

Fall 2016

An Interpersonal Exploration of Zen Buddhism: A Case Study of Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm

Yuwen Michelson

SIT Study Abroad, ymichels@hamilton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Michelson, Yuwen, "An Interpersonal Exploration of Zen Buddhism: A Case Study of Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm" (2016). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 2492.

http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2492

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

An Interpersonal Exploration of Zen Buddhism:

A Case Study of Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm

Michelson, Yuwen

Academic Director Thanh Doung

Advisor Cô Huyen Bạch

Hamilton College

Sociology Major

Da Lat, Vietnam

“The philosophy of Buddhism cannot be removed from the practice. Zen is every moment; when you are doing it you are aware... Keep your mind steady and do not be influenced by any other factors. Live with the concept of Impermanence and the true answers will come from inside of you.”

Introduction:

Through ethnographic research, I plan to examine the institution of Zen Buddhist education. I study how the applied socio-cultural meanings of what it means to be a “Buddhist” affect individual and shared meanings of Zen Buddhism. I focus on how pedagogy and practice of Zen Buddhism influences personal interpretations of Buddhist thought and tradition.

Over the years, many Buddhist scholars have brought to light several methodological issues with the study of Buddhism via examination of the canon. These concerns range from issues of objectivity and intention to interpretation and creativity; while also including other complications regarding politics and power. Scholars also question the role of written text in general due to the multifaceted nature of Buddhism. Critiques of the traditional historical-philological approach towards studying Buddhism suggest studying alternative semiotic forms of oral and vernacular traditions. For this reason, I investigate patterns of students’ personal, ritual, social and institutional interaction with Zen Buddhism, as well as their evolution within the monastic order.

For the purpose of this study, curriculum should be thought of not as the physical texts, but rather the flow of knowledge among Zen educators and practitioners. Though many of the ancient texts are treated as intellectual history, Buddhism itself is composed of the living interaction between the text and the students’ learned interpretation of the religion. Monastic students and teachers should therefore be thought of as scholars and practitioners who are constantly seeking knowledge of Buddhism, rather than those who possess it. Monastic education reveals that Zen Buddhism should be studied not as an object with particular features,

but as a series of integrated processes which aid its practitioners in mastering their minds and thoughts to attain the peaceful natural state of the Buddha, or the True Mind.

Buddhism, in practice, is a production of the learned interpretations of a student. This definition allows for a more full bodied examination of the Buddhist religion, since it is a practice based heavily on subjective analysis; students negotiate meaning within the context of lived experience. In Buddhism, tradition and pedagogical methodology are adaptive; they reflect the trajectory of one's interpretive process. Referring to oneself as a 'Buddhist' is primarily a function of the individual's conception of Buddhism. As this conception develops, so too does the user's practice and holistic experience of the Buddhism as a mode of being, as well as his/her conception of what it means to 'be' Buddhist.

I choose to conduct ethnographic research at Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm supplemented with in-depth interviews of the nuns and monks who practice there due to the nature of Buddhism; this decision is founded on the expectation that meaning, for Zen Buddhists, is produced on the local level in contextual circumstances. Local production of meaning is crucial for the study of Zen Buddhism, and this paper, since it reveals the interaction between the Dharma and its students; thus connecting the real life and practice of Zen Buddhist practitioners to the institution's theoretical teachings.

Methods:

For the purpose of this ethnographic study, I will use qualitative research methods. The reality of Buddhist monks/nuns and their education is subjective. One's activity and participation within the temple is essentially a projection of their consciousness regarding their personal

interpretation of what Zen Buddhism exists as. This personal experience with Zen Buddhism, rather than the objective fact of 'being Buddhist,' may result in a wide variety of conceptions of what it means to exist as a Buddhist, as well as practice Zen Buddhism. Therefore, looking at the experiential practice of what is taught through Buddhist Zen Dharma, I hope to answer the question: does the life of the monk /nun reflect their teachings?

In this particular social setting, there are a variety of realities for any and every individual being studied. Therefore, to ensure efficient, detailed analysis of the existence of multiple points of view, I plan to use a qualitative paradigm (Angrosino 2010). I will conduct my field work in Da Lat, Vietnam at Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm, in order to better understand and study monastic education based on the individual practitioners' systems of meaning. My research examines various individuals within their group context (ethnography) as well as alone (interview). I seek to specifically examine how patterns of creation and interpretation of Zen Buddhist thought and practice arise, as well as differ and coincide for individuals versus groups.

I enhance my ethnographic data with in-depth interviews. In these interviews, I will delve deeper and investigate how Buddhism is explicitly and implicitly performed. I will also analyze the identity that each practitioner generates based on his curricula and life experience. I will conduct a series of 7-10 in-person interviews. The interviews will consist of various questions pertaining to the experience of the individual within the institution of the monastery, the experience of the individual's interpretation of Zen Buddhism, and how the monk thinks of Zen as a practice. I will focus on teasing out how the individual in question interprets the values of Buddhism, as well as how he came to know and accept these values.

I will select participants based on geographic location and affiliation with the temple where

I conduct my fieldwork. I will be using convenience, systematic, and snowball sampling. I intend on using snowball sampling as my main sampling strategy; however, due to limited time in the area of study, I may also primarily rely on convenience sampling if there is a lack of diverse and willing participants. The majority of the interviewees will be acquaintances of the interviewer.

Each interview will be about 40-60 minutes long. All interviews will be based on an interview guide that consists of open ended questions. There will also be a translator involved, Cô Huyen Bạch, who has been a nun practicing Zen Buddhism at Trúc Lâm for over fourteen years and speaks fluent English. I will code transcriptions by individual experience with Buddhism, social systems or social relationships, behavioral patterns, 'idea' systems of belief, attitude, value or symbols, expressive culture, as well as sociocultural meanings behind relationships.

Lit Review:

Buddhism in Vietnam

Mahayana Buddhism was first introduced to Vietnam in the first century CE, by way of Central Asia. Then, Theravada Buddhism was introduced by way of India in the seventh century CE. Buddhism grew in popularity throughout the first millennium of Vietnam's history, however during the Chinese occupation in the early fifteenth century, Buddhism began to decline due to the destruction of temples and the dominance of Confucianist thought (Juergensmeyer 1352). When the French colonized Vietnam in the 1850's, Buddhism was further suppressed by the advent of Roman Catholicism. Today, approximate figures show that 80% of Vietnamese follow some blend of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, while the next largest religious

group is Christianity with 8% of the population (Juergensmeyer 1350). Even though distinct religions may not be formally practiced, Tam Giao philosophies (intermixture of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism) heavily shape the everyday behaviors, attitudes and spiritual worship of those in Vietnam.

Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia, adjacent to the South China Sea as well as Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. It used to be called the “Indochinese Peninsula” due to its location between India and China. Buddhism was first introduced to Vietnam by Indian monks traveling via sea trade routes, far before it was imported to Southern China (Tho 7). It started as a revolutionary movement against the theistic authority of Brahmanism in ancient India. For this reason, Buddhist teachings, although religious, contain a progressive spirit that emphasizes equality and non-theistic authority. At this time, Buddhist monks were intellectuals who had a broad knowledge of Buddha’s life and his teachings. In Vietnam in particular, Buddhism has had a great impact on culture. Buddhist thought in Vietnam is primarily the result of an amalgamation of intercultural communications throughout its history.

When Buddhism was initially introduced to Vietnam, it incorporated native belief about the power of water since Vietnam is a local water agriculture civilization. Narratives with prominent rain, thunder, cloud, lightening and other water symbols were used to familiarize Buddhism with the local people. Rituals, as well as places of worship, were established as working people hoped to control the power of water so they could yield good harvests (Tho 7). This first introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam was peacefully received and accepted, indigenized much earlier than Confucianism or Taoism. The second time, Buddhism was introduced Vietnam was under Sino-domination through the dominion of the royal class. It was

during this first millennium that Vietnamese-Indian Buddhism had a chance to mix with Chinese-Indian Buddhism. This is the reason why Vietnam is the only country in Asia to have both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism together (Tho 9).

During this time period, about 200 CE, Vietnam had a chance to establish an integrated theoretical system of both religion and philosophy; thereby using Confucianism as a theory of socio-politics, Taoism as a theory of non-action, and Buddhism as a theory of liberation from suffering. For this reason, Vietnamese Buddhism is more flexible than traditional Buddhism since it developed at the center of two of the most dominant streams of Buddhist thinking from both India and China. From the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, under the Ly and Tran dynasties, Buddhist Masters were the leading spiritual force, taking part in political affairs as road court advisors. Monks were leading the spiritual trends of the nation, as well as advising on political, military and diplomatic issues. In addition, many famous kings, after transferring their throne to the younger generation, converted to Buddhism, dwelling in Buddhist temples as ordained monks, practicing meditation and studying Buddha's teachings to cultivate their mind and virtue. Today, Buddhism in Vietnam is a product of intercultural communication between Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism co-existing with native belief (Tho 9).

