



# Body Image of Buddhist Nuns

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of Body Image has been significant in the lives of human beings since times immemorial. It forms an integral part of our self identity and is difficult to elude. Therefore it produced a quest among the researchers to discover the ideas Buddhist nuns have about their body image, who prima facie are different from other females. The researchers therefore wanted to explore, whether the immense exposure in this modern world with various sources to enhance one's beauty affect this cult of Buddhist nuns. The aim of the present research study was to explore the internal representations Buddhist nuns have about their body image. A Purposive sample of four Buddhist nuns (25 – 40 years) was taken. The case study method was used under which free association, Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn and Partland, 1954) and semi – structured interviews were used. The thematic analysis of the data revealed various themes like satisfaction, dissatisfaction, surrender of the body self and defense mechanisms or transcendence. This reflected that the subjects had an overall satisfactory body image mainly due to the overpowering effect their religious practices have on them. Though in some instances they do depict dissatisfaction with their bodies but whether they handle that resentment on the basis of defense mechanism or their religious transcendent values still remains unanswered.

Keywords: body image, Buddhist nuns, case study, free association, Twenty statement test, semi structured interviews.

## INTRODUCTION

### Body Image

The term body image refers to how we perceive our body; in our minds or looking into the mirror; encompassing our sense of how others see us in terms of our physical appearance and the level of connection to our bodies. Paul Schilder (1886-1940), an Austrian psychoanalyst, was the first to coin the phrase Body image in his Book – The Image and Appearance of Human Body, published in the year 1935. Each one of us has a body image and is considered to be an integral part of our self identity and affects the quality of life. We cannot elude having a body image; it is a part of Human nature.

In psychology, it refers to the beliefs and perceptions about our physical appearance. It is a subjective concept also influenced by the reactions of others.

Positive body image constitutes having a pragmatic and rational perception of our bodies. Having a realistic picture and feeling comfortable in one's body. Also appreciating our natural shape and feeling content about one's unique body and refusing to spend an unreasonable amount of time being apprehensive about it.

Whereas, Negative body image refers to feeling under confident, conscious and anxious about one's own body. It involves having a distorted perception of our body. If an individual possess a negative body image then he/she is convinced that others mostly perceive his/her body negatively and his/her appearance does not match the societal standards of beauty.

Various factors affecting body image of an individual include Religious beliefs: The Religious beliefs pertaining to different religions strongly impact and are intricately interwoven in the thinking patterns of an individual and hence affect perceptions about one's body. To get acceptance in a particular religious community it is important for an individual to conform to the various religious and cultural norms related to body which in turn serves as a crucial factor in the formation of body image. Family: The family members especially parents significantly affect a child's view of himself or herself about his/her physical appearance. This could be either negative as a result of criticism or positive followed by encouraging remarks by them. Past childhood experiences: often impose The experiences from the past can leave a negative effect on an individual especially when the person has gone through the experiences of harassment, bully, sexual or physical abuse and ostracized on the basis of body colour, skin, size or other related aspects. Media: Media is a prime factor affecting the body perception of individuals. It reflects high and unrealistic standards of beauty which are difficult to attain. These ideals of the body showcased by magazines, newspapers, movies, advertisements immense pressure to accomplish the perfect body. Personal characteristics of the individual: Individuals with low self esteem are relatively at a higher risk to negatively evaluate their bodies. They may also engage in using drugs, alcohol and follow extreme diets and regimes that may harm their body or may also prove to be fatal.

### **Body image and women**

Considering good or bad we live in an image-conscious society. Throughout history, humans have regarded the beauty of the human body as important.

Every culture promotes a certain body image as being beautiful, which is the ideal body image every woman wishes to attain. These socio cultural standards of beauty are often unrealistic in nature and difficult to accomplish. In an effort to acquire a perfect body, women often compromise on their health and as a result they experience great levels of anxiety and depression.

