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Fight Club: An Exploration of Buddhism

Abstract

Initially panned by many critics for its violent content, David Fincher's *Fight Club* may seem like the most unlikely film to incorporate the tenants of Zen Buddhism. However, if one looks beyond the surface, issues like fighting against capitalism, saving people from themselves, creating a world-wide equilibrium, and suffering to gain enlightenment are all present in *Fight Club*. This alone may not be enough to prove an air-tight connection between Zen Buddhism and *Fight Club* but the film's characters, structure and storyline can also be linked to key aspects of the Zen Buddhist doctrine. By exploring these multiple connections this paper provides a different, if not completely opposed, view of what could be one of the most controversial and ultimately misunderstood films of the last decade.

In 1999, the movie *Fight Club* was released to both ferocious criticism and fanatical support. The movie, based on Chuck Palahniuk's novel of the same name, was supported by large numbers of young adults who felt the movie's message was important, and appreciated the film's ability to show a critical analysis of American culture. Controversy surrounded the film for its cynical view on modern day capitalism, its vulgarity, and most of all, its violence. The controversy, in retrospect, was very short-sighted because upon digging deeper in to the movie's message, one finds a story of a man's spiritual journey to break his cycle of suffering and achieve enlightenment in the mold of Siddhartha Guatama.

While a movie entitled *Fight Club* would seem to go against the very concepts of Buddhism, the film shows remarkable similarities to the major tenants of Zen Buddhism. These commonalities include the four noble truths, the eightfold path, samsara, the Tri Kaya doctrine, the three characteristics of existence, rebirth, and nirvana. Therefore, I intend to show that the film is not merely just another Hollywood-produced feast of angst and violence, but it serves as a modernist twist on Buddhism and a running commentary on both society and the importance and impotence of religion.

The Story:

Fight Club is the story of an every-man played by Edward Norton who is never mentioned by name in the film, and is only called "narrator" in the closing credits. Norton's character describes himself as a person who values the material wealth of his life more than his actual life and as a result of the blandness of his existence, finds himself constantly lying awake at night. Like any good capitalist, he goes to get a quick fix from his doctor, looking simply to pop some pills to make everything better. Instead, the narrator's doctor gives him the idea to visit a self-help group for men with testicular cancer in order to experience what "real pain" is.

By joining this group of men who are beaten, depressed, cynical, and physically destroyed by the disease, the narrator is allowed to cry and experience his own pain that he had been harboring inside. After being able to release his frustration, he sleeps through the night and then ends up joining more self-help groups to continue his unorthodox treatment. His system works flawlessly for almost a year, until Marla Singer, played by Helena Bonham Carter, starts attending the narrator's groups as "a tourist" who goes simply because it is "cheaper than a movie and there's free coffee." Marla's entrance into the narrator's life causes him to repress all the progress he has made because there is "another faker present," and once again, he finds himself stricken with insomnia.

One day, after working out a short term solution with Marla, the narrator finds his apartment blown up and all his material possessions destroyed, leaving him homeless. It is no coincidence that the narrator's apartment is in a building called The Pearson Towers, one letter removed from "person." Even more illuminating is that the building's slogan, " Pearson Towers: A Place to Be Somebody," which alludes to the narrator's inward discovery and rebellion from consumerism.

Looking for help, narrator he calls a soap-maker named Tyler Durden, whom he met on a plane trip. Durden's character is played by Brad Pitt. What is interesting to note here, is that Tyler and the Narrator, who is often called "Jack" in all references to the movie by analysts and fans, had crossed paths on the airport's treadmill system, and during this scene Jack asks himself: "If you wake up at a different time in a different place, could you wake up as a different person?" This rhetorical question is very similar to a Zen koan, a paradoxical question the answer to which is supposed to result in enlightenment for the person searching for the answer. Koans, in Zen Buddhism, are "...especially designed for one purpose; this purpose is to open the mind that has been closed by habitual responses to the world and reality."¹ This scene is important in the film because it finally gives an explicit mention of Jack's desire to be someone else.

