Delineating the 'Dark Night' in Buddhist Postmodernism

Anna Lutkajtis

Introduction

In contemporary Western meditation-based convert Buddhist lineages,[1] the term 'dark night' has been adopted in order to describe a variety of meditation-related difficulties. While the term dark night is not a Buddhist term - rather it is an abbreviated form of the expression 'dark night of the soul' and derives from Christian mysticism – it has recently been appropriated in postmodern Buddhist discourses. The Buddhist dark night is referred to in a range of media, including popular news articles, discussion forums, blogs, podcasts, and texts and meditation manuals written by well-known contemporary meditation teachers. Despite the proliferation of the phrase, there has been much confusion regarding what the term dark night actually refers to in a Buddhist postmodern context. Given that the study of meditation-related difficulties is becoming an area of interest in both the sciences and the humanities, I argue that it is important to delineate the term dark night in Buddhist postmodernism.[2] Hence, I have utilised discourse analysis in order to examine several primary sources that refer to the

Anna Lutkajtis is an independent researcher based in Sydney.

[1] The term 'Western meditation-based convert Buddhist lineages' is used by Ann Gleig to describe "convert" or "white" Buddhism as practiced predominantly by Euro-Americans. Gleig writes that "Converts are concerned with seeking enlightenment and focus heavily on meditation practice." Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 7.

[2] While scholars such as David McMahan have referred to 'Buddhist Modernism' (a form of Buddhism that has resulted from the encounter between traditional Buddhism and Western modernity under colonialism) Gleig argues that there are clear indications that convert Buddhist lineages have passed the modern age and are now postmodern. Themes that are more suggestive of postmodernism (for example, globalism, the adoption of technology, recognition of diversity, and a renewed interest in tradition), are certainly found in the following case studies. Hence while there is much debate regarding the relationship of postmodernity to modernity I choose to adopt the term 'Buddhist Postmodernism' when referring to the practices, figures and communities described in this article.

Buddhist postmodern dark night. Based on this analysis, I argue that there are three dominant discourses regarding the dark night in Buddhist postmodernism: 1) the '*dukkha nana'* discourse; 2) the 'insight gone wrong' discourse; and 3) the meditation 'adverse effects' discourse. While these discourses appear, on the surface, to be quite different, they are linked by a common theme; that is, an attempt to differentiate between Buddhist meditation-related difficulties and Western psychopathology.

The Dark Night: A Brief History

It is important to note that the term dark night is not a Buddhist term, rather it is an abbreviated form of the expression 'dark night of the soul' and derives from Christian mysticism. The term commonly refers to a poem and theological commentary written by the 16th-century Spanish mystic and poet St John of the Cross (1542–1591). The poem – *La Noche Oscura del Alma* – describes the difficult journey of the soul in its quest to reach mystical union with God. This is a journey that involves periods of profound spiritual suffering and desolation. While there are various analyses of St John's dark night, in general it is interpreted as referring to a profound feeling of spiritual 'dryness' or the absence of God.[3] This sense of alienation from God has been described as the "darkness of midnight when detachment has left us all alone and all is lost."[4] When it reaches this level of despair, the dark night may become a crisis of faith and result in intense doubt regarding the spiritual path. Historically, many saints and seekers have spoken of such experiences of spiritual darkness (for example, Mother Theresa and St Teresa of Avila). In the Christian tradition, these dark periods are usually recognized as periods of great spiritual development.

In the 1960s and 1970s the term 'dark night of the soul' transcended the Christian spiritual tradition from which it originated and was integrated into modern Western psychology. Specifically the term was adopted by transpersonal psychologists interested in 'spiritual crisis' or 'spiritual emergence.'[5] Stanislav and Christina Grof coined the term spiritual

[3] For example, John H. Coe, 'Musings on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, vol. 28 no. 4 (2000), pp. 293-307.

