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# The Dual Role a Buddhist Monk Played in the American South: The Balance between Heritage and Citizenship in the Refugee Community

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**Abstract:** Buddhist Monks in Vietnam struggle with cultural preservation differently from a monk in the U.S. where the forces of acculturation for new arrivals, often refugees, are extraordinarily overwhelming. The author provides a case study examining how Buddhist leaders engage in cultural preservation and community building in the American South. Fusing ideas of Engaged Buddhism and community building, the author will demonstrate how a Buddhist monk is able to navigate the broader American culture and assist Vietnamese immigrants and refugees to acculturate, while maintaining their own cultural heritage, beliefs and religious traditions; ultimately building a viable and sustainable Buddhist community that contributes greatly to its new host community.

**Keywords:** Engaged Buddhism; Vietnamese refugees; community building; social work

## 1. Introduction

A few days after taking a group of students from my community building class to visit the Vietnamese Buddhist temple, Chùa An Lạc, we were sitting together in the classroom reflecting on the experience. These were very bright students, attending a private liberal arts college<sup>1</sup>. Most were white and privileged, and were steeped in our attempts to teach about diversity and pluralism. One of the students raised her hand and posed the question, “does the temple have anything in its mission statement about social justice?”

I love teaching and do enjoy the conversations I have with students in the classroom, but I am sometimes stunned by their questions and comments. I had to pause for a moment and process her question. I have been connected with this Vietnamese Buddhist community for almost twenty years and have brought numerous friends, acquaintances and classes to the temple for visits. Having spent a good portion of the past twenty years studying Vietnamese Buddhism and tradition, I have to remind myself that people who are unfamiliar with the religion and culture come with a lot of curiosity and interest. This Buddhist community, especially the head monk Thích Thường Lực<sup>2</sup>, is always patient, kind and generous. Buddhism often comes with an air of mystery in this country, and people are

<sup>1</sup> This story is from my time teaching at Guilford College, a small, Quaker liberal-arts college in Greensboro, NC. One of the courses I taught while there was Community Building and I would take this class to Chùa An Lạc as an experiential exercise in community building from an immigrant and refugee perspective.

<sup>2</sup> When I give presentations or chatting with people about Vietnamese Buddhism, I will often ask them what they think, “Thích” means. Some Americans are familiar with it, especially with the writings of Thích Nhất Hạnh, so their assumption is that Thích means, “master” (from the master pupil dynamic in Asian traditions) or teacher. Thích is actually a truncation of, Thích-Ca Mâu-Ni. Thích-Ca Mâu-Ni is the literal sounding translation of *Śākyamuni* to Vietnamese, *Śākyamuni* being the clan that the historical Buddha came from. When a Vietnamese becomes a Buddhist, they are assigned a Buddhist name; Thích Thường Lực Buddhist’s name is Thường Lực. Monks who have been ordained will use Thích in front of their name, signifying that they have become a member of the historical Buddha’s clan, the Śākya clan. You see this in Vietnamese

drawn to it without really questioning what attracts them, or the nuances of the tradition and culture it comes from. Americans will see figures such as His Holiness The Dalai Lama on television or the Internet, and will conflate all Buddhist ideas and cultures into that one caricature. Many Buddhist leaders from Asian countries have learned the language of Western liberalism and are able to use it effectively to communicate ideas and concepts that are, in reality, completely foreign to a Western frame of mind.

My initial reaction was to respond to this student about the ethnocentrism of applying the term “social justice” to a culture and religion that has transplanted to this country because of the great suffering inflicted upon its people by its government. These momentary pauses before reacting, my “mindful” moments, help me to gather my thoughts and be skilful in my tone and response. I informed the student that social justice is, in a lot of ways, a very Western concept<sup>3</sup>. This Vietnamese Buddhist community is guided by the Buddhist tradition that permeates its culture and beliefs, passed down for generations. There are codes of ethics that guide how Vietnamese Buddhists live their lives, but the term social justice is not something that comes up as a part of conversation when the Buddhist temple conducts its day-to-day activities. I could see the student was attempting to process my answer, unsure how to connect it to her frame of reference, where social justice is an important part of her developing identity.

The exchange reinforced for me the importance of attempting to help students navigate the complexities of working with diverse groups of people, especially when we are dealing with immigrant and refugee populations who come to this country, with their own set of values, norms, beliefs and religious traditions. Our concept of Buddhism that gets promulgated by the mainstream media often greatly misrepresents the reality of most non-Western Buddhists who live in this country.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my own personal experience of working with Vietnamese Buddhist immigrant and refugee populations who have migrated to a rural part of the Southeastern United States. This is, in essence, a case study, though not a formal case study, however. As a trained clinical social worker and academic, I will often follow specific guidelines in how I engage in community-based research. These guiding principles are important and will serve as the foundation of my research methodology. Often following the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and critical ethnography [2,3], I approach most of my community-based work on these sets of ideas.

My experience with this particular immigrant and refugee community is very different, however. I will often use the term autoethnography when I am describing my work and experience with this particular community, but even this term becomes problematic. When we deconstruct autoethnography, it is ethnographic study that uses the author or researcher as the platform for disseminating information about a community group or culture that he or she is invested in. Or as Jones notes, autoethnography is a “blurred genre, it overlaps with, and is indebted to, research and writing practices in anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism, journalism and communication” ([4], p. 765). But D. Soyini Madison considers autoethnography as more an autobiography, or what she calls, “travel writing, or memoir.” (I don’t completely agree with Madison’s assessment on this). For Madison, she prefers to use the term, “critical ethnography” noting that it, “is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among others, one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in others worlds” ([3], p. 10). Beyond the semantics of autoethnography *versus* critical ethnography, the ideas and concepts (*i.e.*, my methodology) of which I

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Buddhist names, Thích Nhất Hạnh, Thích Thiện Quảng, Thích Thường Lực. Vietnamese Buddhist nuns will be addressed as, Su Co (sister) and monks will be addressed as, Thầy, which means, “teacher” or “master.” Thầy is the proper way to address Buddhist monks and nuns in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Harvey expands on this idea more, “It is true that Buddhism does not usually talk in terms of ‘rights’, which is a term that arose from the Western philosophical tradition. That does not mean, however, that Buddhists cannot agree with the substance of what is expressed in ‘human rights’ language.” ([1], p. 119).

have approached my work with this Vietnamese Buddhist community clearly falls in the realm of what Madison would consider to be critical ethnography and what I consider to be PAR.