After Jack calls Tyler, the two meet in a diner, working out a way to get the narrator shelter. It is here that the film begins to show significant signs of its ties to Zen Buddhism as Tyler explains to Jack that we, as Americans, are "...by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty..." don't concern him. What concerns him are "celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy's name on my underwear. Rogaine, Viagra, Olestra." Here Tyler is explaining to Jack one of the key features of Buddhism, the rejection of material possessions. It is later, outside of the diner that Tyler asks for the narrator to "hit him as hard as he can", and then, with the first punch thrown, the first "Fight Club" is born.

Fight Club soon accumulates more members and becomes too large to fit in a bar basement. It is at that point that Tyler's teachings have imprinted themselves on to the followers of Fight Club, who then recruit even more members, causing the group to evolve in to a much larger group which is then renamed Project Mayhem by Tyler. Project Mayhem then takes the aggression the men of Fight Club used against each other and then channels it toward all things pro-capitalist, using the organization to destroy corporate America through terrorist acts in the city. Meanwhile, the narrator is confronted by Tyler's feelings for his foil, Marla, as well as Tyler's control of Fight Club, taking away the shared control they had in the beginning.

The transition of Tyler from protagonist to antagonist is shown over the last third of the film, ultimately resulting in a one on one confrontation with Tyler. After his confrontation, the narrator demands to have control of his life, of Project Mayhem and of Marla. It is here that the grand secret of the movie is revealed: Tyler and the narrator were the same person from the beginning. This revelation leads to backtracking by Norton's character, looking to undo what his alter ego had set in motion, both with Project Mayhem and Marla. A problem arises when Tyler does not want to leave, showing up as the narrator attempts to stop Project Mayhem from their master plan: destroying the headquarters of every credit card company in order to the debt record at zero.

The two personalities battle as the narrator attempts to disarm the bombs and Tyler works to stop him, eventually capturing and holding the narrator hostage until the deed is done. It is during the final dialogue between the two that Norton's character finally takes control and destroys Tyler, erasing him from the narrator's mind forever. Unfortunately for the narrator, he was unable to stop the buildings from being destroyed. Still, he is not saddened because he finally feels complete and at peace with himself and with his feelings for Marla.

The film, at its core is a love story that happens to be paralleled by a man's search for independence from the society which has imprisoned him and his from his insecurity as a human being. Beneath its surface context, *Fight Club* is truly a

Zen Buddhism parable, telling the story of an every-man who though imprisoned in a life of suffering, desires to find enlightenment and peace.

It may be difficult for someone who is not looking to detect the religious aspects of *Fight Club*, but one core idea is the cycle of self-inflicted suffering. In the film, the narrator, while explaining his life situation, says: "Like everyone else, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct." He then goes on to say: "I would flip through catalogs and wonder, "What kind of dining set defines me as a person?" The message here is that this average person, the every-man, is trapped in the constant cycle of consumerism. In Buddhist teachings, it is precisely the attachment to material possessions that keeps a person attached to this world, the soul must be liberated from that attachment if they hope to attain some form of inner peace, and ultimately nirvana.

Throughout the movie, there are other references to the entrapments of consumerism, including the narrator saying sardonically that in the future, everything left to be explored will be named after the huge conglomerates, like the "IBM Stellar Sphere," "the Philip Morris Galaxy," and "Planet Starbucks." But it is the speech given by the narrator's alter ego, Tyler, which bluntly states the movie's core message. Tyler calls the members of Fight Club "...slaves with white collars," saying that they are all "...middle children of history," that they have "...no purpose or place... no Great War, no Great Depression, our great war's a spiritual war, our

Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.” These comments both clearly identify Tyler and Jack's motivations, and sheds light on the religious messages the movie is attempting to send.

The Four Noble Truths:

The relationship between the narrator and Tyler is a representation of the four noble truths of Buddhism: Dukkha, Samudaya, Nirodha, and Magga. Dukkha states that there is suffering, and this is simply a part of life. Samudaya says that Dukkha is caused by an attachment and desire to worldly objects. Nirodha is the truth which simply states that Samudaya can be eliminated by Magga, otherwise known as The Eightfold Path. In the film, the simple translation is that the narrator's suffering is a part of life caused by the cultural consumerism in America. It is through Tyler and the eightfold path of *Fight Club* that the narrator can eliminate his suffering. Tyler sums up the connection when he says: "It's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything.”