In the 13th century King Tran Nhan Tong originated the Zen Buddhism sect Trúc Lâm in Vietnam. Due to almost a thousand years of colonial domination by China, Vietnamese religion was heavily influenced by the practice of Mahayana Buddhism which emphasizes the enlightenment of all beings. King Tran Nhan Tong is particularly important to Vietnamese Buddhism because he attained Enlightenment in Vietnam thus creating the first form of Vietnamese Buddhism, Trúc Lâm Zen Buddhism. As the first Patriarch, he reconciled Chinese

and Indian Buddhist teachings, taking from Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zen, Tantra and Pure Land Practices.

Religious history in Vietnam is a blend of indigenous beliefs interacting with socialism and a variety of other imported religious traditions. Although freedom of religious practice was guaranteed by the Ordinance on Religion and Belief in 2004, the Vietnamese government still requires registration of all religious organizations. The government also banned all missionary activities and specified that activities that seek to “undermine the country’s peace, and unity” are illegal (Juergensmeyer 1352). Due to the hostility of the Vietnamese government toward religious organizations, as well as perceived risks with affiliating oneself with religious institutions, it is difficult to properly estimate the religious demographics in Vietnam. Many Vietnamese are reluctant to mark their private religious affiliation on their communist identity cards.

Buddhism as a philosophy and practice is heavily dependent on the devices of the internal mind, self-consciousness, self-confidence and self-liberation. The Buddhist method emphasizes self-cultivation by practice of meditation and awakening of the True Mind as well as the natural cultivation of compassion and wisdom. Additionally, all are equal in their ability to achieve enlightenment. The road to emancipation is not a supernatural process, but one that every person must choose for him or her self. In general, the construction of Buddhist teaching can be broken down into three main parts of self cultivation: conduct, concentration and wisdom. Buddhist meditation is considered to be one technique of introspection that a person may use to experience truth and attain nirvana. Overall, Buddhist values are humanist and sustainable in comparison to many other theistic religions.

Textual Practice and the Buddhist Canon:

The Pali canon of the Theravada school was transmitted orally and augmented for thousands of years by the Arahats, who had attained Enlightenment and escaped the cycle of Samsara, until it was written down for the first time in Sri Lanka in the first century (Freiberger 263). After the fifth century, the Pali canon featured fixed contents; also regarded as normative by western scholars. Text collections in the Pali canon were constructed based on what the editors at the time agreed to be the ‘significant’ topics, including: the early life of Siddhattha, his ascetic years, his awakening, his death, the ‘sermon of Benares’, the Four Noble Truths, the Middle Way, the doctrines of dependent origination, Annatta, the Five Khandahas, karma and rebirth, meditation, general ethic principles and the basics of Sangha (Freiberger 266). Often academic anthologies select topics and texts that coincide with these passages. The academic community, generally speaking, works to protect this selection.

Scholars of religion apply the term ‘canon’ to create a certain corpus of texts that emphasize two important aspects: first that it is normative, and second that it is fixed and exists in a standardized form (Freiberger 262). Therefore, standardization is a result of the process of canonization. This process often leads to the idea that when something is canonical, it is also authoritative and resistant to change or alteration.

However, due to the contextual construction of Buddhism and Buddhist thought in different regions, there is considerable incongruence surrounding what characterizes a ‘good’ Buddhist. American intellectuals’ fascination with Buddhism extends back to the nineteenth century when European scholars in the nineteenth century had trouble distinguishing between

Buddhism as a religion and as a philosophy; however, these distinctions are a misunderstanding. To practitioners, Buddhism is thought of as the absolute Truth. Though the history of Buddhism was written through the “canon,” which was thought by European and Asian scholars to represent the oldest and thus ‘truest’ teachings of the Buddha, in reality, the original parameters of the canon were formed primarily in response to Western scholars and their notion of *editio princeps* (McDaniel 194). This led to the reification of the canon into modernity. The idea of the ‘true canon’ has had many ramifications on monastic instruction in Southeast Asia, yet the ‘ideal’ canon is rarely taught or known by the majority of Buddhists in Vietnam (McDaniel 14). What is important to note is that a compilation of a ‘canon’ for many Buddhists is a much wider variety of texts than commonly understood in the West.

It must be understood that even if one could define what constitutes the ‘ideal’ canon, this does not mean one can assume that the canon is universally read, understood, held to high esteem, or preserved by the religious community that ‘defines’ it. Nor can it be assumed that this community which creates an ideal canon will adhere to it. For many local teachers who are not drawing from an immutable, pre-established body of knowledge, encompassing their teachings in a canon is nearly impossible. For the purpose of this study, since I am putting precedence on the evolving conversations, learning traditions, interpretations and textual practices of Buddhism, the canon is not as relevant as the curricula.

Although, heterogeneity of the canon contributes much to the success of Buddhism; the more views and practices legitimized by passages of the canon, the more worldviews are represented, and thus all the more people are able to feel at home in the religious tradition (Freiberger 274). Buddhism is a multifaceted phenomenon, made more complex by the nature of

its historical developments. In general, canonical texts are not a divine manifestation, but rather a matrix of historical controversies detailing power relations and revolutions in thought. It is important to note that there is a localized understanding of what makes someone a 'wholesome' Buddhist, while the source of the texts themselves often reveal what constitutes a 'wholesome' in that region. Different areas value the teachings of the Buddha for distinctive reasons.

The idea of "textual communities" provides a useful concept used to analyze processes that encourage the continuity and the transformation of cultural forms within South and East Asian religious communities at different times for various reasons. Textual community is a tool used when examining the lives and histories of certain ancient texts in relation to the lives of the monks studying them. These texts, though not homogenous to all people who call themselves Buddhists, at least serve to label these people as a collective. This community of people all understands the world and their place in it in shared terms. This way of thinking - and more importantly being - is influenced by shared text, though the interpretations may differ. Even if specific texts are not completely authoritarian, there still exist methods of interpretation that are. For example, the interpreter must be a powerful member of the larger textual community (Blackburn).

In practice, the canon is open and fluid, often negotiated by the teacher in their oral performance and creative engagement with the curriculum. Monastic library collections, and their choices of course texts for pedagogical use, vary widely in range and type. Some are canonical and some are not. There is a lot of similarity in the general curriculum of monastic education, however there is no standard curriculum. The curriculum itself is malleable; there exists no 'universal text' as compared to Western Christianity and the Bible. Curriculum is not

regulated by the government or any other institution. In fact, the curriculum often operates directly in opposition to Vietnamese secular government forces and their ideological nation building coercion. The texts are not stable objects; they are tools to reveal the deeper relationship between teacher and student, reciter and audience.

Furthermore, in the process of imparting and translating the Buddha's teachings or Dharma, scribes constantly altered the content and structure of the ancient text. These alterations were seen as the interpreters being creatively engaged, and this practice was often encouraged. Evidence suggests that most texts were aurally copied, meaning that a monk would recite a manuscript aloud, often from memory, and then another would listen to the dictation and copy it down onto a new palm leaf. This meant that many scribes had little or no contact with the actual source text. This allowed for manipulation, expansion and rearranging of vernacular texts in non-standardized ways (McDaniel 86).

Religious texts add heavily to the symbolic dimension of social life. For many, they are the building blocks of culture. Written word in Buddhism follows very specific principles. The aim of this style of writing is to use compact and modest words. These words carry with them a penetrating philosophy about life and the human condition relative to nature so that "the verses bear attributes of nirvana" (Tho 12). The words are not to be taken literally, they are merely hints. The aim is to grasp the essence of all nature hidden under the external forms of things. That being said, it cannot be ignored that politics and culture are dialectic in that they are a reflection of the practices of people. Culture is built into politics, and because of this, often the interpretation of texts is political as well (Büyükokutan 621).

Monastic education, due to its shifting reasons for implementation, changes based on

individual need. Change in curriculum, educational methods, rituals, and interpretation is implemented ‘on the ground’ so to speak. Vernacularly speaking, change is subtle and organic, occurring text by text or teacher by teacher. “In seeing the monastic school space as a series of changing relationships, one can see in close detail how, when, by whom, and even why texts changed locally when introduced into communities with their own ritual needs, ethical conundrums, and social concerns” (McDaniel 17).

Teachers are independent masters due to their lack of adherence to a standardized body of facts and texts. Consequently, students’ educations are heavily dependent on the guidance of their teachers. However, it is important to mention that the lessons and stories of teachers are often interpreted as guidelines rather than dogmatic prescriptions. Primarily, tradition and pedagogical methodology are adaptive and reflect the trajectory of the interpretive process of Buddhism. Moreover, there is also no formalized divide between religious and secular curriculum in monastic education. Many areas of education are formal courses in math, biology, and foreign languages, however they are taken alongside religious classes and incorporate Buddhist teaching within the subject matter.