[4] Daniel A. Dombrowski, *St John of the Cross: An Appreciation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 30.

emergence in order to describe a period of significant distress associated with a spiritual awakening.[6] According to Grof and Grof, spiritual crisis or emergence occurs when an individual's process of spiritual growth and change becomes chaotic and overwhelming, resulting in disruption to psychological, social and occupational functioning. While the manifestations of spiritual crisis are highly individual, and no two spiritual crises are exactly the same, there are some common features that appear for most people. These include a loss of sense of identity, radically changing personal values, and the occurrence of mystical and spiritual experiences.[7] Mentions of the dark night of the soul can be found in the transpersonal spiritual crisis literature and these mentions usually refer to St John of the Cross' dark night as a classic example of a spiritual crisis.[8]

In the transpersonal psychology paradigm, a dark night may occur for any individual who is on a spiritual path and, as a result, is engaged in a personal spiritual transformative process. This process may include unusual and distressing states of consciousness that traditional Western psychiatry would normally define as psychopathology. However, Grof and Grof[9] argue that such experiences are actually crises of personal transformation: "Episodes of this kind have been described in sacred literature of all ages as a result of meditative practices and as signposts of the mystical path." Italian psychiatrist and transpersonal pioneer Roberto Assagioli refers to the dark night as a stage of growth, a purification process, and a 'divine homesickness.'[10] Transpersonal psychologist Ken Wilber refers to the dark night as an "abandonment depression" that occurs when one's experience of the divine begins to fade.[11] It is important to note that while transpersonal

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[5] The transpersonal movement emerged out of the encounter between Western psychology, Eastern contemplative traditions, and the psychedelic counterculture of California in the 1960s. Transpersonal psychology acknowledges the importance of transpersonal and spiritual dimensions of human existence.

[6] Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof, *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis* (New York: Tarcher, 1989), p. x.

[7] Grof and Grof, *Spiritual Emergency*, pp. 13-26.

[8] Grof and Grof, *Spiritual Emergency*, pp. 40; 140; 184.

[9] Grof and Grof, *Spiritual Emergency*, p. x.

[10] Roberto Assagioli, 'Self-realization and Psychological Disturbances', in *Spiritual Emergency* eds Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof (New York and Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1989), pp. 39-40.

psychology references 'the divine,' the transpersonal dark night is less concerned with traditional notions of God and organised religion, and more about a transformation of the private psychological self. The transpersonal dark night may involve a loss of spiritual or religious faith, but it also refers more generally to a loss in one's sense of personal identity, life direction and purpose. Hence, the transpersonal dark night contains spiritual elements, but it is a private, mystical, individualised spirituality that has emerged from the sociological interaction between Eastern/shamanic traditions and a Western psychological worldview.

The *Dukkha Nanas*

The dark night first made its appearance in postmodern Buddhism with the work of American Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield. Kornfield is a teacher in the American *vipassana* movement, a former Theravada monk and founding member of the Insight Meditation Society. Part of the baby boomer generation of American dharma teachers, Kornfield has been at the forefront of a movement that attempts to integrate the traditional teachings of Buddhism with the humanistic values of the European Enlightenment and Western psychology.[12] Gleig argues that Kornfield's approach has re-visioned the Buddhist goal of enlightenment from a transcendental condition that demands world renunciation, to an embodied enlightenment that is possible for lay practitioners in everyday life.[13] Hence, Kornfield's focus is on the integration of spiritual insight into worldly life and the challenges that may accompany this integration.

Kornfield brought the term dark night into the popular postmodern Buddhist vernacular in 1989 when he wrote a chapter for Grof and Grof's classic text *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis.*[14] Titled 'Obstacles and Vicissitudes in Spiritual Practice' Kornfield's chapter details a variety of difficulties on the spiritual path and briefly mentions the term dark night in relation to the Theravada *dukkha nanas* (Pali: insights into suffering), a series of insights that are characterised

[11] Ken Wilber, 'The Spectrum of Pathologies,' in *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision*, eds Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan (New York NY: Tarcher/Penguin, 1993), p. 149.
[12] Ann Gleig, 'From Theravada to Tantra: The Making of an American Tantric Buddhism?' *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2013), pp. 221-238.
[13] Gleig, 'From Theravada,' p. 221.
[14] Grof and Grof, *Spiritual Emergency*, pp. 137-169.

by fear, misery and disgust and which can cause mental distress.[15] As a meditator progresses through the *dukkha nanas*, they can expect to experience a range of challenging perceptual, emotional and psychological changes. The *dukkha nanas* are well documented in Buddhist manuals such as the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification), the *Vimuttimaga* (The Path of Freedom), and the *Abidhamma*, and are usually interpreted as milestones on the path to enlightenment. In his 1993 work *A Path With Heart* Kornfield is more explicit about the connection between the dark night and the *dukkha nanas*. In this text he refers to the dark night as part of a process of death and rebirth which occurs during insight meditation and which involves the gradual dissolution of personal identity.[16] This painful process involves cycling through the *dukkha nanas*.

