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Finding Joy and Keeping Peace: A Buddhist Analysis of Merle Highchurch from *The Adventure Zone: Balance*



Art By: Carey Pietsch

Introduction

The Adventure Zone: Balance is a Dungeons & Dragons actual play podcast hosted by the McElroy brothers, Griffin, Travis, and Justin, and their father, Clint. With Griffin as the DM, Travis playing Magnus Burnsides the human fighter, Justin playing Taako the elf wizard, and Clint playing Merle Highchurch the dwarf cleric, the adventure started in 2014 as a relaxed and comedic exploration of how to play Dungeons & Dragons, until somewhere around the third arc of the campaign when Griffin began to devise a deep, lore-filled, satisfactory plot that would continue to unravel until its completion in 2017. Filled with grand relics, lovable NPCs, and equal moments of comedy and drama, fans laughed, cried, and adored every minute of Griffin's exposition mixed with his family's tomfoolery, leading to a graphic novel adaptation being released a year later and continuing to be published by arc up to this day. With 69 episodes, each ranging from one to three hours, there is plenty to be analyzed and uncovered when it comes to the story of *Balance*. In particular, there are a multitude of scenes throughout this story that can

be related to a Buddhist frame of thinking, especially with the overall theme of Merle Highchurch's interactions with John (or "the Hunger"). Using Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield's *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* and Charlotte Joko Beck's *Nothing Special*, this essay will use a Buddhist lens to analyze Merle's character and his interactions with John.

Up until the last two arcs of *Balance*, we are under the impression that the main plot point is the seven grand relics that Magnus, Taako, and Merle must scour the lands to retrieve before they get into the wrong hands and cause more chaos and destruction. The three of them get employed by an organization called the Bureau of Balance, led by a woman named Lucretia who created this organization with the sole purpose of retrieving all seven relics from the wrong hands. Each arc up until the last ones focuses on one of the relics, and the adventures that they embark on in order to retrieve it. However, it is not until episode 59 that we are made aware of the fact that these three, along with Lucretia and other NPCs named Davenport, Lup, and Barry, created those grand relics in the first place, with practically everyone's memories being wiped aside from Lucretia's. In this episode, everyone's memories are restored and we are taken back into their pasts, to a time before the "main" adventure even began.

These seven characters, being Magnus, Taako, Merle, Lucretia, Davenport, Lup, and Barry, all belonged to a group of space explorers called the Institute of Planar Research and Exploration, or the IPRE. Leaving their plane of origin to embark on this interplanar journey, they were not aware that the planet they left behind would be gone until it was too late. This is because of two main forces that dictate the fates of the planets they visit throughout this arc. The first force is called the Light of Creation, a glowing ball of light that, when arriving upon a planet, grants that planet's inhabitants a great amount of thought and creativity, usually improving the societies surrounding where it lands. Chasing this Light of Creation throughout an

infinite amount of planets and realities is the second force, and the story's main antagonist, the Hunger. The Hunger is a massive army that takes the form of a dark cloud wide enough to cover multiple planes at once. Once the Light of Creation lands on a planet, the Hunger soon follows, being able to sense its presence and rush to devour it as soon as possible with its army's forces ravaging the world below. Each time the Light of Creation is devoured, the Hunger grows infinitely more powerful. That is why the IPRE's main goal becomes to retrieve the Light of Creation before the Hunger can get to it, for each of the almost 100 planets that they visit.



Art By: @superdonut on DeviantArt

Scene One

In episode 63, Merle is taught a new ability by Abbess Oriana, the leader of a monastery in one of the planes they visit. This ability is called “parlay.” She explains to Merle that this ability has “allowed all these different nations to find peace during times of potential turmoil” (McElroy episode 63). Going into “parlay” means entering an extra-dimensional space where “you are able to communicate with your visitor and discuss terms of peace,” but doing so requires an act of absolute humility since the visitor can harm or kill you at any time, while you have no such option and act as a peacemaker “humbly waging your life in an effort to cease

conflict between yourself and a rival” (McElroy episode 63). With this newfound ability, the IPRE urges Merle to use it to communicate with the Hunger to try and find peace since they “...haven’t been able to outrun it or escape it or kill it” (McElroy episode 63).

