

“WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A BUDDHIST?”

Lovro Tacol*

Middle European interdisciplinary master programme in Cognitive Science (MEi:CogSci)
Ljubljana, Slovenia

DOI: 10.7906/indecs.14.4.6
Regular article

Received: 5th October 2016.
Accepted: 24th October 2016.

ABSTRACT

*What is it like to be a Western Buddhist? How does one experience the world around him, how does one describe, or construct, his own vision of the world, what world-views does one have? In the following research I tried to answer all of these questions with the help of phenomenographical and corpus linguistics analysis of texts that 16 Buddhists, an experimental group, and 16 non-Buddhists, who served as a control group, produced when answering a specially designed questionnaire, the *Questionnaire of Life Situations*. The point of it was for participants to describe their experience as vividly and as detailedly as possible. The analyses of all the participants' answers have shed light on quite some differences between the groups, as well as some similarities. Very briefly, Buddhists seem to be a lot more compassionate and tolerant than general population, their way of thinking about the world and about life is much more holistic, as also more positive, optimistic, and bright; they seem to be more self-assure, more peaceful and calm. Although this study has some disadvantages – age bias (non-Buddhist group was fairly younger) and small sample – it represents a novel combination of approaches and an effort to explore the interdisciplinary area of psychology of religion, world-view studies, and cultural issues in cognitive science. In the future, it would be highly interesting to expand the study by getting more participants and, perhaps, including more groups.*

KEY WORDS

Buddhism, phenomenography, corpus linguistics analysis, experience, description

CLASSIFICATION

APA: 2630, 2720, 2920, 2930
JEL: J17, Z12

INTRODUCTION

As the title already hinted at, the following article was dedicated to finding out, and describing the essence of, what it is like to be a Buddhist. By *what it is like* I mean any for this population universal type of experience and the way of describing that experience. The main goal of the study was then to see to which degree Buddhists in the West take over traditional Buddhist teachings, ways of looking at the world and ways of describing the world. Are there any important differences between people that consider themselves Buddhists and those that do not? If there are any noticeable differences, can they be ascribed to the fact that the former endorsed certain Buddhist teachings? And, if there are no differences between the two groups, what can be said about the lack of the differences?

Since I cannot avoid being immersed in the Western culture, and also from the strong personal interest in investigating the interactions between the Western and Eastern culture in general, the focus of my study was on the experience of an average Western Buddhist¹. But why Buddhists in the first place? I am very interested in psychology and sociology of religion and Buddhism seems to be the fastest growing religion in the West both in terms of new converts and more so in terms of "friends" of Buddhism, who seek to study and practice various aspects of Buddhism [1].

Zen and other forms of Buddhism are steadily growing in popularity in the Europe, United States, and elsewhere in the West; practice centres are drawing new members and Buddhism has become a force in popular culture through books and movies. According to the Pew Foundation's *2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, about 27 % of American Buddhists were themselves raised as Buddhists. This means that roughly three-quarters of American Buddhists are converts to the new Buddhism that has grown up in the West. In the *Australian Census of August 2001*, the number of Buddhists had grown by 0,75 % to 1,9 % of the population. That is almost one in fifty Australians declaring themselves to be Buddhists [2]. The *2009 Purdue Social Research Institute Survey* found that 2,2 % of Americans said that Buddhism had "a great deal of influence on their life", and that same percentage said they met with a Buddhist monk or teacher at least a few times a year. As well, 2,7 % said they practiced Buddhist meditation at least once a month, and 3,1 percent said they read Buddhist literature at least monthly. In the *2003 Religion and Diversity survey*, 12,5 % of Americans said Buddhist teachings had "an important influence on their thinking about religion or spirituality". It seems that people in the West are looking for experiential practices, not just a new belief system; it is the transformative practices like meditation which people are really attracted to.

The "art" of my research was to look at things which may not lend themselves to comparison *prima facie*, and which then turn out to be somehow related – or not. I examined our culture's view on Buddhism through the help of qualitative, phenomenographical analysis of texts (I therefore bring forward phenomenological perspective) and more detailed corpus linguistics analysis (that introduces linguistic perspective). The level of explanation was basically psychology (this research thus also incorporates psychological perspective). The study is situated in, and combines, the following fields: psychology of religion, world-view studies, and cultural issues in cognitive science. More precisely, I looked at the intersection of world views, their content and contextuality, and the psychological basis of these world views.

BUDDHIST THOUGHT

What follows below, is a short summary of some of the main Buddhist ideas – those that people in the West, who want to acquaint themselves with Buddhism, usually come across first. Whole philosophical legacy of all the traditions in Buddhism is immensely rich and vast, sadly too extensive to be comprehensibly and accessibly described in this article.

Buddhism is a nontheistic religion, which means that its religious practice and beliefs do not depend on the presence of god(s) [3]. Buddhism is, in fact, so different from other religions that some people question whether it is a religion at all. Siddharta Gautama, commonly known as the Buddha², taught that believing in gods was not useful for those seeking to realize enlightenment. Most religions are defined by their beliefs, but in Buddhism, merely believing in doctrines is beside the point. The Buddha taught that one should not accept doctrines just because they are written in scriptures or preached by priests. Instead, one must find the truth for oneself, within oneself – one must not blindly believe in the teachings but explore them, understand them, and test them against one’s own experience. The focus of Buddhism is thus more on practice than on following belief(s).

The Buddha – as an awakened or enlightened teacher – shared his own insights to help sentient beings end their suffering through the elimination of ignorance and craving. Buddhists believe that this is accomplished through direct understanding and the perception of dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths. These Truths, which are said to be the foundation of Buddhism, are: (i) The truth of suffering (*dukkha*), (ii) The truth of the cause of suffering (*samudaya*), (iii) The truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirhodha*), and (iv) The truth of the path that frees us from suffering (*magga*).

The First Noble Truth is often translated as *Life is suffering*, but the Pali word *dukkha* is much broader and it also refers to anything that is temporary, conditional, subject of change. Thus, even something precious and enjoyable as happiness is *dukkha*, since it is not permanent; great success, which fades with the passing of time, and even the purest state of bliss experienced in spiritual practice, is *dukkha*. The historical Buddha once summarized his own teaching in the following way: “Both formerly and now, it is only *dukkha* that I describe, and the cessation of *dukkha*.” The word *dukkha* certainly does not mean (just) suffering, so from a Buddhist perspective, labelling Buddhism as a “bleak, pessimistic and world-denying philosophy”, as some commentators have done, “may reflect a deep-seated refusal to accept the reality of *dukkha* itself” [3; p.62].