In *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry,* a book which focuses on life after spiritual awakening, Kornfield uses the term dark night to refer to a more general sense of darkness and loss that occurs with the fading of mystical experiences.[17] As scholars and mystics will attest, all mystical peak experiences are inevitably followed by a return to the conventional self and to mundane life. The ecstatic non-ordinary states that can be achieved in contemplative practice tend to fade with time as an individual returns to a state of ordinary consciousness, and one is left with the mundane task of integrating insights into everyday life. Similar to Assagioli's 'divine homesickness' and Wilber's 'abandonment depression,' here Kornfield uses the term 'dark night' to refer to the "long painful periods in which we lose our sense of connection with the Divine."[18] However, there is still a connection to the *dukkha nanas* as Kornfield draws attention to the cyclical nature of the contemplative path. He notes that the progress of insight is not linear, but "circular and continuous" and as one progresses one will face a fluctuating series of exalted mystical states and future dark nights.[19]

The use of the term dark night to describe the *dukkha nanas* has been developed further by Daniel Ingram, an experienced meditator in

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[15] Jack Kornfield, 'Obstacles and Vicissitudes in Spiritual Practice,' in *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*, eds Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof (New York and Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1989), p. 164.
[16] Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1993), p. 148.
[17] Jack Kornfield, *After The Ecstasy, the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2000), pp. 113-115.
[18] Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy*, p. 113.
[19] Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy*, p. 116.

the *vipassana* tradition and a founder of the 'Pragmatic Dharma' movement: a movement that emphasises a secular, practical and transparent approach to meditation practice. While he does not identify as a dharma teacher, Ingram is the author of a popular meditation manual *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha (MCTB)*[20] and the founder of the Dharma Overground,[21] a website which includes a forum where meditation practitioners can discuss their experiences. Ingram's personal style is reflective of the characteristics of Gen X dharma teachers, who, compared to the baby boomer generation are "much less performative as teachers and much more comfortable with personal disclosure."[22] Hence, *MCTB* provides an exceptionally detailed description of the *dukkha nanas*, and the perceptual, emotional and cognitive challenges that accompany these stages of insight. In the Gen X spirit of full dharma disclosure, Ingram also discusses his own personal experiences with the dark night in *MCTB* ("I was a chronic Dark Nighter for over ten years") and on the Dharma Overground forums.[23] At the time of writing, the Dharma Overground category 'Dealing with the Dark Night' had 218 individual threads dedicated to the topic of the dark night.[24]

Like Kornfield, Ingram takes the view that the dark night is not just a phenomenon that happens on the meditation cushion; if unresolved, it can 'bleedthrough' and impact the everyday personal life of a meditation practitioner, causing long-lasting emotional disturbances.[25] Further, for some people the effects of the *dukkha nanas* may get intermeshed with pre-existing psychological issues, leading to a state that can be "so overwhelming as to preclude normal functioning."[26] Ingram writes that effects of the *dukkha nanas* may "haunt" practitioners in their daily life, "sapping their energy and motivation, and perhaps even causing feelings of unease, depression, paranoia, and even suicidal thoughts."[27] In extreme cases this may result in

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[20] Daniel M. Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book* (London, UK: Aeon Books Ltd, 2018).
[21] *Dharma Overground* at https://www.dharmaoverground.org/. Accessed 30 July 2019.
[22] Gleig, *American Dharma*, p. 222.
[23] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 234.
[24] *Dharma Overground* at https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/category/89581. Accessed 30 July 2019.
[25] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 215.
[26] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 215.
[27] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 221.

a practitioner making "radical life changes that cannot be easily undone, such as a divorce or firing off angry emails to your boss."[28]

Both Kornfield and Ingram refer to dark night 'cycles,' and in *MCTB* Ingram describes these cycles in great detail. He notes a major problem that can occur with the dark night; that is, a meditator may get stuck in a dark night cycle – a situation which prevents the progress of insight and leads to the meditator becoming a "Dark Night yogi" or a "dark nighter."[29] Until the meditator figures out how to transition through this stage successfully by reaching the first stage of enlightenment (stream entry) they will cycle repeatedly through this dark night phase. Ingram argues that this progression appears to be a "hardwired part of human physiology" and "if meditators stop practicing entirely at this stage, they can get stuck and haunted for the rest of their lives until they complete this first progress of insight."[30] A meditator who gets stuck in the dark night for a long time is referred to as a "chronic Dark Nighter."[31] Similarly, in *A Path With Heart* Kornfield argues that it is important to have a knowledgeable meditation teacher and guide, otherwise it is possible to get overwhelmed by the *dukkha nanas* and quit meditation practice altogether. He warns that if an individual quits meditation during this stage:

> they [the *dukkha nanas*] will continue to haunt us. They can easily become entangled with our personal loss and fear in our everyday life. In this way, they can become undercurrents in our consciousness, and the unresolved feelings can last for months or years, until we do something to take ourselves back to this process and complete it.[32]

This idea of the dark night becoming entangled with various aspects of one's life is a theme that is explored in more detail by Ingram, who writes about 'off the cushion' meditation effects and their interaction with both psychopathology and general non-pathological psychological content. In *MCTB* Ingram attempts to differentiate between dark night symptoms (meditation-related) and personal issues and circumstances (not meditation-related). He argues that true dark night symptoms should ideally resolve themselves rather quickly, hence in this sense they can be differentiated from psychopathology:

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[28] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 230.
[29] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 212.
[30] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 233.
[31] Ingram, *Mastering*, pp. 233-234.
[32] Kornfield, *A Path*, pp. 150-151.

> Occasionally, people at this stage can also have what appears to be a full psychotic break, or what is often called a nervous breakdown, though if these are truly a side effect of insight practices, they should pass quickly.[33]

He also notes that not all psychological distress can be attributed to the dark night:

> On the other hand, genuine mental illness or unrelated emotional or psychological difficulties can show up in people's lives. Blaming it all on the Dark Night may not always be accurate or helpful.[34] Ingram suggests that in some cases meditators may be better served by seeking qualified medical/psychological support or medication.

Insight Gone Wrong

American meditation teacher Shinzen Young provides a different definition of the Buddhist dark night. According to his website, Young is "a Jewish-American Buddhist teacher who got turned on to comparative mysticism by an Irish-Catholic priest and who has developed a Burmese-Japanese fusion practice inspired by the spirit of quantified science."[35] Young's teachings are meditation-focused and centred on the practice of mindfulness meditation.

Contrary to Kornfield and Ingram, Young does not consider ordinary meditation-related experiences with the *dukkha nanas* or the cycles of insight to be significant enough to be referred to as a dark night. He writes:

> It is certainly the case that almost everyone who gets anywhere with meditation will pass through periods of negative emotion, confusion, disorientation, and heightened sensitivity to internal and external arisings. It is also not uncommon that at some point, within some domain of experience, for some duration of time, things may get worse before they get better. The same thing can happen in psychotherapy and other growth modalities. For the great majority of people, the nature, intensity, and duration of these kinds of challenges is quite manageable. I would not refer to these types of experiences as "Dark Night."[36]

Rather, Young reserves the term dark night for a phenomenon that he describes as more serious, potentially disabling and considerably rarer; that is, the misinterpretation of the Buddhist insights of emptiness (*sunyata*) and

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[33] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 231. Also, according to transpersonal psychologists, a hallmark of a spiritual crisis is that it does eventually resolve and lead to positive transformation. Hence, in this way it can be differentiated from psychopathology, which may be lifelong and only responsive to medical intervention.

[34] Ingram, *Mastering*, p. 234.

[35] Shinzen Young at https://www.shinzen.org/about/. Accessed 30 July 2019.

[36] Shinzen Young, 'The Dark Night,' 13/11/2011, at https://www.shinzen.org/the-dark-night/. Accessed 30 July 2019.

nonself (*annica*). Traditionally, in Buddhism, gaining insight into the nature of emptiness and nonself is a positive thing and should be experienced as liberating. However, Young argues that occasionally these insights can be misunderstood by meditation practitioners, leading to a state that is sometimes referred to as "falling into the pit of the void."[37] This state entails:

> an authentic and irreversible insight into Emptiness and No Self. What makes it problematic is that the person interprets it as a bad trip. Instead of being empowering and fulfilling, the way Buddhist literature claims it will be, it turns into the opposite. In a sense, it's Enlightenment's Evil Twin. This is serious but still manageable through intensive, perhaps daily, guidance under a competent teacher. In some cases it takes months or even years to fully metabolize, but in my experience the results are almost always highly positive.[38]