Goldstein and Kornfield, in *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, state that “If we look closely at this hunger, allowing ourselves to experience it fully, we can see that we are constantly driven by it. We can also see the fundamental, existential pain in which it is rooted. It is this raw and open painful place in ourselves that we spend our lives trying to cover up and avoid. We keep running away from the immensity of it” (174). It has taken the IPRE 30 cycles of running away from the Hunger and avoiding it to begin seeking out other solutions, such as coming to peace with it, thanks to the monastery’s leader. With it being so huge, deadly, and menacing, they felt that they had no option but to abandon each planet the Light had touched, leaving it for the Hunger to ravage before it caught them as well. With this quote from Goldstein and Kornfield, we can view the Hunger in a more literal sense as something that the IPRE is driven away from. It is only when Merle seeks to parlay with the Hunger that he allows himself to fully face it. Spending their journeys up until this point running away from the immensity of it, Merle is the first one to sit and experience it fully. Obviously, it is only out of survival that they continue to run away from such a monstrosity, but as Goldstein and Kornfield explain, “It is not at all that we shouldn’t do these things, but only that we should look clearly and penetratingly at them so that we can understand this aspect of our lives” (173).

Entering this extra-dimensional space, we are introduced to the leader of the Hunger, the man who started it all: a human man, dressed in a suit and tie, named John. During Merle’s first couple of meetings with John, he is killed outright—but important to note is the fact that every time the IPRE leaves a plane and starts a new “cycle,” their bodies are reset to the exact state

they were in when they first left their home planet, meaning as long as at least one member is alive and manages to get away on the ship, every member of the crew is “reborn.” Despite John’s initial hostility, Merle continues to parlay with him with no intent nor capability of harming him back. Using a Buddhist lens, we can clearly see that Merle has reached spiritual maturity. As Beck states in *Nothing Special*, “In spiritual maturity, the opposite of injustice is not justice, but compassion. Not me against you, not me straightening out the present ill, fighting to gain a just result for myself and others, but compassion...” (53). Rather than seeking to hurt John back, Merle chooses the compassionate path of continuing to sacrifice himself to communicate to him for the sake of his friends and, eventually, for John’s sake as well. Merle pursues this life that Beck speaks of, “...a life that goes against nothing and fulfills everything” (53).



Art By: @forksthousands on Twitter

Merle continuously putting himself in harm’s way just to communicate with the Hunger eventually intrigues John, and they have their first discussion of why John is doing this and what the Hunger’s goals are. This is how we learn the origins of the Hunger, how John was once a normal human being until he “solved” the meaning of life and successfully visualized eternity’s treacherous arc (McElroy episode 63). Going on a spiel about how existence is horrible, John tells Merle that everyone in his plane listened to him, and that this collective consciousness

spurred into what became the Hunger now. Being unsatisfied with the rules of the universe and finding them unfair, the Hunger continuously chases this Light of Creation in order to expand and consume more and more, breaking the rules that he saw. Related to this more literal hunger and dissatisfaction, Beck states that “We want to quench our thirst permanently... That promise of complete satisfaction is never kept. It can’t be kept. The minute we get something we have desired, we are momentarily satisfied—and then our dissatisfaction rises again” (46). This perfectly describes the existence of the Hunger—it is constantly, repetitively seeking out the Light in order to grow more and more, but no matter what, it remains unsatisfied and Hungry. John is actually amused by Merle and his team’s nickname of the “Hunger” for him, as he remarks:

John: You call us the Hunger. That’s not entirely inaccurate. ‘Cause we are... hungry. But it would be more accurate to simply call us, Dissatisfaction. But soon--

Griffin: And he holds up his hand, and says,

John: --you will call us... Ascendant. (McElroys episode 63)

Scene Two

Throughout each cycle, and each session of Parlay, Merle and the rest of the IPRE are forced to “wake up” over and over again, getting so close to the bottom of life and realizing that their situations were “...hopeless—and wonderful” (Beck 222). John finds Merle’s carelessness amusing, and continues to kill him at the end of each session, even if it goes well. John is the one spending all of his energy on these schemes in order to never hit that same bottom (Beck 222).

The advice that Merle tries to give John during one instance of their parlay follows Beck’s description of “waking up”:

Merle: What brings me joy is... life. I think you can find joy anywhere, in life. I think it’s a conscious choice. I think you- you choose joy, in life. And no matter how bad things are, no matter how crummy, no matter how dark, no matter how many times some guy named John kills your ass--

Griffin: He chuckles.