Media also plays a significant role in setting these unattainable beauty standards. It often glamorizes a very thin body for women and popularizes the idea to be good and a desirable thing to be associating it with success and social acceptance.

Therefore, desiring to be slimmer woman develop eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating. They also indulge in unhealthy diet

practices like skipping meals, smoking, using diet pills, etc which leads them to become malnourished.

In the quest for perfect shape and size, women these days are also open to various artificial means like liposuction, plastic surgery etc. Thus, becoming obsessed with their body image issues.

### **Buddhist nuns and Tenets**

A Buddhist nun is called a bhikkhuni (Pali language) – a female who has taken a higher ordination in the Buddhist community. A nun lives a simple life, wears a maroon robe, shaves her head and learns and practices the teachings of the Buddha Dharma and mostly lives in a nunnery. The nuns strongly follow the Buddhist philosophy in their lives and these teachings form a pivotal role in the lives of the nuns and thus it is important for them to abide by these doctrines. Some of the important teachings include: The Four noble truths; the central concept of the four noble truths is seeing life as, it actually is and not as what we wish to see. The First truth revolves around the idea that each of our lives incorporates suffering or dukkha. The Second truth says that the main cause of suffering in our lives is desire. When we desire for ourselves rather than the whole, it will always lead to suffering. The Third noble truth says that if our connection with desire ends, the suffering in our lives will also end. The Fourth noble truth shows the way to end suffering in our lives. Lord Buddha said that the way to cease suffering was to follow the Noble Eight Fold Path which provides guidelines for the day to day living and encourages seeking a simple orientation towards life. The noble eight fold path includes Right Understanding: It is about viewing the world as it is and not as what we believe it to be or what we wish it could be. Right Intent: It is about endurance and passion for the journey of life. It comes from our heart and includes cognizing the equalities of all life and compassion for life, beginning with ourselves. Right speech: It is about communicating meticulously and resolving never to speak in rage or unkindness; all this will inculcate in us the spirit of empathy and will lead us to live a compassionate life. Right action: It talks about the need to take a moralistic orientation in life and to be considerate towards others and the world we live in. Right action also includes the five precepts given by Lord Buddha: not to kill, lie, avoiding sexual misconduct, stealing and avoiding intake of drugs. Right Livelihood: The teachings of Buddhism encourage the idea of equality of all living beings and veneration for life. Lord Buddha discouraged certain types of work such as those dealing with ammunition, drugs and those that are nocuous for human or animal life. He even did not support the practice of fortune telling as it made conjecture about a fixed future, whereas his teachings encourage the idea that future is created by what we do in the present.

The idea of Right livelihood also implies that a Buddhist, who is able, will engage in some kind of work, either as a part of the Sangha (monk community), or in his/her workplace or indulge in some kind of home or community based work. Right Effort: It implies the idea of inculcating in life zeal and positive attitude in a steady, cheerful and balanced manner. It also includes leaving behind the feelings of envy, rage, ill will, malice and focusing on clear and truthful thoughts. Right Mindfulness: It is about being alert and focused in the present moment and having a clear and vigilant mind. This path is closely associated to the practice of meditation and forms its basis. Right Concentration: This path forms the next step for the practice of meditation. It includes concentrating on any object in the nature. Right mindfulness and Right

concentration teaches the mind to see the reality as it is and not as how we are trained to see it. By being attentive in the present moment and concentrating adequately, one gets happiness and joy in the present. Another significant teaching of Lord Buddha is about the Dependent Origination: It is basically called the law of causality which revolves around the idea that nothing has unique existence, rather an outcome of circumstances that have happened before. It is closely associated with the idea of cause and effect and the Four Noble Truth that is; desire and suffering are dependent on one another. Therefore following the path religiously cause desire to be reduced which in turn leads to lessening of suffering in our lives. Three Characteristics of Existence: This is an important teaching of Buddha and mentions the three significant characteristics of existence which include Suffering, The concept of Impermanence and No Unique Self. Suffering in our lives is induced from old age, lonesomeness, separation from loved ones etc. Also we always expect life to be permanent in nature but everything in this world is impermanent. All is subject to a process of continuous change and vicissitude. Moreover according to the Buddhist philosophy, we are a result of our past deeds that is; our current existence is connected to our previous existence. Karma and Intention: Buddhist philosophy strongly propagates the ideology of karma that is; our present life is the result of our previous life and our current life will shape our tomorrow.