Here Young also draws a parallel with the clinical condition depersonalisation and derealisation disorder (DP/DR). In his popular YouTube video titled 'Enlightenment, DP/DR & Falling Into the Pit of the Void' he refers to DP/DR as "'enlightenments' evil twin."[39] In psychiatry, DP/DR is a mental illness and is defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-V) as a dissociative disorder. Its essential features are "persistent or reoccurring episodes of depersonalisation, derealisation, or both."[40] Episodes of depersonalisation are characterised by a feeling of unreality or detachment from one's self, whereas episodes of derealisation are characterised by a feeling of unreality or detachment from the world. Young proposes that both Buddhist enlightenment and DP/DR might result from the same realisation or insight, however, the lived experience of DP/DR is the diametric opposite of the lived experience of enlightenment. While enlightenment is experienced as liberating, DP/DR is experienced as pathological. While Young does not offer an explanation for why enlightenment might 'go wrong' in this way, other studies suggest that the meaning attributed to a meditation experience might affect its interpretation and subsequent affective valence.[41]

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[37] Shinzen Young, 'Enlightenment, DP/DR & Falling Into the Pit of the Void,' YouTube (3 December 2009), at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zIKQCwDXsA. Accessed 30 July 2019.

[38] Young, 'The Dark Night.'

[39] Young, 'Enlightenment, DP/DR.' At the time of writing, this video had 42,629 views.

[40] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), p. 302.

[41] Richard J. Castillo, 'Depersonalization and Meditation,' *Psychiatry*, vol. 53 (1990), pp. 158-168.

Young posits that descriptions that match the 'pit of the void' condition, or DP/DR, are found in classical Buddhist literature, including the Pali Canon, although he does not provide any further detail on where such descriptions might be found.[42] However, similar problems associated with the insight into emptiness can be found in Buddhist literature and have been noted by Buddhist scholars. For example, Robert Sharf mentions a similar state – 'falling into emptiness' (*duokong*) – which is described in the medieval Hongzhou school of Zen.[43] *Duokong* is said to arise from unbalanced meditation practice; specifically, it occurs when a meditator places excessive focus on achieving 'inner stillness' (*ningji*) at the expense of engagement with the scriptures.[44] Further, *duokong* is associated with 'meditation sickness,' a term that has been used by various Buddhist masters to critique practices that they considered detrimental to contemplative progress. Sharf writes:

> Today we might translate "meditation sickness" as "zoning out," by which I do not mean being lost in thought or daydreaming. Rather, I suspect that when medieval meditation masters used terms such as "falling into emptiness" and "meditation sickness," they were targeting techniques that resulted in an intense immersion in the moment, in the now, such that the practitioner loses touch with the socially, culturally, and historically constructed world in which he or she lives. The practitioner becomes estranged from the web of social relations that are the touchstone of our humanity as well as our sanity. The key to avoiding this is to learn to see both sides at once. Zongmi says: "While awakening from delusion is sudden, the transformation of an unenlightened person into an enlightened person is gradual."[45]

The Buddhist saint Nagarjuna (c. 150 – 250 CE), one of the most important and influential Mahayana philosophers, also spoke of the potential problems associated with emptiness. Nagarjuna is credited with saying that "emptiness misunderstood destroys the slow-witted, like a serpent wrongly held or a spell wrongly executed."[46] That is, the failure to correctly grasp the insight into emptiness, (which, like a serpent, is notoriously slippery) may have dangerous consequences. For example, contemporary Buddhist meditation

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[42] Young, 'Enlightenment, DP/DR.'
[43] Robert H. Sharf, 'Is Mindfulness Buddhist? (and Why it Matters),' *Transcultural Psychiatry*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2015), pp. 470-484.
[44] Sharf, 'Is Mindfulness Buddhist?' p. 476.
[45] Sharf, 'Is Mindfulness Buddhist?' pp. 476-477.
[46] Mark Siderits and Shoryu Katsura, *Nagarjuna's Middle Way: The Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2013), p. 274.

teacher Lewis Richmond argues that emptiness may be misinterpreted as a nihilism regarding all phenomena which may then lead to feelings of depression, anxiety and dissociation. In an article for *Buddha Weekly*, he writes:

> If we can't understand such a profound concept, we often 'lazily' associate Emptiness with Nihilism. The problem begins with the English translation of the original Sanskrit term Shunyata. This profound and complex concept is often translated into English as 'voidness.' Voidness sounds a lot like 'nothingness' and, in my many years of attending teachings, I've often heard teachers interchange the word Emptiness, Voidness and Nothingness, so this can be confusing from the get-go. In the same discussion, some teachers will warn against nihilism, but never-the-less use the word 'nothingness.' There is really no adequate word in English for Shunyata, as both 'voidness' and 'emptiness' have negative connotations, whereas, Shunyata is a positive sort of emptiness transcending the duality of positive-negative.[47]

While Young's definition of the dark night refers to a relatively rare and quite extreme phenomenon, a more common and less intense form of 'insight gone wrong' may be a lingering nihilistic attitude which arises from misunderstanding emptiness to mean that nothing in the world has a real existence. According to meditation teachers, becoming stuck in either of these dark nights can destroy a meditator's chances of progress and liberation. Hence, "as novice snake-handlers and apprentice sorcerers can attest, serpents and magic spells are dangerous instruments in the hands of those who lack the requisite knowledge."[48]

The Dark Night Project and Meditation Adverse Effects

Finally, the dark night has been appropriated in Buddhist postmodernism as a general term that encompasses a variety of meditation-related adverse effects. Negative effects related to meditation have been described across a variety of religious traditions, and in Western psychology.[49] The use of the

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[47] Lewis Richmond, 'What the Teachers Say About Emptiness: Removing "Lazy Nihilism" from Shunyata — or "How Deep the Rabbit Hole goes" and "How Big is the Moon?"' *Buddha Weekly* at https://buddhaweekly.com/what-the-teachers-say-about-emptiness-removing-lazy-nihilism-from-shunyata-or-how-deep-the-rabbit-hole-goes-and-how-big-is-the-moon/. Accessed 30 July 2019.

[48] Siderits and Katsura, *Nagarjuna's Middle Way*, p. 274.

[49] Anna Lutkajtis, 'The Dark Side of Dharma: Why Have Adverse Effects of Meditation Been Ignored in Contemporary Western Secular Contexts?' *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2019), pp. 192-217.

term 'adverse effects' in Western meditation research can be traced back to Leon Otis,[50] who used the term in his 1984 study of TM meditators, and Deane Shapiro[51] who referred to adverse effects in his 1992 study of *vipassana* meditators. More recently, Lindahl et al. have described meditation adverse effects as meditation experiences that are "challenging, difficult, distressing, functionally impairing, and/or requiring additional support."[52] The authors note:

> Meditation-related effects that are not health-related benefits or that are reported as distressing have been classified as "side effects" or "adverse effects" (AEs), especially in clinical psychology research."[53]

The use of the term dark night to refer to a variety of meditation adverse effects, can be traced to Professor Willoughby Britton, a meditation researcher who founded the Dark Night Project at Brown University. The Dark Night Project began as an effort to document, analyse, and publicise accounts of the adverse effects of meditation.[54]

According to an article in *The Atlantic* titled 'The Dark Knight of the Soul:'

> One of her [Britton's] team's preliminary tasks—a sort of archeological literature review—was to pore through the written canons of Theravadin, Tibetan, and Zen Buddhism, as well as texts within Christianity, Judaism, and Sufism. "Not every text makes clear reference to a period of difficulty on the contemplative path," Britton says, "but many did."
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> "There is a sutta," a canonical discourse attributed to the Buddha or one of his close disciples, "where monks go crazy and commit suicide after doing contemplation on death," says Chris Kaplan, a visiting scholar at the Mind & Life Institute who also works with Britton on the Dark Night Project.
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> Nathan Fisher, the study's manager, condenses a famous parable by the founder of the Jewish Hasidic movement. Says Fisher, "[the story] is about how the oscillations of spiritual life parallel the experience of learning to walk, very similar to the metaphor Saint John of the Cross uses in terms of

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[50] Leon S. Otis, 'Adverse Effects of Transcendental Meditation,' in *Meditation: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Deane H. Shapiro and Roger N. Walsh (New York, NY: Aldine Transaction, 2009 [1984]).

[51] Deane Shapiro, 'Adverse Effects of Meditation: A Preliminary Investigation of Long-term Meditators,' *International Journal of Psychosomatics*, vol. 39 (1992), pp. 62-67.

[52] Jared R. Lindahl, Nathan E. Fisher, David J. Cooper, Rochelle K. Rosen and Willoughby B. Britton, 'The Varieties of Contemplative Experience: A Mixed-methods Study of Meditation-related Challenges in Western Buddhists, *PLoS ONE,* vol. 12, no. 5 (2017), p. 1.