As noted, this comes from my eighteen years of connection with this Vietnamese Buddhist community. This has been more than a group of people that I have studied for research purposes. My agenda when I first connected with this group was not to do research or to be a casual, social science, “objective observer”. I came to this community with a deep passion to learn about the culture, the community and the religious tradition. It has evolved out of my own personal interest in Buddhism. My experiences have not been to sit down and engage in ethnographic questions with community members. It has been to get to know this community intimately and to be a part of this community as much as I can, knowing that I am an outsider, that I am a Westerner learning about an immigrant and refugee community of which I would never truly know what their life experiences were and are. I was not a researcher or academic, I was a student, a student of Buddhism and a student of their culture. It is a community that has welcomed me with graciousness, and in reality this community has given me more than I can ever give back to them.

Through my time with this community I have seen rifts, fractures and amazing growth. I have followed two specific Buddhist teachers throughout the past eighteen years and they have been my guides and instructors in both a Buddhist tradition and the Vietnamese culture. I would spend days on end at the Buddhist temple, working, studying, eating, sharing and learning. Ernest Stringer in his book on PAR quipped about his community-based research, “I’ve heard such comments as ‘All he does is sit around drinking coffee or tea with people’” ([2], p. 95)<sup>4</sup>.

After several years connected with this community, I traveled to Long Beach, California and spent a month at a Buddhist temple there, studying with the monastic brother of my first Buddhist teacher, Thích Thiện Quảng. After my month in California I traveled back to this area and spent a year as an AmeriCorps member at this Buddhist temple (For the rest of the paper I will refer to the Buddhist temple by its proper Vietnamese name, Chùa An Lạc. Chùa is Vietnamese for Temple or Pagoda, and An Lạc is the formal name of the Temple, which loosely means peace and tranquility, or happiness. An Lạc is a term taken from one of the Buddhist scriptures, or what is called *Sūtra*).

AmeriCorps is like a domestic Peace Corps, where members serve in local communities. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) has an organization called The Center for New North Carolinians (CNNC) [5]. This center was initially developed in conjunction with the Department of Social Work at UNCG. The main mission of the CNNC is to serve newly arriving immigrant and refugee populations in the area. The former director of The Center for New North Carolinians, Raleigh Bailey noted, “In the early 1990s, North Carolina began to witness a dramatic influx of immigrants. The foreign-born population increased by 273.6 percent between 1990 and 2000, growing from 115,077 to 430,000 residents.” North Carolina, especially in Greensboro where I reside, was designated as a refugee resettlement area, because of, “(1) a robust labor market”, and “(2) a federally funded program that settled refugees in selected parts of the state” ([6], p. 57).

A component of the CNNC is an AmeriCorps program called the AmeriCorps ACCESS project (Accessing Cross-Cultural Education Service Systems) [7]. AmeriCorps ACCESS members are placed in community organizations who serve immigrant and refugee populations. I had connections with the CNNC ever since my time as an undergraduate social work student at UNCG. At this time, in 2000, the two main Buddhist teachers I followed, head monk Thích Thiện Quảng and his novice monk Thường Lực, were attempting to establish a new Vietnamese Buddhist temple in High Point, a small furniture town located in the central part of North Carolina. Knowing that being a part of the AmeriCorps ACCESS project would help connect the Vietnamese community to an organization which had a

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<sup>4</sup> Stringer elaborates more on the connection with people in PAR, “The process of action research, therefore, are enriched by researchers who contribute to the lives of the groups with whom they work. Researchers increase their effectiveness when they immerse themselves in the richness of group life, talking with people about general events and activities, sharing a birthday cake, participating in informal or leisure activities, telling jokes, and so on” ([2], p. 95).

history of helping immigrant and refugee populations develop non-profit organizations, I decided to spend a year as an AmeriCorps member at Chùa An Lạc, helping with administrative duties that many organizations and religious based groups deal with when attempting to establish themselves. I also taught an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class and a Citizenship Class.

My year as an AmeriCorps member at the temple was, in a small way, an attempt to give back to the community that had given me so much at that time. It also allowed me the opportunity to spend more time with the community than just visiting on the weekends, when people would come together for cultural events and community building. My AmeriCorps time also became the essence of the critical ethnographic approach of working with this community. I wanted to transcend this position of being a casual observer, to a more engaged dialogue with the community. As Madison continues to note about critical ethnography,

It is through dialogue and meeting with others that I am most fully myself. The wonderful paradox in the ethnographic moment of dialogue and otherness is that communion with another brings the self more fully into being and, in doing so, opens you to know others more fully ([3], p. 11).

This year spent with this community as an AmeriCorps member also communicated to the community my investment into their culture and beliefs, and in their success in maintaining a viable and sustainable Buddhist temple, which also serves as a community and cultural center. As Stinger notes, “The process of action research, therefore, are enriched by researchers who contribute to the lives of the groups with whom they work” ([2], p. 95). All of this, I am fully aware, could have been done without me. But I could not have learned as much about the community and been a real part of it, unless I was willing to let go of my own “objective” biases and spend substantial time working directly with this community.

Even after my year as an AmeriCorps member was over I continued to maintain a strong, ongoing relationship with this Vietnamese Buddhist community and the members of the Chùa An Lạc. As I have noted, this has been a part of my life for eighteen years now. My time and experience culminated to me eventually moving into Chùa An Lạc a little over a year ago, living and studying as a Buddhist monk for six months<sup>5</sup>.

