressive class structure and intentional community building exercises and activities.

¹⁰ George Haas "Live a Meaningful Life" <http://www.mettagroup.org> accessed July 23 2015.

¹¹"Dharma Punx New York City Sangha" Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/groups/DPXNYCSangha/> [accessed July 22 2015].

Their class has attracted a steady but much smaller number of participants—12-15 compared to 80-100—than Korda’s.¹² This raises questions as to what wider institutional practices are needed to support the emerging relational turn within the Insight network. As well as interpersonal focused teaching and practices, considerations need to be made around how organizational elements such as physical space, class structure and size, volunteer and leadership opportunities, relationships between sub-groups within the larger sangha, and community social events can foster or hinder sangha building.

Secure Attachment and Buddhist Soteriology

As documented above, one of Korda’s main aims is to use Buddhist practices as a means to foster affect regulation and secure attachment. In this section, I will consider how he relates this goal to the Buddhist soteriological aim of *nibbāna*. Even if one agrees with Korda that there are canonical Theravādin Buddhist practices and communal forms that approximate secure attachment in the psychoanalytic sense, these are ultimately viewed as stepping stones upon which to move towards *nibbāna*. Unlike relational psychoanalysis, which affirms attachment needs persisting across the human lifespan, the ultimate Buddhist goal is an unconditioned state. Here Korda departs from classical Theravāda, an issue of which he is well aware. For example, in reflecting on differences between himself and one of his main monastic teachers, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Korda acknowledged, “Than Geoff tends to diminish the importance of secure attachment as an end in itself; he views the unconditioned as the ultimate goal that transcends the conditional happiness afforded by secure attachment.”¹³

To clarify these differences, it is useful to examine Korda’s specific rendering of Buddhist subjectivity and soteriology more closely. Korda aims to develop a spontaneous and flexible sense of self that is able to relate non-defensively to others. He sees this “authentic self” as entirely congruent with the Buddhist model of *anattā* and explains this through two models: “the strategic self” and the “globalization of identity.” Korda notes that when teaching *anattā*, the Buddha talked of the necessity of a provisional, strategic sense of identity that was woven together from the flux of impermanent aggregates into a “coherent single self-narrative, creating a reassuring sense of inner order and stability” (Korda, 2014i). Korda suggests that the authentic self of developmental theory is a necessary foundation for this strategic self, which “constructs itself from the dazzling parade of authentic, spontaneous behavior, impulses and self-stories that naturally arise” (ibid.). In contrast, what Winnicott calls the “false self” or what Korda refers to as the “performative self” is solidified into defensive and regressive patterns that cannot form a coherent or flexible self-identity. In short, for Korda, the authentic self is not a reified essentialist identity underneath performative roles as it seems to be for Winnicott, but rather the fluid flow of spontaneously arising somatic-emotional states, which correspond to the impermanent flow of the five aggregates. In making this distinction, Korda thereby renders Winnicott’s theory, which

¹² Janusz Welin, personal correspondence, August 8, 2015; and Rakhel Shapiro, personal correspondence, November 5, 2015.

¹³ Korda, personal correspondence, May 26, 2015.

valorizes an authentic and non-defensive developmental self, congruent with the Buddhist model of no-self.

A second way Korda harmonizes psychoanalytic and Buddhist models of subjectivity is through a focus on the creation of context specific configurations of self-identity. Here Korda discusses how particular somatic holding patterns are first created in response to situational relational situations in childhood, and then become “globalized” as reified forms of identity. By drawing attention to the original psychodynamic constitution of these states, and through mindfully experiencing their somatic components, however, one can recognize them as relative rather than essentialist identities. Korda’s dharma talks contain many reflections in which he encourages his students to move from reified identity statements expressed in statements such as “I am bad” or “I am anxious” to action specific statements such as “I did something unskillful” or “I am experiencing anxiety” (Korda, 2014d).

With both his teaching on the “strategic self” and on the “globalization of identity,” Korda employs psychotherapeutic insights as further evidence for the impermanence and conditionality of self as taught with *anattā*. How though does this relate to classical Buddhist soteriology? Korda recognizes a range of legitimate goals of Buddhist practice from anxiety reduction to insights into the conditioned nature of self. However, he shared that he had little interest in teaching classical Stages of Insight practice, and is focused rather on the cultivation of “an awareness without agenda,” which is inherently healing and transformative. Korda recognizes that this is a departure from the classical stage-oriented Theravādin approach to liberation but does not see it as necessarily at odds with the latter. The main difference is that Korda sees therapeutic goals like secure attachment or flexible, authentic non-defensive subjectivities not only as necessary preconditions for higher, classical stages of practice but as legitimate ends in themselves.

Korda rarely mentions the soteriological goal of *nibbāna* and when he does it is always in naturalistic rather than metaphysical terms. Liberation is “the capacity to be with whatever arises in life” rather than a “mystical state.” His descriptions of *nibbāna* fall into two main categories: one defines it as the absence of the three poisons, generally rendered in psychotherapeutic terms such as the relinquishing of “unskillful defense mechanisms and addictive behaviors.” The other describes it as an unconditioned state, “a true stillness that is deep and unassailable.” Both are seen as impermanent experiences, however, rather than reflexive of the permanent uprooting of afflictions (Korda, 2014h; Korda, 2014s). Korda’s soteriology is illustrative of what Aronson has identified as a shift from a traditional moral *karmic* narrative to a contemporary Western *psychosomatic* one in which allowance of impermanent, emotional states takes precedence over the cultivation of moral virtues (Aronson, 2012: 23).