It is crucial to understand that Buddhist practice is formed out of a need-based curriculum. There is a distinct dialectic between the way that the texts are taught and understood. This allows room for personal negotiation with the lessons through life experience, as application in context is what creates ‘learning’ here. Education is based off of active engagement with the texts in the classroom and in the student’s life experience, drawing together a full picture of what it means to be a ‘good’ Buddhist, even if ‘good’ is subjective to one’s specific area. The selection of ancient texts for a particular community is idiosyncratic, evolving out of the various needs of the

community throughout history. The texts selected by the leaders in the Buddhist community therefore shape the practice and the education received. Examining which texts are studied in a certain area can tell you a lot about the reading culture, the way the community interprets Buddhism itself, and how action oriented their pedagogies are.

Reading Buddhist text is best defined as the negotiated construction of meaning based on the interpretation learned through one's vernacular landscape. In this way, reading is an art form since it creates a unique picture of the conveyed knowledge of a specific interpreter. There is a distinct dialectic between the way that the texts are taught and understood. This allows room for personal negotiation with the lessons via life experience. Application in context is what creates 'learning' here. Lastly, the intimate relationship that develops between a student and a teacher is a crucial tradition at the heart of Buddhist curriculum; this unique dynamic is learned and passed on to others. Often monks design their own curriculum, seeking out various teachers who are experts in different subjects.

Buddhist texts are not static physical entities, but content which inspires closer examination of the invaluable and powerful principles that the Buddha put forward. Many of the ancient texts are treated as intellectual history, but Buddhism itself is composed of the living interaction of text with students learning the religion and philosophy. Buddhist practice is constantly adapting itself to fit the needs of the teacher and or the student. The study of Buddhism therefore has a uniquely innovative quality, allowing for its practice to evolve within the various conditions it is taught and understood under.

Buddhist Higher Education: Issues and Socio-Intellectual Climate

In 2016, Jeffrey Waite the Lead Education Specialist for the World Bank noted that the portion of young people in Vietnam pursuing higher education is growing rapidly, particularly at a rate that is faster for women than for men (World Bank). Thus, Vietnam faces the challenge of expanding its higher education sector rapidly without reducing the quality. The challenge for Vietnam is not only to set up institutions of higher education, but also to increase the number of graduates who have qualifications that are relevant to the economy and society in general. So far, Vietnam's higher education system has not met global standards. A study done by the Pedagogy University of Ho Chi Minh City in 2013 showed that 75% of students lack the skills needed to pursue a career (Tuyet).

The Ministry of Education and Training oversees all aspects of Vietnamese education. All curriculum of religious schools, as well as attendance statistics, must be submitted to local authorities for approval. Furthermore, all government authorities have the power to reject requests for religious activities at any time by simply providing a written statement to justify their decision (Decree 92, 2012). There are several key issues facing Buddhist Educational institutions including outdated libraries, classrooms, technology and lack of student housing as well as research facilities. Another key issue in Buddhist higher education is the lack of united curricula and textbooks for the system as a whole; often curriculum authors want students to follow the same path that they themselves experienced (Hoang,7). Because of these and other reasons, Buddhist higher education is facing a decline in funding for resources, facilities, and salaries due to tight control over religious education by Vietnamese government. Moreover, tuition fees at Buddhist universities are significantly cheaper than national, private or

international universities.

Currently, there are four Buddhist Universities in Hanoi, Hue, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho which offer bachelor and masters degree programs. The curriculum taught within these institutions is a mix of canonical texts, as well as social science subjects. The learning style focuses mostly on rote memorization and lecture style classes. Another interesting point to note is that a study of Early Monastic Buddhism conducted by Dr. Nalinaksha Dutt found that most of the translated Pali canon texts used in Buddhist higher education “undoubtedly passed through several redactions with accretions and omissions” (1941).

In general, there are three stages in any course of Buddhist education: learning, practicing, and realization. Being knowledgeable about texts and sutras is important, but more what is critical to one’s education is understanding how the teachings of Buddha apply to real life. It is emphasized that Buddhist teaching is meant to awaken the True Mind, and that theoretical knowledge must be linked to one’s practical skills. Buddhist education must not only focus on knowledge, but also wisdom in both theory and practice. In theory, Buddhist Education at a higher level is meant to personally liberate students through the practice of the Buddha’s teaching in all areas of life inside and outside of the classroom.

Buddhism as Spirituality; Buddhism as Religion: A Sociological Concept

Most frequently, spirituality is thought of as one’s conscious belief in existence of forces or “God” at work beyond their experienced reality. Although it is often associated with the individual’s inner life, it is not directly dependent on religious institutions or dogma. Many

people think of spirituality and assume an amalgamation of faith, belief in the sacred and “do it yourself” religion. However, for the purpose of this study, spirituality is to be thought of more as a specific language used to communicate and facilitate the dialectic between inherent faith and the ritual interaction of all that is deemed ‘sacred;’ thus affirming the individual’s existence within an objective system of belief. This understanding is partially a nod to Simmel’s Seinsform or ‘form of being.’

Spirituality is a manifestation of the creation of the individual, often based off of religiously affiliated text or philosophy, but differing by the nature of one’s evolving process of faith and involved practice which has not been imposed externally by some other existing source. As Simmel notes in his sociological examination of human form, all humans by nature are religious since it is a form by which the human soul experiences life and comprehends its existence (1997). Spirituality, though abstract in many ways, is concrete in its assertion of ‘knowing.’ To differentiate between religion and spirituality, I give the example of belief itself versus the objective mental pattern of understanding. Religion is the interpretation of faith, while spirituality is faith incarnate.

To depart from this dual nature of belief in something greater than oneself, I note that spirituality often evolves from an intellectual reflection of the nature of self, society, religion, as well as rational analysis of that which many call ‘God.’ To this extent, many who are ‘believers’ in God and devoutly religious not would not be considered inherently spiritual. Sociology of religion has primarily focused on institutional legitimization of belief on the part of the individual. However, the concept of spirituality suggests a shift away from the study of hierarchical forms of one’s relationship with the sacred, as well as explicit and implicit

obedience to authority.

If religion represents a normative universe to which we are 'supposed' to adapt, spirituality is a process and a means of interpretation which opens the sacred to all individuals, constructing found meaning for that individual's life based on individual perspective (Berger 1967).

Although both groups are interested in the transcendent, spirituality carries with it a very specific objective regarding the attainment of freedom from the human condition, which leads to direct communication, wisdom or connection with that which one defines as "God."

Buddhism exists in multiple different forms to varying populations. For some it is religion, for others it is philosophy, and to many it is a metacommunicative framework and a means of interpreting the world and culture of many places in Asia. Buddhism frequently operates in the metaphysical dimension; "this metaphysical dimension, however, forms part of the philosophy and does not derive from a revelation, even though it does involve ritualistic aspects which are associated with religious practice" (Faure 28). Many claim that it is specifically not a religion, or at least that Buddhism's specifically religious aspects are of secondary importance.

When addressing the philosophical nature of Buddhism, it is said that 'reality is unknowable.' This is because Buddhist belief insists that things do not exist in themselves, and the nature of things, an illusion of the object of knowledge, cannot truly be conceptualized since the truth is ineffable. Therefore, knowledge in the Buddhist sense is non-conceptual and non-linguistic (Faure 30). For Buddhists, knowledge is intuitive, and so by Western rationalist standards of discourse it is labeled and generalized within a philosophical framework. Indeed, Buddhism can be labeled with various terms, inferring certain meanings upon its nature, but it should be made clear that Buddhist thought in particular (inclusive of ritual logic and mythology)

is determined by a given society, at a given time, within a certain culture, by a specific language. It is for this reason that Buddhist practice is something that is derived and plural.

Though Buddhism's individualized character is often emphasized, it is crucial to understand that it also has a marked communal aspect. For instance, in Zen Buddhism in particular though meditation and contemplative practice is highly solitary, it is socially determined in a collective context. Monks and nuns in a temple have an idealized and routinized version of ritual practice, including strict ceremonial and aesthetic ways of living and 'doing' Buddhism. While the practice of Buddhism for these monks and nuns is definitely spiritual in nature, an internal experience with libertarian undertones, it would be ignorant to overlook the disciplinarian aspect of their external experience. Therefore, in monasticism we see Buddhism as a social structure including a strict schedule which is followed throughout the day.

Throughout Buddhist history, the primacy of monks and nuns has been undermined. Unlike Christianity, a monk can easily renounce monasticism, and many men and women, in cultures where monasticism is common, some view a temporary stay at a monastery as an obligatory rite of passage (Faure 135). It is not uncommon, in South East Asian in particular, to encounter laypeople who at one point in their life resided in a temple. However, it is important to note that the Buddhism offered here is far different than that of the Western conception of 'Neo-Buddhism,' which has been idealized into a popular and purely spiritual form. Though Buddhism has the tendency to appear as distinctly aesthetic and spiritual, its devout and ritualistic aspects cannot be underestimated. A full understanding of Zen Buddhism recognizes its use as an intellectual, religious and spiritual resource, which includes consideration and knowledge of Buddhism's history as well as Asian society.