The Second Noble Truth teaches that the cause of suffering is craving or thirst (*tanha*); this can be craving for sensory pleasures, craving to be something, to unite with an experience, or craving to be separated from painful feelings. One continually searches for something outside oneself to become happy, but no matter how successful one is in doing so, one never remains satisfied. Another common explanation presents disturbing emotions as the cause of *dukkha*. In this context, three *root* emotions, also called the *three poisons*, are mentioned: (i) ignorance (of the nature of reality), (ii) attachment (to pleasurable experiences), and (iii) aversion (the fear of getting what we do not want or not getting what we want). The Buddha taught that this thirst and disturbing emotions grow from ignorance of the self.

The Third Noble Truth puts forward the teaching about the end of *dukkha*, the fading, cessation, relinquishment of the craving itself. Cessation is the goal of one’s practice in the Buddhist tradition and comes only when one develops a genuine understanding of the causes of suffering, such as craving and ignorance, and eradicates these causes [5]. Cessation is often equated with the sublime state *nirvana*, which can be described as the state of being in cessation or the process of the cessation; a temporary state of *nirvana* can be said to occur whenever the causes of suffering have ceased in one’s mind.

The Fourth Noble Truth represents the path, or a method, to the cessation of *dukkha*. The path consists of a set of interconnected factors or conditions that, when developed together, lead to the development of *dhyana* (in short, different meditation practices) and with it the end of *dukkha*. The term *path* is otherwise usually taken to mean the Noble Eightfold Path (also known as the Middle Way) which consists of the Right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. The path is a series of stages leading to liberating insight, to the attainment of the sublime state of *nirvana* [3].

We can understand that life is impermanent, but are we impermanent as well? The Buddha taught that before we can understand life and death we must understand the self. An individual, according to the Buddha, is a combination of five *aggregates* of existence, also called the five *skandhas* in Sanskrit. These are: *form* (our physical form), *sensation* (emotional and physical feelings, and our senses), *perception* (cognition, conceptualization, and reasoning), *mental formations* (habits, prejudices, predispositions, volition, attention, faith, conscientiousness, pride, desire, vindictiveness etc.), and *consciousness* (awareness of an object, but without conceptualization). What is most important to understand about the *skandhas*, is that they are empty. They are not qualities that an individual possesses, because there is no one, no *self* possessing them; this doctrine of *no-self* is called *anatman* or *anatta*. The Buddha taught that *I* is not an integral, autonomous entity – the individual self, or ego, is more correctly thought of as a by-product of the *skandhas*.

It is said that wisdom and compassion are the two main pillars of Buddhism. Wisdom, particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, refers to realization of *anatman* or *shunyata*. As for compassion, there exist two words in Pali language – *metta* and *karuna*. *Metta* is a benevolence toward all beings, without discrimination, that is free of selfish attachment. *Karuna* refers to active sympathy (empathy) and gentle affection, a willingness to bear the pain of others, and possibly pity. *Metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* (roughly translated to *sympathetic joy*) and *upeksha* (translates to *limitless equanimity*) are considered four divine states or virtues that Buddhists are to cultivate in themselves.

Reincarnation, quite a popular concept also in the West, is often deemed to originate from Buddhism, but there is actually no Buddhist teaching of some transmigration of the soul to another body after death. However, Buddhists often speak of *rebirth*. But if there is no soul or permanent self, what is it that is *reborn*? Buddha taught that each moment one is born, decays, and dies – what he meant, is that every moment the illusion of *me* renews itself. Not only is nothing carried over from one life to the next, nothing is carried over from one moment to the next³. The force that propels this continuity is *karma*, which is actually nothing but simple action and reaction, cause and effect; *karma* also means *volitional action* in a sense that every thought, word or deed conditioned by desire, hate, passion, illusion, etc. create *karma*. When the effects of *karma* reach across lifetimes – Buddhists believe that even though our physical body stops to function, energies do not die with it, but continue to take some other shape or form – *karma* brings about rebirth. That is, however, not easy to understand. For this reason, many schools of Buddhism emphasize a practice of meditation techniques that enable intimate realization of the illusion of self.

PHENOMENOGRAPHY

Phenomenography is a qualitative research methodology which investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience something or think about something. It first appeared in publications in the early 1980s as an approach to educational research [6,7] – it thus emerged from an empirical rather than a theoretical or philosophical basis [8].

Phenomenography's ontological assumptions are subjectivist – different people experience the world and then construe it in many different ways. The emphasis of this research method is therefore on (analysis of) description. Description is of a great importance because our knowledge of the world is a matter of meaning and of the qualitative similarities and differences in meaning as it is experienced and construed by different people [9]. Apart from the description, phenomenography also seeks an understanding of experience [6].

Phenomenographic studies usually include close interviews with small contextual groups, with the researcher working toward an articulation of the interviewee's reflections on

experience that is as complete as possible [10]. Data analysis is group-oriented, because the aim of phenomenography is to identify possible conceptions of experience related to the phenomenon under investigation, rather than individual experiences; in other words, it aims for a collective analysis of individual experiences [8].

When performing data analysis, the researcher sorts perceptions which emerge from the data collected into specific "categories of description". This process is strongly iterative and comparative – it involves continual sorting and resorting of data and ongoing comparisons between the data and the developing categories of description, as well as between the categories themselves [8]. These categories (and the underlying structure) become the phenomenographic essence of the phenomenon; they are the primary outcomes and are the most important result of phenomenographic research [7]. The categories of description are logically related to one another, typically by way of hierarchically inclusive relationships, although linear and branched relationships can also occur [8].

The focus of phenomenographic analysis is also on the variation: variation in both the perceptions of the phenomenon, as experienced by the interviewee, and in the “ways of seeing something” as experienced and described by the researcher – namely, phenomenography allows researchers to use their own experiences as data for analysis as well [9].

CORPUS LINGUISTICS

Corpus linguistics is a convenient umbrella term for linguistic research that depends on the use of *corpora* (singular *corpus*, i.e. a large body of "real world" texts) [11]. In corpus linguistics, language study is always the study of written texts or text pieces. It is the insistence on working only with real language data taken from the discourse in a principled way and compiled into a corpus. It is an empirically-based approach; empirical evidence serve to advance our understanding of language. Corpus linguistics as a method can be combined with any subfield of linguistics, e.g. psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, critical discourse linguistics.