Conclusion: Buddhist Modernism Extended and Interrupted

In conclusion, I want to consider the significance of Korda’s approach in terms of the unfolding of Buddhist modernism in the West. David McMahan (2008) correctly identifies depth psychology, as heir to Romanticism, as one of the three main Western discourses

that has shaped Buddhist modernism. He offers a brief history of the western psychological reconfiguration of Buddhism showing how cosmological realms have been translated into psychological forces and how Buddhist practices such as meditation have been rendered as psychotherapeutic techniques (2008: 51-59). Korda both reproduces and updates this psychotherapeutic lineage. His dharma talks are littered with direct psychological assimilations such as describing *asuras* as metaphors for repressed emotions and *Māra* as the super-ego (Korda, 2014e, 2014f). In some places, he seamlessly interweaves Buddhist, psychoanalytic, and neuroscientific thought with little attention to gaps or differences between them. In others, he adopts psychoanalytic insights to temper intensive retreat practice and adjust classical Buddhist practices for different attachment types.

A point worth noting here is that this psychotherapeutic rendering is done intentionally and with self-reflexivity. Korda is fully cognizant of the fact that he is translating cosmological phenomena into psychotherapeutic terms and that this is a departure from canonical Buddhism. He legitimates this reframing through three main strategies: pedagogical-pragmatic, textual-traditional, and cultural-historic. *Pedagogical-pragmatic* is when Korda presents his adoption of therapeutic knowledge as a pragmatic teaching tool to respond to the specific intrapsychic and relational needs of his students. Similarly, he notes that neuroscientific and clinical research evidence convinces certain people of the value of Buddhism. As he puts it, “Hard facts really reach people. I’m not just telling them to do it, but telling them why” (Merz, 2013).

A second strategy is the *textual-traditional*, in which Korda situates his clinical innovations in the Pāli Canon. For example, he introduces the Buddha as an early radical psychologist and the dharma as one of the first “profound and complete set[s] of psychological insights.”¹⁴ He also presents his teachings as contemporary expressions of foundational Buddhist principles: neuroscience and psychoanalysis, for instance, are offered as newly available ways to rigorously examine the causes and conditions of suffering. Additionally, he feels, “every entitlement to import insights from modern neuroscience, schools of western philosophy, and clinical psychology into my teaching and personal practice because the Buddha insisted, in the *Kālāma Sutta*, to constantly examine our beliefs in terms of usefulness in real, daily life” (Korda, 2013b).

Closely related to the *textual-traditional* is the *cultural-historic*. Here Korda legitimates his innovations by situating them as continuous with the adaptations and assimilations that Buddhism has always undertaken as it has travelled across Asia and into the West. As he puts it, “I believe that we cannot escape context in how we understand or teach the dharma; the dharma soaks up the cultural values that surround it wherever and whenever it arrives at a region; so what became Zen Buddhism was a merger of Taoist philosophy and other regional influences and practices.”¹⁵ Ira Helderman (2015) uncovers the same strategy in the work of psychotherapists who incorporate Buddhist mindfulness into their clinical practice. Drawing on his ethnographic work with psychotherapists, Helderman demonstrates that careful attention to psychotherapists’

¹⁴ Korda, personal correspondence, March 20, 2015.

¹⁵ Korda, personal correspondence, March 20, 2015.

own intentional processes of incorporation reveals “that psychotherapists themselves increasingly compare their activities to previous instances when Buddhist traditions were introduced to new communities like medieval China. They at times even cite Buddhological historical literature in support of their analogies” (2015: 67).

As well as continuing certain Buddhist modernist trends, however, Korda should also be seen as countering others. In particular, as amply demonstrated, Korda has interrogated many aspects of the modernist privileging of individual meditation. He places much emphasis in his teaching on the rebuilding of sangha and has critiqued the decontextualization of mindfulness from its wider ethical and communal context. Many of his dharma talks target the individual self that operates as the basic unit of consumption in capitalism and the “well-being industry” that secular mindfulness has given rise to (Korda, 2014b, 2014o, 2013b).

Unlike certain targets of mindfulness critiques, Korda does not use Buddhist techniques to shore up an autonomous, separate self but draws heavily from the relational turn in psychoanalysis to continually emphasize the conditional and relational nature of self. In fact, for Korda, wellness of both the modern self and Buddhist modernism itself appear ultimately dependent upon the development of internal and external secure attachments and the re-embedding of meditation in relational and communal life. Rather than the ubiquitous photo of the individual meditator, heavily critiqued after its repeated appearance on the front cover of *Time Magazine*, Korda’s Buddhist and psychoanalytic interweavings depict the neglected third jewel of sangha or community as the ultimate sign of well-being. Making this image multidimensional, however, will necessitate a continuing re-envisioning of multiple levels of Buddhist modernism from its meditative rhetoric to its organizational structures.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Samantha Whitham for her careful transcription work for this article.

This article is funded in part by the UCF College of Arts and Humanities, Office of the Provost, and Executive Vice President and the Office of Research and Commercialization.

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