Monastic life follows several key principles. It provides one with the opportunity to learn, study and explore the Dharma rigorously as well as perfect morality even in the most inconspicuous aspects of one's everyday life. Monastic life also revolves around various forms of meditation and prayer, which are practiced intensely with great persistence. In summary, monastic life is oriented towards intense training to perfect three basic principles of the Noble Eightfold Path: insight, morality, and concentration (Schmidt-Leukel 77). Monks and nuns are bound to the precepts of their monastic community and can enter at the age of twelve; however, some enter even earlier. One physical sign that signals one's entrance to the order and renouncement of former life is a shaved head and the donning of the monastic robe. Monks and nuns retain few personal items (three-piece robe, bowl, razor, needle, water strainer, a bag, medicine) since part of their training is learning to be content with little.

There is hierarchy within monastic life, however age (not biological, but by number of years spent within the order) is the primary means of organization. Buddhist scripture frequently affirms the principle that monks and nuns should make decisions unanimously without disrupting harmony, and in fact it is a serious matter if one were to be accused of deliberately instigating division (Schmidt-Leukel 78). Generally, the communal interaction among members of the order is characterized by signs of generosity, kindness, love and affection in acts of body, speech and thought, in both public and private.

Sangha, or the Buddhist community, is comprised of four groups: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen (Faure 130). The image of laity in early Buddhism was extremely poignant since there were and still are clear distinctions between monks and laypeople. Although laypeople have different moral and behavioral requirements following only five precepts compared to the

100+ precepts of monks or nuns, they are an important part of the Buddhist community since they are often responsible for observing the behavior of monks (Freiberger 270). Laypeople also may contribute by feeding, clothing, and providing for other basic necessities of the monks or nuns in their community. Within Buddhism, both groups ultimately strive for attainment of rebirth in heaven and attainment of Nirvana. The purpose of Sangha, in its institutionalized monastic form, is to provide monks with the optimal conditions for inner spiritual progress for each individual, while at the same time propagating the Buddha's message (Schmidt-Leukel 74). Though monks and nuns seemingly tend to live shut away from the world and society, history has revealed that Buddhism has always been engaged in political and social life.

Buddhist education seeks to educate the whole person by combining religious and secular skill sets. Monastic education is not only about reading and interpreting text; it is multifaceted much like modern American Military Academies. There are physical, economic, social and aesthetic dimensions. One central aspect of monastic education is learning how to look and behave like a monk or nun. The kinesthetic and affective sides of monastic education cannot be ignored either. Texts are often heard or chanted repeatedly in a "cacophonous sensory atmosphere." This involves strenuous physical discipline and heightened aesthetic awareness. Socially monk or nun-hood may offer prestige or honor. Economically, it may offer free education and shelter to some who may have few or no other options, including an escape of familial or social responsibilities. Also, due to the nature of monastic education, it can offer highly localized people the chance to travel to be exposed to intellectual communities, which may otherwise be out of reach.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Buddhist social programs do not reform or create

the material conditions of a persons' life, but serve to facilitate the spiritual condition of one's ethics and religious belief so that the person is compassionate, generous, persistent, benevolent and full (Tho 11). These elements of Monastic Education are just as integral to a monk or nun's tutelage as the text based readings (McDaniel 12).

Zen Buddhism & The Establishment of the Trúc Lâm Zen Sect

According to Professor Tran Hong Lien at the Viet Nam Buddhist Academy, the Chinese spread Mahayana Buddhism, which literally means the "Great Vehicle." This type of Buddhism is known to emphasize the enlightenment of all beings. It was due to the adoption of this religious sect that the Ly and Tran dynasties (1009-1400) had the opportunity to renew Buddhism in Viet Nam. In premodern times, Zen spread from China to other Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Tibet and other parts of central Asia; however, much of the history and study pertaining to the origins of Southeast Asian Buddhism, and Zen in particular, has been through the lens of Japanese Zen scholarship (Dumoulin, 1988).

In 1963, the world was introduced to Vietnamese Buddhism through the self immolation of a monk on a public street. He was willing to manifest his suffering in a dramatic display for the sake of peace and the enlightenment of his people (Thien-An, 1975). In Vietnam, Zen Buddhism must be examined within the context of a communist regime which strongly promotes nationalism since it has long been a dominated nation with little opportunity to introduce its traditional culture to the rest of the world as a free member of the international community. For this reason, as well as the introduction of Western religions and religious thought, traditional religious life of many Vietnamese has escaped the grasp of Western understanding. This is

particularly true regarding Zen Buddhism, which is mostly introduced to the Western scholars by way of translations of Buddhist text. However, an imperative part of Zen Buddhism lies in the self absorption and complete immersion into intensive practice of the Zen Buddhist way. This devotion requires deep commitment to becoming a disciple of Buddha, Buddha Dharma, self reflection, contemplation, and meditation. It is extensive mental training and physical submersion into a Zen mode of being. In the latest development of Vietnamese Zen, Buddhist practice is firmly grounded in the Lâm-Tê Zen tradition (Thien-An, 1975).

Zen Buddhism is a sect that is heavily influenced throughout history by the values and teachings of eminent individuals, with an emphasis on tradition, hagiographical works and lineage. Due to this bibliographical nature, Buddhist Zen history appears to be more episodic than normatively traditional. Regarding the development of Zen over time, scholars question if there is an “authentic” Zen since the great men who established their respective Zen sects must be studied and assessed within their historical and social contexts in order to best understand their successional lineages. It would therefore be difficult to try to discern which lineages are “pure.” Even geographic boundaries cannot aid in defining “authentic” Zen, since at throughout history China itself has been ill-defined, at one point formally including what is now known as Vietnam. China “controlled” the northern third of modern Vietnam until the tenth century, while the central part of Vietnam was considered to be a part of the Champa kingdom (Dumoulin, 1988).

However, what can be deduced is that, within the realm of Asian spirituality, Zen is thought of as one of the purest manifestations of the essence of the Buddhist religion. Though the ‘original’ Zen texts were written in the medieval Chinese colloquial language, it should be noted

that the Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, etc... translations and commentaries aided in the contextual understandings of Zen in their respective areas, and their specific interpretations regarding the evolution of religious thought. Furthermore, to study the different sects of Zen one must also note and follow the dialogues between the different texts and religious leaders throughout the ages.

For those who would extract Zen from its context and think of it as just another reified mysticism of universal or perennial philosophy would be using a loose generalization and superficial characterization. The potency of Zen Buddhism lies in the detectable theme of Zen as an art form. In the typical modern philosophical interpretation of Zen, we may think of Zen teachings and practice as a process by which simple and concrete things become transparent to a timeless and present absolute reality (Dumoulin, 1988). There is an immense amount of scholarship on the study of Zen; however, Vietnamese Buddhism, as a sect of Zen, primarily originated inside Vietnam itself.

Point of Departure

One question many sociologists ask is, how we can understand the relationship between the sacred and contemporary society? This idea is crucial for understanding this research project since my examination and impression of Buddhism and Buddhist thought seems to render the term 'religion' as inadequate. Spirituality seems more fitting to describe the profound dynamics at work, yet it would be inaccurate to discount the theological recycling of religious thought within the sociological definition of spirituality. Though Buddhism retains certain dogma, the way it is taught emphasizes subjective personal authenticity rather than objective truth. It is this

practice that legitimizes change as normative and fluid for the basis of Buddhist teachings, thus opening the doors to spiritualism in its autonomous form. Theologically, the concept of spirituality points to the borders between the individual and the institution, “between the freedom to believe on one hand and the legitimate control of belief on the other” (Flanagan 176). The institution of belief itself cannot be ignored either. The complex dynamics between institution and the individual often manifest in ways that are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Not to mention that individual belief is steeped in implications varying in temporal and contextual circumstances.

Sociological efforts in general secure a basis in the understanding and mapping of the social scene, as well as the behavior institution at work, however spirituality and Buddhism operate in the realm of the unseen. One may believe that these two notions stand in contradiction to each other, that sociology cannot tread in these ambiguous waters, or that this belief structure, spiritual-reality amalgamation is unwarranted of sociological attention. However, this academic question of whether it is possible to study spirituality at all relies on an exclusionary definition of its outcomes and symptoms. It is true that our current academic tools are incapable of studying the incorporeal aspects and essence of spirituality and hence, Buddhism.

However, if this area of study is approached as an intangible phenomenon, ‘unseen’ but emotionally and physically experienced, that subsequent experience can be pragmatically and empirically studied. Spirituality, by any discipline or discipline, must be understood and studied in the context of the subject’s lived reality; if it is not comprehended under this umbrella it is easy to invalidate and ignore. However, it is also thereby denying the legitimacy of the culture’s own system of belief. It is this very belief institution, as well as it’s exposure to human consciousness

and social consciousness, that is inherent to the study of sociology itself. Sociology reveals the unsaid understandings of reality and illuminates our awareness of the human perspective, particularly regarding social relationships. Approached in this way, its use and employment is somewhat akin to those who engage with spirituality and Buddhism.