The focus of corpus linguistics is on the meaning; meaning being what is verbally communicated between the members of a discourse community. Once we ask what a text segment means, we will find the answer only in the discourse, in past text segments which help to interpret this segment, or in new contributions which respond to our question. The discourse is the totality of all the texts that have been produced within a discourse community. However, just like the discourse community, the discourse is not an ontological reality; it is a construct, the object of research constructed by the linguist. It is up to each individual to connect the text segment to their first-person experience [12].

The (single) word is not privileged in terms of meaning. The corpus linguist posits endocentric entities, formally held together by some local grammar, and calls them lexical items or units of meaning. Lexical items can be single words, compounds, multi-word units, phrases, and even idioms. Just like single words, lexical items tend to recur in a discourse. This is why statistical procedures can be used for detecting them in a reasonably large corpus, as significant co-occurrences of the same entities.

One of the main conceptual tools in corpus linguistics analysis is looking for keywords in context – namely, by observing the occurrence of linguistic units in context we find out how they are typically used. Frequency is an important parameter for detecting recurrent patterns defined by the co-occurrence of words and is thus an essential feature for making claims about the discourse. However, statistical significance is never enough. Lexical items also have to be semantically relevant [12].

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

All in all, I gathered descriptions from 16 Buddhists and 16 non-Buddhists. In the Buddhist group there were 7 males (43,75 %) and 9 females (56,25 %), aged from 23 to 63 ($M_{age} = 40,9$). Their native languages were: German (5 participants or 31,25 %), English (4 participants or 25 %), Polish (3 participants or 18,75 %), Slovenian (2 participants or 12,5 %), Italian (1 participant or 6,25 %), and Swedish (1 participant or 6,25 %). Non-Buddhist group also consisted of 7 males (43,75 %) and 9 females (56,25 %), but the group was in general fairly younger, with the age span from 21 to 63 ($M_{age} = 29,9$). From linguistic point of view, this group was less diverse: the leading native language was Slovenian (10 participants or 62,5 %), followed by English (4 participants or 25 %), Croatian (1 participant or 6,25 %), and French (1 participant or 6,25 %).

MATERIALS

For interviews to be structured (i.e. to avoid submitting different questions and/or instructions to participants) I designed a special questionnaire, titled *The Questionnaire of Life Situations*⁴.

Its main goal is to get as vivid and as detailed descriptions about peoples' outlook on life as possible; here my assumption is that a certain outlook is reflected through the description of experience of being immersed in an imagined important situation in life. In the questionnaire I ask participants to imagine how would it be like if they experienced the situation⁵ by posing them always the same question, namely, "How would you feel if ..."⁶. The depth of their introspection is furtherly encouraged by the only instruction at the beginning of a questionnaire: "... describe your feelings, emotions, thoughts, attitudes etc. in detail (at least 5 sentences!)". To reiterate, I want interviewees to let the experience of the question take them wherever their stream of consciousness/experience is going to go and then to detailedly describe the whole content of their experience.

There are all together 10 situations in the questionnaire;

- 2 of them are related to the *outlook on death* ("... somebody close to you died?" and "... you thought about your own death?"),
- 2 to the *attitudes towards other people* ("... somebody talked bad about you behind your back?" and "... you heard someone bragging about oneself?"),
- 2 to the *outlook on nature or environment* ("... you sat at the bay and watched the vast ocean before you?" and "... you read/heard about a natural disaster and its consequences?"),
- 2 to the *outlook on the course of their life* ("... you thought about the future?" and "... you thought about your past?") and,
- 2 of them to the *reactions to a negative and a positive event* ("... you lost your job?" and "... you got a nice present?").

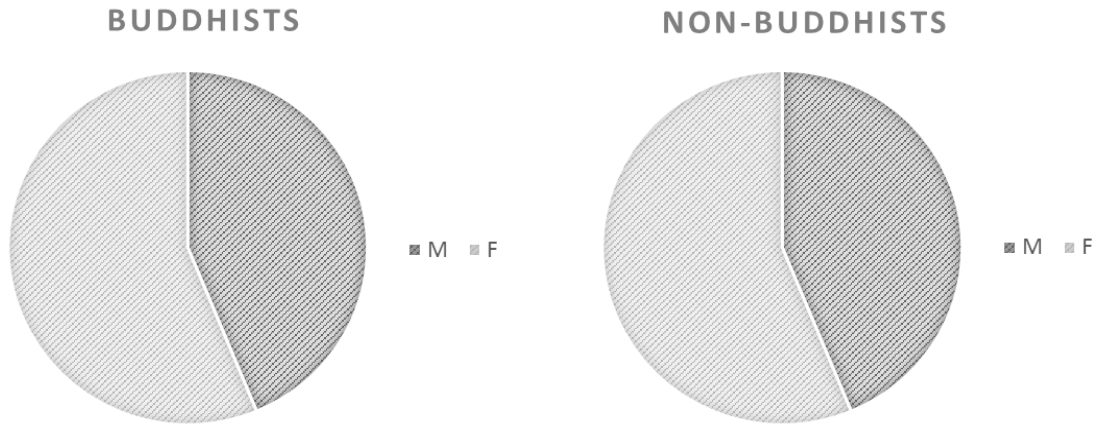


Figure 1. Diagrams, depicting the proportion of genders for two groups. As can be seen, the proportion between female and male participants was the same in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist group.