Given this background, the main purpose of this paper is to educate the reader on the challenges of a Vietnamese Buddhist community attempting to establish itself in a rural part of the United States that is politically conservative, traditionally Christian (one of the first things local people will ask you upon meeting you is, “So, what church do you go to?”) and has a long history of racial issues, which historically included apartheid laws and segregation that still hangs over the region and area.

As I mentioned earlier, many Westerners have caricatures in mind when they are thinking in terms of Asian cultures and religious traditions. As academics, we are not much better. In Healy’s book *International Social Work*, she notes,

More than 90% of American professors surveyed express no need to read books or journals published outside their own country to keep up in their fields—a quite astounding finding of disinterest in their profession beyond national borders, and possibly indicative of ethnocentrism ([8], p. 6).

This is disturbing, given the fact that part of our obligation as teachers is to educate students on global issues; now so, more than ever, given the level of international migration we are experiencing all

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<sup>5</sup> I actually lived and studied as a novice monk. The process for ordination can take anywhere from two to several years, depending on the persons disposition, growth and understanding. Although studying as a novice monk, I was never ordained a full Buddhist monk. Many of the adults, some I have known for eighteen years, were pleased to see me attempt to deepen my own Buddhist practice and to dedicate a good portion of my time studying Vietnamese Buddhism and their culture.

over the world. Before I can begin discussing my experience with the Vietnamese Buddhist community I have worked so much with over my life, I must give, at the very least, a background on Buddhism, its tradition and theories. Looking at how Buddhism spread throughout the world, into Vietnam and eventually to the United States. This is by no means an exhaustive history, and I would encourage readers more interested in this background to refer to my referenced sources.

## 2. Buddhist History

Buddhism has a long and complex history, dating back 2500 years and originating in India. The word Buddha is a Sanskrit/Pali<sup>6</sup> word and translates into “to awaken” or “to open up”. The term actually is very ancient in the Sanskrit language and was originally used to describe a flower opening. The historical figure we know today to be the Buddha was actually a man born in the northeastern part of India, or what is known today as Nepal. The word Buddha was known during this time in India as an individual who is “awakened” or enlightened. Over time, especially for those of us in the West, we often now associate the word Buddha to mean the historical founder of the Buddhist religion. The man himself was known as Siddhārtha Guatama from the Shakya Clan, and this historical figure is often referred to as Śākyamuni Buddha (enlightened one from the Śākya Clan) [9,10].

Guatama Buddha was born around 5th to 6th century B.C.E. and was originally a prince in the Śākya clan, until deciding later in his life to give up his princely duties and become an ascetic seeking spiritual enlightenment. Through his spiritual discipline, he was working towards finding a way to the elimination of suffering and to end the repeated cycle of birth and death, known as *Samsāra*. After many years of asceticism and *Vipassana* meditation practice (insight meditation [11]), Guatama eventually obtained the spiritual enlightenment he sought and became whom we now know as the Buddha ([9], pp. 7–8).

After his enlightenment, the Buddha traveled around the region teaching on his enlightenment and how he came to this point in his life. During his religious training, he attained many discoveries and would expound on them to people who would listen and follow him. The foundation of his teachings consisted of what is known as The Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold Path. These were to become the ethical and moral ideas that guide all Buddhists throughout the world and influence Buddhists in their daily lives. The Four Noble Truths consist of:

1. Life is Suffering (*Dukha*)
2. The Arising of *Dukha*
3. The Cessation of *Dukha*
4. The Path Leading to the Cessation of *Dukha* ([10], p. 16)

These concepts, as with many things that we attempt to translate into English, become difficult for a lot of Westerners to comprehend. The first Noble Truth, life is suffering, or *Dukha*, does not, from some scholar’s account, literally mean that we are in a constant state of suffering. What some have translated it now to mean is more of this idea of dis-ease, that life is difficult and that we are quite often struggling. Walpola Rahula expands on this,

*(Dukkha)* includes deeper ideas such as “imperfection”, “impermanence”, “emptiness”, “insubstantiality”. It is difficult therefore to find one word to embrace the conception of the term *dukkha* as the First Noble Truth. It is better to leave *Dukha* untranslated, than to give an inadequate and wrong idea of it by conveniently translating it as “suffering” or “pain” ([10], p. 17).

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<sup>6</sup> Sanskrit and Pali are both languages used in ancient Buddhist texts. Sanskrit is often related to the *Mahāyāna* school of Buddhism, and Pali is related to the *Theravāda* school. I will mainly be using Sanskrit and Vietnamese, though in some cases Pali will be used in referenced sources.

The Second Noble Truth, the arising of *Dukha*, the Buddha believed is often created within ourselves, through our attachments and desires. With the Third Noble Truth the Buddha believed that there was a way to reduce the amount of *Dukha* in our lives. This leads us to the Fourth Noble Truth, the path leading to the cessation of *Dukha*, or what the Buddha called the Noble Eightfold Path<sup>7</sup> ([12]):

1. Skillful Understanding
2. Skillful Thinking
3. Skillful Speech
4. Skillful Action
5. Skillful Livelihood
6. Skillful Effort
7. Skillful Mindfulness<sup>8</sup>
8. Skillful Concentration [12]

Along with these Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, the Buddha also taught what is called the Five Precepts. After a student had listened to the Buddha's teachings and decided that he or she wanted to become a follower of the Buddha, they would take what is called "refuge". This refuge means that a person would dedicate his or her life to these teachings and agree to observe a moral and ethical code known as the Five Precepts. These Precepts were:

1. One shall not kill
2. One shall not steal
3. One shall not engage in false speech
4. One shall not engage in sexual misconduct
5. One shall not take in any intoxicants ([10], p. 80)

The Buddha believed that if one followed these moral and ethical guidelines, a person would greatly reduce the amount of suffering or *Dukha* in his or her life. As Rahula notes, "Practically the whole teaching of the Buddha, to which he devoted himself during 45 years, deals in some way or other with this Path" ([10], p. 45). These Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path and Five Precepts have been the guiding principles for all Buddhist schools and traditions and have been handed down from the Buddha himself through subsequent generations.