In terms of sociology, for the purpose of this study, the best way to study this process of belief and spiritual journeying is to articulate the negotiation involving the various social players of the religious or non-religious scene, as well as the inner process of interpretation of the individual in question.

Case Study Results

The Trúc Lâm Zen sect aims to help its practitioners to understand the true nature of their mind and rupa (physical body & outside world) to attain the peaceful state of the Buddha, or the True Mind. Efforts to restore the Trúc Lâm Zen Sect to Vietnam are seen in the recent establishment of about thirty Zen Monasteries throughout the country. Trúc Lâm Zen attracts people who have a certain understanding of Buddhism, which is mainly practice-based, emphasizing the positive effects of meditation. Thiền Viện Trúc Lâm was built in 1993 and completed in 1994. Currently, there are about 150+ monks living in the monk quarter and about 150+ nuns living in the nun quarter; although, this number fluctuates due to lay women and men who reside within the monastery temporarily. Trúc Lâm is the last establishment that the Grand Master built. Since the Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ had such a reputation throughout the world, this place has retained a lot of meaning. The Grand Master's vision for this place in particular was as a holy institution that trains monks and nuns in the way of Zen; this is why Trúc Lâm Da

Lat has the strictest schedule, and is considered to have the ideal conditions and environment for practicing Zen Buddhism in Vietnam. As one monk noted in an interview, “this is the place with the most roots.”

This case study consists of ethnographic observation of monk and nun life at Trúc Lâm Da Lat, as well as the Yên Tử Festival of the Anniversary of the Death of the First Patriarch. This participant-observant research is coupled with in-depth interviews of the nuns and monks of Trúc Lâm. This case study seeks to examine the origins of Vietnamese Buddhism, as well as shed some light on how following the Trúc Lâm Zen practices creates a practitioners’ religious life and consciousness.

One thing of importance to note is that Vietnamese Zen Buddhism, founded by the First Patriarch, was specifically created in order to cater to Vietnamese culture and tradition. It is a sect of Zen Buddhism that incorporates certain aspects of three different branches of Buddhism: Pure Land, Theravada and Mahayana. Up until the 1960’s, Buddhism in Vietnam was mainly based on a Pure Land philosophy due to decades of Chinese cultural influence; however, today in Vietnam Zen Buddhism is the predominant form of Buddhism for practicing Buddhists. Zen has long been considered the ‘umbilical chord’ of Buddhist philosophy with its strong emphasis on meditation; after all, the Buddha did sit under a Bodhi tree for forty-nine days in sitting meditation. Zen practice involves extensive self-examination and is a journey of self-exploration which requires practitioners to reflect on the nature of their mind. Nuns and monks must see their own minds with insight and clarity as the vehicle for the creation of one’s entire world and a tool for manifesting reality. Many Zen Buddhist followers also seek to correct the

misperception that Buddha is like the Western perception of a “God” who is granting wishes. Zen corrects this assumption with intention; Buddha is an Enlightened teacher who has walked the Middle Way and is humbly revealing it to others through his Dharma, often referred to in interviews as a realistic cure to suffering. However, the primacy of practice cannot be undermined regarding Zen Buddhism as theory; the intellectual understanding of Zen as a phenomenon is not the same as the actual insight and experience gained from practicing Zen as a mode of being. Zen requires serious contemplation, concentration, and physical and mental exertion.

In order to fully understand the lives of the monks and nuns at TrúC LâM, we must first look at their decision to be ordained within the greater context of Vietnamese culture, society and tradition. Asian cultures in general, and Vietnamese culture in particular, is anchored in the Confucian principle of *filial piety*. This is not just a cultural trend, but a lived reality for almost all Vietnamese people who are extremely family oriented. To leave this responsibility, on which much of Vietnamese life is centered, and choose the life of a monk or nun is the ultimate detachment. The entire current of life and the ‘norm’ suggests that being dedicated to one’s family is the ultimate honor and duty. Thus, becoming a nun or monk is a serious act of rebellion for many who follow this path. Particularly marked for females, the usual head of family affairs, many nuns interviewed spoke about responsibility to family and child rearing as a part of life’s ‘suffering.’ Continuing the family lineage is a birthright, and to reject this obligation is a huge breakthrough and requires the monk or nun to believe they are doing something with far greater reach, altering karma for lifetimes to come.

In every interview the subject of Impermanence was discussed at length as a reoccurring phenomenon that is crucial to the art and practice of Zen. Understanding and identifying this phenomenon is a fundamental aspect of being a nun or monk. One monk noted in an interview that impermanence is quintessentially the evolution of form of all things, people and experiences, specifying “if you see a person with wise eyes, you see the deterioration of all life and all substances... even the mind’s desire is changing, changing, changing, and all matter is in a constant state of flux – all bodies decay over time; this is the truest reality.” Another monk noted that even the self, something often thought of as permanent, is a dynamic composite saying “there is no true or unchanging self, the self is a composition of many things” characterized in particular by the nature of its ephemerality. Four different nuns mentioned that their realizations of life as impermanent came in the form of relatives or close acquaintances passing away; additionally, all four nuns cited these realizations as the catalysts for their decision to don the monastic robes and dedicate themselves to monastic life. One of these nuns now refers to the passing of her twenty-two-year-old daughter as one more impermanence of life, detailing that “death happens to everyone at any given time;” and although she used to have a lot anxiety about the anniversary of her daughter’s death, the Buddha’s teaching of life as impermanence has eased her mind. She now approaches the death anniversary as a beautiful memory.

When we know that all phenomenon is impermanent this is the right view. One misperception that Zen practitioners would seek to correct is that people think that when they have difficulties or struggles that this is what makes life suffering, but no this is not correct, they do not see the impermanence. Suffering arises in both happiness and sadness, in all things and emotions, for suffering inherently is the fear of disappearance and the unsatisfactory nature of

feelings in general. Desire in and of itself is suffering because all things come to an end; nothing is permanent. Thus leading us to another crucial practice of Zen, letting go.

All phenomena must be let go of and received naturally with no effort to secure or discard them. Detachment is the key to being present, and requires practicing mindfulness at the highest level. A concentrated, mindful awareness is the key to the cultivation of wisdom. Wisdom functions according to universal truth, and wisdom itself, in Zen, is awareness of impermanence. In a group interview, one nun specified that the Diamond Sutra aids in the development of wisdom: "...All phenomena are like dreams, illusions, bubbles and shadows, like dew in the morning and flashes of lightening...." To practice Zen one must actively exercise detachment on all levels. Thoughts in particular must be let go of in order to retain a calm mind. One monk advised that Zen monks and nuns do not chase after their train of thought, but "sit on the bank of a river and observe the flow of thought, letting things come and go effortlessly... thoughts will rise and fall, but we do not jump in the river or dam the river, thoughts are not to be elaborated on or blocked;" this is Knowing with the senses sans perceptions.

To a Zen Buddhist, the answer always lies in looking inward rather than outward. Reflecting back to the self is fundamental; nothing can be found outside that is not first found inside. One high-ranking nun during an interview, who has been practicing at Trúc Lâm for over twenty years, turned to the Dharma to explain her notion of blaming self as more important than blaming others, saying, "look back at your self; why do you look to others?" This practice is strengthened by her monastic community in which she is able to see conflict very clearly. Within the nun community of Trúc Lâm, she is able to distinctly recognize her behaviors and easily identify her bad habits, continuously reflecting on her self and seeing her ego through her

interactions with others. This leads to another practice of Zen best expressed by one senior nun who said, “winning against millions of enemies is useless, winning against ourselves is the most precious. The moments when we win within ourselves are rare and take much time; when we lead with our true self nothing can harm us.” Zen asserts that we create our world with our mind and that we alone control our choices, fears and desires or... they control us. Overcoming our ego is our biggest battle, and reflecting back on to the self, as well as concentrating on letting go of all things and all selves, allows for liberation. When we let go of our ‘self,’ our “I,” that is the ultimate freedom and awakens our True Nature, our oneness. Understanding the concept of non-self is key to awakening since Zen Buddhists believe that there is no one inside; when we realize the ‘I’ is empty and there is no individual or person inside this is wisdom. When we look outside and see that we are everything, this is compassion. When we look inside and see that we are nothing, this is wisdom.

Some may refer to this as an indication of the presence of the True Mind, the Buddha Nature, the Buddha Mind, or the Middle Way. Monks and nuns train their mind to be open to awareness through all doors, while a lack of thinking lets the True Mind be illuminated through other senses. One extremely important distinction to note is that all monks and nuns interviewed noted the discrepancy between the delusional mind and the True Mind. Our mind naturally wants to discriminate, to judge, and to differentiate, but the True Mind knows that we are all one, and that presently, we are all the same. To Zen Buddhists, we may make choices regarding our actions that force us to discriminate in this world of duality, but we make decisions that are best for all beings and all life because in the truest reality we know that we all have the True Mind

inside of us, and this makes us one. All people are equal, but to obtain this perspective in the first place we must all take these different perspectives and possess different karma.