Merle: You find joy. I’ve found joy. Honest to God gettin’ to know ya, I’ve found joy

playin' chess with ya [laughs], I have enjoyed-- I haven't enjoyed, you know, gettin' my-- my ass killed, but I-- I find joy whatever I do. I don't always do things right, and I don't always do things smart. And I don't always do a character voice.

Griffin: [laughs]

Merle: But whatever I do, I find joy in it. Because, at the end of the day, that's all you got, is lookin' back on the joy you had and the joy you found and the joy you gave other people. (McElroys episode 63)

This perfectly matches Beck's sentiment of finding all things in life wonderful. As she says, "Got a toothache? That's also it—wonderful. When we think about the toothache, of course we don't think it's wonderful. But it is wonderful simply to be what life is in this second, toothache and all" (Beck 223). Merle's fondness of all aspects of life, both good and bad, is held in stark contrast to John's nearly obsessive pessimism.



Art By: Carey Pietsch

Additionally, Goldstein and Kornfield state that "Every experience, no matter how wonderful or terrible it may be, will change and pass away. What we are is a process that is continually unfolding into the unknown of each new moment. In striving to regain what has passed, we keep ourselves prisoners of what we already know" (159). With the Hunger striving to consume each plane and make it a part of itself, being unable to accept the rules of the universe and attempting to maintain immortality, John eventually does become a prisoner to this creation.

Thankfully, with Merle's insistent compassion, John does eventually "melt" with Merle, as Beck's metaphor implies that "If one ice cube begins to melt...the other ice cube—if it gets close at all—has to begin to melt also. And it, too, begins to gain some wisdom and insight. Instead of seeing the other ice cube as the problem, it begins to be aware of its own ice cubeness" (133). Unfortunately, due to all that the Hunger has become, John no longer has control over it as he is consumed as well. While John has "melted" with Merle and begun seeing the error of his ways, the Hunger is already alive, real, and rampaging. We can also see this as a metaphor for karma, with karma being the experience of cause and effect over a period of time on one level, and the quality of mind during the moment of action on another (Goldstein and Kornfield 138). With everything that John had already started, and everything that the Hunger had done in destroying multitudes of realities, all of the karma catches up to John in one of the last scenes of parlay with Merle.

Usually, during parlay, Merle and John like to sit and play chess together while they converse. However, this time, John seemed very off—rather than his usual human look, we see rifts in his body with the Hunger peeking through, along with seeing the cloud of the Hunger outside a window in this extra-dimensional room. Despite this, Merle continues to play along and talk to him like usual. John finally comes clean and explains to Merle that he is no longer in charge—that the Hunger has become its own being outside of his own will, and that they are not happy with the fact that he has not been able to find the Light of Creation in a while, and that they are going to consume him soon too. Desperately, John just wants to talk to Merle to have someone to say goodbye to when the time comes. They catch up like old friends, despite being lifelong enemies, and finally, towards the end of their game of chess, the Hunger strikes. The scene is described as follows:

Griffin: And as he says that, one of your pieces moves of its own volition, uh, and

approaches John's king. It's a knight. And as the knight moves towards the king, the piece actually animates, and there's— there's a mounted rider on a horse, and this rider raises a sword and rakes it across the king, and cuts all of those glowing threads that are surrounding the king, and suddenly John's king explodes, and all of the pieces that it had consumed come flying out of it and go scattering across the table. And when that happens, the room around you screams.

And— and those eyes start burning and they're squinting with rage, and suddenly hands attached to these, uh, long arms appear from the walls and the floor and John stands up from his chair with a start but he's too late. These hands are just tearing at him, and those— those rifts all over his body start to expand. Um, and a group of arms reach up and grab his legs and start to pull him down into the floor. And...he's...screaming, and he's reaching for you, Merle. What do you do?

Clint: I wrap my arms around him! I grab— I run to him, I grab him, throw my arms around his chest, lock my hands behind his back, and try to pull him out!