Buddhist followers and adherents divided into different groups. A monastic tradition formed after the Buddha started teaching and those who wanted to devote themselves to this Path full time become Buddhist monks (*Bhikkhu*) and nuns (*Bhikkhuni*) ([14], p. 115). This community of monks and nuns become known as the *Saṅgha*, and this is what *Saṅgha* initially meant, a community of just monks and nuns ([14], p. 768). Over the years, this term *Saṅgha* has evolved to mean an overall Buddhist community (though some traditions still recognize the *Saṅgha* as meaning just a group of monks or nuns). For the monastics, there were additional rules that one was to follow, but for the lay individual, he or she only needed to observe the Five Precepts and attempt to follow the Eightfold Path as closely as possible [15]. The monastic order was an important component in maintaining and spreading the teachings of the Buddha, and quickly become the leadership that formed for lay individuals to follow. This is really important to note, since this Buddhist leadership through the monastic training was

<sup>7</sup> The Eightfold Path is often mistranslated as "Right" (ex. Right Understanding, Right Thinking, etc.). I prefer Bhante Henepola Gunaratana's translation of The Eightfold Path where he uses "Skillful" as opposed to "Right". Therefore eliminating the binary of "right" and "wrong" which can be antithetical to Buddhist practice.

<sup>8</sup> From a clinical social work perspective, the very act of mindfulness and concentration has shown to have significant impact on people who are experiencing a breadth of mental health issues, ranging from anxiety and depression to posttraumatic stress disorder. Mindfulness practices (becoming ubiquitous in our Western lexicon) have also shown to have significant benefits in the application of pain management. All of this being the more "secular" notion of Buddhist practice, mindfulness, without including the other moral and ethical codes that the Buddha originally taught ([13], pp. 187–200).

instrumental in maintaining the doctrine and ideas that were carried down through the generations and the monastics serve an essential role for Buddhist communities [16].

### 3. *Mahāyāna, Theravada and Buddhist Diaspora*

As with any religion there are fragmentations and schisms, and Buddhism was not immune to these divisions. Around 100 B.C.E. Buddhism divided into two main schools, *Mahāyāna*, which means great or large vehicle and, *Hīnayāna*, which means lesser vehicle. The terms themselves were used to describe the type of practice. *Mahāyāna* Buddhists believed in what were called the later teachings of the Buddha, while *Hīnayāna* Buddhists believed in what were the original teachings of the Buddha ([9] pp. 82–86). Both were working towards this notion of enlightenment, but *Mahāyāna* Buddhists became increasingly concerned about the suffering of others, and the need to help reduce or eliminate *Dukha* in all living beings. *Mahāyāna* Buddhists began to work towards this notion of the *Bodhisattva* ideal<sup>9</sup> ([1], p. 87). A *Bodhisattva* is an individual who attains enlightenment, *i.e.*, ends the cycle *Saṃsāra* for himself or herself, but continues to stay in this life to help others end their suffering ([14], p. 134). For the *Hīnayāna* Buddhist, the main goal was to obtain enlightenment and end the cycle of birth and death. Both traditions continued to put a heavy emphasis on compassion (*Karuṇā*) and non-violence (*Ahimsā*), but *Mahāyāna* Buddhists felt that it was a moral obligation to actively help end the suffering of others (hence the term great vehicle, a vehicle that can carry more than one person, and small vehicle, a vehicle for only one person). Over time, the term *Hīnayāna* became perceived as derogatory, meaning lesser than, so the term *Theravada* formed, which means School of the Elders. Eventually those in the *Theravada* tradition only recognized and observed the original teachings of the Buddha and did not recognize the later teachings of the Buddha, as the *Mahāyāna* Buddhists did ([9], p. 98).

Through this process of shifting and changing, Buddhism began to spread outward into the Asian world. The *Theravada* tradition moved south through India and easterly, moving into Sri Lanka, Burma (modern day Myanmar), Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. *Mahāyāna* Buddhism moved north and easterly into Tibet, Nepal, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam ([1], pp. 6–7). Through this movement a synchronistic process happened where Buddhism would integrate the cultural norms and values, while still maintaining the foundation of the Buddhist teaching (Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, *etc.*). The monastic order helped to maintain the structure, while integrating traditional rituals and practices from each culture that Buddhism spread to. Given these two main schools of Buddhism, with the influence of each culture and tradition, we began to see a plethora of Buddhist traditions emerge (*i.e.*, Chan, Zen, Pure Land). Each tradition became a unique form of Buddhism, fusing indigenous cultural values and practices, while maintaining the foundational teaching. Often, Buddhist monastics would become the cultural brokers, teaching on the Buddhist doctrine as it has been passed down, and integrating the local cultural customs and beliefs. We see this role continue even today, as we will reflect later in this paper, with Vietnamese Buddhist monks and nuns in this country ([9], pp. 117–20).

### 4. Engaged Buddhism

As noted, Buddhism has evolved over the past 2500 years based on the traditions, cultures and identities of those practicing it. The idea of “Engaged Buddhism” much like “social justice” is, in a lot of ways, a very Western concept ([1], p. 112). For Buddhists, especially *Mahāyāna* Buddhists, all Buddhism is an engagement, “in contemporary Asia (Buddhism) means energetic engagement with social and political issues and crises at least as much as it means monastic or meditative withdrawal” ([17], p. ix). The *Mahāyāna* Buddhists emphasis on the *Bodhisattva* ideal is an engagement with others with the intent of reducing suffering, or *Dukha*. A strong component of Buddhism, however, is based on this

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the Five Precepts, some Buddhists in the *Mahāyāna* traditions would take additional precepts, such as *Bodhisattva* vows ([1], p. 87).

notion of enlightenment, which is a solitary process. The foundation of Buddhist practice is meditation. Many in the *Mahāyāna* tradition believe that before one can even begin to help others, or reduce the amount of *Dukha* in the world, one has to become enlightened him/herself, which could take numerous lifetimes. This process of meditation can often be perceived as very solipsistic and detached from others. As Kraft notes, “Buddhism has been seen as passive, otherworldly, or escapist” ([18], p. 65).