The Eightfold Path:

The Eightfold Path, specifically, is "Right Understanding", "Right Thought", "Right Speech", "Right Action", "Right Livelihood", "Right Effort",

"Right Mindfulness", and "Right Concentration." While there is not a literal translation of the eightfold path in *Fight Club*, the narrator, who does not give himself in fully to the methodology or rules of Fight Club, seemingly breaks every aspect of the eightfold path. He is unable to understand Tyler's thinking, unable to think for himself, he minces his words in discussing Tyler, does not participate fully in Fight Club or its later form in Project Mayhem, does not fully accept the sacrificial aspect of his living situation, does not put the effort to rid himself of his worldly possessions, and of course, keeps the two divisions of his personality, the narrator part and the Tyler part separate. It is also important to realize here that Jack as pulls himself further away from Tyler, he breaks from the eightfold path of Fight Club and thus continues to suffer.

The narrator appears to be damned by his inability to let go of his worldly desires, until he has the grand epiphany near the end of the film, realizing that he and Tyler are actually the same person. This revelation is not only climactic in a story-telling sense, but illustrates the idea that we are all connected and that there is no single person who is different from another. It is one of the major factors in the film that suggests a Buddhist undertone to the story, "its spiritual meaning really comes through here: there is no separate person; there is just One only, although there are different bodies and different wills."² Similarly, this climactic scene helps facilitate another aspect of Buddhism, the concept of continual rebirth otherwise

known as samsara. Samsara is exhibited in the movie through the evolution of the character from joining the first group to the overtaking of his personality by Tyler through Fight Club and Project Mayhem.

In the first self-help group, Norton's character allows himself to partially let go and open up to a stranger, and finds that he can once again sleep now that he had "found freedom," because "losing all hope was freedom." Sleep, however, is symbolic in the sense that it is a short-term solution to Jack's problems, which is evidenced when he starts having to go to multiple groups, he chooses a different name for each group, reinventing himself each time. "Every evening I died, and every evening I was born again, resurrected." This concept then causes him to create Tyler as his next evolution, something to do in order to quell the desire to break samsara and seek a better life, once again referencing the quote with a desire to "wake up as a different person." Once Tyler enters the story, there is a constant struggle for control between the two, and each time that the narrator or Tyler is in control, it is essentially just another cycle in the constant death and rebirth of samsara.

Other than the narrator and Tyler, the other major character in the movie is Marla Singer. In the film, Marla serves as a foil to the narrator, being someone that is so similar to him and yet, different. In the movie she joins his group and is just like him, a "tourist." However, it is seemingly because of Marla that the narrator is

forced to go to the extremes of manifesting his alter ego. Of course, in creating Tyler, the narrator ultimately can not escape Marla as she and Tyler become romantically involved. This leads to jealousy on the part of the narrator and the actions which, once set in motion, cause a confrontation of the three characters. While it may seem that this is simply a clever love triangle, there is a deeper religious symbolism in the movie, because in the context of a Buddhist interpretation, the connection between Tyler, the narrator, and Marla can be viewed through something called the "Tri Kaya Doctrine."

The Tri Kaya Doctrine:

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Tri Kaya Doctrine is roughly translated in to "three personalities," stating that the Buddha has three bodies. One of the bodies is the Nirmana Kaya, which is the "apparitional body," and is the teacher of Buddha's law. Another body is the Sambhoga Kaya, or the "state of perfect bliss," which is the shared presence of the Buddha. The final body is called the Dharma Kaya, which is the body of "most excellent law," which is the body symbolizing the enlightenment of Buddha nature.³ The connections between the doctrine and Fight Club are blunt: One can easily label Tyler as the Nirmana Kaya, Marla as the Sambhoga Kaya, and the narrator as the Dharma Kaya, but the actual meaning to the story of the film, once these connections are made, is what is more important.