Regarding karma, many nuns and monks cited this phenomena as the law of cause and effect on a universal scale. Unlike the Western perception of karma, the Zen perspective sees karma as an accumulation of all past, present and future actions throughout one's many lifetimes. We change our karma not through direct manipulation, but by living fully in the present and accepting this present moment fully and completely, regardless of external circumstances. Even the enlightened Buddha had karma since he voluntarily reincarnated in human form, although he had already escaped the cycle of Samsara (life, death, rebirth), in order to assist others. The physical body is affected by karma, but the mind can overcome this. The key is not letting the karmic cycle distress the mind. If we fully accept where we are in the karmic cycle and do not fight it, there is no suffering. For example, one monk spoke of a Grand Master in Thailand who had diabetes, "he paid his debt smiling, at peace with his mind, without negative thoughts... with the true mind {he} watched the experience go by without being affected by its movement." Some nuns recognized that in choosing to be a nun they sought to improve their karma in this life as well as in the next.

Going back to the True Mind, it is necessary to understand that this state of being is attainable because it is inherent. The mundane mind was described to me as awareness with attachment, busy and restless with thoughts and desires. In reality, the True Mind is always present, but we are not always consciously cognizant of it. I relay one example given to me by a monk to elucidate this point: "from a lake we take out a glass of the water. The water is murky, but after some time passes the dirt settles and the water is clear. Is this water different now that it

is clear? Have we done anything to alter its original properties? No. It is the same water. The clear water is the True Mind; the murky water is the delusional mind; the lake is the True Mind.” The ultimate reality leads us to see that there is nothing but the True Mind, and whether we are aware or unaware limits not its existence.

As one nun explained, the True Mind is smelling, tasting, hearing, seeing, touching, and recognizing thoughts without discrimination, judgment or comparison. The True Mind is thinking without discriminating. To Zen Buddhists there is right thinking and wrong thinking. Right thinking accompanies wisdom, while wrong thinking is motivated by ignorance and desire. Conception through the mind’s door is illuminated by the True Mind; however, the delusional mind comes into play once we start to make judgment about what we are perceiving and add our own opinions based on past experiences or personal preferences. When we think with wisdom and the right view this leads to the truth and is not tainted by karma.

Here, it is key to note that the True Mind goes by many names, but one main indication of its presence and that one is on the path toward this awakened state of being is if the individual in question is able to practice unconditional love and compassion toward him or her self and all others. One of the most venerable nuns at Trúic Lâm explained that we know we are on the right path in our practice when our wisdom and compassion exist naturally, saying, “...at this time we even love a tiny ant or mosquito because of our immense and unconditional compassion.” This emergence of unconditional loving kindness is also known as a love without saying ‘I.’ With familial love, or romantic love in particular, love exists as an expectation and requires standards or conditions to be met within the relationship; another nun noted that, “when we love someone we put our selves in them, but this causes problems because they are not us. If we truly love

someone, we must support who they are and love them unconditionally,” this is a love that does not recognize a self and is free from attachment; here we see our true nature.

To be Zen, one must first practice living without attachment. An example of this way of being, illustrated beautifully by a monk, is to “imagine holding something very precious in your hand... as soon as you tighten your grip, suffering arises – Zen is to live life with an open palm...” Many nuns, when asked how Zen practice and the Dharma in general aids them in everyday life, specifically used some amalgamation of the words “so, if it comes, let it come, and receive it, and then, if it goes... so, let it go.” In particular, six of the senior nuns who had been living at Trúc Lâm for ten or more years used the phrase “let it go” often to answer a variety of different questions pertaining to their Zen nature, practice, education and lifestyle at the monastery. One nun noted that part of the practice of living in the present in Zen necessitates an understanding that everything happens for a reason, and that having no attachment to any outcome leads to living life with no annoyance. She relayed that “habit tells us to hold on, but our practice tells us to let go, let go, let go...” This nun, who has been at Trúc Lâm for eleven years, also noted that if she can live fully in the present, then it will create positive conditions for the next life. She then further elaborated, saying that she desires to escape Samsara and that she knows that it takes many lives to be present enough to reach Nirvana and escape being reborn.

Often, symptoms of practice associated with Zen Buddhism are used as reasons to justify the practical nature of the training of one’s mind. However, to fully understand Zen it should be known that the core of Zen is practice and the actual lived experience of existing without attachment; it is with this acute awareness of life as ‘suffering’ that Zen can then be appreciated as a cure for all ailments. Now, to address the main practice: meditation.

Meditation is to be Zen. Simply put, meditation is a state of awareness. Meditation focuses on the Knowing; in this state, emptying the mind allows for the practitioner to fully experience with all senses, minus the *a priori* perceptions or *a posteriori* judgments. This state of being is closely tied to the Buddha Nature; one senior nun describes meditation as “opening awareness through all the doors... the lack of thinking lets the True Mind be illuminated through our other senses.” Focusing our awareness is contemplation, but as soon as discrimination or differentiation develop in our mind this is the delusional mind. Meditation calms the restless mind; the calm mind is the moment of Nirvana. Sitting in mediation is sitting at peace with the True Self. This is another reason why the schedule at Trúc Lâm is so strict and rigorous. Following the schedule faithfully, which is the same everyday, aids in the training and disciplining of the practitioners’ mind. Nuns and monks awake at 3:00AM each and every morning to sit in meditation until the sun rises. Additionally, there is also an afternoon session of meditation at 2:00PM, as well as another session at 7:00PM. Each session is approximately two hours; the nuns and monks of Trúc Lâm most often practice sitting meditation, also complimented by walking or lying meditation.

Every nun and monk interviewed cited the positive health benefits of meditation, both mental and physical. One monk who lived in the United States for decades before coming to Trúc Lâm to be ordained, mentioned that he started meditating in medical school, after he had already attained a Masters degree in computer science, to cope with his stress. When his work load became so intense that he was unable to continue his meditation practice, he noticed a severe decline in his mental health. He then realized first hand that “meditation goes deep into

your mind” and now, after four years practicing at TrúC LâM, he says that he does not think of the future often but that he only hopes to maintain this level of awareness. For him personally, “Buddhism is a philosophy with ritual practices. Buddhism gives us the full picture of human beings, but you alone are the one who creates everything, and you alone receive what you create in the world.” He also stated that Zen Buddhism is practical, and meditation specifically is a realistic way to improve the mind and one’s quality of life.

The most mentioned term in every interview was the word “Dharma,” which is formally known as the teachings of the holy Buddha. This was also the term which had the most definitions and perspectives when it came to explaining its use and meaning within practice and regarding personal interpretations of Zen Buddhism in general. One significant and fundamental point of note, pertaining to the Dharma in relation to the Buddha, is that the Buddha himself said if you believe in him, but do not understand him, you give him a bad name. He is considered the most prominent leader and teacher in Buddhism, but it is crucial to recognize that he asks his followers to walk the path themselves. He asks his students not to blindly follow him, but to learn in practice to apply the Dharma in all experiences. One practitioner affirmed, “a true believer does not learn the Dharma; they live it.” To differentiate Zen Buddhism from other Western religions, it can be said that Zen practitioners strongly prefer to believe in the Buddha’s teachings rather than the objective idol. One nun was particularly adamant about relaying her sentiments on the matter saying, “I’ve been to many pagodas to stay and I’ve met so many monks and nuns...to me pagodas are like any social organization, they are a microcosm of the outside world- this is not heaven - anything you can find in the outside world you can find here

(anger, joy, sadness jealousy, conflict, peace, happiness, etc.). For me, I trust Buddha's teachings, not his followers. His followers are only human." This nun also made a point of noting that when we practice Buddha Dharma the teachings live in one's heart. The Dharma is alive when the heart is happy, and this is anywhere; "happiness is in you, not in a place or a person."

One extremely indicative example used to describe the Dharma illustrates the teachings as an abstract tool: "Imagine a river. One bank is our world, 'reality' as we know it. The other side is Awakening. The river itself is our journey through life. Dharma is like a boat we may use to cross from one side to the other. However, it is imperative that *you* steer and paddle. Now, the paddle is our Zen practice; but, you will drift in the river forever without your own effort." Once we apply the Dharma in our own lives, this is when the journey really begins. Furthermore, it is essential to note that once you reach the other side, the boat and the paddle are no longer needed. Another monk after listening to this metaphor commented, "the destination is of little importance compared to the journey... the journey without interruption, that is what is important."