It was the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, who first coined the term, “Engaged Buddhism” and “introduced its implications to the West” ([17], p. 2). For Thích Nhất Hạnh, Engaged Buddhism was a way to counter the notion that Buddhism was very passive and focused on self-enlightenment. Engaged Buddhism was a manifestation of the moral and ethical guidelines handed down from the Buddhist tradition, in direct response to the suffering caused by war. Having endured the French Indochina War as a young monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh continued to see his country divided by struggle, ultimately leading to the U.S. becoming involved in the civil strife. In the 1960s, as the conflict escalated and people were dying, Thích Nhất Hạnh believed that Buddhists did not have the luxury of helping others only *after* becoming a *Bodhisattva*, Buddhists must deal with suffering directly as it was occurring. Because of this, Thích Nhất Hạnh formed the School of Youth for Social Services in, “1964, which trained social workers to rebuild bombed villages” ([19], p. 357). This was Thích Nhất Hạnh’s way of fusing Buddhist ideas (especially the moral and ethical codes) with social work and community work. This School of Youth for Social Services trained monks, nuns and lay people to be community and social workers and to “relieve the suffering caused by the war and to extend their work to all Vietnamese people regardless of political orientation” ([20], p. 38). These engaged Buddhists also helped to “rebuild bombed villages, teach children, set up medical stations, and organize agricultural cooperatives” ([21], p. vii).

We also need to be aware of the Engaged Buddhist social movement among *Theravada* Buddhist traditions. Often, we will equate Engaged Buddhism with the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, with its emphasis on the *Bodhisattva* ideal of reducing suffering among all living beings. Socially Engaged Buddhism was a “struggle of Third World Buddhists” ([22], p. 26). Engaged Buddhist ideas have a long and rich history in other Southeast Asian countries, and are not specifically led by monastics. Aung San Suu Kyi has led a struggle in Burma (Myanmar) for democracy and freedom for over thirty years, using Buddhist principles as her guide and eventually winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her non-violent leadership [23].

Maha Ghosananda was a Cambodian Buddhist monk and often referred to as the Gandhi of Cambodia. Maha Ghosananda worked tirelessly in Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand in the late 1970s and 1980s, helping Cambodians attempting to escape from the brutal Khmer Rouge. Maha Ghosananda would travel “through the refugee camps, where Cambodians were physically starving and spiritually demoralized, and he constructed makeshift Wats and chanted the Buddha’s Dhamma” ([24], p. 115). After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, Maha Ghosananda traveled back to Cambodia to help rebuild Buddhist temples and “led the movement to educate the monks and nuns in the skills of nonviolence and the monitoring of human rights” ([25], p. 20).

Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa was a Thai monk who advocated reform in the Thai *Theravada* Buddhist tradition. He worked towards removing the more superstitious elements of the Thai Buddhist tradition and attempted to bring the practice back to the basic principles that were first taught by the Buddha. Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa also wanted to reinforce the compassionate nature of Buddhist practice, writing an essay titled, *Democratic Socialism* where he equated Buddhism to social work and notes, “Social services is for the benefit of all humanity in the most basic sense: to overcome *dukkha* or suffering...All true social work serves this ideal” ([26], p. 167).

These are just brief examples of Engaged Buddhists throughout Southeast Asia. As we reflect on the Engaged Buddhist practice of Vietnamese immigrant and refugees, especially as they migrate to the U.S., we should not forget that Engaged Buddhism is a Buddhist practice and is not unique to just *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. As Rick Fields noted about the struggles with the war in Vietnam,

“Vietnam...became the only Asian country where Theravadins and Mahayanists worked in active collaboration” ([19], p. 354).

Though Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the term, Engaged Buddhism, and began the social services community that provided aid to those who were suffering from war, the ideas that influenced him to start this movement were already deeply rooted. It began with the Buddha’s teachings of The Four Noble Truths, The Eightfold Path and The Five Precepts. It was expounded on and evolved through the *Mahāyāna* tradition of the *Bodhisattva*, a being whose purpose is to help alleviate suffering in the world, and is what all *Mahāyāna* Buddhists strive to become. It began with the notion of community, or *Saṅgha*, that was so essential in the Buddhist traditions and influence how Buddhist communities come together and practice. All of these were in place long before Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the term Engaged Buddhism. These ideas were in the cultural DNA of Vietnamese Buddhists. But as Jones notes, “Socially engaged Buddhism developed as a ‘radical conservatism’ out of the struggle of Third World Buddhists to develop a synthesis combining the best in their traditional cultures with the best of modernity” ([22], p. 26). This would be essential for Vietnamese Buddhists as they migrated to the United States and attempted to maintain their own cultural values and norms while becoming a part of modernity in the United States<sup>10</sup>.

## 5. Vietnamese Migration to America and Acculturation *versus* Assimilation

The Vietnamese War ended in 1975 resulting in the death of 1.1 million Vietnamese [27]. This does not include the suffering inflicted upon Vietnamese who worked with the Americans during the war, remaining in Vietnam and enduring persecution after the United State withdrew. According to Taylor:

Many Second Republic officials were killed and hundreds of people were sent to concentration camps, ostensibly to re-educate them to live in a socialist society. A system of registering the population was instituted to ensure that those whose families had supported the Second Republic were penalized by denial of employment, education, and food rations ([28], p. 614).

After the Vietnam War, countless Vietnamese started fleeing their country, with many coming to the U.S., leading to one of the largest mass migrations to this country in history ([29], p. 351).

As Hien Duc Do notes, “the American public’s general attitude toward Vietnamese refugees at the end of the war (1975) were hostility” ([30], p. 81). As he continues, “A May 1975 Gallup Pole showed ‘54 percent of all Americans opposed to admitting Vietnamese refugees to live in the United States.’” Cited as, “One common concern was economic self-interest—a fear of having jobs taken away and needing to provide public assistance and welfare to the refugees” ([30], p. 81). For anyone who is keeping up with our current U.S. political discourse, these are the same “common concerns” echoed today, as well as potential terrorist activities, in wanting to refuse refugees fleeing war to come here.