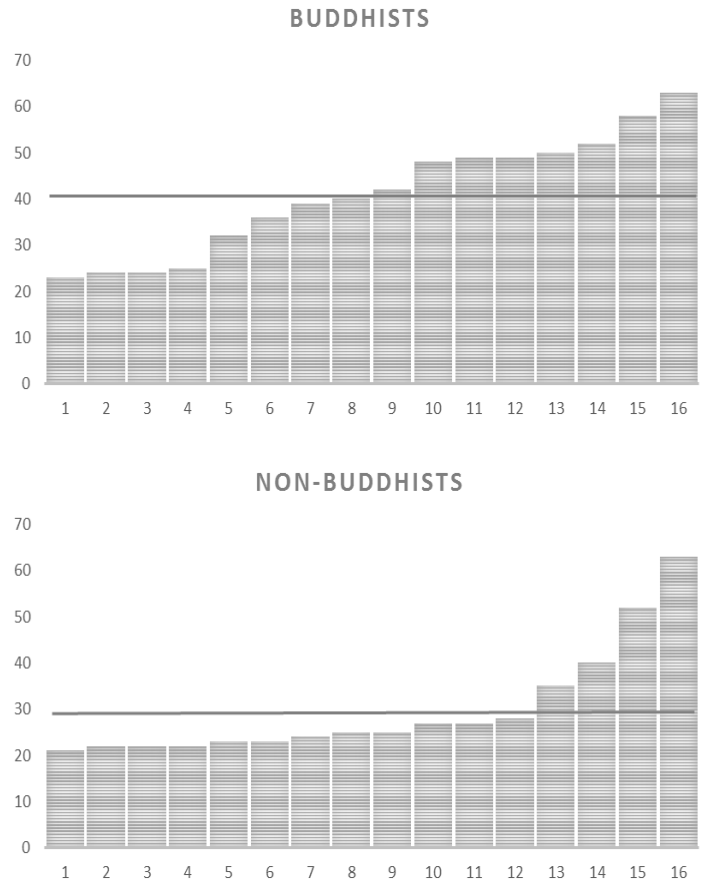


Figure 2. Diagrams showing the age of participants in two groups studied; participants in both groups have been deliberately – to better visualize age distribution – ordered from the youngest to the oldest one. From these diagrams it can be nicely seen how participants in the Buddhist group are more diverse, regarding their age, and how almost every age (group) is represented. On the other hand, the majority of participants in the non-Buddhist group were young adults, people in their early twenties; only a quarter of this group was represented by older population. The difference between two groups can be observed also if we look at the M_{age} , which is in the diagrams displayed with the horizontal line – on average, the participants in the Buddhist group were around 10 years older.

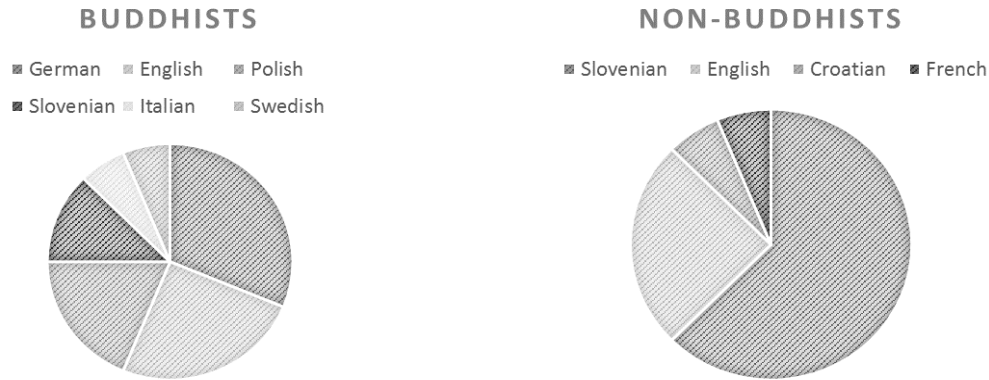


Figure 3. Diagrams that show native languages of people who participated in the study. It can be seen that the Buddhist group was linguistically more diverse than non-Buddhist group. The proportion of participants whose native language is English was exactly the same in both groups.

PROCEDURE

All of the interviewing was executed online, via internet – predominantly because it is easier to find participants from many different countries; I wanted to meet this condition in order to minimise the effect of a native language on the way of describing experience.

Finding participants for the non-Buddhist group was easier and faster – I sent the e-mail encompassing the questionnaire, a short description of my study, and a request for participation to my friends and relatives. In the course of one month around 75 % of people who had received my e-mail, answered me with their completed questionnaire. With that act they became the participants.

However, looking for participants for the Buddhist group took a lot more time and effort. First, I posted my questionnaire along with a longer description of my study and a request for participation to three online forums for practicing Buddhists – involved in practicing certain techniques for mental training, relaxation, contemplation, etc. and who adopted the Buddhist teachings and its world-view more than a year ago – namely *NewBuddhist.com*, *Dharma Wheel*, and *Buddhism on reddit*. Then, I also sent the e-mail (see previous paragraph) to two e-mailing lists – one for practicing Buddhists in Vienna, Austria, and the other for practicing Buddhists in Lublin, Poland. Lastly, one of the previously mentioned forum’s moderator helped me with acquiring a few more e-mail addresses of Buddhists from Germany. In the course of one month and a half, just around 1 % of the people who saw or commented my posts on the online forums and around 30–40 % of the people who got my e-mail either via mailing list or directly, answered me with the completed questionnaire. Those became the participants.

ANALYSIS

The analysis took place in two steps – the first being the phenomenographic analysis and the second one the Corpus linguistics analysis. In the first part, I basically read participants’ answers over and over again until I almost memorised them completely – that helped me to extract repeating topics and patterns from the text more easily. After isolating the reoccurring topics from all the answers, I counted participants who expressed the same idea and ascribed a number to each topic. Lastly, I linked certain topics into smaller or bigger clusters. These clusters represented so called phenomenographic categories of description, the *essence* of all the answers one group has given on a particular question. When I compared the two groups on a question, I mostly dealt with those categories and with their *weight*, i.e. how big and important they were in a group (in comparison to other phenomenographic categories).

For the second part of the analysis, I used a free computer software, a toolkit for Corpus linguistics analysis, called AntConc [14]. When performing Corpus linguistics analysis, one looks at certain lexical units (single words, multi-word units, phrases, etc.) and tries to define their meaning in a context; that being lexical units which continuously co-occur with the one under investigation, on its left and right side. These lexical units are called *collocates*, because they share location with the lexical unit under interest. In the following analysis, I reflected my initial delineation of different outlooks on life, the ones that I included in the *Questionnaire of Life Situations*. I took a closer look at those 10 words: *death*, *life*, *people* (also *person*), *nature* (also *ocean*), *positive*, *negative*, *past*, and *future*. For every word I first counted the occurrences in both groups, then I produced so called *concordance lines* (Figure 4), and finally looked for any repeating lexical units. More precisely, I started with bigger chunks – with multi-word expressions – because this are, in my opinion, the most informative; furtherly, I looked at frequent single words to optimise the explanation of a certain word’s context.

Concordance		Concordance Plot	File View	Clusters/N-Grams	Collocates	Word List	Keyword List
Concordance Hits		40					
Hit	KWIC						
5		come in mind (fortunately) when I think about my past. It's sad because you know it will					
6		a good one after that. I think about my past a lot and I find myself thinking how could					
7		with what might happen. When I think about my past, I generally feel very happy and lucky. I ha					
8		derful moments in the past. Now thinking about my past I realize how simple and carefree some period					
9		he latter are far more common. Thinking about my past is not something especially emotional for me.					
10		It usually comforts me. I use thinking about my past as a way of dealing with present. Whenever I					
11		the benefit of mankind. If I thought about my past I would feel sentimental because I would star					
12		my friends and family. I would look at my past with proud and pleasure and would start smili					
13		it. Because if there wasn't for my past I wouldn't be who I am today.					
14		me. That happened me quite a lot in my past when I wasn't that good as I'm					
15		. I have made peace with many things in my past that had burdened me for a long time. As					
16		ught something negative along. When I think of my past, I feel grateful for all the experiences I go					
17		if something goes wrong. When I think of my past I always think of bad things that happened to					
18		I would consider my present state worse than my past, I would feel sad about it.					