Griffin: Alright. You— you wrap your arms around John and... unintentional or no, are giving him this embrace as you try to pull him up and out of the ground as these hands keep pulling him, but... the— the hands just have him, there's so many, they're so strong. Um, and his waist is in the ground and his stomach and chest, and he's trying to keep himself out with his arms but there are arms grabbing his arms and pulling those down into the ground, and just before he disappears, his eyes meet yours and he's inches from you, Merle, and you hear him whisper,

John: [distressed] Break the bonds, Merle, break—

Griffin: And then he's gone. And the eyes all around the room turn towards you. (McElroys episode 68)



Art By: @sacalow on Reddit

As John is faced with the fruit of all of his past actions, we can turn towards what Goldstein and Kornfield write: “Our culture is generally geared to the pursuit of immediate gratification of desires, and this reinforces the view that what we do will not have effects, that there is no karmic result from our actions that will come back to us. But when we step back and take a broader perspective, we begin to understand that we are the heirs of our own motives and

deeds and that our lives do not unfold randomly or haphazardly” (143). With John’s attire, behavior, and description of his human life, we are left to wonder whether he might have been a part of our reality or not, and if so, if his endeavours and creation of the Hunger might have been a metaphor for something more real to our world, such as capitalism, getting so out of hand that even those who started it are no longer in control. If only John had understood the scope of what he had done when he began preaching about the “true” nature of existence, and what that would mean for his future self with this build-up of causes and effects, he might have taken a different path in life.

Despite all the evil that the Hunger has done, despite how many times John has killed Merle, despite everything, Merle still holds compassion for John, even embracing him in this scene and trying to save him from his own karmic fate. With this in mind, we can view Merle as truly compassionate and spiritually mature. As Goldstein and Kornfield explain, “...if we can drop beneath the behavioral level and allow ourselves to open to others...we can often see the suffering underneath. We can get a sense, perhaps, of that place of pain in them that is manifesting, often unconsciously, as unpleasant or obnoxious behavior. And when we open to and feel the suffering of another, compassion will have the chance to come forth” (127-128). With Merle opening to John’s suffering by willingly communicating with him despite everything, he becomes a true and compassionate peacekeeper. Despite John’s evil deeds, Merle recognizes the humanity in him, resonating with this poem in *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* by Thich Nhat Hanh, titled “Please Call Me by My True Names,” which speaks on the importance of recognizing all life in order to open up the door to compassion:

Do not say that I’ll depart tomorrow
because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply; I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch,

to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile learning to sing in
my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope,
the rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the
river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in
time to eat the mayfly.

I am a frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond,
and I am the grass-snake, who, approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.
I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to
Uganda.

I am the twelve-year old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a
sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and
loving.

I am a member of the Politburo with plenty of power in
my hands,
And I am the man who has to pay his debt of blood to my
people dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in
all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills all four oceans.
Please call me by my true names,
So I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
So I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names
So I can wake up and so the door of my heart can be left
open,
The door of compassion. (Goldstein and Kornfield 132-134)

Scene Three

We must die to our attachments, our hopes and plans, to all our fears and expectations. To be here fully we have to let go of it all. Of course later we can pick much of it up again, but we still touch our life more lightly and wisely...Most of practice is a relentless

process of letting go. (Goldstein and Kornfield 178)

Throughout an entire century, the members of the IPRE were forced to die to their attachments over, and over, and over again. They were forced to make a life for themselves in one world, only to know that it would all be taken away in a year or less by the forces of the Hunger that constantly hunted the Light (and them) down. With 100 years of relentless “letting go,” we can see real effects in characters like Merle, who ends up being the one who dies the most throughout the century, as he willingly sacrifices himself over and over again just to talk to John.

During the finale of *Balance*, the IPRE finally decides that they are no longer going to run away from the Hunger, and that they are going to stay and fight for the planet that they made their home and for the people of that world and for all of the planes that had been sacrificed thus far. Rather than withdrawing for the hundredth time, they choose to stay. Throughout a century of running away from the Hunger, did the IPRE ever truly “get away”? No, because as Beck states, “...if we withdraw, we can be sure that our problems stay right with us...they’ll stay right with us until we pay some real attention to them” (237). And so the Hunger stayed, until they finally paid attention to it.