The Dharma was also referred to on several separate occasions as medicine, a recipe, and a precious textbook. Knowledge of the Dharma alone without application is useless. Knowledge of the Dharma without application was once described to me as a glass of water without drinking it. All the description in the world will not give you the experience of drinking the water. You will not know the refreshing nature of your thirst being quenched until you take a sip. Often the question 'what makes someone a good Buddhist' was answered with the definition: someone who is able to apply the Dharma to him or her self always. Anyone who experiences the teachings in real life application is a 'good' Buddhist. "The Dharma is everywhere" is an

expression that was used several times in interviews, but it was applied within the context that understanding in terms of words and language is inadequate, and that the meaning of this sentiment arises only with firsthand experience. What is important here, is that the practitioner believes that an Enlightened state of awareness exists and that it is achievable or able to be experienced by living every moment and action in its full awareness with the help of the Dharma; this is not a theory alone, it is a very means of existence.

Practically speaking, the Dharma may act as corrections in the minds of practitioners. If one practices the Dharma, they change the world by changing themselves and vice versa. Realistically, the Dharma should assist the practitioner in becoming more mindful of their desires, cravings and emotions. Once the person has applied the teachings in their life, it ought to aid in relieving their afflictions. One venerable nun interviewed, who has been practicing at Trúic Lâim for over twenty years, applies the Dharma to her life in every moment and teaches the younger nuns not by speech or words, but through actions only. One prime example of this is when the younger nuns make mistakes. She says that it is easy to forgive them due to her immense compassion; she sees the other nuns as younger versions of herself. Thus, her forgiveness comes naturally. She details that “when we forgive, we become happy, and then we ourselves become absolution.”

In a group interview, five of the most respected nuns at the monastery agreed that a good nun follows the positive example of the other nuns before her, keeping the precepts, following the schedule, and all the while walking, speaking, relaxing, and doing everything in coincidence with the Dharma. They also revealed one test to know if the Dharma is actually being applied in one’s life, saying, “if someone scolds you and you do not get upset, this is how you know the

Dharma is working.” Later, the head nun mentioned that one of the most important aspects of learning and living the Dharma is in its creation of the perfect conditions for you to then teach and benefit others.

Over the period of one month I was able to be a participant and observer at TrúC Lâm Thiền Viện within the nun quarter of the monastery. I was also able to attend the Festival of the Anniversary of the Death of the First Patriarch at Yên Tử, joining twelve other reputable nuns. Through my careful observations, I was able to notice several things of note relating to the application of the Zen Buddhist philosophy and practice of the nuns, monks and lay people who I encountered while there. Regarding my research methods, field notes of my involvements and observations were taken daily; all the notes written were recorded the same day as the experiences.

After examining all of my field notes, the first pertinent observation pertains to the differentiation between the lay women who were living at the monastery temporarily to practice and ordained nuns regarding the ‘front-stage’ and ‘backstage’ presentation of self. This understanding is a nod to Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective on social interaction in everyday life, which understands people as actors who present themselves based on the audience, social context and cultural norms in order to be successful in presentation of self. Where front stage is a setting where the person in question has a fixed fashion of performing to suit the specific situation and audience, backstage is setting where the person feels that they can relax and feels their actions will not be judged based on a conditions of ‘proper’ or ‘appropriate’ performance.

For many of the lay women practicing at Trúc Lâm Thiền Viện, it was clear that there was a specific distinction between the way that they behaved in ‘front-stage’ and ‘backstage’ settings. This was seen most clearly with the younger lay women who I was able to spend time a lot of time with. They were clearly tempering their behavior when they were around ordained nuns or in overtly ritual ceremonies or settings (ex: mealtimes, meditation times). This observation I even extended to my own self and behavior, which was definitively different when I was interacting with ordained nuns versus other lay women whom I felt more able to be ‘giggly and less filtered’ around. Due to the fact that I felt an elevated level of reverence and respect was required when I was with ordained nuns or in officially ‘religious’ settings or ceremonies, my conduct and concentration on my behavior was significantly more regulated in certain situations. One specific example of this is the tone of voice that I and other lay women used when talking to each other versus talking to ordained nuns (Field notes. 11). When talking to ordained nuns I noticed that I, and other lay women, specifically softened our tone of voice to sound like a deliberate whisper, not timid, but slightly abated compared to a normal speaking voice. This was an effort to make our voice to sound more palatable and also to sound more respectful to older nuns who spoke so softly that I often could not hear them unless I was concentrating extremely hard.

For ordained nuns, over time I realized that this ‘front-stage’/‘backstage’ differential in presentation of self and regulation of behavior did not exist, or rather existed to a much less noticeable extent. The ordained nuns’ demeanors rarely changed, despite the change of situation, scenery, or audience. No matter how comfortable the ‘backstage’ setting, the ordained nuns never “broke out of character” so to speak. This observation led me to the realization that their

Zen mode of being was never subject to dramatic realization, or rather, their persona as a Zen nun was not a performance at all. They were not fulfilling a specific role, but their consistent and perpetually immutable presentation of self was a symptom of their Zen practice, not a character with set behaviors that required certain parameters of 'self' to be met.

One moment that particularly stood out to me as an example of the even-temperedness of the practicing ordained nuns was in the airport. Myself and twelve other nuns were about to board a flight to Hải Phòng to attend the Festival of the Anniversary of the Death of the First Patriarch. I was speaking to one of the senior nuns, who has been practicing at Trúc Lâm for twelve years, when she told me that she had never flown on a plane before. I, naturally, asked if she was excited or anxious about it. She replied that some nuns who had not been practicing for as long as she may have these feelings, but she felt only stillness and calm; so, therefore no excitement or anxiety or anything of that nature (Field notes. 19). This response particularly stuck me as an archetypal representation of the Zen mode of being applied in everyday life and practical experience. The nun was not only well versed in the Zen Buddhist philosophy and Dharma, but she was fully embracing and practicing Zen in all aspects of her 'being' even in a setting and situation outside of the monastery walls. She recognized, objectively, her own subjective emotions and then let them go before they could infiltrate her peace of mind; then, in keeping with the Zen practice of emptiness and awareness, she maintained her stoicism and calmness. Another experience when the same peaceful mode of being was visibly noticeable was later in the week at the festival at Yên Tử where there were about 1,000+ Buddhists crowded into one large pagoda waiting for a special once-a-year ceremony to begin. There were hundreds of people filing into one large open pagoda, and there was a palpable sense of excitement and

commotion as many lay people were rushing and buzzing around trying to find seats. However, standing ‘behind the scenes’ with the twelve nuns of Trúc Lâm Thiền Viện, they seemed unbothered and completely unaffected by the frenzy surrounding them. Standing by the back entrance of the pagoda, patiently waiting to take their seats in the front of the extremely loud and boisterous crowd, they looked exceptionally calm and relaxed as if they were about to enter an empty pagoda. To them, it appeared to be a mundane and routine ritual chant. This was an exemplar instance of the Zen mode of being contributing to their peace of mind and ability to remain calm, unaffected and unperturbed by the extenuating circumstances that would lead anyone else to feel overwhelmed or have strong emotions. It was one of the biggest holidays of the year in Zen Buddhism, but the nuns’ indifference and resignation to harmony rather than discord of any nature revealed just how their practice of emptying the mind affected their behavior and temperament in any situation (Field notes. 39).

Regarding an environmental observation of Trúc Lâm Thiền Viện, there are specified public and private areas for visitors who come to pay their respects to the pagoda as a place that is sacrosanct. This, I considered as evidence of the sacredness of the monks and nuns who practice there. On several occasions, when I would walk through the public section of the monastery wearing my monastic robes, I was always vividly aware of stares of curiosity that I received from tourists and domestic visitors. I personally was perceptively aware of these gazes due to the oddity of being looked at like I was a nun, when in reality I myself was a tourist only days earlier (Field notes.9).

Relating to corporal analysis of the Zen interpretation of compassion, I found that when I talked to one of the nuns whom I was the closest to during my time at the monastery, she could

read my level of awareness through my eyes during conversation. She was acutely perceptive of when I was paying direct and sole attention to her when she spoke to me. When I was looking directly at her she was able to tell when I was having thoughts versus when I was exclusively listening, sans perceptions. Also, multiple times during conversation she was keenly observant of when I was tired, physically and or mentally, pausing our conversations on several occasions due to the awareness that I was unable to give her my *full* attention saying, “your mind is tired... you must rest now so that you can be better prepared to learn.” She specified that learning is only available to people who are in the right mindset to pay attention (Field Notes. 6, 13.). On these occasions I always surprised not only by her magnitude of compassion and attentiveness, but also that she was able to pick up on my drowsiness and exhaustion before even I was aware that they were present.

While visiting several different Zen pagodas and temples in the North of Vietnam, during our trip to Yên Tử, the nuns relayed to me that people who decide to be monks and nuns pick different monasteries for specific reasons. These reasons are less about favoritism and more related to qualifications, which sometimes can be associated with karma. Some monks and nuns choose monasteries based on practice or community, aesthetics, geographic location, or occasionally due to a karmic connection (Field Notes. 25.). What is clear from these conversations is that, to the nuns, everything always has a certain cause and effect; things are not simply ‘coincidental.’ The effects of a cause, though not always distinguishable to the lay person, are always a valid consequence of certain conditions which have karmic significance and may even be the result from several lifetimes of past implications even if they are unbeknownst to the person in question.