Figure 4. Print-screen of *AntConc*'s interface; the picture shows *concordance lines* with first three *collocates* on the left of the word *past*. In my analysis, the (broader) context was always represented by the maximum of five collocates on every side.

RESULTS

First, I am presenting the results of the phenomenographic analysis; when comparing the two groups, I am actually dealing with so called phenomenographic categories of description and their relations as I view them.

Faced with the question about somebody close dying, Buddhist produced fewer mentions of being sad as well as lesser variety in the description of sadness; participants in this group also transferred the object of sadness from themselves to others, which never happened in the control group. While non-Buddhists described they would (or they did) experience physical pain, shock, disbelief, numbness and mild derealisation if (or when) somebody close died, Buddhists' descriptions formed categories that clearly originated in their specific world view: *wish for good rebirth and help with meditations*, *inevitability and acceptance*, *opportunity to see positive sides and to learn*, and *optimistic continuation of life*.

When thinking about their own death, most of the non-Buddhists' answers fall into phenomenographic categories *fear and anxiety*, *awareness of its unimaginability* and also *absence of fear* on the other side. The latter was the most prevalent category in the Buddhist group. Apart from that Buddhists mainly described that they are aware of death's certainty, that life continues, that they are anticipating and preparing for their own death and that thinking about it gives rise to mindfulness in daily life.

When asked how would they feel if somebody talked behind their back, both groups gave fairly similar answers and they both touched a wide variety of topics. The category *being hurt* was a lot more pronounced in the non-Buddhist group, where it also included sadness, disappointment, feelings of being betrayed. In the Buddhist group, on the other hand, this category was linked to *letting go*. The most prevalent category in both groups was *asking WHY*, but there were some differences regarding the other connections – in the non-Buddhist group this category was linked to *being angry*, whereas among Buddhists it connected to *embarrassment about other's behaviour* and *awareness such people are unhappy*. Buddhists in general expressed more compassion (categories *good wishes for the person* and *trying to forgive*), while non-Buddhists described they would avoid and ignore such people in the future.

If participants in the non-Buddhist group saw somebody bragging in public, they would feel nervous, irritated and would most probably remove themselves from the situation, whereas Buddhists never described something like that; categories *dislike of behaviour* and *confrontation with the bragger* also didn't appear among Buddhists. On the other hand, there were categories which were present only in the Buddhist group, but not among non-Buddhists: *curiosity*, *silent amusement*, *smiling and/or laughing*, and *empathetic tendencies towards the bragger*. These were main differences between the groups, but there were quite some similarities, for example both groups gave descriptions that fall into phenomenographic categories *bragging is good to some extent* and *indifference*.

When describing their experience when sitting at the bay and looking over the vast ocean participants in both groups gave quite similar descriptions; *ocean's calming effect*, *feeling peaceful*, and *feeling relaxed* are examples of such shared phenomenographic categories (however, they were more pronounced in the non-Buddhist group). *Realization of (ocean's, or Earth's) vastness* was also a shared category, but worded very differently – non-Buddhists focused on themselves and how small they are “compared to everything”, while Buddhists simply stated “how vast everything is”. It seems that, in general, non-Buddhists described their feelings more, while Buddhists focused more on the ocean, the water, and the nature as such.

When asked about feelings concerning nature disasters both groups answered in a way that form the most prevalent phenomenographic category *feeling sad and concerned*. Participants from both groups described views which can be attributed to the category *indifference as the result of the media* – however, this was more pronounced in the non-Buddhist group. Furthermore, there were some more visible differences between the groups. While non-Buddhists expressed feelings that fall into categories *feeling scared* and *feeling helpless*, Buddhists, on the other hand, gave answers that form categories *feeling hurt and crying* and *feeling ashamed*. Non-Buddhists described they would imagine themselves in the same situation, whereas Buddhists instead described how they would imagine, and think of, the people who actually were in that situation.

Judging by their answers, when non-Buddhists think about the future, they either feel scared or happy, whereas Buddhists did not mention fear at all. More than the fear of the unknown (expressed also as a burden), as was the case among non-Buddhist participants, Buddhists expressed concern about certain aspects of our socio-economic development. There was one shared phenomenographic category, namely *being determined to be better*, but it is fairly more pronounced among Buddhists. Two quite saturated categories appeared in the Buddhist group only: *belief it is better to be HERE and NOW* and *avoidance of imagining and overthinking the future*.

When thinking about their past, participants in the non-Buddhist group mostly feel nostalgic – some smaller categories, consisting of different types of feelings were linked to mentioned one: *feeling lucky*, *feeling good*, and *awareness that past was simpler*. Feelings of nostalgia

did not occur in the Buddhist group at all. Buddhists, on the other hand, again strongly stated their belief it is better to be HERE and NOW. *Trying not to dwell on the past* was quite a prominent category among Buddhists, too, but it also appeared in a lesser degree among non-Buddhists. The category that appeared in the Buddhist group only, was the category *no regrets* and quite a lot of answers can be attributed to it.

In general, it seems that Buddhists gave more positive, optimistic answers when asked how would they feel if they lost a job, while non-Buddhists described their feelings in a more negative, pessimistic way. For, phenomenographic categories that occurred only in the Buddhist group were *feeling grateful for the new opportunity, realization of the possibility for development, feeling free, and awareness that everything is impermanent*, whereas the categories that appeared only in the non-Buddhist group were *feeling angry, feeling useless, searching for emotional support*. The shared category *feeling worried* was far more pronounced among non-Buddhists and was also worded in a way that participants would experience a lot of stress themselves, while Buddhists described they would especially be worried for others who depend on their income.

Faced with the question about receiving the gift, both groups produced similar descriptions – for example categories *feeling happy* and *feeling grateful* received the greatest number of descriptions in both groups. However, in the non-Buddhist group the answers that fall into the category *feeling happy*, were much more diverse, including superlatives like “very happy” and “overwhelmed”, whereas in the Buddhist group these were simply “happy”. Buddhists gave descriptions that can be attributed to the phenomenographic category *love to share the joy with others*, which was not present in the non-Buddhist group. Strictly Buddhist category was also *awareness that it is impermanent*, while categories *feeling doubts about the expression of thankfulness, questioning the value and the motives, and feeling uncomfortable if it is too expensive* occurred only among non-Buddhists.