By 1975, as Vietnamese started migrating to the U.S., the country was on the heels of social upheaval. Individuals in The Civil Rights movement had fought vigorously for equality, and the elimination of the Jim Crow and segregation laws were beginning to erode the apartheid system that had dominated the culture of the Southern U.S. Given all of this, the country was far from the equality and racial justice that many had struggled and died for. Laws had changed, however, and Vietnamese refugees were coming to this country during a time when legal structures were more supportive:

Before 1960, the National Origins system severely restricted immigration of Asians to America. The 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act under President Johnson, with its new preference and quota system, allowed more Asians to be accepted into

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<sup>10</sup> In the mid-1960s, Thích Nhất Hạnh started touring globally, speaking of the suffering of the Vietnamese and calling for the end of the war. It was during this time he was “exiled” by the Vietnamese government. He eventually moved to France and started a monastery and helped Vietnamese refugees there ([17], pp. 323–34).

the U.S. The American Civil Rights Movement (1955–1968) abolished much outright racial discrimination. The Vietnamese were lucky to arrive in the wake of these historical developments ([29], p. 353).

Starting in 1975, 130,000 Vietnamese began coming to the U.S., in the beginning these were mostly well-educated professionals. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, 500,000 “boat people” started arriving. These numbers only increased with time; by 2000, there were 1,122,528 Vietnamese in the United States, and by 2011 1,737,433 (0.5% of the US population and a 38% increase from 2000 to 2010) ([29], p. 349).

Many of these refugees struggled with their adjustment to their new country. Historically, newly arriving immigrant and refugee groups attempt to acculturate to a new way of life, hoping to maintain aspects of their indigenous customs while adopting the norms and values of the dominant culture. For those in the dominant culture, however, acculturation is not important. The dominant cultures expectation for many arriving to the U.S. is that groups are expected to assimilate.

Hien Duc Do notes with the Vietnamese immigration experience,

To minimize the social impact of this large influx of Vietnamese refugees, the U.S. government adopted a refugee dispersion policy that had four purposes: (1) to relocate refugees as quickly as possible so that they could achieve financial independence; (2) to ease the economic impact of a large influx of refugees on any given community; (3) to make it easier to find sponsors; and (4) to prevent the development of an ethnic ghetto. Given the U.S. political and social climate at the time, the factors leading to this policy were primarily political and financial, not social. The policy sought to encourage Vietnamese refugees to assimilate quickly into American society by finding work as soon as possible after leaving refugee camps ([30], p. 82).

There are, of course, very problematic aspects about this US government policy. But I want to draw your attention to two main points that speak volumes to the challenges that Vietnamese faced when coming to the country, the first being the “social climate” in this country after the end of the Vietnam War. The U.S. government created a policy that focused more on the overall climate of Americans’ perceptions of Vietnamese refugees coming to this country, than they did about a group of traumatized people who were escaping for their lives. The trauma of Vietnamese refugees was not a consideration of the U.S. government.

The second issue is based on American’s perception and pressure. Because of this the U.S. policy on Vietnamese refugee resettlement was based on, as noted, “the primarily political and financial, not social.” That means that no consideration for the social and cultural identity was part of the U.S. policy in transitioning Vietnamese refugees to this county. As the quote above states, the U.S. policy was based on “assimilating” Vietnamese refugees to this country as quickly as possible. In other words, the U.S. Policy with regard to Vietnamese refugees, was not integration (*i.e.*, “we will help you to integrate to our country and help you maintain your cultural identity.”) The U.S. government wanted to assimilate Vietnamese refugees as quickly as possible. This left Vietnamese themselves to try and maintain as much of their cultural identity as they could.

## 6. Chùa An Lạc and a Vietnamese Buddhist Community: A Critical Ethnographic Reflection

I met Thích Thiện Quảng at the Vietnamese Buddhist temple, Chùa Quan Âm, in Greensboro, NC in 1998. At the time there were only two Buddhist temples in Guilford County serving immigrant and refugee populations<sup>11</sup>. The Greensboro Wat (Wat is Thai for temple or Pagoda) is a temple that has been around since the 1980s and primarily serves the Thai, Cambodian and Laotian communities

<sup>11</sup> As of writing this paper, there are now seven Buddhist temples in Guilford County. The original, Wat Greensboro, serving Thai, Cambodian and Laotian communities. Three Vietnamese Buddhist temples, Two Laotian Buddhist Temples and a Burmese Buddhist temple. All serving Southeast Asian immigrant and refugee communities.

(all who observe *Theravada* Buddhism). Chùa Quan Âm is a Vietnamese Buddhist temple serving the growing Vietnamese Buddhist population in the area and follows the *Mahāyāna* school of Buddhism. Thích Thiện Quãng was a quiet and unassuming monk who spoke little English, but was always welcoming and tried very hard to communicate to me as much as he could. He had just taken on a novice monk, Thường Lực, who was around twenty-three at the time and had come to this country at nineteen. Thường Lực's father had been one of the Vietnamese "boat people" who escaped Vietnam and spent time in a refugee camp in the Philippines before eventually relocating to the U.S. and bringing the rest of his family over.

I started spending time with Thích Thiện Quãng, Thường Lực and the members of Chùa Quan Âm, doing photo documentary work and trying to learn as much as I could about the community and Vietnamese Buddhism. The Vietnamese population continued to increase and in late 1999, Thích Thiện Quãng decided to branch out and start another Vietnamese Buddhist temple in the more rural area of High Point, a city right next to Greensboro. High Point is an old furniture factory town, and there were a number of Vietnamese migrating there to take advantage of the factory jobs. Followed by his novice monk, Thường Lực, they both moved into a small, two-bedroom apartment in a low-rent housing complex. These were interesting times, as several of us would meet in the tiny living room of this two-bedroom apartment to discuss the growth of the potentially new temple, and engage in the ceremonial Buddhist practices.