[53] Lindahl et al., 'The Varieties,' pp. 3-4.

[54] Tomas Rocha, 'The Dark Knight of the Soul,' *The Atlantic* (25 June 2014), at https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/06/the-dark-knight-of-the-souls/372766/. Accessed 30 July 2019.

> a mother weaning a child … first you are held up by a parent and it is exhilarating and wonderful, and then they take their hands away and it is terrifying and the child feels abandoned."[55]

Britton also founded Cheetah House which started as a non-profit semi-residential social service organization, where people who had experienced meditation adverse effects could stay and recover. Now no longer a physical place, Cheetah House still exists online via a website, which states:

> Cheetah House is a non-profit organization that provides information and resources about meditation-related difficulties to meditators-in-distress and providers or teachers of meditation-based modalities.[56]

While Britton's Dark Night Project has since been renamed the Varieties of Contemplative Experience (VOCE)[57] and the Cheetah House website does not mention the term 'dark night' (except in a section that contains meditator's personal stories) Britton's work on meditation adverse effects, and the media attention that it attracted, led to the creation of a dark night meme in postmodern Buddhist meditation culture. The term found resonance with both journalists and meditators, and mentions of the dark night can be found on meditation podcasts,[58] blogs,[59] discussion forums,[60] and social media sites such as Reddit. Within these contexts the dark night is used as an umbrella term to refer to any disturbing meditation-related phenomena or adverse effect, including experiences of depression, anxiety, dissociation, psychosis or the re-experiencing of trauma.

Britton's work on meditation adverse effects has also inspired more research into meditation-related difficulties (in particular, the relationship between meditation and trauma)[61] and an increased recognition of the wide

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[55] Rocha, 'The Dark Knight.'

[56] *Cheetah House* website at https://www.cheetahhouse.org/. Accessed 30 July 2019..

[57] *The Varieties of Contemplative Experience* at https://www.brown.edu/research/labs/britton/research/varieties-contemplative-experience. Accessed 30 July 2019.

[58] For example, 'The Dark Side of Dharma,' *Buddhist Geeks*, at https://art19.com/shows/buddhist-geeks/episodes/bb6cd056-ca75-42e0-bead-2d8d862aa46f. Accessed 30 July 2019.
Also, 'The Dark Night Project,' *Buddhist Geeks*, at https://art19.com/shows/buddhist-geeks/episodes/7c66e68d-ab9b-4a08-a21a-caa8d8a724f9. Accessed 30/07/2019.

[59] For example, Ron Crouch, 'The Bright Side of the Dark Night,' Aloha Dharma, at https://alohadharma.com/2015/03/03/the-bright-side-of-the-dark-night/. Accessed 30 July 2019.

[60] *Dharma Overground* at https://www.dharmaoverground.org/. Accessed 30 July 2019.

diversity of meditation-related experiences. While Kornfield's earlier work on the dark night was therapeutically oriented, Britton's work is both therapeutically and politically oriented, as it has expanded the definition of the dark night to include symptoms (e.g., psychosis, re-traumatisation) that some members of the baby boomer generation of meditation teachers have perhaps too quickly and rather insensitively dismissed as pre-existing or unrelated psychopathology. Whereas in the past, people experiencing these types of severe symptoms may have been simply excluded from meditation retreats and referred on to medical practitioners, there now seems to be more focus on understanding and integrating such experiences within meditation communities.

Conclusion

The term dark night has a long history in Christian mysticism and a rather short history in Buddhist postmodernism. While the term has recently gained popularity in contemporary Western meditation-based convert Buddhist lineages, its usage has been so vague as to be meaningless outside of the context of specific meditation teachers, traditions and worldviews. The aim of this article has been to delineate the dark night; that is, to reach a more informed understanding of the various discourses surrounding the term. It is clear that the three dominant dark night discourses, while appearing quite dissimilar, do share a common theme; that is, they all attempt to differentiate between Buddhist meditation-related difficulties and Western psychopathology. This article has not attempted to discuss whether this differentiation is possible, however given that Buddhist postmodernism and modern Western psychology have co-arisen and been mutually informed by one another, it is likely to be a difficult task. Nevertheless, I believe it is a worthwhile task and I am hopeful that this article will inspire new avenues of thought regarding Buddhism, spiritual crisis and the dark night.

[61] David A. Treleaven, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018). '