Once a viewer looks through this lens, seeing Marla, Tyler, and the narrator as actually separate manifestations of one common thought, the movie really opens up to numerous possibilities. For one, if Tyler is the embodiment of Nirmana Kaya, then his leadership qualities in the film make a lot more sense, especially as a teacher for the narrator. In Buddhist teachings, the Nirmana Kaya is the idea of the historical Buddha, and is what is referenced when a particular person hopes to become more than just a bodhisatva, and has that internal characteristic about them. Also found in Buddhist teachings, is the idea that the Nirmana Kaya manifestation of the Buddha has compassion for all beings. In the film, Tyler too has compassion for all beings, wanting to free the "middle children of history," almost ignoring the narrator near the end of the film in order to flesh out the larger picture. The same holds true once seeing Marla as the Sambhoga Kaya. After this connection is established, one can then understand why, even though it appeared the narrator had nothing but distaste for Marla, both he and Tyler had romantic feelings for her. In Buddhist teachings, it is Sambhog Gakaya which is needed in order to achieve Niramana Kaya, which ties directly to Marla being the catalyst for the narrator being forced to manifest Tyler.

The core "body" in Mahayana Buddhism is the Dharma Kaya, which is a constant, enlightened presence in the world which gives rise to the other manifestations of the Buddha. In the movie, the narrator is the one tangible

character who is sustained throughout, in almost every part of the movie from beginning to end. Dharma Kaya is also seen as the "pure" and "flawless" manifestation of the Buddha.⁴ While it may appear that the narrator is the opposite of that idea of Dharma Kaya, it is the conscience of the narrator that causes him to risk his life in order to save his city and nation from a terrorist attack planned by Project Mayhem and the awareness and his new found self control allows Jack to provide meaning and perspective to his journey.

Tilakkhana:

Attached to the idea of the Trikaya doctrine is the Zen Buddhist belief of Ti-lakkhana, or "The Three Characteristics of Existence," which include anicca; which is "change," dukkha; which is "suffering"; and anatta, which is the belief in "no permanent self,"⁵ each of which can be linked to Fight Club.

Tilakkhana is easily transposed on to the division of the three acts of the film. The first act is explanation of the narrator's problems, specifically with his insomnia which is brought on by a feeling of emptiness despite his material possessions. This act is ended quite explosively; after his meeting with Tyler on the plane and the subsequent destruction of his apartment, i.e., "change." The second act in the film is essentially the beginning of Fight Club and its evolution into Project Mayhem. This act of the film is loosely tied together by both the narrator

and Marla's quests to hit bottom, i.e. "suffering," the second of the three characteristics of existence.

Finally there is the third act of the film, which is the realization of Tyler and Jack's true relationship, and Jack's quest to right all of Tyler's wrongs. This act is epitomized by both the meeting they have in the hotel where the big secret of the film is revealed, and the dialogue they have while Tyler is waiting for the bombs to go off in all of the credit buildings, holding Jack hostage as he does so. It is here that we see the third tenet of the characteristics of existence, that there is no true "self" and that there will always be a part of Tyler and Marla in Jack, and the same goes for Marla and Tyler having parts of Jack in them as well. While this is a fairly loose interpretation of how the film breaks down, it is still just one more aspect of Zen Buddhism that the film exhibits, whether it wants to or not.

Rebirth and Nirvana:

Lastly and most prominently in the film are two of the central themes in all of Buddhism, as well as many other Eastern religions: the concepts of rebirth and nirvana. In the film, there are numerous examples of rebirth. One such reference is the previous example of the narrator saying that he died and was born again at every group meeting. Another such reference is the large explosion that destroys his apartment, the literal creation and manifestation of Tyler, and the transition from

Fight Club to Project Mayhem. Finally, there is the narrator's self realization that he and Tyler are one and the same, resulting in the ending confrontation. These are all a series of deaths and rebirths for the narrator.

In Buddhism, it is not one, but multiple deaths and rebirths that are needed for one to escape samsara and achieve nirvana. Similarly, in the movie, it is the sum of the parts that allow the narrator to go from a slave of consumerism to a confident and caring individual free of all things tying him to this world. By the end of the movie, the narrator has come to the realization that he created a manifestation of Tyler in order to change his life, and liberate himself from the trappings of desire that caused his suffering.