While living in the apartment, Thích Thiện Quãng and Thường Lực, along with a handful of Vietnamese followers, began searching for a suitable house to start the new temple. This is often how Vietnamese Buddhist temples initially form, especially in more rural areas where the community is lacking the resources to buy a building to convert into a temple. In these situations the community would just purchase a house. Purchasing a house was also a logistic consideration, since most monks or nuns actually lived in the Buddhist temple, so having a residential dwelling also served the needs of the monastics. In many cases, the community without a monk or nun present would purchase a house, convert into a temple and then the community would start searching for an ordained monk or nun to move in and become the head monastic. This was the developing of a Buddhist community that many Vietnamese engaged in during the earlier years of migration. This was the community forming the *Saṅgha* that was so essential in Buddhist practice.

After looking at several houses, the community, under the guidance of Thích Thiện Quãng, finally found a suitable, two-bedroom house, which had about an acre of land. The community pooled their resources and was able to make a down payment on the house. On January of 2000, Thích Thiện Quãng and his novice monk, Thường Lực moved into this house and began forming the Buddhist temple, Chùa An Lạc. It was also at this time that I started spending more time at Chùa An Lạc, helping the community convert this house into a viable Buddhist temple and learning more about the community and tradition. This was an amazing experience, and I really began to see first-hand the community building aspect of Vietnamese Buddhists, especially under the guidance of a Buddhist monk and his novice pupil.

Two very important Buddhist festivals were rapidly approaching, Tết Nguyên Đán (or simply known as, Tết, Vietnamese New Year) and Phật Đản (Buddha's Birthday). The community was assiduously working to prepare the temple for these first two festivals. Tết was to fall on Feb. 6 of 2000, so this did not give the community members much time to prepare. But the burgeoning community came together and managed to get the temple established enough for the important Vietnamese holiday. In the synchronistic fashion of Buddhist tradition, there becomes this fusion of the indigenous cultural heritage of the New Year's celebration, while simultaneously also becoming a Buddhist tradition and religious festival. Tết Nguyên Đán was now a cultural festival and a Buddhist holiday. On this cold evening in February many Vietnamese (Buddhists and non-Buddhists) crammed into this tiny, two-bedroom house to celebrate Chùa An Lạc's first Vietnamese festival.

The next big festival occurred in the spring of 2000. This was Buddha's birthday, or Phật Đản, a traditional Buddhist holiday. Once again, the temple community had to come together and prepare

for a big cultural and religious event, while still establishing themselves as a viable Buddhist temple. What was truly amazing about these festivals was how these events mobilized the Vietnamese Buddhist community. Having to live in a dominant culture that is not Buddhist, and then having to live in a region of the country that is considered the “bible belt” (Southeast region of the U.S. this is heavily Christian and politically conservative, also not known for being open to other beliefs and faiths), it was difficult for Vietnamese Buddhists to express their religious beliefs openly. Chùa An Lạc was forming into more than just a Buddhist temple; it was becoming a cultural and community center. With the monks living there, people were stopping by on a regular basis. People would come in during lunch to eat with the monks. Families would come by in the evening to bring dinner for the monks<sup>12</sup>. People would come by after work so they could do things around the house itself to help make it look more like a Buddhist temple on the inside. The community was developing into an actual *Saṅgha*, with the monks once again taking on the role of cultural brokers, much as monks have been doing for the past two thousand years. The temple became a “refuge” for Vietnamese Buddhists to help maintain their cultural identity, while acculturating to the broader American culture.

In the summer of 2000, I decided to travel to Long Beach, CA and visit the Dharma Brother of Thích Thiện Quảng, Thích Thiện Long. They both had studied at the same monastery in Vietnam before migrating to the U.S. Thích Thiện Long was the head monk of a Buddhist temple in CA, Chùa Phật Tổ. I traveled to this temple because I wanted to deepen my own practice in Buddhism, while learning about a Vietnamese Buddhist community that had become more established. The Vietnamese population in California was bigger than the rural community of High Point, NC, and Vietnamese in Long Beach were able to create their own pockets of communities around multiple temples that generally collaborated on events and provided for the Vietnamese community. It also became a valuable learning experience for me in connecting with Vietnamese Buddhists, and helped give me ideas to bring back to Chùa An Lạc when I returned a month later and become an AmeriCorps ACCESS member, working full time at Chùa An Lạc for the next year.

The subsequent years after 2000 showed growth with Chùa An Lạc. Under the leadership of Thích Thiện Quảng, the temple’s main mission was to focus on sustainability and viability, not growing too rapidly. Thích Thiện Quảng was always cognizant of the economic status of most of the temple’s working class members, and never wanted to push members to take on more than they could financially. Tithing is antithetical to Buddhist tradition and most Buddhist communities and temples sustain themselves based on the generosity of temple members (*Dāna*). Giving to a temple helps to generate merit, which can lead to a favorable rebirth. Merit giving can come in the form of money, food, or labor. Most temple members would often come to the temple and do work as a form of *Dāna*, which literally led to the physical growth of the temple itself.

A couple of years after founding Chùa An Lạc, Thường Lực became a fully ordained monk and was now known as Thích Thường Lực. With both monks fully ordained, the temple was increasing in its leadership, with Thích Thường Lực taking on more managerial responsibilities as Thích Thiện Quảng, getting older, assumed more teaching responsibilities. Eventually, Thích Thiện Quảng appointed Thích Thường Lực as the head monk of the temple, passing on the leadership to his young student. Under the leadership of the new head monk of Chùa An Lạc, Thích Thường Lực, the temple members embarked on an expansion project with the house, doubling the size of the actual dwelling and creating a larger main hall that could hold the growing number of Vietnamese that started coming for regular Sunday services. A Vietnamese youth group, GDPT Thiện Tài [31]<sup>13</sup>, also migrated to the temple, especially

<sup>12</sup> Another important component of Buddhism is this idea of *Dāna*. *Dāna* is this idea of “giving” or “charity” and helps generate merit for those who engage in it. This notion of giving is a guiding principle of Buddhists ([14], pp. 211–12).