Buddhist ideas give huge importance to the intentions behind ones actions. With right actions and thought an individual will get fruitful outcomes and it leads to spiritual growth. Rebirth and Nirvana: According to Buddha, rebirth is dependent on a cause and effect relationship that is; we harvest, what we sow and the ultimate aim in Buddhism is to reach Nirvana (enlightenment). The term Nirvana was visualized by Lord Buddha as teaching others to experience enlightenment. Once Nirvana is attained an individual gains freedom and all karmic debts are settled. The Three jewels and five precepts: When a person accepts the Buddhist philosophy he/she also has to take adopt the three jewels of Buddhism which are- The Buddha (finding Buddha in oneself), The Dharma (teachings of Buddhism) and The Sangha (community who follow Buddhist teachings). The Five precepts are the main ethical values needed to be imbibed by the followers of Buddhism. These are: The First precept is that of not purposely killing anyone which implies being concerned about ones safety and well being of all living creatures. The Second precept is to take only what has been given. This includes not stealing, returning the borrowed material and not taking undue advantage of anyone. The Third precept often talks about sexual misconduct and moderating biological drives and not misusing the senses. Moreover it propagates being satisfied with what one possesses. In the Fourth precept, one is encouraged not to say false things or defame anyone and spread rumours. This teaches an individual to have an optimistic motive to discussion. The Fifth precept is to avoid intoxicants like alcohol, unnecessary drugs, tobacco and caffeine in order to develop logical thinking and attain mindfulness.

### **Review of literature**

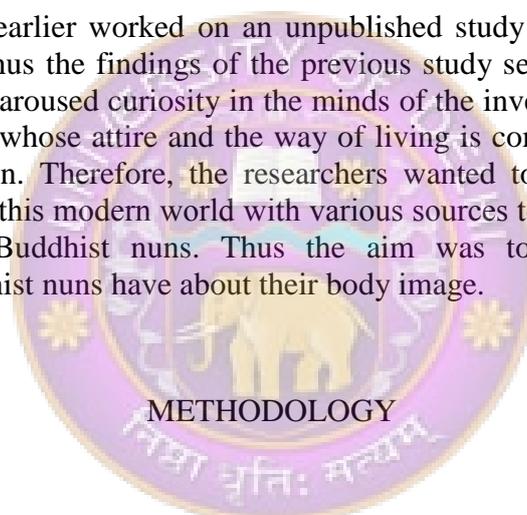
The study on body image has been one of the most important areas of research in the field of Psychology. Thus a number of researches have been conducted all over the world based on Body image and the factors affecting it. A lot of stress has been on the role of media which is evident from a study by Zain-Ul-Abideen (2011) who found that media was a cause of eating disorders in women of Pakistan. Thomsen (2002) in his research found that adolescent females fear gaining weight after reading fashion or

health magazines. Moreover a study by Morry and Staska's (2001) also support similar findings about media exposure to the "ideal" form is being internalized. Also it found that media is also responsible for problematic eating patterns. Likewise, Turner, Hamilton, Jacobs, Angood and Dwyer's (1997) found that the exposure to fashion magazines is related to women's greater preoccupation with being thin, dissatisfied with their body.

The Swimsuit Problem by Bailey, Lamarche and Gammage (2014) discovered a tendency in young women to evaluate one's own body by how others perceive it. Further, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2010) supports the notion that the body image attitudes and behaviors that characterize eating disorders may derive from proprioceptive deficits due to dissociation. Henderson and Ellison (2014) in their research found that women having an eating disorder, who prayed regularly had higher level of self-esteem than who did not pray. A study by Skrzypek, Wehmeier, Remschmidt (2001) found that body size estimation remains a worthwhile approach to assessing body image disturbance in eating.