Although this “fighting back” may initially be thought of as going against the Buddhist lens of “letting go,” we can view it as a sense of agency in Beck additionally stating that “Of course it’s fine to buy life insurance and make sure the brakes work on our car. But in the end, even these don’t save us; sooner or later, all of our protective mechanisms will fail...If we’ve hit the eye of the hurricane for a year or two, it still cannot be counted on” (71). The IPRE can have a sense of agency in doing what is right out of the compassion for their fellow beings while simultaneously coming to the realization that, after they do this and if they do win and beat the

Hunger, this will be their home for good—and that when they die, they will die for good for the first time in 100 years—and they accept this.

It is episode 69 of *The Adventure Zone: Balance* when the story ends. As the IPRE rallies the rest of the world into a battle against the Hunger (who essentially represents karmic law at this point), Magnus, Taako, and Merle have a final face-off against the embodiment of the hunger in their plane now, which Griffin describes as this:

...on the deck of the ship in front of you, several puddles of the Hunger's black opal material have splashed down onto the ship, and they lay inert for a moment, then vibrate, and come together to form one larger puddle, and from that mass, a figure takes shape. It's a humanoid figure, one with far more definition than the other shadows you've faced. He's wearing a sharp suit, with well manicured hair, and though his body's entirely made up of this black opal plasma, you can see his face: Merle, it's John. But at the same time, it's not John; his usual composure is gone. This monster in front of you is panting with rage, but for the moment, he's simply standing at the ready, pulsating with heat and power. He's ready to fight. (McElroys episode 69)



Art By: @YallOutfoxed on DeviantArt

The three have a final boss battle with this creature, who is certainly no longer controlled by John. When it is finally slain, we are taken to John's final appearance:

And then the light swells and consumes everything you see.
Merle. The white light starts to dissipate, and as it does you find yourself standing on a beach at sunset, and there's a cool, gentle breeze coming up the coast as the tide rolls out, and the last of the sun's light retreats past the horizon. And, sitting on his suit jacket, with his shoes off and his pant legs rolled up, with his feet in the sand facing the ocean, is John. And he's human again. And he pats the ground next to him, and he says-
John: Merle...will you sit with me? Just...just for a moment?
Merle: ...You got it, buddy.
Griffin: You go and you move over to him and he says-
John: We don't have to talk. Let's just...let's just watch this together.

Griffin: And you sit there for a minute, watching the tide pull further and further away as the water rolls gently onto the shore, and the sun drops further and further behind the sea, and then the final sliver of sunlight is gone. And so is John. (McElroys episode 69)



Art By: @jeinu on Tumblr

“Only through acknowledging and opening to suffering can we stop and come to rest, can we find stillness and a deeper ground of goodness and well-being. It is this suffering that prompts us to let go, to live more lightly. By touching this suffering we can awaken the fullest compassion within us” (Goldstein and Kornfield 176). As Merle willingly sits with John and watches the sunset with him, John is prompted to finally open to his suffering and rest. After so long of being afraid of the truth of the universe and the laws of reality, Merle helps John accept things the way they are. Through his compassion, John, and the Hunger, are able to fade away.

Conclusion

Although Merle was never explicitly mentioned to be a Buddhist (he was actually a cleric of Pan, with many jokes about him being Christian-esque more than anything), we can look towards Merle’s actions throughout the series and notice how he embodies important Buddhist concepts such as compassion and spiritual maturity. Being given the title of the Peacekeeper,

Merle is able to see the good in all beings, as well as the importance of compassionate communication with even your greatest enemies. Merle sacrificing himself over and over again for the sake of this communication exemplifies his selfless personality with multiple traits that can be examined through a Buddhist lens positively. With John and the Hunger representing dissatisfaction and karma, we are able to see how Merle helps John “melt” with his compassion truly being able to change him. Despite John’s karma catching up to him in the end, he is able to finally let go thanks to Merle’s guidance.

Merle can be viewed as having the spiritual faculty of faith, but “...faith that we can have in the direction of our life’s journey, a direction not in time or space, but in the dimension of our understanding” (Goldstein and Kornfield 158). He is able to understand the importance of our perception, and the agency we have in shaping our views of reality positively, or at least neutrally, rather than constantly fighting against it or running away from it like John did. An important quote from *The Adventure Zone: Balance* summarizes this aspect of Merle’s character perfectly, as he exclaims to Lucretia, “...you gotta stand for something, or you’re gonna fall for anything. So listen! You have got faith: it’s faith in you” (McElroys episode 40).



Art By: @Nitebight on Twitter