<sup>13</sup> GDPT is a Vietnamese youth group, structured similarly to the Scouts here in the U.S. GDPT is an abbreviation for, Gia Đình Phật Tử, which is literally translated as, group of Buddhists like a family, but generally means, Buddhist youth. Thiện Tài is the Vietnamese translation of *Sudhana*; a boy profiled in one of the *Mahāyāna* text, *The Avatamsaka Sutra* (Flower Ornament Scripture) and whose name means, “Great Wealth” ([31], p. 1173). The Gia Đình Phật Tử youth group mainly refers to themselves as GDPT and much like Buddhist temples (ex. Chùa An Lạc, Chùa Phật Tổ), each GDPT group will

with the increasing size of the space. GDPT Thiện Tài was a Vietnamese youth group that specifically worked with young Vietnamese (mostly school aged kids) to help them maintain their cultural identity and language. Both Thích Thiện Quảng and Thích Thường Lực were very supportive of the GDPT Thiện Tài, and made sure they were an integral part of Chùa An Lạc's community.

Several years after purchasing the house, Chùa An Lạc's community took advantage of the next-door neighbor putting their house up for sale. Although this temple had two established Buddhist monks, there were no nuns who were part of this community. The lack of female monastic leadership, such as nuns, created complications for doing community work, since there were cultural and religious considerations with monks accompanying women to medical appointments. The monks, especially the bi-lingual Thích Thường Lực, would often accompany lay individuals to various appointments to help interpret during interviews. Many newly arriving Vietnamese needed someone to interpret for medical appointments, social service visits, and other situations, which required someone who could understand both English and Vietnamese really well. The lack of female monastics led to a great void in the needs of women, since they would often feel uncomfortable with a monk interpreting with sensitive medical issues.

When I was staying at Chùa Phật Tổ in Long Beach, CA (a community with a considerably larger Vietnamese Buddhist population) there were nuns living at the temple and available for the community to access. It was not uncommon to see older Vietnamese women; many trained as nurses, retired and had decided to leave the family life to pursue ordination as a *Bhikṣuṇī*. These women would then dedicate their monastic lives continuing to serve the community as nurses. With the purchasing of the house next door by Chùa An Lạc, women were able to move into that house and the monks could begin to train women who were interested in becoming Buddhist nuns. Up to this point there had been women in this area who were interested in monastic training, but would often have to move to other parts of the country where there were larger Vietnamese Buddhist communities and opportunities for women to train as *Bhikṣuṇī*. With the addition of this house, women where were interested could now train as nuns at Chùa An Lạc.

## 7. Conclusions

Sixteen years has passed since the founding of Chùa An Lạc. Kids have become adults, who now have kids of their own, who are growing up in the temple and attempting to maintain a cultural identity. Some communities now consist of second and third generation Vietnamese, born in the United States and growing up as Vietnamese Americans. They delicately attempt to straddle two very distinct cultural identities. I spent time with some of these young people and will often view them as typical American kids. Then I see them interact with their parents, grandparents or older temple members and this metamorphosis happens where they become traditionally Vietnamese. These younger people are able to navigate their cultural identities a lot easier than the first and second generations of Vietnamese who came to this country.

Because of political changes in Vietnam, and the reduction of persecution, Vietnamese now coming to the U.S. are considered immigrants not refugees. Whereas refugees migrate to another country because "they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group" [32], immigrants migrate for other reasons and are not recognized as having to flee their home country by the U.S. Government. Refugees are permanent residents, but immigrants initially do not have permanent statues and have a finite amount of time to work on obtaining citizenship or they will have to return to their home country. Vietnamese who are now immigrating to the U.S. struggle with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service

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take on a Buddhist name to signify each group. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* goes into great detail about the auspiciousness of Thiện Tài's (*Sudhana*) birth and is therefore why his names means, metaphorically, "Great Wealth." In taking on the name of Thiện Tài, this GDPT group is both honoring this Buddhist figure and wishing for great fortune for the youth as they grow.

(USCIS), knowing they do not have the same privileges as refugees, and are working with a timeframe on becoming a U.S. citizen. They struggle with the language and cultural norms and will often find the temple a great source of refuge, where they can converse openly in their primary language and discuss their religious beliefs without being proselytized to by Americans who know nothing of the Buddhist religion or Vietnamese culture.

I have continued to maintain a connection with this temple and community over the years. Often cycling in and out depending on jobs and educational programs that I had to attend to as part of my own personal life. Over these years I have brought many friends, acquaintances, and, at different times, classes to Chùa An Lạc. Thích Thường Lực is very engaging and does a wonderful job educating others on the community building aspect of the temple and how it serves as a cultural center. I often chide him for being a “social worker” monk, which he takes in his stride. The temple continues to hold regular festivals each year, which takes an enormous amount of time, planning and energy. For each festival (generally four each year) the temple members put up several huge, heavy-duty event tents.

Thích Thường Lực and I have talked about the amount of work that goes into these events and he is very reflective on it. Thích Thường Lực notes that he could always garner the resources to build a big building or other kind of structure that would alleviate all the work that goes into preparing for the festivals (often attracting 400 to 500 attendees for each event). But he attributes a lot of the success of the temple to the fact that it requires people to come together to prepare for these huge events. It is one thing for people to show up to a building, watch an event, eat then leave; but having to come together as a community, set up everything for the event, prepare food and serve it to guests, then clean up and take things down afterwards requires enormous planning and time-consuming execution. Regardless of conflicts and differences, everyone works together to make sure each festival is successful. This type of community building cannot be coordinated by chance; it requires the dedication of all community members coming together to make it work. It is what creates a true *Saṅgha*, and Thích Thường Lực, much like his predecessors from the past two thousand years of Buddhist diaspora, has become the cultural broker of this Vietnamese Buddhist community.

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