Zen Buddhism, at its core, is "the 'everyday mind,'" where acting takes place before thinking. According to Daisetz Suzuki, after someone obtains the everyday mind mentality, that "man thinks, yet he does not think"⁶ (Herrigel 11). Here Suzuki simply means that man, once enlightened can simply know how to do things. This concept is exhibited in *Fight Club* through the overtaking by Tyler Durden of the Narrator, and all the terrorist actions that he performs while he thinks he is asleep. Through his trials and tribulations, he shows compassion not only for the rest of humanity through his desire to stop the epic action being planned by Project Mayhem, but also compassion for individuals by wishing to repair things with Marla. Most importantly though, at the end of the movie, the narrator manages to

gain control back from Tyler, and by doing so, breaks the final barrier holding him from accepting the true Buddha nature.

It was the Zen master Seung Sahn⁷ who said "...in this life we must all kill three things: First we must kill our parents. Second, we must kill the Buddha. And lastly, we must kill him! [author's emphasis]" This is a very important quote to recognize because in the film, there is a dialogue between Jack and Tyler where they have a discussion about their respective parents whom, naturally have similar characteristics. Secondly, in the film, one could see Fight Club and Project Mayhem, not specifically as Buddha, but as the "way" of the Buddha and it is an important milestone in the film when Jack realizes that Project Mayhem is more of a façade than a true path to spirituality. Thirdly and finally, Sahn said that we must kill "him," and by that he means kill the Zen teacher, who in this film is in fact, Tyler Durden. Sahn was not being literal in his sayings. He merely meant to show that "Zen practitioners must integrate these objects with their concepts of 'self.'"⁸ The true power of such a statement can be shown at the end of the film. The narrator assures everyone at the end that everything is alright, that everything will be fine, but specifically reassuring Marla, telling her: "you met me at a very strange time in my life." The line manages to sum up the journey of the narrator particularly well.

Violence as Meditation:

Fight Club's biggest criticism, and the reason it was panned by both critics and fans at the box office, was its violent content. With a film that has the word "fight" in the name, it helped shape the views of those who planned on going to see the film expecting nothing but a glorified showcase of violence. The film, however, actually praises social change, selflessness, courage, and spiritual discovery. As was evidenced by the quotes from Shan, there can be a call to violence without it being directed at another person or being literal at all. The violence in *Fight Club* is not violence for the sake of violence, rather, it is a form of self-induced suffering for those who feel they have wronged themselves in some way. What this film shows us, is merely another interpretation of punishment that does not include the specific "tortures" of isolation, fasting, and solidarity of a training regimen like Siddhartha Gautama did in his quest for enlightenment⁹

In the film, there are three examples which highlight this theory that just because there is violence in the film, that does not mean its message strays from any major tenets of Zen Buddhism. Firstly there is the actual organization known as Fight Club, a group that originated from a request of the Narrator from Tyler Durden to punch him in an empty parking lot. The eight rules of Fight Club only back up the group's core belief in non-violence, with the third rule demanding the fight stop when someone taps out, the fifth rule demanding that there only be one fight at a time, and the seventh rule that fights will go on as long as necessary. If

anything, Fight Club is merely a continuation of the same support groups the Narrator joined in the first half of the movie, merely expressing themselves non-verbally about their problems and how they feel about them.¹⁰

The second example is that one of the first missions Project Mayhem is to start a fight with a complete stranger, and lose. While the scene in the film is quite comical, the Narrator explains in a voice over, that "most people... normal people, will do almost anything to avoid a fight." While taken literally, this quote seems fairly obvious, but if one takes the idea of a "fight" and transposes it with the concept of suffering to experience enlightenment then the quote becomes a critical social commentary. The key in this scene however, is that they were asked to lose the fight, showing that the object of the assignment was not to create violence, but for the members of Project Mayhem to understand that there is much more below the surface for them to learn.

Finally, directly following the montage of Fight Club members trying to fulfill the assignment, the Narrator goes in to his boss's office with the intent to blackmail his boss into allowing him to leave the company while at the same time bankrolling Fight Club. Obviously aghast at the Narrator's demands, the boss calls security which then leads to the Narrator's last resort: fighting himself. In the scene, the Narrator beats himself up extensively and frightens his boss in to submission. Here is probably the key scene in the film in regards to violence versus non-

violence, because while the scene is very graphic, the Narrator does not act outwardly towards his boss, nor does he attempt to fight the security guards who were called up to the office, instead, he opts for self-sacrifice in order to obtain peace of mind and free himself from the corporate world. Even though the scene may be heavily unorthodox and it may be hard to distinguish the intended meaning from the literal one, it once again shows a character of *Fight Club* gaining something through suffering and self sacrifice, both key issues in Buddhism of any form.