### **Rationale and objective**

The researchers had earlier worked on an unpublished study on the body image of women in general. Thus the findings of the previous study served as an impetus for the present study and aroused curiosity in the minds of the investigators about the life of the Buddhist nuns whose attire and the way of living is completely different from the general population. Therefore, the researchers wanted to explore, whether the immense exposure in this modern world with various sources to enhance one's beauty affect this cult of Buddhist nuns. Thus the aim was to explore the internal representations Buddhist nuns have about their body image.



### **Design**

The research was conducted using a case study method. The techniques employed for data collection were -Free association, Semi-structured interview and Twenty statements test which were administered on each subject and the responses were analyzed using thematic analysis in order to find the answer for the following Research Question:-

How satisfied/dissatisfied are Buddhist nuns with their body image?

### **Sample**

The sample was purposive comprising of four Buddhist nuns belonging to the age-group of 25-40 years. All belonged to the middle class section of the society, pursuing education in Buddhist philosophy. The demographic information of the subjects is:

**Table - I:** Demographic Information of the Subjects

Name	Age	Educational Qualifications
XYZ	40 Years	Bsc. and studying Buddhist Studies
XYZ	27 Years	4 <sup>th</sup> year in Buddhist Studies
XYZ	25 years	1 <sup>st</sup> year in Buddhist Studies
XYZ	32 Years	7 <sup>th</sup> year in Buddhist Studies

## METHODOLOGY

The methods used in the present study were the following:-

### **Free association**

Free association is technique associated commonly with psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud dealing with uncovering the repressed thoughts, feelings, desires and bringing them into the consciousness. This technique requires the subject to get into a relaxed position and speak what comes to his/her mind without censoring it. The therapist actively listens and records to the patient's discourse to uncover the unconscious conflict which after being discussed comes to the conscious awareness of the patient.

In the present study this technique was employed in order to gauge into the unconscious views of the four subjects regarding their body image.

### **Twenty Statements Test**

Twenty statements Test is a standardized measure developed by Kuhn and Partland in 1954 to assess an individual's views about himself/herself. This test involves completing up to twenty statements like "I am..." providing an insight into what an individual thinks about oneself.

This technique was conducted in order to know the subjects views about their bodies.

### **Semi Structured Interview**

A semi – structured interview is a method used in social sciences research which is flexible in nature as it allows the interviewer to design and modify the questions (based on the themes to be explored) during the interview session.

For the current research, this technique was administered on all the subjects to find out their perceptions about their bodies.

### **Procedure**

To begin with the research, a pilot study was conducted on two Buddhist nuns to evaluate the feasibility of using the aforementioned methods. The final sample was a purposive sample comprising of four Buddhist nuns.

The three methods (Free association, Twenty Statements Test and Structured Interview) were administered on each of the subject individually after rapport formation and they were informed of the confidentiality of their responses.

#### Free association

The following instructions were given to each subject for free association. Instructions- "You are required to talk about your body image as freely as possible for 15 minutes. Speak loudly about whatever comes to your mind without screening out anything even if it is irrelevant according to you."

Conduction-In the free association method the subjects were asked to sit or lie down in a relaxed and comfortable position and asked to report whatever came to their mind related to body.

Recording and transcription-Free association of each subject was recorded after which the recorded content was listened carefully and was transcribed.

#### Twenty statements test

Instructions- Following instructions were given to the subjects:-

"Keeping in mind your own body image, please write twenty sentences. You can start from-

I am -----

I feel ----- and so on".

Conduction-A paper and pencil was given to each subject and they were told to write 20 statements about what they feel about their body. Some leads were given to them in order to give them an idea of how to go about it. After they had written the statements the paper was taken back.