This observation of karma is also made clear through my interactions with many Buddhists when I regrettably informed them that I am ethnically Chinese. Karma lies not only in our physical actions, but also our heritage. On many occasions I received a ‘cold shoulder’ after telling people that I was Chinese due to the fact that China has historically been at odds with religious and cultural freedom in this part of the world. In a conversation with one nun, it was made clear to me that Vietnamese people meant no harm when they appeared to be uncomfortable or perturbed after I relayed my ethnicity to them. For many, this fact signaled to them that they should be suspicious or distrustful, and understandably so, considering that heritage and legacy of lineage run very deep in this part of the world. One real manifestation of this ‘karma’ causing issues with my tangible life experience was that it was very difficult for the nuns to get approval for my stay at the monastery. I have an American passport which says I was born in China; Because of this, the local government was unable to approve my stay and had to pass on my paperwork to the higher regional government for further review. A nun relayed this information to me while she was speaking to me about how several nuns were slightly skeptical of speaking to me for an interview when they heard that I was Chinese (Field Notes. 41.).

However, Karmic connections are also positive. While on a pilgrimage to a pagoda atop Núi Yên Tử, the nuns and I also stopped at the Half Roof Pagoda, which houses a special holy well filled with water considered to have sacred properties. Most nuns filled their bottles with water from the well in order to drink, but I instead asked to wash my face. One nun looked quite surprised and then mentioned to me that earlier in the day the Second Patriarch, also known as the Abbot, had told the nuns to cleanse their ‘face’ with the holy water. The Abbot was speaking metaphorically; saying to cleanse their “face” which relates to the shroud of human emotion and

perception hanging in our mind. This washing away is symbolic and relates to removing feelings of anger, desire and happiness, which are all pollution in the True Mind of pure awareness.

However, this caused one of the nuns to assert that I must have some kind of karmic connection to the Abbot, since I inadvertently ‘knew’ to wash my face with the sacred water even though I had already been told by the nuns that the common custom is to drink it (Field Notes. 38.). This physical manifestation of karma proved to the nuns that I had the right cause and condition for revealing a karmic connection between myself and the Abbot, “perhaps in a past life you two were connected and this lead you to seek him out again in this life.”

One more observation I had that closely tied to my findings in the interviews was just how aware the nuns were of my words being intentions. While I was with the nuns, I was privileged enough to join them on pilgrimages to two of the most sacred places in Zen Buddhism in Vietnam. Being at the summit of Núi Yên Tử was extremely breathtaking and, being swept away with the beauty of the place, I asserted that I would really enjoy living the simple aesthetic lifestyle here. However, upon hearing this, one of the nuns then proceeded to detail to me all of the actual repercussions of living the aesthetic lifestyle fully, including having no food or water, being almost completely alone, and devoid of all resources needed to survive including simple pleasures like soap or clothing (Field Notes. 36.). This interaction made me realize the weight of my spoken words and the intentions that they carry. Words are intentions. This led me to realize the stark difference between when a nun or monk would verbally agree to something versus when a Western person would say they agreed to something. Many times it was made clear that when I said something it was taken very lightly, and it was understood that if I agreed to anything there was often room allotted for me to change my mind; whereas, usually, it was more

concrete or binding if a nun or monk were to agree to something. One nun, after I had agreed to bring her a copy of my finished paper, asked again later that day, “but will you really bring it to me, or did you just agree to agree? – I know you Westerners like to say yes in the moment and then change your mind.”

One last point of note relates to the noticeable difference between the practicing monks and nuns who attended the Festival at Yên Tử and the thousand plus lay Buddhists. It was quite clear that there were specific rituals which both groups of Buddhists were taking part in like chanting and going to temple; however, personally, after spending time with the nuns and hearing the way they spoke about their personal practices, it felt to me like there apparently was a “right” way to be Zen. To dedicate one’s life to Zen is at the heart of most of these nuns’ and monks’ practices and being at a festival with a thousand Buddhists, it was evident that many of them followed the rituals of the religion but, as seen in followers of many religions, failed to subscribe completely to the Zen practice of living the Dharma in full at all times. They knew the precepts and the Dharma, knew when to kneel and when to stand, knew the chants, but it appeared to me that many of them were just there to be there. To further elucidate this point, I cite an occurrence in an interview with one monk at Trúc Lâm Thiền Viện. We were in the Great Hall within the public area of the monastery where visitors come to prostrate to the Buddha. A lay woman had come into the space to create ‘holy’ water on Buddha altar. After she blessed the water she proceeded to douse herself with it, drinking some and pouring the rest on her head and various parts of her body. When she was finished, the monk turned to me smiling and said, “this is so foolish, but we must let them do it because it gives them hope... and in time we will teach them the proper way to practice... though this is not the way, we must accept all people in all

walks of life, in any religion or practice because this is the way of Buddhism... (Interview Notes, 5 December 2016).”

Conclusion

At this point, I must take the time to sincerely thank all the nuns and monks of Trúc Lâm Thiền Viện, who were always welcoming, helpful and kind to me during my time there. I am especially grateful to my translator and teacher Cô Huyen Bạch, who was continually patient and accommodating throughout my research process. As for definitive conclusions regarding my research and analysis of this case study, it seems that my time spent at the monastery and the understanding gleaned from the ethnography as well as interviews only clarified to me that any deductions or inferences made would be inadequate, and would serve to vastly undermine the expanse and depth of insight that Zen Buddhist practice has to offer.

One insight that is of note, however, is the juxtaposition of the western saying “Living life to the fullest” with the Buddhist concept of “Living life in the emptiness.” One monk asked me during our interview, “when we depart this world where does the fullness go? We take nothing with us when we die.” The Zen Buddhist vision of a full and meaningful life is a life lived in the emptiness of the mind. Whenever there is something to be ‘had,’ something that we possess, this leads to a limitation. But alas, emptiness has no limitation. So which is greater, to be empty or to be full? As a wise monk once said, “If you have emptiness it is boundless...” To an authentically Zen person, emptiness is fullness; however, this wisdom is only made manifest through the process of practice. If one has questions about Zen, or is simply curious to learn more, my best advice would be the same as the very first nun that I was lucky enough to

interview, “the Buddha’s teaching is immense and takes lifetimes to understand... you must come here to live and so you will truly Know.”

Works Cited

- An, Thien Thich. *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam in Relation to the Development of Buddhism in Asia*. Los Angeles: College of Oriental Studies, Graduate School, 1975. Print.
- Angrosino, Michael V. *How Do They Know That?: The Process of Social Research*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2010. Print.
- Association of Buddhist Studies* 27.2 (2004): 261-83. Print.

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy; Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967. Print.

Blackburn, Anne M. "Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture." Princeton University Press. 2001

Büyükokutan, Barış. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Appropriation: Buddhism, the Vietnam War, and the Field of U.S. Poetry." American Sociological Association, Aug. 2011. Web. 11 Mar. 2016.

Dumoulin, Heinrich, James W. Heisig, and Paul F. Knitter. *Zen Buddhism: A History*. New York: Macmillan, 1988. Print.

Faure, Bernard. *Unmasking Buddhism*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Print.

Flanagan, Kieran, and Peter C. Jupp. *A Sociology of Spirituality*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007. Print.

Freiberger, Oliver. "The Buddhist Canon and the Canon of Buddhist Studies." *Journal of the International*

Hoang, Nguyen Quy. "Higher Buddhist Education in Vietnam-Challenges and Solutions."

International Labour Organization. "Out of Child Labour and Into Education in Vietnam."

Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 10 July 2015. Web. 14 April 2016.

Juergensmeyer, Mark, and Wade Clark. Roof. "Vietnam." *Encyclopedia of Global Religion*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012. 1350-353. Print.

McDaniel, Justin Thomas. *Gathering Leaves & Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist*

- Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand. Seattle: U of Washington, 2008. Print.
- Schmidt-Leukel, Perry. *Understanding Buddhism*. Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic, 2006. Print.
- Simmel, G. (1997) [1912], 'Religion', in G. Simmel, *Essays on Religion* (trans. And ed. H.J. Helle with L. Nieder), New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 137-211.
- Tho, Hoang. "Vietnamese Buddhism in Intercultural Communication: the Aspect of Buddhist Philosophy" Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences
- Tuyet, Tran Thi. "The Causes of Passiveness in Learning of Vietnamese Students" *Journal of Education Research*. Vol 29. No.2 (2013) 72-84.
- Whitehead, Tony L. "Basic Classical Ethnographic Research Methods." *Ethnographically Informed Community and Cultural Assessment Research Systems (EICCARS) Working Paper Series* (2005):1-20. Print.
- World Bank. "Vietnam: Higher Education Development Policy Program." Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 30 July 2009. Web. 14 April 2016.