When performing the Corpus linguistics analysis, I noticed that Buddhist participants in general exhibited much more holistic view in their answers than non-Buddhists. A lot of times they included the word’s opposite pole, so they mainly wrote about death and life together, positive along with the negative, and they connected past and future in the same sentence. Other, more detailed results of Corpus linguistics analysis are shown in Table 1.

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

THOUGHTS ON SPECIFIC RESULTS

In the process of designing the *Questionnaire of Life Situations*, I was thinking of which questions to pose to find out as much as possible about individual participant’s outlook on course of (their) life. In the end, I decided for “How would you feel if you thought about the future?” and “How would you feel if you thought about your past?” – two questions that at first glance seem the same, but are in my opinion very distinct; note the difference between ‘the’ and ‘your’. In general, I was interested in finding out how participants describe their life, but I nevertheless worded the question about the future like I did on purpose: I was curious to see participants’ understanding of the particular question. It turned out that almost all non-Buddhists answered in a way of what they expect of their future, what they would like to do with their life, what they feel they have to do with themselves, and similar. On the other hand, almost all of the Buddhist participants described different views on human future – some of them were worried about climate change or socio-political situation in the world, others expressed feelings of optimism that everything will turn out good, and so on. I would say that this is a perfect example of how people, who say they are Buddhists, accepted Buddhist teachings and world-views – in this situation it is mainly practicing the non-attachment to self,

Table 1. The comparison of usage of 10 selected words between the two groups.

<i>death</i>	This word was used similarly by the participants in both groups. However, it can be observed that Buddhists linked it directly to life, which never happened in the non-Buddhist group. Buddhists also concerned death as a process, while non-Buddhists considered it in their answers more as a moment.
<i>life</i>	In general, it seems that non-Buddhists focused more on <i>their</i> life, while Buddhists wrote about life in general, about life as universal, all-pervading.
<i>people;</i> <i>person</i>	Participants in both groups used the word <i>people</i> prevalently in the context of finding out about a natural disaster and its consequences, and the word <i>person</i> mainly in the context of receiving a present. Non-Buddhists frequently used the word <i>like</i> , designating which people they feel inclined to and which not, whereas that kind of description never happened in the Buddhist group. Buddhists used the word <i>sad</i> near to <i>people</i> to express their empathy with people in distress, which did not occur in the non-Buddhist group. Interestingly, non-Buddhists used <i>person</i> just to refer to other persons, while Buddhists used it also to refer to themselves.
<i>nature;</i> <i>ocean</i>	While participants in the non-Buddhist group expressed appreciation, admiration, and even love towards the nature, Buddhist participants seemed to have focused mainly on nature's power and expressed feelings of worry. As for the word <i>ocean</i> , non-Buddhists described their admiration of its vastness and again expressed how they love being in the nature by expressing their love for the ocean. Buddhists hardly used the word <i>ocean</i> – instead they used <i>water</i> very frequently. They used it when they diverted their train of thought from the feelings and just wanted to explain what the water means to them or to the humankind, in general.
<i>positive</i>	The undoubtful similarity between the groups is that they both used the word rather rarely. Non-Buddhists used it mostly in the context of (imagining) their future, while Buddhists seem to have used it prevalently when explicitly deciding on which feelings to describe and in the context of describing their state of mind.
<i>negative</i>	Sadly, not much can be said about the general use of this word in both groups, because participants rarely used it in their answers. Non-Buddhists understood <i>negative</i> more in a sense of a type of feelings which arise when they think of a specific event in their life; on the other hand, Buddhists understood it more as a type of "external" phenomena (attitudes, energies etc.) and also discussed it together with its opposite.
<i>past</i>	Non-Buddhist participants seem to <i>think about</i> the past far more than Buddhist participants; in the first group, namely, there were three times more occurrences of these kind of expressions than in the second. Non-Buddhists in general wrote more about thinking itself, while Buddhists, when mentioning <i>past</i> , went <i>in medias res</i> and described the actual past events, experience, memories etc. Buddhists used the article <i>the</i> a lot more frequently than the possessive modifier <i>my</i> ; exactly the opposite happened in the non-Buddhist group.
<i>future</i>	Participants in the non-Buddhist group expressed thinking about the future a lot more frequently than those in the Buddhist group; apart from that, non-Buddhists used “ <i>when</i> I think about” noticeably more, whereas Buddhists used “ <i>if</i> I think about”. It can be, again, observed that non-Buddhist participants used the possessive modifier “ <i>my</i> ” a lot more frequently than the article “ <i>the</i> ”; exactly the opposite happened in the Buddhist group.

or more specifically, trying to diminish the egocentric perspective. I also think that Buddhists, expressing thoughts or feelings directed towards the whole planet instead at themselves, showed they actually realise the cultivation of compassion, one of the main pillars of Buddhism, or *Metta* (which can be roughly translated as a benevolence toward all beings, without discrimination, that is free of selfish attachment).

Another observation concerning Buddhists' display of their compassion, is that when answering a question "How would you feel if you read/heard about a natural disaster and its consequences?", they wrote answers that form phenomenographic categories *feeling hurt and crying* and *feeling ashamed*, whereas non-Buddhists expressed feelings that fall into categories *feeling scared* and *feeling helpless*. One aspect of compassion, *Karuna*, refers to feeling empathy and gentle affection, a willingness to bear the pain of others, and possibly pity. I believe that Buddhists exhibited a similar kind of compassion in their answers. Some of the Buddhist participants even explained that it does not matter if the person who died is their close one or someone they do not know – in any case it is a (human) being and they feel the same with and for everyone.

Apart from the previously mentioned situations, Buddhists wrote they would express compassion in wide variety of hypothetical scenarios – from being compassionate towards the person who would gossip about them, feeling compassion towards people who would brag about themselves in public, maintaining compassion towards employers who would fire them from a job, to being compassionate towards people who would delve too much in the past or in the future instead of being in the present. Describing compassionate feelings was actually so prevalent that almost every Buddhist included them in the questionnaire at least once; on the other hand, non-Buddhists hardly mentioned the word *compassion* (there was only one occurrence altogether).