#### Semi-structured interview

Semi structured interview was administered to know the subject's conscious thoughts regarding her body image. Before framing the interview, topics were decided for this exploratory study covering every aspect about body image after which 24 questions were framed to bring out what subjects feel in terms of her body. The questions were kept short and crisp and were understandable and covered how the subjects feel about their looks, attire, and comparison of the life before and after being a nun etc.

Instructions - The following instructions were given to each subject:

"Now some questions will be asked from you. Answer them keeping your body image in mind. There is no right or wrong answers and no time limit.

Answer them truthfully to obtain a better understanding of yourself."

The data after being collected was then put to thematic analysis.

## RESULTS

Table - II: Result Table

Techniques	Results
Free Association	Data collected presented very scanty discourses given by the subjects, Even after being instructed were unable to speak for long in terms of their body image
Twenty Statement Test	Unable to answer any of the statements in terms of their body image, maximum statements indicated mind purification, faith in their religion etc.
Semi Structured Interview	Depiction of sense of comfort in wearing the robe, belief in impermanence of beauty, valuing inner peace and beauty, being comfortable in their own skin etc.

## DISCUSSION

### **Narrative**

The subjects had immense faith in their religion and were strong followers of the Buddhist teachings. The ideologies of their religion were the driving wheel of their lives. Their day-to-day living was guided by the doctrines of Lord Buddha. The ultimate goal of their lives is the attainment of Nirvana (enlightenment) by following the path of spirituality. They believe that becoming a nun in their present lives is a positive outcome of their karma (deeds) of their previous lives. To attain their supreme goal of enlightenment they adopt the idea of peaceful and unadulterated thinking. They depicted a strong belief towards keeping their mind focused, attentive and concentrated so that they can walk on the path of spirituality. They emphasized on the importance of self love and self care as they strongly believed that if an individual cannot love oneself, how he/she will be able to love others. For them, their attire (maroon robe) was a symbol of honor, responsibility and respect. They showcased extreme satisfaction and contentment with their holy robe. They had no intention of modifying or changing their apparel. They considered it as an integral part of the Buddhist tradition, which they did not wish to change or modify. For them it created a sense of belongingness with their community and gave them comfort and peace. The idea of ideal body image majorly was focused on the following aspects such as loyalty, honesty, truthfulness and kind heartedness. For them an individual with a perfect body image was the one who can work for the betterment of others and make the world a happy place to live in.

An ideal body image is possessed by an individual who is healthy and takes care of his/her body. Moreover, for them beauty is impermanent in nature as it is a source of desire. They do not believe in the ideology of 'what is beautiful is good' and do not show bias for beauty. According to them, beauty is deep within an individual and their

main focus is inner beauty which holds greater importance for them in their lives. The subjects rejected the idea of using artificial means to enhance ones outer beauty (Liposuction, Plastic surgery, Botox) and rather said that one should be the way they are. They considered the idea of mind purification and beautification above the idea of physical appearance enhancement. For them spending time in matching the standards of ideal body image which is generally triggered by culture, media etc is futile; rather they said that one should spend time in working towards the betterment of the community they live in. For keeping themselves physically and mentally fit, the subjects practiced meditation, exercise and yoga in order to lead a healthy life. They consider that the sole motive for them is to stay well and dedicate their lives wholeheartedly to their religion. The subjects also talked about being overweight, short in height, having flat nose etc. during the session.

### **Thematic analysis**

#### **Satisfaction**

It refers to a state of being content, gratified and fulfilled with one's possession. The subjects reported an overall satisfaction with their body image and this can be validated from the fact that out of a total of 33 satisfactory statements some of the statements reported by the subject included: "I feel lucky wearing this robe", "I am fine I don't need any beauty product".