Its Impact:

Fight Club as a movie, is a product of the culture and time it was written. In 1998, when the book had just come out and the movie was in the planning stages, there was massive growth in the economy, the stock market was on the rise, the deficit was shrinking, and the surplus increased. As much as *Fight Club* is parable of religion, the book and the movie also stand as a commentary on the 90s culture, shining light on the underbelly of American society, disavowing the consumer culture that capitalism preaches and Buddhism denounces. However, more importantly, the movie sheds light on religion and the problems inherent within it.

Through example, *Fight Club* shows us that social organizations like the self-help groups, which focus only on self-deprecation, are essentially traps of self-

loathing that do not allow a person to evolve and move forward. When viewed as a commentary on spirituality, it criticizes religions that put shame and punishment ahead of inner peace and self discovery. In addition to the religion commentary, the movie criticizes cults and their followers. This is demonstrated well by the example of the evolution of Fight Club in to Project Mayhem. What the author and director are trying to convey here is that inner peace should not be at the mercy of a mob. It is up to the individual to create his own self-peace. If you hand your spirituality over to someone else, you then run the risk of having a maniacal leader who turns spiritual self discovery in to a personal vendetta against whatever enemies he or she has.

The film also manages to shine light on those, like the narrator, who simply go through the motions of spiritual enlightenment. As Tyler says in the film, "hitting bottom isn't a weekend retreat. It's not a goddamn seminar." The only explanation for why Fight Club, and to a lesser extent Project Mayhem, is shown in such a negative light is the criticism that the author has for organized religions that simply go through the motions and absorb mindless followers, rather than offering any true spirituality. Edward Norton, in an interview with *Premiere Magazine* in 1999 said that "In Buddhism there's Nirvana, and then there's Samsara, the world of confusion and disharmony. That world is our testing ground, where we have the experiences that help us become enlightened. I'm not saying *Fight Club*

is *The Book of Living and Dying*, but it was kind of that idea: You're challenging yourself to break out of the world"¹¹ (Schneller), hinting at the fact that there is a viable tie to Buddhism in a story and an inherent criticism of religion as well.

As it stands today the movie *Fight Club*, is one of the most underrated and misunderstood stories in recent memory. There are numerous layers in the film, and whether it is the social commentary of the movie or the deeper meaning that can be found in the story of the every-man narrator as he becomes liberated from the things which hold him down, *Fight Club* stands as an uncompromising time capsule of the rights and wrongs of American consumerism in the 1990s.

¹ Smith, Gary. 2002. "Understanding the meaning of Zen Koans". eSSORTMENT.com. 2 Dec. 2005.

² Zuck, Jon. 2005, April. "To Boldly Fight What No Movie Has Fought Before..." 9 Dec. 2005.

³ Carus, Paul. 1921. *The Gospel of Buddha*. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co. 227.

⁴ Eliot, Sir Charles. 1959. *Japanese Buddhism*. New York: Barnes and Nobel, Inc. 112-15.

⁵ Yool, George R. 1992, April. "Glossary of Zen and Buddhism: An Introduction to Zen Thought." 12 Oct. 2005. 12.

⁶ Herrigel, Eugen. 1971, Feb. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. New York: Vintage Books. 11

⁷ Seung Sahn defined.

⁸ Kwang, Dae. 1997, Oct. "Kill the Buddha." *Providence Zen Center Newsletter*, vol. 9, iss. 10. 12 Oct. 2005.

⁹ Carus, Paul. 1921. *The Gospel of Buddha*. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co. 26-27

¹⁰ Mccarty, Pat. 2005, Aug. "Experts explain how we are 'One' in film." *The Seattle Times*, Religion Section, B5.

¹¹ Schneller, Johanna. 1999, Aug. "Brad Pitt & Edward Norton: Two heavy hitters put their muscle behind the controversial Fight Club" *Premiere Magazine*. Edward Norton Information Page. 10 Oct. 2005.