But, is all this compassion that "came out" of Buddhists genuine or were they only mentioning it because it is supposed to be a "Buddhist thing", that is, because they wanted to present themselves as good and empathetic persons? Well, I actually cannot answer this question, but I can presume that some amount of social desirability bias is always present when conducting research with self-reports, especially with questionnaires. One of the possibilities to see how honest the Buddhist questions were, would be to check which Buddhists wrote (more) about compassion. If it turned out that younger participants, who just recently took over Buddhist teachings, more frequently described being compassionate than older participants, I could conclude that they still feel some sort of need to "fit in", to satisfy the picture others have of Buddhists. I have indeed checked for any correlation between mentioning compassion and age of a Buddhist, but it turned out that there is none – no matter how old the participant, all expressed compassion and love to a same degree, and also in a very similar way.

When I was reading through the answers on questions "How would you feel if somebody close to you died?" and "How would you feel if you lost your job?", I was deeply surprised by the answers from the participants in the non-Buddhist group. Even though the first question represents the outlook on death and the second one the outlook on a negative event, they can also represent the distinction between the outlooks on losing a person and losing a thing. In short, both questions regard the experience of loss – however, I expected that participants' responses will be stronger in case of losing a person. It turned out that non-Buddhists displayed extremely similar reactions in both cases; they reported feelings of shock and disbelief, sadness, irritability and crying, both if they lost a person and if they lost a job. Perhaps this is a reflection of current socio-economical state in most of the European countries where it is hard to get a job, to keep a job, and, in general, to have enough income to sustain oneself and one's family. Maybe it is also a reflection of Western culture's materialism and materialistic values. Notwithstanding the explanation, such extreme negative

responses for the loss of a job did not occur at all among Buddhist participants; as a matter of fact, they were not even negative. Quite on the contrary, Buddhists regarded the loss of a job as an opportunity for new experience in life and expressed mostly the feelings of gratitude. Apart from that, they wrote about the impermanence of everything in life – why would, then, a job be an exception? Once again, it seems that they indeed internalise what they have learnt from Buddha's teachings; in this case, Buddhists showed their understanding and embracing of the notion of *anicca*, impermanence of everything, everlasting flux and change of everything in life.

When I asked non-Buddhist participants "How would you feel if you sat at the bay and watched the vast ocean before you?", I got plenty of answers such as *calm, peaceful, relaxed, free* etc. but almost none from Buddhist participants. The latter mostly reported feelings of joy and happiness. Why did Buddhists not express more calmness, peacefulness, relaxedness ... in their answers? After all, the imagined scene seems to be one of the most calm and peaceful scenes possible. But after giving it more thought, the difference between the groups seems really sensible. Buddhists practice meditation regularly – some of the participants in my study do it on everyday basis – and they thus probably experience feelings of calmness, peacefulness, relaxedness, (mental) freedom, and such every day, be it in the nature, at their homes, or maybe even in the office. They practice different meditation and relaxation techniques to "transfer" the experience from meditative state to everyday wakeful state; they strive to achieve peace (of mind) in every kind of situation. That is most probably also the reason they would not feel (or report) any particular feeling when they imagined looking at the ocean. Non-Buddhists, on the other hand, treat the scenario as a very special one – they do not experience that kind of stillness and peace very frequently, so they cherish that kind of moments even more.

THOUGHTS ON STUDY LIMITATIONS

Let me now turn to some of the possible limits and drawbacks of my research. I think that one of the first drawbacks is the problem of big mean age difference between two groups (participants in the Buddhist group were on average 10 years older than participants in the non-Buddhist group). The other important thing to stress is that non-Buddhists were mostly people in their early twenties. I think this could present a serious bias to evaluating and interpreting the differences between the groups. After all, I am aware of specific social environments different age groups are immersed in, of distinct contexts they are surrounded with, and of different life experience people of different age groups go through. For instance, participants in their twenties have, perhaps, not completed their studies, and still live with their parents. On the other hand, middle-aged participants most probably have a job and are parents; maybe they have already lost their own parents. There are also elderly participants, who already enjoy retirement, their children are adults and perhaps even have their own children. To conclude, it could happen that because of the age bias the differences that I ascribed to Buddhism actually come from differences in age and age-related experience.

For the whole time during data analysis phase and especially when going through results, I have treated the experimental group, namely the Buddhist one, as a homogenous group. But is it really that homogenous? It may be fairly less homogenous than I, when started this study, expected. The quarter of participants in the Buddhist group are in their mid-twenties, which means, considering the fact they were born and raised in the Western culture, that they have just begun to take over Buddhist teachings and incorporate them in their lives. They may have only encountered Buddhism in the last year, and maybe they know less about Buddha's teachings that I do after studying for the research, but they call themselves Buddhists nonetheless, and thus ended in the Buddhist group. On the other hand, exactly a quarter of

Buddhist participants were elderly (elderly as over 50 years old) and might as such have already lived two, or even three, decades of life dedicated to Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice. The other half of participants in this group, in their thirties and forties, are probably somewhere between the two extremes I have just described. All in all, I do not know exactly to what degree have Buddhist teachings influenced their style of living, their way of thinking, their way of describing their experience, etc. The same, of course, goes for the young "Buddhists" and for the elderly "dedicated Buddhists". So, in fact, it seems that there are two problems here: one is that of the obvious heterogeneity in the Buddhist group, which makes me (and the reader) take all the results with a grain of salt, and the other is the practical impossibility to determine in any way "how Buddhist" someone is. Of course, I could include a question like "For how many years do you consider yourself a Buddhist now?" in the first part of my questionnaire, but would the number provided really tell me something? Does someone, who is Buddhist for 10 years, exhibit more pronounced characteristics of way of thinking, doing, and living – or is more "advanced" on his path – than someone who is Buddhist for, let us say, 5 years? I do not believe that years of being a Buddhist really correlate with being wiser, more compassionate, more indifferent, more present, and whatnot; I think that nurturing and developing all these qualities instead relies more on some sort of person's general intelligence and insight, and of course on the level of their mental and spiritual development before they proclaimed themselves as Buddhists.

THOUGHTS ON STATUS OF BUDDHISM IN WESTERN CULTURE

To make the situation even more complicated, the problem is also that different people probably define themselves as Buddhists at different times of their *path*. I imagine that some may read few books or go to a few lectures about Buddhism, find it interesting, and soon call themselves a Buddhist, while others might spend years contemplating Buddhist teachings, embracing them in everyday life, practicing different kinds of meditations, and still not call themselves a Buddhist. It is quite probable that in my study I stumbled only upon people who are not (yet) "real" Buddhists; whatever a "real" Western Buddhist is, actually. After all, I looked for potential participants largely via internet forums, and as one forum's moderator assured, most of the "real" Buddhists do not even have an e-mail account, let alone they engage in some internet forums, which host endless discussions about different topics.