#### **Dissatisfaction**

These statements reflect lack of contentment with oneself and restless longing for what one does not have. The subjects rarely reported bodily dissatisfaction as across the sample in the total of 43 statements only 4 statements reflected discontentment. For them unhappiness with their body is relevant to the extent of their inability to perform their religious duties, for instance in the 22<sup>nd</sup> answer of the first subject she reported dissatisfaction with weight as she might get a disease which will hinder her from praying.

#### **Surrender of body self**

The Buddhist nuns have surrendered their body to attain nirvana (enlightenment). This is evident from getting their heads shaved which is symbolic of getting rid of desires, jealousy etc. Also according to the responses of the subjects it was found that they were not hesitant to surrender their body self to Buddhism because of being self aware of their decision.

#### **Defense Mechanisms or transcendence?**

In the previous unpublished study of the researchers on general population of women on the topic body image, depicted rampant use of defense mechanisms by the subjects. In this study, however it cannot be clearly stated that the subjects have used defense mechanisms. Though the subjects depict discontentment with their bodies in some areas, they have tried to reason out their dissatisfaction on the basis of transcendent values. Like one of the subjects mentioned that she is not dissatisfied with not being able to become the director of the nunnery because of her short height, but was content with a taller and knowledgeable person being chosen for the post. This could be due to the powerful effect of the Buddhist teachings on them making them to move beyond the realms of envy, ill will etc. But sometimes there can be seen

a reflection of the use of certain defense mechanisms by them. Like one of the subjects mentioned in her free association about her nose being flat, eyes are small and her hair being white. But in her semi structured interview she said “I am happy with what I have, it is my “karma ka faal”(deeds of past life). But here also it cannot be clearly stated that whether the subjects have used defense mechanism because these statements do not completely correspond well with the notions of defense mechanism and can be explained on the basis of their transcendent values. Thus here we are left with a question in our mind about their explanations for their dissatisfaction.

**Research Question: How satisfied or dissatisfied Buddhist nuns are with their body image?**

The responses of the nuns showcase immense satisfaction with their bodies. This could be due to the reasons that the various teachings of the Buddhist philosophy form the core of their life style and are intricately interwoven in the way they think. Like, one of the most significant teachings of Lord Buddha is about the four noble truths which explain that the cause of suffering is desire and once suffering is eliminated we can attain enlightenment. The nuns consider beauty as the source of desire, therefore they do not give it unnecessary importance as it can act as a source hindrance in attainment of nirvana (enlightenment). The nuns strongly believe in the eight-fold path which provide guidelines for their day to day living. The first-fold (right understanding) is about seeing the reality as it is and not distorting it. Therefore, nuns do not crave to attain a superficial body image as promoted by the media and the cultural standards of beauty and are satisfied with their present state.

The sixth-fold (right effort) is about inculcating zeal and positive attitude in a balanced way, ingraining clear and honest thoughts in one’s life and leaving behind the feelings of jealousy and anger. Thus, looking at a beautiful woman definitely arouses a sense of admiration in them but they do not feel envious about them. The nuns also vehemently believe in the concept of impermanence and consider that beauty is impermanent in nature and hence find it unnecessary to spend time on beautification of oneself.

Moreover one of the major reasons of their satisfaction with their body and appearance is that it was their conscious decision to become a nun. Also, their religious and cultural practices have such an overpowering effect on their lives which was observed throughout their interview as they were unable to speak about their body and diverted to talk about their life as a nun.

Certain instances of dissatisfaction with the body were also narrated by the subjects but the researchers cannot clearly state whether they have used defense mechanism or made use of their religious transcendent values to justify their discontentment. But still with some assurance, it can be said that the possibility is more for the use of super eminent values because for them their religious teachings hold utmost importance and it is very important for them to follow it to be able to continue the life of a nun.

## CONCLUSION

From the results of the present study it can be concluded that the subjects are satisfied and content with their body image. Though in some instances they do show dissatisfaction with their bodies but whether they deal it by using defense mechanisms or their religious transcendent values remains a question in the mind of the researchers.

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