In the introduction I mentioned how many people in the West are converting to Buddhism; I think that being a Buddhist is quite popular nowadays, that it is "trendy" and "cool". Most of the people who embrace Buddhism may look for a more peaceful way of living, a stress-free zone in an otherwise hectic and fast-paced world. They may go to the local Buddhist centre once in a while to chant and meditate in a group and they may change their haircut and light some scented candles at home. But, does that all make them "real" Buddhists? Or did they just embrace one style of living, but they could as well endorse some other – and maybe will, after they get tired of Buddhism? A friendly remark that the "real" Buddhists do not use internet and a few confessions of people that wanted to be Buddhists, support my belief that a number of people who converted to Buddhism represent more of a new-age trend than sincere devotion to religion, faith and/or practice. Myriad of different meditation techniques (some of them do not have any roots in traditional Buddhism, but are promoted as Buddhist) classes, yoga classes, camps, retreats, even special clothing and accessories, etc. indicates there are companies that obviously found out that Buddhism is "trendy", and now seek costumers in people who want to escape from stressful everyday life, and find some temporary peace, some sort of "instant bliss". As an excerpt from one of the former "friends of Buddhism" suggests: "So many people in the West are participating in Buddhism as if it were a hobby. I have suffered from this delusion. I tried to keep the path of transformation at a safe distance

by convincing myself that the East was spiritually superior. [...] So, I read the books and remembered my lines. I engaged in wordy debates about Buddhist philosophy without the slightest clue as to what I was talking about. [...] I was the same old miserable person with a new wardrobe and vocabulary. I had created some fairy tale apart from my daily life. I was still trapped in my imagination, and as a result nothing changed" [15].

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I find qualitative research and phenomenology very tempting and extremely promising. Even though they present quite a challenge, I will try to do a similar study in the future. Perhaps it would be enough for the beginning to just expand the present study and simply gather a lot more participants, for instance 100 in each group; I am sure that in this case biases would be less likely to occur. The next step could be to exchange Buddhists with members of some other religion, faith or practice, for instance Christians or Muslims, and investigate their way of describing the inner and the outer world(s). It would be especially highly interesting to include several groups of participants, with each group representing a different world religion. I could, then, modify or extend my initial questionnaire and ask for all sorts of questions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to express gratitude to my supervisor, dr. Alexander Batthyany. Thank you for your persistent support, out-of-the-box ideas, and that you never stopped doubting in me! Next, I would like to thank each and every one of the participants – this study would not be possible without your answers, without your descriptions. I know it was quite a challenge to write so much. This is the reason I am even more thankful for your effort. Third, I would also like to give thanks to all of you who helped me in the process of acquiring new participants: you have made my life much easier. Last but not least, thank you, dr. Thomas Nagel, who – among other works you have written – inspired me with your essay "*What is it like to be a bat?*" to title my project in the same way.

REMARKS

¹This term would translate as a resident of Europe, or countries of European colonial origin in the Americas, northern Asia, and Oceania, who embraced Buddhist teachings and/or practices.

²*Buddha* literally means *the awakened one*; according to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha lived and taught in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE [4].

³This is a part of the concept of *anicca* (meaning *impermanence*): all phenomena, including beings, are in a constant state of flux – always changing, always becoming, always dying.

⁴The complete questionnaire is in the Appendix.

⁵In other words, what would it be like to *be them* (in certain situation) – in the Nagel's sense of the subjective character of consciousness, a *what it is like* aspect [13].

⁶I am aware that some of the situations inside the questionnaire were already experienced in the lives of most of the participants and thus would not need to be stated in the conditional mood, but I wanted to standardize the way of posing questions to standardize the way people start to imagine, re-experience, re-live, and to introspect.

APPENDIX



THE QUESTIONNAIRE OF LIFE SITUATIONS

Gender:	
Age:	
Native language:	

Below you will find a set of questions asking you about different situations in life. Please, try to **imagine each situation as vividly as possible** and then **describe** your feelings, emotions, thoughts, attitudes etc. **in detail (at least 5 sentences!)**

1.) How would you feel if somebody close to you died?

2.) How would you feel if you lost your job?

3.) How would you feel if you got a nice present?

4.) How would you feel if somebody talked bad about you behind your back?

5.) How would you feel if you sat at the bay and watched the vast ocean before you?



6.) How would you feel if you thought about your own death?

7.) How would you feel if you heard someone bragging about oneself?

8.) How would you feel if you read/heard about a natural disaster and its consequences?

9.) How would you feel if you thought about the future?

10.) How would you feel if you thought about your past?

REFERENCES

- [1] Guruge, A.: *Role of the Sri Lankan Leadership in the Protection of Buddhism*. All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, Colombo, 2008,
- [2] Brahmavamsa, A.: *Growth of Buddhism in the West*. Third Buddhist Summit, Phnom Penh, December, 2002,
- [3] Gethin, R.: *Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998,
- [4] Lopez, D.S.: *The Story of Buddhism*. HarperCollins, New York, 2001,
- [5] Kyabgon, T.: *The Essence of Buddhism*. Shambhala Publications, Boston, 2001,
- [6] Marton, F.: *Phenomenography – describing conceptions of the world around us*. *Instructional Science* **10**(2), 177-200, 1981, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00132516>,
- [7] Marton, F.: *Phenomenography – a research approach investigating different understandings of reality*. *Journal of Thought* **21**(2), 28-49, 1986,
- [8] Åkerlind, G.: *Variation and commonality in phenomenographic research methods*. *Higher Education Research & Development* **24**(4), 321-334, 2005, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360500284672>,
- [9] Svensson, L.: *Theoretical foundations of phenomenography*. *Higher Education Research & Development* **16**(2), 159-171, 1997, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0729436970160204>,
- [10] Marton, F. and Booth, S.: *Learning and Awareness*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey, 1997,
- [11] Hoffmann, S.; Rayson, P. and Leech, G.: *Introduction: English corpus linguistics – looking back, moving forward*. *Language and Computers* **74**(1), 1-4, 2011,
- [12] Teubert, W.: *My version of corpus linguistics*. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* **10**(1), 1-13, 2005, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.10.1.01teu>,
- [13] Nagel, T.: *What is it like to be a bat?* *The Philosophical Review* **83**(4), 435-450, 1974, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2183914>,
- [14] Anthony, L.: *AntConc (Version 3.4.3)*. Computer Software. Waseda University, Tokyo, 2014,
- [15] Riggs, B.: *Buddhism in the West: Make-Believe or Authentic Spirituality?* <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2011/08/buddhism-in-the-west-make-believe-or-authentic-spirituality>, accessed 19th August 2016.